

KISSING THE UGLY PARTS:
VIOLENT PRODUCTIONS OF QUEER OTHERNESS & THE EMBRACE OF
UNINTELLIGIBILITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

ENGLISH

AUGUST 2015

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Keywords: queer, transgender, narrative, embodiment, film

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Anna Katharina Kai (née Kessler), who taught me how to read, write, and give life to language despite her only having a seventh grade education. She also showed me how to embrace my own unintelligibility and “kiss the ugly parts” long before I even had words to express such queerness.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funding from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM) English Department in the form of a Graduate Assistantship and additional funding from the UHM English Department Travel Fund as well as the Graduate Student Organization helped to support my dissertation research and writing. I am most appreciative to my committee members whose time and effort helped me get to this point in the program. In particular, conversations with Monisha Das Gupta, Vernadette Gonzalez, John Rieder, and Laura Lyons have continued to shape my thinking and framed the central questions that led to this project. Also, I remain immeasurably grateful for the guidance provided by both of my dissertation co-directors, Cindy Franklin and John Zuern. By providing extensive feedback on multiple drafts of the dissertation, Cindy and John have allowed me to recognize the value that a project such as this can offer—even if my intent is to negate the very fabric that allows it to have any social value at all. Both of them provided an immeasurable amount of support (and humor) in my personal and professional lives that has truly extended my thinking, sustained my activist convictions, and prolonged my own livelihood.

I continue to appreciate the contributions of faculty, friends, and colleagues at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, California College of the Arts (CCA), San Francisco State University (SFSU), and Norwich University. In particular, I wish to thank Terri Liberman, Helen Caudill, and Topper Morris for believing I could be more than just a soldier and guiding me toward graduate school. I also want to thank Jim Henry for extending beyond his capacity as a faculty member and agreeing to bear witness to my departure from the U.S military. Jim’s presence provided me with the courage necessary to face the prospect of court martial and forced deployment. Additionally, I wish to acknowledge Del LaGrace Volcano for being generous with his time and his work. I would also like to thank Julian Carter at CCA and Deborah Cohler at SFSU for our lively conversations and their continued support to faculty members.

Moreover, I wish to extend my thanks to queer and trans* organizations, students, and youth who always held me accountable and helped me put theory into action. In particular, I am grateful to the Rainbow Revolutionaries, The Aloha Pride Center Youth Group, Spicy T, Q-Element, The Aloha Bears, Trans-Spectrum Hawai‘i, Flying Over Walls, Black & Pink, TGIJP, and the students of Trans A-Genda’ at CCA, the Students of Color Coalition at CCA, the Normativities upper-division course (Fall Semester 2013) at CCA, and the Transgender Identities & Communities upper-

division course (Fall Semester 2014) at SFSU.

Furthermore, I am indebted to the support of my queer family: Lieteau, Theo Jung, Teresa and Hawkeye Haven, Jessie Boi, Keir McCoy, Caitlin Prendiville, Madeleine Lipshie-Williams, Momi Awana and Greg Mackey, Raquel Vigil, Andrea and Bryan, Alan Dunnigan, Jessica and Von, Danae Barnes, and Francine. Rebekah Edwards and Steve Tanaka always remained by my side as kin, coconspirators, and accomplices in every way imaginable. Lastly, I am most thankful to Charlie “Squirrel” Fredrick for keeping me grounded and focused on what is truly important, sharing the vision of this project, embracing my ugly parts, and helping me find love in a hopeless place.

ABSTRACT

This project considers how violent productions of queer otherness gesture toward the viability of unintelligibility. Chapter 1 examines how queer otherness and unintelligibility emerge as a response to the medicalization and pathologization of the body. As restrictive categorizations limit gender variance, cultural productions like R. Zamora Linmark's novel *Rolling the R's* and Loren "Rex" Cameron's "Distortions" self-portraits contest the normative alignment of a sexed body, thwart a "born in the wrong body" narrative, and *queer* what it means to be embodied. By analyzing the films *Soldier's Girl* (2003) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), Chapter 2 examines how the military and marriage function as state-sanctioned intuitions that violently police unruly bodies and nonnormative desires. Although the violence of heteronormativity sustains the production of heterosexual citizenship and quarantines volatile forms of queer otherness, these films point toward how unintelligible desires create fissures within the heteronormative matrix as they reformulate the possible ways that bodies can interact, collide, and share intimacy. By examining the film *Fight Club* (1999) and the character Jenny Schecter from the television series *The L Word* (2004-2009), Chapter 3 addresses how queer negativity can mobilize unintelligibility as a volitional practice. These representations direct the audience toward embracing the violence of sensation and, by doing so, produce a disidentificatory spectatorship that remains oppositional toward hetero-/homonormative social value and "appropriate" affective responses to self-destruction and trauma. Extending this discussion, Chapter 4 argues for a queer spectatorial framework that is not reliant on the legibility of desire and intimacy. New Queer Cinema (NQC) films, like *Pansexual Public Porn* (1997), redefine how desire and intimacy can function between an audience and nonnormative bodies and desires. The final chapter draws upon Keir

McCoy's 2002 self-portrait "Shatter" to illustrate how queer otherness offers a glimpse at the political agency unintelligibility might forge. As a provisional position and as a practice that cuts into the subjective experience and across the discursive field, unintelligibility guides us to "kiss the ugly parts" that cannot be discursively contained; also, it ruptures, dismantles, and subverts hetero-/homonormative processes of recognition that often determine the viability of an individual's life.

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INTRODUCTION

Kissing the Ugly Parts:

Violent Productions of Queer Otherness & the Embrace of Unintelligibility

[T]he human body is still the measure of all things. This is the scale we know best. This ridiculous six feet belts the globe and everything in it. We talk about feet, hands, spans, because that is what we know. We know the world by and through our bodies. This is our lab; we can't experiment without it.

–Jeannette Winterson

My body is me, but it is not only mine. If I accept the position taken by Jeannette Winterson's narrator in the novel, *Lighthousekeeping*, that "the human body is still the measure of all things" (171), then my body is also the medium of my interface with the larger world. How I negotiate my interactions with others, and how others perceive me, is a part of my tangible, embodied experience. When I experience embodiment in concert with others, I participate in the social production of bodies. Since my body may very well be a lab for experimentation as I interact with those around me, how might I narrate the ephemeral experiences I have and how might the reproduction of these narratives increase the vulnerability or precarity of my body over the bodies of others?

The narratives I ascribe to my material existence help define the limits of what counts as a "natural" or "normative" body. By privileging the visual field of what I consider a human body to be, and viewing it as a vehicle for inhabiting a viable existence, I incessantly taxonomize bodies, behaviors, attitudes, gestures, comportments, and desires, measuring them in a comparative way to my own. Within a Western epistemological framework, such categorizing imposes limits on what is considered a recognizable and legitimate body, structuring bodies in relational (yet hierarchical) ways that reproduce an overarching narrative about an ideal body. My reliance on this process reveals the operations of power and structures of inequality that fuel my current understandings and reductive narrations of the complex and fluid configurations of embodiment, desire, and identity.

At the very root, rendering bodies legible within a discursive field is a violent process because of how the contours of our cultural consciousness assist us in sculpting and enforcing a normative human morphology. The viability of a body, in relation to normative discursive constraints, is dependent on its vulnerability to existing norms. Although norms establish the

parameters for the formation of relational identities, and they are themselves mutable over time, the ideological underpinnings that reinforce the notion of identity as immutable and static, yet natural, create tension between the imagined ideal body and the materiality of the skin I find myself beholden to.

In these moments of tension, dominant ideological formations inscribe queerness¹ into the discursive field as an intelligible, yet marginalized, form of otherness. Or, these structures of power beckon the queer figure to narrate their² material existence in order to be rendered intelligible, yet marked as “other.” Here, I use the term “queer” to represent one of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definitions, and it is to be understood as a moment where “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (*Tendencies* 8). In such instances, a queer subject can narrate their desires and embodiments that are not cogently representable, or that are simply unrecognizable within a dominant framework of recognition. Drawing from Sedgwick, the “lapses and excesses of meaning” in discourse both limit and open up what narratives we can tell about our material conditions. Isolating an irreducible form of illegibility displays how narrative voice functions as a mechanism that works in tandem with the figurative experience of embodiment and the linguistic field of discourse to reveal a representation of an individual’s material conditions—forcefully rendering what is illegible, legible. For example, if identifying as a butch lesbian is the closest approximation to my embodied experience, then my narrative of being a butch lesbian only becomes legible if I narrate my experiences as such. Furthermore, straight and gay audiences shape the legibility of my embodied “butchness” by measuring it against heteronormative male masculinity. If this was not the case, then my butch identity would either become disarticulated from masculinity, start to signify something else, or cease to be legible altogether. Additionally, if I identify as a butch lesbian transwoman, then the ways that

¹ The term “queerness” is used here to suggest a constantly mobile state of *becoming* that draws attention to the instability of other identities that are perceived as fixed. It is not intended to map a particular identity onto any one individual.

² Here, and in other parts of the dissertation, I intentionally use the personal pronouns “they” and “their” to signify the singular and to point to the linguistic trappings and constraints of the English language, particularly when it comes to narrating the materiality of queer experience and gender-variant embodiment. However, in other areas of this project, I honor the pronominal preference if it is given, whether it is gender-specific or gender-neutral pronouns.

others narrate my material conditions might call into question my legibility as a butch woman and as a lesbian. Within these moments, discursive constraint frames marginality in reductive ways that explain or substantiate the legitimacy of queer otherness within a set field of recognition—and, it is one in which the oppressed are reiteratively called upon to explain the conditions of their oppression to their oppressors. In contrast, if I was assigned female at birth (AFAB) and do not identify as a woman, I might feel that continuing to narrate my experience as a woman will provide me with greater legibility and allow the conditions of my existence to remain intelligible. These narratives are always an approximation, and reproducing them can be both violent and affirming; they are confined to the symbolic value of language that can only ever provide a metaphorical representation of felt sensations and lived experiences. However, narratives of queer otherness can lend themselves to articulating the conditions of constraint, identifying others with similar experiences, forming solidarity, and speaking “truth to power.”

As a departure from the “either/or” (dominant/marginalized) narratives that viable subjects reproduce within the discursive field, this project is shaped by the contributions of queer theorists, like Lauren Berlant and Ann Cvetkovich, whose work in Affect Studies pushes us beyond what we can learn and discern through discourse. By focusing on embodied experiences and felt sensations that produce alternate frameworks of recognition and intimacy, this project proceeds in two ways. First, I analyze the discursive constraints imposed on normative and non-normative bodies alike and examine the violence done to formations of queer otherness at the emergent moments they become intelligible within a discursive field. Secondly, through analyzing the narrative arcs produced within a discursive field, I look toward the silences, sensations, ephemeral moments, and gestures beyond representational forms that remain unintelligible or cannot be simply marked as a position of marginality. Here, “unintelligibility” is not a concept that can merely be reduced to signifying anything outside the parameters of what is considered normative as it cuts into the individual subjective experience and into the discursive field whereby individuals are recognized according to specific social scripts. For example, within a heteronormative framework, a gay man’s gender and sexuality are considered intelligible to normative and non-normative positionalities. His sexuality is recognizable as a form of otherness, albeit a marginalized one. As a result of this marginality, narratives about what it means to culturally, socially, politically, and sexually inhabit the identity of a gay man (in

a particular time and space) gain a lucrative valence within hetero- and homonormative discursive fields. In contrast, I assert that what is “unintelligible” is incomprehensible to dominant and marginalized (or minority) positions alike as it cannot be rendered or reconciled within any epistemological framework. In effect, unintelligibility works as a radical anti-taxonomy that is devoid of claims to authenticity or origin.

This project attempts to challenge this very philosophical problem: How can we articulate what unintelligibility is without rendering it intelligible? To linguistically render unintelligibility is to set it up as the antithetical referent to what is understood as intelligibility. Yet, this paradox produces a political yield—one that points toward the problems inherent in discursive constraint as it simultaneously gestures toward the fissures that already exist within, and are a part of, discourse. These fissures are inevitable and an ethical necessity as they provide an opening to another space and time that is just over the horizon and beyond the confines of discourse—a “something else” that exists and is both inhabited and inhabitable. Some queer theorists approach this paradox, and the ethical necessity it produces, by way of envisioning queer world-making. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José E. Muñoz suggests, Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. (1)

Muñoz’s perspective allows for the imagining of alternatives, particularly those formulations of queerness that have not yet materialized or have not been named. Departing from Muñoz, I propose that the “something else” just over the horizon is inhabitable in the present and it is not dependent on a future yet to come. If the horizon merely demarks the limits of discourse and what is articulable, then queer world-making practices allow us to not only imagine unintelligibility, but embody it as well.

Although unintelligibility is often viewed as a categorical condition that leads to a particular type of disposability (an undesirable life because it is a life considered unsustainable due to its illegibility within a discursive field), I argue that it can be embraced as an active and

participatory practice that can rupture, dismantle, or subvert discursive constraint. As an abject condition without agency, unintelligibility is a product of violence and uncaring. However, embracing unintelligibility as a practice lends itself toward a deeply interpersonal ethics of care. Adopting it as a practice is akin to “kissing the ugly parts,” embracing the inarticulable, unnamable, reviled, and monstrous composite of an unintelligible existence that cannot and will not be discursively contained. In this sense, unintelligibility interrupts a kind of constitutive illiteracy by providing an alternate way of conferring recognition—one that privileges bodily experiences vis-à-vis embodied sensations and interpersonal intimacies—that is at once cataclysmic and catalytic. These forms of recognition do not rely on the taxonomical configurations and regulatory scripts of gender and sexuality. As such, an embrace of prolonged unintelligibility marks a shift away from identity, signification, and discourse and should not be reduced to these focal points that dominate contemporary research in the areas of gender and sexuality, particularly in the humanities and social science arenas.

In order to bridge the conceptual difference of unintelligibility as a condition and as a practice, I focus on narrative structure, and draw upon personal narrative, as a vehicle to theorize, to propel the theoretical forward, and to explain the conditions of an experience. Sometimes these moments of narrative act in concert with the theoretical and cultural texts I am using; other times, they are in tension. More importantly, I recognize the contradiction of using and analyzing narrative to signal moments and movements beyond discursive constraint, since I must operate discursively within the confines of language to explain the material conditions of queer otherness and the practice of becoming unintelligible. However, speaking about what might be deemed “unspeakable,” and allowing for other narratives to co-exist in contradictory ways, facilitates the construction of the “I” in the narrative to always be relational to a “you.” To say “I am a lesbian” establishes a set of claims that are larger than my own identity as this utterance affirms the parameters of what constitutes a lesbian within a larger relational scope. As such, I draw upon the French structural linguist Émile Benveniste, who asserts in his monumental text, *Problems in General Linguistics*, that the “*I* signifies ‘the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*.’ This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness. [...] *I* can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone” (218). In these instances, when narrative mobilizes the “I,” it

is being used as a performative rhetorical strategy that points toward a unique, momentary, and provisional position in discourse—one that is not a guarantor of truth or a prescriptive measure. In addition, the “you” that the “I” is hailing in these moments is defined in a symmetrical way, “for *you* as the ‘individual spoken to in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance of *you*.’ These definitions refer to *I* and *you* as a category of language and are related to their position in language” (Benveniste 218). Although neither the “I” nor the “you” exist outside of language, they are not solely determined by the language that allows them to come into being. Nor do proclamations of universal truths substantiate the viability of their existence. In a more general sense, the multiple apparent and latent meanings of language can be interpreted, reinterpreted, and misinterpreted through this dialogue, illuminating an undeniably poetic and fictive quality—a quality that propels the narrative forward and disrupts the discourse that contains it. Moreover, it is at these junctures where articulating ruptures or slippages in the discursive field may, in fact, enable a particular kind of reading practice that allows for the divergent form of literacy I mention earlier. Turning toward narrative is not only appropriate but also warranted as, ultimately, this project pursues the lived experience of unintelligibility (particularly exhibited in the representational form). In this project, personal narratives function as a mechanism to mobilize the “I.” The anecdotes I provide attempt to illustrate how theoretical concepts share a reciprocal relationship to a lived experience of embodying the iterative spaces and fissures within discourse—one that calls forth moments of queer otherness and unintelligibility. Furthermore, the relevance of this project extends to the personal and political viability of my own lived experience as well as that of others, as we continue to vacillate between prolonged moments of queer otherness and momentary ruptures of unintelligibility.

This project is a cultural analysis that is informed by, and draws on, the work of Judith Butler, Gayle Salamon, Jasbir Puar, Judith “Jack” Halberstam, Michael Warner, José E. Muñoz, Lee Edelman, and Samuel Delaney. These queer and trans*³ theorists have particular

³The asterisk (*) following the word “trans” is used to intentionally denote a radical inclusion of all folks who fall within a discordant gender identity spectrum. When used without the asterisk, the term “trans” usually only refers to transwomen and transmen. “Trans*” as an inclusive identity has recently gained political currency within the radical queer community. It also serves as an umbrella term for individuals who express gender variance or gender non-conformity even if their gender identification does not include the prefix “trans” (Ryan). Although the term “transgender” had once been used in a similar fashion to identify a vast array of individuals within the trans* community (Feinberg 5), it is often seen as being synonymous with transsexuality. Within dominant discourse,

importance to this project as each contributes different, yet essential, components to the field of Queer Studies. Such contributions involve theorizing the larger political project of queer lives in relation to bodily materialism, discursive constraint, dominant ideological formations of power and privilege, queer temporality and spatiality, non-normative formations of intimacy, or the disavowal of heteronormative investments in futurity, reproduction, stability, and continuance. Examining such undertakings draws attention to the resistances, reworkings, and creative imaginings that are made possible within the realm of unintelligibility.

In order to extend the contributions of these theorists, I examine how their concepts facilitate and shape narratives of queer otherness in cultural productions that were distributed and circulated in the United States during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As this project remains situated within Cultural Studies, the diverse array of genres I analyze range from visual productions (such as film, cable television, and photography) to literary and extra-literary forms. How does genre problematize or concretize forms of queer otherness? To that end, if unintelligibility exceeds the limitations of the linguistic and visual fields, then what genres might foster the emergence of unintelligibility? These questions facilitate my analysis regarding the limits and possibilities of representing queer otherness and unintelligibility. For example, literary and extra-literary genres constrain unintelligibility because of the limits of language. Yet, such genres allow for a broader field of interpretation because of the slippery and symbolic characteristics of language. Similarly, the medium with which an audience experiences a particular genre can impact the ways that queer otherness and unintelligibly emerge. By taking semiotics into account, visual representations such as film and photography run the risk of being stripped down to a bare referent or being filled with multiple references. However, this stripping of meaning can point toward the film or photograph's potential engagement with unintelligibility. In a similar fashion, the over-production of meaning can point toward a visual representation's capacity to inhabit and sustain a form of queer otherness. Such analyses allow the audience to engage with certain genres that might hasten the *undoing* of discursive constraint. Due to the scope of the project and the textual forms I analyze, these questions are tantamount to

“transsexuality” denotes individuals who seek medical treatments (i.e., hormone therapy and/or sex reassignment surgery). Throughout this project, when discussing a specific subgroup of the trans* banner, I use the term preferred by those individuals.

the theoretical framework I draw upon. Cultural and literary productions serve as a way to sketch a narrative arc of how normativity and queer otherness negotiate discursive constraint and how unintelligibility arises in response to such constraints—while also raising questions regarding genre.

Theoretical Framework & Methodology

This project emerges as a way to combine, mobilize, and heuristically investigate various positionalities within Queer Theory that have substantiated the validity of the mismatches between sex, gender, and desire in a variety of ways. At the same time, this project also gestures beyond the epistemic categories of the “normative” and the “deviant” provided by the queer theorists I draw upon. Here, I intentionally use the word “gestures” because this project, as stated earlier, cannot occur in or through discourse alone; nor can the analysis I offer provide a prescriptive solution to a systemic problem. Instead, the analysis of discursive restraint that I call forth attempts to use language in a manner that points beyond language and discourse itself. In some ways, this venture entertains the possibility of thinking about issues of sex, gender, and desire that are unrestricted by, outside of, and beyond the discursive field. This possibility motions toward how embodiment and desire might creatively manifest at moments of unintelligibility. In other ways, this project offers a further exploration of the institutional parameters and limitations of what constitutes an intelligible subject by probing the regulatory regimes and discursive constraints that violently render formations of unintelligibility into marked forms of queer otherness. By addressing the systemic violences that restrict and oppress those who queerly live their lives, and those who remain within the realm of the “normative,” the range of what is considered recognizable, permissible, or appropriate becomes apparent. To clarify, this project proposes the possibility that unintelligibility offers a momentary freedom from the chains of discourse in response to the manner in which we are continuously *being rendered* and *rendering* others as recognizable, intelligible subjects. These lapses into unintelligibility enable one to momentarily operate outside of socially predefined parameters that signal toward the possibility of unraveling systems of oppression, subverting dominant ideology, and allow for the potentiality to create alternative networks of intimacy that are not dependent on archaic forms of epistemic relational pairings (e.g., man/woman, male/female,

heterosexual/homosexual, husband/wife, top/bottom) or identity-based communal formations.

In order to recognize how the practice of unintelligibility can be useful, it is important to note how institutionalized violence produces forms of queer otherness and maintains “normative” dispositions. Namely, heteronormativity causes individuals to secure their privilege through the enactment of heteronormative practices; but such individuals must also partake in systems of differentiation that ritualistically oppress those marked as “other,” whether it is due to one’s race, ethnicity, nationality, class, biological sex, gender expression, sexual orientation, disability status, or other variations from the “norm.” Appearances (i.e., visual encodings that are not always mutually agreed upon or under a person’s control) and practices (i.e., speech acts, behaviors, and bodily movements) that deviate from the norm become markers of an individual’s “otherness” and become intrinsically subordinate to privileged positionalities. In other words, the centrality of privilege and the establishment of heteronormativity are correlative to the continual relegation of the “other” to the margins.

Additionally, social institutions reinforce the establishment and maintenance of formally structured binaries that regulate an individual’s physical body, modes of identification, expression or repression of voice, sexual practices, and desires so that they fall in accordance with normative scripts. Individual participation in, and compliance with, hegemonic discourse secures the perpetuation and reinstatement of these norms through arranged social hierarchies, which in turn establish a particular identity for an individual based upon specific culturally derived ideals. When, as is common, we complacently accept these ideals as innocuous aspirations, we fail to question what compels us toward these desires, how such desires may be socially constituted and institutionally reinforced. In effect, our collective complicity allows us to *imagine* these ideals as attainable and “real.”

Yet, as political, cultural, and socio-economic climates change, group affiliations and memberships in a particular community may be redefined, including some individuals and casting out others. Individual participation in, and compliance with, various hegemonic discourses secures the perpetuation and reinstatement of regulatory frameworks, such as heteronormativity, gender scripts, and social hierarchies which in turn establish a specific identity for an individual based upon cultural conceptions of an ideal that transforms into an imagined “real.” Here, the ideal is an unattainable form of the materiality of what is considered

“real.” However, the “real” can never be entirely manifested into being since it is imaginary. This imagined “real” I address here is similar to the conceptual framework Judith Butler uses for gender performativity in her seminal book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Drawing from Jacques Derrida’s reading of Kafka’s “Before the Law,” Butler states, “The one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits” (*Gender Trouble* xiv). In this sense, the imagined “real” is brought into *being* through the anticipation which conjures it as an object. Yet, the “real” only exists in an imagined form as it is reiterated through the linguistic and theatric performances of *becoming* an illusory state of *being*. Concepts of *being* are static notions of fixity (a state), whereas *becoming* never allows for one to occupy an immobile physical location. Nonetheless, *becoming* is the constant reiterative performance (a process) that produces an illusory effect, allowing one’s identity to be perceived as stable. Such reiterative performances function similarly to the apparent and seamless motion perceived in animation and film, although such movement is an illusion created from the rapid succession of numerous static images arranged in a sequential order.

To delineate between what is perceived as “real” from its approximation, Judith “Jack” Halberstam in their book, *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, defines “realness” as something that “is not exactly performance, not exactly an imitation; it is the way that people, minorities, excluded from the dominant real, appropriate the real and its effects” (51). In effect, “realness” is performative and relational to the “real” in so far as the “real” can be appropriated. Yet, I would argue that even the “dominant real” functions as an appropriation of a type of “realness” that only exists in an imagined form; and, it is culturally reinforced within normative discourse through hegemonic ideals. For how can an individual, whether deemed “normative” or “deviant,” lay claim to the “real” if it remains an evasive concept that can only be grasped through the performativity of “realness” and manifested through imagination and desire?

As unintelligibility can operate in the field of the imaginary, within the discursively inarticulable spaces, it also functions in tangible ways. I speculate that unintelligibility is the space where we can understand the body as real, and not an appropriation of the “real,” as it is these moments when the body is separate from discursive constraint. To clarify my claim, I

draw upon Butler's discussion of the imagined "real" of the fantasized body. She states,

Always already a cultural sign, the body sets limits to the imaginary means that it occasions, but is never free of an imaginary construction. The fantasized body can never be understood in relation to the body as real; it can only be understood in relation to another culturally instituted fantasy, one which claims the place of the "literal" and the "real." The limits to the "real" are produced within the naturalized heterosexualization of bodies in which physical facts serve as causes and desires reflect the inexorable effects of that physicality. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 90)

Like Halberstam, Butler addresses the limitations of the "real" within heteronormative discourse; however, she recognizes the illusory state of an imagined form of "realness" where the individual fantasizes the construction of the body. The present cultural and ideological underpinnings of what a "real" body might be *always* mediate the construction of the fantasized body as it takes the place of the "real." Through hegemony, the constant regulation of the self and others maintains the heteronormative framework of continual imagining as ideological and repressive state apparatuses (e.g., the media, schools, marriage, and the military) sustain and monitor such regulation. However, if the physical body were disarticulated from the fantasized and culturally inscribed body, what sort of body would remain and how might desire function outside of such regulation? For instance, if I close my eyes and touch the naked body of a lover with the back of my hand, I may not necessarily recognize which body part I am touching; however, this type of not-knowing is no less tangible and no less real within the moments I experience the sensation of touch that gives me pleasure. If I do imagine myself touching a particular body part of my lover, I might be surprised to discover that when I open my eyes, the part of the body I had imagined giving me pleasure was different from the part of the body I was touching. Or, if I am lying with multiple lovers, the body part being touched may not even belong to the lover I was imagining.

As a more specific example of the physical body being disarticulated from the fantasized and culturally inscribed body, I offer up the experience of the glory hole. A glory hole is often a crudely cut hole, typically at crotch level, that exists in some public multi-stall restrooms and adult video arcade booths. While the partition between stalls restricts the field of vision and maintains anonymity, an individual may observe another through the hole and engage in

masturbation or other sexual activities. These spaces typically operate in relative silence short of the sounds of bodily contact, inarticulable utterances of pleasure, and the occasional audio emanating from pornographic films if the space is located in an adult video arcade. Although the acts of voyeurism and masturbation lend themselves to a particular type of culturally inscribed and fantasized body—one that is inevitably optically rendered—I wish to focus on other sexual activities that involve contact between two or more individuals in these spaces. For those who insert their phallus⁴ into the hole, the fantasy of a particular type of sexual act may exist whether it is oral, vaginal, or anal penetration. However, since the partition separates the person from the object placed in the hole, it also separates the inserter of the object from the recipient of the object on the other side of the partition. More crudely, if I am to stick my dick (or other body parts) into the glory hole, I cannot know whether my cock is being inserted into a mouth, anus, or vagina. Even if I believe I can differentiate between these instances of contact, I cannot be certain about the type of body behind the partition to which I attribute these sensations. Neither the inserter nor the recipient can substantiate with any degree of certainty the others' nationality, immigration status, relationship status, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, weight, age, (dis)ability, sex, gender identity, gender expression, or sexuality as desire becomes momentarily divorced from these categories. In other words, the partition serves in a manner where both individuals must disarticulate the real sensation of bodily contact from the culturally inscribed fantasy of what the “real” may be as desire manifests. Even though I do recognize that those who seek out pleasure at glory holes may still retain a particular culturally inscribed fantasy about a specific body, what I find interesting is how these spaces are more dependent on the fulfillment of sexual desire and the not-knowing anonymity provides than gender performativity and visual encodings of the (non)normative body. In this sense, there is something aleatory about this pleasure as it relies on a chanciness, which for some is a constitutive factor in their desire to frequent these spaces. The space of the glory hole restricts performativity; yet, this space enables bodily materialism to fuel desire, a desire connected to a tangible body that is often disconnected from the fantasized or culturally inscribed body. In essence, these moments permit the practice of unintelligibility as a moment of accessing the “real”—one that is derived

⁴ Here I am purposefully using the term “phallus” instead of “penis” to include enlarged clitorises, dildos, or other devices that are attached to (or detached from) the body for the purpose of sexual intercourse.

from sensation felt through bodily contact and is devoid of discursive constraint and identity-based signification.

In contrast, as fervent hetero-/homonormative desire compels intelligible subjects toward striving to obtain the unattainable “real,” they often engage in linguistic and corporeal performative acts that produce specific expectations of embodiment. Hegemonic discourse restricts the reiterative and nonreiterative performative acts for both compliant and noncompliant subjects as they are the result of hetero- or homonormative ideology. As is the case with the deployment of certain forms of camp humor, queer performativity can sometimes reassert other oppressive ideological conditions (e.g., racism, misogyny, ableism, and fatphobia) while claiming to subvert heteronormative constraint. However, despite the ideological and discursive limitations of performativity as a subversive practice, camp humor can be a useful tool for the individual who transgresses norms as a way to linguistically express desires that cannot be easily rendered intelligible. In other words, queer performativity can expose slippages and misalignments between a person’s perceived identity and their linguistic utterance in order momentarily to resist hetero- and homonormative ideology. These utterances “queer” moments of intelligibility upon their articulation only if the utterance purposefully creates an incongruity or a slippage between the signification of the person’s body and signification of the imagined identity or desire they speak of. Particularly since dominant discourse attempts to construct one’s subjectivity as concrete, and just as intelligible individuals often perceive identity as unalterable, the creative imaginary power that enables queer otherness to articulate the parameters of desire serves as a way to potentially shake the foundation of a seemingly reified subjectivity. As a result, an individual’s desire can potentially inhabit multiple forms that play off of dominant conceptions surrounding identity, while simultaneously resisting them.

To further illustrate my point, I turn to a 2009 *YouTube* video clip produced by self-proclaimed “life coaches” Red and Charles. In the segment, entitled “2 Hot Transsexuals [*sic*] Finally Give Some Answers!,” Red and Charles provide tongue-in-cheek responses to invasive questions trans* and gender-variant individuals are often asked. When answering the question, “Why do you want to change your body?,” Red, articulates:

For my whole life, um, I just felt really uncomfortable with how few tentacles I’ve had.

I’ve always felt like I should have been born with more tentacles [...] Unfortunately, you

know, modern science has only come so far. So I figured that, you know, physically transitioning...was the next best thing to being a beautiful majestic octopus, swimming the seven seas, inking things that attacked me. (Freshlycharles)

Although meant in jest, Red provides the viewer with a momentary emotional identification that neither accepts nor rejects a particular gender or positionality, gesturing toward a moment of unintelligibility, even when the particular social context dictates an idealized desire surrounding the physical and affective responses of what is rendered intelligible. In this instance, the viewer understands the response being given even though it is not the anticipated response to the initial question. Red has never been an octopus, but they convey that they feel as if they should have been born with more tentacles. Even if an individual can never embody the imagined positionality they speak of, it is nonetheless possible to convey how they feel through expressing these imagined, momentary forms of *being* (e.g. “I *feel like* [an octopus].). Feeling *like* something (e.g., a “natural” woman), creates a particular cultural context that enables a recognizable articulation of desire and affect; however, it may not always lead to an intelligible desire as in the case of Red’s emotional identification and desire of embodying an octopus.⁵

To further complicate notions of embodiment, identity, and signification, Red’s response to the question, “What if you were born into the right body?” is equally as performatively disorienting as their identity remains complex. They explain, “If I was born into the ‘right body,’ I would probably either be a transman or like a lesbian separatist. I would probably live like in the woods, worship the mother goddess, invent...little guillotines to cut off penises. That’s probably what I would do” (Freshlycharles). Their response, although meant to evoke humor, is not any less absurd than the complexity of their own identity. Gleaning from the title of the segment, Red and Charles both identify as transsexuals—a marginalized and “deviant” position in relation to the norm. As the segment continues, Red indirectly discloses they were assigned male at birth (AMAB) and are trans-feminine identified, yet their gender expression is relatively masculine in appearance. Drawing from their response to the question above, it may be worth asking, what does it mean for someone who is AMAB to desire to become a transman?

⁵ In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler frames this concept with her discussion on Aretha Franklin singing “You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman” (29-30). She returns to Franklin’s lyrics in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (Butler 317) to further clarify her poststructuralist critique of identity.

Or, if the lesbian community attempts to expand the category of “woman” to include transwomen, and anyone who *feels like* a woman, then it would seem logical that a person who was assigned female at birth (AFAB) and *looks like* a transman could be accepted into the community if they *feel like* or identify as a woman and desire other women. Surely such desires do exist and are not ludicrous to those who experience them. If anything, these immeasurably complex positionalities highlight the absurd ways presumably progressive, liberationist communities police the categories of “man” and woman” and, by extension, the identities of their members.

Presently, the transgender movement and trans* community, as well as the lesbian and gay communities, do not have the language to qualify these desires as legitimate forms of embodiment. In other words, no space exists in these communities for bearded women without breasts or transmen who were AMAB. Yet, it is at these interstices where individuals such as Red mobilize their queer otherness, in this case through queer performativity, to gesture beyond the discursive constraints of language, identity, and signification. In other words, the cultural context created in these moments focuses on reformulating the fantasized and idealized social desires surrounding the physical and emotional attributes of masculinity and femininity (attributes of those rendered intelligible) that are present within dominant ideology. Such reformulations press the viewer to engage in a particular form of literacy that is dependent on not-knowing as they gesture beyond queer otherness toward unintelligibility, precipitating a reading practice where similes of octopi, transmen, and lesbian separatists are imaginable spaces to inhabit for an AMAB individual. Although these comparisons and emotional identifications enact a temporality of desire that still operates within the discursive parameters of what is considered intelligible, and become relational to the experiences of others, such deviations from the norm permit a momentary rupture within the discursive field, gesturing toward an inhabitable space of unintelligibility and highlighting the falsehoods that individuals and their desires are categorically definable and unalterable.

Through queer performativity, the emotional identification with particular mismatched cultural conceptions of gender destabilizes heteronormativity. Yet, even if individuals are able to articulate the precision of their desires through the specificity of language, will such articulations further restrict one’s modes of identification or create more ambiguity and

multiplicity as a result? To remain within the scope of this project for now, I would like to believe that queer otherness, in some instances, can mobilize the mutability and specificity of desire, particularly by utilizing performativity in ways that disrupt queer otherness's position of marginality. These disruptions signal a disidentificatory process and gesture toward, but do not inhabit, the space and practice of unintelligibility.

In his influential book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José E. Muñoz refers to disidentification as,

a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance. [It] can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production. For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy. (25)

Like queer performativity, Muñoz's contribution offers marginalized individuals a way to resist the mono-dimensional scripts of dominant discourse by adopting and inhabiting the multi-dimensional construction of various positionalities concurrently or nonconcurrently. Muñoz further suggests, "Disidentification is, at its core, an ambivalent modality that cannot be conceptualized as a restrictive or 'masterfully' fixed mode of identification. Disidentification [...] is a survival strategy that is employed by a minority spectator...to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification" (*Disidentifications* 28). As a survival strategy and as a form of resistance, Muñoz's process of disidentification incites the marginalized subject's agency. In response to restrictive parameters of identification, agency emerges through the construction and temporary embodiment of these multiple subject positions that enables the "I" to speak. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, and relating back to Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, even though an individual's subject position is thought to be always discursively constructed, the individual can exercise various types of agency that are dependent on, but not determined by, how the individual's identity is rendered by others—either through occupying a static position of *being*, or as it manifests through a constant process of *becoming*.

Moreover, these continuously mobile forms of *becoming* challenge static notions of identity and are one mode of resisting dominant ideology through the process of disidentification. Muñoz further describes this process as a "mode of dealing with dominant

ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (*Disidentifications* 11). This process allows for individuals to resist identification with or assimilation into normative scripts. In this sense, disidentification functions similarly to queer performativity—the emphasis of the former is on visual encoding/decoding whereas the latter is on linguistic speech acts. Both are deeply entangled in discourse and are interdependent on one another. On a fundamental level, disidentification and queer performativity are necessary tools for those who embody forms of queer otherness, and other marginalized positions, in order to survive and resist the prescriptive parameters of identification that cause discursive constraint. However, like Butler’s notion of gender performativity, disidentification operates on the precept that discourse is inescapable. Also, although disidentification is a process that focuses on the non-fixity of identity, it nonetheless traverses various fixed positions, unlike unintelligibility.

To provide a concrete example of the utility and limitation of disidentification, I turn to a scene from John Cameron Mitchell’s film *Shortbus* (2006) in which Jaime and James are listening to Sophia, their sex therapist, discuss the elusive nature of the female orgasm at an underground salon with the film’s namesake. Upon overhearing Sophia, a gender-variant character named Shabbos Goy, who is also a self-proclaimed “orgasmic superhero,” interrupts Sophia to affirm that female orgasms do in fact exist. Shabbos invites Sophia to their performance art piece, “Ode to the Female Secretion,” in hopes of helping her with her “problem.” Upon Shabbos asking Sophia more questions, a conversation ensues:

Shabbos: Are you a heavy bleeder?

Sophia: On my second and third days.

Shabbos: Oh, that’s so hot. That’s so hot. You know, I use menstrual blood as makeup in my show. Tampons. Just pull them right out, fresh from the fruit, and I use it as lipstick.

Jaime: It’s a period piece. (*Shortbus*)

In the above example, Shabbos’ queerness resists the cultural conceptions of what menstrual blood can be used for and, instead, finds its utility in the form of cosmetics for the purpose of reclaiming female empowerment through artistic expression. Shabbos’s description of the performance piece actively works at destabilizing dominant discursive knowledge surrounding the female body and menstruation while utilizing the female body as both known and unknown

territory. For the spectator of the imaginary performance described within the film, the naked female body, and the act of using menstrual blood as makeup, becomes a marker of otherness that resists the phallogentrism of discourse; yet, the female form and menstrual blood are also conceived as objects on display, dangerously reinforcing the dominant discursive field at the same time. The simultaneous occupation of these positionalities (as queer otherness with agency and object without agency) becomes evident in Jaime's response when he utilizes camp humor to dismiss or make light of Shabbos' performance.

Furthermore, when Sophia is pressed on her willingness to participate in the performance and Shabbos asks her to donate menstrual blood for their face, Jaime responds in disgust:

Jaime: Oh, come on now.

Shabbos: What?

Jaime: Drawing the line! Whoa!

Shabbos: Did that make you—You know, I think I just made you uncomfortable because you're a little baby homo.

Jaime: Does this really have anything to do with an orgasm?

Shabbos: It comes from her fucking pussy! Why are you so uncomfortable about it?

Jaime: I can deal with pussies. I'm around them all the time!

Shabbos: I'm not talking about your fucking boyfriend. (*Shortbus*)

Shabbos' disidentification relies on their reorientation of the spectator to the female body in a manner that produces pleasure and empowerment instead of exploitation and denial of female-based identifications and desires. Yet, even though this disidentification is initially apparent for the spectator of the imagined performance and the viewer of the film, the conversation devolves into a catty argument between Shabbos and Jaime that eventually leads to their flinging insults and grappling with one another on the couch. Jaime's linguistic retorts respond to Shabbos' disidentificatory use of menstrual blood as lipstick in a manner that reinscribes shame and disgust onto the female body. As Muñoz argues, disidentification operates on *and* against dominant ideology; and, regardless of the multiplicity of identifications an individual may inhabit, the process of disidentification is also bound to the parameters of, and its relationality to, normative discourse. As it can be a useful survival strategy that resists heteronormative ideology, disidentification nonetheless contributes to the process of rendering forms of queer

otherness intelligible within discourse—albeit rendering such positions of marginality as something inhabitable and resilient. In other words, the performance of queerness requires the subject to continually disidentify with normative discourses within the parameters of discourse itself, and it allows individuals to thrive in places where mismatches and misalignments of meaning or identifications are commonplace. In this sense, disidentification enables queer otherness to find comfort in discursively constrained, unwelcoming, or uncomfortable spaces.

Throughout a ceaseless disidentificatory process, individuals can glean specific knowledge regarding the constraint of socially instituted values. By traversing various discursive forms of knowledge, normative conceptions of embodiment, and dominant forms of identification, individuals who engage with the process of disidentification reveal the unstable states of *being* through the performativity and simulation of the imagined “real.” These moments are akin to what Judith Butler describes in *Undoing Gender* as a form of undoing. Butler uses the term “undoing” in a two-fold manner—it undoes restrictive normative conceptions of gender and sexuality and it can also be self-reflexive, causing an individual to *become undone* (*Undoing Gender* 1). She asserts, “Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one’s personhood, undermining the capacity to preserve a livable life. Other times, the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 1). On one hand, *undoing* operates in a way that can challenge and resist static notions of *being* (i.e., normative notions of gender) and increase the viability of a life subjected to discursive constraint. To a certain extent, disidentification and queer performativity assist in this mode of undoing as they are strategies of resistance and survival for those who occupy the field of queer otherness. On the other hand, *undoing* may facilitate the constraint of discourse to an extent where an individual’s life no longer becomes viable or gives way to a less than intelligible existence. Butler continues to map out how undoing is relational to frameworks of recognition. For example, being rendered a particular gender may confer a particular type of recognition; however, this recognition may “undo” the person’s sense of self and their ability to live within discursive constraint. Similarly, withholding the recognition of a gender that is considered unrecognizable within a particular set of norms may also lead to the undoing of the individual. As such, the frameworks of recognition are sites of power that call into the question

who counts as recognizable and who does not.

In agreement with Butler, I wish to limit my scope of this project to only a few aspects of this “undoing.” The first aspect addresses how queer otherness emerges from such undoing insofar that it is the product of discursive constraint and frameworks of recognition. The second, yet corollary, aspect is how queer otherness occasions the temporary undoing of discursive constraint and frameworks of recognition through momentary disruptions, disidentification, and queer performativity. Signaling the ways in which unintelligibility emerges on the heels of queer otherness, the final aspect points toward the symbiotic relationship between an intrapersonal undoing and an infrastructural one. Such undoing gestures toward a practice of unintelligibility that imagines other ways of conferring material viability and intimacy that do not depend on socially instituted forms of recognizability.

If we understand intelligibility as a consequence of recognition, and attribute it to the adherence of social norms, then there may be value in maintaining a less than intelligible or unintelligible existence, particularly since such an existence does not preclude queer world-making or the formation of networks of intimacy and support.⁶ Once again, Butler contends,

Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognized within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred. It may well be that my sense of social belonging is impaired by the distance I take, but surely that estrangement is preferable to gaining a sense of intelligibility by virtue of norms that will only do me in from another direction. (*Undoing Gender* 3)

In some instances, the space individuals take from these norms propels their own agency forward; other times, the conditions of this distance are imposed by the norms that confer recognition. Despite Butler’s position that one’s sense of belonging is impaired by this distance, I argue it is only impaired insofar that the conditions for belonging are constitutively dependent on the framework of recognition that norms establish. I contend that instances of contact and sentiments of belonging can and do emerge from unintelligibility even if estrangement is

⁶ Even when considering queer formulations of kinship, I am inclined to avoid the term “community” because of how discourse structures communal identification in relation to frameworks of recognition and taxonomical configurations.

experienced from those with conferred recognition. These moments of connection are not contingent on identity-based forms of recognition but, rather, they develop from moments of contact, networks of intimacy, and assemblages within a given time and space.

The mobilization of unintelligibility as a practice gives way to other modes of existence—ones that propose an alternative framework of recognition that is not beholden to being rendered intelligible. Additionally, unintelligibility nonprescriptively disrupts the manner in which individuals articulate themselves in relation to such frameworks of recognition, superseding the interdependent polemical arrangement of a subject's position as either part of the constitutive outside (i.e., marginal) or the constitutive inside (i.e., normative). To engage in unintelligibility as a practice and create such disruptions is also to forge a certain type of political agency that is not dependent on claims of legitimacy substantiated by frameworks of recognition.

In contrast, queer otherness runs the risk of reinforcing particular frameworks of recognition and conferring the power of norms through establishing its own regulatory queer ideal. In her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar pointedly observes, “While liberal underpinnings serve to constantly recenter the normative gay or lesbian subject as exclusively liberatory, these same tendencies labor to insistently recenter the normative queer subject as an exclusively transgressive one” (22). The normative queer subject Puar refers to is one that proposes itself as an idealized form of queerness—always transgressive, yet one that issues its own forms of regulation and recognition. Puar continues to assert,

[Q]ueerness as transgression (which is one step ahead of resistance, which has now become a normative act) relies on a normative notion of deviance, always defined in relation to normativity, often universalizing. Thus, deviance, despite its claims to freedom and individuality, is ironically cohered to and by regulatory regimes of queerness—through, not despite, any claims to transgression. (Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* 23)

The differentiation between who is “deviant” and who is “normal” operates so that *all* bodies, desires, and practices are marked as either “normative” or “other.” Here, Puar suggests that those marked with any form of queer otherness run the risk of normalizing their position of deviance in relation to the construction of a universal notion of normativity. Claiming queerness as a prescriptive measure for resistance, or as singularly transgressive, enforces a particular

notion of normative deviance. Policing the space of what and who constitutes this form of deviance can be just as violent a process as maintaining the space of the normative, particularly since this form of queerness calls forth its own regulatory regimes in order to maintain a presumably static position of transgression. In short, normalizing forms of queer otherness as solely “deviant” and “transgressive” reinforces the regulatory frameworks that fuel discursive constraint, adversely impacting those who occupy dominant and marginal positions. For instance, to “look queer” within the San Francisco Bay Area presupposes a collective understanding of what a queer aesthetic entails for that specific urban geography. Queers who maintain, circulate, and reinforce this collective understanding participate in the regulatory regimes that normalize what a “deviant” or “transgressive” aesthetic is in relation to the normative. Similarly, camp humor is a practice that may also occasion the reinforcement of a normative notion of deviance, and it does not necessarily interrogate its own limits of deviance or how it may ascribe such limits to a singular and regimented form of transgression—one that is often phallogentric and runs the risk of further marginalizing women, transgender and gender-variant individuals, and people of color. To this end, the viability of queer otherness extends only as far as queers cease to legislate how queer other queers are in relation to each other’s queerness.

As some forms of queer otherness necessitate the continuance of a linear narrative (as with heteronormativity), whether it is one of normativity or a normative form of transgression, I turn toward the gaps, fissures, and momentary ruptures contained within, and created by, these narratives as a means of marking emergent moments of unintelligibility. In contrast, divergent forms of queer otherness utilize nonlinearity to break down narrative structure in a manner that resists regulatory regimes of any sort. For these types of representations, I examine how unintelligibility manifests in temporary ways via these ruptures in narrative, even if it folds back into discourse as an intelligible form of queer otherness. Nonetheless, the continual ruptures provide the occasion for unintelligibility to be sustained as a practice within particular times and spaces that challenge and threaten the perceived stability of hetero- and homonormativity. It is precisely because of the visibility of queer otherness and the ruptures that permit unintelligibility to emerge that such real or imagined threats can occur.

As part of my methodology of unraveling this perceived stability in the texts I examine, I

draw on the work of Judith “Jack” Halberstam, Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, and Jasbir Puar as their analyses surrounding queer spatial-temporal fields carry immeasurable significance in the field of Queer Studies. In *Queer Time & Place*, Halberstam describes “queer time” as “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6). Halberstam also addresses the corollary of “queer space” as the “place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics” (*Queer Time & Place* 6). In other words, queer times and spaces emerge at temporal moments, depart from the linearity and naturalization of heteronormative space-time narratives, and disrupt investments in the nuclear family, futurity, reproduction, economic stability, and continuance. Not only do queer temporality and spatiality pose an alternative to such heteronormative scripts, but, to push Halberstam’s observation further, they also enable a self-reflexive process that interrogates normative parameters of recognizability and queer frameworks of recognition/transgression. In this sense, momentary ruptures that call queer time and space forth cannot easily slip into prescriptive forms of “deviance” and “transgression” against which Puar cautions.

Such interventions are important and necessary, particularly to preserve queer forms of intimacy that are not institutionally supported. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner note in their article, “Sex in Public,” “Heteronormative forms of intimacy are supported [...] not only referentially, in overt discourse such as love plots and sentimentality, but materially, in marriage and family law, in the architecture of the domestic, in the zoning of work and politics. Queer culture, by contrast, has almost no institutional matrix for its counterintimacies” (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 203). Queer times and spaces provide the occasion for discursive and material interventions into heteronormativity by way of counterpublics, autonomous zones, and queer kinship, effecting normative scripts and actively working to forge and preserve forms of intimacy in the present regardless of how ephemeral those moments may be. Groups such as Gay Shame,⁷ ACT UP,⁸ Pink Panthers,⁹ and Bash Back!¹⁰ have used direct action to mobilize

⁷ Matt “Mattilda” Bernstein Sycamore provides more context on the emergence of the Gay Shame movement in her essay, “Gay Shame: From Queer Autonomous Space to Direct Action Extravaganza,” published in the anthology *That’s Revolting!: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation*.

such interventions. However, moments of queer time and space can also emerge in less formalized or organization-driven ways.

Creating queer counterpublics and forging queer moments of intervention extend far beyond gender and sexuality alone. For example, compliance with homonormativity entails doing more than just being a respectable, “straight-acting,” and monogamous married couple; it also necessitates being a good “citizen-worker/citizen-consumer.” In this manner, economic stability and citizenship are deeply connected to hetero-/homonormative forms of regulation. Political projects such as artist collectives, anarchist community centers, and underground punk shows can and do emerge as momentary spatial-temporal ruptures to capitalism and state control, but they do not necessarily dismantle them. Some queer and trans* prison abolition groups, like Black and Pink (B&P)¹¹ and Flying Over Walls (FOW),¹² have proven more successful at sustaining vital counterpublics and prolonging temporal ruptures.

Through utilizing horizontal organizing strategies and taking direction from incarcerated queer and trans* individuals, FOW offers community-based workshops that range from basic “Know Your Rights” trainings to more complex and nuanced educational programming. Such workshops highlight the interconnections between homonormativity, gentrification, the radical increase in cost-of-living, large-scale displacement of working-class families and families of color, and the disproportionate incarceration rates of people of color in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to monthly prisoner letter writing nights, FOW also forges alliances with other grassroots organizations in order to cultivate solidarity, provide support, and establish networks of intimacy for those most impacted by the effects of capitalism and the carceral state. Creating and prolonging queer times and spaces—ones that remain in opposition to state control and

⁸ Deborah B. Gould’s book, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight against AIDS*, chronicles the organization’s development in the late 1980s and its decline in the early 1990s.

⁹ See the Pink Panthers Movement website for additional information (Haley).

¹⁰ Refer to *Queer UltraViolence: Bash Back! Anthology* (edited by Fray Baroque and Tegan Eanelli) for interviews, communiqués, analyses of direct actions, and other documents relating to Bash Back!.

¹¹ On the B&P website, the stated purpose reads: “Black & Pink is an open family of LGBTQ prisoners and ‘free world’ allies who support each other. Our work toward the abolition of the prison industrial complex is rooted in the experience of currently and formerly incarcerated people. We are outraged by the specific violence of the prison industrial complex against LGBTQ people, and respond through advocacy, education, direct service, and organizing” (*Black and Pink*).

¹² FOW is “a queer/trans prisoner solidarity project in the San Francisco Bay Area, working in collaboration with Black & Pink” (*Flying Over Walls*) and the Transgender, Gender-Variant, and Intersex Justice Project (*TGI Justice*).

capitalist structures—can be a mechanism for survival. It can also be an affirmation of an individual's experience with inhabiting a marginalized position of queer otherness, allowing for the creation of a world just beyond the horizon.

In response to normative modes of production, reproduction, consumption, comportment, and the social order, queerness offers a response to abject forms of intelligibility and discursive constraint insofar as it is not bound to normative modes of transgression. In his polemical book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman argues,

[Q]ueerness exposes the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality, alerting us to the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain it and engaging those fantasies through figural logics, the linguistic structures, that shape them. If it aims effectively to intervene in the reproduction of such a reality—an intervention that may well take the form of figuring that reality's abortion—then queer theory must always insist on its connection to the vicissitudes of the sign, to the tension between the signifier's collapse into the letter's cadaverous materiality and its participation in a system of reference wherein it generates meaning itself. (6-7)

To intervene and potentially abort a social reality that is, as I have discussed earlier, a construction of culturally inscribed fantasies, is to expose the gaps in performativity, the limitations of disidentification, and to recognize the discursive constraint and material viability placed on the representational form. Edelman provides a compelling argument, with which I am in agreement, for such interventions, and the subsequent rejection of reproductive futurism, embrace the ascription of negativity to the queer—an ascription that is always, already attributed to queer forms of existence within the current social reality of heteronormativity. He contends, “The embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (Edelman 6). In this sense, queer negativity, by way of its own negation, functions as a tool that not only undermines normative notions of what positive social values are, but it also contests the normative structure that ascribes any such value to the social. In other words, to embrace queer negativity is to contest the very structuring of identity, signification, and discourse that renders individuals as normative or marginalized. Furthermore, it disrupts the social value attributed to

the frameworks of recognition that continually reproduce intelligibility.

It is important to note that Edelman's framing of queer negativity and, as discussed earlier, Muñoz's utopic vision of queer world-making are not inherently antithetical to one another. On the level of language, queer negativity can point toward irruptions of unintelligibility. For example, if I negate what I and others claim me to be (e.g., "I am *not* gay"), then I deliberately sever my assurance and the assurance of others from knowing who I am. This not-knowing, similar to the not-knowing in the space of a glory hole, serves as a guide toward the elusiveness of the "real" or "essence" of a person, experience, or desire. Refusing to answer the question that often follows, "Then, who or what are you?," enacts a particular form of agency that entertains unintelligibility's capacity as a radical anti-taxonomy. This radical anti-taxonomy requires us to *imagine* the sorts of queer world-making strategies and alternative forms of recognition that are possible for us to inhabit beyond the horizon of intelligibility. In contrast to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would refer to as a "nonce taxonomy" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 23), an anti-taxonomy insists solely on the unmaking of categorical imaginings and not their subsequent remaking within the discursive field. As such, even if I refuse the manner in which I am being hailed, and consequently lose my discursive viability, the material conditions of my existence may change, but do not dissipate.

It is this return to the body with which this introduction started—yet, uncircumscribed by discursive parameters—where bodily materialism, desire, and intimacy can operate unmediated by language and the visual field. By investigating the gaps, fissures, silences, and ephemeral moments that occur at queer times and spaces, and utilizing Edelman's notion of queer negativity, the narratives of intelligible positionalities I examine give way to what unintelligibly may offer. Just as forms of queer otherness emerge as a strategy for surviving discursive constraint, so too does unintelligibility emerge as a practice and as a dimension of the lived experience—particularly for those who have already been, or are yet to become, undone by normative frameworks of recognition.

Despite not knowing what exists just beyond the queer dystopic horizon, this project argues to embrace unintelligibility as a challenging, yet conceivable, task. As much as it is a theoretical venture, such work is also an ethical necessity that strives to make unintelligibility not only an inhabitable way to live, but also a desirable one worth living. If we are to adopt

unintelligibility as a practice, then we are in dire need of a queer ethical awareness surrounding the violences that emerge in direct response to the possibilities this radical anti-taxonomy offers. In this regard, the larger queer political project lies in our ability to recognize the ethical value queer otherness holds. For Edelman, “Queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (3). Just as violence is a course of action that is often enacted (against or in defense of oneself) if one’s subjectivity remains unintelligible to others, queerness must resist participation in the social structures that precipitate culturally instituted fantasies of the body and discursive constraint. In essence, it is important for individuals to think through nonprescriptive ways of being “ethical” with alternative modalities of queerness from which unintelligibility springs forth. Such an ethics is applicable not only in our immediate and visceral reactions to the current political climate in the United States, but is also relevant to the ways in which we negotiate intimate relations with others (sexual or not). To this end, queer politics and queer ethics become intertwined as they are strategic positionings that enable individuals to be in solidarity with others, regardless of the multitude of other differences, via rendering oneself unintelligible and “undignified” or “unacceptable” in relation to normative conceptions of *being*. These positionalities continue the push for/of/within queer theorizing and queer imagining, whether or not these manifestations are temporally felt, embodied, enacted or immediately recognized.

Overview of Chapters

As previously mentioned, discursive constraint restricts the narratives we can tell about bodies; it also limits the number of realizable identities for gender-variant individuals to embody. Often, as is the case, an individual’s legibility and subsequent material viability becomes actualized through the recapitulation of a narrative that correlates to a specific intelligible identity. In Chapter 1, I examine these discursive limitations, material consequences, and institutional violences done unto gender-variant bodies when such bodies are rendered intelligible within a normative discursive field. As a way to gain legibility, transsexuals and cissexuals¹³ alike frequently

¹³ “Cissexual” is often used to describe an individual who identifies with the biological sex they were assigned-at-birth. In other words, it is another term for someone who doesn’t identify as a transsexual. The term “cisgender” is

reproduce the “born in the wrong body” narrative. This narrative signals a presumed discordance between individuals’ physiological sex assigned at birth and the sexed body they believe they ought to have been born into. Those who subscribe to this narrative view the perceived “incongruence” as an error and one that must be corrected. Medical and psychological institutions further reinforce this narrative, ascribing to the belief that the minds of such individuals are “diseased” and/or their gender identities are “dysphoric.” By invoking this narrative, transsexuals may acquire access to hormones and/or surgery in order to “fix the problem”—inevitably, attempting to realign themselves with the “right body.” Such a narrative not only offers agency by way of a specific form of recognizability, but it also enables individuals to reinforce their gender identity as falling in accordance with normative gender conventions.

As restrictive categorizations limit the possibilities of gender variance and queer otherness, this chapter examines how such frameworks of recognition contribute to the policing of bodies, behaviors, and desires, relegating them to the margins or forcefully having them assimilate as being “diseased” within. In doing so, I critique the portrayal of a “gender dysphoric” adolescent in Alan B. Goldberg’s 2008 *ABC News* article, “Born With the Wrong Body.” Like so many other contemporary portrayals of gender-variant individuals, these depictions of adolescents (along with the work of researchers such as Henry Rubin, Jay Prosser, and Milton Diamond) reify the sex-gender binary and reinforce the discursive constraint that restricts intelligibility and normalizes the transsexual experience insofar as it can be “corrected.”

As a deviation from this trans-normative realignment, I turn toward the character of Exotica in R. Zamora Linmark’s novel, *Rolling the R’s*. In the chapter “Lips,” the way Exotica describes her embodied experience differs from a very linear “born in the wrong body” narrative by virtue of the playful and metaphorical language she uses to describe her body’s materiality—thereby queering her embodied otherness. Linmark also makes readily apparent how Exotica’s body becomes a prevalent site of recognition or misrecognition. Although her narrative evokes

also used to denote individuals whose current gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned-at-birth (i.e., non-transgender folks). Although both of these terms are most commonly circulated in the queer community, and they are a means of not privileging those with sex-gender concordance over trans* identities, they presume only two inhabitable genders or sexes. Furthermore, such terms shuttle bodies into two distinct intelligible categories—“trans-” on one hand and “cis-” on the other.

gender-related discomforts, she deploys performativity and disidentification as tools for survival and resistance. Furthermore, Linmark's witty use of language highlights the malleability of the meaning of words. Similarly, the novel's structure stretches the bounds of its literary genre as it weaves together short stories and vignettes told from the perspective multiple narrators. In this sense, Linmark *queer* the readers' expectations regarding how a narrative arc can develop and, thereby, solicits a queer reading of both its content and form.

As long as the altered/sewn/scarred trans* body remains as a reminder of how identity is malleable and transgressive, tensions between an attempt to discursively solidify one's identity as only ever having been "male" or "female" (within a prescriptive framework) remain for those who identify as transsexuals. In order to highlight these tensions and offer a divergent perspective from the above two narratives, I examine Loren "Rex" Cameron's self-portraits in his photography series, "Distortions." Cameron's portraits, on the level of reception, create a disidentificatory moment for the intelligible viewer. On the level of artistic production and narrative, these photographs highlight the restrictiveness of discourse in a way in which literary representations cannot—visually framing Cameron being boxed in by language and being undone by others. While at the same time, Cameron as the subject of the photographs cannot or does not respond to being discursively rendered intelligible, thereby mobilizing Lee Edelman's notion of queer negativity through the act of silence as an act of refusal.

To extend my analysis of discursive constraint in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 examines two separate, yet highly exclusionary, state-sanctioned institutions—the military and marriage—as they operate in analogous ways and violently police unruly bodies and non-normative desires. These institutions regulate bodies, modes of identification, and social interactions through complex systems of recognition. In order to ensure the future continuance of these institutions, these systems of recognition heavily rely on the regulatory frameworks of heteronormativity (and, increasingly homonormativity) in order to forcefully forge kinship ties, through mediated social relations, between those who partake in their reproduction. Kinship, in this chapter, is represented by the fraternal bonds that soldiers create while in military service and by the fidelity forged within a familial unit, particularly between husband and wife. As a result, the relationships that emerge from these interactions are products of shared experiences and communal identities. They become an affirmation of heterosexuality and a way of asserting

one's loyalty to the family home and the country's home front.

To analyze the effects of and tensions between intelligibility and queer otherness within the institutions of the military and marriage, I examine *Soldier's Girl* (2003), a Showtime docudrama detailing the events leading to the death of Private First Class (PFC) Barry Winchell in 1999, and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a fictional film based Annie Proulx's short story. Unlike the literary and extra-literary representations of these storylines, the visual elements of both films convey the discursive constraint and physical isolation that is endemic to institutionalized forms of recognition. On the surface, both films present death as an inevitable outcome for individuals whose queer otherness threatens the regulatory regimes that keep such oppressive structures in place. However, I contend the momentary ruptures of queer otherness that emerge in these films directly correlate to the regulatory and discursive constraints imposed upon bodies perceived as disruptive to the foundational norms that institutions such as the military and marriage rely on. No matter how much these institutions attempt to violently eradicate these ruptures, such disruptions create fissures within the unstable landscape of heteronormativity.

In Chapter 3, I look toward representations of queer otherness that emerge as grotesque—namely, depictions of inherent self-destruction and internalized monstrosity. Instead of these manifestations folding back onto themselves because of their perceived fragility, my reading of such representations proposes that their existence mobilizes queer negativity and calls forth moments of unintelligibility—potent moments that threaten to unravel in the public sphere. First, I analyze David Fincher's film, *Fight Club* (1999), adapted from Chuck Palahniuk's novel. As much as the film affirms a recuperation of “lost masculinity” (one that manifests in underground fight clubs across the country), the sheer physicality of the interpersonal violence represented on the screen projects beyond the individual and onto consumer culture and modes of capitalist production. In this sense, to self-destruct is to destroy the very agent that allows capitalism to function. Such self-destruction poses a resistance to notions of production, reproduction, stability, and continuance—all of which are aspects that disrupt operations of civility, obedience, and heteronormative public life.

Lastly, I shift toward examining clips from Season 2 of Showtime's cable television series *The L Word* (2005) in order to show how the central character of Jenny Schecter constructs an imaginative counterpublic that provides space for her to work through sexual trauma

associated with having been raped. The carnivalesque aspects of this counterpublic space draw attention to the internalized forms of monstrosity Jenny experiences and situates her body as a spectacle. Her emergent queer positionality defiantly rejects a normative trajectory of reconciliation with her past trauma and present desires. While remaining critical of how interpersonal and intrapersonal harm operates in both productions, and in being attuned to the limitations that attend such transgressions, I suggest that these visual representations facilitate a disidentificatory spectatorship that asks us to embrace violent sensations as a way to protest the conditions that make such sensations violent

Chapter 4 calls attention to the emergence of a new generation of cinematic productions in the early 1990s that was later called “New Queer Cinema” (NQC). As NQC gains visibility in both mainstream and marginalized arenas, the political practices and activist exigency of queerness develop, reaching beyond the categories of gender and sexuality to critiques of systemic violence. Through nonconventional filming and editing techniques, and providing narrative voice to forms of queer otherness, NQC reconfigures the static, taxonomical identificatory structuring of desire within a hetero-/homosexual binary. It also simultaneously questions the normative ideological constraints that are typically placed upon aesthetic, critical, and cultural productions, queering spectatorship for the viewer, while allowing a new, imaginative set of implications to materialize.

As such, I examine Del LaGrace Volcano’s short film *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) as an example that points toward the queer potentiality of unintelligibility, subversive participatory spectatorship, the emergence of counterpublic spaces, and the imaginative possibilities that surface from the bodily materialism of intimacy. This NQC production, and ones similar to it, continue to resist participation in hetero- and homonormativity by rejecting frameworks of recognition that validate an endorsement of traditional cinematic conventions or dominant discursive constraints. Instead, such cinematic representations push for more mobile and fluid conceptions of queer otherness (evinced by a multiplicity of experiences, embodiments, identifications, and expressions of desire) and actively work toward an embrace of unintelligibility as a participatory practice.

The final chapter of this project addresses the question of whether an unintelligible life is not only livable, but a desirable life to live. By examining the resistances, reformations,

reconfigurations of *being* violently rendered intelligible, I explore what unintelligibility might offer by turning toward the implications of unintelligibility as an ethical practice that remains in the present and is not dependent on a foreseeable future. This insistence on the present tense still allows for queer world-making strategies that imagine “something else” beyond the horizon. Drawing upon Keir McCoy’s 2002 self-portrait “Shatter,” I discuss the necessary advocacy for prolonged and sustainable unintelligibility and the formulation of a radical anti-taxonomy. Embracing unintelligibility and learning to “kiss the ugly parts” radically shifts the ways we confer recognition; it also changes the ways support, solidarity, and accompliceship take shape. Such formulations are crucial components toward the day-to-day survivability for many individuals whose lives become livable through the few meaningful intimate connections that supersede rigid taxonomies—intimacies that propel bodily materialism, narratives of alterity, and non-normative desires forward in imaginative and expressive ways.

CHAPTER 1

Re-Scripting Gender: Trans* Narratives, Representation, & Embodiment

*And if you happen to be gay,
you should show a little heart and understanding.
Instead of twittering and whispering and pointing Judas fingers,
like a bunch of cunning linguists at some gender crucifixion.
And if you think I'm such a freak,
there's no need to cut me down,
and put me in my place.
You just may want to look at your pants, oh so wet,
and your knees like castanets,
are giving you away.
–Star Maris, “I’m Not A Fucking Drag Queen”*

As a way to express her frustration and hurt after experiencing misrecognition, Star Maris, a Canadian transgender activist and performer, wrote the song “I’m Not A Fucking Drag Queen.”¹⁴ The song was featured in the film *Better Than Chocolate* (1999), an independent Canadian romantic comedy directed by Anne Wheeler. Although the story’s focus remains on the budding relationship two lesbians, Maggie (played by Karyn Dwyer) and Kim (played by Christina Cox), a subplot develops around the transgender character Judy Squires (played by Peter Outerbridge).¹⁵ Throughout the film, Judy struggles with her legibility as a woman. Desiring to inhabit a particular field of recognition, Judy works on building self-confidence. On stage at a gay night club, Judy performs Maris’s song, “I’m Not A Fucking Drag Queen” as an act of defiance and a means of self-empowerment. The above excerpt directs the listener toward the sociality of linguistic violence, and in this case, the articulation of such violences by the narrator, Judy. She continues to gesture toward the potentiality of physical violence, not against her, but directed at anyone who persists in taunting her:

‘Cause I’m not a fucking drag queen,
So please don’t be so rude.
I’ll break your fucking legs, sir.

¹⁴ Star Maris passed away on February 2, 2001 at the age of 46. Her death was announced that same month in the *Trans Alliance Society Newsletter* (1-2).

¹⁵ It is worth noting that some trans* activists have taken issue with the disproportionate number of cisgender individuals who play transgender characters, particularly as such roles become more prevalent in mainstream film and television.

And then I'll pirouette while,
I mend my transgender heart. (*Better Than Chocolate*).

Here, Judy's righteous anger is offered up as a violent response against those who linguistically chastise her as an individual and as a representative constituent of the transgender¹⁶ community. Such linguistic encodings are a direct result of how Judy, a self-identified transgender woman, is identified by the spectators of her performance—in this case, they are rendering her as a gay male “performing” as a drag queen—as she puts forth witty quips as a response to her own sense of vulnerability. Her heightened visibility as a “non-passable” woman results in her being harmfully rendered intelligible to others as something more comprehensible and legible within the counterpublic sphere of a Canadian lesbian night club. Yet, her performance resists such legibility, as she violates the constraints of gender conformity and femininity by threatening to “break *your* leg” (emphasis mine), a threat of physical violence that is often read as an “expected” masculine characteristic.

Trans* folks, like Judy, often resist when cisgender individuals elect to shuttle their bodies into a taxonomical category, particularly when these categories are not self-selected by trans* folks or if their identities do not fit nicely within the predefined discursive parameters of gender normativity. When such parameters are established as norms, and are viewed as naturalized expectations of embodiment, cisgender individuals who comply with such norms police the resistances that disrupt the solidification of an identity. Intentional or unintentional deviations from the norm often result in cisgender individuals marking others as inhabiting a visually recognizable form of queer otherness or an illegible form of unintelligibility.

This chapter addresses several prominent theories in Queer and Trans* Studies that focus on gender performativity, transsexual embodiment, and the (re)construction of trans* identities that negotiate the terrain between hegemonic and counter hegemonic ideology. I wish to highlight in this chapter the multiplicity, fluidity, and temporality of trans* identities as they

¹⁶ I do acknowledge that many self-identified transsexuals choose not to use the term “transgender” as a way of validating the medicalized aspect of their “transition” and distinguishing themselves from those who choose not to physically alter their bodies. Although transsexuals are a subsection of the trans* community, I specifically apply the term “trans*” to any individual who does not fit within the defined parameters of gender normativity for this chapter unless an individual specifies their experience as transsexual, transgender, transgressive, or (more broadly) gender-variant. As a political marker, “trans*” signals a particular temporality with gender—one that is flexible, contingent, and always invested in a continual state of *becoming*.

traverse the unstable ideological terrain of the sex-gender system in contrast to how socially constructed norms of this system often reinforce a common misconception that an individual's biological sex determines a "correct" gender, which directly impacts an individual's sexual orientation as well as the "appropriate" corresponding desires. As bodies are always in perpetual motion (directly connected to affect and highly interpersonal), the larger political aim ought to focus on how to legitimize all personal experiences and desires (whether intelligible or not) without interpellating an individual's embodiment as a pathology, a position of compromise, or as a non-viable existence.

Since many trans* individuals' modes of embodiment and expression are continuously shifting, mutable, and/or ambiguous, such instances of interpellation occur with frequency. The potential for such mutability displays the social construction of identity and the unnaturalness of concretized embodiment. Furthermore, if such individuals are perceived as threatening the fabric of social functionality, then the "threat" extends beyond those individuals who do not abide by set gender norms. Heteronormative institutions (e.g., the American Medical Association [AMA], the American Psychiatric Association [APA], and the federal government) persist with such policing as they attempt to mitigate any disruptions to the social order by assigning a particular role to the unintelligible body as "diseased," "perverse," or "inappropriate" so that the individual's sex, gender, sexual orientation, behaviors, utterances, relationship structures, and/or desires become intelligible as they are clearly defined and violently rendered in relation to, or within, the recognizable bounds of the dominant discursive groupings.

Although this chapter embraces redefining one's body in any amalgamation desired, I am not advocating for the structuring of a singular trans* narrative that is assimilationist and does not advocate for prolonged unintelligibility or marked queer otherness any more than I am advocating for any conformist or cis-normative gender roles. Too often, institutional authorities and the systems they serve procure personal narratives that are later to be wielded with destructive efficacy against trans* individuals, whether or not they desire to conform to social norms. Such narratives are often solidified into a homogenous trans* experience and dictate how one ought to act, feel, or behave. The harnessing of such narratives in the name of scientific inquiry not only creates destructive social limitations with regards to embodiment, self-identification, and representation (particularly within medical discourse), but it is also inherently

political as such positionings further participate in the erasure of any potential alterity, rendering such lives less livable unless there is a desire to “normalize” and “mainstream.” As a result of the preponderance of such transsexual narratives in the media (e.g., Chaz Bono and Caitlyn Jenner) and my own wariness of the use of the term “transgender” to connote a static category of identification, I am reminded of how the mobilization of identity categories may also become a form of power that I am attempting to combat. Like the character of Judy, if I am to denounce the term “drag queen” in favor of self-identifying as transgender, I may, in fact, mobilize a specific moment of agency while also succumbing to a particular cultural meaning that does not accurately define my embodied experience. As such, I argue for gender-variant modes of identification and embodiment as potential sites of *becoming* that have the capacity to destabilize heteronormative notions of biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. At these moments, the construction of the body (sewn or not) becomes a site that is not restricted to the discursively reinforced imagined “real,” but rather redefines it.

Regardless of the categorical tensions that facilitate the (re)production of trans* narratives and solidify their subjectivities within this prescriptive framework, I posit that ruptures occur as the mobilization of the body contests not only gender norms, but also challenges the rigidity of the imaginary that perpetuates the production of such scripts. To substantiate my claims, first I turn to the theoretical underpinnings that surround the institutional limitations placed on gender performativity and examine how an individual’s mutable subjectivity might undermine notions of the “real” or can work at reinforcing ideological and biological facticity—aspects which direct and harness one’s desires within the confines of discourse. In particular, I critique the work of humanities scholar Jay Prosser, sociologist Henry Rubin, and sexologist Milton Diamond in order to illustrate how specific depictions of individuals—based on theory, interviews, phenomenology, and scientific research—reify the sex-gender binary and mark bodies through difference as a way to legitimize the (re)production of trans* narratives within the medical establishment. Next, I turn to Alan Goldberg’s *ABC News* article, “Born With the Wrong Body,” to highlight how medical discourse becomes translated into a “born-in-the-wrong-body” rhetoric. Transsexuals who mobilize such rhetoric do so in order to gain legitimacy by way of claiming the status of the “diseased” subject with the hopes of their experiences being rendered intelligible and authentic so they may be recognized

and socially accepted as “real” men or women. Such narratives reinforce the violent gendering aspects of norms for both trans* and cisgender individuals.

In contrast to such trans* normative narratives, I turn toward the character of Exotica in R. Zamora Linmark’s novel, *Rolling the R’s*, and Loren “Rex” Cameron’s “Distortions” self-portrait series. In the novel, Exotica’s self-representation departs from the “born in the wrong body” narrative as she describes her embodied self in a manner that “queers” her otherness. In the case of Cameron’s photographs, the framing of his female-to-male (FTM) transsexual body threatens the prescriptive gender norms by bodily challenging the rigidity of the imaginary that perpetuates such scripts. In a Deleuzian sense, these representations of the body are “the Figure is the form that is connected to a sensation, and that conveys the violence of this sensation directly to the nervous system. [...] [I]t is the human body that plays this role of the Figure: it functions as the material support or framework that sustains a precise sensation” (Smith, “Deleuze on Bacon: Three Conceptual Trajectories in *The Logic of Sensation*” xiii). Both of these representations enable queer otherness and unintelligibility to emerge, reconfigure, or distort notions of the “diseased” body, placing the audience in a state of dis-ease in order to ask if *anyone* is ever born into the “right” body. Although I do acknowledge that hegemonic discourse and normative values restrict the possibilities of realizable genders to a finite number, creative and imaginative alternatives emerge and eventually transform the limits of the discursive.

Theoretical Framework: the Institutional & Interpersonal Violence of Recognizability

Since the advent of the first widely published transsexual autobiography by Christine Jorgensen (1967), there has been, and still exists, a large gap in information that discusses the experience of *being* and *becoming* trans*. Here, I am suggesting that a mode of “being” is a fixed and static present; “becoming,” rather, signals the possibility of continual shifts marked by an anticipatory future of mutability. In other words, the experience of *being* trans* lends itself to a particular type of embodiment—one that is often substantiated by the phenomenology of intelligible trans* identities—whereas *becoming* trans* is marked by an experience that is not yet here and not readily legible as fully-realized or intelligible within dominant discourse.

Often the viability of trans* existence has been subjected to examination as an “object” of

study, particularly for transsexuals because of their desire to physically change their bodies to match an idealized image. For some transsexuals, heightened visibility creates a sense of gender panic or terror for those who embed themselves in gender “norms”; for other transsexuals, invisibility may create another sense of gender panic or terror related to the threat of being discovered in the event that he or she is not able to “do” gender properly. Regardless, only within the past few decades has there been a surge in production of scholarship regarding trans* subjectivity, often recorded and recounted by visible, audible, and/or legible trans* individuals.¹⁷ The issues these scholars and activists raise, either through the testimony of their own personal narratives or the analysis of other trans* stories, seem to stitch together a variety of bodily expressions and embodiments which demand validation within or outside of culturally inscribed notions of gender. Such complicated expressions of gender identification, and politically charged modes of bodily desire, are often illuminated in feminist, queer, and trans* discourse via close examination of autobiographical and fictional narratives. The circulation of these textual representations points toward the political currency narratives, which represent individual lives, hold within dominant discourse. In these cases, narrative serves as a mechanism to lay claim to an “authentic” trans* experience and assert its legitimacy as an intelligible form of being.

Certain narratives gain a greater valence than others, particularly when gender “experts” assert the legitimacy of specific claims. Within Gender Studies, the claims of transsexual theorists and scientific researchers are often pitted against those of queer theorists and scholars. As a result, one of the fundamental divisions in this field occurs around the concept of gender as performative and gender as embodiment. As these approaches need not be adversarial, I turn toward theorists such as Jay Prosser and Henry Rubin who focus on narrative as a mechanism that sustains this divide. The point here is to examine how their work reproduces the medicalized rhetoric of gender variance as pathology—a narrative of being “born in the wrong body” that has become mainstream. This focus is not to illustrate the fallacy of such claims, but to highlight how the power of such understandings exert a force that can violently render individuals intelligible within hegemonic discourse while, at the same time, limiting the

¹⁷ Some of the more notable trans* writers I am referring to include: Leslie Feinberg, Kate Bornstein, Jason Cromwell, Susan Stryker, Jamison Green, J. Jack Halberstam, Julia Serano, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, Riki Wilchins, J. Bobby Noble, Dallas Denny, Jennifer Finney Boylan, Patrick Califia, and Dean Spade.

possibilities of other narratives to emerge. Although I recognize how cisgender and trans* individuals experience a significant difference and degree of difficulty with traversing interpersonal interactions and institutional systems throughout their lives, I wish to emphasize that the gendering process remains the primary issue since it violently renders *all* individuals intelligible within dominant discourse—cisgender and trans* alike.

In his book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Jay Prosser takes Judith Butler's notion of "gender performativity" to task in an attempt to recover the transsexual narrative from queer theory's "arrogation of transgender" (32). Prosser asserts, "What gets dropped from transgender in its queer deployment to signify subversive gender performativity is the value of the matter that often most concerns the transsexual: the *narrative* of becoming a biological man or a biological woman (as opposed to the performative of effecting one)—in brief and simple the materiality of the sexed body" (32). By devaluing the embodied aspects of the figurative and performative subject, and privileging the materiality of "sex," Prosser's emphasis on the narrative of biological gender results in a critical misinterpretation of Butler's texts. Furthermore, Prosser suggests that Butler ignores the fact that many transsexuals desire to be nonperformative; instead, he suggests that she uses transgender embodiments to concretize "gender performativity" when, in fact, his own analysis concretizes a particular narrative of the sexed body. Whether or not I wish my gender to be nonperformative is beside the point since the narrative I provide to gain legibility is already an aspect of my gender performativity. Once my narrative is recognizable as not just belonging to me, then I effectively lose ownership over my narrative even though my identity, as a result, is validated as intelligible. Although Prosser's aim is to highlight the phenomenological experience of being transsexual as one that aspires to be no different than cisgender individuals, his analysis runs the risk of dismissing the embodied aspects of gender performativity that give way to forms of queer otherness and illegible unintelligibility.

The trajectory of Prosser's argument is inevitably pointed toward gaining validity through espousing *some* transsexual narratives—those deemed as *being* "authentic"—and perceiving transsexual embodiment as constative, nonperformative, and aligning with a "straight gender" (32). He contends that transsexual trajectories are often appropriated to exhibit the mobility and fluidity of gender as queer subjects instead of their desire to remain within a static qualification of "being." Prosser's presumptions hinge on his misreading of *Gender Trouble*.

He interprets the text as enabling the following syllogism:¹⁸ “transgender = gender performativity = queer = subversive” (Prosser 33). He suggests that such a syllogism reaffirms itself in relation to its antithesis and thus produces a binary opposition that awards one set of terms with presumed primacy over the others. For example, being “straight” is often privileged over being “queer.” Although Prosser’s misreading of Butler’s text enables his argument regarding transsexual narratives to unfold, it must be noted that Butler does have difficulty in accounting for the teleological aspect of a transsexual’s desire for sexed embodiment. For Prosser, the medical/mechanical production of bodies visibly reflects an alteration of prescriptive limits that are historically contingent; however, after the moment of “transition” has passed, it seems that the limitations of gender performances are reinscribed within a binary framework.

Although Prosser’s conceptual and political impulse is to recover narrative from performativity, what is at stake in this attempt? In many ways, such narratives do not risk erasure or cooptation by marginalized forms of queer otherness and, in recent years, transsexual narratives have become the dominant narratives of trans* experience as they are the most frequently reproduced and widely circulated in the media and medical discourse. These narratives do, however, risk being used to further the pathologization of gender variance at the expense of desiring to inhabit a set of norms. Such narratives reposition the “I” of the subject as one that speaks to a specific type of knowledge; in this case, a bodily knowledge of what it means to become a “woman” or “man.”

Similarly, sociologist Henry Rubin uses a phenomenological approach in his book, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men*, as it “returns agency to transsexuals and authority to their narratives” (25). Throughout Rubin’s book, he proclaims that hormone therapy marks the beginning of the FTMs’ transitions. Through such treatments, one’s notion of “manhood” and accompanying “masculinity” appears to be reinforced in relation to dominant conceptions of what constitutes a “man.” That is to say, without such treatments, the subject’s femaleness seems to remain and the narrative of inhabiting social norms of maleness

¹⁸ I would like to highlight that what Prosser terms a syllogism is technically incorrect. The categories that he sets up are more akin to a set of equivalencies rather than an application of deductive reasoning to Butler’s logical argument in order to arrive at a specific conclusion. This set of equivalencies produces an axiom that Prosser regards as an impediment to authentic narratives of transsexual embodiment. However, it is worth noting that many trans* individuals regard their gender expression as performative, queer, and subversive. These individuals do not necessarily find a conflict between the way they might narrate their embodiment and axiom Prosser arrives at.

fails to occur. Although I do not wish to entirely dismiss such personal narratives as “false consciousness,” as Rubin defensively suggests would happen (12-14), I cannot help but recognize that these framing of these experiences reinforce a particular Western hegemonic ideology. They also dismiss other contemporary constructions of trans* identities where gender expression and embodiment may remain incongruent but the individual’s identity is no less legitimate—even if such “identities are fictionalized constructs of our collective imagination” (Rubin 12). For instance, to use Rubin’s own words, what happens to the legitimacy of a trans* narrative when one’s “inner self” does not fit into the divide of the two discrete categories of “male and female, which are hegemonically defined by the presence or absence of a penis and by secondary sex characteristics?” (19). When I was the faculty advisor for a trans* and gender-variant student group at the California College of the Arts, several members identified as non-operative transsexuals. For example, one student’s gender identity as a man did not conflict with his feminine presentation—a presentation that often caused him to be perceived by cisgender individuals as inhabiting the category of “woman.” Despite the student being assigned female at birth (AFAB), the perceived incongruences between his gender expression, gender identity, and sexed body did not negatively impact his sense of self. In fact, it was the incongruences of his identity that were a composite of his embodied experience as someone who identifies as a transsexual male and desires not to medically transition.¹⁹

Yet, Rubin insists that one way the transsexual subjects of his study claim legitimacy is through explaining the logic of treatment via hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery (SRS). In his notes section on Chapter 1, Rubin asserts that the FTMs in his study remarked, their bodies had betrayed them at puberty. Several reported thinking that there was a physiological reason for their dilemma [...] [T]hese FTMs believe that science will one day find the physiological cause of their transsexualism. Almost all of the FTMs in this study privilege their subjective sense of themselves, their psychosexual outlook, their male gender identity, and justify their testosterone treatments as a means for making their bodies fit their minds. (187)

¹⁹ Although this may be a mode of identification that is generationally and geographically specific, many other trans* individuals fail to inhabit social norms, and such failure does not conflict with their “inner self.” Additionally, the narrative of transition from one gender to another becomes a normalizing one that is ascribed to all trans* individuals since only two genders are legible within dominant discourse.

Although pre-operative transsexual men do not conform to their biological/anatomical self as female, they are, according to Rubin, thoroughly inscribed within a gender binary in search of, or aligning with, an empirical “true self.” The above qualification seems to point toward a “born in the wrong body” narrative, where a realignment or “correction” of what is (presumably?) physiologically rooted, and which implies a type of gender conformity—at least, a process of conforming to the image of one’s inner self that, as Butler would suggest, is a culturally mediated and interpreted form of “sex.”

On one hand, Rubin’s recognition of how the imaginary is a key factor in the production of identity seems to gesture toward supporting Butler’s claim about the fantasized body and the unattainability of our “true” or “real” (inner/imagined) self. On the other hand, he is setting up a true/false binary which validates the phenomenological accounts of FTM embodiment while ignoring how the narration of their experiences is limited by the social and cultural contexts of dominant ideology. The problem is not determining the truth or earnestness of these individual’s identities; instead, it is that these FTMs are, within a collective consciousness, utilizing dominant discourse to endorse a specific set of socially and medically constructed ideals regarding what *is* and *can be* “male.” Although I do not posit that FTMs inhabit a “false consciousness” (Rubin 12), nor do I suggest that their experiences are any less real than other trans* individuals, I do, however, reject the notion of a “true self” since one’s sense of embodiment is often within propinquity to what is claimed as the *authentic* or *original* self. The terms “authentic” and “original” can only emerge into discourse while simultaneously invoking their negated counterparts—what is deemed “inauthentic” and “unoriginal.” These binary oppositions construct their symbolic meaning when held in relational difference to each other. As with Prosser, Rubin’s epistemological framing of gender identity appeals to the *telos* of desire for the sexed body and fleshes out an assertion of authenticity that calls forth the conceptual category of “sex.” The issue I take is not with the desire to inhabit a sexed body or to gain recognition of a particular embodied experience; rather, it is with how norms affect specific narratives that lay claim to an “authentic” gender. Within this framework of legibility, difficulty arises when the assumption is made that one’s inner identity *is* the “real” or “authentic” identity. Such claims presuppose that if an individual’s gender is unable to be narrated, or if it is regarded as unrecognizable, then such embodied experiences are inauthentic—that is, if they are even

regarded as inhabitable possibilities at all. Medical discourse and gender norms continually reassert this notion. Yet, if framed another way, the act of medically transitioning from one gender to another might offer a rupture where new possibilities of embodiment can and do occur as skin is sewn and transformed into something that is not “authentically” male, yet no longer viably rendered as “completely” female.

However, Rubin’s insistence on the medicalized transsexual narrative serves as a way for his subjects to affirm a stable identity that is specifically located within gender norms and affords them the occasion to be culturally interpellated as “male.” Furthermore, viewing these transformations as “treatment” for FTMs is symptomatic of how medical discourse polices moments of variance by subjecting these individuals to a singular, static role as male-identified subjects. Like so many other self-identified FTM transsexuals, Rubin no longer feels the need to question or contest the construction of his subjectivity; his own sense of self marks an “intersubjective recognition” that enables him to alter his female body, “taking the next logical step in order to be granted human status [as] authentic and recognizable” (181). For Rubin, it seems that after the moment of “transition” has passed, his gender identity ceases to “perform” and merely exists, inhabiting gender norms.

If the demands of recognition within the social order and the personal desire to be rendered intelligible were not as forcefully persistent, would these FTMs feel as inclined to perpetuate a medicalized transsexual narrative or experience the same immediacy to seek out medical treatments in order to authenticate or validate their identity? Additionally, how do these narratives provide a sense of relief from the constant onslaught of queries that demand an FTM individual substantiate who he is within the current sex-gender system? Instead, such narratives run the risk of reinforcing gender normative behaviors—behaviors that are often regarded as “innate” and are sometimes misogynistic (i.e., “Boys will be boys!”). Furthermore, these transsexual narratives precipitate from a medical/psychological diagnosis. Within the context of the FTM transsexual narrative, these diagnoses reinforce, and are reinforced by, culturally dictated beliefs of what a “man” should be.

Culturally instituted knowledge, produced and sustained by the medical institution, dictates the prescriptive parameters of socially acceptable sex and gender identifications. The inclination of medical and psychiatric practitioners is often to assign a particular role to the

unintelligible body so that an individual's sex, gender, and/or sexual orientation are clearly defined in relation to or within the dominant group and rendered discursively viable. Such identities, like those assumed by trans* individuals, are often initially unintelligible since they are continuously shifting, mutable, and ambiguous. As the trans* subject illuminates the fabrication and instability of the sex-gender system, regulatory regimes immediately police the individual's performance, reinstating and naturalizing distinctions between the "diseased," "disordered," or "dysphoric" body and those that are "normal" or healthy. For some individuals, these diagnoses provide an affirmation of an embodied feeling—a feeling that is often regarded as a "condition" of non-normative embodiment and that is incongruous with how frameworks of recognition confer an individual's intelligibility. For others individuals, these diagnoses propagate the belief that an individual's discomfort is a result of a psychological "defect" that causes "impairment." From this angle, the framing of gender variance as a "condition" becomes the impairment that directly stems from a gender dysphoric social order. Although utilizing a diagnosis can undo the distress an individual feels, the force with which these diagnoses become an imperative (in order to pursue bodily modifications) intensifies the distress and danger for those whose trans* identities exists outside of the neatly defined parameters of our current sex-gender system.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) is no stranger to reinforcing taxonomies and establishing an epistemology regarding the desirable, healthy, and stable mind and body fit for capitalist modes of production. With each revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, debates regarding the inclusion, exclusion, and naming of gender nonconformity occurs among sexologists, physicians, mental health practitioners, and trans* activists. These debates come as no surprise, since the list of quantifiable mental health disorders continues to grow, expanding what is included in the *DSM* with each subsequent edition. In the most current iteration, the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* renames what was previously known as Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the fourth edition (*DSM-4*)²⁰ to "gender dysphoria." According to the APA, "people

²⁰ According to the *DSM-4 (Text Revision)* the diagnostic criteria for GID entails the following: "A. A strong and persistent cross-gender identification (not merely a desire for any perceived cultural advantages of being the other sex) [...];" "B. Persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex [...];" "C. The disturbance is not concurrent with a physical intersex condition"; and, "D. The disturbance causes

whose gender at birth is contrary to the one they identify with will be diagnosed with gender dysphoria” (“Gender Dysphoria” 1). The APA’s intent behind this shift in terminology is to provide a diagnosis for the insurance coverage of procedures and medications that would otherwise not be covered if an individual chooses to medically transition. In this sense, keeping a diagnosis could prove beneficial for some individuals, disastrous for others, or even simultaneously harmful because of the violence of pathologization. In order to gain access to surgeries and hormones deemed “medically necessary” by the APA, individuals must often conform to a particular narrative—a narrative that endorses a binary perspective of gender and one that explains an extreme form of distress around how their current body does not reflect how they feel. Otherwise, the costly expense of hormone prescriptions and surgeries falls onto the individual as such procedures are regarded as “cosmetic” without a diagnosis and may be more difficult to obtain or they are accessed using unmonitored and less-than-legal methods.²¹

Notwithstanding, some members of the Gender Identity Disorders Working Group proposed removing the condition entirely (just as “homosexuality” was finally removed in 1986 from the *DSM-3*), however a central concern remained around individuals not being able to gain access to hormones and surgery if no psychiatric diagnosis existed. The APA claims that “Replacing ‘disorder’ with ‘dysphoria’ in the diagnostic label is not only more appropriate and consistent with familiar clinical sexology terminology, it also removes the connotation that the patient is ‘disordered’” and thereby avoids stigmatization (“Gender Dysphoria” 2). However, why must accessibility to medically transition in the United States be dictated by the purview of sexologists and insurance companies? Furthermore, if “dysphoria” is typically characterized as a state of unease or a feeling of emotional turmoil and mental discontent, and “disorder” denotes confusion and a disruption of order or “normal” function, then it remains unclear how one term remains any less stigmatizing than the other as both suggest a chronic form of distress.²²

clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (American Psychiatric Association 581).

²¹ In many instances when insurance companies refuse to cover trans*-related health care costs, surgeons and physicians can still require a diagnosis of “gender dysphoria” even if such procedures are deemed “cosmetic” and are paid in full by the individual.

²² As a way to distinguish it from other forms of gender nonconformity, the APA asserts that “The critical element of gender dysphoria is the presence of clinically significant distress associated with the condition” (“Gender Dysphoria” 1).

In many ways, the label of “gender dysphoria” is no less pathologizing than the previous designation of GID as long as individuals are provided with the appropriate “treatment” that allows for their sense of embodiment to align with their self-narrative. Gaining access to health care that would allow an individual to medically transition seems to motivate what narratives are disclosed, particularly if an individual does not have the economic means to transition outside of the medical establishment. Additionally, increased distress may occur for other individuals who cannot or will not disclose an inauthentic narrative—a narrative that would allow them access to medically transition. Also, the medical and psychiatric institutions may deny an individual access to medically transition simply because their narrative does not fall within the diagnostic parameters, thus leading to another form of distress brought on by systemic violence.²³ In either case, it is the individual who is regarded as “gender dysphoric” instead of recognizing how social and cultural norms cause all individuals, cisgender and trans* alike, to be dysphorically gendered. For many trans* folks, whether they choose to medically transition or not, the distress of being pathologized can be greater than the distress of living in a dysphoric world.

Regardless of whether it is called GID or gender dysphoria, the APA proclaims that their focus is truly on the *distress* gender discordance causes. Yet, what is not being accounted for in these diagnoses is the intersectional and systemic ways in which distress manifests or the ways in which the problem might actually belong to the dominant culture within a society and its members who become “undone” in the presence of trans* individuals. Moreover, what of the added distress incurred due to living in poverty? Or, the distress one experiences due to institutional and interpersonal racism? The point I raise is not about whether or not certain individuals ought to be able to gain health care access in order to medically transition but, rather, it is about contesting how the medical establishment regulates bodily comportment through pathologizing certain forms of distress whether or not the individual exhibits such distress or self-reports it.

²³ A former trans* student confided in me that they desired to obtain a prescription for hormones but were consistently denied by different medical practitioners because they refused to narrate their experience as one that conformed to the sex-gender binary. After growing increasingly depressed as a result of this added “distress,” the student returned to their doctor’s office and informed a new medical practitioner that they felt as if they were “gender dysphoric” and might inflict self-harm if they did not change their body to reflect their sense of self. Although this narrative was only partially accurate, they were immediately given a prescription for hormones. Unfortunately, this case is not an isolated one and reflects the medical establishment’s insistence that only certain individuals ought to have the means to medically transition.

With regards to articulating the experience of distress related to gender dysphoria, individuals often narrate their apparent discomfort as stemming from an inability to conform to their assigned role at birth, manifesting a narrative of being “trapped in” or born into the “wrong” body. Yet, I would argue the discomfort such individuals experience is not caused by one being *trapped in* the wrong body, but instead, the individual is *trapped by* the restrictive confines of normative gender representations that are socially and culturally reinforced. As the APA astutely asserts, the “DSM not only determines how mental disorders are defined and diagnosed, it also impacts how people see themselves and how we see each other” (“Gender Dysphoria” 1). Such diagnoses help facilitate the construction of a “born in the wrong body” narrative—a narrative that is symptomatic of how social and medical institutions perpetuate what Butler refers to as the “culturally instituted fantasy” of the “real” (*Gender Trouble* 90), permitting the trans* body to be marked, labeled, and pathologized as “distressed” in order to treat a “condition” and return it to a set of normative standards. As such, the distress experienced by an individual can be directly correlated to the continual maintenance and policing of a highly ordered sex-gender system—a system that is most often perceived as stable. Yet, such individuals are only granted this mobility and re-partitioning of embodiment if they are in a position of privilege that allows them the means of gaining access to these technologies/treatments deemed medically necessary.

The issue I am raising is not over the argument of cosmetic versus medically necessary procedures, particularly since changing one’s name and gender marker on legal forms in the United States requires some sort of diagnosis and, in some states, additional proof of one’s *completed* transition. Such diagnoses are not required for cisgender women who want breast implants, cisgender men who desire penile extensions, or the multitude of reasons an individual might desire to change any of the names they were given at birth—as long as their reason is not for the purposes of becoming the “opposite” gender. Modifications to the cisgender body remain uncontested and are frequently narrated as a “necessity” to an individual’s mental health, well-being, and social viability. Instead, the issue I raise is with how the medical and psychiatric establishments reinforce the parameters of gender legibility on an individual level (with the production of a particular narrative) and on an institutional level (with claiming authority and control over who can gain access to particular methods of transition). In effect, any individual

ought to have access to modify their body as they see fit and be able to do so without the scrutiny or regulation of the APA, psychiatrists, or other medical practitioners.

In addition to the APA's restrictive identifications, which essentialize and conflate anatomical sex and secondary sex characteristics with the ideal body image, the field of sexology contributes greatly to the legislation of gender identification and embodiment. Milton "Mickey" Diamond, a renowned and controversial sexologist at the University of Hawai'i (Mānoa), in the course of his research, attempts to clarify the difference between sex and gender as well as the social aspects of sexual identity and self-ascribed gender identity for clinical and medical agents that deal with transsexual and intersex individuals.²⁴ According to sexologists, "sexual identity speaks to the way one views him- or herself as a male or female. This inner conviction of identification usually mirrors one's outward physical appearance and the typically sex-linked role one develops and prefers or society attempts to impose" (Diamond, "Sex and Gender are Different" 323). In contrast, Diamond explains that "gender identity" is defined as the

recognition of the perceived social gender attributed to a person. Typically, a male is perceived as a boy or a man, where *boy* and *man* are social terms with associated cultural expectations attached. Similarly, a female is perceived as a girl or woman. The distinctions made between boy and girl and man and woman usually again represent differences in social expectations that go along with increases in maturity. ("Sex and Gender are Different" 323)

Although Diamond is trend-setting in his field by distinguishing between sex and gender²⁵ while also drawing attention to the social and cultural aspects of these categories (a distinction that is

²⁴ Diamond is most famously known as one of the leading researchers who "helped" David Reimer realize his "true" sex and aided him in transitioning back to being "male" after he had been raised, and consequently socialized, as a girl following a botched circumcision. Of course, since Reimer committed suicide in 2004, it is difficult to assess what productive help may have been generated by Diamond. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler's chapter "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality" addresses the psychological violence Reimer experienced following John Money's, and later Milton Diamond's, medically mediated interventions.

²⁵ In the article, "Sex and Gender are Different," Diamond suggests, "Maintenance of clear conceptual distinctions between the two words *sex* and *gender* and associated concepts is particularly helpful for the psychological understanding of identity. [...] in certain contexts—particularly those involving transsexuality and intersexuality but in other instances as well—it is most useful to recognize and encourage the distinction" (321). In the field of sexology, the categories of "sex" and "gender" are frequently interchangeable and linked to biological facticity. Diamond's advocacy for parsing these two analytical categories signals a crucial and necessary intervention.

commonplace in Women's and Gender Studies), he dangerously reinforces the sex-gender binary by linking gender to a neurological facticity.

In his article, "Biased-Interaction Theory of Psychosexual Development," Diamond purports that one's gender identity is both prenatally and postnatally influenced by the mind: "one can say the person has a gendered brain since it is the brain that structures the individual's basic personality; first with inherent tendencies then with interactions coming from experience" (589). Furthermore, Diamond extends this assertion to the sexual identity of transsexuals, suggesting that such individuals are "intersexed in their brains" ("Biased-Interaction Theory" 597, note 14). These claims, and other science-based research that substantiates them, run the risk of asserting that an individual's brain is biologically structured in a way to be intrinsically male or female.

Additionally, Diamond suggests that self-image also plays a part in crystallizing an individual's sexual identity. He claims, "If a designation of transsexualism is to obtain, as the individual matures, the self-image (sexual identity) he or she has of himself or herself solidifies as that of the sex opposite to their anatomical sex. The mirror image is in conflict with the mind's image" (Diamond, "Sex and Gender are Different" 324). Here, Diamond does not acknowledge that the requirements set forth for obtaining one's desired "self-image" presupposes the solidification of oppositional identification of one's medically assigned sex. Why must the only way to obtain the mind's image of oneself be vis-à-vis identifying with the opposite of one's anatomy? He continues to suggest that one's "sexual identity is immutable" (Diamond, "Sex and Gender are Different" 325), enabling the changing of one's body instead of one's mind. Yet, doesn't this mutability of the body highlight the social construction and fluidity of not just gender, but biological sex as well?

Given such research, if the medical establishment claims that my sexual identity is immutable and my transsexuality is, in fact, deemed an intersexed condition because of my gendered brain, then I may be afforded the privilege to access those procedures considered medically necessary in order to bring my mind and body into alignment—that is, if I also endorse the manner in which I am made legible within medical discourse and adopt a narrative that remains in alignment with this field of recognition (e.g., "I am trapped in the wrong body"). However, this type of research is not only biased toward a Western binary notion of gender, but

it also disregards those who experience gender as a continuum, as a spectrum, or as something that is not quite intelligible.

Furthermore, if such research were to be used as diagnostic criterion for discerning whose gendered brains are incongruent with their current sexed bodies, questions of accessibility to technological means that allow for the modification of an individual's body would arise. For example, individuals who do not meet the criteria but, nonetheless, experience gender dysphoria may not qualify to medically transition. Conversely, if an individual does meet the criterion but does not experience psychological distress that is a marker of gender dysphoria, then I am wary of the institutionalized pressure the individual may be subjected to in order to "fix" their body so that it aligns with their mind. Such concern is highly warranted, as medical practitioners in the past have disregarded the agency of children born with anatomical abnormalities (e.g., visible intersex conditions such as the presence of both male and female genitalia) and elected to "correct" their conditions. These surgical interventions still occur today, sometimes without the consent of the parents and certainly without the consent of the child.

Even though researchers like Diamond maybe have the best intentions in mind, attempting to eradicate the tensions and ambiguities that exist between sex and gender does not entirely dissolve what the medical field perceives as innate disparities, nor does it lessen gender dysphoria that results in prolonged distress. Such motivations reinforce the binary distinctions set forth by the sex-gender system and they highlight how dominant narratives of transsexuality gain viability through their circumscription within medical discourse. Additionally, affirming Diamond's research seems to endorse the idea that the alignment of mind and body is the path of least resistance and the most desirable one to pursue since the "typical person" has "little doubt of his or her basic male or female self and sexual identity despite any lack in wished for specially preferred gender feature" ("Sex and Gender are Different" 326). The "little doubt" that is experienced by the "typical person" is a result of an unaware compliance with tautological identifications that are produced and reified by the sex-gender system, highlighting how hegemony is effectively and ceaselessly at work. Yet, why do individuals insist on endorsing such a system that violently polices their minds and bodies regardless if their brains are properly or improperly gendered? Also, why does the risk of becoming unintelligible seem so much greater than the violence bodies endure to conform to the social order?

Essentially, gender-variant modalities, whether readily visible or not, illustrate the potentiality of undermining heteronormative discourse in a manner that enables a redefinition of these parameters (or the eradication of them) whether or not individuals utilize the medical industrial complex as part of this process. Such individuals nevertheless reclaim autonomy over their own bodies, pushing back against institutional claims, and choose not to reiterate a destructive and limiting narrative that actively prohibits the production of non-normative representations. As such, the institutions they seek help from are always already at odds with the fundamental questions that underlie what a desirable life constitutes.

Regardless, for Prosser, Rubin, Diamond, as well as other transsexual theorists, psychiatrists, and sexologists, the infusion of transsexual narratives with medical discourse helps affirm the validation of transsexual subjectivity and presupposes that the “dysphoric” mind can be brought in alignment with an individual’s desired body. Such medicalized/pathologized narratives of trans* embodiment continue to persist as a result of an individual’s desire to be rendered intelligible; and, as a result, they place confining limitations on the possibilities of a continual “embodying” because of the systems that call forth a specific performative account of recognizability. As seen with the scholarship of Prosser, Rubin, and Diamond, pre-op transsexuals often naturalizes their gender roles by essentializing the desired (anatomical) sex, or sex characteristics, through the onset of hormone therapy and their ability to “pass,” or rather to remain invisible, outside of marked forms of queer otherness. These individuals conceptualize themselves as always already men or women. Once the pre-operative transsexual transitions to post-operative embodiment of the desired self, the individual resists gender ambiguity since his or her identity is “corrected”—reinforcing the static binary of biological sex (male to female or female-to-male) despite the potential to destabilize and transgress such categories further.

Prosser, Rubin, and Diamond’s arguments effectively fail to consider how the endorsement of such institutionally driven narratives becomes inevitably destructive to temporal forms of queerness, which I contend everyone experiences at one point or another. These homogeneous narratives drive forward with a totalizing teleological force that, when buttressed by the medical establishment, can *undo* trans* and gender-variant individuals who experience their embodiment in a multitude of ways. For Butler, these narratives signal a normative (and more specifically heteronormative) alignment with the sex-gender system—one that reveals the

fallacy of biological facticity for *both* trans* and cisgender individuals. In alignment with Butler, narratives that render a particular gender intelligible also confer a particular type of recognition. This recognition, and effect of discursive constraint, can “undo” the person’s sense of self and place limits on how their life is lived or made livable.

As a way of extending Butler’s argument regarding the relationship between discursive constraint and undoing, I turn toward representations that explore how frameworks of recognition operate as sites of power that call into the question who counts as recognizable and who does not. In the following section, I provide three representations whose narratives evoke radically different forms of undoing. The first representation tells a narrative that would align with Prosser and Rubin’s claims as it effectively results in an undoing of non-normative possibilities whether or not these configurations are imagined or embodied. The second representation invites a narrative of queer otherness. Similar to the first, this narrative ushers forth a form of recognition that can “undo” a person’s sense of self; however, it *broadens*, instead of limits, how life can be lived or made livable. Momentary disruptions, disidentification, and queer performativity signal this undoing. Emerging on the heels of queer otherness, the final representation mobilizes a narrative that gestures toward unintelligibility as a continual process. This process permits a temporary undoing of discursive constraint and frameworks of recognition in order to expand the possibilities of how life can be lived or made livable. Such narratives confer the material viability and intimacies that are a part of lived experience, but they are not dependent on intelligible forms of recognition.

Aspiring to inhabit variant forms of queer otherness, and ultimately unintelligibility, can come at a cost because of the heightened visibility it produces. Whether made into a spectacle, stifled, threatened, or violently converted into something intelligible, the possibilities of a queer existence remain constrained by discourse as there become fewer spaces and sparser moments for such invocations to exist. Consequently, my interest lies in how we can hasten the *undoing* of discursive constraint so that life can become more livable and more desirable to live. Here, the battle is not over how queer and gender-variant forms of *being* should or should not be rendered as viable subject positions within medical discourse, and it is of no concern to me as to the ways in which individuals wish to physically alter their bodies or sculpt their subjectivities with the available technological means of doing so. Instead, I wish to illuminate how insidious

and persistent medical discourse is as it substantiates the standard of what constitutes gender norms without any contestation of the parameters or standards of normalcy. Desire to change one's sexual or gender identity is legitimized by the medical establishment as long these claims are grounded as biological or psychological facticities that are not aligned with what is considered a normal, healthy, or acceptable individual. Definitions of normalcy dictate not only the parameters of those gender performances that are discursively available, but also those modes of identification that are revered as desirable and livable.

Intelligibility of the "Wrong" Body

When categories of relational difference²⁶ are presented as oppositional instead of intersectional, a discursively inscribed homogeneous narrative proliferates. With regards to how this occurs with gender identity, I turn to a 2008 *ABC News* article, written by Alan B. Goldberg, which promotes a *20/20* television special where Barbara Walters interviews a ten-year-old transgender girl (Riley Grant) and her parents (Stephanie and Neil Grant).²⁷ At the onset, the title of the news article, "Born With the Wrong Body," signals an incongruence between the imagined gender the child sees herself to be and the child's lived embodiment. Yet, if Riley is born into the "wrong" body, is there a "right" body for her to inhabit? Why must we assume that one is born into a "right" or "wrong" body to begin with? What enables this moralistic equivocation to persist since it only reifies the social order's compulsory obsession with the gender binary?

The rhetoric deployed in the news article further reinforces the spectacle of Riley's identity as a deviation from the "norm." In reference to her daughter's condition, Stephanie tells Barbara Walters, "She has a birth defect...I can't think of a worse birth defect, as a woman to have, than to have a penis" (Goldberg). Although Stephanie understands the disparity between the categories of "sex" and "gender," she seems to negatively reinforce the social order's persistence on only two livable possibilities (girl or boy) and implies that a woman having a penis would be torturous, traumatic, and harrowing. For the mother of a transgender child, the

²⁶ We should question how we deploy the term "difference" and cautiously, as well as responsibly, ask questions that would raise issues surrounding this dichotomized framework.

²⁷ The surname "Grant" was used as an alias in order to protect the family's privacy.

mere thought of shifting from one gender to another is fraught with anxiety. As the story continues, Goldberg describes the tension and strain Riley's condition places on the familial unit and relationships outside of its structure. Eventually, everyone's anxiety momentarily subsides when Riley is diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID).²⁸ In relief, Riley's mother comments: "Oh my God, we're not making this up. This is real. There's a diagnosis" (Goldberg). Upon discovering that a medical/psychological diagnosis exists, the mother asserts her vindication that she and her husband were not imagining Riley's condition. Her turn of phrase, "we're not making this up," suggests that gender is not creative. For Riley's mother, to imagine gender as something else beyond its biological facticity is problematic and warrants a diagnosis so that it can be corrected. This affirmation of Riley's condition propagates the belief that the child's discomfort is a result of a psychological "defect" that causes "impairment" instead of stemming from a gender dysphoric social order. From the article's narrative, the reader is informed that accessibility to treatments is seen as a possibility for Riley and other transgender-identified youth as long as they meet the current diagnostic criteria. These are likely options to be pursued since, as Norman Spack, an endocrinologist at Harvard University, remarks, trans* children are aware of "which physical attributes are going to be absolutely threatening to their entire future ability to blend in" (Goldberg). Spack's perspective, like many medical practitioners who assist trans* clients, presumes "blending in" to gender norms ought to be the driving force behind prescribing hormone therapy to gender nonconforming youth. A secondary assumption that Spack's statement affirms is that there are particular characteristics that are identifiable as "threatening" to a youth's "future ability to blend in." Perhaps it is worth asking whether or not the degree of influence medical practitioners assert is part of a trans* youth's the drive to "blend in." Furthermore, how might family dynamics steer a child's desire to "blend in"? Might this desire, whether guided by medical practitioners and family structures, be more about the stability of the social order and the familial unit than the comfort of the youth

²⁸ It is important to note that Riley was diagnosed under the *DSM-4* (Text Revision) criteria for GID as the revised guidelines for gender dysphoria in the *DSM-5* were not published until May 2013. The differential diagnosis for GID suggests that "it represents a profound disturbance of the individual's sense of identity with regard to maleness or femaleness. Behavior in children that merely does not fit the cultural stereotype of masculinity or femininity should not be given the diagnosis unless the full syndrome is present, including marked distress or impairment" (American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [4th Edition Text Revision] 580).

who conforms to them? Even if Riley's future life does become a little less threatened and a little more livable, her transgender subjectivity seems to terrorize the notion of familial normalcy.

More importantly, this article serves as a mainstream representation of early onset transsexualism in children. It is an article that is meant for mass consumption as it frames gender identity in a reductive manner, privileges medical discourse over personal articulations of embodiment, relies on sensationalizing a story about gender variance, and exploits the emotional appeal of the parents so the audience will readily sympathize with the strife of having a child with a gender-related "birth defect." As a result, the underlying moral of this article seems to suggest the following: identify the problem as soon as possible and then fix it. In this particular case, the "problem" the family faces is Riley's GID. The impetus of the article focuses on correcting Riley's gender dysphoric body so that it is in alignment with her gendered mind and causes the least amount of distress for Riley, her family, or others in her life. Even if medical intervention may have been something Riley always desired and eventually pursued, what is most troublesome with this representation is that *the child is the one regarded as the problem*. Instead of viewing how the gendering process is all too often a violent one, and recognizing the systemic factors that control and regulate gendered behavior and attitudes, the reader is assured that the child's "defective" aspects can be readily normalized through medical intervention.

Although medical discourse allows Riley's family to name her experience, thereby rendering it intelligible, there is something to be said about the discomfort unintelligibility creates—an interpersonal discomfort with societal norms being imposed on all individuals instead of the intrapersonal discomfort that is often attributed to not inhabiting such norms. For Riley and her family, the distress of gender dysphoria dissipates once her sex-gender alignment becomes legible; that is, Riley's "wrong body" must be rendered intelligible in order to relieve the gender dysphoric distress felt by Riley and her family. However, the distress caused by adhering to gender norms remains ever-present as readers of the article are left with a belief that GID is an easily correctable problem that some children are born with. Left with a lingering fear that their child may have a birth defect too (or, thankful that he or she is, in fact, "normal"), the article serves as a cautionary tale to parents so that such "defects" may be identified early and corrected to alleviate personal discomfort and social confusion.

This *ABC News* article, like the numerous others that sensationalize gender-variant representations for public consumption, reproduces a specific trans* narrative like a plastic factory mold. Additionally, the article never seems to critically engage with the ethical considerations of the child's desire, account for alternative modes of embodiment that simply cause discomfort for everyone but the subject, or understand that the cause of distress for the subject may, in fact, be a result of others' distress. As a result, the larger systemic problem of gender nonconformity is immediately dismissed as the child's gender identity is "corrected" and naturalized, salvaging the functionality of a heteronormative family embedded within a heteronormative social matrix. What if we are to reframe this experience in a manner that causes us to reflect on how societal norms of gender can cause anyone, at any given time, to experience moments where our body does not match or entirely align with the person we imagine ourselves to be or become? Also, why do we allow the medical establishment's authoritative position to dictate what constitutes an incongruent body in need of realignment? The medical necessity does not lie in "fixing" the defective trans* body; rather, it is necessary and imperative to renegotiate our relationship to gender so that bodies, regardless of whether or not hormones or surgeries are pursued, are not violently policed and neatly placed into a categorical index.²⁹

Perhaps if we were not living in a technological age, the desire (or need) to physically alter one's body in order to align with heteronormativity and gender binaries would not be prevalent. Yet, some individuals regard trans*-spectrum-identified folks who elect to medically transition as destabilizing the dominant heteronormative order. However, the ability to elect these surgeries can also be a class marker since many folks simply cannot afford them—or the associated costs not covered by insurance carriers—regardless if they are considered "medically necessary or "cosmetic." Depending on hegemonic encodings of the body, certain surgeries can help foster specific forms of assimilation and privilege (e.g., the ability to become a straight male or a straight female and "pass" as cisgender) that were not otherwise present, reinforcing dominant perspectives of what the trans* body should or should not look like. Unfortunately, social scripts cause us to *believe* that we must acknowledge how categories of biological sex,

²⁹ I wish to note the importance of work being done in Disability Studies at this moment as this project intersects with and takes shape alongside such research. The anthology *Sex and Disability*, edited by Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow, presents interesting arguments that are at the forefront of discussions around sex, gender, desire, pathology, and physical disability.

gender, and sexual orientation are “innate” aspects of one’s identity and that such categories are clearly marked as binary oppositions—resulting in anything marked as “other” to fall within an either/or dualism (i.e. male/female, man/woman, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual) unless it remains unintelligible.³⁰

Language places discursive limitations on one’s articulation of desire since it can only be a metaphoric approximation that represents, and stands in for, the lived experience or imagined desires of an individual along with those who recognize and acknowledge the individual’s subjectivity as emergent. Discursive limits bring forth dominant narratives about gender embodiment. Such narratives not only march forth with force because of the institutions that propel such positivist, affirmative, and “truth-seeking” epistemic conceptions of gendered life as monolithic and readily definable, but, in doing so, they also distort other narratives of temporal embodiment as “inauthentic.” As with Alan Goldberg’s *ABC News* article, the institutionalized reinforcement of such claims permits the continual reproduction of specific, unalterable narratives, confines these narratives to particular forms that limit their potential malleability and permeability, and/or it attempts to discredit or silence any other alternate narratives that might threaten the stability of the highly sanitized and partitioned ontological claims which permeate throughout dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality. Such narratives are reiteratively deployed in order to “make sense” of the world and navigate it with the least resistance. In effect, this process causes an individual to be violently rendered intelligible, in a simplistic, yet comprehensive manner, delineating a prognosis of who one was, is, or should be. Such utterances are oftentimes posited as truth claims, asserting one’s identity as definitive, concrete, and unchangeable.

So as not to delegitimize the tangible experiences linked to any particular trans* narrative, or the various violences that are continually enacted on such individuals, we must be critical of any systems and structures that enable particular positionalities to emerge as a way to prevent the violences aimed at those who are regarded as not viable subjects within the social

³⁰ These identity “markers” create a limited number of taxonomies. For example, if one is read as “female,” then the baseline of possibilities that exist—given the traditional conventions within a binary system that strains for gender stability—limit the scope one’s identity to the following: feminine heterosexual woman, masculine heterosexual woman, feminine homosexual woman, or masculine homosexual women. Conversely, if one is rendered “male,” the individual’s identity is limited to the above categories, only supplementing his gender identity with “man” in lieu of “woman.”

order. For example, the (literal and figurative) scarred/marked trans* body is oftentimes subjected to aggressive visual encodings/decodings as it is placed on display, while the subject's gender and sexuality are repeatedly interrogated and inevitably pathologized within a heteronormative framework of recognizability. Here, the implicit "deviance" is endemic to the trans* subject's violation of a "normative" and desirable embodiment. The prescriptive measure given, to "change one's sex to match one's mind," only saves those from specific institutional violences as long as they are recognized as inhabiting spaces within the gender spectrum that reinforce the existence of these categories, allowing their lives to be regarded as discursively viable according to the rules that govern the solidification of such categories. "Violations" of the rules causes queer subjectivity to become a difficult terrain to negotiate as one attempts to be rendered recognizable and unintelligible, validating personal experiences and desires without using the defined parameters dictated by the social order.

Body Parts & Queer Otherness

In order to recover the lived experience of queer otherness as a viable one, I turn toward the character of Exotica in R. Zamora Linmark's novel, *Rolling the R's*. As a slight deviation from the trans-normative realignment that follows a "born in the wrong body" narrative, Exotica's description of her embodied experience is playful as she uses metaphorical language to describe her material condition of existence. Despite the gender-related discomforts Exotica expresses, her own gender performativity and methods of disidentification become tools for continued survival and resistance.

Linmark's novel, *Rolling the R's*, takes place in Honolulu, Hawai'i, during the early 1980s and is infused with popular culture references from that era. Encapsulating the perspectives of several preteen adolescents, the collection of short chapters and vignettes string together a story that explores themes related to ethnic identity, sexuality, trauma, violence, assimilation, cultural confusion, and the desire to find a sense of belonging. Through the variety of themes and varying perspectives of the narrators, Linmark's witty use of language highlights the malleability of stories and the slipperiness of what words can signify. Written in an experimental fashion, the novel's structure stretches the bounds of its own literary genre. It also *queers* the readers' expectations about what narrative can and should do. Similar to how queer

otherness highlights the constraints of discourse while complicating the value and meaning of taxonomical configurations, Linmark's novel tests the limits of a genre while soliciting a queer reading of both its form and content.

Throughout the novel, Linmark makes readily apparent how the body of each character becomes a prevalent site of recognition or misrecognition. Furthermore, the body is a significant component of how identities become forged and mobilized by the narrator of each chapter. Several of the chapter titles throughout the novel offer the reader a way to focus on specific body parts. From the start of the first chapter, "Skin, Or Edgar's Advice To Closet Cases" (Linmark 1-2), to other chapter titles such as "Lips" (12-15), "The Eyes of Edgar Ramirez" (41-43), "Tongue-Tied" (48-54), "Face" (124), and "Heart" (140-42), Linmark positions the reader in a manner that visually constructs not only the body of the text but also assists with the fashioning of each character's body. In this way, the reader observes the unfolding of how each character self-identifies and the way in which they are visually marked by others. The careful revealing of each character's complex identity provides context for the ways in which they are recognized or misrecognized as intelligible, illustrating how the tangible body is not always indicative of a person's sense of self. *Rolling the R's* offers a new way of refashioning the relationship we have to our own bodies, the bodies of others, and the narratives we provide to articulate our momentary positionalities.

In the third chapter, "Lips," Linmark exposes the reader to the linguistically savvy Edgar, the coy and reticent Vicente, and a transgender sex worker named Exotica. From the onset of the chapter, Exotica's name, although racially unmarked, points toward aspects of her identity that may be considered foreign, strange, or unusual in a mysterious, alluring, or sensual manner. The reader's knowledge of Exotica as transgender and as a sex worker becomes indicative of how her clients exoticize her body. However, these indicators are not necessarily ones that result in the objectification of her body or a loss of agency. Instead, Exotica's agency mobilizes as she traces her own geographies of desire and difference through narrative. For instance, as Exotica applies her makeup in front of a vanity mirror (presumably getting ready to see one of her clients), Vicente asks, "Have you always wanted to be a woman?" (Linmark 12). Following this contestation of the self, Exotica expounds on a theory to her own gendered existence: "Well, I always knew deep inside me that I was made to follow in Sister Eve's footsteps, but my mother

hated apples. In fact, she was allergic to them, especially mountain apples. That's why I came out a boy instead of a princess" (Linmark 12-13). The reinvention of the Judeo-Christian Creation myth skews dominant religious ideology, enabling a momentary transgression from the normative gender roles that are dictated by an omniscient God and become socially and culturally reinforced. Instead of retelling a dominant narrative of transgender embodiment or simply answering "yes" to the question asked, Exotica takes the occasion to invent another origin story of her own creation—one that is no more or less plausible than medicalized narratives of transsexualism. In this instance, her desire to become a woman is not a result of a "birth defect," but rather it is caused by her mother's distaste for apples. This distaste for apples can be interpreted as: wanting to not be sinful; a refusal to usurp the intentions of God; or willfully resisting any desire to understand the knowledge of sin since Adam and Eve's fall from the Garden of Eden was precipitated by consuming the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Here, and in other stories throughout the novel, Catholicism plays an influential role as a cultural space—one that causes the repression of desires, while also inviting a playfulness around the creative expression and imaginative manifestations that desire provides.

Further along in Exotica's response to Vicente, she suggests, "I don't know what forces impel me to be this way, and I'm not just talking about putting on a dress and makeup, or deceiving men either" (Linmark 13). Exotica's own words signal a sense of "not knowing" that is not necessarily clouded with distress regarding her gender identity. Her own notion of embodiment extends beyond the act of wearing women's clothing or *intentionally* deceiving men. Although many trans* individuals are often accused of deception because they choose not to disclose their gender variance, disclosure of their perceived gender misalignment could put them at the risk of physical violence or alienation, isolating them from social interaction and physical intimacy with others. For Exotica, her remark might suggest that she does not view her gender identity as a deception, but neither is she incapable of wearing a dress, putting on makeup, or deceiving men either—a deception that is not necessarily linked to her gender expression. We might also read her statement as one that points toward an "authentic" or "true" self, or her statement might signal that nondisclosure of her gender variance is not the same as

deception.³¹ What is definitive from Exotica's narrative is that her marked queer otherness is linked to whatever propels her forward to be ambiguously differentiated as "this way."

Even though Exotica's narrative suggests confidence in her gendered sense of self and an absence of distress, she does express a desire to refashion her body through medical intervention. Having already received breast implants, Exotica's declaration of her gender as a woman does not directly conflict with her current embodiment or her desire to change her physical form. Instead, she views her "huge mole" between her legs as a "nuisance," but it is "packed in a nylon stocking and pull[ed] [...] out in case of emergencies" (Linmark 12). Exotica's renaming act of her genitals as a "huge mole" is not necessarily indicative of gender dysphoria. Rather, this metaphor highlights an undesirable aspect of her body—an aspect that she was born with—but it is not something she considers as "defective." Furthermore, moles are often removed for aesthetic purposes. Although Exotica's mole may be a "nuisance" and she looks forward to its eventual removal, she still recognizes it as a part of her body and as something that remains functional as, on occasion, it necessitates being pulled out for use. The ambiguity of what constitutes an "emergency" adds to the humor of Exotica's statement. If the reader presumes that Exotica's primary income is from sex work, then such "emergencies" are sexually suggestive and may involve her clientele's subsequent fetishization of specific body parts—in this case, the "huge mole" that she has not yet had removed. If they are not a product of a client's fetishization of Exotica's body, then, we might ask, who are these "emergencies" meant for? How do they occur and what might they entail? In these moments, her playful and metaphorical language highlights a particular type of performativity that *queers* her discordant embodied otherness and resists a typical transsexual narrative.

As her narrative indicates, Exotica perceives her position within human ontology as only occupying one of two options: man and woman. The rationale for inhabiting, and enduring the violence of, a binary sex-gender system is understandable because of the commonplace violence many trans* individuals experience as a result of transgressing gender norms. Despite the

³¹ To this point, the onus is often placed on trans* individuals to disclose their "true" gender—something that frequently becomes conflated with a cisgender individual's perception of anatomical sex markers as evinced by a trans* person's genitalia. If an individual does not disclose his or her trans* status but it eventually becomes revealed, the individual can often be met with varying degrees and types of violence. Ironically, this same standard is never upheld for cisgender individuals where trans* folks demand that their "cis-" status be revealed or else risk being accused of deception.

potential for violence, Linmark's playful language directs the reader's attention to the lips of each character and, in doing so, points toward the double entendre of the chapter's title. Essentially, Exotica's prospective vaginoplasty³² would assist her in acquiring another set of "lips." Here, each set of "lips" becomes a separate, yet interrelated, aspect of her linguistic and physical recognizability. The implied double-meaning of the title and the witty language Linmark uses point toward the playfulness of Exotica's gender identity. She neither pathologizes nor essentializes her gender even though she desires to become fully intelligible as a woman.

As Exotica continues to discuss her relationship to her body, she remarks that the removal of her "mole" will "straighten out [her] act" (Linmark 12). Once again, the multivalent meanings of the word "straighten" indicate a process of disidentification. For instance, we can take Exotica's turn of phrase as an expression that bottom surgery will improve her life, or it may indicate a literal shift in how she and others perceive her sexual relationships with men, moving from a "gay" encoding to a "straight" one. It could also suggest a concordant alignment of her gender identity with her gendered sense of embodiment. And, yet, her expression may infer a shift away from sex work or, quite frankly, have nothing to do with her gendered sense of self at all.

Aside from the playfully performative and disidentificatory narrative Linmark constructs for Exotica, a secondary narrative emerges as well. From the start of the chapter, Vicente—a fifth grade student with a precocious talent for writing—narrates the opening passage: "Exotica is a woman trapped in a foreigner's body. Like Jodie Foster trapped in her mother's body in *Freaky Friday*, except Exotica is a man from the waist down" (Linmark 12). Vicente's description of Exotica's body sketches a relatively formulaic representation of transwomen. By likening Exotica's experience to Jodie Foster's character Annabel in the film *Freaky Friday* (1976), Vicente understands Exotica's body in an accessible and easily translatable manner. Given the popular culture reference he uses, Vicente's fifth grade sensibility assists him in momentarily rendering Exotica's body intelligible and discursively viable. Although this representation is not too different from the way trans* individuals are currently portrayed in the

³² A vaginoplasty is a sex reassignment surgery (SRS) for MTFs that results in the inversion of the penis and scrotal sack to construct vaginal walls, labium, and a clitoris. Within the trans* community, any surgical procedure that involves the reconstruction of an individual's genitalia is more commonly referred to as "bottom surgery."

media—and there is a considerable degree of violence that such individuals incur once they have diminished agency over how they narrate their own lives—what I find most compelling is how Vicente likens Exotica’s gendered experience to being “trapped” in a foreigner’s body. From Vicente’s perspective, the foreign body is the one Exotica was born into instead of her sense of self being construed as the “strange” or “foreign” component. Here, Vicente marks Exotica’s body as a type of queer alterity that becomes a strange and exotic landscape—a landscape that Exotica’s sense of self inhabits temporarily.

Like a traveler “trapped” in a foreign country with no money or passport, the marked queer otherness of Exotica’s body becomes a part of the landscape and a commodity in the public market of sex work. Exotica’s participation in sex work can be seen as a means to an end for her own survivability and as a resistance to gender norms. However, her role as a sex worker may also be of her own volition. Likewise, sex work that is a part of U.S. street-based economy poses a resistance to normative moral sensibilities and capitalism, particularly since it is a criminalized mode of income. But, it also reinforces them as a constitutive outside to normative values and regulated economic structures. In this regard, Exotica’s own narrative of embodiment and involvement in sex work can be regarded as disidentificatory.

In these instances, I posit that queer otherness has the capacity to enact two distinct types of disidentification. For trans* individuals like Exotica who may desire to gain gender legibility as authentic men or women, disidentification operates within the sex-gender logic of a hegemonic binary (e.g., “I am a woman and not a man.”). Yet, for other individuals, queer otherness can present another method of disidentification that is outside of the sex-gender logic of a hegemonic binary (e.g., “I am neither a man nor a woman” and/or “I am both a man and a woman”; “The binary does not describe/define my experience”). Opening up the process of disidentification in this way validates the political potential trans* bodies have to disrupt discursive constraint and ensures that such work is not discounted since trans* modes of identification can momentarily highlight the performative aspects of discourse even if radical visioning is not the endgame of such subjectivities.³³ Furthermore, we should conceive of such

³³What I am speaking to here are instances where trans* identities seek validation fashioned through an identity politics model. Although I greatly recognize the systematic silencing of the “T” in LGb(t) political formations, not all transgender politics (like mainstream gay and lesbian agendas) are about radically transforming or destroying the gender binary. Such politics, akin to homonormativity, can undermine and contradict radical formations of

performative modes as continuous enactments and utterances that redefine identity categories through working *on and against* various hegemonies.

Framing Queer Negativity

Whether or not queer otherness helps to reconceptualize physical embodiment and gender performativity in constructive and creative ways, discursive constraint still shapes many other trans* narratives like Exotica's. As these narratives are often linguistically bound, they are simply not doing the same type of work to destabilize gender norms that unintelligibility might provide. However, other modes of nonliterary artistic production may offer alternative depictions of trans* embodiment that provide a greater range of narrative representations and usher in moments of unintelligibility. Loren "Rex" Cameron, a renowned transsexual photographer, is one such artist doing this type of work. In his book, *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits*, he proclaims:

For the longest time, transsexuals and especially transsexual men (FTMs) have been virtually invisible to the dominant culture. Marginalized even within the gay and lesbian subculture, transsexuals have occupied no real space of our own. In the last decade or so, more and more transsexual people have been speaking out about our experiences. We are beginning to represent ourselves for the first time and to develop our own voice [...] it is my intention to embrace and include in this work those people who may identify more comfortably as 'transgender' or 'gender transgressive.' [...] Inhabiting a less static gender identification than that of typical transsexuals, they are exploring and experiencing a fluid range of gender embodiment. (Cameron 11-12)

Cameron's book, published in 1996, was the first photodocumentary of its kind, coupling portraits of transmasculine folks and photographs of their anatomy with personal narrative and description. Due to the invisibility of trans* issues within dominant culture in the 90s, there were minimal representations, particularly of transmasculine individuals, available in

queerness which seek to challenge systemic violence and heteronormativity. In this context, a *transnormativity* develops that frequently misunderstands queerness and further discounts it as abstracted theoretical drivel or insignificant to the materiality of existence. This polemic refuses to enter into a dialogism with queerness; rather, it conjures justification for forwarding the thesis of transgender visibility in order to increase access to services. This justification is often couched within a "progressive" framework—one that quickly proclaims a moral high-ground, all the while hindering the potential for alternative imaginings.

mainstream media, popular culture, and the art world. Additionally, trans* folks in the gay and lesbian communities were further marginalized despite the pivotal role many played in resisting the institutionalized and state-based violence that these communities faced and still face to this day.

In many ways, Cameron's book helped pave the way for transmasculine narratives to be heard by a wider audience, providing self-representations of trans* embodiment as an alternative to the preexisting cisgender representations of trans* bodies and experiences. More specifically, his series of photographs entitled "Distortions" brings the tension between discursive constraint and the issue of recognizability to the forefront. These three black and white self-portraits each contain large block lettering in black that encapsulates the image. Additionally, writing frames the FTM's upper torso and face as a dual border, wrapping around the photograph in a clockwise direction. In order to read the words that frame the photograph, the onlooker must either physically rotate the image or awkwardly contort their body. In this way, Cameron is not only "distorting" the audience's notion of gender stability, but he also causes us to engage with his artwork as active voyeurs. In doing so, he renegotiates our relationship to our bodies, the bodies of others, and the space in between, challenging the fundamental relationship between a subject and object.

In the first photograph, Cameron looks down somberly with a furrowed brow and only half of his face is illuminated (see fig. 1). The text³⁴ framing the image reads:

MEN ARE JERKS, WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO BE ONE?
YOU'RE JUST A DYKE WITH A BEARD. ARE YOU MISOGYNIST?
I JUST CAN'T GET USED TO CALLING YOU "HE".
YOU WANT TO CUT OFF YOUR TITS? MAYBE YOU'RE JUST
HOMOPHOBIC. YOUR VOICE DOESN'T SOUND
VERY MASCULINE. WHY CAN'T YOU JUST BE A BUTCH
DYKE? DOES THIS MEAN YOU'RE HETERO-
SEXUAL? YOU STILL LOOK FEMALE TO ME. (Cameron 29)

³⁴ I have inserted line breaks into my transcription of the images' text. These breaks, very much like ones found in poetry, occur at moments when the text wraps around the photograph; it simulates the disorienting pause that occurs when the onlooker rotates the image to read the text.

Cameron places his bare, scarred, and marked transsexual body on display as he highlights how his gender and sexuality are repeatedly contested within a heteronormative framework of recognizability. He presents his body as a spectacle for the audience to consume, inviting the onlooker to become an active participant and read the text that surrounds him. As the declarative statements and questions are spoken from the first-person and intended for the photographed subject, the image purposefully directs the onlooker to assume the role of interrogator. The framing of Cameron's portraits becomes reflexive to the surveyor and causes the audience to be temporarily placed in a position that simultaneously constructs and distances his body as "other." The intent behind this forceful and structured psychological role-play is to reflect back to the onlooker the grotesque nature of these moments of interrogation as a shock to the senses and to sensibility in general. Through this process, Cameron highlights how the experiences of trans* folks are always under scrutiny, mostly by cisgender individuals, as their subjectivity becomes continually contested within a framework of gender legibility. For many cisgender individuals, this scrutiny emerges as a response to a disjuncture between the imaginary of what a "man" is and the failure to optically code the image of the body before them. If we fail to recognize who or what the subject in the photograph is, then the subject's queer otherness points toward fissures within the discursive constraints and it gestures beyond what we recognize as intelligible.

In the second photograph of the series, Cameron's portrait visually displays the parameters that quarantine the FTM (see fig. 2). With his head canted slightly, he looks upward toward the camera and returns the gaze to the onlooker with a mixed expression of seduction and contempt. The caption framing the image reads:

YOU'RE SO EXOTIC! MAY I TAKE YOUR PHOTO-
GRAPH? I'VE ALWAYS BEEN ATTRACTED TO HAIRY
WOMEN. YOU'RE THE THIRD SEX! YOU
INTRIGUE ME. MY ATTRACTION TO YOU DOESN'T
MEAN I'M GAY: YOU'RE REALLY A
WOMAN. I THINK TRANSSEXUALS ARE SEXY.
I LIKE VERY BUTCH WOMEN. YOU'RE THE
BEST OF BOTH WORLDS. DO YOU HAVE A PENIS? (Cameron 30)

Similar to Exotica's character in Linmark's *Rolling the R's*, the issue of exoticism marks

Cameron's fantasized body as a fetishized object. Once again, as onlookers, we are thrust into a position that objectifies Cameron's body, but this time we are invited to hyper-sexualize it. The description makes apparent that the presumed mystique of the trans* body fuels a desire for Cameron's marked otherness. Like any other fetish, the desire is highly specific to a particular fantasized body, body part, aesthetic, or sexual act. For the onlooker, a desire for what is non-normative and strange prolongs the eroticism of the gaze. If the fetishistic gaze is maintained, then the trans* body remains violently rendered as an object for pleasure not unto its own, thereby lessening the individual's agency as a viable subject. Yet, Cameron defiantly returns the gaze to the onlooker. His facial expression can be interpreted as reflecting back a similar type of objectification. This silent mirrored reflection transposes the exoticism onto the onlooker and frames them as perverse and monstrous in return. Essentially, the effect this image produces is that it *queers* the one doing the looking as much as the one who is looked at. Cameron's returned gaze highlights the fetishization of the non-normative body and alludes to the ghastly framing of these desires.³⁵

Additionally, Cameron need not respond with words as his photographs are a refusal to such forms of solicitation. Remaining silent and refusing to respond to the social value placed on his body can be regarded as an embrace of queer negativity—a tactic that disengages with the social value altogether instead of attempting to engage with the social value as a means of thwarting it. Since the objectification and subsequent fetishization of a body or body parts are commonplace for those who fantasize about having sexual relations with trans* individuals, these “tranny chasers” often consider comments like the ones illustrated by Cameron as “positive” forms of love, support, admiration, and desire. Although some of these individuals may perceive their expressions of desire as “queer,” such articulations are defended with a justification that reinforces some supposed “positive social value” (Edelman 6). For example, after having confronted a lover about their fetishization of my trans* body, I was promptly provided with the justification that at least *someone* was willing to have sex with me. This statement presupposes that sharing intimacy with me, or other trans* folks, is akin to a public service and one that contributes to “positive social value.” In this case, the “positive social value” is construed as an affirmation of trans* identities, even if this affirmation is a quality or

³⁵ The desires themselves are not intrinsically ghastly; rather, it is how they are framed and conveyed.

product of objectification.³⁶ To engage with this justification was to affirm its social value. In contrast, refusing to engage and remaining silent enables an embrace of queer negativity; “its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself” (Edelman 6). In this sense, queer negativity represents a series of negative dialectics³⁷ between social value and desire, gender and sexuality, and even intimacy and the body. All the while it negates the social and cultural norms that structure discursive viability and chafes against the very notion of intelligibility.

In the third and final photograph of the “Distortions” series, Cameron shifts from representing the exoticism of the trans* body to the combative linguistic attacks that emerge in highly contested and exclusionary spaces (see fig. 3). Cameron stares directly outward with a distressed look. His hand clutches the right side of his half-lit face as a shadow obscures the other half. The hand only seems to partially sustain the weight of his head. Imperative statements and accusatory questions that are filled with condescension litter the frame:

THIS IS WOMYN-ONLY SPACE. WHERE’S YOUR
DICK? SORRY, BUT I DON’T LIKE MEN. YOU’RE NOT A
MAN: YOU’LL NEVER SHOOT SPERM. YOU
MUST BE SOME KIND OF FREAK. I CAN’T BE WITH
YOU: I’M NOT A LESBIAN. DO YOU HAVE
WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A REAL MAN? YOU’RE
KIND OF SHORT, AREN’T YOU? YOU PISS
LIKE A WOMAN. YOU DON’T BELONG HERE. (Cameron 31)

This final portrait illustrates how Cameron struggles to find a space of belonging because of his marked queer otherness. The remarks that frame his image, along with his evident distress,

³⁶ In a separate encounter that did not involve another’s desire for my body but, rather, a detestation of it, I vocally critiqued a gay male’s phallogocentrism. In response, he suggested that I wouldn’t understand anything about “cock” as I don’t possess one. Although the justification given can be read as contributing to a “negative” social value, it operates in the same manner as the previous example I have provided. Whether a social value is constructed as “positive” or “negative,” its value remains in the social aspect itself.

³⁷ From the philosopher Theodor Adorno, I borrow the term “negative dialectics” to mean a refusal to accept the presumption that an identity unites a thing to the idea of the thing. In his book, *Negative Dialectics*, he suggests, “If negative dialectics calls for the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true—if it is to be true today, in any case—it must also be a thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims” (Adorno 365).

signal the isolation that can occur from explicit exclusion of dominant or marginalized spaces. Within the photograph, the discursive limits of intelligibility linguistically box him as the questions asked demand a recognizable response. Such threatening accusations and demands aimed at the trans* body seem to point toward the volatility of highly exclusionary spaces and signal their potential fear of infiltration.

Often, when there is a visually discernible variation in an individual who does not fit the gender conformity of a highly partitioned or policed space (e.g., a public restroom), then such an individual becomes a threat to the social space or becomes threatened by it. An individual's presence in a sexually charged, homosocial environment might prove dangerous if the disjuncture between their physical embodiment and perceived identity is revealed. For example, if Cameron's trans* body is rendered male, then he must enact socially acceptable forms of masculinity and dominance in order not to be punished for threatening a men's space. This same process also occurs for the cisgender male who toes and exposes the fine line between the homosocial and homoerotic. When a disjunction occurs (e.g., a masculine female in a heteronormative women's space), the "safety" of the environment is perceived as threatened and the individual's body is rendered unintelligible since it does not adhere to a conventional cultural inscriptions. Such threats to an individual's security hinge on the risk of alienation and might lead to self-questioning. This type of self-questioning results in a habitual interrogation that demands an account be given of oneself in relation to the established parameters of recognizability.

Keeping these "violations" of conventional cultural inscriptions in mind, some bodies (like Loren "Rex" Cameron's) continue to be held in perpetual motion and resist fitting nicely into a clearly intelligible category or may risk the violence of being violently rendered intelligible. Perpetual motion may yield the promise of unintelligibility as an active process and destabilizing force—one which unravels the violence intelligibility brings forth. Regardless of one's self-identification, or the ways in which others identify a subject on display, the imagined "real" of gender embodiment is never attainable since the subject's performativity is always an approximation; and, as an approximation, it undermines the "natural" alignment of the sex-gender system. In many ways, heterosexuality mirrors this process of gender normativity as the two become inextricably linked within dominant discourse. Butler claims, "In other words,

heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and *failing*. Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself” (“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 313). This constant “failure” highlights the slippages of intelligibility, ushering forth emergent forms of queer otherness. Therefore, at any moment, *any* individual (not just gender-variant folks) can and do display or emphasize characteristics that might be associated with one or more genders. This does not mean that all gender-variant individuals permanently assume a specific gender, consistently perform a specific gender role, assume all gender identities at once, or permanently reject identifying with one or more gender roles. The multiple forms of (real or imagined) embodiment that a gender transgressive individual assumes can be seen as composite of temporary identifications, depending on who is mapping the transient body. Although the realization and enactment of imagined forms are limited by our discursively conditioned experiences, and we may never be able to clearly define these approximations of our experience through the performative, I suggest we shift toward embodying these emergent forms of queer otherness as they may provide more moments of unintelligibility to spring forth. These moments allow for us to validate the imaginative and material forms of subjectivity while counter-acting the ways in which recognition is bestowed onto individuals solely on the basis of their linguistic and visual recognizability.

As systemic violence (produced by the medical establishment’s insistence on linguistic and visual forms of recognition) enforces gender normativity upon all bodies, behaviors, and desires, those marked with queer otherness become relegated to the margins or forcefully assimilated as “diseased” within. As an ethical imperative, measures must be sought to move beyond the taxonomies that reproduce this violence. Queer otherness offers the potential to glimpse at what unintelligibility can provide—unrestricting identity and shifting toward a relational embodiment that is less linguistically and visually dependent, but rather revealed by sensory experiences. Furthermore, in response to the social conditioning that results in us shunting bodies into a categorical identity index, resistance takes place—particularly at those moments when an individual’s identity does not, or cannot, fit nicely within predefined parameters.

Even though our subjectivity is narrated within, and held in relation to the ideological parameters, which we continue to sustain, of our historically contingent times and geophysically

specific locations, alternatives exist to the conventional framework, which causes us to narrate our desires in a normative fashion. As a continuation of my focus on the dynamic interplay between intelligibility and queer otherness, as well as between queer otherness and unintelligibility, I turn my analysis toward cultural representations of two separate, yet highly exclusionary, state-sanctioned institutions—the military and marriage. Shifting from the discursive limitations of narrative and embodiment, Chapter 2 examines how the films *Soldier's Girl* (2003) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) negotiate the terrain of kinship and desire as such elements become regulated and queered.

CHAPTER 2

“Fucking Happy”: Interrogating Heteronormative Kinship in *Soldier’s Girl* & *Brokeback Mountain*

I, _____, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same [...]
—United States Code, “Enlistment Oath”

Will you love and honor each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives? [...] Will you accept children lovingly from God and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?
—Catholic Church, “Rite of Marriage”

Notions of “home” traverse the corporeal, spatial, and ideological. Being “at home” with oneself typically suggests a form of bodily comfort. In the literal sense, to *arrive* at home demarks the boundary between the public sphere and the private, domestic realm. This physical space also becomes tied to the ideological as we fashion an idea of the home as one that extends beyond the walls of a house. A home often translates to ideas of comfort and safety that we experience, or imagine experiencing, within the private sphere—experiences that are deeply connected to the kinship we share with others, as “home” is often regarded as being “where the heart is.” Ideological notions of home further extend from these bonds of intimacy as they become reinforced by the Nation-State and the institutions that legitimize such bonds (e.g., marriage). As such, perceived “threats” to the “home front” are often viewed as a threat to the stability and security of the “American way of life,” resulting in an unfolding of heightened nationalism and militarism that conflates defense of a home country with the defense of our family, property, culture, and values. In this sense, the defense of national space and American ideals becomes tied to the defense of the home (i.e., The Department of Homeland Security). The idea of nationalism and the notion of a singular, unified, and coherent “national identity” are continuously constructed within hegemonic discourse as a way to visually map out specific places or origins that circulate around the concept of “home.” As with Chapter 1, I interrogated how not feeling “at home” in one’s body may signal a gesture toward unintelligibility which is made possible by formulations of queer otherness. Although “home” can often be a site of

comfort, acceptance, and belonging, these spaces can threaten the lives of those regarded as outside, foreign, or strange deviations from normative social identities. In this chapter, I turn the focus toward cinematic representations of two separate, yet highly exclusionary, institutions—marriage and the military—that highlight how normative bodies, modes of identification, and kinship structures become codified within complex systems of recognition in defense of the home and homefront. These systems of recognition heavily rely on heteronormativity, and increasingly homonormativity, to concretize normative constructions of “home” by way of forcefully forging kinship ties through mediated social relations and formal legal bonds between those who partake in their reproduction.

In the films *Soldier's Girl* (2003) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), these heteronormative kinship ties are representative of the fraternal bonds between soldiers and the fidelity between husband and wife. As a result, the relationships that emerge from these interactions are produced through a combination of legal/contractual bonds,³⁸ shared experiences, and communal identification. They become an affirmation of heterosexuality and a way for an individual to assert loyalty to the Nation-State. Although these films serve as a reminder of how ideological and repressive state apparatuses serve as a form of constraint that can end in violence and death for those marked as embodying queer otherness, the representation of unintelligible desires and queer kinships in the films point toward a critique of these regulatory apparatuses and challenge an individual's “appropriate” narrative of experience within them. More specifically, both films address the constraints of heteronormativity, signaling to moments in which the audience can disidentify with the normative scripts presented.

The visual depictions of kinship and desire in *Soldier's Girl* (2003) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) also provide an alternate framework for understanding the affective relations in the military and marriage, facilitating a larger conversation about the allure and illusion of happiness. What exactly does it mean to *be* happy? How might happiness be intertwined with imagined fantasies about marriage and sensationalized notions of patriotic service? If idealized

³⁸ Here, legal/contractual bonds include any contractual agreements determined and upheld by a Nation-State. Such agreements typically have negative legal recourse and negative social impacts attached to them if they are not upheld. For example, marriage certificates and military contracts of service both reinforce particular affective elements of their corresponding relationships—between individuals for marriage and between an individual and a country for the military. If an individual does not fulfill a military contract, financial and/or criminal sanctions against that individual can be enforced.

hetero-/homonormative notions of happiness were cast aside, would another form of happiness emerge and would such emotions remain intelligible to others? What would an embrace of happiness look like if embodying it were to jeopardize belonging, recognition, or even life itself? Embodying some forms of happiness might very well lead to social exclusion and physical death. In this sense, happiness is not necessarily dependent on the intelligibility of an individual's desires or intrinsically linked to the prolonging of their life. These questions shape the central characters' attempts to find happiness within frameworks of recognition or "fuck" happiness altogether.

The Case of PFC Barry Winchell's Death & the U.S. Military's DADT Policy

Early in the morning on July 5, 1999, as he slept in his barracks at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, 21-year old Private First Class (PFC) Barry Winchell was brutally beaten with a baseball bat by 18-year old Private (PVT) Calvin Glover. The next day, Winchell died of massive head trauma at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center. The case received national attention not because of the low rate of murder among U.S. military servicemembers, but because of the circumstances surrounding and leading up to Winchell's death. Although a physical altercation between Winchell and Glover had occurred the day prior, Winchell's murder stemmed from a cascade of events prompted by allegations of homosexual conduct from his superior officers as well as fellow soldiers. An informal inquiry as to Winchell's sexual relations was initiated as a result of rumors spread by Specialist (SPC) Justin Fisher, Winchell's roommate.³⁹ At the time of these allegations, Winchell was in a relationship with Calpernia Addams, a pre-operative transsexual woman, who performed at a night club called The Connection located in Nashville, Tennessee. As reported in a *Washington Post* article on August 11, 1999, "[Winchell] confided to friends that he had long questioned his sexuality and had been curious about gay life" despite only having dated cisgender women prior to his involvement with Addams (Pressley). Aside from the mention of Winchell's "curiosity" with "gay life," it is unknown if he ever made a declaration about his sexual orientation.

Despite the military's presumed advocacy for inclusion and diversity, policies such as

³⁹ Fisher was also implicated in Winchell's murder and later was convicted of conspiracy charges following his court-martial.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) resulted in a proliferation of binary thinking. The “Army’s Homosexual Conduct Policy” defined homosexual conduct as: “An act or a statement by a soldier that demonstrates a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts, the solicitation of another to engage in a homosexual act or acts, or a homosexual marriage or attempted marriage” (United States). Homosexual conduct is distinguished from heterosexual conduct here, yet neither is clearly defined. The policy’s emphasis on creating a distinction relies on the performance of a homosexual “act” or the imagined act being realized through an excitation of speech. As Judith Butler points out in her book, *Excitable Speech*, the linguistic performance of announcing one *is* “homosexual” allows for the imagined “acts” to be realized as these words “do not merely describe; they are figured as performing what they describe, not only in the sense that they constitute the speaker as a homosexual, but that they constitute the speech as homosexual conduct” (107). An individual can be gay and serve in the military as long as the soldier does not (intend to) act on, display, or speak of his/her same-sex attraction. In other words, it is fine if the soldier is gay as long as the soldier’s behavior is consciously policed in order to *appear* heterosexual. The creation of this heteronormative “double bind” allows for the soldier to serve, but serve in silence—a silence that results in self-censorship, prohibiting an individual from self-describing, but allowing the term “homosexual” to be used in order to discursively identify others. For example, I cannot say that I am gay; however, I am free to use the term to describe the conduct, behavior, or mannerisms of others. Furthermore, grounds for an investigation, or even an informal inquiry, were based on whether or not a “reliable witness” was able to bring forth “credible evidence” that the soldier participated in any activity that could be broadly construed as falling under the policy’s definition of homosexual conduct. Here, the U.S. military’s policy already presupposes that notions of reliability and credibility are framed within heteronormative discourse and shaped by homophobic and heterosexist ideology. In Winchell’s case, Fisher was considered the “reliable witness” who brought forth the “credible evidence” of Winchell’s homosexual conduct because he frequented the night club Addams performed at.

Although the policy does regulate what is deemed “appropriate” behavior (read: heterosexuality) for a military workplace, it is inadequate in accounting for the multiplicity and fluidity of sexual desire or the broad range of gender expressions that are often misinterpreted

and conflated with a person's sexual orientation. Within these discursive constraints, an effeminate man might be read as gay; similarly, a masculine woman might be read as a butch lesbian. These visual encodings do not necessarily correspond to the subject's sexual orientation as both could exhibit gender characteristics and behaviors of the "opposite" sex and still self-identify as heterosexual. In this sense, the DADT policy was more about *performing* heteronormative gender roles than about same-sex desire. Moreover, since the policy cannot account for desires that are not defined by the either/or hetero-/homosexual binary, labeling Winchell's as "gay" because of his attraction to Calpernia Addams seems inadequate and reductive.

Immediately branded a hate crime by many LGBT rights organizations such as the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN), news reports cast Winchell's violent murder as a product of repressed homophobia that stemmed from the military's DADT policy on homosexual conduct in the service. SLDN, and similar organizations that advocated for a repeal of the DADT policy, posthumously framed Winchell as a gay soldier. As David France aptly wrote in his *New York Times* article, "An Inconvenient Woman" published on May 28, 2000, "By superimposing a rigid grid of sexual identity over the lives of Calpernia Addams and Barry Winchell, the activists effectively severed the soldier from the love for which he died." France's remark implies that these representations of Winchell's sexuality are irresponsible as his relationship with Addams cannot be discursively contained by categories such as "straight" or "gay." To contain it within a "rigid grid of sexual identity" undercuts the viability of Winchell's love for Addams and further undercuts the viability of their relationship.

Some activists and grassroots organizations, like Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC)⁴⁰, responded to how LGBT rights organizations quickly appropriated the circumstances surrounding Winchell's death in order to advocate for the passage of hate crime legislation—legislation that does not account for the complex ways an individual's intersectional

⁴⁰ Based in Washington, D.C., GenderPAC (1996-2009) was a national LGBT rights organization that comprised of several coalitional alliances with trans* and gender-variant groups who worked to guarantee every American's civil right to express their gender identity—free of stereotypes, discrimination, and violence—regardless of whether or not they conformed to normative expectations of gender (Theophano).

identity might increase their proximity and vulnerability to violence.⁴¹ Furthermore, such legislation frames “harm” as solely an interpersonal act that one (or more) individual(s) perpetrates onto another; it does not regard this harm as a result of systemic problems or see it as stemming from institutionalized violence. In a mass e-mail action alert distributed on May 30, 2000, the Executive Director of GenderPAC, Riki Wilchins, is quoted as issuing the following statement:

When transgender women are assaulted because they are perceived as homosexual, gay groups point out that it's an anti-gay hate crime. When a gay man is picked out in part because he's young and slender and gentle and blond, gay groups point out that it's an anti-gay hate crime. And now when a young soldier is killed because he's dating a transgender woman, gay groups point out that this, too, is only an anti-gay hate crime.

It[']s past time we acknowledge that when GLBT victims are beaten, assaulted or killed, it's never just about sexual orientation. It's always about orientation and gender, or orientation and race, or orientation and class. Representing these crimes as anything less does a terrible injustice to the lives we lead, the challenges we face, and the scars we bear. (GenderPAC)

Wilchins' remarks illustrate how hate crime legislation, and the organizations lobbying for more stringent laws around such identity-based crimes, often simplify the circumstances of an individual and the circumstances around their death. To this end, the delineation of Winchell's sexual orientation (as outlined by the military's DADT policy and repurposed by LGBT rights organizations) cannot, and ought not, apply to the circumstances of his murder, especially since doing so would forcefully render his sexual identity intelligible at the expense of erasing the relationship that was the underlying factor in his death. The acknowledgment and false acceptance of “difference” focuses on the privileging of a dominant discourse within an ahistorical framework of predominately Western, middle-class, white, male heteronormativity. Such modes of thought cannot engage with the systems of power that regulate our desires. Instead, individuals are violently cast into frameworks of recognition or, if their bodies and desires are

⁴¹ Hate crime legislation advocates and lobbyists framed the protection of sexual minorities as being central to their pleas. However, hate crime legislation encompasses other “protected classes” under the federal statute (e.g., race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability).

rendered unintelligible, their subject positions become delegitimized. In the case of Barry Winchell, the violence surrounding his murder and the violence of misrepresenting who he was are radically different types of harm that produce entirely different effects. However, they are both propelled by the ways in which frameworks of recognitions render Winchell's queer otherness as legible. Even though unintelligibility can result in the delegitimization of an individual's subjectivity, this violence might circumvent the violences individuals face when embodying queer otherness. Furthermore, as Rikki Wilchins's statement reminds us, these forms of harm are never monolithically driven but, instead, are a result of intersecting forms of subjugation.

With this in mind, and notwithstanding a critical analysis of the military or military violence, SLDN⁴² and other gay rights organizations such as the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the National LGBTQ Task Force (previously known as the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force [NGLTF]) rejoiced as the U.S. Congress passed a federal statute in December of 2010 (H.R. 2965; S. 4023) that repealed the DADT policy. Sixty days after receiving presidential approval and certification from the defense secretary and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the congressional act, which now allowed gays and lesbians⁴³ to serve openly in the U.S. military, took effect on September 20, 2011. Although the military has expanded the categories of "acceptable" sexual identities to serve in their ranks, the danger with the policy's repeal is that the broadening of sexual diversity in the military now allows for gays and lesbians to feel equally invested in the nationalistic pride and patriotic fervor that incites individuals' devotion and service to the Nation-State. Coupled with U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in 2013 that the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was unconstitutional, homonationalism serves as a powerful force to protect the sanctity of the "home" and "home front." As such, the repeal of

⁴² Following the 2010 repeal of the DADT policy, SLDN was renamed OutServe-Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (Out-Serve SLDN).

⁴³ It is important to note that the DADT policy only impacted gays and lesbians who were currently serving in the U.S. military or were planning to enlist in its ranks; it did not impact the preexisting ban on transgender and gender-variant individuals. Prior to the Clinton administration instituting the DADT policy in 1994, a similar blanket ban barred gays and lesbians from military service. Just as closeted gays and lesbians served prior to 1994, transgender and gender-variant individuals exist in the Armed Forces even if they are not "visible" or "out" as trans*. As of May 2014, the Williams Institute estimated there are 134,300 transgender veterans and approximately 15,500 transgender individuals currently serving on active duty, in the reserve forces, or in the National Guard (Gates and Herman). Research initiatives at the Palm Center have been working on lifting the military's ban on transgender individuals (Palm).

DADT does not significantly impact the cultural climate of gender and sexual-based violence that the U.S. military is predicated on. The persistence of this cultural climate results in the military remaining a fraught environment for those whose non-normative gender expressions or sexual relations, like Barry Winchell's, are not readily intelligible. Furthermore, ideological investments in the military perpetuate nationalistic pride and extend U.S. imperialistic endeavors. Despite the heightened visibility of the DADT and DOMA repeals, queer and trans* scholars and activists continue to critique the effects of the military and the disposability of lives on the homefront and beyond the borders of the Nation-State.⁴⁴

The Violence of Heteronormativity: Performing Masculinity in Soldier's Girl (2003)

Given the wide-spread media coverage on Winchell's death, and presumptions regarding his sexuality, critical attention to the film *Soldier's Girl* (2003) is particularly important. Despite how Winchell's case was intrinsically tied to the effects of the military's DADT policy by proponents for and against the policy, the public cannot, and nor should it, identify Winchell's sexuality with any degree of certainty. This "not knowing" provides a justification to examine alternate representational forms, like *Soldier's Girl* (2003), that offer a nuanced entry point into the military's cultural climate, while also attuning the audience to an intimacy that is not readily classifiable within a hetero- or homonormative framework. In many ways, the Showtime docudrama *Soldier's Girl* (2003) is arguably a *less* sensationalized account than the news and media representations, as it refrains from allowing the audience to map a particular sexual identity onto Winchell or Addams and it gestures toward an alternate reading of their relationship as a marked form of queer otherness.

The film *Soldier's Girl* (2003), directed by Frank Pierson, presents the male body and the spectacle of hyper-masculinity as ways to cope with the "crisis" of heteronormativity through the perpetuation of visual and linguistic performances that are emblematic of an imaginary notion of national identity, but it is also a volatile love story that transgresses the confines of

⁴⁴ Some of the more notable critiques and theorization have emerged from Judith Butler (*Precarious Life* [2004]; *Frames of War* [2009]), Jasbir Puar (*Terrorist Assemblages* [2007]), and the Against Equality collective (Against Equality). In particular, the *Against Equality* anthology (2014), edited by Ryan Conrad, is notable for its critiques around same-sex marriage, the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the military, and the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC).

heteronormative desires. The docudrama is based on the events leading up to the death of Barry Winchell, who is played by Troy Garity, and his love affair with Calpernia Addams, played by Lee Pace.⁴⁵ *Soldier's Girl* (2003) highlights how the DADT policy's flaws and contradictions reflect the instability of compulsory heterosexuality, yet it also draws our attention to the cultural elements of hyper-masculinity that are apparent in the military. For example, Barry must continually assert his masculinity as a way to prove that he is *not* homosexual and that he does not have homosexual desires: "I'm not gay!" (*Soldier's Girl*). Surprisingly, Barry never provides us with the positive claim, "I am straight," calling into question the way in which he narrates his own mode of identification. Such threats to an individual's security might lead to self-questioning that result in,

putting oneself at risk, imperiling the very possibility of being recognized by others, since to question the norms of recognition that govern what I might be, to ask what they leave out, what they might be compelled to accommodate, is, in relation to the present regime, to risk unrecognizability as a subject or at least to become an occasion for posing the questions of who one is (or can be) and whether or not one is recognizable. (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 23)

Here, Butler remarks on the correlation between the contestation of who is recognizable as "human" and the contestation of an individual's intelligibility. With this in mind, the function of stating one is *not* gay becomes two-fold. Barry is aware of the norms of recognition that call his identity into question, causing his statement to be a defense for his compliance with heteronormativity. In this sense, Barry's self-representation takes the form of a denial, as there is the implication of an accusation (e.g., "not gay" equals "not guilty").⁴⁶ On the other hand, Barry risks being rendered unrecognizable since he continually gives an account of himself in relation to *what he is not* during moments of interrogation where the self is repeatedly reconstituted. Yet, it is precisely this negation of an identity that gestures toward the unintelligible intimacy he

⁴⁵ Barry Winchell and Calpernia Addams' first names will be used throughout my analysis of the film *Soldier's Girl* (2003) even though I have previously referenced them by last name only. This change in naming retains the consistency with which different genres of writing refer to their subjects. It is also meant to recognize a distinction between the people (Barry Winchell and Calpernia Addams) and the characters in the film who they are modeled after.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, the equating of "straightness" with "innocence" does not easily compute in this case as the grounds for an admission of heterosexuality would have likely still led to an investigation into Barry's sexual conduct precisely because of his involvement with a transsexual woman.

shares with Calpernia.

Barry's statement asserts his incessant need to comply with military modes of recognition. Despite having never admitted that he is "gay" or "straight," if he is coded as "heterosexual," then he is not only rendered recognizable, but he also gains acceptance and protection from the military's homosocial kinship system—a potentially lethal fraternity. Yet, obtaining membership is not an easy task by any means. The violent interrogation of the self emerges during moments in the film when those who operate in compliance with the military framework label Barry's sense of being as a non-normative mode of identification. Upon entering into the barracks at Fort Campbell for the first time, Barry uses his first name during his introduction to SPC Justin Fisher, his future roommate and "battle buddy." In response, Justin verbally attacks Barry: "You're Barry-the-fuck who? [...] No first names in the infantry unless you want everyone to think you are a pussy" (*Soldier's Girl*). Justin's response is an interrogation of who Barry is within the military's framework of recognition, and it is also an assertion of how one's identity is continuously regulated in accordance with heteronormative ideals of masculinity and heterosexist speech acts. Justin enforces the patronymic as the privileged marker of identity; this practice also suggests an erasure of a soldier's individuality beyond the name of the father. Additionally, Justin's remarks clearly convey that an infantry soldier cannot *be* a "pussy" nor can anyone *think he is* a "pussy." As Barry later learns, a soldier's membership and acceptance into the infantry is contingent upon his continual gender performance; and, the mastery of such performative acts holds a particular valence that can be wielded against those who are *imagined* as deviating from the norm as their bodies are ascribed as inhabiting a form of queer otherness.

Within the military, these reiterated (linguistic and theatrical) gender performances become naturalized through the ritualized violence endemic to hyper-masculinity. Although we might initially regard Barry as conceding to a normative gender presentation, he circumvents the dichotomous oppositional framework of hetero-/homosexual desire, allowing for the possibility of multiple forms of *becoming* to emerge during moments of contestation. However, when his subject position is called into question, the unnaturalness of asserting hyper-masculine behavior reveals a crisis of heteronormativity—the more Barry "acts" hyper-masculine in order to ensure he is never regarded as effeminate, then the more the framework he operates within appears

constructed and volatile.⁴⁷ This denaturalization of Barry's gender performance, alongside the heterosexual norms present in the film, is similar to Roland Barthes's description of the wrestling audience in his book *Mythologies*. Barthes asserts, "the public [...] abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequence: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees" (Barthes 15). Barry's body creates a "spectacle of excess" (Barthes 15) that highlights the homogenizing effects of the military national imaginary, revealing the illusion of acceptance and belonging for an individual within a particular framework of recognition. During one scene, Barry is disciplined for being late to formation. As he continues to perform push-ups, the Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) in charge of the formation yells, "Do you deserve to be called a 'Screamin' Eagle?!" (*Soldier's Girl*)⁴⁸. Barry bellows in response, "No, 'cause I'm an asshole, Sergeant!" as he continues to count the number of push-ups completed. This spectacle draws attention to the performativity of constantly reproduced normative regimes and all of its accompanying contradictions. In other words, Barry must "earn" his membership in his unit through a hyper-masculine performance of physical feats—completion of one hundred push-ups with his rucksack and weapon—while, at the same time, suggesting his unworthiness of inclusion to the group through self-deprecation. As Barry performs these physical tasks and his body become a site of contestation, his enactment of the spectacle highlights the performativity of masculinity and draws attention to the instability of a heteronormative framework—a framework that is sustained, in this instance, by its continual reliance on the performativity of masculinity and the violent policing of the slippages and failures of such performances. Also, since the continuance of the spectacle relies on emphasizing both the speech act (linguistic performativity) and the visual coding of Barry's actions by others (the reiterative theatrics of hyper-masculinity), Barry's identity is *always* being contested as his body turns into a mobile, one-man stage within the military's system of (mis)recognition.

Barry's exclusion from the onset of the film suggests the rite of passage that must be crossed in order to enter into the fraternity of the military's "elite" Airborne Infantry unit. Once

⁴⁷ These reiterative and performative elements of masculinity in the film are akin to Judith Butler's arguments regarding the cultural practices of drag in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* (174-80).

⁴⁸ Military units often have nicknames that correspond with their unit's history, traditions, customs, or mottos. The nickname "Screaming Eagles" represents the patch worn by soldiers of the 101st Airborne Infantry Division.

he earns entry into the group, his identity is still continually called into question. After failing to qualify on his weapon, Barry's loyalty to the unit is challenged by Justin: "You cannot let the company down. Everyone has to operate at the utmost of their capability" (*Soldier's Girl*). Justin sees Barry's failure to qualify as not only a failure that impacts the unit, but as a disruption to the normative framework of competence and cohesion that ensures the unit's stability. In other words, Barry's failure becomes another site of contestation that destabilizes and threatens the functionality of the military. Just as the function of Barthes's wrestler "is not to win," but instead, "it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him" (16), Barry's compliance and eventual qualification on his weapon give the illusion of his acceptance and recognizability. Like the wrestler's excessive gestures, Barry's display of hyper-masculinity remains as the performance that is expected of him in response to the "crisis" of heteronormativity.

According to Dennis Sumara, "because heteronormativity regulates the ways in which sociality is dominated by ideas and practices that privilege those persons whose public performance of identity appears to conform to the very narrow understanding of what constitutes a heterosexual identity, it also organizes what does not count as a heterosexual identity" (14). In these terms, Barry's physical altercations only erupt when his identity is perceived as *not* "heterosexual." In fact, it is Barry's unwillingness to engage in physical altercations to defend against being called "faggot" that lead to further linguistic and physical provocations by PVT Calvin Glover. His unwillingness to engage in the spectacle of hyper-masculinity and display his prowess through the physicality of fighting instigates more violent acts against him.⁴⁹ At several points in the film, Barry attempts to defuse arguments that erupt between him and Justin, and later Calvin (Barry's murderer). Barry continually asserts: "I don't want to fight you!" (*Soldier's Girl*). When physical violence is forced on him, Barry yells, "You made me do this"

⁴⁹ Violent (physical, verbal, and psychological) encounters have always been a constant threat for individuals who inhabit continuously shifting modes of identification. Having inhabited a mutable identity (as a queer trans* graduate student and as a masculine, but presumably heterosexual, female officer in the US military) for a number of years caused me to continually traverse a paradoxical sense of embodiment that is akin to a Möbius strip. As my sense of self was always constructed as a constitutive outside, it complicated how I traversed the interiority and exteriority of my own embodiment. Such complications created tension for me in the private and public spheres as well as within my personal and professional life. From hearing stories and having witnessed events that resemble PFC Winchell's experiences, I have discovered that when there is noncompliance with dominant ideology, especially in institutions like the military, those who belong to the dominant group will *always* respond with force aimed at bodies that do not fit nicely within the defined parameters.

as he vigorously fights back (*Soldier's Girl*). Although his statement is directed at Calvin (the person with whom he is in conflict with), we can also read it as a rhetorical strategy that places the focus of blame not on Justin's instigations or Calvin's provocations, but on the social institution of heteronormativity that forces Barry to enact a spectacle of violence within the military. Despite the film's representation of Barry endorsing hyper-masculinity as a mode of survival and as a way to give an account of himself, his behaviors and actions evoke a refusal of participation in rigidly set sexual identity categories. His simultaneous compliance and resistance creates a queer positionality of otherness that complicates the intersections between his own embodiment and the intimacy shared with Calpernia, normative expressions of sexuality, the ritualized performativity of hyper-masculinity, and notions regarding devotion and allegiance to the military as well as the nation it serves. The point I want to illustrate is that the contradictions and paradoxes that emerge from queer alterity are not a simple splicing or straddling of two set identities. In fact, such queer otherness emerges from Barry's unintelligible desires being rendered intelligible by the constraints of a heteronormative system of recognition. Inhabiting these categories of identification results in a fragmentation of the self, and they unveil the complexity of any specific, momentary embodiment.

Barry's queer positionality prompts his vulnerability to the violences enacted within the military's framework of recognition and his queer otherness becomes apparent when notions of "home" are being put forth as sites of stability and acceptance. Upon entering Fort Campbell, the army post that Barry is assigned to, the audience sees a sign placed in front of the gate which reads: "Home of the Screaming Eagles." "Home" is typically viewed as a site of sanctity, security, and safety. Here, these notions render home into a site of violence, exclusion, and Barry's continual interrogation. Later in the film, Barry drives Calpernia to her family "home." In her refusal to enter the household, and after recounting the painful memories of her last encounter with her family, Calpernia states: "I have to be more of myself before I walk up to that house again" (*Soldier's Girl*). Calpernia recognizes the anxiety that her gender variance causes for her family.⁵⁰ She is also suggesting that she feels she is not quite "at home" in her body;

⁵⁰As I discussed in Chapter 1 with Alan Goldberg's *ABC News* article, "Born With the Wrong Body," the heteronormative matrix and notions of the "normal" family are revealed as anxiety amounts for the gender variant individual to embrace a more "normative" narrative—one that is infused with possibility and the presumed "naturalness" of *being* a particular gender.

once she can *become* a more idealized version of herself, she can then return to her childhood “home.” This moment in the film serves as a cautionary tale of how fragile idyllic notions of “home” tend to be as they are reliant on an individual’s recognition by and belonging to a specific kinship structure. This moment also signals the ways in which Barry is unaware of how his own positionality threatens the stability of the “home” (broadly construed) and challenges the dominant ideology of the military.

Barry’s “not gay,” and yet not quite “straight,” embodiment problematizes his role as a soldier and his role as a citizen. In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Lauren Berlant describes how the political public sphere is infused with the intimate public sphere as both contribute to the production of the “good citizen.” This interfacing with the public sphere becomes a measure of gaining or losing acceptance within the social order. She suggests, “the dominant idea marketed by patriotic traditionalists is of a core nation whose survival depends on personal acts and identities performed in the intimate domains of the quotidian” (4). Often, what is not made visible is the pervasive cultural fear, or imagined threat, of no longer being able to live up to “The American Dream.” For Berlant, “the intimate public sphere of the U.S. present tense renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere” (5). Since this book’s publication in 1997, and with the advent of the events that followed September 11, 2001, an emphasis on family time and domestic familial space in the United States still persists as well as state-sanctioned legal contracts that legitimize hetero- and homonormative kinship structures. To be a “good citizen” is to marry, raise children, work hard to provide for the family unit, participate in economic exchange (i.e., purchasing products), and uphold “American” values as these are all personal acts that focus on the domestic realm and that remain conditions for social inclusion.⁵¹ In fact, it seems that an individual’s social membership becomes the condition of rendering him/her not just a “good citizen” but a patriotic one. These roles continually define and regulate individuals as producers and consumers of hetero- and homonationalism, attaching a coherent, presumably fixed, “American” identity to such bodies. Here, one’s “membership” is ascertained through maintaining and policing the constructed divisions that reinforce the Nation-

⁵¹ This topic is taken up in Chapter 3 and discussed more at length in relation to Jasbir Puar’s scholarly contributions.

State's investment in biopower. In contrast, Barry's relationship with Calpernia complicates the domestic realm and problematizes the family sphere. Not only is it a non-procreative relationship, but his relationship can also be regarded as a personal sexual act that disrupts any prospect for social inclusion as a soldier and "good citizen."

As non-normative structures of kinship and intimacy are often regarded as "unstable" when contrasted with the supposed safety and security of a stable "home," they, consequently, become a threat to the national imaginary as potential sites of "terror." For example, the presumed "destruction of family values" (vis-à-vis same-sex marriage and the repeal of DOMA) becomes regarded as an act of terror on heteronormativity—a threat to the intimate sphere "home." Similarly, homonormative arguments in favor of same-sex marriage recast affirmative "family values" and frame their engagement with the intimate public sphere as one that deserves "dignity" and "respect." In the article, "Gay Rights versus Queer Theory: What is Left of Sodomy After *Lawrence v. Texas*?", Teemu Ruskola suggests,

Although this humanizing gesture is hard to resist, we nevertheless ought to insist on separating sexual acts from identities as much as we can, at least for the purposes of legal categorization. *Lawrence v. Texas* is a rhetorical symptom of the risk that the invitation to enjoy the "intimate public sphere," to use Lauren Berlant's term, is being ultimately offered "only for members of families," whether gay or straight. (245)

In a move to separate out an individual's identity from particular sexual acts, Ruskola claims that "family need not be built around a relationship that is defined by a sexual bond, and a sexual connection needs not to constitute an embryonic family. After all, sex need not be about connection at all; sex can signify intense alienation and separation as much as connection" (245). If sex can be just as much about separation as it can be about connection, what exactly might sex separate us from and how might it shift us toward reconfiguring our understanding of intimacy altogether? It seems that these reconfigurations of intimacy, whether sexual or not, blur the lines between the public and private spheres, redirecting focus away from the happy, hetero-/homosexual, monogamous family that is encased within the stable, domestic "home" of the national imaginary. Furthermore, sex acts that are devoid of legal recognition, or are separate from familial kinship ties, resist the reproduction of the "good citizen" and queerly reconfigure and/or undermine notions of "home" altogether.

Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, in their article “Monster, Terrorist, Fag,” suggest that “sexuality is central to the creation of a certain knowledge of terrorism,” one which contributes to “an aggressive heterosexual patriotism” (117). Frameworks of recognition assist with the production of this patriotism as they are embedded within a particular national discourse that renders specific bodies intelligible by affirming their status as patriotic citizens. Puar and Rai state that the deployment of heteronormative patriotism is two-fold. It involves “the quarantining of the terrorist-monster-fag using the bodies and practices of a queer ‘other’” and “the incorporation of aspects of queer subjectivity into the body of the normalized nation” (Puar and Rai 126-27). In Puar and Rai’s formulation, queerness gets mapped onto the racialized body of the terrorist-monster-fag, allowing the public to regard it as innocuous. Furthermore, the folding of “good” queer subjects (namely homonormative gays and lesbians) into the discursive production of patriotic citizenship assists with the quarantining of the terrorist-monster-fag’s queer otherness. This formulation can also apply to the case of PFC Barry Winchell. On one hand, the DADT investigation and his murder effectively quarantined his queer otherness. On the other hand, the posthumous depictions of Winchell’s identity and the invocation of his murder to repeal the military’s DADT policy, as well as appeal for the passage of hate crime legislation, prompt the participation of “good” queer subjects in the production of patriotic citizenship. With the passage of the federal hate crime law in 2009, the repeal of the military’s DADT policy in 2010, and the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling of DOMA as unconstitutional in 2013, homonormativity continues to take root in the production of patriotic citizens and the discourse of a normalized nation.

Distortions, Home, & Marriage in Brokeback Mountain (2005)

Similar to *Soldier’s Girl* (2003), the film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), directed by Ang Lee, portrays the emergence of queer positionalities that erupt from a normalized nation’s regulation of non-normative desires. Drawing from the short story written by Annie Proulx and first published in *The New Yorker* on October 13, 1997, screenwriters Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana adapted “Brokeback Mountain” for the silver screen. The short story and the film focus on heteronormative conventions, propriety, values, and cultural constraints—all elements of a normalized nation—that cause difficulty as the main characters traverse their non-normative

desire for each other in rural Wyoming during the early 1960s through the early 1980s. Yet, critics and the general public will often mischaracterize and reductively frame the cinematic version as an epic romantic drama that tells the tale of a “gay cowboy love story.”

Following the film’s highly acclaimed international and national reception, and after having gained notoriety winning three Academy Awards, Proulx expressed regret with having written the short story that started it all. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Proulx states: “So many people have completely misunderstood the story. [...] [A] lot of men have decided that the story should have had a happy ending. They can’t bear the way it ends [...] They can’t understand that the story isn’t about [the main characters]. It’s about homophobia; it’s about a social situation; it’s about a place and a particular mindset and morality” (Proulx). As Proulx aptly pinpoints her frustration with how many individuals interpret the story, she draws attention to the ways in which visual culture operates. Particularly in the U.S., difficulty exists in parsing out the performative elements of sexuality and desire from the taxonomical configurations they signify. In other words, much of the media buzz about the film focused on determining the sexuality of the main characters instead of remarking on how the cinematography and geography, coupled with the themes of desire, longing, and loss, help shape the plot.

In many ways, the film’s striking visual representations of landscapes (including the mountain that is the story’s namesake) and the silences found in between the characters’ dialogues unpack and prolong moments filled with symbolic value in Proulx’s short story. These cinematic depictions of same-sex desire prompted mainstream audiences to ascribe their own contemporary notions of gender and sexuality onto the characters portrayed. Whether fetishized or loathed, the legibility of these characters exclusively existed within a sexual binary, resulting in a loss of the ambiguity of their relationship and producing a misreading of the ways desire can remain unnamed while its corporeal schema lingers as something that is tangibly felt. To this end, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) warrants further investigation into how the structural violence of heteronormativity shapes desire and how the institution of marriage and the performativity of masculinity function as regulatory regimes imposed on both characters. Such analyses complicate our understanding of the characters and they allow us to approach queer kinship and intimacy in nuanced ways.

The film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) explores the intimate relationship of two cowboys

from opposite corners of Wyoming, Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal), who meet in the summer of 1963 while herding sheep on Brokeback Mountain. These men negotiate systems of recognition and regulation through their participation in heteronormativity as a way to survive the real and imagined violences that erupt from their desire for each other. Both Ennis and Jack's investment in their marriages to women, and their perceived investment in the sanctity of the family, highlight the performativity and fabrication of the "home" within the rural context of the West. Their marriages, and presumed sanctity of the nuclear family, function as a necessary apparatus to a normalized nation and help create the illusions of monogamy, security, family, and happiness.

Brokeback Mountain (2005) situates the centrality of marriage to a normalized nation through the interactions between Ennis and Jack. Although the film mostly focuses on the intimacy between these two primary characters, the dialogue between them points toward Ennis's acknowledgment that their desire can only exist on the peripheries of his social obligations to Alma and the children. Ennis continually struggles and fails at maintaining these obligations, but his insistence on the centrality of them aligns with the cultural norms of his rural Wyoming town. As Ennis describes to Jack the brutal murders of two ranchers that were presumably lovers, he depicts how the threat of violence and self-policing ensure compliance with heterosexual cultural norms. These forms of violence and self-policing are corollary to similar depictions in *Soldier's Girl* (2003) and are no less enforced. Such compliance grants Ennis (and, to a degree, Jack) access to a form of heterosexual citizenship that folds into a normalized nation—one that sustains, and is buttressed by, the centrality of marriage and family. Even Ennis's gender performativity and stoic demeanor throughout the film are iconic of an American working-class masculinity. If, by chance, his masculinity fails—as it does with Jack and his father-in-law's emasculation of him during a Thanksgiving dinner—Ennis's marriage to Alma will secure the continuance of a heterosexual citizenship. Yet, Ennis and Jack's relationship not only distorts the idealized vision of married life as exclusive and exclusively heterosexual, but it also maintains a distinction between sexual orientation as an identity and the expression of unintelligible desires.

As with the character of Barry in *Soldier's Girl* (2003), Ennis and Jack present the former as a negation (e.g., "I'm not queer"; "Me neither" [*Brokeback Mountain*]); while the latter is

tangible but inarticulable for both characters. As mentioned earlier, the audience may map their own desires onto Ennis and Jack. But as in Barry's case, it is the parsing out of identity from sex act, coupled with the minimal linguistic exchanges Ennis and Jack have, that complicate ascribing any singular sexual identity to either of them. It is precisely at these moments of contact and connection with each other, as well as alienation from the rest of the world, that the unintelligibility of their desire emerges. Moreover, if the audience is unable to fully comprehend the embodied expression of these desires when they emerge, another layer of unintelligibility can get mapped onto the characters. Yet, such unintelligibility solicits a familiar affective relationship to the themes of love, lust, and loss that the film presents.

Mostly set in a rural, working-class Wyoming town, the film evokes the solitary specificity of the American West. The iconic, picturesque landscape reflects the nonverbal and stoic interactions between Ennis and Jack. Such rugged terrain is also representative of a need to survive the economic and intimate strains placed on the primary characters as both are working-class and struggling to make ends meet. Despite the depiction of the setting as rural and desolate, the isolation of the landscape offers a reprieve from the pressures of regulated social interactions. For Ennis and Jack, the sharing of everyday experiences during their initial summer on Brokeback Mountain served as a space for intimate interactions. These shared communal interactions involved conducting personal, and often private, day-to-day tasks necessary for functionality and survivability. Regardless of the lack of enclosure (apart from a small canvas tent), a close, intimate space emerges within the campsite area for accomplishing private activities such as bathing, urinating, and eating. These domestic functions become emblematic of a temporary displacement of the "home," juxtaposing privacy with the expansive landscape of the West.

Notions of "home" continue to become distorted from the onset of the film. After receiving instructions from their employer, Ennis and Jack settle down for a drink at the town bar. Attempting to make conversation with Ennis, Jack asks him about his family. Ennis describes how, following the death of his parents, he lived with his brother at the family ranch. However, Ennis solemnly admits that after his brother married, "Then no more room for me" (*Brokeback Mountain*). Ennis's comment alludes to marriage as the central institution that family revolves around and life is organized by. Yet, those who do not get married, particularly

for the working-class, are excluded from the sanctity of the “home.” Within this context, these allusions to marriage frame it as a site of physical stability and economic security, but not necessarily one of love. As the audience recognizes later on in the film, marriage is anything but secure and stable, yet it propagates idealized notions of love and happiness.

In particular, marriage is the basis of convenience that places a great deal of focus on the symbolic Child as reassurance for the preservation of heteronormativity’s future. Lee Edelman, in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, articulates how the image of the Child invokes an intent to restore an idyllic version of a never-present past as part of the national imaginary: “The Child, that is, marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (21). For Ennis’s wife, Alma, her children are viewed as central to the sanctity of her relationship with Ennis. Alma regards Ennis as violating this sanctity of marriage and of the “home” when she witnesses Ennis and Jack kiss as they reunite with each other after a four-year separation. For Alma, this transgression creates a “crisis” within the domestic realm.

As Ennis departs to take off with Jack for one of their “fishin’ trips,” Alma peers out of the living room window and clutches her daughter in her arms as she weeps. Alma’s embrace and “primal instinct” reaffirm normative gender roles, sexual desire, and heterosexual investments in the centrality of the family. Her socio-economic status as an unemployed mother with young children increases the affective elements of distress and anxiety in the scene as Alma’s concern regarding the financial stability of her and her children is called into question. From Alma’s perspective, Ennis has not only committed a transgression against their marriage contract, but against a culturally specific and temporally contingent code of morality. At first, Alma does not articulate her knowledge of Ennis’s relationship with Jack. Although she remains silent, her visceral and nonverbal actions cogently express her anger, distress, and concern. The audience can presume that she fears for the future of her child as her own imagined heterosexual ideal shatters. A distortion of “home” and violation of the domestic sphere occurs for Alma as she recognizes that her marriage to Ennis becomes anything but a site of stability and security.

Years later after Ennis and Alma are divorced, Alma confronts Ennis following a family Thanksgiving dinner:

Alma: You oughta get married again, Ennis. Me and the girls worry about you bein’

alone so much.

Ennis: Hm. Well, once burned. (*Brokeback Mountain*)

The above exchange is useful in several different ways. First, Alma frames the discussion with her concern for Ennis with regards to how he has not married someone else. Alma articulates that Ennis's daughters share in this "worry" out of concern that he is too isolated. Regardless of Alma's sincerity, her assertion points to a reality of exclusion from the familial sphere and, at the same time, regards loneliness as having no "positive social value" (Edelman 6) whatsoever.⁵² Since much of the heteronormative social order values the centrality of family, an individual who does not, or cannot, embrace a heteronormative trajectory is indeed at risk of isolation. Yet, such isolation persists only insofar as alternate kinship structures are available to take their place.⁵³ Within the heteronormative frameworks of recognition, isolation produces an affect that is antithetical to "happiness" since the virtue of "happiness" is contingent on sharing those moments with others. Since Ennis's participatory engagement in heteronormativity is limited to family holiday dinners and occasional weekends with his daughters, Ennis traverses a space of "queer negativity"⁵⁴ that disengages with the "positive social value" (Edelman 6) heteronormative happiness offers.

As the above scene continues, Alma finally vocalizes to Ennis the distress she experienced when she discovered Ennis and Jack were lovers:

Alma: You still go fishin' with Jack Twist?

Ennis: Not often.

Alma: You know, I used to wonder how come you never brought any trouts home. You always said you caught plenty, and you know how me and the girls like fish. So one night I got your reel case open...night before you went on one of your little trips. Price tag still on it after five years...And I tied a note to the end of the line. It said, "Hello, Ennis. Bring some fish home. Love, Alma." And then you come back... lookin' all

⁵² As discussed at greater length in Chapter 1, Lee Edelman examines the relationship between "positive social value" and "queer negativity" (6).

⁵³ For example, many gay men during the AIDS epidemic found themselves without family and therefore without assistance or care. However, alternate kinship structures, paid care takers, and volunteer organizations such as The Shanti Project in San Francisco assisted with alleviating isolation.

⁵⁴ In Chapter 1, my discussion of Loren "Rex" Cameron's photographs addresses how "queer negativity" (Edelman 6) functions as a tactic that refuses to engage with social value as a means of thwarting it; instead, it disengages with the social value altogether.

perky...and said you caught a bunch of brown ones and you ate ‘em all up. D’you remember? I looked in that case first chance I got and there’s my note still tied there...That line hadn’t touched water in its life!

Ennis: That don’t mean nothin’, Alma.

Alma: Don’t try and fool me no more, Ennis. I know what it means...Jack Twist...

Ennis: Alma...

Alma: Jack “Nasty.” You didn’t go up there to fish. (*Brokeback Mountain*)

As Alma recounts the moment she confirms that Ennis’s “fishin’ trips” were anything but a platonic homosocial activity with Jack, she casts guilt upon Ennis as she regales her story of the unfound love note. By not providing fish upon his return, Alma regards Ennis as a liar, as someone who is inattentive, and unable to provide for his family. For Alma, these aspects and the disruption of “proper” relations between men mark Ennis’s betrayal.

Similar to the repression of non-normative desire in *Soldier’s Girl* (2003), many of the characters in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) refrain from openly articulating their thoughts or emotions, creating sites of continual yearning and desire that are never entirely fulfilled. Even the initial sexually intimate encounter between Ennis and Jack occurs with little verbal communication of their desire for one another. While lying in the tent next to each other on a cold night on the mountain, Jack wraps his arm around Ennis. Surprised and half-coherent, Ennis asks Jack, “What are you doing?” (*Brokeback Mountain*). A violent physical struggle ensues that erupts into an intense erotic charge as Ennis penetrates Jack. The withholding of Ennis’s emotions serves as a marker for desire that cannot, or at least should not, be articulated since it violates his presumed heterosexual identity.

The day after their intimate encounter, Ennis and Jack engage in a brief dialogue, giving an account of the night’s events and their own positionalities within a framework of recognition:

Ennis: This is a one shot thing we got going on here.

Jack: It’s nobody’s business but ours.

Ennis: You know I’m not queer.

Jack: Me neither. (*Brokeback Mountain*)

Ennis alludes to the temporality of his desire. He believes that his attraction is momentary and cannot be encapsulated within a timeframe that predicts or anticipates a future. In fact, since

their male-on-male desire is non-reproductive there can be no investment in the child; thus, Ennis can only live in the making of the present. Although Ennis's masculinity is not called into question at this point in the film, he, like Barry in *Soldier's Girl* (2003), gives an account of himself to Jack in relation to *what he is not*. What would it mean to take Ennis and men like him at their word? In many ways, a declaration like this affirms only the negation of a particular identity. Not only does it clarify the taxonomical category that Ennis finds himself *not* belonging to, but it also parses out the difference between an intelligible epistemological identification and the unintelligible affective and embodied aspects of a sexual act. Ennis's brooding and distant personality is held in stark contrast to the development of Jack's optimism for the future. In the scene above, Jack is on a trajectory of becoming self-aware of his own desires but is eager to create a connection with Ennis, even though Jack will recognize their differences later on in the film. Jack's anxiousness to establish his similarity to Ennis results in his affirmation of Ennis's comment. Moreover, recognizing Ennis's emotional withholding and the specific cultural context of the time, Jack affirms Ennis' need for their intimacy to remain contained within the private spheres they establish—isolated in the wilderness or restricted to a shoddy motel room.

As the film progresses, both Jack and Ennis marry women and have children of their own. They continue to see each other a few times a year, escaping from their heteronormative lifestyles. While in a bed at a motel, Jack whispers to Ennis: "I swore to God I wasn't going to get into this again" (*Brokeback Mountain*). Over the years, Jack's optimism of wanting to build a life with Ennis persists despite his attempt to regulate his own desire. Jack is caught between living in a moment of queer temporality—where his specificity of desire allows him a momentary mode of identification and embodiment that is not static nor afforded to him as *being* a heterosexual—and hoping for a future with Ennis that reflects the illusory security and stability of a heterosexual union.⁵⁵ Jack proposes his fantasized notions to Ennis: "You know it could be like this. Just like this, always" (*Brokeback Mountain*). By resisting the domestication of their intimate affair, and as a way to avoid the physical and linguistic violences aimed at those whose desires are considered non-normative within the particular time and place in which they are

⁵⁵ The type of queer temporality I signal here draws from Judith "Jack" Halberstam's definition of "queer time" as a "temporality that emerge[s] within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (*In a Queer Time & Place* 6).

situated, Ennis replies, “It ain't goin’ to be that way” (*Brokeback Mountain*). Jack’s hopeful optimism frames an imaginary future with Ennis. Although Jack’s idea of it being “just like this” is suggestive of a prolonged form of intimacy in the private sphere (e.g., having a ranch somewhere with Ennis), the social order that frames heteronormative investments in the future drives his hope forward: “hope, after all, would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism, [...] which is always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane” (Edelman 4). Ennis’s refusal of Jack’s hopeful, future-driven proposal can be read as a form of internalized homophobia. Alternatively, it also can be seen as Ennis’s recognition of how the private sphere is, in fact, not so “private” but what Lauren Berlant would regard as the “intimate public sphere.” Since the film leads the audience to believe that Ennis commits to a solitary life after Jack’s death when we see him living alone in a trailer at the end of the film, Ennis’s response at this earlier moment can function as a rejection of a future with or without Jack, a disavowal of hope for a different present, and a refusal to buy into the affect of happiness that accompanies the heteronormative social order. It is Ennis’s failure to name his love for Jack and participate in Jack’s fantasized future together that disallows him to engage with an idealized, intelligible notion of intimacy. Instead of endowing Ennis’s lived reality with a fictionalized notion of stability, hope, and happiness, Jack’s coherent fantasy of a future “yet to be” remains just that—fantasy. Even though Ennis’s desires for Jack and his disengagement from Jack’s imagined future might be regarded as unintelligible (even to Ennis), the expression of his conflicting emotions, his desire for Jack, and the intimacy they share is embodied, visceral, and tangibly felt by Ennis.

In constant tension with the desire for hope and happiness, the film portrays Ennis and Jack’s vulnerability to violence within their social framework of recognition. After spending a night with Jack at the campsite instead of sleeping on the herding grounds to ward off coyotes, Ennis returns to find one of the sheep dead with its innards torn out. The death of the sheep serves as a metaphor, symbolizing the violence that is inflicted on those who stray from security of the dominant group. It directly references Ennis’s transgression, his inward guilt of having betrayed a heterosexual identity, and alludes to the presumed violences enacted on an individual who remain on the fringes of recognizability within a heteronormative framework—namely, foreshadowing Jack’s murder.

At the start of their relationship, Ennis internalizes a self-loathing hatred and, on multiple occasions throughout the film, he projects outward his frustration and anger as violence. These violent acts serve as spectacle for Ennis's hyper-masculinity as he attempts to cope with his lost heterosexual privilege. One of the first physical altercations emerges between Ennis and Jack after Jack informs Ennis that their employer has asked him to bring the sheep off the mountain. Since bringing the sheep back to town signals an end to their relationship, Ennis storms off in a rage unable to cope with his new, emergent desire for Jack or entirely reclaim a heterosexual identity. As Jack tries to playfully coax Ennis off of the hill where he is still brooding, a fistfight erupts between the two of them. After accidentally giving Ennis a bloody nose, Jack attempts to comfort him. Without words, Ennis forcefully punches Jack in the face. This violent encounter repeats once they return to town from the summer on the mountain. When Jack drives off, Ennis crouches in a small alleyway, vomits, and then proceeds to punch a brick wall. As a passer-by takes notice of Ennis's emotional outburst, Ennis shouts, "What the fuck are you looking at?! Huh?!" (*Brokeback Mountain*). The scene immediately crosscuts to Ennis's marriage to his betrothed, Alma. Crosscuts such as this one redirect the audience's gaze back to the centrality of the family sphere. In this manner, Ennis's conflicting desire for Jack and his repulsion toward his own desire become erased as the heteronormative framework is recuperated through Ennis's marriage to Alma.

As spectators watching the story unfold, we initially imagine how Ennis would navigate the paradox of his queer desires and his identification as "not queer." Yet, via this crosscut the film causes us to resist an immediate identification with Ennis and his queer predicament, especially when Alma is present in the frame. Later, when Alma witnesses the reunion between Ennis and Jack outside of the apartment and they kiss, this hegemonic impetus once again compels the audience to identify with Alma and the family sphere as the camera cuts from a close-up of the kiss to a close-up of Alma walking out the apartment door to her view from the window and back again to Alma's expression of shock, confusion, and hurt. Following Ennis's return the next day, a disaffected Alma greets him only to have Ennis depart again minutes later to go on a "fishin' trip" with Jack. Alma clutches one of her children as the camera cuts to her view from the window looking out over Ennis and Jack getting into the truck and back to a close-up of a distressed, horrified, and sobbing Alma. These moments in the film compels us to resist

“queering” our gaze as we identify with the abandoned wife and child and frame Ennis’s swift departure as representative of a neglectful father and irresponsible husband.

What I am drawing attention to is how heteronormativity is imagined through a continual performance; it is also reinforced by structures of power deeply embedded in social frameworks of recognition that confer heterosexual citizenship. The force with which heteronormativity operates is so powerful that it envelops the spectator who sustains its production through hegemony. As such, the constant regulation of the audience’s investments in the value of marriage and centrality of family are maintained by cultural norms and monitored by our collective participation in their accompanying frameworks of recognition. Since the audience continuously narrates Ennis’s desire within or in relation to a privileged heteronormative framework, his performance of heterosexual behavior transforms into a “spectacle of excess” (Barthes 15) that is akin to Barry’s gender performativity in *Soldier’s Girl* (2003). Ennis’s heterosexual performances (i.e., the saturated and reiterative gestures that linguistically and visually unfold throughout the film) typically occur when Ennis is with Alma. Such performances attempt to recuperate the naturalization of gender roles and the notion of a normalized nation, but they continuously fail to do so. For instance, if the audience believes that getting married and raising children are forms of civic duty, then the isolated moments in the film when Ennis and his family are together could confer a heterosexual citizenship onto Ennis. However, his continual failure to fulfill his obligations as a husband and a father, especially when he is with Jack, calls into question both his compliance as a “good citizen” and his identity as heterosexual. Therefore, Ennis’s performance of heterosexuality is contingent upon his participation in heteronormative frameworks of recognition—frameworks that are *not* necessarily concerned with interrogating why he might identify as “not queer” or with questioning how the process of recognition might produce certain kinds of harm. Such encodings create a metaphorical mine field for those individuals who, like Ennis, vacillate between various modes of *being* and *becoming*.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ As mentioned in Chapter 1, concepts of *being* are static notions of fixity (a state), whereas *becoming* never allows for one to occupy an immobile physical location. Nonetheless, *becoming* is the constant reiterative performance (a process) that produces an illusory effect, allowing one’s identity to be perceived as stable. Here, I am working with two versions of *becoming*. The first is the iterative performativity that draws from Judith Butler’s work; the second is a more explicitly interruptive, and possibly more self-conscious, performance.

Paradoxically, Ennis's masculine gender performativity recuperates his role as protector. Any threat to Ennis's private sphere or his intimate relations, whether they are with Alma or Jack, becomes a site where Ennis feels he must assert his heterosexuality through hyper-masculine behavior. For example, at a Fourth of July fireworks display, Ennis provokes a fight with two bikers who were continually using vulgar language around his family. His actions perpetuate heterosexist notions of the patriarchal husband, father figure, and savior of women and children. Yet, Ennis's hyper-masculine behavior can also be read as a survival strategy within a system of continual regulation. He is cognizant of the real violences that might occur if his desire for Jack becomes a site of contestation: "The bottom line is, we're around each other and this thing grabs hold of us again, in the wrong place, in the wrong time, and we're dead" (*Brokeback Mountain*). Ennis narrates a story to Jack, telling him about two men who ranched up together and, consequently, were murdered because of the unintelligibility of the intimacy they shared. Because of the imminent threat of death that their relationship holds, and regardless of what freedom Ennis's divorce from Alma might afford him, Ennis can only give Jack siloed moments of intimacy:

Ennis: Two guys living together? No way. Now, we can get together once in a while, way the hell out in the middle of nowhere, but...

Jack: "Once in a while." Every four fucking years?

Ennis: Well, if you can't fix it, Jack, you gotta stand it.

Jack: For how long?

Ennis: As long as we can ride it. There ain't no reins on this one. (*Brokeback Mountain*)

Feeling a loss of control and that the future can bring nothing but violence, Ennis offers an ever-fading present that is located "nowhere" within a heteronormative system of recognition. In fact, it is a future of imagined desires that never come to fruition since Jack is brutally beaten to death, presumably by men who discovered his sexual attraction to other men. Following Jack's death, *Brokeback Mountain* exemplifies Ennis's love for Jack—an ever-present piece of the landscape that lingers in the backdrop of the story as both a metaphor and a character in its own right. In many ways, the mountain signifies an intimacy that is arguably more "natural" than the relations structured within the domestic interiors of the small town in Wyoming. Single, living alone, and still stricken by the loss of Jack, Ennis is left with two tattered shirts—Jack's shirt enveloped by

his own—and a postcard of the mountain that invoke memories of their shared intimacy, gesturing back to a happier time than the present.

What Does It Mean to Be “Fucking Happy”?

In the films *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Soldier’s Girl* (2003), the stories told are less about the transcendence of love and romanticized notions of how love is portrayed as a universal quality, but instead tell narratives about loss and how that loss results from the continual regulation and policing of queer otherness within heteronormative frameworks of recognition. Both films portray white working-class people in rural environments. Intertwined with the character’s socio-economic positionalities, these films highlight the often violent consequences of participating in and being policed by heteronormative regulatory regimes that focus on the centrality and security of “home” and family—namely the military and marriage. Depictions of non-normative desires, intimacies, and kinships emerge as visceral and tangible forms of unintelligibility—they are encased within a moment or a gesture and are more immediately felt than discursively rendered. Yet, the underlying commonality of both films is that the lives of the central characters whose actions or desires signal queer otherness and maintain (albeit intermittent) moments of unintelligibility, end in tragically violent deaths. Despite all of the characters’ efforts, their failure to *always* perform their respective roles in the military or in marriage not only points toward their individual deficiencies to fully embody heterosexual norms, but it also signals heteronormativity’s inability to *always* sustain itself.

Although Ennis and Barry’s linguistic and theatrical performances of hyper-masculine prowess might be viewed as similar to the ludic parodies of heteronormativity, which occur in “drag” performance, violence is a constant threat to them if they cannot effectively perform the imagined “real.” This inability is similar to “one of the most conventional forms of male neurosis,” which is “performance anxiety” (Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 235). During several scenes in both of the films, Ennis and Barry display an anxiety surrounding a momentary loss of heterosexual privilege. These moments illustrate the tensions that exist between the continual need to assert their masculinity and how their gender performativity is endemic of compulsory heterosexuality in the military and marriage.

The inability to successfully perform the imagined “real” may result in an individual’s

becoming highly visible because of marked ambiguity. For example, even though Ennis and Barry *pass* as cisgender males, it is their marked sexual ambiguity that calls their masculinity into question. This sexual ambiguity refers to Barry's involvement with a pre-operative transsexual and Ennis's involvement with another cisgender male (Jack) while still maintaining his marriage to Alma. Both relationships are initially ambiguous to other characters and the audience because of the difficulty in classifying their sexual desires within a hetero-/homosexual binary. Yet, it is important to account for how these ambiguities become visible and create complications for both Barry and Ennis. Just as Barry's non-normative desires were framed as "homosexual conduct" by the military—and the visibility of such desires leads to his untimely death—Ennis, too, fears that committing his life to Jack would, in his own mind, seal his fate by making his non-normative desires visible. Such ambiguity creates complications for the characters, for those who are in heterosexual relationships with these characters (e.g., Alma), and for those who feel compelled to shuttle their bodies into "fixed" categories of identification. Although I feel that it is important for the main characters to retain this ambiguity, as these unintelligible desires provide a powerful exigent agency in response to heteronormative conventions, it is equally important to recognize the vulnerability that the characters face as a result of the impending threat that such visibility brings forth.

On the level of language, discursive unintelligibility and the negation of linguistic meaning may offer a reprieve from some forms of vulnerability while increasing the likelihood of others. As Judith Butler notes, "If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence" (*Excitable Speech* 5). Similarly, if PFC Barry Winchell and Ennis Del Mar ascribe their desires to a particular non-normative sexual identity, such words would mark their bodies as the "letter of the law" and the specific cultural/historical contexts they are within both frame and threaten their existence. Yet, if they are to refuse any sexual identity and only ascribe to a negative value when prompted, then they still risk disposability within the social order—a result of vulnerable conditions produced by misrecognition or not being recognized at all. In *Soldier's Girl* (2003), Barry's "queerness," in relation to everyone except his encounter with Calpernia Addams, is accentuated by the continual interrogation he receives from his peers and superiors as well as his disidentification with being either hetero- or homosexual. In *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), Ennis functions in a similar fashion as he attempts to retain both his heterosexual

privilege and his non-normative desire for Jack, vacillating between the institution of marriage and the momentary freedom that their excursions to Brokeback Mountain offer him. The mutability and specificity of desire in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) enables the emergence of queer temporalities; in Ennis's case, it is his disidentification with the mythical exclusivity of heteronormativity while he also recognizes the impossibility of a future with Jack.

Despite Ennis and Barry's compliance with certain heteronormative conventions, it is the spectacle of their hyper-masculinity that exposes and betrays the performative and highly constructed heteronormative framework. Akin to Judith Butler's insistence that these norms are always "failing," Ennis and Barry's performances draw attention to the unnaturalness of this structure and the forced policing of its codes of behavior and sexual conduct. As spectators, we witness the unfolding of these "failures" as their queer otherness and unintelligible desires become fertile texts for analysis and interrogation. It is here where the audience can stage an intervention into the heteronormative framework—one that resists the constant violent encoding and decoding of queer otherness. An ethics that responds to these situations would entail adopting a radical anti-taxonomical understanding of identity and subverting heteronormative affectations surrounding "happiness." Instead of privileging heteronormativity and labeling Barry or Ennis as "gay" or "marginalized," their unintelligible desires place them not on the peripheries of heterosexuality, but in a position that illuminates the instability and unreliability of restrictive identity categories. By understanding why these desires—which are only given meaning after the sensation is felt—are "uncategorizable" and highlighting how stable identity categories can become defamiliarized, these cinematic narratives illustrate the constructed nature of all identity categories and gesture toward their necessary undoing.⁵⁷

Viewing Barry and Ennis as not belonging within a polarized "straight/gay" framework allows the expression of their desires to do something very different than oscillate between prefigurative categories—especially since such oscillation does nothing to break up the binary

⁵⁷ Although I am advocating for post-identity politics, I want to acknowledge how particular identity-based groups (e.g., Black Lives Matter) have mobilized a form of strategic essentialism as a means of leveraging hegemonic discourse and dominant ideology in ways that demand recognizability and combat oppressive systems of power. In community organizing, intersectional approaches to social identity are particularly useful with promoting unity among a particular demographic and building solidarity among individuals with disparate experiences. However, identities still remain within a binary of inclusion and exclusion, deeming who can and cannot gain membership to a particular identity and who can or cannot remain legible within specific framework of recognition.

itself. Instead, the unintelligibility of these desires becomes momentary, tactile, and engages with an alternative notion of what “happiness” could be like. For example, in a response to Calpernia’s questioning of Barry’s fidelity and insinuation of repressed homosexuality, Barry cries out: “I don’t know what people want from me. I just want to be fucking happy” (*Soldier’s Girl*). Here, “people” is a referent for Calpernia, Barry’s unit and his superior officers, and those who interrogate and police his compliance with heteronormativity. It also signals the audience and our complicity to render Barry’s identity as either heterosexual or something else entirely. Although we may understand his desire for happiness as a desire to be a part of the military and to be with Calpernia, this utterance also complicates and pushes against intelligible notions of heteronormative happiness. What exactly would happiness entail for Barry? His happiness is currently disrupted by the military’s insistence on making his identity intelligible as “homosexual” because of his relationship to Calpernia. Likewise, Calpernia disrupts Barry’s aspirations for happiness by her insistence on rendering his desires and their relationship as intelligible—an intelligibility that also conflicts with Barry’s “happiness” of serving in the military. For Barry, “to be fucking happy” suggests an abandonment of heteronormative happiness altogether or to “fuck being happy.”

Similarly, Ennis understands the amount of labor that entails the production and performance of heteronormative happiness. As with Barry’s need to maintain his relationship to the military and the “homefront,” Ennis must maintain his marriage to Alma and his investment in the “home” in order to access those few moments with Jack that make him happy. In her article, “The ‘Gay Film’ That Wasn’t: The Heterosexual Supplement in *Brokeback Mountain*,” Lisa Arellano remarks,

In the film, Ennis and Jack’s engagement with one another is rerouted through familial details that locate them within a world where their desire will be marked, from its inception, as impossible. While neither character discloses a joyful family past, the men’s narratives are easily legible [...] The idea that these two men can be made comprehensible though their birth families is quite distinct from the idea that they are posturing and preening for each other; the first notion makes recourse to the universality of relationships defined by heteronormative kin structures—the second acknowledges the existence of desires and relationships outside of, and defiant of, these norms. This

pattern of erasing the queerness of men's relationships and replacing it with legibly heterosexualized representations continues throughout the film. (62)

As Arellano, along with other scholars who have written on the film, astutely notes, the cinematic depiction of Jack and Ennis's relationship is contextualized first and foremost by the heteronormative kinship structures they participate in. Not only is the relationship between Ennis and Jack regarded as futile from the film's onset, but the audience's readings of the characters' developments amplify the impossibility of a future trajectory where they are together; and yet, the plot also produces a highly legible narrative about "star-crossed lovers."

As too many scholarly discussions regarding *Brokeback Mountain* tend to focus on Ennis's entrenchment in heteronormative frameworks of recognition at the expense of Jack, the complexity of Jack's character and his ability to imagine another world with Ennis warrants further examination. In many ways, there is a clearer connection between the characters of Barry and Jack. Both are able to visualize a world in which they could be "fucking happy"; both are murdered. The impossibility and intangibility of Jack and Barry's happiness does not prohibit them from imagining their happiness coming to fruition—a happiness that is viscerally felt by both characters but remains unintelligible to the audience and unattainable in their present circumstances. On one hand, that there are moments in both films when Barry and Jack's frustrations mount with their inability to achieve normative forms of happiness, yet, on the other hand, their happiness takes shape outside of these forms of recognition. Even immediately following the first summer Jack and Ennis spend on Brokeback Mountain, Jack eagerly asks Ennis if he will return the following year. Ennis responds: "Well, maybe not... Like I said, me and Alma's getting' married in November. So...I'll try to get something on a ranch, I guess" (*Brokeback Mountain*). When asked the same question in return, Jack's replies: "Might go up to my Daddy's place and give him a hand through the winter. I might be back...If the army don't get me" (*Brokeback Mountain*). As Ennis couches the improbability of his return to Brokeback Mountain with his marriage to Alma, Jack's response remains hopeful despite the prospect of being drafted into the Army. Even from the start of the film, Jack recognizes the constraint of these heterosexual kinship structures as he offers a parallel comparison between conscription into military service and participation in the compulsory institution of marriage. The temporal contingency with which Jack stages an indeterminate future—as he *might* go to his father's place and he *might* return next year—

permits an alternate orientation toward heterosexual kinship structures and the ideologically sustained “happiness” they supposedly produce. Such indeterminacy defiantly resists a heteronormative nomenclature of affect and expectation even as Jack and, in similar instances, Barry desire to be “fucking happy.” Furthermore, the characters are able to “fuck”/subvert/re-contour heteronormative conventions of happiness, embrace *fucking* as happiness, or imagine a happiness that is not intrinsically linked to or defined by the security of “family” and “home.”

Even as PFC Barry Winchell and Jack Twist work toward being “fucking happy,” their murders point toward the peril that maintaining such happiness can bring. The violences that stem from a heteronormative framework suggest an explicit need to rethink the social conditioning that facilitates the shuttling of bodies into a categorical identity index. Whether an individual is in compliance with hegemonic discourse or operating outside of it, these brutal acts highlight how oppressive tactics can silence, erase, or further marginalize non-normative desires. While the “crisis” of masculinity and instability of a heterosexual identity leads to subsequent policing and regulation of non-normative desires, a site of discomfort emerges that forces those occupying privileged subject positions to consider their own positionalities on individual and collective levels—from the communities we associate with to how our (imagined or lived) identities are constructed by our adherence to various hegemonies.

Although many cultural productions, whether or not they are based on a true story, may not always cause us to rethink the systems of power that regulate our modes of identification or behaviors, *Soldier’s Girl* (2003) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) cause us to recognize how identity is more than the refashioning of a limited attitude but how it can also contribute to the proliferation of a myth that encapsulates heteronormativity and reinforces violences that are endemic to hegemonic discourse. In order to circumvent the perpetuation of institutions that secure heteronormativity, and in an effort to destabilize dominant ideology, we should consider negotiating a spectatorship that is not reliant on the legibility of desire and intimacy. Perhaps only then we can start to understand how unintelligible desires may, in fact, become recognizable without violently forcing an individual to give an account of him- or herself in relation to who he or she is, but instead, allowing for the precisions of desire to be expressed in relation to who or what one is not. Furthermore, the impetus of such desires can prove disruptive to the foundational norms that institutions such as the military and marriage rely on, creating fissures

within heteronormative matrix and providing a starting point for prolonging survivability within violent structures, forging queer kinships, and “fucking happy.”

Extending my conversation regarding the constraints and ruptures of heteronormativity, and offering disidentificatory moments that subvert normative affective responses, I turn toward representations of queer otherness that emerge as grotesque and threaten to unravel the public sphere in Chapter 3. By analyzing David Fincher’s film, *Fight Club* (1999) and segments from Season 2 of Showtime’s cable television series *The L Word* (2005), I turn toward how depictions of inherent self-destruction and internalized monstrosity mobilize queer negativity and call forth moments of unintelligibility.

CHAPTER 3

Embracing Violent Sensations: Self-Destruction & Monstrosity in *Fight Club* &

The L Word

The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché). The former is inseparable from its direct action on the nervous system, the levels through which it passes, the domains it traverses: being itself a Figure, it must have nothing of the nature of a represented object.

—Gilles Deleuze

In the spring of 2006, one of my lovers at that time wanted to experience what it would be like to cross-dress in public. Having been assigned female at birth (AFAB) and having spent the majority of her life subscribing to a hyper-feminine expression and embodiment, her endeavor was to understand, for at least a moment, the affective aspects of *passing* as a man. As preparation for her “transformation,” we purchased masculine garments at a Goodwill store, ACE bandages to bind her breasts, and used clippings to affix facial hair. Upon her transformation, she decided to go out to a local gay bar as a “test run” for her passing ability and to confront her own discomfort with expressing gender variance in public. Angles, located at the corner of Seaside Avenue and Kuhio Avenue in Waikīkī (an area highly populated by tourists), was the gay bar of her choice. For a Tuesday night, she anticipated this bar wouldn’t be too crowded, allowing her to comfortably deal with whatever social anxiety she might feel. She also thought Angles would be conceivably a “safer” environment than attending a straight bar as she attempted to mitigate the degree of violence directed at her in the event she was unable to successfully pass as a man. To honor her request that I accompany her on this adventure as her “lady” counter-part, I threw on a pink sequenced shirt, dangly earrings, a lavishly flowing skirt, and strapped on a set of high heels. My more “feminine” accoutrements stood in stark contrast to her baggy jeans, long-sleeve button-down shirt, baseball cap, boots, and masculine, rugged aesthetic. After grabbing my lipstick and purse, I threw her my keys and we headed out the door.

Once we arrived at Angles and settled down for drinks with friends, my lover candidly expressed a sense of freedom that she attributed to how others at the bar responded to her current masculine expression. In a predominately white, cisgender, gay male bar, the performance of

her masculinity was revered and desired. Her “success” with passing as a gay male was not just the result of her accurately performing a generic or normative version of masculinity; rather, it was a result of how she was being racially encoded as Latino by the other patrons. Although she has a darker complexion and is Irish American, she was able to appear and be coded as a young *cholo* by other white, cisgender gay men—several of whom hit on her and made remarks regarding the racialized otherness of her masculinity. Here, most of these men interpreted her racialized otherness as a product of the performative aspects of her masculine aesthetic. Among these white gay men, the fantasized brown body is often tied to a specific aesthetic that my lover was able to achieve, but would have been unable to do so as a white woman. The circulation of a shared imaginary about the fantasized brown body, particularly in white gay male spaces where there is lack of understanding around ethnic difference and cultural nuance, inevitably becomes monolithically constructed as “Latino” even in places as ethnically diverse as Hawai‘i. If my lover’s masculine performativity did deviate from the norms established in a white gay male space, then it is safe to assume that such deviations fell within a permissible range—a range that coincides with a set of acceptable parameters for a fantasized brown body to inhabit as long as that body remains desirable to other white gay men in the bar. In this sense, my lover experienced a form of collateral drag as a racialized, fantasized, and desired gay male—an unintended result of her attempt to just *pass* as male for a night within a particular framework of recognition.

In juxtaposition to my lover’s masculine aesthetic and gender expression, my own experience of traversing the same spaces took on a form more akin to drag collateral damage than just collateral drag. Despite being assigned female at birth (AFAB) and putting forth my best efforts to accurately perform femininity that ascribed to the normative gender presentation of women, that night I seemed to utterly fail at being read as a woman. At various moments throughout the evening, it was unclear how I was being rendered by other patrons or bar employees; it was also unclear what frameworks of recognition my gender presentation was being measured against. When ordering drinks at the bar, my lover would get served and I would be ignored. From what I could gather, I was certainly marked as “not woman” and equally marked as “not white.” For example, dressed in feminine apparel, I entered into the women’s restroom at the bar. Immediately following my entrance into this highly partitioned

and gendered space, I was policed by the bar's bouncer, a cisgender Filipino who was presumably gay, for being in the "wrong" bathroom. Upon asking him why he was prohibiting my use of the women's restroom, he implied that I might scare away the tourists. Logically, I was in the "right" restroom as I was wearing the same garment (i.e., a skirt) that was symbolically portrayed on its door below the word "WOMEN." Had I passed more as a woman or was a cross-dressing white gay male tourist, would my pink dollars have allowed me entrance into the restroom of my choice? With no other option, I marched into the men's room, hiked up the skirt, and frustratingly figured out how to hover over a urinal facing backwards. Considering how my body was awkwardly positioned over the non-partitioned space of the urinal, the men's restroom quickly cleared out—among them were certainly several white gay tourists.

Following my interactions inside and outside of the restrooms, my lover and I decided to depart as to avoid the discomforts of others turning into another moment of contestation or result in a physically violent rupture. Ironically, upon exiting the bar, two drunk white men (presumably either tourists or military) charged toward my direction unprovoked, pushed me down, and shouted homophobic epithets. Unfamiliar with being either the object of such violences or in close proximity to such occurrences, and fearing further scrutiny of my gender expression if the police became involved, my lover whisked me away in sheer terror. In contrast, my own reaction remained unaffected by my partner's affect.

What should have been a deeply disturbing moment, was one in which I found humor. My familiarity with violent encounters, particularly ones that are a product of the misreadings of others or a result of my illegibility in specific moments and contexts, became a part of what could be considered drag collateral damage. At various moments throughout the night, my drag presentation seemed to cause "damage" to hetero- and homonormative framings of gender. Although my intent was to embody a gender identity that aligned with the sex I was assigned at birth as a way to highlight the social construction and playfulness of gender, the unintended violences I experienced while inhabiting this form of drag remain collateral to my intended purpose. My attempt to embody norms as a way to undo norms failed as I experienced an undoing by others for inhabiting the norms I was trying to undo. Within these frameworks of recognition, drag collateral damage operates in different ways. In one space (the counterpublic of a gay bar), my lover's perceived otherness was revered where my marked otherness lead to

unrecognizability and exclusion from a restroom. In another space (the greater heteronormative public outside of the gay bar), my partner's "otherness" became invisible whereas a heightened visibility surrounded the perceived "violations" of gender norms that my own gender expression enacted—an otherness that carried with it the potential threat of violence. What was it about my expression of femininity that became upsetting for those within and outside of the gay bar? At that moment, it seemed that I was conceived as something undesirable and monstrous. No matter how much I attempted to embody the category of "woman" (a category that I was expected to inhabit from birth but continuously failed at performing), I became something, in that moment, that might scare off tourists or warrant physical assault—a monstrosity emerging from the wreckage of drag collateral damage.

This example illuminates some of the ways the private, public, and counterpublic spheres operate. First, my former partner's reluctance to transgress her femininity until that point in time was a direct result of the way in which her own desires were subjected to a highly gendered process of socialization that directs the focus of women toward embracing a Western ideal of feminine beauty—one that is to be offered up as an object of desire for male consumption within the sex-gender binary. Secondly, her subsequent "male presentation" signaled not only a shift in gender performativity and gender norms, but racial ones as well. Furthermore, my own gender nonconformity, within the context of the privatized sphere of a highly partitioned restroom, encased within the counterpublic space of a gay bar, embedded within a highly volatile heteronormative space of touristic consumption such as Waikīkī, creates layers of potential volatility. Not only was my gender expression immediately contested with the restroom incident, but it was further rendered (inaccurately and violently) legible as a terroristic form of queer alterity in the public sphere of the street—terrifying to tourists (gay or straight) and perceived as terrorizing to a general heteronormative public.

Informed by Jasbir Puar's work on terrorist assemblages⁵⁸ and her examination of "the relations between representation and affect" that produce queerness "as not an identity nor an anti-identity, but an assemblage that is spatially and temporally contingent" (*Terrorist*

⁵⁸ In particular, Puar's analysis of a racialized homonationalism and its dependence on the organic and non-organic, optic and affective assemblages of "the terrorist" are particularly insightful.

Assemblages 204), I examine how constructions of monstrosity are linked to and produced by violence—whether implicit and covert or explicit and overt. What might it mean to embrace the perverse, monstrous, and self-destructive? In many ways, monstrosity operates as a queer failure that continuously negates the social value; it also provides an opening for those of us who are *not* marked as monstrous to understand how institutional, interpersonal, and internalized violence manifest and are interdependent on one another. It is important to note that when I use the term “violence,” I do not merely mean only physical altercations even though the media circulate similar anecdotes to the one I have provided as cautionary tales of intolerance or bigotry. To this end, such instances of physical assault and death become highly publicized (even sensationalized) accounts that typically focus on the internalized or interpersonal violence experienced by the “victim” or “perpetrator.” However, it is important to keep in mind that the most insidious violences can often be the ones that are not always readily apparent or physically injurious. Rather, forms of institutional violence become obscured and rendered invisible despite the ways it has physical effects on bodies (e.g., homelessness and incarceration), enabling such violence, despite its public qualities, to be swept away from the public’s field of vision. Akin to attitudes toward conceptions of “power,” “violence” becomes a term that solicits strong reactions. Some regard it as a necessary means to an end; others see it as something negative and corrosive to humanity.

Yet, can violence produce something different altogether? What kinds of bonds and social relations might emerge as a result of violence? How might formations of violence be both a product of and a constitutive element in the formation of publics and counterpublics? Such questions do not take form in an effort to recuperate violence as a justification to do harm to others on an interpersonal level. They are also not intended to provide leverage for the continuance of institutional oppressions in favor of privileged positionalities. Moreover, it is important to note that I do not advocate or endorse sensationalized forms of violence that saturate contemporary U.S. culture. Rather, I acknowledge how violence permeates through every aspect of life, especially for marginalized communities. As such, I am curious about what happens between bodies when violence, like power, occurs at the intersections of social identity and the apex of desire. Asking these important questions might direct us toward an embrace of violent sensations as a way to understand operations of violence, particularly if we are not

routinely exposed to types of harm that result in a continual undoing of the self or lead to extinguishing the very possibility of life.

In this chapter, I examine representations of queer otherness considered grotesque, reviled, or monstrous. More specifically, I am interested in depictions of inherent self-destruction and internalized monstrosity. Instead of regarding these aspects as simply products of violence, I propose that their emergence in the cultural productions I examine produce a form of queer negativity that facilitates social relations that are more dependent on unintelligibility than on the social value of intelligible bonds. The negation of social value and embrace of unintelligible monstrosity produces potent moments that threaten to unravel in the public sphere. First, I analyze David Fincher's film, *Fight Club* (1999), adapted from Chuck Palahniuk's novel. As much as the film affirms a recuperation of "lost masculinity" (one that manifests in underground fight clubs across the country), the sheer physicality of the interpersonal violence represented on the screen projects beyond the individual and onto consumer culture and modes of capitalist production. For the characters portrayed in the film, to self-destruct is to destroy the very agent that allows capitalism to function. And, such self-destruction poses a resistance to notions of production, reproduction, stability, and continuance—all of which are aspects that disrupt operations of civility, obedience, and heteronormative public life.

Lastly, I shift toward examining clips from Season 2 of Showtime's cable television series *The L Word* (2005) in order to show how the central character of Jenny Schecter constructs an imaginative counterpublic that provides space for her to work through sexual trauma associated with having been raped. The carnivalesque aspects of this counterpublic space draw attention to the internalized forms of monstrosity Jenny experiences and situates her body as a spectacle. Although this space is conceivably violent, it also provides the opportunity for the creation of an emergent queer positionality that rejects normative reconciliations with past trauma and present desires.

Negating Social Value & Unraveling the Public Sphere

Through recognizing how individuals or groups participate in or are vulnerable to various forms of violence (either linguistic, physical, and/or imagined violence) as represented in these cinematic and television production, I want to simultaneously recognize that some bodies,

willingly or not, are always already “on the line” and protest the conditions that constrain their existence or make their existence a life difficult to live. In this sense, embracing monstrosity as a way to understand the social bonds that violence produces is not only a practice for volitional forms of unintelligibility; rather, it is also an ethics of care that recognizes how bodies traverse the violence of a highly partitioned and policed public sphere.

In order to discuss how the partitions between public and private spheres are made to appear separate, but break down, blur, or grate against one another, the anecdote I provided frames the theoretical underpinnings of the issue at hand. My interaction inside and outside of Angles frames how personal and political landscapes of violence are inextricably melded together and it depicts how queer alterity has a reciprocal relationship to violence. Since my performativity that night produced a form of drag collateral damage, it also highlights the convergence between queerness and terror. What José E. Muñoz has described as “terrorist drag” (*Disidentifications* 97), and drawing from Jasbir Puar’s concept of “queerness as assemblage” (*Terrorist Assemblages* 205), I argue that queerness holds the capacity to terrorize hetero-/homonormative nomenclatures and spaces in volitional ways. To terrorize a nomenclature is to undermine and thwart current taxonomical configurations. By turning the violence of naming against itself, and reflecting on how such frameworks of recognition are monstrous by producing the very monstrosities they name, we can see how queerness emerges by way of its insistence to *exist* and *persist* as a reviled figure on the landscape of publics and counterpublics alike. Instead of policing such queerness, what might be gained from embracing the monster that terrifies—and, not solely out of compassion because we perceive such a creature as abject? Rather, what if we were to fold its rage and resoluteness into our bodies thereby becoming a monstrosity of our own making? The recent work of scholars such as Michael Warner, Lauren Berlant, and Jasbir Puar have been especially insightful to this conceptual framework as they draw attention to the formation of publics and counterpublics and provide analyses on the operations of biopower and necropolitics.

In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner reworks the Habermasian model of the public sphere, refashioning it to account for more contemporary movements around gender and sexuality. Starting with the stories about Diogenes, the Greek philosopher who provoked disgust from others because he masturbated in the central market place, and Catharine Beecher’s attack

on Frances Wright's lectures for women's rights and other civil liberties in the 1820s, Warner cunningly describes the dynamics of relationality between the public and private spheres. He writes, "In both cases, being in public is a privilege that requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private. [...] [T]he transgression is experienced not as merely theoretical, but as a violation of deep instincts about sex and gender" (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 23). As Warner astutely observes, the physical orientation of our bodies—where we are spatially located in addition to our linguistic utterances in these spaces—and our relationship to our own psychogeographic play between the public and private aid in the formulation of the public sphere. Also, individuals are often rendered in various ways within a particular public as a result of their heightened visibility (being marked as "other") or their adherence to particular linguistic and physical performances that render them invisible and wholly integrated or assimilated into what is deemed as "normal" within the parameters offered.

Hegemonic discourse's cultivation of "normalcy" affirms violent institutions and conventional gender roles as a way to maintain a member's intelligibility within discursive constraints or to police and marginalize those who are marked as "queer monstrosities." Although queer monstrosities is quite broad, here I am suggesting that it constitutes those individuals or groups who willingly contest what is considered "normal" or "natural" by societal structures of power and dominance. Such queer monstrosities invoke a counterpublic space that is reflective of Mikhail Bakhtin's discussions on the carnivalesque and grotesque body in *Rabelais and His World*. The individuals who inhabit these spaces are often subjected to silence, dehumanization, and social and/or physical death; but, their existence can also create a momentary disruption that destabilizes or reconfigures heteronormative convention within the public sphere. As with the case of Diogenes in the public market place, the emergence of the public and private appears instantaneous as they are inextricably intertwined.

If we recognize what is acceptable to *say* or *do* in "public," then what is regarded as impermissible is relegated to the private sphere.⁵⁹ As such, we ought to define ourselves in

⁵⁹ A more personal example of the moments of contestations that occur when an act of impropriety emerges within the public sphere can be best characterized by a lecture I had given to a sophomore-level literature class on the importance of understanding the public and private spheres. At the start of my lecture, I had *unintentionally* written on the chalkboard "private/pubic" and did not notice my error until I realized my students' eyes were transfixed on what I had written. Muffled comments were exchanged in shock of the "disruptive" word that

relation to the interplay between the public and private spheres in which we partake. This understanding of their relationality to one another enables a greater permeability of the partitions that often divide these two spheres.

To recognize how the private and public spheres are often gendered, Warner turns to how feminism exploded the private and domestic realm while vitalizing the personal as political. As Warner recounts the words of Catharine MacKinnon, “The private is the public for those for whom the personal is political. In this sense, there is no private, either normatively or empirically” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 33). Warner’s discomfort with this extreme formulation is a result of recognizing how the economic separation varies greatly between the male public and female private and proves to be more fluid than static. He suggests such a separation does not erase the relevance of the feminist stance: “In fact, because the interweaving of gender, labor, and publicness was indirect rather than definitional, it could often go unrecognized, and still does. To see this might help us understand why inequality persists despite the apparent breakdown of the most static form of the gendered division of labor” (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 38). Although formations of publicness and privateness are not definitional and reinforced at a level of ideological complicity (i.e., internal and external perceptions that link femininity to private feelings and domesticity or masculinity to public economic life and a vocational extra-domesticity), they are nonetheless institutionally reinforced. Such institutional factors result in some individuals having “neither privacy *nor* publicness, in these normative senses of the terms” (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 53). One way of thinking about an individual’s denial of privacy or publicness is to consider how participation in institutions and partaking of services that are legally sanctioned by the U.S. government (e.g.,

manifested in front of them. Accounting for my previous *intentional* moments of provocation, one student suggested that I had made the mistake on purpose. Aptly, this student readjusted the normative value of the public space we engaged in, reorienting himself to anticipate the unexpected “disruptions” within the classroom. Oddly enough, my mistake wasn’t too far off the mark as I was able to redirect the class conversation via an explanation of the etymology of the word “public.” Its Latin roots imply the connection between “public membership to public maturity” (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 23). This unintentional mishap in the classroom also points toward how Warner recognizes some of the elemental ways in which the public and private are bound to language and the body—in my example, the body of the students, my own bodily presentation and performativity, as well as the variety of linguistic discourses we partake in (informal speech acts, such as pidgin, to more formal writing genres that are conveyed as “pertinent” to higher education.). As he suggests, “The acquisition of language is an education in public and private speech genres and their different social contexts, which are commonly contexts of gender” (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 25).

marriage, social security benefits, and immigration rights) are highly regulated activities that result in certain individuals becoming explicitly excluded. For example, individuals who are incarcerated do not participate in the public sphere in a physical sense and are denied a public voice within the political sphere of the U.S.'s representative republic since they are not allowed to vote. The otherness of such individuals—which can also be extended to disabled individuals, queers, transgender folks, immigrants, and people of color—problematizes their democratic participation in or ownership of a public sphere. Similarly, their marked otherness also disallows participation in the functions of an exclusively private sphere as the heightened visibility of such otherness results in the publicness of its regulation, monitoring, and admonishment.

Warner's position has emerged from queer theory to show how some individuals have made dissident sexuality articulate; how they have come together around nonnormative sexualities in a framework for collective world-making and political action; how in the process people have challenged the heteronormative framework of modern culture while also availing themselves of its forms; how these forms of collective action and expression mediate the sexualities and identities they represent; and how many of the central aspirations of the resulting queer culture continue to be frustrated by the ideological and material organization of publics, both of dominant culture and of queer culture. (*Publics and Counterpublics* 17-18)

Although I align myself with Warner's position, the intent of this chapter is to reconsider how public and counterpublic spheres shape collective bodies, allowing individual "unruly" bodies to respond. I am not attempting to make dissident desires, identities, or political frameworks intelligible; rather, I want to consider the negative social value of monstrosity as a site that gestures beyond discursive constraints.

Examining affect is one way of understanding how the negative social value of monstrosity can point toward unintelligibility as a point on the horizon. In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar discusses the value of affective analyses when examining terrorist corporealities. She states,

While dismantling the representational mandates of visibility identity politics that feed narratives of sexual exceptionalism, affective analyses can approach queernesses that are unknown or not cogently knowable, that are in the midst of becoming, that do not

immediately and visibly signal themselves as insurgent, oppositional, or transcendent. This shift focuses us to ask not only what terrorist corporealities mean or signify, but more insistently, what do they do? (Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* 204).

Akin to terrorist corporealities, the figure of the “monster” displaces intelligible forms of queer otherness that are tied to the representational mandates of visibility within an identity politics framework. In this sense, the monster signals something far more terrorizing and terrifying than a marginalized positionality. The figure of the monster enables us to viscerally experience the violence of sensation as we become enmeshed in the grotesque. In the representational form, the monster lies just beyond the outskirts of the village, lingers on the tree line of the forest, and wears a thin veneer as camouflage. If anything the monster’s liminal identity occupies the space on the horizon where dawn and dusk are indistinguishable and where marginalized queer otherness and unintelligibility meet.

Shifting from epistemological frameworks toward ontological affective assemblages in order to consider the value of monstrosity can produce two diametrically opposing perspectives. On one hand, examining affect in the public sphere could easily result in a “positive” value. In Friedrich Nietzsche’s terms, this perspective produces a “transvaluation of all values”⁶⁰ that can result in the value of life over suffering. On the other hand, adopting a perspective that insists on negation and devaluation of life and suffering highlights the conditions that enable such suffering to persist. Here, the negation of social value within the public sphere makes an important intervention that allows us to examine the figure of the monster as a way to confront the violence of sensation in a manner that supersedes its representational form. As I will discuss further in the next section, the physical elements of interpersonal violence and intrapersonal facets of self-destruction in *Fight Club* (1999) create a shift from knowledge to affect. In such instances, if we are able to confront these sensations without sensationalizing the figure of the monster, our relationality to the monster becomes no longer representational; rather, it transforms our relational intimacy with the monster into an embrace of monstrosity, unraveling the current

⁶⁰ The “transvaluation of all values,” otherwise known as the “revaluation of all values,” is a concept derived from philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In his book *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche’s comparative analysis of Christianity to Buddhism results in him revealing the ways the moral framework of Christianity is oppressive. If Christianity values death over life by regarding desires as lustful, then a transvaluation of all values embraces life (as opposed to the exaltation of suffering) and accepts instinctual desires as organic and valid aspects of a corporeal existence.

configurations of the public sphere.

Inherent Self-Destruction in Fight Club (1999)

Self-destruction is one form of monstrosity that threatens to unravel the public sphere while also providing the audience with an immediate confrontation with the violence of sensation. Because bearing witness to the infliction of bodily harm can traumatize, the experience of witnessing produces sensations that can be just as transformative as being the recipient of violence. If self-destruction can be considered a form of protest (one that places an individual's body on the line in order to reveal the material effects of unlivable conditions), then bearing witness to self-destruction through experiencing the violence of sensation can also serve as an entry point into understanding the institutional factors that create the material conditions we live in. Within the current socio-economic climate of the United States, self-destruction can be seen as an active, volitional process of destroying the very agent that allows capitalism to function (i.e., the citizen-worker/citizen-consumer)—one that puts an individual's own subjectivity and corporeality beyond use.⁶¹ Unlike the destruction of property, self-destruction extends beyond resistances to capitalist modes of production as it defies investments in reproduction, stability, and continuance—the very elements of heteronormative public life that sustain a consumer-driven culture and maintain neoliberal notions of civility and obedience. Lee Edelman's turn toward "the anti-social" and Judith "Jack" Halberstam's use of "queer time" intervene and oppose the continuance of heteronormative public life. The negation of social value (as is the case with Edelman) and the emergence of temporalities that resist heterosexual logics of community, identity, and embodiment (as with Halberstam) are tools for survival and destruction. These tools provide agency to those who inhabit forms of queer otherness; they can also be used by those who do not inhabit a marginalized position to destroy agents of state violence. Taking such a position can lead to an individual's self-destruction; yet, it is one that forges solidarity with individuals for whom stability and continuance are already threatened.

If self-destruction threatens a heteronormative public sphere, then how might intimacy

⁶¹ This form of self-destruction is similar to the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD)—a military doctrine that was prevalent during the Cold War (1947-1991) and continues today with the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

become renegotiated for those who experience various forms of violence? What alternate intimacies, in lieu of heteronormative ones, might emerge as a result of such violences? Here, I take the term “intimacy” to mean a way of being together in “public” that is predicated on sensation rather than knowledge, thus at once exposing and short-circuiting the violence of heteronormativity and neoliberalism. In this sense, my shift toward the anti-social and queer negation, by way of embracing violent sensations, is not in tension with formulations of intimacy. One cultural production that contrasts the socio-economic violence endemic to a hetero-/homonormative consumer culture with the ultraviolence associated with physical forms of self-destruction is the film *Fight Club* (1999). Based on Chuck Palahniuk’s novel, directed by David Fincher, and starring Edward Norton and Brad Pitt, *Fight Club* (1999) has been a contentious film. From the onset, it did not meet studio executives’ expectations at the box office. The film’s reception was also mixed, receiving polarized critiques when it was finally released on October 15, 1999 in U.S. and Canadian theaters. Some have speculated that the studio’s delay of the film’s commercial release was a result of the Columbine High School massacre in April of the same year, fearing that the explicit violence would not fare very well with public sentiment. It was not until later that the film received commercial success and critical acclaim with its DVD release, establishing for itself a cult following.

As a controversial film, *Fight Club* (1999) is often highly criticized for its explicit violence, hyper-masculine and misogynistic attitudes toward women, and moral ambiguity despite receiving praise from critics for its directing, acting, thematic focus, and storyline. Since part of the film’s plot revolves around the formation of an anti-corporate/anti-materialist/anti-authoritarian anarchist organization called Project Mayhem, it is important to note the timeliness of its narrative arc within the context of U.S. politics. Nearly a month following the film’s initial release, the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference occurred. Moreover, as one of the central characters in the film utters the epithet “ground zero” to connote the figurative demolition of major credit card companies at the film’s end, such words take on another significance that is reflective of the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001. In a 2014 *Esquire* article, Garin Pirnia writes, “Most of *Fight Club* comes off as a masculine, caustic satire, but the ideas in the movie metastasized into real-life 21st-century America. At the end of 1999, we were two years away from 9/11 and eight years from the

immobilizing global financial crisis that would eventually birth Occupy Wall Street. [...] The figurative demolition of the buildings mirrors both the literal destruction of the Twin Towers and the figurative decimation of our financial system” (“Why *Fight Club* Matters More Than Ever”). Pirnia’s reflection offers the audience a casual justification for the film’s enduring relevance—a relevance that remains applicable to the current socio-economic conditions of the U.S. and reflective of a not-so-distance past.

While the anti-capitalist and, arguably, anti-nationalist discourse remains constant throughout *Fight Club* (1999), explicit forms of misogyny appear alongside the violence-saturated imagery of the film. Placing these two elements side-by-side complicates the thematic focus of the film along lines of socio-economic class and gender. In some ways, the film reductively equates capitalism with the feminine and rationalizes that women emasculate men via consumerism and other modes of production. The emasculation of men, then, becomes the implicit reason behind the need to destroy capitalism and femininity, allowing for an immediate rationalization of film’s explicit misogyny. Although *Fight Club* (1999) seems to suggest that we are in a dire need for a militancy that is both “for and against” precarity—a militancy that challenges the ever-present consumer culture of capitalist structures—it also implies that such a militancy might reproduce structures of violence that are no different than those that remain attached to our current heteronormative capitalist society.

At the start of the film, we are introduced to the unnamed narrator (played by Edward Norton and who I will refer to as “Jack”) as he chokes on the barrel of a gun. The audience becomes immediately aware of the impending demolition of several buildings that house major credit card companies, signaling socio-economic collapse and marking wide-scale financial liberation from a debt-driven society. As we see Jack sitting still and profusely sweating, his voice-over narration provides the audience some insight. He reflects on his current situation as having something to do with a woman named Marla Singer (played by Helena Bonham Carter). The narrative progresses forward and as Jack has a series of flashbacks. We finally find Jack at work in a state of malcontent with his white-collar job. He mentions, “Like so many others, I have become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct” (*Fight Club*). The “nesting instinct” Jack references is highly gendered. His implication suggests that the elements which comprise a home are intrinsically feminized. For Jack, to participate in “home-making” is to participate in a

process of feminization. Since Jack regards nesting and home-making as emasculating to men, then the current consumer-driven culture that compels us to purchase items for the domestic sphere is equally feminizing. In his comment, Jack likens the domestication of masculinity to a form of enslavement. A Marxist feminist analysis would regard this scene, alongside many others in the film as deeply misogynistic—men are depicted as hard-working “bread winners” and women as effervescent consumers who use sex and materialism as means of sublimating the masculinity of men. While honoring this analysis, we might also regard the ways in which Jack could be disarticulating heteronormativity’s conflation of femininity with the domestic sphere. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the negation of culturally inscribed fantasies about the “home” and the domestic sphere *queers* our understanding of heteronormative time and modes of production/reproduction. Furthermore, class consciousness plays a factor in an individual’s ability to own a home, let alone fill it with things that make it feel more home-like. From this perspective, Jack’s incessant desire to define his life through commodities becomes not only a self-reflexive commentary, but also invites the audience to become introspective regarding how definitions of “success” typically revolve around an entrenchment within materialism and heteronormative modes of capitalist production.

In an attempt to find escape from his commodities “addiction” and to cure his insomnia, Jack sets out on a search for genuine intimacy that is not a predefined or prepackaged formulation for corporate success and “proper” citizenship (i.e., knowing the “right” people in order to climb the figurative “ladder”). Even though he is not dying and is not diagnosed with any physical or mental illnesses, he starts to attend various support groups, including one for men with testicular cancer. The name of this particular group, called Remaining Men Together, implies that a “safe space” ought to be etched out for men who have recently lost their ability to reproduce and, consequently, the referent of their manhood (in a very biologically deterministic way). Moreover, the film’s representation of the group satirizes how, in these spaces, men can freely express this loss through emotional release (specifically crying) and do so with anonymity. At the opening of the scene, one of the men tells a story about how his ex-wife wanted to get pregnant. Because he could no longer help her bear children, she divorced him. As the emasculated man cries, the film frames the cultural currency that our sexed bodies and body parts (particularly our genitals) have within the privacy of heterosexual reproductive familial

structures and within the public fields of recognition that validate an individual as a “complete” man or woman. In this depiction, these men do find a form of intimacy with one another at the support group, but it is one that the film mocks. For example, Bob, another member of the group, and Jack share a moment of bodily intimacy as they embrace each other and take turns crying. The narrator remarks, “Bob loved me because he thought my testicles were removed too” (*Fight Club*). Jack indulges in this form of intimacy as the cathartic release he experiences when crying with Bob provides him with a sense of peace and the ability to fall sleep, albeit temporarily. Although Jack’s motivations for being at the group are masked by a pretense that he, like Bob, no longer has his testicles, a parallel emerges between Jack’s need for the group and the needs of the other men. Similar to the men in the group who struggle with their inability to reproduce, Jack’s struggle is with his inability to sustain the level of production expected of him within a capitalist framework.

One interpretation of Remaining Men Together is that it overtly ridicules the intent and purpose of similar groups like those for breast cancer survivors. Additionally, such ridicule is implicitly embedded within the film’s misogynistic messaging that says consumer culture is effeminizing men and that the current structures we have to support men in reclaiming their masculinity are further emasculating them. However, I would contend that the film’s satirical outlook on these men has less to do with the “crisis” of masculinity that they experience due to their inability to sustain productivity within the workforce or because of their inability to reproduce the next generation of consumers and producers who will inevitably end up “working jobs [they] hate so [they] can buy shit [they] don't need” (*Fight Club*). Instead, the film divorces the desire to reproduce from any association with intrinsic “maleness” and derides any desire to produce and persist in a capitalist economy. In this context, any support group functions as a necessary coping mechanism that contains and redirects an individual’s discontent with current modes of production and reproduction. While serving as an emotional “release valve,” such support groups simultaneously encourage individuals to arrive at a resolution where they must accept their current conditions and become “productive” and “proper” members at the day’s end—even if their conditions lead to their impending death (e.g., terminal cancer).

Through satirizing all support groups and not just highly gendered ones, *Fight Club* (1999) raises questions regarding the value we place on other modes of “productivity” marked by

our life “accomplishments” as an attempt to define the success of our lives through the legacies we leave behind after we die. Although casually broached, the theme of death habitually appears throughout the film. For instance, most of the members in the support groups that Jack attends are “diseased” and awaiting their impending deaths. These groups seem to function as a forum of affirmation that takes the shape of an antemortem memorialization of an individual’s life. These spaces are also reliant on prefabricated, platonic, and sanitized forms of intimacy that may or may not involve the tactile sensation of other bodies (e.g., guided meditation). Other than the retelling of an individual’s story of struggle and providing supportive comments or friendly embraces, these “counterpublic” spaces for the dying continue to police particular individuals who seek other more fulfilling forms of intimacy that are specific to their current needs and desires. One example is of a cancer patient named Chloe who, after telling everyone that she no longer fears death, continues to recount her loneliness and then proceeds to solicit the audience for a sexual encounter because “[She’s] so close to the end and all [she] want[s] is to get laid for the last time” (*Fight Club*). Instead of regarding Chloe’s utterance as a sign of desperation that warrants pity and sympathy from the audience, it can also be interpreted as a sign of her sexual agency. Her articulation of desire disrupts the presumed propriety of what is considered a non-sexual space—one that supposedly provides her with intimacy and comfort as she learns to accept her fate. In fact, it is her frail and diseased body juxtaposed with her utterance that creates this momentary disruption to the social progression of the support group. In this moment, Chloe alters the presumption that the ill, the old, and the diseased—like those who are dying of cancer—are somehow without sexual desire or sex drive. Yet, the moment of Chloe placing the bodies of others in a position of *dis*-ease passes as the group’s facilitator swiftly leads Chloe from the podium.

Jack’s own reaction to Chloe’s solicitation is marked by awkwardness when Chloe flirtatiously confronts Jack after the group breaks. Jack’s awkward behavior is a result of his inability to negotiate Chloe’s sexual agency as it disrupts the normative codes of conduct with the space of the support group. Furthermore, Jack’s fear of exposure as someone who is actually not dying is further exasperated by the presence of Marla Singer—another “fake” who seems to attend the same support group meetings as Jack. He regards Marla’s presence as something that interferes with his ability to cry. If he cannot cry, then he cannot sleep and his insomnia returns.

If his insomnia returns then Jack cannot reassert control over his life and he cannot be a “productive” worker or member of society. Out of fear of losing the “release valve” that allows him to cope with the effects of capitalism, Jack redirects his attention away from his conversation with Chloe to a confrontation with Marla. His desperation for Marla to leave reveals that his addiction to consumerism has become supplanted by an addiction to its escape—namely, a reliance on these support groups to cope with the effects of his corporate job and a consumerist-driven culture.

Jack’s escape from an inauthentic, materialist-stricken, and corporate-driven world becomes threatened when Marla first appears at the Remaining Men Together testicular cancer support group with a cigarette in hand. Her entrance disrupts the men’s meeting space as she proclaims more than asks, “This is cancer, right?” (*Fight Club*). For Jack, Marla becomes a threat to his new found “addiction” to such support groups. Soon thereafter, he characterizes her as “the little scratch on the roof of your mouth that would heal if only you could stop tonguing it, but you can’t” (*Fight Club*). Jack’s depictions of Marla cast her as either an intruder or an infection, which spreads very much like a cancer, that facilitates his undoing. Later, Marla becomes a major factor that facilitates Jack’s subsequent self-destruction—a transformation that allows Jack to negate the previous social value that his job, condo, material possessions, and life once held. Moreover, Marla’s philosophy of life (or, rather, of her impending death), her impoverished circumstances, and her voracious sexuality antagonize capitalistic formations that are hell-bent on reproduction and consumerism. Her “unruliness” is not only a result of her continued survival, but it also proactively works against normative formulations of safety, stability, and appropriateness. From walking out into the middle of traffic to stealing food from Meals on Wheels, Jack remarks, “Marla’s philosophy of life was that she might die at any moment. The tragedy, she said, is that she didn’t” (*Fight Club*). This “tragedy” ought to be taken part in jest and part in understanding Marla’s circumstances. On one hand, she experiences a form of disappointment since she does not die in the same manner that an individual might experience disappointment if an expected promotion is not granted. On the other hand, her comment speaks to the real conditions of her life as being a life that is not necessarily one worth living because of her precarious circumstances.

Marla’s nihilism fuels her insistence on embracing the ugly, monstrous, perverse,

depraved, and self-destructive elements of herself and coaxing these parts out of Jack. It is also these elements of Marla that draw her toward Jack and his “alter-ego,” Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt). When Tyler comes to Marla’s apartment to “rescue” her from a suicide attempt, he assists her with leaving the dilapidated Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Hotel before the police arrive. As they head toward the exit, we hear the police knocking loudly on her door and calling her name. At this moment, Marla makes several comments about herself in the third person and directs them at the authorities. Gesturing back in the direction of her room, she refers to herself as “infectious human waste” and as a “monster” before shouting back to the cops, “Good luck trying to save her!” (*Fight Club*). These comments could be regarded as self-debasing; however, we might also regard them as a parody about how the lives of women living in poverty are often not valued as lives worth saving. The scene’s self-reflective qualities complicate discussions surrounding whose lives are grievable.⁶² In this sense, the cops (and by extension larger social institutions) are merely *performing* the functions of their duty and have no investment in whether or not a woman such as Marla Singer lives or dies. As such, Tyler values Marla’s outlook on life and her striving attempts to “hit bottom” because it aligns with his intent on “self-destruction” (*Fight Club*). Whether or not we consider Marla’s suicide attempt “real” or cause for concern, we may also want to contemplate an individual’s right to death and self-destruction. Might individuals’ choice to take their own lives be considered a final act of agency? What if we were to consider this act of agency also one of protest that resists the conditions of an unlivable or unbearable life?

Regardless, the connections between Marla and Tyler’s personality bear striking similarities. So much so that the audience might be led to believe that Marla is also a fabricated hallucination of Jack or, at least, another element of his fractured personality like Tyler. Marla and Tyler’s characterizations of Jack remain aligned even if they are corporeally distinct from Jack. Although the film frames Marla and Tyler as antithetical to one another (we are led to believe that Marla emasculates Jack with her wit and sexual agency, whereas Tyler enables Jack to reclaim his masculinity through violence-saturated homosocial bonding), their influence over Jack occurs in tandem, as both forces are committed to Jack’s undoing—an undoing that prompts

⁶² Judith Butler’s work in *Precarious Life* provides a more detailed discussion surrounding precarity and grievable lives.

a series of events that resonates beyond individual self-destruction. Jack's undoing, the emergence of fight clubs, and the birth of Project Mayhem lead to the film's climatic ending where corrupt financial institutions are diminished to piles of rubble.

Prior to meeting Marla and Tyler, Jack is a relatively privileged upper-middle class, white cisgender male. He works as a claims adjustor for a large automobile company, owns his own condo that is filled with IKEA furniture and name brand department store clothing, and is single. Despite his privileged position, Jack's narration instills a form of cultural anxiety surrounding daily functions or behaviors that are often not regarded as "dangerous" or as posing an immediate threat to one's body (e.g., car accidents and plane crashes). He frankly describes his occupation as an automobile recall agent to one of his "single-serving" friends aboard an aircraft while on a business trip. The mere articulation of his occupation and job description become a terrorizing threat to the imaginary of presumed safety we all partake in. Upon meeting Tyler on one of these flights, Jack proceeds to lose everything. Airport security confiscates his luggage, containing all of his expensive name brand clothing, due to "mysterious" vibrations emanating from it. When Jack attempts to question the Airport Security Officer regarding his vibrating suitcase, the officer implies it is either a result of an electric razor or a dildo. When Jack interjects that he does not own a dildo, the Airport Security Officer dismissively waives him off, signaling a loss of his masculinity.⁶³ Upon Jack's return to his home, he discovers that his condo and everything in it coincidentally exploded due to the pilot light going out on his gas stove. Toward the end of the film we learn that Jack's alter-ego, Tyler Durden, is responsible for purposefully destroying Jack's own home and presumably sabotaging Jack's luggage. It is Jack's chance encounter with Tyler that leads to the development of their friendship and Jack moving into the abandoned squat on Paper Street, signaling a rupture with his corporate and consumerist existence. From this moment, Jack's figurative and literal material existence is certainly ending as his quest for self-destruction begins.

Jack's desire to reclaim his lost "manhood" and redefine a notion of himself in relation to the larger public works out through his disgust with corporate America and results in the creation of his mind's fabrication of Tyler. Following the explosion of Jack's condo, Jack recounts the

⁶³ The scattered references to, and depictions of, dildos in *Fight Club* (1999) allude to a symbolic castration of men and particularly emerge during moments when others question Jack's masculinity.

degree of his loss to Tyler: “I was close to being complete” (*Fight Club*). In response, Tyler suggests: “We are by-products of a lifestyle obsession...I say never be complete...stop being perfect, let’s evolve!” (*Fight Club*). For Tyler, Jack’s material possessions and obsession with consumerism cloud his understanding of personal value and worth. Tyler continues to impart to Jack that “The things you own end up owning you” (*Fight Club*). Throughout the course of the film, from the start of *Fight Club* to its evolution into Project Mayhem, Tyler’s philosophy toes a fine line between the potential for the chaos of anarchy to enable individual freedom and the potential of further restrictiveness within a controlling and totalitarian fascist regime.

Yet, Tyler recognizes that bodily pain and the symbolic pain of loss are necessary aspects of life. For Tyler, consumerism pacifies and numbs us from our ability to feel pain or loss. As he induces a chemical burn on Jack’s hand, Tyler proclaims, “Without pain, without sacrifice, we would have nothing...Fuck damnation! Fuck redemption...First you have to know, not fear, know that someday you’re doing to die...It’s only after we have lost everything that we are free to do anything” (*Fight Club*). In this sense, the materialization of physical pain becomes one way of acknowledging and affirming Jack’s livelihood and existence on an individual level. On a collective level, his intercorporeality between other men and larger social structures becomes established through the emergence of various underground fight clubs across the nation. Here Tyler believes that pain and loss allow us to access our liberatory potential. This moment also foreshadows the birth of Project Mayhem that evolves from the homosocial bonding between men at the various fight clubs.

At formative beginnings of *Fight Club*, Tyler’s solicitation for physical violence is couched as an exchange for Jack staying at his dilapidated “shit-hole” of a residence. In addition to setting up fight clubs all over the U.S., Tyler is a film projectionist who creatively contributes to the silver screen by splicing single frames of pornography into them, thereby disrupting the happy, heteronormative familial outings to a Sunday matinee. Jack mentions that he is also regarded as a leading guerilla terrorist in the food industry who frequently urinates on many of the over-priced foods sold in the restaurant of the luxurious Pressman Hotel. Later, we learn that Tyler steals the fat from liposuction clinics in order to render bars of soap, which he then sells to department stores at twenty dollars apiece—or, as Jack frames it, “Selling rich women their own fat asses back to them” (*Fight Club*). The satisfaction that Tyler and Jack receive from selling

these bars of soap is because they are able to capitalize on a system where the standard of beauty can only be obtained by those who are willing and able to pay for it. Utilizing a byproduct of an industry that capitalizes on the self-image of women and turning it into a marketable high-end beauty product emphasizes the absurdity of such standards and reinforces the hold that such standards have on our pocketbooks and purchasing practices. Jack's remark, along with other moments in the film, structures a running commentary on the gender politics of beauty. Despite Jack and Tyler's attunement toward class disparities and their recognition that the gender politics of beauty impact men as well, they target women as the primary consumers.

In reference to Catharine Beecher, Michael Warner suggests, "women, accustomed to being the spectacle displayed to male desire, often experience the visibility of public space as a kind of intimate vulnerability. Men, by contrast, often feel their masculinity challenged when their bodies are on display as objects of erotic desire" (*Publics and Counterpublics* 33). In many ways, the film *Fight Club* (1999) directly responds to a crisis of masculinity that stems from a perceived loss of agency for men within this context. For Tyler and Jack, they believe this crisis is a result of celebrity culture and the pervasiveness of male bodies offered up as objects instead of retaining their scopophilic subjectivities as voyeurs. One example that illustrates this point is when Jack and Tyler are about to board the bus. They continue to coax each other on:

Jack: If you could fight any celebrity, who would you fight?

Tyler: Alive or dead?

Jack: It doesn't matter. Who would be tough?

Tyler: Hemingway. You?

Jack: Shatner. I'd fight William Shatner. (*Fight Club*)

Following this brief exchange, Tyler and Jack board the bus and Jack's voice-over as narrator persists. Looking up at a Gucci underwear advertisement for men's briefs that is plastered on the inside of the public transportation, Jack mentions, "I felt sorry for guys packed into gyms, trying to look like how Calvin Klein or Tommy Hilfger said they should" (*Fight Club*). Immediately following this voice-over, Jack asks Tyler, "Is that what a man looks like?" (*Fight Club*). Tyler laughs at Jack's question, gestures upward toward the advertisement, and audibly sighs, "Self-improvement is masturbation. Now, self-destruction..." (*Fight Club*). The above exchange remains equally as problematic as Jack's comment about selling soap to women. First, Jack and

Tyler are disgusted with celebrity culture, yet they select two very prominent hyper-masculine figures to entangle themselves with in their imaginative grappling sessions. Secondly, as Jack and Tyler are denouncing dominant notions of consumer-based forms of masculinity, the scene cuts from Tyler on the bus mid-sentence to Tyler's highly eroticized, sweaty and muscled body center screen—a body that arguably surpasses standards of male beauty and fitness like the half-naked models in the Gucci underwear ad—as he trounces another member of Fight Club. Even though Tyler and Jack despise celebrity culture and denounce masculine ideals of beauty, they seem to struggle with fully embodying their politics.

As the Fight Club Jack and Tyler start takes off, both characters continue to “size up” everything around them and become reflective of idealized, normative, and respectable forms of masculinity. In the intimate domestic space of the bathroom, Tyler (who lounges in a filthy tub filled with rusty water) proclaims to Jack (who sits idly by as he clips his nails), “We are a generation of men raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is really what we need” (*Fight Club*). Although this moment reinforces one of the film’s central messages that women are the reason why men are emasculated, coercing them into a prefabricated Western ideal of masculine beauty that is reinforced by the advertisements surrounding us, I argue that this comment might hold a different meaning—one that displaces, and possibly subsumes, the comment’s inherent misogyny. Instead of reading Tyler’s comment as solely misogynistic, and thereby linguistically violent toward women, we might also reimagine it to connote a disavowal of heteronormative structures as well. The cohabitation of Jack and Tyler creates a different type of homosocial bonding that often borders on the homoerotic, such as sharing the intimate space of the bathroom in which one performs bodily function deemed private—an intimacy that is often shared by a couple or familial unit. As Tyler lies in the bathtub naked, striking up casual conversation with Jack, his current domestic life remains unrestrained by heteronormative investments including normative relationship structures that might formalize the partitions between different forms of intimacy. In this same scene, Tyler’s critique is equally as harsh when directed at Jack’s story about his father. In fact, Tyler equates the absence of Jack’s father and his desire to start a new family every six years or so to that of establishing franchises. Tyler astutely connects the reciprocity of the familial unit’s modes of production to its capacity to “reproduce” more consumers for future generation to come. Additionally, he equates capitalist

modes of production to familial modes of reproduction.

As much as the film affirms a presumed need to recuperate a sense of lost masculinity, it simultaneously chastises celebrity culture and works at undoing social class stratification. For Jack and Tyler, *Fight Club* is a space where men can gain recognition in a tangible way and are able to embrace their own damaged state—a state that is a result and reflection of damaged forms of publicness and privacy. Jack remarks, “You weren’t alive anywhere like you were there. [...] Who you were in *Fight Club* is not who you were in the rest of the world” (*Fight Club*). Class standing, education level, job status, or the absence of testicles due to cancer does not matter within the counterpublic space of *Fight Club*. Instead, the shared violence of sensations becomes an equalizer among the men who participate. In these moments, the audience gains nothing from viewing the film as solely a sensationalistic glamorization of violence—particularly since we live in a culture saturated with violence and violent representations. However, our participation in *Fight Club*, vis-à-vis viewing the shared violence of sensation, can serve as a figurative referent to the institutionalized violence produced by contemporary formations of materialism and consumerism.

Yet, it is important to note that the patterned misogyny present throughout the film makes it difficult to ignore the ill-conceived message that implicates women as the driving force behind a consumer-driven culture that is insistent on the emasculation of men. In some ways, such patterned misogyny might be a residual effect of heteronormativity’s unsuccessful attempt to undo itself, begging the question: How might self-destruction and an embrace of violence become liberatory without recuperating heteronormative logics? Inevitably, it is Marla Singer who enables Jack to become Tyler in the first place, and it is Marla once again who is partially responsible for Tyler’s undoing in the end because of her love for Jack. Examining *Fight Club* (1999) from an anti-materialism and anti-corporate lens, while also being attuned to its patterned misogyny, reveals how the medium of the body readily makes visible the gendered violence of an institutionalized capitalist framework. In this sense, *Fight Club* (1999) transforms into a counterpublic space of protest—one that employs tactics that reflects with the conditions that are being protested. More specifically, the visible effects of self-destruction match the condition of disposability (of people and items) that a capitalist economy and consumer-driven neoliberalism rely upon. In other words, the violence of self-destruction externalizes what is often hidden and

conveys, in its representational form, a violence of sensation for the audience. *Fight Club* (1999) not only depicts how we are held hostage by Western hegemonic ideals regarding beauty, truth, power, success, and gender, but it also holds us hostage. Leaving the audience with no “happy place” to escape to, the film forces us to contend with the fraught, impending havoc of a consumer-driven culture that manifests in highly gendered ways.

Embracing Monstrosity in The L Word (2005)

In 2004, the Showtime cable network aired the first television drama series that specifically centered on lesbian life, love, and culture. Following the success of *Queer As Folk* (2000-2005),⁶⁴ a television drama that portrays the lives of five gay men, Showtime aired *The L Word* (2004-2009), which ran for six seasons and depicts hip, middle-class lesbians living in Los Angeles, California. One of the characters in the series is Jennifer “Jenny” Diane Schechter (played by Mia Kirshner) who moves to L.A. to live with her boyfriend, only to discover her attraction to women (Season 1). In the second season, Jenny’s character drastically transforms from the hyper-feminine and naïve college girl to an individual who is attempting to explore her previously repressed sexuality.

While *Fight Club* (1999) presents a frustrated form of masculinity that ruptures capitalism through externalizing violence and self-destruction, Season 2 of the television series *The L Word* frames an injured femininity that resists normative framings of trauma through internalizing violence and monstrosity. Jenny’s imaginative realm becomes the stage where she examines her past trauma; it also provides the occasion for her to convey to the audience the violence of sensation that embodying monstrosity entails. Much of Jenny’s character development centers on her aspirations to be a creative writer. It is in these moments, we see her revisiting a past self that is partially derived from fragmented memories and partially reconstructed what seems like a lucid, but nonsensical, dream. These vignettes break from the narrative plot as the audience enters Jenny’s mind, revealing the root of her artistic endeavors through a series of events taking place at a carnival. These scenes are reflective of the

⁶⁴ Showtime adapted *Queer As Folk* from a British television series by the same name. The United Kingdom version, created by Russell T. Davies, aired in 1999 and initially consisted of an eight part series. In 2000, a two-part follow up called *Queer As Folk 2* aired.

Bakhtinian carnivalesque and grotesque body as they conflate Jenny's past experiences as a rape victim with a fantasy world. She fashions an imaginary realm of her own making where she attempts to reconcile an ideological shift into queer otherness with her fractured sense of self. The carnivalesque aspects of this counterpublic space draw attention to the internalized forms of monstrosity Jenny experiences and situates her body as a spectacle. My interest in these scenes lies not in the narrative sequencing in relation to the overall plot of each episode, but in how the carnival atmosphere formulates these "freakish" moments. These moments highlight the spectacle of Jenny's internalized violence and frame the figure of the monster as the backdrop to an imaginative queer counterpublic. Simultaneously, they also convey the violence of sensation to the audience as representations of Jenny's irreconcilable past trauma.

One of the first glimpses of the carnivalesque montage occurs in Season 2 Episode 3 ("Loneliest Number"). At the onset of the scene, the images blur in and out from Jenny behind her computer to the image of a young girl. Boys rush around the adolescent girl as she covers her eyes. Looking toward a mirror in front of her with the image of the carnival grounds in the background, we see the little girl throw a book forward, shattering the looking glass. The girl enters through the mirror into an adjacent room as carnival-like music persists in the background.⁶⁵ The scene abruptly ends with the older Jenny of the present writing this story on her laptop, her face dimly lit as her body is entrenched in the darkness around her. The sequencing of this scene momentarily stuns the audience's senses. Similar to Halberstam's discussion on the "fantasy shots" present in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), this scene, and others like it, interweave varying "shots in which time speeds up or slows down through the film, creating an imagistic counternarrative" (*In a Queer Time & Place* 87). The heightened mobility and the blurring of images suspend normative notions of temporality and spatiality as it *queers* our relationship to them. Through this kind of non-representational warping of time and space, we become a part of the carnival experience as our role as audience, much like that of the images we see, becomes blurred; we transition from observing Jenny to bearing witness and even being folded into the carnival crowd as participants.

For the start of each subsequent episode, Jenny sits in a darkened room typing on her

⁶⁵ The scene described is undoubtedly a reference to Lewis Carol's novel *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

computer. In Episode 4 (“Lynch Pin”), the camera immediately cuts to what she is typing on the computer screen. The audience is momentarily given a glimpse of what she is writing before the screen blurs to black and white images. We see two images flash before us—a teddy bear ornamented with a red bow and, directly following, another stuffed animal wearing a red coat. The camera then cuts to two young girls (presumably a young Jenny and childhood friend) at a carnival booth firing bb guns at moving ducks with red targets accenting their bodies. As the camera frames the backside of the children, we see their moving targets down-range. The sharp cuts to specific images (e.g., framing one moving duck) to the a frontal shot of the girls gaily firing the rifles and then back to adult Jenny sitting on the target assembly line are all accented with the sharp sound of the gun firing. As Jenny emerges she is dressed entirely in white with the surrounding backdrop darkened. The girls shout loudly as they jump up and down joyously, “There. I got her!” (“Lynch Pin”). A dark red stain emerges through Jenny’s clothing as she stares downward and then back up. The next frame is of Jenny running from the booth through the carnival as the camera tracks her flight, framing the backs of the girls once again. Because of the black and white imagery, the red stain emerges as a focal point on the screen. Jenny has, quite literally, been wounded by an earlier form of herself, signaling a loss of childhood innocence.

As the scenes of the carnival intensify in a manner reminiscent of Tod Browning’s American horror film *Freaks* (1932), we are brought once again to the carnival grounds where everything is constant motion and at an intensified rate. Jenny, in a white frock, is working at a candy booth. The camera immediately pans to the carousel where the artificial lighting and the close-up shots, as well as angled shots of horses, add to a sense of horror and create a distancing effect. Then it pans back to the crowd, who pass by Jenny’s booth, as shots of the moving carousel are superimposed and blurred. Menacing Ed Wood-esque music plays in the background and combines with the whispers of hushed voices coming from the carnival attendees. The image of a carousel pig is interspersed throughout the camera shots as Jenny looks up from working at her candy booth in horror only to notice the disfiguration and “pig-like” aesthetic of those staring at her. The words “stop starring” resonate as the camera interposes images of the carousel and the people around Jenny. Her face, remaining unaltered, becomes visibly marked as an outcast because the disfiguration she feels internally (presumably

from her early childhood sexual assault) is not reflected externally. In other words, Jenny's trauma becomes a scar that is not as visibly apparent than the scars from Jack and Tyler's Fight Club. Rather, it is a form of violence that results in isolation and difficulty traversing interpersonal relationships for Jenny. Moreover, the pig-like faces of the carnival crowd reflect a grotesque element of human nature—one that permits the rape of Jenny's younger self. As the audience hears Jenny whisper "monstrosity," the word reverberates with distress until the end of the scene ("Labyrinth"). For Jenny, the violence of this imaginary realm initially becomes the opportunity for her to confront her past trauma and work through her present desires for other women. Yet, slowly, Jenny learns to embrace the monstrosity of her past sexual assault and formulate an emergent queer positionality that rejects normative reconciliations.

The audience viewing the spectacle of the "monstrous" becomes solidified in Episode 6 ("Lagrimas de Oro") when we are brought into the metaphorical circus ring. The short story that Jenny writes, thus animating the scene, is appropriately titled "The Ringmaster." The "ring leader" (portrayed by Jenny's writing coach, Charlotte Birch) grandly announces: "Hurry, hurry, hurry. Step right up ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, girly boys and boyish girls, tops and bottoms, queers, bis, transgenders, and label free people of every stripe and variety [...]" ("Lagrimas de Oro"). The ringleader's elaborate and grandiose gestures set up the spectacle for the audience. She continues her narrative and describes what we, as spectators, have come to see: "[...] human freaks brought before you for your entertainment and amusement" ("Lagrimas de Oro"). As Charlotte Birch's character introduces the other members of the side show, the Temptress (played by *The L Word* character Carmen de la Pica) and the Temptress Tamer (played by *The L Word* character Shane McCutcheon), Jenny plays the role of the silent Harlequin Ballerina tight-rope walker perched above the circus ring. Unlike the previous carnival scenes that reference an earlier child-like Jenny, this one is representative of Jenny's current relationship with Shane (Jenny's primary love interest) and foreshadows Shane's future involvement with another woman named Carmen. As the Temptress (Carmen) enchants the Temptress Tamer (Shane), the Harlequin Ballerina observes this, teeters, and falls from her perch. The audience shrieks co-mingle with the Harlequin Ballerina's own screams of despair, becoming audible to the viewers. This scene shares similarities to the previous one where Jenny is shot with a BB gun. Her past trauma informs her fear of intimacy and situates her within a

field of heightened vulnerability. Yet, unlike the other scenes which are a direct reference to the sexual violence she experienced as a child, the previous discomfort she expressed with regards to her sexuality is replaced with a new found embrace of queer alterity—one that emerges as Jenny becomes roommates with Shane, “comes out,” and cuts her hair short. Also, the highly performative elements of “The Ringmaster” scene reveal the viewers’ participation and complicity with the act being played out. As audience members who are now a part of the circus crowd, we are implicated in the “spectacle of excess” (Barthes 15). Our involvement as spectators directly contributes to the production of the act. Similar to how Roland Barthes, in his book *Mythologies*, describes the audience’s cheering and jeering at the wrestlers and their excessive gestures in the ring, we know too well the story Jenny tells—one of love triangles, unrequited love, and loss. Although we know the story, the spectacle of excess illuminates the homogenized and predictable responses of the characters’ roles. Yet, Jenny’s character development throughout the series reflects a resistance toward these normative affective scripts.

By the end of Season 2, Jenny casts aside illusions of acceptance and belonging, working toward a hopelessness that is not intent on “fixing” her wounds or stitching together her fragmented self. Rather, Jenny embraces the “broken” aspects of herself, even if some of them are intent on emotional and physical self-destruction. For example, in the Season 2 finale (“Lacuna”), Jenny inflicts self-harm by cutting herself with a razor blade. At the start of Season 3 (“Labia Majora”), we discover that Jenny was hospitalized at a mental health facility near her hometown in Illinois. Upon her release, Jenny’s family and friends refuse to openly discuss her self-destruction out of fear that she remains fragile. Yet, Jenny’s candid acknowledgment of her experience as a “cutter” creates an isolating effect. As her frustration with being silenced mounts, Jenny becomes more determined to tell her story and eventually publishes a book that further provokes tension among her family and friends. The significance of her resolve throughout the television series points toward an unapologetic embrace of the ugly, undesirable, and monstrous aspects of her identity—even if this embrace includes isolation, alienation, and her eventual murder at the end of Season 6 (“Last Word”).

In the second-to-last episode of Season 2 (“L’Chaim”), Jenny’s sense of reality meshes with the creation of her carnivalesque realm. The camera pans outward to reveal a luminescent neon sign around the silhouette of a curvy nude female figure. Like the artificial lighting in the

carnival and the exaggerated gestures of the ring leader, the audience can anticipate the spectacle that lies just beyond the front doors of the “gentleman’s club” on Sunset Strip. As the camera brings us inside, Jenny, in her debut, seductively dances on stage and exposes her breasts. The scene is entirely silent except for the sounds of a whip that match her sharp, jagged movements. The camera cuts to the image of rowdy men in the audience. Even though the silence is overwhelming, we can see the figures hollering at her and coaxing her to remove the rest of her clothing. The silence makes apparent the sexual objectification of Jenny’s body both past and present. However, Jenny’s performance is also telling of her reclaimed agency. She is aware of this objectification but dances and strips of her own volition. On one hand, Jenny sees herself as a mere actor on stage that provides the audience with an illusion of vulnerability; on the other hand, the image of her stripping on stage suggests an embrace of her vulnerability. Jenny’s extreme discomfort on stage forces her to come to terms with past sexual violences. By embracing her vulnerability and stripping in front of a room full of presumably straight cisgender men, Jenny recognizes that her identity as a queer cisgender woman and sexual assault survivor will always be exposed as a misrecognized catachresis. The closing shots—which rapidly intersperse images of the men’s contorted faces with grotesque sketches of them and include brief clips from the other carnival scenes—are less of a catharsis but, instead, a visual representation of Jenny’s queering of affect as she rejects normative reconciliations to heal the wounded child of her past. The overlapping of these images in the form of a montage displays a gradual intensification of the carnivalesque quality that shapes Jenny’s queer positionality. In doing so, this sequencing draws direct parallels between Jenny’s vulnerability, her internalized desire to self-destruct, and her externalized visible otherness as queer. In other words, Jenny “lets it all hang out”—both in terms of her past trauma and her present desires.

An alternate, and perhaps more pervasive, reading of this final Jenny montage draws corollaries between her attraction to women and her sexual assault—connections that might construct an inaccurate trajectory of lesbian desire. If Jenny is read as a helpless victim of rape (i.e., someone who has no agency or self-value and, thereby, strips only for the sexual gratification of men) and is only driven to the arms of women because of her past trauma, then her character would remain a stagnant, representational shell of her past childhood self. Such a

reductive analysis dismisses the complexity of Jenny’s character and sexuality.⁶⁶ This presumption also delegitimizes the sexual attraction women have for other women because it supposes that such desires *only* emerge from damaged forms of heterosexual union—namely, abusive, destructive, or negative experiences with men.

Conversely, in *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich claims that the embrace of lesbianism is a healthy response to male violence. She remarks:

But why can’t saying that “sexual abuse causes homosexuality” just as easily be based on the assumption that there’s something right, rather than something wrong, with being lesbian or gay? As someone who would go so far as to claim lesbianism as one of the *welcome* effects of sexual abuse, I am happy to contemplate the therapeutic process by which sexual abuse turns girls queer. (*An Archive of Feelings* 90)

Cvetkovich’s argument poses an alternative to the “negative” value that sexual abuse imposes on a lesbian identity. In partial agreement with Cvetkovich, I acknowledge that Jenny’s sexual abuse might have *queered* her sexuality. However, this queering is not necessarily a symptom or cause of her lesbianism. Although Cvetkovich uses the term “queer” to signal “the unpredictable connections between sexual abuse and its effect, to name a connection while refusing determination or cause” (*An Archive of Feelings* 90), her argument remains tied to the constraints of discourse.

Yet, to explore the relationality *between* the categories of lesbianism and queerness, and *between* the terms of lesbianism and sexual trauma, is to assert a particular type of causality that suggests a linear progression from one point to another. For example, I might assert as part of a “coming-out” narrative that I identified as a lesbian when I was younger, but now I identify as queer. Or, I might suggest that because of past sexual abuse, now I am a lesbian. These two statements do not conflict with Cvetkovich’s desire to recuperate a “positive” or “productive” value with their assertions. However, asserting the reciprocal value of the category “lesbian” (i.e., “Because of my sexual trauma, I am now heterosexual.”) or implying the inverse with sexual violence (i.e., “Because of my past identity as a lesbian, I now have sexual trauma)

⁶⁶ It is important to note that Jenny’s queer sexuality cannot be simply reduced the category of “lesbian.” When Jenny returns to Los Angeles in Season 3, she is in a relationship with Moira/Max Sweeney (played by Daniela Sea), a working-class butch woman who later identifies as a female-to-male (FTM) transgender individual.

undercuts the “productive” value Cvetkovich is after. While the relationality between the categories of lesbianism and queerness might allow for the rejection of causality in favor of more temporal invocations, an implicit determination and causality links together the terms lesbianism and sexual trauma. Furthermore, the term “lesbianism” limits the ways desire can be expressed in relation to sexual trauma because of discursive constraint. In contrast, using the term “queerness” to narrate the relationship between desire and sexual abuse permits non-linear associations to emerge and, in doing so, it expands an individual’s agency.

With regards to Jenny, if we perceive her as incapable of resolving the internal conflict with her sexuality because of her failure to come to terms with her rape, then we run the risk of minimizing the agency she has over her sexuality and the ways she experiences trauma. If Jenny is, in fact, the author of these scenes, these elements are not out of her control. Her authorship highlights the immeasurably complex relationship she has with past trauma, recognizing how “each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed (Butler, *Precarious Life* 20). In the final scene, Jenny strips on stage and conveys the felt sensation of these complexities, inviting the audience to inhabit vulnerability with her. Although we are invited to inhabit this space alongside Jenny, little value exists in attempting to assert control over her past or allowing for a resolution, with any sense of finality, to her trauma. If anything, her continued vulnerability highlights the complexity of her character, moving far beyond an injured lesbian identity or tarnished heterosexuality. Moreover, her vulnerability calls into question the audience’s own understandings of desire and trauma as categories that do not necessarily have a direct correlation to one another while also highlighting how they are also not always embodied in mutually exclusive ways.⁶⁷

Jenny’s queer navigation of trauma and desire allows her body to become momentarily unhinged from the “real world.” In this sense, her queerness signals a temporality that is not necessarily restricted to the imaginary realm she fashions; rather, her queerness transforms spaces (like the stage of the strip club) that can intervene with heteronormativity’s insistence.

⁶⁷ Similar to my analysis of Loren “Rex” Cameron’s “Distortions” portraits in Chapter 1, the framing of Jenny’s trauma and desire become reflexive acts that eventually return to the audience. This reflexive reframing implicates us in constructions of monstrosity.

Through redefining the relational terms set forth by heteronormativity, Jenny's navigation of intrapersonal and interpersonal intimacies emerge in the imaginative counterpublic space she creates in her stories. The creation of this space enables Jenny's character to escape from discursively imposed dualisms regarding her sexuality (i.e., straight/gay) and sort through the ambiguity she experiences with regards to her past trauma. Her relationship to both her sexuality and trauma forgoes participation in a socially acceptable process that results in a tidy resolution to her internal or external conflicts. In these instances, her queer potentiality resides with her unresolved relationship to trauma, violence, and intimacy; they also provide the audience with the occasion to flirt with the unmitigated fantasies of figural logics that allow for us to imagine Jenny's representation of herself as a resistance—a resistance against institutional frameworks that facilitate “appropriate” structures of feeling and constrain affective and embodied responses to trauma and violence.

Embracing Violent Sensations

In contrast to the spectacle of interpersonal physical violence and self-destruction in *Fight Club* (1999), Season 2 of *The L Word* (2005) offers an examination of intrapersonal psychic violence and internalized monstrosity. However, both visual text convey the sensation of violence with immediacy and illustrate how, according to Judith Butler, “the body has its invariably public dimension” (*Precarious Life* 26). Through formations of intimacy forged from violence, bodies in the public sphere reveal how vulnerability can manifest in relational ways. This vulnerability implies placing one's body at a risk—to risk recognition, displacement (communal or geographic), isolation, and/or life itself. Within such moments of vulnerability, loss is a factor that shapes intimate connections and encounters. Butler suggests,

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, or bonds that compose us. (*Precarious Life* 22)

Butler's invocation of a body's intercorporeal elements draws attention to how our embodiment

is fashioned in relation to the bodies of others. Beyond the intercorporeal dimension that accounts for the physical space in between bodies, Butler points toward the connections or “ties” we have with others. These ties anchor us to others and reveal, particularly when threatened with being severed, how they constitute our embodiment and compose our subjectivity within frameworks of recognition that validate our “humanness” and substantiate a shared humanity. However, as Butler suggests, “there is a limit to discourse that establishes the limits of human intelligibility” (*Precarious Life* 35). As with any taxonomical configuration, such limits delineate between who is recognized as human and who is not.

One response to these limits is to broaden the category of what constitutes the human and, by doing so, encompass a larger scope of relational kinship structures and intimacies that confer recognition. Although such a strategy illustrates the interpersonal elements of human embodiment and subjectivity, it also runs the risk of appealing to a universal humanism that presupposes recognizability and delegitimizes the specific and nuanced vulnerabilities individuals face at institutional levels. If an individual is not recognizable according to current taxonomical configurations of who is deemed “human,” then perhaps such unrecognizability can pose its own form of agency—an agency that is enacted upon the field of recognition by virtue of its existence.

Instead of broadening the category of “human,” what might be gained by embracing the inhuman? As present in *Fight Club* (1999) and Season 2 of *The L Word* (2005), self-destruction and internalized monstrosity “insist on enlarging the inhuman instead—or enlarging what, in its excess, in its unintelligibility, exposes the human itself as always misrecognized catachresis, a positing blind to the willful violence that marks its imposition” (Edelman 152). Since queer modalities are often at the mercy of heteronormativity, which silences certain forms of queerness yet appropriates others to help facilitate its own investments in making what is indiscernible separate and intelligible, alternative representations of the inhuman might render queer subjectivities as recognizable even if they are not constituted as intelligible. What becomes recognizable is the visceral force with which the sensation of violence is felt. Moreover, an embrace of the violence of sensation facilitates a disidentificatory spectatorship that stands in opposition to heteronormative social value and “appropriate” affective responses to self-destruction and trauma.

Even if we are to embrace violent sensations, will it enable us to be understood, felt, or known to others, even if we are not rendered as “human”? What is our capacity and limitation *to be* something? What is our capacity to be kind, spiteful, gentle, or insidious whether or not we embrace the violent sensations? These questions are not posed in an effort to search for a cause or origin to the existence of such qualities, but this is, rather, a rhetorical pondering of capacity negated through the rigidity of categorical essentialism that either fabricates or aids in the production of queer monstrosity. These queer interventions with affect and comportment effectively terrorize heteronormativity as they disrupt “appropriate” public practices, creating heightened anxiety surrounding a potential instability in a regulatory system bent on pathologizing and criminalizing alterity and unintelligibility. The mobilization of such terrorizing desires enables the possibility for unapologetic disruptions and transgressions that undermine, deconstruct, and rework institutional violence. In other words, to embrace violent sensations is to envelop and protest the conditions that make such sensations violent.

In Chapter 4, I discuss how New Queer Cinema (NQC) mobilizes a disidentificatory spectatorship that prompts critiques of systemic violence and generates a platform for an exigency of queerness, gesturing toward sustained unintelligibility. NQC simultaneously questions the normative ideological constraints that are typically placed upon aesthetic, critical, and cultural productions, queering spectatorship for the viewer, while allowing a new, imaginative set of implications to materialize. Some of these implications are examined in Del LaGrace Volcano’s short film *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998). This film, and other NQC productions like it, points toward the queer potentiality of unintelligibility, subversive participatory spectatorship, the emergence of counterpublic spaces, and the imaginative possibilities that surface from the bodily materialism of intimacy.

CHAPTER 4

Intimate Encounters in New Queer Cinema: Spectatorship & Permeability in *Pansexual Public Porn*

*[T]he only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given
ground relative to one's desire.*

—Jacques Lacan

In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner suggests that “lesbian and gay men have found that to challenge the norms of straight culture in public is to disturb deep and unwritten rules about kinds of behavior and eroticism that are appropriate to the public” (25). As such, hegemonic investments in heteronormativity (and, arguably, homonormativity as well) underwrite and reform disparate desires into intimacies that can be regarded as “appropriate” for the public sphere, or they become discounted altogether. Drawing on theorists such as Judith Butler, Michael Warner, and Judith “Jack” Halberstam, this chapter examines the permeability of desire in Del LaGrace Volcano’s short film *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998). Volcano’s cinematic representation acknowledges an individual’s specificity of desire while also contextualizing such desires within a radical anti-taxonomy. Furthermore, *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) and films like it not only present representational forms of non-normative desires and alternative networks of intimacy,⁶⁸ but they also *queer* spectatorship in a manner that allows for reading practices to emerge that can resist, reform, and refashion the intimate encounters we experience in the public sphere. Such readings pose interventions that allow queerness to be articulated, enacted, and imagined more fully while they also gesture toward embracing unintelligibility as an ethical necessity and liberatory process that can make life a little more livable—and, perhaps, turn life into something desirable and worth living.

To contextualize this queering of spectatorship, I first turn to the emergence of a new generation of cinematic productions in the early 1990s that was later called “New Queer Cinema” (NQC). Scholars have expanded the NQC canon to include films released since the early 1990s. These later films, like their predecessors, typically reject heteronormative

⁶⁸ In Chapter 3, I define “intimacy” as a way of being together in a public that is predicated on sensation rather than knowledge. Reconfiguring how we connect with one another in public allows for an exposure and short-circuiting of the violence that persists with heteronormativity and neoliberalism.

conventions, eschew happy endings, thwart mainstream images of the LGBT community, and provide representations of queer protagonists that are often living on the fringes of society. As NQC gains visibility in both mainstream and marginalized arenas, the political practices and activist exigency of queerness develop, reaching beyond the categories of gender and sexuality to critiques of systemic violence. Through nonconventional filming and editing techniques, and providing narrative voice to forms of queer otherness, NQC reconfigures the static, taxonomical identificatory structuring of desire within a hetero-/homosexual binary. It also simultaneously questions the normative ideological constraints that are typically placed upon aesthetic, critical, and cultural productions, queering spectatorship for the viewer, while allowing a new, imaginative set of implications to materialize.

As discussed in the previous chapters, discourse confines and directs not only what can be articulable, but also what is imaginable. As such, discursive limits can often restrict as well as expand interpersonal forms of intimacy. Because of these limits, the numerous configurations of possible queer desires, identities, and embodiments are often disregarded as lived (or livable) experiences. In contrast, expressions of heterosexual desire are not only regarded as “acceptable” and “ordinary,” but they are often encouraged by the public and saturate every aspect of public life. Because of its ordinariness and saturation of the public sphere, attention only becomes elevated toward heteronormative formations of intimacy when it affirms highly ritualized heteronormative conventions (e.g., marriage proposals in a public park or restaurant). In such instances, the public sphere not only regulates “appropriate” expressions of desire, but it also structures and polices the interpersonal social relations that we depend on for intimacy.

If desire remains highly mobile, variable, and in need of continual policing because of its inability to ever be fully contained, then opportunities to reimagine structures of intimacy that simultaneously affirm desire and expose, short-circuit, and/or defy heteronormative constraint also exist. These disruptions and challenges occur as volitional counterpublic formations and remain in tension with the larger public whether or not they are consciously formed with this intent in mind. For instance, public cruising in parks, the back rooms of gay bars, bathhouses, sex clubs, porn theaters, and dungeon parties are all spaces that do far more than just signify representational places that recognize and make visible non-normative desires. As Warner asserts, these counterpublic spaces “can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social

relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived, including forms of intimate association, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment, erotic practices, and relations of care and pedagogy” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 57).⁶⁹ The relationships that emerge from these interpersonal interactions are a product of shared experiences and communal identities.

Sometimes these counterpublic spaces solidify community solidarity in response to pressures that threaten their existence and they also become more visible within specific historical moments, geographic environments, political climates, or cultural contexts. For instance, many bathhouses in urban hubs were faced with closure during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 90s. Because of U.S. government-driven responses that amplified public fears, such spaces were presumptively regarded as places of contagion that posed a health risk to the general population. In response to community deaths, these spaces intentionally became places to discuss the epidemic and implement, as well as educate others on, safer sex practices. Furthermore, it is worth noting the intricate configurations of the public and the private within spaces such as sex clubs and bathhouses during this time period. Some owners took it upon themselves to eliminate the “private” rooms in their establishments so they could better control and regulate the sexual activities of their patrons. This intentional removal of partitions resulted in more public sex occurring within the confines of the private clubs and, consequently, created space for public health initiatives. In many sex clubs and bathhouses today, these spatial configurations still exist along with materials and resources for safer sex practices.⁷⁰

Although some communities remain on the fringes or are relegated to the domain of the “private” and hidden from public view, conferring recognition of an individual’s communal identification is a very public act. A community’s contestation of an individual’s belonging within a particular space facilitates a contestation of the self. The individual’s assessment and affirmation of their inclusion into a particular community becomes a repeated act of self-validation—one that is structured through frameworks of intimacy and recognition. For instance, inclusion into the BDSM community is contingent on an individual’s reiterative physical acts or

⁶⁹ Samuel Delany in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* makes a similar argument to Warner with regards to public sex and the cultivation of intimate networks.

⁷⁰ The anthology *Policing Public Sex: Queer Politics and the Future of AIDS Activism*, edited by the Dangerous Bedfellows Collective, provides a more comprehensive discussion on the topic—one that incorporates a diverse array of perspectives from artists, journalists, academics, activists, and sex workers.

linguistic utterances that confer a past, present, or future desire to participate in kink and knowledge (however superficial) about its cultural practices. Based on an individual's self-identification and the ways in which they might fit in to a particular community, communal identity becomes conferred, but only until it is contested in another space or at another time. Despite these formulations of communal identification, is it possible for us to perceive our existence without community, detached from social institutions, publics and counterpublics, and our narcissistic drive to embrace such self-validating memberships? If it is possible, would such an existence be desirable and/or not part of a narcissistic drive but differently expressed? Furthermore, what would networks of intimacy that are devoid of communal identification look like and where would such desires be expressed? As publics and counterpublics alike create spaces for individuals to negotiate formations of intimacy, these formations become recognizable whether or not such interpersonal dynamics are regarded as normative or marginalized. How then might we imagine interpersonal recognition and being together as a "public" in ways that are predicated on sensation rather than epistemological frameworks that demarcate parameters of intelligibility?

The ways in which individuals relate to one another, share intimacy, and express desire are often regarded as highly regimented since epistemological frameworks regularly structure identities as static and immovable categories that remain intelligible. For instance, if I identify as a gay cisgender man (even if I did not always identify as gay), social and cultural norms ideologically reinforce my sexual attraction to other men. I do not have to engage in sex acts with another man in order to identify as "gay" since my attraction to, and desire for, other men confers my identity. Yet, my desire is shaped by these norms to the extent that I can imagine the permeability of the categories "gay" and "man." Such norms reinforce my attraction to assigned male at birth (AMAB) individuals and they frequently exclude the possibility of my being attracted to transmen, transwomen, genderqueer individuals, or cisgender women who imagine their identities as gay men and desire to engage in sex acts as gay men. Additionally, social and cultural norms often influence how to have sex and where to have sex. They also reinforce the desire for a specific phenotype (e.g., body size) or social identity, further complicating elements of desires along intersecting axes of race, class, gender, and nationality.

Perceiving desire as impermeable and solely predicated on a static identity proliferates a

violent process of translation that demarks the boundaries between recognizable forms of intimacy. These translations—whether they are intelligible utterances rendered into a recognizable speech act or reformed into coherent visual representation—affirm how desire manifests within a social order and reinforce which intimacies are legitimate, appropriate, or even recognizable aspects of public life. Judith Butler’s discussion in *Precarious Life* addresses the limits of the public sphere and its control and regulation. In the preface, she mentions, “The public sphere is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown. The limits of the sayable, the limits of what can appear, circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as viable actors” (Butler, *Precarious Life* xvii). Inferring from Butler’s remarks, one possibility for transforming the public sphere exists when individuals make public the very things that cannot be said or shown in public. Usually these articulations are conveyed in a manner that essentializes and naturalizes an individual’s experiences and identity.

In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner speaks to this point by suggesting that “variant desires are legitimate only if they can be shown to be immutable, natural, and innate” (9). As a critique of Andrew Sullivan’s book *Virtually Normal*, Warner sarcastically suggests, “Nearly everyone, it seems, wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn’t seem to be a choice at all” (*The Trouble With Normal* 53). The process of expanding the category of what is regarded as “normal” violently renders intelligible that which could not be said or shown in public; furthermore, it disregards the possibility that unintelligible moments, gestures, or sensations already exist within the public sphere and can permeate the veneer of discursive constraint. What is regarded as unintelligible often cannot be described with speech because no language exists to describe it; similarly, it might not be seen even if it is in plain sight. If we can readily see and name unintelligibility, then its utility diminishes as a lived experience beyond language and the optic. Conversely, if I do not articulate my desires or experiences and I continue to remain unseen, then I risk losing recognition within the social order altogether.

Hetero-/homonormativity privileges certain networks of intimacy over others. As to not risk isolation, alienation, or abandonment, we mediate and participate in these privileged

formulations through our compliance with social institutions that uphold normative conventions and standards of propriety. These standards are reinforced on an individual level as conventions dictate how desire operates and is allowed to be expressed within a given space (i.e., the bedroom, public restrooms, or private clubs). Our hyper-dependency on, and incessant need to play into, these socially reinforced “scripts” of intimacy, is perpetuated by linguistic and theatrical performativity, revealing how our bodies and interactions are *always* interpersonal. As a result, the relationships that emerge from these interactions are a product of shared experiences and communal identities. They become an affirmation of who we are and they define our allegiance to beliefs, ideals, individuals, and communities. How then might we break from taxonomical configurations and embrace the emergence of unintelligible desires that are, nonetheless, tangibly felt and enacted via intimate encounters?

Drawing from the NQC canon, *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) is an example that points toward the queer potentiality of unintelligibility, subversive participatory spectatorship, the emergence of counterpublic spaces, and the imaginative possibilities that surface from the bodily materialism of intimacy. Similar NQC productions continue to resist participation in hetero- and homonormativity by rejecting frameworks of recognition that validate an endorsement of traditional cinematic conventions or dominant discursive constraints. Instead, such cinematic representations push for more mobile and fluid conceptions of queer otherness (evinced by a multiplicity of experiences, embodiments, identifications, and expressions of desire) and actively work toward an embrace of unintelligibility as a participatory practice.

NQC: A Response to Obligatory Performances of Identity, Difference, & Spectatorship

With the emergence of films and scholarly work, later coined “New Queer Cinema” (NQC) in 1992 by B. Ruby Rich, the cinematic representations of queer sexualities and variant gender expressions flooded the silver screen in both mainstream popular culture and independent or marginalized circuits. Michele Aaron, in the introduction to her reader entitled, *New Queer Cinema*, suggests, “Queer represents the resistance to, primarily, the normative codes of gender and sexual expression—that masculine men sleep with feminine women—but also to the restrictive potential of gay and lesbian sexuality” (“New Queer Cinema” 5). She continues to write:

Founded upon the spectator's alignment or identification with or gravitation towards a 'character-not-you', narrative cinema itself depends upon establishing empathy, alliances, and desire along lines not restricted to normative patterns of attraction. Cinema, as I implied above, is rooted in queer processes. Not only has NQC helped generate this kind of thinking, it has encouraged mainstream cinema to harness cinema's queer potential.

(Aaron, "New Queer Cinema" 10)

Since cinema is already involved in queer processes of affect and alignment (even if we do not inhabit the identity of a character we align with), Aaron credits NQC with extending this process and influencing mainstream cinema's potential to solicit audience engagement and participation. Although not always self-reflexive, NQC films often gesture to the audience's presence, highlight the ways in which looking operates, and also exposes how the act of looking engenders a particular form of violence. I suggest that NQC conveys these sensations (violent or otherwise) to the audience in a manner that solicits the spectators' participation and *queers* their gaze. Such sensations create a type of disfiguration of identity that enables queer potentiality to emerge within or in opposition to dominant ideology and hegemonic discourse.

Such transformations of spectatorship occur in a multitude of ways. In Judith "Jack" Halberstam's reading of *Boys Don't Cry* (1999),⁷¹ the emergence of the "transgender gaze" disrupts the audience's connection/identification to the main character, Brandon Teena (played by Hilary Swank). Halberstam continues to complicate the conventional male gaze by looking at the shot/reverse shot technique that the director implements when John Lotter (played by Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom Nissen (played by Brendan Sexton) departs Brandon in the bathroom of Lana Tisdel's home.⁷² The filming technique mimics an "out-of-body" experience for the main character and permits the audience to view ourselves alongside Brandon. This filming technique subsequently allows the audience to experience, as Halberstam remarks, being "out-of-time" as well (*Queer Time & Place* 88). This moment in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), points toward one of the ways in which cinematic techniques can stage an intervention with the audience's notions of

⁷¹ Directed by Kimberly Peirce and co-written by Andy Bienen, the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) was based on the real-life story of Brandon Teena, a trans* individual who was beaten, raped, and murdered after his assailants discovered that Brandon was AFAB. Brandon died on December 31, 1993, in Humboldt, Nebraska at the age of 21.

⁷² Lana Tisdel was Brandon Teena's girlfriend in Falls City, Nebraska. In the film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), Lana is played by Chloë Sevigny.

normative time and space, queering their sensibilities. Brandon's "double" is seen at the end of the hallway to the bathroom, leaning against the wall, staring back at the tormented Brandon in the bathroom. For Halberstam, "In this shot/reverse shot sequence between the castrated Brandon and the transgender one, the transgender gaze is constituted as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from two places (at least) at the same time, one clothed and one naked" (*Queer Time & Place* 88). Halberstam suggests the division of the two Brandon images causes the audience to identify with the clothed Brandon, becoming sutured to the transgender subject who represents survivability, whereas the naked Brandon becomes the spectacle that must suffer and endure torture until his premature death. In many ways, the simultaneous torture and distancing that occurs for Brandon, directly elicits a visceral reaction from us as the audience. Such transformative performances in mainstream and marginalized film and television aggressively confront spectators and call for the audience to reflect on how identity, difference, and interpersonal connections become established.

As NQC emerges in both mainstream and marginalized arenas, the political practices and activist exigency of queerness become more transparent, pushing the boundaries of and reaching far beyond static taxonomical configurations of gender and sexuality. According to Aaron, "Queer is not just about gender and sexuality, but the restrictiveness of the rules governing them and their intersection with other aspects of identity" ("New Queer Cinema" 7). Here, Aaron wishes to point out that many filmmakers in the early 90s defiantly resisted assimilation into homonormative representations of "good gays" by mainstream culture. She asserts, "It must be remembered that queer's defiance is leveled at mainstream homophobic society *but also* [author's emphasis] at the 'tasteful and tolerated' gay culture that cohabitates with it" (Aaron, "New Queer Cinema" 7). Such representations continue to permeate in today's mainstream media and popular culture as homonormativity frames nonthreatening "respectable" gays and lesbians as "good citizens" who desire to be "normal" and participate in idealized forms of public life that typically entail marriage, children, and property ownership.⁷³ These gay and

⁷³ Queer radical organizations like Gay Shame have drawn correlations between homonormativity and the gentrification of urban spaces (Sycamore). Under the guise of neighborhood "revitalization" and beautification, new, high-priced housing developments and parks continue to be built. As property values in the surround areas increase, affluent gays and lesbians have been increasingly moving into these "safe" and "family friendly" neighborhoods, leading to a displacement and mass exodus of working-class families (many of whom are People of

lesbian depictions of nonthreatening, anesthetizing, and homonormative model citizens, which are almost always framed as comical caricatures, are often viewed by the general public as being devoid of sexual desire and can be seen in television shows such as *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* (1996-2002), *The Ellen Show* (2001-2002), *Queer Eye* (2003-2007), *Modern Family* (2009-present), and *The New Normal* (2012-2013)—only to name a few.

In contrast, NQC stages a critical intervention into mainstream culture by circulating queer representations that problematize homonormative narratives. Such interventions allow for alternative, non-normative narratives to gain cultural currency with their circulation while they also assert their “political exigency and practice” (Aaron, “New Queer Cinema” 6). For example, it is important to note that a great deal of NQC film and television productions from the 1990s to present day are influenced by the AIDS epidemic and the important political work that many activist groups initiated, foregrounding specific issues of concern (e.g., Queer Nation, ACT UP, Pink Panthers, and Out-Rage!). As a way to historically contextualize queer existence in the face of a deadly epidemic, many films explicitly address issues surrounding HIV and AIDS either via their narrative arc, thematic resonances, or personal accounts provided by individuals (e.g., *Longtime Companion* [1989], *The Living End* [1992], and *Zero Patience* [1993]). Other representations make subliminal references or covert gestures to the AIDS epidemic and how HIV continues to impact the LGBT community in order to illustrate the resonating effects for the audience (e.g., *Paris Is Burning* [1990], *My Own Private Idaho* [1991], and *Totally F***ed Up* [1993]).

In her article “AIDS and New Queer Cinema,” Monica B. Pearl discusses how NQC defies cinematic convention in a similar manner to how AIDS and the HIV virus disrupt the body “because it caused illness and death, and therefore aggravated loss among small groups of individuals in particular communities [...]” (24). AIDS representations, and viewing the epidemic as a historical marker, shifts NQC notions of spectatorship that link to empathy, alliance/coalition building, and intra-/interpersonal negotiations of desire. For Pearl, the virus completely restructured the ways in which people imagined themselves since the virus became infused with the body it infected, causing the body’s own immune system to turn against itself.

Color [POC]). The most prominent examples of this are the Castro District in San Francisco and Jackson Heights, located in New York City’s borough of Queens.

In a similar manner, NQC reworks typical narratives and metaphors about AIDS and subverts normative understandings regarding contagion and immunity. She states, “[T]he story of self versus foreign object does not apply. The self as whole, sacrosanct, inviolable, and definable became, even for those who were not ill, an illusion of self and subjectivity that could not be sustained” (Pearl, “AIDS and New Queer Cinema” 24). NQC films incorporate these elements into their body of the work through the use of various nonconventional filming techniques and by defying normative cinematic conventions with regard to content, genre, and format. Such films provide an unapologetic perspective on the body as they portray the faults and misgivings of characters who choose to confront (or sometimes defy) death in unexpected ways. These alternative narratives provide a different lens that remakes queer history by retelling narratives in a manner that does not regard the past as something sacred and inviolable. Whether unapologetically embracing the death drive (e.g., *The Living End* [1992]) or pointing toward struggle, survival, and defying death altogether (e.g., *Zero Patience* [1993]), NQC films that address the AIDS epidemic provide a multitude of voices that reconfigure the static, taxonomical structures. The structures that govern the audience’s internalized “scripts” regarding embodiment, identity, difference, and desire within a hetero-/homosexual binary become complicated as NQC muddles the illusion of the self as “whole” and easily definable and reorients the audience toward alternative ways of structuring intimacy and traversing the world. In doing so, NQC questions the normative ideological constraints that are typically placed upon aesthetic, critical, and cultural productions while allowing a new, imaginative set of implications to emerge as an “unscripted” departure for the audience. The proliferation of these queer images, narratives, and themes in independent and experimental filmmaking marks a transformation of cinematic thought on a global scale.

In many ways, NQC emerges as a response to pre-established LGBT representations in mainstream cinema and television and the indirect ways that queer content is covertly handled on screen. Television programs have frequently worked within normative ideological constraints to espouse queer themes. The subliminal messaging of same-sex attraction between characters is often deployed via subtext. For example, in the CW network’s ongoing drama series *Supernatural* (2005–present) a continued trajectory of subliminal homoeroticism emerges between the main characters Sam and Dean Winchester—two brothers who fight evil monsters

on a sinister landscape where the lines between “good” and “evil” are constantly blurred. Another example that speaks to the permeability between homosocial activities and homoerotic desire is the ongoing sexual tensions (and transgressions of gender performativity) between Xena and her sidekick, Gabrielle, on the popular series *Xena: The Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). In these television series, a mere gesture, glance, or the uses of double entendre within the script calls for even a mainstream audience to query the existence and visibility of queer subjectivities.

Even with the presence of homoerotic subtext in some mainstream television shows and film, it is also important to mention the ways in which sexual or gender dissidence is quickly erased, suppressed, or discarded in other popular cultural productions. Once non-normative performances of gender and sexuality have gone outside of the purview of what is considered “acceptable,” “tolerable,” and “positive,” an erasure of the queer figures occur. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith “Jack” Halberstam illustrates this point in reference to the Latina butch character, Private (PVT) Vasquez, in the box office hit *Aliens* (1986) who dies early on in the film:

Vasquez’s butch performance hints at an “alien” logic of gender within which masculinity is as much a production of ethnicity as it is of gender and sexuality, but although the film permits the momentary exhilaration of Vasquez’s butch prowess, it also quickly snuffs it out by making her the alien’s first victim and by finally attaching her unorthodox gender performance with a perversely alien identity. (181)

Similar examples, such as the untimely death of the Chief of Security and Tactical Officer, Tasha Yar, during Season 1 Episode 23 (“Skin of Evil”) of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1988), support Halberstam’s claim of “butch” identity being marked as “alien” and quickly erased from the landscape of possible queer potentiality. As a response to the nonexistence and/or erasure of queer characters who violate conservative conventions of propriety in regards to gender and sexuality (as their subjectivities grate against the normative partitions set forth by spectators), NQC emerges in the early 90s and depicts queer life and livelihood with a defiant edge.

Although some contemporary filmmakers create productions that are thematically and stylistically classifiable as NQC, many films produced from the 1990s to present day reflect homonormative aspirations for LGBT individuals to “mainstream.” In neoliberal fashion, such films present a “good gay/good citizen” dynamic that sanitizes queer culture and depoliticizes

queer struggles for liberation. Such films often have a fairy tale “Happily Ever After” ending (e.g., *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* [1995], *In & Out* [1997], *Better Than Chocolate* [1999], *Transamerica* [2005], and *Make the Yuletide Gay* [2009]). In contrast, many other films run the risk of being regarded as depictions of abject queers whose existences are constantly threatened (e.g., *Bent* [1997], *High Art* [1998], *Gods and Monsters* [1998], *Boys Don’t Cry* [1999], and *Brokeback Mountain* [2005]). From a homonormative perspective, these “Happily Never After” films often come to a violent, fatalistic end and are used to further a neoliberal mainstream agenda that primarily focuses on the interests of white, middle-class gays and lesbians and further marginalizes working-class, POC, and disabled queers and transgender individuals. Instead of understanding how such films can *queer* interpersonal relationships, reinvigorate the struggle for transformative justice, and present a new way of traversing the world, gay and straight audiences regard these raw depictions and nihilistic framings as warning signposts of what occurs when the LGB(T) community does not unite to fight for the right to assimilate into heteronormative conventions. According to Michele Aaron, “It must be remembered, however, that reading queerly often involves reading against the grain, not just against the grain of the text, but more aptly for our times, against the grain of one’s own preferences” (“The New Queer Spectator” 197). Along these lines, adopting a queer conceptual framework permits the audience to critically engage with gender variance and the fluidity of desires in mainstream cinema and television without singling-out or sensationalizing the narratives of marginalized and “othered” characters.

In this sense, the content of a cultural production can only be as useful as the ways in which we are able to read, analyze, and interact with its form. Furthermore, a direct corollary exists between the narratives produced in NQC and the visual pleasure an audience gains from watching them unfold in unexpected and nonprescriptive ways. In other words, NQC addresses the fluidity of spectatorship and the scopophilic appetites of an audience even as our alliances, desires, and affective responses are reworked in non-normative ways. In their essay, “Reviewing Queer Viewing,” from *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman address at length how lesbian spectators bring forth particular subcultural experiences and frameworks of understanding that are often absent from dominant heterosexual ideology—particularly in reference to the increased production and consumption of butch-femme porn that

is drastically different from heterosexualized eroticization of femme-on-femme “lesbian” pornography. They suggest that “no essential ‘lesbian [or gay, for that matter] gaze’” exists (Evans and Gamman 213). Instead, it is “specific cultural competencies” that influence the production and consumption of such imagery (Evan and Gamman 213). They assert that such “cultural competencies” are what “generate interpellation, identification, and voyeurism in the cinema. And these visual signs need more analysis and investigation, rather than relying on ideas about ‘authentic’ sexual aims” (Evans and Gamman 213). As norms shift over time and vary from context to context, the cultural competencies that define particular communal identification also grow, expand, and change. Yet, is it possible for spectators to obtain these cultural competencies even if they are not a part of a specific community or subcultural practice? How might the legibility or illegibility of particular cultural competencies allow for a new orientation toward queer representations and unintelligibility? On one hand, the legibility of specific cultural competencies allows for an entry point into queer reading practices that provides intimate knowledge about queer otherness. On the other hand, the illegibility of cultural competencies might provide us with something different altogether—disassociating from typical taxonomical configurations that give us the epistemic “know how.” And, yet, how and to what extent is illegibility vulnerable to mistranslation so that it becomes legible in ways that support, rather than defy, queerness?

Mistranslations that essentialize cultural productions and hetero-/homonormative reading practices (i.e., the ways a film can direct a spectator’s gaze) can be highly problematic. If we accept the fluidity, potential vacillation, or “not knowing” of gender identification and desire (for both the spectator and the cultural production the spectator is looking at), we may be able to uncomplicate our relationship toward unintelligible representations and reorient ourselves to radically new ways of understanding recognition, connection, and intimacy. By not reconciling non-normative expressions, gestures, and slippages of gender and sexual dissidence within a rubric of intelligibility, we can approach cinema with a spectatorial fluidity that queers our relationship to cultural productions and lived experiences. This form of unintelligibility is not one that comes out of ignorance or “not seeing”; rather, it produces a different way of knowing and seeing via the affective engagement it solicits. In this sense, NQC “must be contested that it can endure, it must remain marginal that it can flirt effectively with the center” (Aaron, “New

Queer Cinema” 11). Such reconfigurations reform the audience’s expectations and cinematic experiences.

*Participatory Practices in Pansexual*⁷⁴ *Public Porn (1998)*

Often documentary filmmakers strive to portray elements of a “true story” in a manner that the audience would regard as truth-telling or authentic. However, issues of authenticity tend to bubble to the surface, particularly since directors frame the subject matter through their own creative lenses. As a result, any film (fictionalized or not) runs the risk of essentializing a particular perspective, contributing to a monolithic narrative, or sensationalizing certain parts of the storyline for a greater effect. In particular, documentaries are never unbiased or objective. In order to gain credibility, they infuse personal narratives as a way to historicize or contextualize the film’s purpose. These narratives do not necessarily invite the audience’s participation. However, some films that document the lived experiences of individuals implicate the audience in a particular type of participatory spectatorship.

One such artist who solicits a type of participatory spectatorship is Del LaGrace Volcano. As a photographer, performance artist, and filmmaker, Volcano’s visual art utilizes “technologies of gender” to highlight what he⁷⁵ terms the “hermaphroditic traces” of his body (Volcano). In his artist statement, he remarks,

I name myself [author’s emphasis]. A gender abolitionist. A part time gender terrorist. An intentional mutation and intersex by design (as opposed to diagnosis), in order to distinguish my journey from the thousands of intersex individuals who have had their “ambiguous” bodies mutilated and disfigured in a misguided attempt at “normalization.”

⁷⁴ The term “pansexual” is typically used to describe an individual’s sexuality as heterogeneous and fluid. Consisting of different sexual forms (e.g., autoerotic and group play) and many points of desire (e.g., kink culture), pansexuality is not limited to the gender binary. As an alternative to “queer,” pansexuality encompasses a desire for those who are gender-variant and it is inclusive of cisgender individuals regardless of whether or not the pansexual individual identifies within or outside of a gender binary (“Pansexual”).

⁷⁵ I will use the pronouns “he” and “his” as opposed to “she” and “her” when referring to the artist Del LaGrace Volcano. As discussed in previous chapters, spectators often grapple with pronoun usage when they attempt to render transgender, genderqueer, or other gender-variant bodies and ambiguous identities intelligible within the scope of a normative gaze. This strategic move in using masculine pronouns does not relegate Volcano’s gender identity to the confines of a cisgender male nor does it infer that he statically identify in an “either/or” binary framework of gender—if anything, Volcano’s lived experience and artistic representations are always playing with categories in a “both/and” manner. Instead, the use of masculine pronouns serves as an approximation of Volcano’s masculine gender presentation and also to navigate the inflexibility of the English language which does not have the capacity to account for individuals who occupy the borderlands of rigidly defined social roles.

I believe in crossing the line as many times as it takes to build a bridge we can all walk across. (Volcano)

Volcano's work not only highlights the necessary interventions that are needed within gender norms, but it also poses a violent rupture to the confines of discursive constraint. Volcano's visual art nurtures the complexity of how sex, gender, and desire materialize through language, performance, and the materiality of the body. Despite the perceived inescapability of language and gender norms, Volcano cunningly articulates alternate positionalities that invite spectators to operate as participant-observers within a world where sex, gender, and desire are malleable moments of self-creation.

In one of Volcano's early short films, *Pansexual Public Porn: a.k.a. The Adventures of Hans & Del* (1998), he and collaborator Hans Scheirl record some of their experiences as transmasculine individuals in gay male cruising spaces in the summer of 1997. However, this film is not solely about public sex. Rather, it reveals how intimacy operates within these public arenas, how desire remains permeable, and how spectators can participate in the process. At the onset of the film, a quote by Stafford, a female-to-male (FTM) transsexual and former fashion model, appears on the screen. Superimposed over the image of men cruising in a public park, it reads: "Gender confusion is a small price to pay for social progress" (*Pansexual Public Porn*). We hear Del LaGrace Volcano⁷⁶ describe how he and Hans have wanted to make queer porn for queer people since they met. Del remarks, "The idea was always to include ourselves in the pursuit of pleasure as well as in the means of production" (*Pansexual Public Porn*). From the onset, Del and Hans have inserted themselves into their film in a way that invites the spectator to observe their bodies and engage in the production of pleasure alongside of them. Like the voyeurs standing in the background of various frames, the audience is transported into these cruising spots in search of pleasure.

Most of the participants in the film are cisgender men who Del and Hans met with only minutes before filming. As Volcano's film visually depicts the adventures he and Hans have in

⁷⁶ Del LaGrace Volcano and Hans Scheirl's first names will be used throughout my analysis of the film *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) even though I have previously referenced them by last name only. As with Chapter 2 and my discussion surrounding *Soldier's Girl* (2003), this change in naming retains the consistency with which different genres of writing refer to their subjects. This shift is also meant to complicate the lines between documentary and fictive productions.

these public cruising spaces, the audience witnesses how these self-described pansexual tranny⁷⁷ bois traverse the lived experience of sensation and desire on tangible levels and unfolds how others relate to their bodies. Bringing the audience along from a first-person perspective, the camera follows several men who trail off into the bushes. A musical compilation plays in the background for the duration of the short. The use of various shots (from large wide frames to close-ups at crotch level) and varying camera angles (some that tilt upward to the face of an anonymous voyeur) provides the audience with a first-person account of occupying a wooded area with other men. The film conveys the sensation of anticipation, as we await the pleasure of touching and being touched by others. Even if we do not feel the sensation of touch at those moments, we nonetheless experience the sensation of anticipation through observing the visceral pleasure of the bodies on the screen.

As the men gather around to watch, Del pulls his testosterone enhanced clitoris through the opening in his boxer briefs and then uses a pump to enlarge it further. All the while, the audience's attention shifts from Del to the onlookers as we are directed to gaze at those who are gazing at Del. What is astounding about this shot, and the majority of the film, is that the scene's heightened erotic charge remains, interestingly, devoid of the exotification and fetishization of the transmasculine body. Within the porn industry, intensified sexual objectification of women (including transwomen) remains the status quo. Needless to say, transsexual men and gender-variant individuals who are assigned female at birth (AFAB) remain absent from mainstream porn and have only recently appeared on a few "fetish" websites (e.g., *Bonus Hole Boys* and *T-Wood Pictures* (formerly known as *Trannywood Pictures*)). However, in *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998), the audience observes the men looking at Del and Hans with interest, not fetishistic intrigue. The short provides agency to Del and Hans while reframing the cisgender men as objects of desire. Furthermore, the film brings to our attention that pleasure is not solely constructed through images of body parts fitting inside of other body parts. Rather, the sensation of touch and the sensation of looking are refocused in a manner that detracts from anatomical

⁷⁷ Although the term "tranny" is often used as a pejorative that typically was used against sex workers who were transwomen of color, some transmasculine individuals have used the term as a self-descriptor. Within the transgender community, use of the term remains controversial. Some argue that transwomen of color can only use and reclaim the word, believing that to do so as a transmasculine and/or white person is a form of cultural appropriation—one that erases the historical specificity of the word's usage and erases or delegitimizes the experience of transfeminine sex workers.

reductionism and gender simplicity.

As the film continues, we see scenes from different cruising spaces with varying forms of enclosure. The camera follows Hans walking toward the doorway to another room. He turns and beckons back to us the viewer as he points in the direction of an open doorway. The film then immediately cuts to the interview of an older gentleman. Framed by walls with graffiti on them, the man remarks on the public sex space:

[E]verything happens in, in the open air by the rocks, and behind the rocks. And it can be very amusing. [...] [A]ll kinds of people go there, as they do here. You just have to see it. He's available, [...] the one in the white shorts. Shouldn't have any trouble. What does everyone come here for? It's not Fire Island, but it's our equivalent. But of course it stops when the weather gets cold. You can't expect people to be having fun on the seafront when it gets cold. (*Pansexual Public Porn*)

The rather talkative man candidly provides his expert insight into the inner workings of public sex. When Del informs the man that he and Hans are “trannys,” the man’s face expresses confusion. Hearing his voice from behind the camera, Del clarifies, “I used to be a woman” (*Pansexual Public Porn*) and genuinely asks if that might cause any issues while occupying these traditionally cisgender male spaces. The man, now having received clarification, reassuringly affirms for Del it would not. This particular moment in the film displays the tension around discursive constraint. Although the man’s confusion around Del’s utterance “trannys” warranted a simplification (e.g., “I use to be a woman”) in order for him to render Del and Hans’s identities intelligible, the absence of these exchanges during the moments of public sex that Del and Hans engage in represents an alternative form of recognition. The recognition of Del and Hans’s bodily schema remains salient even if others regard their bodies as unintelligible. Del and Hans’s interactions in these spaces point toward how bodily sensation can convey a form of recognition that is not discursively dependent on being linguistically rendered intelligible.

The next segment “Studland Bay,” filmed in black in white, depicts a man masturbating with his hand inside his underwear while looking around him as he is perched on a set of rocks as he looks around. Although an audience’s presumptions might conclude that the man has male anatomy, we cannot be certain. The image immediately cuts to a close-up of the naked lower torso of a transman lifting the hood of his vaginal area so he can pee standing up with greater

ease. Set against a similar backdrop, the camera pans out as we see Hans's grinning face in nothing but a vest. Although photography and cinematic representations have often taken a pornographic approach to trans* bodies as they reproduce the same voyeuristic violence of medicalized bodies, *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) presents Han's genitals in a playful manner—one that neither objectifies them nor robs him of agency over his body. As such, the film cuts to Hans engaging in sex with another man as they proceed to take turns pleasuring each other orally.

One of the most striking scenes in *Public Pansexual Porn* (1998) takes place in the wooded area, where the film first started. Here, three gender-variant individuals are engaged in sexual intercourse in a multitude of ways. The viewer does not necessarily need to see the mechanics of the sex that is being had to register it as queer sex. For example, the audience recognizes that one of the individuals is being fisted by another, but cannot discern which orifice it is. In viewing this scene, the desire to understand the mechanics of queer sex dissipates. Instead, the audience facilitates the production of pleasure by participating in its consumption as viewers; genitals, if shown, become less important than the forms of pleasure being experienced. Similar to the final scene, of a panned out shot from a distance that frames two naked (presumably?) men against a rock face, we cannot know for certain how the mechanics of sex are operating, but we can be certain that such pleasure is tangibly felt and visually conveyed. Here, I am pointing to an effect of destabilization along the lines of what Halberstam might suggest—once the audience has experienced the transgender gaze, everything regarding gender and sexuality seems unstable. Our participation as voyeurs implicates us in bringing these public sex acts to fruition, and our experience of these public sex acts results in a destabilization of how we interpret interpersonal exchanges of intimacy in the public sphere, producing a new understanding of desire as something that is both provisional and permeable.

Although the film follows the sexual adventures of Del and Hans, it takes the audience on a journey that calls us to question the relevance intelligibility holds in the pursuit of pleasure and it provides us with insight into intimate public encounters. One of the final images we are left with is of a sign posted near one of the beach cruising spots. The sign reads:

We hereby inform you that there is a byelaw in existence stating that “No person shall in any street or public place willfully and indecently expose his person” and “every person

who shall offend against the foregoing byelaw shall be liable on summary conviction for every such offence to a fine.” Telscombe Town Council. (*Public Pansexual Porn*)

The sign, as an afterthought, signals the criminality of public sex. By placing the warning sign at the end of the short, Volcano avoids criminalizing the participants in the video. Instead, he focuses on the pleasure between bodies and between the audience and the participants on screen, framing pleasure as something that is irreverent of public laws concerning propriety. As such, we are left with the final frame of two naked bodies set against a rockface, seen from a distance but in plain sight, engaged in sexual intercourse.

The film allows for the audience to follow Del and Hans on their journey as they traverse queer sexual spaces. We become participant-observers in the production of pleasure even if we are the voyeurs who watch two men following each other from an enclosure to an area with dense foliage. Even if we presume we know with certainty what we see before us and think we can decipher the mechanics of sex between cisgender and gender-variant individuals, Volcano’s close-ups of non-genital body parts—shots that make it difficult to distinguish between bodies and among body parts—and the queering of normative sex practices call into question the ways we observe and experience pleasure.

On the level of production and audience reception, *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) subverts heteronormative conventions surrounding visual culture. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey uses a psychoanalytic framework to analyze 20th century film as a way of uncovering the operations of erotic pleasure for the male spectator. Her feminist analysis highlights how such conventions create a dynamic where the cisgender woman is set up as the spectacle (i.e., the object to be consumed) and the cisgender man is set up as the spectator (i.e., the consumer of the object). Heterosexual principles of mainstream pornography make these conventions since the camera’s focus is always on the woman as “recipient” of the penetrative act and object for consumption, not on the male “penetrator.” Volcano’s film maintains the illusory fantasy that pornography often creates; however, it does so while revealing embodied sensations for the audience and the film participants while also avoiding the subjugation of the recipient. In short, *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) is not about cisgender men penetrating “female-bodied” transmen; it is about how gender variance factors into the field of public intimacy and how bodies intertwine to express their desires whether or not they are

queerly marked as “other” or considered unintelligible. Such films complicate mainstream pornography and the classic narratives present in cinema—narratives that incessantly rely on the fixity of identity for the spectator and the spectacle.

On one hand, films like *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) highlight the specificity of desire for trans* and cisgender individuals alike. Hetero- and homonormative spectators who watch films such as these must confront and reconfigure their relationship to the facticity of gender identity and physical embodiment as cultural conceptions regarding the sex-gender system shift and/or become contested on a foundational level. In “F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity,” Judith “Jack” Halberstam claims that “desire has a terrifying precision” (760). The article addresses several trans* narratives in cinema and they reform and reconstruct female masculinity. Among the cinematic narratives, Halberstam focuses on the complexity of spectatorship in relation to the sexually explicit film *Linda/Les and Annie* (1992), starring porn icon/sexual revolutionary Annie Sprinkle and her FTM transsexual lover Les Nichols. According to Halberstam, “the video records the failure of Les’s first attempt at intercourse as a ‘man,’ and yet it celebrates the success of his gender flexibility [...]” (“F2M” 763). In resistance to the dichotomous oppositional framework of hetero-/homonormativity, the trans* individuals in *Linda/Les and Annie* (1992) and *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) reinforce the idea that desire is precise through various disjunctures and gaps of gender (re)presentations that exist between the imagined self and the current embodiment. This “terrifying precision” is also transferable onto the audience watching the film as the trans* bodies become situated within the determining field of our voyeuristic gaze. *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) in particular succeeds at maintaining the audience’s gaze—a gaze that becomes less transfixed on the bodily differences of Del and Hans and more intent on queering how we perceive and receive pleasure. By accounting for the specificity of a particular desire at any given moment in time, the audience adopts a queer spectatorial framework. Such reorientations reconfigure how sexual attraction can operate as they also redefine how spectators assess, codify, and relate to non-normative bodies and desires.

Reconfiguring sexual attraction and the specificity of desire can complicate how we categorize experiences, taxonomize embodiments, and regulate pleasures within a heteronormative framework. Alan Sinfield, in “Lesbian and Gay Taxonomies,” offers an

alternative framework to conventional taxonomies for expressing the “specificity and multiplicity of the potential combinations and interactions” (135) between bodies. He highlights the importance of creating alternative taxonomical configurations because conventional ones, [...] structure the contradictory and conflicted patterns through which we make sense of the world and our subjectivities. They inform the language through which we come to consciousness and are reaffirmed in our daily interactions. They empower and oppress us. Hence, they structure our psychic formations and our sexual relations, in fantasy and in actuality. (Sinfield 133-34)

For Sinfield, multiple variables allow us to understand the world and how we locate others in accordance with our constructed realities, fantasies, and desires. In order to articulate the specificity of our desires and the ways in which such desires may shift over time, Sinfield argues that we might consider linguistically reframing identification in relation to what we desire *to be* and *not to be*. Articulating imagined possibilities not yet manifested does provide more flexibility with self-identification, but it also only broadens the horizon of taxonomic inclusion as it broadens the plethora of ways an individual can identify. Projects that propagate taxonomical classifications participate in a never-ending process that works on the supposition that everything and everyone can be quantified and qualified as intelligible. Although Sinfield offers a new categorical manner of inclusion, these taxonomies still remain problematic as they are not the same as the desire of *being*, *becoming*, or *embodying* multiple or varying subject positions. Yet, negating these endless possibilities of identification might reconfigure normative frameworks of articulating desire. Despite the endless representations of desire that are yet to be imagined, performed, or embodied, such taxonomies can still place limits on how discourse regulates identity and structures subjectivity. Even taxonomies of negation are dependent on their constitutive outside status—a position that defines the parameters of intelligibility.

Both Sinfield and Halberstam provide engaging ways of enacting desire; however, both also suggest how the desire of a spectator and the object they gaze at remain confined to discursive parameters and visual markings. Such constraints can violently render non-normative desires visible, intelligible, and recognizable whether or not hetero-/homonormative conventions regard them as perverse, depraved, or wayward. For now, NQC films like *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) incite a disjuncture between normative perceptions of unintelligible desires and how

such desires are actually embodied and enacted.

Countering Public Space

Before adopting a radical anti-taxonomy that recognizes unintelligible desires, we may also want to consider how public spaces shape and are shaped by the ways we apply and engage in public forms of intimacy. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner addresses the production and maintenance of our belonging to the public sphere. He suggests, “the idea of a public is motivating, not simply instrumental. It is constitutive of a social imaginary” (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 12). How might desires toward an unknown horizon of unintelligibility shift as attitudes toward the landscape of a public, and its accompanying social imaginary, change? Warner continues to assert that much of the process in which a public is created “remains invisible to consciousness and to reflective agency” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 14). The conditions required in making a public range from the general to the particular. He presumes that even as we *counter* publics, we are imagining and drawing from the very medium that enables the public to come into being. Therefore, if we are to de-partition the ways in which eroticism gets restricted in public spaces and no longer keep sex behind the proverbial closed doors of a private bedroom, then we must also account for the ways in which counterpublic formations, like public cruising areas, and our desires for them could be impacted. What might this space look like if desires that deviate from the norm are not suppressed, swept aside, or relegated to the private? How might this change communal identifications, notions of propriety, structures of intimacy, and the social imaginary itself?

Warner continues to suggest that the social imaginary is dependent on our relationality to strangers: “A nation or public or market in which everyone could be known personally would be no nation or public or market at all. This constitutive and normative environment of strangerhood is more, too, than an objectively describable *Gesellschaft*; it requires our constant imagining” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 75-6). The formation of the public, as well as particular communities, rest upon a continual imagining that locates an individual’s own position in relation to others, revealing our reliance and dependence on the other’s existence. Yet, we also

participate in the construction of the stranger⁷⁸ as we traverse what Lauren Berlant would call an “intimate public sphere” (5). In the context of *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998), the intimate public sphere created by gay male cruising culture subverts the conditions of social membership that produce citizenship. Since heteronormative institutions view public sex as illegal and indecent, participants who engage in such activities rework how intimacy gets expressed and where pleasure can be experienced. Moreover, Del, Hans, and the other gender-variant participants in the film challenge the conditions of social membership in gay male cruising culture as they physically insert their bodies in these spaces. Their bodies, like all bodies, are undeniably interpersonal and deeply connected to intrapersonal understandings of our relationality to others. Embracing unintelligibility as a lived practice of embodiment and desire both maintains the concept of the stranger and facilitates a sense of recognition within the public sphere. However, what it does undercut, by way of bringing forth a radical anti-taxonomy, is the continual, necessary process that maintains the social imaginary. As noted in previous chapters, the social imaginary (buttressed by heteronormative investments in social identities and reinforced by the discursive constraints) positions human ontology as a means of discerning difference that laboriously reiterates the policing and regulation of bodies and desires. Yet, why should our bodies and desires be subjected to regulation, particularly with the insistence on controlling the manner in which we interact with one another on concrete and tangible levels?

Del LaGrace Volcano’s short film *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998) and other independent NQC productions point toward a larger conversation around queer potentiality. As such cultural productions explore and experiment with counterpublic spaces, imaginative responses and creative possibilities start to surface. Such spaces provide ground to negotiate various forms of intimacy, discover how to express desires in non-essentializing and subversive ways, and resist normative spectatorial gazes. Furthermore, these NQC productions reject the need for legibility, inclusion, and recognizability that validate an endorsement of the traditional cinematic conventions. Such cinematic representations continue to push for more mobile and fluid conceptions evinced by a multiplicity of experiences, embodiments, identifications, and expression of desire.

⁷⁸ Sara Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* further contextualizes the formulation of the stranger in relation to intimacy and the public sphere.

The overarching variations between NQC films, the manner in which stories of queer desire are told, and the focus on different a multitude of themes frame queer otherness and unintelligibility in particular ways that can (and do) shift spectatorship based on the precision and variation of our desires as audience. As audience, we should remain conscious, and perhaps skeptical, of how both documentaries and their fictive adaptations present, reconfigure, and interpret queer narratives and lived experiences within a hetero-/homonormative framework, while at the same time valuing the power cinema brings to shifting toward queer imaginings. Additionally, the representations of unintelligible desires and viable forms of queerness within NQC not only draw our attention toward the figure of the promiscuous pansexual pervert and other fabulously “fucked up” freaks, but they also gesture toward the potential for such figures *to be embodied* and *to be embraced* according to their own terms.

The concluding chapter addresses the question of whether an unintelligible life is not only livable, but a desirable life to live. By examining the resistances, reformations, reconfigurations of *being* violently rendered intelligible, I explore what unintelligibility might offer by turning toward the implications of unintelligibility as an ethical practice—one which remains in the present and is not dependent on a foreseeable future. Drawing upon Keir McCoy’s 2002 self-portrait entitled “Shatter,” I discuss the necessary advocacy for prolonged and sustainable unintelligibility and the formulation of a radical anti-taxonomy. Such formulations are crucial components toward the day-to-day survivability for many individuals whose lives become livable through the few meaningful intimate connections that supersede rigid taxonomies—intimacies that propel bodily materialism, narratives of alterity, and non-normative desires forward in imaginative and expressive ways.

CONCLUSION

Forging an Ethics Toward Unintelligibility & Kissing the Ugly Parts

I chose not to choose life. I chose somethin' else.

—*Trainspotting (1996)*

In Mark “Rent-Boy” Renton’s monologue from the film *Trainspotting* (1996), the “somethin’ else” that he chooses reflects a tangible form of embodied unintelligibility. It is an existence that is not suspended between life and death; rather, Mark exists entirely *somewhere else*. Such liminality reflects Judith Butler’s concept of *undoing*, as previously mentioned in the introduction, and extends beyond taxonomical configurations of gender and sexuality. Although *undoing* can discursively constrain an individual’s life so that it is no longer viable (or recognized as a less than intelligible existence), *undoing* can also actively challenge and resist static notions of *being* and increase the viability of a life subjected to discursive constraint. As addressed in Chapter 1, disidentification and queer performativity assist in this mode of undoing as strategies of resistance and survival for those who occupy divergent forms of queer alterity. For Mark, to choose life is to choose an unviable life—a life that requires an adherence to norms. To successfully adhere to these norms is to be recognized as an intelligible, functional, and productive citizen.

If we understand intelligibility as a consequence of recognition, and attribute it to the adherence of social norms, then there may be value in maintaining a less than intelligible or unintelligible existence for those who cannot or choose not to adhere to such norms. To choose something other than life requires volitional agency—an agency that is often difficult to muster under discursive constraint. Our sense of belonging is only impaired insofar as the conditions for belonging are constitutively dependent on the framework of recognition that norms establish. To choose something else, something other than life, is to inhabit an unintelligible existence—one that can and does produce moments of contact and sentiment of belonging—even if the individual remains unrecognized or unrecognizable. Here, the “something other than life” invokes what Giorgio Agamben refers to as “bare life” in his book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Although this “something else” reveals how Western biopolitics function, it invokes Lee Edelman’s concept of “queer negation” (e.g., *not* choosing life) as a volitional

choice to inhabit the anti-social. In other words, while the existence of this “something else” remains threatened, it is not necessarily stripped of social value; rather, it chooses to not engage with social value at all.

The aim of this project was to consider how queer otherness gestures toward the viability of unintelligibility. As a provisional position and as a practice that cuts into the subjective experience and across the discursive field, unintelligibility can rupture, dismantle, and subvert heteronormative processes of recognition. At the same time, it provides us with an alternative way of conferring our material existence that is both cataclysmic and catalytic. As an ethical practice, it guides us though how we can “kiss the ugly parts” of those elements that cannot be discursively contained.

In Chapter 1, I examined how queer otherness and unintelligibility emerge as a response to the medicalization and pathologization of the body. As restrictive categorizations limit the possibilities of gender variance and queer otherness, I turned toward Alan B. Goldberg’s 2008 *ABC News* article, “Born With the Wrong Body” to highlight how frameworks of recognition contribute to the policing of bodies, behaviors, and desires, relegating them to the margins or forcefully having them assimilate as being “diseased” within. Next, I turned toward the character of Exotica in R. Zamora Linmark’s novel, *Rolling the R’s* to examine how embodying queer otherness can thwart a “born in the wrong body” narrative. Narratives of the body that contest normative alignments and amalgamations *queer* our understanding of what it means to experience embodiment, particularly when discursive constraint restricts and threatens such an existence. In order to highlight how these tensions play out in the visual field, I offered an analysis of Loren “Rex” Cameron’s self-portraits series, “Distortions.” More importantly, this chapter pointed toward a dire need to seek out other measures that move us beyond the taxonomies that reproduce these forms of violence. If we view the body as the medium by which we interact with the world, then the perpetual motion of our bodies yields the promise of unintelligibility emerging as an active process and destabilizing force—one which unravels the violence intelligibility brings forth. These moments allow us to validate the imaginative and material forms of embodied existences while counter-acting the ways in which hetero-/homonormative frameworks of recognition determine the viability of an individual’s life.

For Chapter 2, I analyzed the films *Soldier’s Girl* (2003) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

to examine how the military and marriage function as state-sanctioned intuitions to violently police unruly bodies and non-normative desires. The violences that stem from heteronormativity sustain the production of heterosexual citizenship which also quarantines volatile forms of queer otherness. Whether an individual is in compliance with hegemonic discourse or operating outside of it, these brutal acts highlight how oppressive tactics can silence, erase, or further marginalize non-normative desires. Here, the ethical impetus fuels an immediacy that applies to everyone, not just marginalized forms of queer otherness. When we understand how unintelligible desires may, in fact, become recognizable, then such desires can create fissures within a heteronormative matrix and provide the occasion for prolonging survivability within violent structures and for reformulating the ways bodies interact, collide, and share intimacy with one another.

In Chapter 3, I addressed how being unrecognizable under current taxonomical configurations of “humanness” can pose its own form of agency—an agency that is enacted upon the field of recognition by virtue of its existence. Since hetero-/homonormativity often succeeds at naming, anesthetizing, or criminalizing various forms of queer otherness that are viewed as “inappropriate” or “dangerous,” alternative representations of the inhuman might render queer subjectivities recognizable even if they are not constituted as intelligible. In turning toward the film *Fight Club* (1999) and the character Jenny Schecter from the Showtime television series *The L Word* (2004-2009), I examined the way queer negativity facilitates social relations that are more dependent on unintelligibility than on the social value attributed to intelligible bonds. The visceral force with which the sensation of violence is felt becomes recognizable even if the individual remains unintelligible to others. Embracing the violence of sensation facilitates a disidentificatory spectatorship that remains oppositional toward hetero-/homonormative social value and “appropriate” affective responses to self-destruction and trauma.

Extending the role of the spectator in Chapter 4, I argued for a disidentificatory spectatorship that is not reliant on the legibility of desire and intimacy. Rather, by accounting for the specificity of desire, a queer spectatorial framework reorients how sexual attraction operates; it also redefines the relationship between an audience and non-normative bodies and desires. Such reconfigurations complicate how we categorize experiences, taxonomize embodiments, and regulate pleasures within heteronormative and homonormative frameworks. Independent

productions that emerge from New Queer Cinema (NQC), like *Pansexual Public Porn* (1998), point toward the potentiality of inhabiting this queer spectatorial framework. These cinematic productions push for more mobile and fluid conceptions of embodiment, identity, intimacy, and desire; they also reject the need for legibility, inclusion, and recognizability. Such representations allow individuals who occupy a position of queer otherness, or inhabit unintelligibility, *to be embodied* and *to be embraced* according to their own terms—making such existences more livable and more desirable to live.

After having examined the resistances, reformations, reconfigurations of being violently rendered intelligible, this conclusion draws upon Keir McCoy's 2002 self-portrait "Shatter" to illustrate how queer otherness offers a glimpse at what unintelligibility can do. What might unintelligibility offer if we were to inhabit it as an ethical practice that shifts toward a relational embodiment—one that is less linguistically and visually dependent, but rather revealed by sensory experiences? Engaging in unintelligibility as an ethical practice ruptures discursive constraint and forges a political agency—an agency that does not require validation within hetero-/homonormative frameworks of recognition. Forging an ethics toward unintelligibility entails critically reassessing how we recognize bodies and desires, as well as radically shifting the ways we relate to them. In this sense, McCoy's photograph speaks to the necessary advocacy for prolonged and sustainable unintelligibility and the formulation of a radical anti-taxonomy. These formulations are not only crucial to the day-to-day survival for those who already occupy a marginalized position of queer otherness or are unintelligible altogether, but they also facilitate a different way for us to engage with the materiality of our bodies, reshape the narratives we tell about bodies, and experience desires with our bodies and the bodies of others.

Kissing the Ugly Parts of a Shattered Self & Shattering the Self to Kiss the Ugly Parts

Keir McCoy, a transmasculine queer photographer, captures the difficulty of visual representation for those occupying a space of queer otherness, while also gesturing toward an embrace of unintelligibility in his 2002 self-portrait entitled "Shatter" (see fig. 4). The black and white photograph consists of two images—a shattered mirror and an image of McCoy holding a fragmented picture of his face up against his countenance. Through utilizing double negatives, McCoy's facial features are barely discernable as the photograph bears a layering effect that

obscures his hand, shoulders, mouth, nose, and left ear. The superimposed images of the shattered mirror, the partial photograph of McCoy's face aligning on top of his facial features, and McCoy himself produce a disorienting effect that blurs the lines between what elements can be regarded as existing in the foreground and which are conceivably in the background. As the outline of splintered mirror fragments point toward his face, the jagged lines and partial obfuscation of the figure disrupt the onlooker's lines of sight and perception of the photograph's visual depth. Instead of tracing the contours of a countenance that demands to be recognized as intelligible, we are left only to follow the lines of fragments, layers, and shadows generated by negative relief.

“Shatter” not only functions as a trans* self-portrait that reflects the emotional and psychological distress an individual experiences when constrained by discourse, but it also points toward embodying disidentificatory practices as strategies of resistance and survival—particularly for those who occupy the field of queer otherness. More importantly, McCoy's representation of his queer otherness conveys a violence of sensation—one that guides the audience through their own process of disidentification. In our minds we stitch together the different fragments of a figure who we recognize inhabits a form of queer otherness and the category of “human.” The image represents the felt anxiety that compounds an individual's inability to live an authentic or desirable life due to the constraints of discourse and frameworks of recognition. For McCoy, the salience of his anxiety stems from inheriting his mother's mental health issues and being forced to operate within the gender constraints of heteronormativity. As his self-portrait conveys what it feels like for an individual to be forcefully rendered intelligible, I contend that it also insists on pushing us to think about how we might imagine conferring material viability and intimacy that are not dependent on socially instituted forms of recognizability. The photograph gives us pause to reflect on who counts as recognizable and who does not. In this sense, “Shatter” signals Judith Butler's two-fold use of the term “undoing” (*Undoing Gender* 1). McCoy expresses through his self-portrait how he is *becoming undone* by normative conceptions of gender and mental health and how he is *experiencing the undoing* of such norms. The constraint of *becoming undone* points toward an uncertain future—if a future exists at all. Such uncertainty manifests as a tension between the felt sensations of a corporeal existence (e.g., McCoy's sense of trans* embodiment) and the ways it might differ from how a

body interfaces with, and gets ascribed a particular social value within, the cultural frameworks we inhabit (e.g., the expression of McCoy's nebulous gender identity). Reflective of the image, the title suggests a continual shattering of the self—a shattering that risks recognition among others and even of oneself.

As much as the image emits the violence of sensation that accompanies such distress, the photograph does not convey a solely abject figure. Akin to my discussion on Loren "Rex" Cameron's "Distortions" series in Chapter 1, McCoy's splintered image returns the gaze of the onlooker as if from behind a mask. The photograph defiantly resists recognition and, by doing so, reconfigures presumptions that pertain to normative notions of identification and embodiment. In this case, the title "Shatter" does not suggest an external force being exerted onto the subject (e.g., to be shattered by normative expectations) and it is not only a form of psychic self-destruction (e.g., to shatter oneself). Instead, it implies a volitional act of shattering that extends beyond the frame of the photograph. The figure beckons us, as audience, to shatter what we know or, at least, what we think we know about bodies, identities, and the pleasure we gain from looking. In other words, McCoy's image prohibits us from seeing what we want to see or knowing what we think we know because, as the figure in the photograph implies, we are only ever seeing and knowing the world through a broken and fragmented looking glass. At the same time, the photograph exposes the protocols of intelligibility that shape our "recognition" of portraits of all kinds.

McCoy's photograph directs us toward shattering our conceptions of who we believe ourselves to be in order to embrace those ugly parts that are undefinable, unrecognizable, or unintelligible. Whether or not we choose to put the pieces back together so they resemble a fragmented, but recognizable whole, an embrace of queer otherness warrants a need to kiss the ugly parts of a shattered self. If we do choose to engage with forms of recognition that are not depend on us putting the pieces back together, then embracing unintelligibility warrants a need to kiss even the sharpest, most reviled, monstrous, and terrifying parts. Such disorientations and reorientations, like those evoked by McCoy's photograph, remain attentive to the ethical drive that facilitates inhabiting unintelligibility as a process of undoing discursive constraint. The value, then, that remains for the advocacy of prolonged unintelligibility is, in part, a result of the difficulty individuals have with maintaining coherence within the discursive field. Whether we

blatantly reject idyllic conceptions of sex, gender, and desire or attempt to embody hetero-/homonormative ideals, we continuously fail. Even though we may be perfectly intelligible within our kinship structures, subcultural formations, or dominant frameworks of recognition, our slippages and failures in other contexts, as Judith Butler notes, signal how bodies, identities, and desires cannot be reduced to, or contained by, normative constructions and their cultural representations.

As norms shift over time, so too do our frameworks of recognition. Yet, dominant structures only seem to account for those bodies that are recognizable and viable in the current moment (or that were in the past) and that are a part of our cultural frameworks. To reject our relationship to the social order allows us to reject an intelligibility that still allows us to remain recognizable in the present while we anticipate and gesture toward the “something else” beyond the horizon. Drawing from Jasbir Puar, I want to suggest that such moments await “anticipatory temporalities” to bring us the “ghosts that are waiting for us, that usher us into futurities” (*Terrorist Assemblages* xx), diffusing dualistic framings of time, space, and material existence. Like the figure present within Keir McCoy’s photograph, such unintelligible specters point toward a potential unraveling of the limits of discourse.

Framing an Ethics of Unintelligibility

The attempt to eradicate dualisms or escape from discourse seems futile, for even the language we have to describe what is performative, temporary, and mutable is rendered legible in so much as they are recognizable within discursively set parameters. Butler even remarks on the discursive limitation of performativity: “the limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. This is not to say that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience” (*Gender Trouble* 13). It at least seems impossible to imagine since we, as individuals who embody a recognizable subjectivity, are deeply inscribed within the confines of discourse and made intelligible to one another as a result of it.

However, to return to the argument I make in the introduction and have been insisting upon throughout this project, the paradox that emerges from linguistically rendering

unintelligibility as the antithesis to intelligibility can produce a political yield. Such positionings highlight the problems that are inherent aspects of discursive constraint and gesture toward fissures that already exist within, and are a part of, discourse. One way fissures emerge is through the linguistic discordance between forms of *being* and modes of *becoming*—the former is always constitutive of a singular, static subjectivity imbedded within discourse whereas the latter is not reliant on a subject or an object as it is temporally fluid and always anticipatory of the next moment. In other words, *being* something is always defined by the parameters of discourse, whereas *becoming* offers moments of queer otherness to emerge as resistance to discursive constraint. Furthermore, these formulations of queer otherness that emerge are always gesturing toward various points beyond the horizon—“anticipatory temporalities” (*Terrorist Assemblages* xx) that prolong unintelligible moments just enough so we can catch a glimpse of the “something else” that exists beyond the confines of discourse, a “something else” that is both inhabited and inhabitable. Although language may not exist, or will never exist, for this *becoming* “something else” (as it is entirely nonprescriptive and often non-descriptive), choosing to exist in/as/with “something else” is a material component of, and lived experience for, many individuals.

Along these lines, another challenge that this project poses is the tension between lived experience and theoretical formations of an unintelligible existence. With this in mind, I do not seek to elevate or devalue one way of knowing or traversing the world even though the epistemological frameworks we acquire from embodied sensations and philosophical inquiry are often regarded as antithetical to one another. Instead, lived experience and theory should be viewed as symbiotic and complementary—without one, the other cannot sustain itself. Part of the ethical yield from this project is dependent on a symbiosis that, at once, calls for us to try-on and embody the theoretical and to theorize that which is already, or yet to be, embodied.

Since our legibility is contingent on the manner in which we do or do not articulate our experiences and desires, discursive and material violences can emerge. In order to circumvent such violences and get away from linguistic trappings, giving an account of *what one does not desire*, as opposed to *what is desired* emerges as a possibility of resistance to the social order. By considering the theoretical contributions of Lee Edelman and José E. Muñoz, the act of negation can produce a disidentificatory effect—particularly during moments of interrogation

when bodies are violently rendered intelligible within frameworks of recognition. If I articulate my desires vis-à-vis negation, I may in fact run the risk of severing myself from assuredly knowing who I am. Even though this risk insinuates a loss of *knowing* my relationship to the social order, it also insinuates the possibility of gaining another way of knowing—one that is not predicated on taxonomical configurations or legible forms of recognition within hetero-/homonormative frameworks. Furthermore, embracing queer otherness and unintelligibility not only results in discursive disorientations, but the material and psychic effects of institutionalized forms of violence can place an individual's life at risk as well.

When considering the force with which institutionalized forms of violence shape the material conditions of our existence, we must insist that the present tense allows for queer world-making strategies that imagine “something else” beyond the horizon. What is at stake when we dismiss the possibilities of queer imagining is the viability of life beyond a discursive field. Such imaginings present the prospect of reshaping the material conditions of existence into something that might make life more desirable and worth living. As such, a deeply interpersonal ethics of care can validate the imaginative and material forms of embodied existences while counter-acting the ways in which hetero-/homonormative frameworks of recognition determine the viability of an individual's life. This ethical awareness contests the limits of discourse and the limits of the body; it also allows for us to stake a claim to queer otherness, conjure unintelligibility as a desirable existence worth living, and kiss the ugly parts. It beckons us to think and move through the world in nonprescriptive ways. It asks us to embody, intervene, and politicize these moments so that unintelligibility can continue to push the limits of queer theorizing and extend queer imagining through embodied possibilities and felt sensations.

APPENDIX

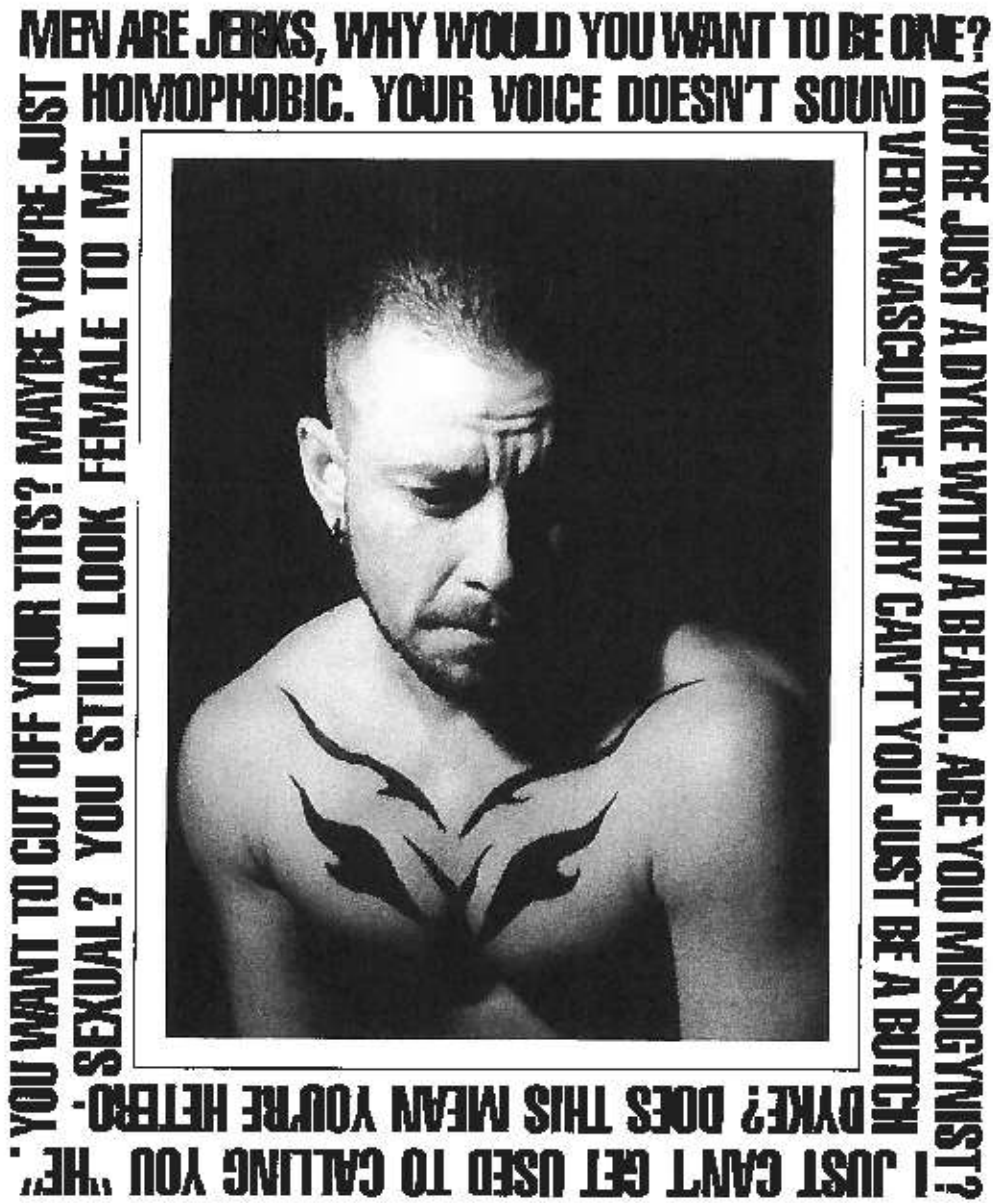


Fig. 1. Loren "Rex" Cameron; "Distortions"; *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* (Pittsburgh: Cleis P., 1996) 29. Print.

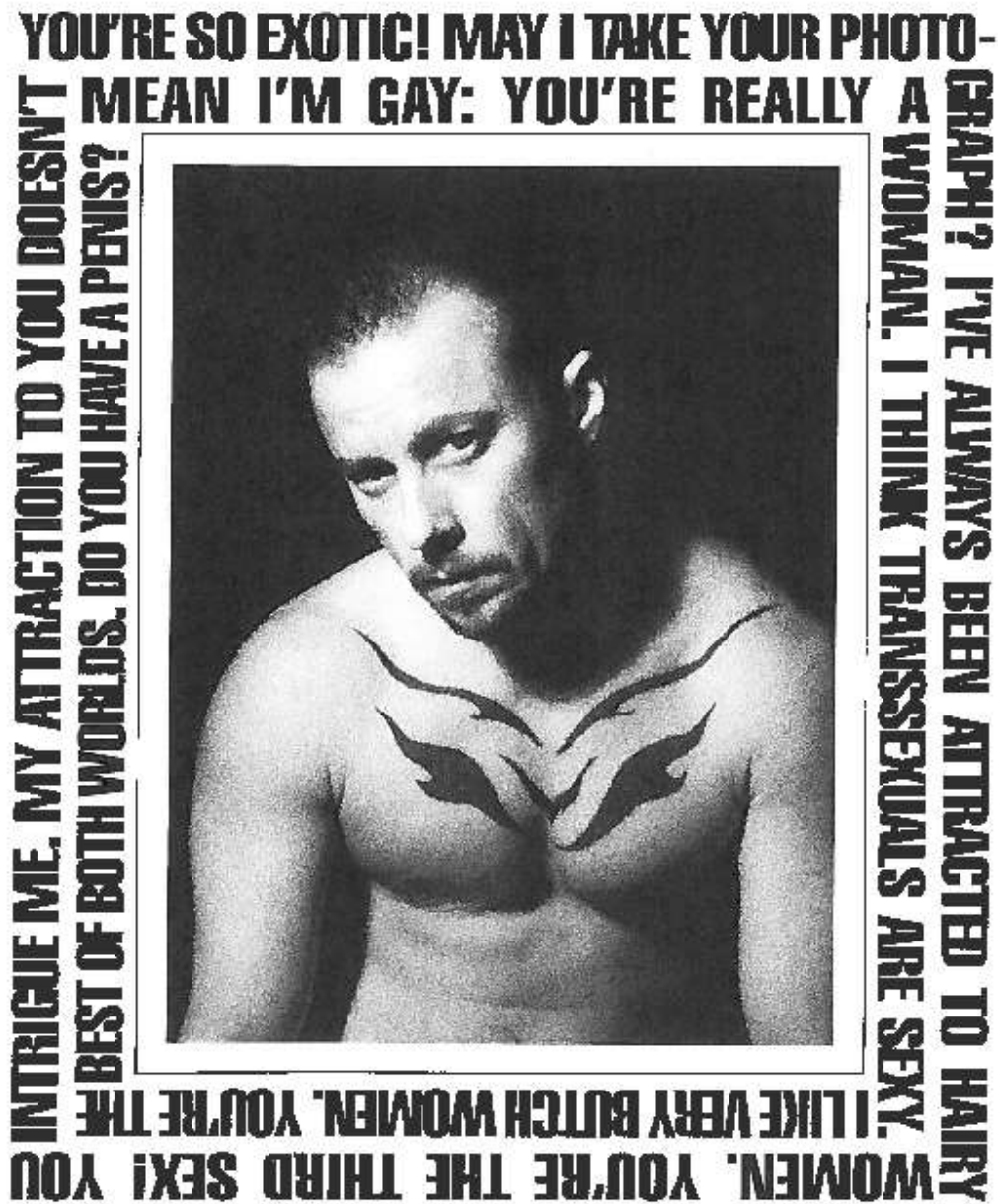


Fig. 2. Loren "Rex" Cameron; "Distortions"; *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* (Pittsburgh: Cleis P., 1996) 30. Print.

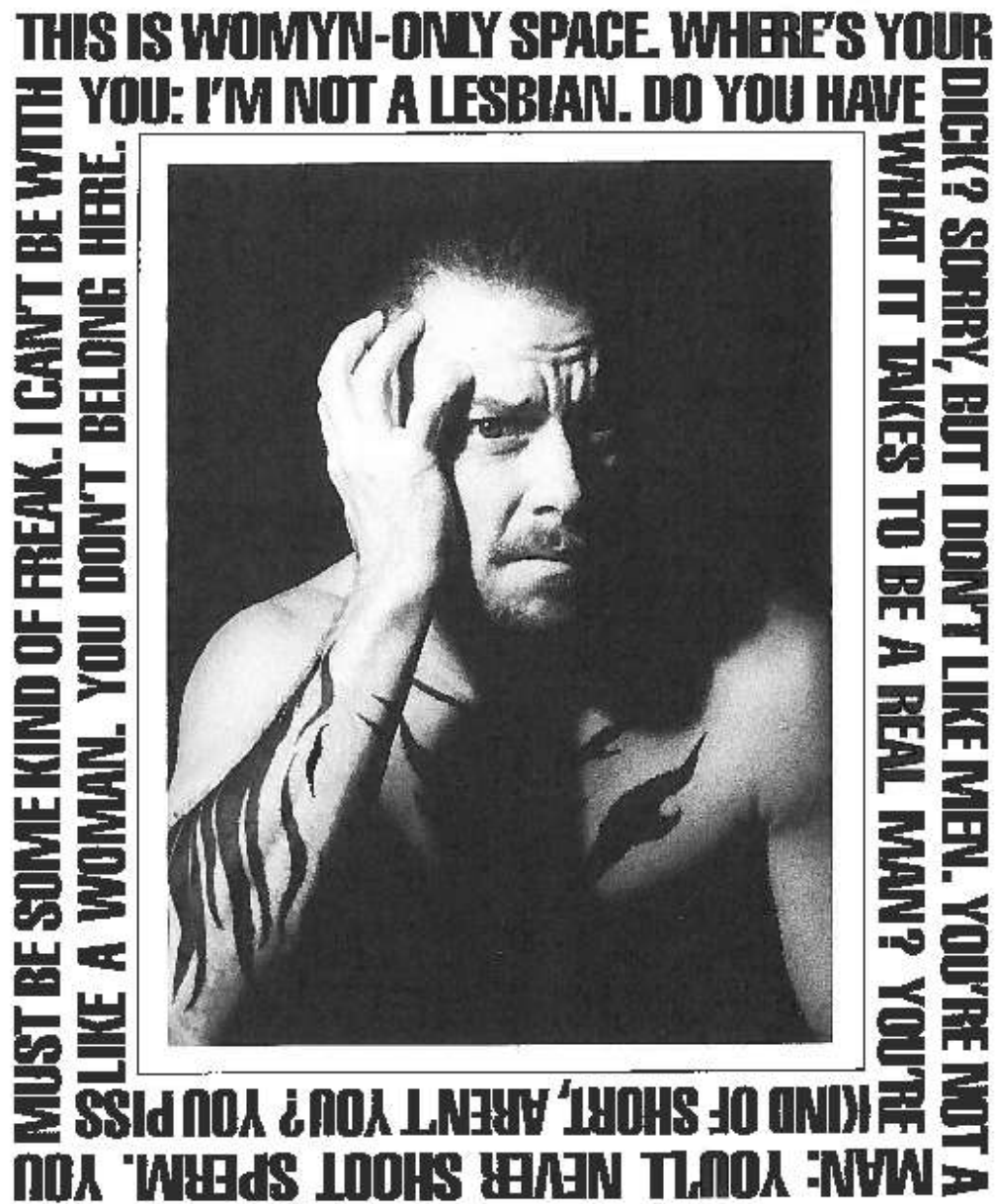


Fig. 3. Loren “Rex” Cameron; “Distortions”; *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* (Pittsburgh: Cleis P., 1996) 31. Print.



Fig. 4. Keir McCoy; "Shatter"; 2002; black and white photograph.

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