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Strange Matter: Lesbian Death in Feminist and Queer Politics

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B.A., College of the Holy Cross, 2003

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Abstract

Strange Matter: Lesbian Death in Feminist and Queer Politics By Mairead Sullivan

This dissertation project, *Strange Matter: Lesbian Death in Feminist and Queer Politics*, presents an archival analysis of major health and social movements that have informed both feminist and queer thinking. This project reexamines the archives of three specific moments in the histories of feminist and queer politics: the rise of a lesbian breast cancer activism in conjunction with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early 1990s; the specter of radical feminism as a separatist movement in the 1970s; and the social and sexological interest in lesbian bed death in the wake of the feminist sex wars of the early 1980s. In doing so, I examine how the figure of the lesbian puts pressure on the imagined dissonances between the political commitments of feminist and queer theory. By challenging the conventional border between feminist and queer theory, this project offers three innovations for feminist and queer studies. First, this project reintroduces the figure lesbian as an important tool for both feminist and queer thought as well as a contested border figure therein. Second, by examining the historical framing of lesbian figures—through lesbian breast cancer activism, radical feminism, and lesbian bed death—this project articulates the historical relationships between feminist and queer activism in new ways. Finally, this project provides an intervention into queer theory's anti-social thesis by mobilizing Melanie Klein's articulation of the death drive.

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Introduction

Strange Matter: Lesbian Death in Feminist and Queer Politics presents an archival analysis of three major health and social movements that have informed both feminist and queer thinking. Specifically, I am interested in the lesbian figures that emerge at the borders of feminist and queer movements for social change. The three specific moments I examine are: the rise of a lesbian breast cancer activism in conjunction with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early 1990s; the specter of radical feminism as a separatist movement in the 1970s; and the social and sexological interest in lesbian bed death in the wake of the feminist sex wars and the AIDS crisis of the early 1980s. These three moments are linked by the ways in which the figure of the lesbian puts pressure on the imagined dissonances between the political commitments of feminist and queer theory.

This project began as a project on breasts. It has since become a project whose primary object is the figure of the lesbian. More specifically, this project argues that lesbian figures emerge in ways that can tell us something about the value of aggression in politics. Using archival materials, I analyze how lesbian figures are invoked to name anxieties around the destructive potential of feminist politics. I argue that the historical association between lesbians and feminism renders both a site of social negativity, often imagined as murderous and destructive. I take my title from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. It is during the time of breast development, according to Beauvoir, that the girl understands her self as "a strange matter, moving and uncertain."¹ This "strange

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Random House, 2012), 320.

matter” is connected to the budding breasts that extend the flesh of the girl into the world, quite literally, causing her to recognize her body as an object for the gaze of others. It is in this time, Beauvoir asserts, that “the little girl feels the ambiguity of the word ‘living.’”²

Ambiguity is a critical theme in Beauvoir’s oeuvre and particularly the work of *The Second Sex*. As Debra Berghoffen notes:

...the idea of ambiguity is Beauvoir’s way of framing the answer to the challenge of Cartesian dualism. It is her way of acknowledging the body; her unique contribution to the phenomenological-existential tradition’s insistence that as human we are situated subjects whose first, primordial and most crucial situation is the body.³

Ambiguity, in Beauvoir, challenges not only the stark divide of body and psyche but also, and perhaps more importantly, the absolute divide of subject and object, self and other. Ambiguity, then, offers a mode to think these categories otherwise, particularly as they overlap and push against each other. Breasts, as a site of such ambiguity, are a strange matter, indeed. Although Beauvoir refers here to the manner in which the flesh seems to escape the will of the girl, one might also read strange as particularly descriptive of ambiguity. That is, strange connotes something unknown or unclear but not simply opaque. The curiosity that strangeness invokes opens a space for engagement, for coming to know otherwise. The matter of “strange matter” is the materiality of the phenomenological body. But, one might also read this matter as “meaning” or “significance.” The budding breasts are to the girl, then, not simply ontological but

² Ibid.

³ Debra B Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 4.

epistemological. The budding breasts tell the story of the girl-cum-woman's definition, via her body, in the immanence that traps her in the position of the Other to the masculine subject's transcendence. Beauvoir's ethical stance of ambiguity, however, refuses to read this division so absolutely.

I begin with Beauvoir's use of ambiguity in order to mobilize its valence to think through the ambiguous positioning of the lesbian between feminist and queer theory. As I will argue in the first chapter, the meaning of the term lesbian shifts as it is framed in relation to both gender and sexuality. But I am also interested in the phenomenological aspects of this tale of Beauvoirian ambiguity. In the fourth chapter, I will return to the phenomenological as I consider the question of aggression in the work of Melanie Klein. Indeed, this project began with an impetus to think through the phenomenological implications of breasted experience. Beauvoir mobilizes these implications to think through the paradoxical experience of being both subject and object exemplified by the girl's experience of the gaze. While female breasts have been an object of much critical and cultural analysis in the histories of feminist thought, their use and usefulness for theorizing these points of ambiguity have been under theorized.

From the mythical amazon of Greek matriarchy to the alleged bra burners of 1960s radicalism, breasts have stood in as a shadow metonymy for female embodiment, femininity, and feminism. And yet, I call them a shadow metonym because while breasts are often at the center of these stories of femininity, they are always just outside the spotlight. Marilyn Yalom's *A History of the Breast* explores centuries of breasted meaning to tell the story of how breasts today have come to be trapped in the oppositional

demands of the good/maternal and the bad/sexual.⁴ Thinking breasts through this lineage, however, remains trapped within oppositional logic, specifically as it is attached to such dualisms as essential/constructed, public/private, virgin/whore. Although analysis of these dualisms are somewhat passé in feminist thinking, critical interrogations of breasts and breastedness remain mired in the practice of uncovering these oppositions.

Iris Marion Young has offered the most explicit engagement with breasts as a site of woman's hailing in these oppositional demands. Her essay "Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling," claims breastedness as a central site (and sight) of women's being in the world.⁵ The sex/gender system, Young argues, can only understand breastedness through the patriarchal divide of sexuality and motherhood. This divide marks breasts as either an object of female sexuality or the marker of maternal responsibility but never both at the same time. Young seeks to explore women's experiences of their breasts as both lived and constructed through and despite these demands. Breasts, she contends, "are a scandal for patriarchy because they disrupt the border between motherhood and sexuality."⁶ This paradox is enforced through the male gaze which renders the breast both an object of sexual consumption and a site of abject repulsion. The sexual fetishization of the breasts, according to Young, demands that they be "like the phallus: high, hard, and pointy."⁷ It is this phallic demand that scripts the social imperatives for breasts as the symbolic site of feminine sexuality, constituted as both private to women's

⁴ Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (Pandora Press, 1998).

⁵ Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 77. Of note: Young's description lacks a critical engagement with the racialized histories of breastedness, particularly in 19th and 20th century United States. African-American women continue to be read and represented through the sexual/maternal dichotomy of the hottentot and the mammy figure. For more on this, see: Wallace-Sander, Gilman.

⁷ *Ibid.*

embodiment and as available for the consumption of the public. By contrast, as Young describes, the maternal breast must remain away from the gaze, desexualized, and sterile.

Attempts to engage breastedness outside of the sexual/maternal dichotomy have focused on visual representations of mastectomy. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring* includes a chapter on breasts which builds upon Young's examination of breastedness through the male gaze to explore the missing breast as a tool for political agency and feminist retaliation.⁸ Garland-Thomson and others have highlighted the work of artists Matuschka and Jo Spence, whose brazen displays of mastectomy scars disrupt the typical representations of breastedness. The political efficacy of the missing breast lies not only in the exposure of the realities of cancer treatment and its mutilating effects but, even more so, in the surprising rupture of the cultural assumptions of breastedness—namely that breasts exist in pairs. Like the maternal and sexual breast, the absent breast draws in the gaze, yet, the mastectomized breast deflects the constituting effect of that gaze by challenging assumptions around femininity and beauty.⁹

Even with this prevalence in feminist theory, breasts and breastedness are conspicuously absent from queer and transgender theory. Judith Butler's early work, for example, muses over the camp performances of drag queens, the promised failure of the lesbian phallus, and the surgical desires of transsexuals—all sites of identity that might offer an interesting investigation of breastedness—but nowhere in *Gender Trouble* or

⁸ *Staring: How We Look*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁹ Consider, for example, the mythic figure of the amazon. She connotes both a lost matriarchal society as well as a female virility. The removal of one breast, so the story goes, allows her to wield a bow and arrow and take up the masculine position of warrior. The remaining breast, however, plants her firmly in the feminine position of mother. There is much work to be done on the relation between the amazon warrior and the breast cancer battle. See, for example, Audre Lorde's call for "an army of one-breasted women" in Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (Aunt Lute Books, 2006).

Bodies That Matter does she mention breasts.¹⁰ Similarly, scholars who have recently turned to representations of queer and transgender bodies have very little to say about experiences of breastedness.¹¹ This is a curious omission considering the importance of practices such as binding (for trans men) and breast forms (for trans women)—not to mention top surgery and hormone induced breast development—for “passing” as well as emotional comfort in daily living.

The politicization of breast cancer in the past twenty years has brought questions of gender and, more recently, sexuality into the lexicon of medical and social research surrounding the disease.¹² These questions, however, have barely found their way into feminist and queer theory. Recently, S. Lochlann Jain’s “Cancer Butch” has explored queer contestations of both the affective demands and the production of femininity at the nexus of capitalism and the now prolific pink ribbon campaigns.¹³ Similarly, and long before breast cancer’s grand entrance into the American cultural imaginary, Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* highlighted the violences of breast cancer treatment in the

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Taylor & Francis, 2011).

¹¹ See Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (NYU Press, 2005); Jamison Green, *Becoming a Visible Man* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2004); Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (Columbia University Press, 2013). While all three discuss the mechanics of top surgery, none offers breasts as a rich site for negotiations of identity and/or pleasure.

¹² By the “politicization of breast cancer” I am referring here to the ubiquity of pink ribbon campaigns and funding organizations surrounding breast cancer. As a result of these movements funding for breast cancer research has increased exponentially over the past two decades. This increase in funding streams has made possible more research on quality of life issues affecting breast cancer survivors. Most research about sexuality post breast cancer centers on heterosexual women and concerns around feminine embodiment such as breast loss, hair loss, and male partners. For a reviews of this literature, see: Emilee, Shepard, and Schmid-Büchi. There is a dearth of research regarding lesbian and queer persons’ experiences post breast cancer. Currently, Mary Bryson of the University of British Columbia is conducting a nationwide research program investigating LGBT persons’ experiences with breast and gynecological cancers. See also my own work along with Ulrike Boehmer and the Women’s Wellbeing Studies at Boston University.

¹³ S. Lochlann Jain, “Cancer Butch,” *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 4 (November 8, 2012): 501–38.

context of a medical paradigm that denies women bodily autonomy and the space to grieve all the while demanding a return to normative femininity, exemplified through the wearing of a breast prosthesis.¹⁴ As Jain points to in her reading of Eve Sedgwick's breast cancer narrative, it was not Sedgwick's experience of breastedness which brought her face to face with her own social status as woman but, rather, the hailing of the breast cancer diagnosis that prompts her to proclaim: "Shit, I guess I really must be a woman."¹⁵ Like the closet of Sedgwick's early work, Sedgwick reads breast cancer as "the secret whose sharing defines women as such."¹⁶

In the introductory essay to *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick invites the reader to her desk, where she has in front of her a number of concurrent projects. Project 1 is the work of *Tendencies*, an examination and interrogation of "queer" and its relation to the strange binarism of hetero- and homo- sexuality within the rubrics of identity and desire. Project 2, which would become *Touching Feeling* a decade later, enters ongoing conversations around performativity, gender, and sexuality.¹⁷ The third project, which never manifests itself in the form of a book—though it nevertheless seems to offer an impetus for the prior two—concerns Sedgwick's own experience with breast cancer in the early nineties. It is Sedgwick's own confrontation with death, illness, gender, and the politics thereof—through both the HIV/AIDS crisis and her own breast cancer—that leads her to confront the "rich junctures" of bodies, identities, and sexualities.¹⁸ In Sedgwick's early work, her approach to her breast cancer experience is through what she

¹⁴ Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*.

¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Duke University Press, 1993), 262.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6.

calls “applied deconstruction.” However, Sedgwick’s later work—which continues to be informed by her ongoing experiences with breast cancer as well as her practice of textile arts and engagements with the philosophical tenets of Buddhism—is less interested in the instability of opposition as it is in thinking otherwise than the now prescriptive demands of exposure and dismantling of binaries that have been rendered routine in critical theory. Sedgwick finds in the work of Melanie Klein, particularly her work on the paranoid and depressive positions, a kind of “oscillatory” logic more amenable to exploring the relation between—and, thus, critical use of—the two stances other than oppositional. This oscillatory logic draws on the reparative work of the depressive position and, in this way, is directly related to the concept of ambivalence in Klein. Ambivalence for Klein “means the holding of contradictory feeling states in the relationship towards one object.”¹⁹ Ambivalence, then, is not simply a detached disinterest but rather it is an investment in the kinds of meanings inaugurated through the imbrications of seemingly oppositional forces.

In this project, I bring this binary logic associated with breasted experience to bear on the figure of the lesbian. Just as breasts are marked by the tension between the maternal and the sexual, the lesbian is marked by the tension between the essential and the constructed. There is a current worry that the lesbian has come to stand in for an anachronistic feminism that is tied to outdated commitments to female embodiment and essentialized femininity. Simultaneously, as I demonstrate in chapter 2, the lesbian is also connected to 1970s feminist movements seeking to overthrow the construction of femininity. Just as breasts come to have different meanings in the context of the bodily

¹⁹ Robert D. Hinshelwood, *Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, Updated edition (London: Free Association Books, 1998), 218.

identities to which they are attached (see, again, for example, the maternal/sexual dichotomy), the figure of the lesbian, I argue, shifts in relation to the context of the surrounding political movement in which she emerges. In this project, I explore the political work of the figure of the lesbian when she is paired with such contexts as epidemic illness, radical feminism, and queer sexual politics. I call this method “thinking breastedly.” Thinking breastedly as pairing is about interrogating the unacknowledged assumptions that define feminist and queer thought, particularly in relation to lesbian figures. Thinking breastedly, then, is not about opposition but rather about the contingencies and continuities that map certain concepts together.

Thinking Breastedly

It is no coincidence that queer theory gained traction as a privileged theoretic during the AIDS crisis and at the height of its political manifestations. The specific violences of the AIDS crisis, especially in the U.S., led to a demand for critical thinking on sex and sexuality to separate itself from the feminist insistence on analytics of gender.²⁰ While queer theory was marked as the successor to feminist thinking on sexuality, the community mobilization that marked the AIDS crisis was largely indebted to the health and social movements of 1970s feminism.²¹ It is a curious recursivity, then, that the breast cancer movements of the 1990s and 2000s would take the political

²⁰ See Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 2008).

²¹ See Lisa Diedrich, “Doing Queer Love,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social & Political Theory*, no. 112 (April 2007): 25–50, doi:10.3167/th.2007.5411203; Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years / Sarah Schulman; Foreword by Urvashi Vaid*. (New York: Routledge, 1994).

movement surrounding the AIDS crisis as their model.²² And yet, breast cancer has not provided the same critical impetus for feminist theory that AIDS did for queer theory. Ulrike Boehmer, in tracing the lineages of these movements, argues that AIDS is specifically bound up with sexuality while breast cancer is specifically bound with gender.²³ I argue, however, that gender and sexuality are not so easily disimbricated in these movements. For example, the social politics of breast cancer remain a largely straight movement that relies on normative gender but the claims for such gender are made through recourse to a normative sexuality—see, for instance, the “save the ta tas” campaign.²⁴ On the flipside, the AIDS crisis unfolds under the backdrop of homophobia but as some argue—such as Bersani’s “suicidal ecstasy of being a woman”—these fears are explicitly caught up with taboos of gender transgression.²⁵ Thinking through this pairing of AIDS and breast cancer, this project will ask: If so much of queer theory has relied on the political movements and social experience of the AIDS crisis—and if breast cancer has mirrored or followed the political trajectory of HIV/AIDS in ways—why has breast cancer and its subsequent political and social movements remained largely absent from feminist theorizing? And, if the nexus of breast cancer and HIV/AIDS produces the

²² See Ulrike Boehmer, *The Personal and the Political: Women’s Activism in Response to the Breast Cancer and AIDS Epidemics* (SUNY Press, 2000); Maren Klawiter, *The Biopolitics of Breast Cancer: Changing Cultures of Disease and Activism* (U of Minnesota Press, 2008).

²³ Boehmer, *The Personal and the Political*.

²⁴ See www.savethetatas.org “Save the Ta Tas” is one of many organizations that funds breast cancer research through the sale of various pink ribbons products. A number of feminist commentaries have been published on how such rhetoric separates the lives of women from the commodification of their breasts. “Save the Ta Tas” in particular is geared toward heterosexual men, offering tongue in cheek t-shirt designs such as: “Big or small, save them all,” “Save a life. Grope your wife.” And “If loving tatas is wrong, I don’t want to be right.”

²⁵ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 18.

lesbian as a biopolitical subject, what feminist and queer work becomes occluded in that moment?

A recent anthology, *After Sex?*, asks after the state of queer theory, particularly in light of the dwindling of the kinds of activist projects that gave rise to early queer thinking.²⁶ In her contribution to *After Sex?*, it is lesbian identity, not sex, that Heather Love refuses to give up: “The wide stance, the longing, the social work, the sluttish classicism, the frumpiness, the bad relationships...”²⁷ Queer theory may be post identity, Love seems to be saying, but identity still has something to say. While queer theory claims to be anti-identitarian, it continues to rely on specific, purportedly counter cultural, practices as the stuff on which said theories are built (bare backing, reproductive refusal, drag). Even in the shift from identity to practice, this stuff of queer theory continues to be reliant on specific gay male practices.²⁸ When and where the lesbian appears she is typically the masculine female, the failing phallus.²⁹ In other cases, she arrives through a look back to the stigmas and traumas of 20th century gay and lesbian life.³⁰ In the nearly ten years since the publication of Edelman’s *No Future*—and its concomitant reinvigoration of the anti-social thesis—a number of theorists have sought to either claim or condemn a contemporary urban, male stylization that is alleged to be axiomatic of this turn, a move which might also be read as a rejection or reclamation, as

²⁶ Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, eds., *After Sex?: On Writing since Queer Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011).

²⁷ Heather Love, “Queers _____ This,” in *After Sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory* (Duke University Press, 2011), 180.

²⁸ See Huffer’s reading of Halperin in Lynne Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave?: A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*, 2013.

²⁹ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998); Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

³⁰ I am thinking here of Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2003); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

Love offers above, of the lesbian as the non-sexy, as the frumpy.³¹ Victoria Hesford, in her recently published return to the feminist archive *Feeling Women's Liberation*, analyses the regulatory efficacy of the epithetical use of “lesbian” in connection to 1970s feminist movements.³² I want to mark this period of the 1970s as a curious time for breasted thinking. In the cultural imaginary, this time is often remembered through the specter of bra-burning, a particularly potent image of feminist refusals of patriarchal demands of a sexualized femininity. Indeed, the lesbian identity that Love clings to so fiercely is a citation of the supposedly desexualized, post bra-burning feminist.

Like the perhaps outdated lesbian, breastedness has become equated with passé modes of feminist thought, specifically concepts of essentialism, emphasis on the maternal, and critiques of patriarchal demands on feminine aesthetics. How has an elision of the feminine in queer theory resulted in the dismissal of the figure of the lesbian? Hesford's analysis of the “feminist-as-lesbian” outlines a paradox that follows the figure into the contemporary queer moment: she both “enacts a further stabilization of *radical feminism* and *lesbian feminism* (read: white, middle class, lesbian) as static terms against which queer can move” while her legacy “continue(s) to infuse contemporary

³¹ In the 2005 MLA panel, and subsequent PMLA forum, Halberstam takes Edelman to task for what she calls his “excessively small archive” which is of most interest to a small set of primarily middle class, white gay men. In a later book, Halberstam offers a widening archive populated by radical feminists. By contrast, others have claimed the figure of the gay man as a rejection of feminisms associated with these frumpish lesbians. Janet Halley, for example, in *Split Decisions* and “Queer Theory by Men,” disavows feminism through the claim of an identity as a gay man. Robyn Wiegman quickly retorts: “Why should queer theory get all the theoretic thrill?” See Robert L. Caserio et al., “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May 1, 2006): 819–28; Robyn Wiegman, “Dear Ian,” *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 11, no. 1 (April 1, 2004): 93–120; Janet E Halley, *Split Decisions How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), <http://proxy2.hec.ca/login?url=http://site.ebrary.com/lib/hecm/Doc?id=10312440>; Ian Halley, “Queer Theory by Men,” *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 11, no. 1 (April 1, 2004): 7–54.

³² Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Duke University Press, 2013).

queer interrogations of sex and sexuality.”³³ Following Hesford, this project returns to the lesbian as she is hailed through the claims of radical feminism.

Whereas early queer theory was primarily concerned with the analytic separation of gender and sexuality, more recently queer theory has turned to questions on the status of the social and temporality in queer life. The so-called anti-social thesis has staked the queer as the harbinger of negativity through the refusal of reproductive futurity and the *jouissance* of anal erotics. The anti-social thesis can be traced, first, to Leo Bersani’s argument in *Homos* and “Is The Rectum a Grave,” that homosexual desire is radically incompatible with sociality as we know it, that is, with what Bersani calls “heteroized sociality.”³⁴ The anti-social thesis has been rejuvenated in recent years and is now mostly understood through the oppositional debates of Lee Edelman’s *No Future* and José Muñoz’s response in *Cruising Utopia*.³⁵ The juxtaposition of a queer refusal of reproductive futurism with the queer embrace of utopic horizons has been marked through a binarized opposition which renders the investment in one necessarily the negation of the other. Rather than argue for or against either side, this project is interested in expanding the possibilities for thinking therein. One way for taxing the limits of this debate, is to push on the polarities of negativity and utopianism. Anality has provided a rich resource for queer thinking on social negativity.³⁶ Anality offers a kind of pre-oedipal—and in this way pre-heterosexual—*jouissance* that is much closer to the

³³ Ibid., 232.

³⁴ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995); Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 7.

³⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

³⁶ See especially: Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave* and *Intimacies*; Dean, *Beyond Sexuality and Unlimited Intimacy*; Edelman, “Tearrooms and Sympathy” and *No Future.*; Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*.

primacy of the pleasure principle. Such claims offer a specific reading of the Freud-Lacanian death drive at the expense of other engagements with psychoanalytic thinking on negativity, however, specifically that of Melanie Klein. I mobilize Klein to think through the ways in which lesbian figures are aligned with aggression and the annihilative potential of radical politics in order to tax these limits.

Many of the themes so prominent in the anti-social thesis were central to radical and lesbian feminisms of the 1970s, including anti-heterosociality (lesbian separatism), anti-heteronormativity (political lesbianism), pro-sex/anti-monogamy (sex wars), resistance to “reproductive futurism” (birth control, abortion). We might read the demands for an ever newer, ever sexier theory as its own anticipatory, paranoid stance against the forever encroaching threats of the social, of assimilation, of a certain kind of (lesbian) bed death.

Lesbians

The recent turn to temporality in queer theory has brought the figure of the lesbian back to life. Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward*, Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feeling*, and Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds*, all call on the figure of the lesbian for conceptual work on the politics, and polemics, of queer history. These lesbian figures, however, bare little resemblance to the “feminist-as-lesbian” Hesford describes or to the lesbian-as-feminists I have outlined above. Others, such as Jack Halberstam, do draw from the radicalism of 1970s feminism, however, without strong attention to the implications of the women’s movement.³⁷ Perhaps the lesbian has come to figure (again?) in this temporal turn in queer theory precisely because such a turn offers a move

³⁷ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011).

away from sexuality in contradistinction to gender as the overarching framing of queer inquiry. To be sure, the question of the lesbian in queer theory is longstanding, one might even argue that this question predates queer theory's documented birthday of 1990.³⁸ I am less interested, then, in answering the question once and for all, than I am in the question's persistence. Part of my claim here is that the lesbian question persists, in part, because even in its attempts to stand in relation to the anti-identitarian queer, lesbian remains strongly identitarian.

I want to ground this queer turn to temporality in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman's 2005 polemic *No Future* stages a concern with affirmative or assimilationist gay politics in distinction to queer life. Rather than staking the queer as that which is against the social, structured as a cohesive community, Edelman's queer is staked against the social that is structured as futurity. Edelman's *No Future* figures queerness as "the place of the social order's death drive."³⁹ Edelman defines the social order as a kind of optimistic politics that requires an investment in the figure of the Child, with a capital C, under a rubric that Edelman terms "reproductive futurism." The central claim of Edelman's polemic is that those who find themselves marked by this stain of queerness rather than repudiate this position should claim this abjection precisely for its rejection of a politics structured on sentimentalized futurity. Edelman's call to arms—though he resolutely refuses any proclamation of a proscriptive politics—is for the queer to take up that place of figural abjection, to proclaim its literal instantiation, and, in this way, to disrupt the very apparatus that maintains such logic. If

³⁸ See Arlene Stein, *Shameless: Sexual Dissidence in American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2006). Especially ch. 5.

³⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

Sedgwick's summarization of a paranoid queer thinking is "I know you are but what am I?" then Edelman's polemic offers this rephrase: I know I am, so what are you?⁴⁰

Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* dwells in the tragic tales of queer lives at the dawn of the modern homosexual. Love's text is more focused on the loss of backward feelings, or the loss of the feeling of being backward, in the current trends in queer studies. Recognizing the tension between a revaluative form of gay politics that seeks to overcome past pains through rhetorics of pride and a kind of redemptive queer politics that wants to embrace the shame and abjection associated with queer life, Love pushes her reader to resist these kinds of reparative moves and instead to confront the negativity of queer pasts head-on. The central lesbian figures of her work include: Radclyffe Hall, Willa Cather, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, as well as their queer female characters. Rather than read these figures as tragic precursors to queer subjects to come, Love aims to dwell in their tragedies as a descriptive rather than proscriptive project. For example, Love's rereading of *The Well of Loneliness* as well as the novel's protagonist, Stephen Gordon, resists the search for positive aspects of Stephen's struggles—what Love terms "isolated moments of resistance"—focusing instead on the title trope of loneliness.

Love's use of lesbian figures is secondary to her interest in a persistent methodology of queer history. Which is not to say that her use of these figures is accidental. As she points out, these very figures and stories have served as emblematic of the kind of queer uptake of tragedy that she aims to resist. By contrast, though with similar goals, Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feeling's* dwells in the collective traumas

⁴⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg and Michael Moon, 1st US edition (Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 135.

of lesbian identity and experience to articulate their potential for critical theory. Published just before *No Future*, Cvetkovich's project is not situated within the conversation of queer futurity. Much of Cvetkovich's look back at the archive involves the places where queer is brought to bear on feminism through radical lesbianism. In particular, Cvetkovich is interested in more contemporary instantiations of lesbian and/or feminist separatism of the kind that seems most problematic to queer commitments, such as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. While elsewhere in the text Cvetkovich examines lesbian narratives in the trauma of the AIDS crisis, these two lesbian camps are distinctly delineated.⁴¹

In the concluding chapter, Cvetkovich interrogates what constitutes, in the most literal sense, a queer archive. Working through the differences of more formal archives, such as those housed at libraries and universities, and community run collections, Cvetkovich finds herself drawn to New York's Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). The LHA, Cvetkovich tells the reader, is different from other archival sites: "LHA functions as a ritual space within which cultural memory and history are preserved...organized as a domestic space in which all lesbians will feel welcome to see and touch a lesbian legacy, LHA aims to provide an emotional rather than narrowly intellectual experience."⁴² This final statement could also be said of Cvetkovich's project. Her engagement with lesbian trauma publics aims to resist any readily available tools for understanding or making meaning of the trauma, rather she highlights the ways in which trauma circulates as and through emotion. Cvetkovich's documenting of the contested choice many scholars and

⁴¹ Cvetkovich acknowledges the tenuous space of her subjects, noting: "This book lies between the queer and the lesbian, not quite occupying either category comfortably." See Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 10.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 241.

activists have had to make between the more formalized NYPL archives and the LHA highlights the presumed connection between a lesbian separatist politics and perceived a lesbian insistence on clinging to past traumas. LHA's insistence on a community based, collectively run organization, even with all the concomitant resource challenges, might be read as an old school paranoia.

Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* articulates different kind of negativity associated with the figure of the lesbian feminist. Like Love and Cvetkovich, Freeman is interested in a kind of backwardness, or anachronicity, of bygone queer figures. For Freeman, the articulated backwardness of these figures implies that something has been left behind. In the case of the figure of the anachronistic lesbian, Freeman argues, what gets left behind is feminism. Freeman's deepest engagement with what she calls the "spectres of feminism" is in her chapter "Deep Lez." Here, Freeman names the work of anachronistic lesbian-feminist as "temporal drag." Temporal drag, unlike its sexier, campier sister at the end of *Gender Trouble*, names a kind of killjoy association implied between lesbian feminist histories and rigidly moralizing and totalizing political goals. As Freeman contends, "even to entertain lesbian feminist ideas seems to somehow inexorably hearken back to essentialized bodies, normative visions of women's sexuality, and single issue identity politics..."⁴³ The lesbian feminist, here, is figured as the queer's prude predecessor. She is, as Freeman asserts, a drag, bringing down the queer party. These school-marmish associations, according to Freeman, mirror the kind of generational logics that have come to define feminism's political projects.

⁴³ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010), 62.

My project begins where these projects leave off, inviting us to think the lesbian as a critical tool for both feminist and queer theory. My methods are primarily archival. In telling the stories of lesbian figures, I drawn from a number of under-cited and unexplored documents and collections. I begin with the archives of Breast Cancer Action, an activist organization that developed under the guidance of ACTUP/Golden Gate in the early 1990s. I then move to the under-cited C.L.I.T. papers, a collection of essays that compose a lesbian feminist manifesto from the 1970s. Finally, I offer an alternative narrative for the rise of the phrase “lesbian bed death” in the 1980s. Through each of these archives I tell the story of different lesbian figures that emerge. My intention is not to recreate or retell these origin stories. Rather, my intention is to understand how certain objects of analysis emerge and persist and, perhaps, what is occluded at these sites of production. In this way, my interest in the archive is genealogical in the Foucauldian sense. A genealogy of this kind is not a search for origins, nor does it attempt to articulate or rearticulate a linear narrative of how now came to be. On the contrary, it is the task of this genealogy to “cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning...”⁴⁴ (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 144).

Chapters

This dissertation will move along the following trajectory. The first chapter tells the story of lesbian breast cancer activism in San Francisco and nationally in the early 1990s as it was built in conjunction with the AIDS activist group ACTUP. I argue that this triangulation between death (cancer/HIV), gender, and sexuality has the effect of

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Cornell University Press, 1977), 144.

bringing the lesbian into the framing of risky sexual practice within the realm of public health. In this way, the lesbian emerges as a biopolitical subject, that is a subject measureable through the mechanisms of public health, through the overlapping crisis narratives of HIV/AIDS and breast cancer at this time.

The second chapter reads radical feminist separatist texts *The SCUM Manifesto*, “The CLIT Papers,” and “Lesbians in Revolt” with Edelman’s figure of the sinthomosexual and his concept of reproductive futurism. In this chapter, I make a claim for the theoretical value of feminism’s radical variant and its commitment to an “anti-social politics” and a violent “politics of destruction” as providing a specific and terroristic threat to reproductive futurism.

The third chapter reads the rise of the phrase “lesbian bed death” with Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” and Dworkin’s *Intercourse*. In this chapter, I map the rise of a sexological investment in “lesbian bed death” and show how the figure of the lesbian is used to inscribe anti-feminist sentiment in the body. Taking up the sexological claim that feminism had a libido killing effect on women, I then offer a counter narrative that connects the term “lesbian bed death” to a speech at the 1987 March for Gay and Lesbian Lives. First uttered at the Sex and Politics Forum, the framing of “lesbian bed death” asks us to reconsider about the place of desire in politics away from the individual and into the normalizing pull of gay politics of the time.

My concluding chapter engages most directly with the current conversations around the so-called anti-social thesis in queer theory and, even more specifically, with the mobilization of the death drive. Recognizing the Freudo-Lacanian inheritances of this debate, I demonstrate that the account of the death drive offered by Melanie Klein

opens a new space for thinking sociality in relation to negativity. More specifically, I connect the Klein death drive to the kind of aggression that the lesbian comes to enact within a political sphere in which she straddles both feminist and queer commitments.

Chapter 1:

A Crisis Emerges: Lesbian Breast Cancer in The Wake of HIV/AIDS

Eve Sedgwick's now famous essay, "White Glasses," contemplates a number of crisscrossed experiences: gender and sexuality, sick and healthy, living and dead.¹ The essay is a meditation on the strange imbrications of these pairings in the purportedly competing realms of breast cancer and HIV/AIDS. First presented in 1991, the essay was written when the U.S. AIDS crisis, roaring on for almost a decade at this point, was opening onto other medical horizons, most notably breast cancer, and specifically by way of lesbian activists. Sedgwick recounts the experience of being at a lesbian open mic night where the support and affirmation she felt from the "hilarious, community-healing, butch/femme-celebrating, powerfully sex-affirmative performance" of fellow breast cancer patient, Joanne Loulan, was ruptured by the positioning of breast cancer politics against those of HIV/AIDS.² The radical, sexual, gender-fucking politics of Loulan's performance, Sedgwick recalls, was marred, indeed "gored," by the momentary, though profoundly jarring, juxtaposition of the lack of federal funding for breast cancer against the "supposed riches being poured into research on AIDS."³ This presumed competition between breast cancer funding and AIDS funding relies on a presumption that more funding for AIDS has a causal relation to less funding for breast cancer and vice-versa. Moreover, as Sedgwick is quick to point out, this positioning of breast cancer as *the* lesbian health crisis, requires an identificatory schema as "that-disease-that-is-not-AIDS"

¹ Sedgwick, *Tendencies*.

² *Ibid.*, 262.

³ *Ibid.*, 262.

which becomes an all too easy slip into “that-thing-that-is-not-man.”⁴ In other words, Sedgwick notes that positioning lesbian breast cancer in contradistinction to HIV/AIDS required not only a disidentification from HIV/AIDS as a wider cultural crisis but also an ours and their mentality that divided the queer community into men and women. The effects of both of these distinctions was a dividing line within the wider queer community.

I examine here the political relationship between breast cancer and HIV/AIDS, particularly during the early 1990s in which, as Sedgwick notes, the identificatory relations between gay men and lesbians were mobilized in various ways. In reading three different activist and political narratives which paired breast cancer with HIV/AIDS, I demonstrate that the term lesbian shifts in relation to how the rhetoric of gender and sexuality is mobilized in order to draw connections between breast cancer and HIV. Drawing on this analysis, I explore how feminist and queer thought has produced important tools, specifically social constructionist understandings of gender and sexuality, for understanding the discursive framing of these relations. Counter intuitively, I argue that on-the-ground politics requires more nuanced engagements with the relationship between social groupings of gender and sexuality than academic theory has allowed. Namely, activists working at the intersection of breast cancer and HIV rely on an ambiguity of these terms. I then move to demonstrate how the ambiguity of gender and sexuality allow for the emergence of the lesbian as a biopolitical subject. The emergence of this subject position, I argue, required this ambiguity in order to track across breast cancer and HIV/AIDS, two diseases that were in the forefront of public consciousness at the time.

⁴ Ibid., 262-263.

It is, by now, widely agreed in the workings of both feminist and queer thought that the analytic concepts of gender and sexuality can be understood and regarded separately. Furthermore, it has become widely accepted that the question of gender would fall under the rubric of feminism while that of sexuality under the banner of queer. Whether one dates this split to Gayle Rubin's 1984 essay "Thinking Sex" or the near simultaneous publications of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* in 1990, the effects of this separation are far-reaching and hotly contested. Janet Halley's *Split Decisions* outlines the malaise that has come to bear on the continued border wars between feminist and queer thought, which is to say, between gender and sexuality.⁵ The constant vacillation between the two fields, and two subsequent objects of attachment, is, perhaps, mostly poignantly demonstrated in the paperback cover of Halley's book, with its dizzying photograph, shown in double exposure to demonstrate a kind of rapid movement, which depicts the overlay of two DaVinci paintings. For Halley, the solution to this dizzying double take is to choose one position, to fix oneself there, and, like a nauseous rider after roller coaster, to take a break. I, however, want to dwell in the moment, and movement, of this vacillation, the dizzying experience of the split.

Many scholars have documented the convergences and divergences of breast cancer politics and HIV/AIDS politics in the United States during the early 1990s. They also note the overlap of gay/lesbian politics and feminist health movements in these two diseases.⁶ Few, however, examine how the rhetorics of gender and sexuality operate

⁵ Janet E. Halley, *Split Decisions How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006). Notably absent is the now passé essentialist rhetoric of sex.

⁶ See: Klawiter, *The Biopolitics of Breast Cancer*; Lisa Diedrich, *Treatments: Language, Politics, and the Culture of Illness*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2007); Robert

within and across these movements. Even when such an examination is undertaken, both gender and sexuality are thought to signify monolithically and always separately. That is to say, there is very little attention to how concepts of gender and sexuality crisscross, overlap, and diverge in ways that support or refute specific political goals surrounding these two diseases. For example, in her book *The Personal and The Political: Women's Activism in Response to Breast Cancer and AIDS Epidemics*, Ulrike Boehmer argues for the importance of tracking sexual orientation in her interviews with women activists in both breast cancer and HIV/AIDS political movements. However, her argument—that women become activists when they have both a personal and political (or collective) relation to the disease—relies on understanding these subjects' experiences as women as similar while their experiences of sexuality mark them as different. As Sedgwick notes, there were many efforts within breast cancer movements of the early 1990s to draw on the political and social capital of the AIDS epidemic. Much of the brief relationship between breast cancer and HIV/AIDS of this time relied not only on drawing discursive connections between experiences of marginalization along the axis of both gender and sexuality but also, as I argue, on drawing explicit connections between concepts of health, death, and politics.

San Francisco was a particular hotbed for political and social activism around HIV/AIDS and breast cancer at this time and, thus, provides an exemplary site of inquiry. I focus here on three distinct but converging narratives of the relation between breast cancer and HIV/AIDS. My first two sites of inquiry emerge from activism taking place in

Bazell, *Her-2: The Making of Herceptin, a Revolutionary Treatment for Breast Cancer*, 1 edition (New York: Random House, 1998); Victoria A. Brownworth, *Coming Out of Cancer: Writings from the Lesbian Cancer Epidemic*, First Edition edition (Seattle : Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2000); Midge Stocker, *Cancer As A Womens Issue*, 1st edition (Chicago: Third Side Press, 1991).

San Francisco. First, I explore how San Francisco AIDS-professional-turned-lesbian-health-activist Jackie Winnow mobilized disparities between HIV/AIDS funding and breast cancer funding to articulate a specifically lesbian movement, one which, I argue, relies on a tension between women's health movements and gay health movements. I then turn to the development of San Francisco based Breast Cancer Action in concert with ACTUP/Golden Gate in order to explore how gender and sexuality became folded together through an activism that paired HIV/AIDS and breast cancer with a radical politics of death. Finally, I examine the media maelstrom that surrounded a 1993 press release claiming that lesbians were at a much higher risk for breast cancer than their heterosexual peers. The press release drew explicit connections between the epidemic status of HIV/AIDS and that of breast cancer for lesbians. Additionally, it effected a shift in understanding of lesbianism from an identity subset of women's health to a risky health behavior in its own right. I conclude the chapter by identifying this moment in the early 1990s as the moment of the emergence of the lesbian as a biopolitical subject. The lesbian's emergence as a biopolitical subject, I argue, relies on the overlapping crisis narratives attached to both breast cancer and HIV/AIDS through political concerns with both women's health and gay health. This moment of biopolitical emergence is under-theorized in both feminist and queer theory. The lesbian biopolitical subject is produced through the interaction of the gay male biopolitic subject in the wake of HIV/AIDS and the emergence of the biopolitical position breast cancer survivor. In other words, I argue that the ways in which breast cancer was drawn into similitude with HIV/AIDS allowed for a point of contact between "women's health" and "gay health" that made possible this

emergence of the lesbian as a distinct category for the interests of health research, advocacy, and activism.

Building a Cancer Movement

The pink ribbon has become synonymous with breast cancer activism. This symbol represents what Barbara Ehrenreich has called the “cult of pink kitsch,” which names the ways in which idealized hetero-femininity is mobilized through consumerism in the name of breast cancer and women’s health. The pink ribbon, and all that it represents, has become so ubiquitous through the dedicated work of Nancy Brinker, founder of the Susan G Komen Foundation for the Cure (formerly the Susan G Komen Foundation for Breast Cancer) in her pursuit of corporate philanthropy to support breast cancer research. The Komen Foundation, as the organization is commonly called, was founded by Brinker in 1982 after the death of her sister Susan from breast cancer at age 36. From the beginning, the Komen Foundation has promoted early screening as the best preventative measure for breast cancer mortality.

The founding of the Komen Foundation contributed to a wider shift in breast cancer cultural narratives following the health activism that came out of both the civil rights movement and the women’s health movement as part of 1970s feminism. Prior to this time, breast cancer had been a largely individualized and highly stigmatized disease. Women, in fact, were often not even told of their diagnosis, leaving important medical decision making to male doctors, or sometimes, their husbands, before undergoing what is called a Halsted, or radical, mastectomy. For nearly a century, since its introduction in 1880, the Halsted Mastectomy was the primary treatment for breast cancer. The Halsted

procedure was a radically invasive surgery, which removed the breast, the underlying pectoral muscles, and all under arms lymph nodes, resulting in extreme scarring and potential loss of arm use.

When Komen was founded, the Halsted procedure was being phased out in part because of advancements in cancer treatment, notably developments in chemotherapy and radiation treatments but also in response to women's advocacy. This shift in breast cancer rhetoric is attributable to many sources but is most often remembered through Rose Kushner's memoir *Why Me?: What Every Woman Should Know About Breast Cancer To Save Her Life*.⁷ Kushner was, at the time, an investigative journalist. It was her own cancer experience and resistance to the one-stop Halsted procedure that prompted her activism. Following Kushner's push for women's self-determination and education in breast cancer screening and treatment, Brinker worked through the Komen Foundation to secure widespread corporate investment in breast cancer research through the coupling of philanthropy and consumer goods. As a result of this work, and the subsequent "Race for the Cure" and three days breast cancer walks that have also been so important in this shift, the current narrative of breast cancer activism is: get screened, catch it early, you too can survive, all while maintaining both your femininity and your dignity.

The story of the Komen Foundation, indeed the story told by the Komen Foundation, remains the prevailing narrative of breast cancer experience in the U.S. cultural imaginary. In many ways, the Komen Foundation can be credited for the widespread shift in breast cancer rhetoric from a solitary and shameful disease to a disease signified by the annual, and sometimes more frequent, gathers of mass numbers

⁷ Rose Kushner, *Why Me* (New York: Signet, 1977).

of women—both survivors and their allies. It is both alongside and against this narrative that the lesbian breast cancer movement emerged in the early 1990s. One of the strongest voices of the emerging lesbian cancer movement of the time was Jackie Winnow.

Jackie Winnow was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1985; following a long history in gay and lesbian activism, Winnow was working as the Lesbian/Gay Community Liaison to the San Francisco Human Rights Commission at the time of her diagnosis. Years later Winnow recalled the invisibility she felt as a person with breast cancer in the gay and lesbian community, which was so heavily focused on AIDS at the time.⁸ Winnow recognized that the gay and lesbian community had done an exemplary job of creating the kinds of informal social service networks which allowed people with AIDS to continue to live with dignity and independence even as their health deteriorated. These same kinds of networks had not been developed for women coping with cancer and particularly not for the women who are often left out of more mainstream health care: lesbians, women of color, and poor and working class women. Recognizing this lack in services and building upon the model put forth by AIDS activists in San Francisco (often referred to as the San Francisco model), Winnow, along with Carla Dalton, founded The Women's Cancer Resource Center (WCRC) in Berkeley, CA in 1986. The WCRC followed the model put forth by the nascent AIDS movement in order to create a resource for women with cancer outside of the formal networks of institutionalized healthcare. The main focus of WCRC was patient education and empowerment as well as connections to resources and alternative therapies.

In 1989, Winnow gave the keynote address—"Lesbians Evolving Health Care"—at the "Lesbian Caregivers and the AIDS Epidemic Conference" in San Francisco.

⁸ Jackie Winnow, "Lesbian's Evolving Healthcare," n.d.

Winnow's speech served as a kind of call to arms for a specifically lesbian focused health movement, one which could bridge lesbian women's experiences in earlier feminist health movements of the 1970s with the kind of feminine labor of care they were taking on within the AIDS crisis. While Winnow's comparisons of breast cancer and AIDS were not quite as stark or virulent as that described by Sedgwick, her speech—given at the Lesbian Caregivers Conference as well as at a number of subsequent conferences regarding lesbian health—nonetheless opened with a comparison of the morbidity and mortality rates of the two diseases. Citing a recent *San Francisco Chronicle* article on the growth of community resources for the nearly (or merely) 100 women with AIDS living in San Francisco, Winnow noted the lack of such resources for the “approximately 40,000 women...living with cancer in the San Francisco/Oakland area” of whom she notes “4,000 of them being Lesbians” and “about 4,000 women dying.”⁹ Though Winnow is quick to assure her audience that she is not suggesting less resources for HIV/AIDS, her argument, nonetheless, relies on the rhetorical power of pointing to the disparities in both funding streams and rates of diagnosis and death in San Francisco between women with AIDS (roughly 100) and women, specifically lesbians, with breast cancer (4,000-40,000).

If AIDS had initiated a specifically gay men's (and mostly white) health movement, with the notable institutionalization of gay health clinics in major cities, Winnow was among the primary voices advocating for an attention to the specificity of lesbian concerns. Publications specifically addressing lesbian health concerns began to rise in the early 1990s. The publications that garnered the most media attraction surrounded lesbians' risk for breast cancer. For Winnow and the WCRC, however, the

⁹ Ibid.,1.

needs of lesbians were more structural and social than connected to any epidemiological factors associated with identity. Winnow's alleged 4000 lesbians out of 40000 women with cancer in the Bay Area is an estimate that draws on the purported statistic that 10% of the population is gay. In other words, while Winnow is concerned with the rise of cancer rates and the lack of research progress, she is not interested in claiming that lesbians have a differential diagnosis rate in comparison with heterosexual women. Rather, lesbians, as well as other marginalized women, have a differential need for community and social support, a need that she stresses is not addressed within either the mainstream efforts at supporting women with cancer or the gay and lesbian efforts at supporting people, mostly men, with HIV.

While Winnow and the WCRC were primarily interested in providing support and health services for women with cancer, activists like Elenore Pred were outraged at the slow pace of research on breast cancer prevention and the stagnated "slash, poison, and burn" approach to treatment.¹⁰ In 1990, Pred and others came together to form Breast Cancer Action (BCA), a Bay Area activist group dedicated to direct action protests to effect change in funding streams for breast cancer research. Also inspired by the AIDS movement, BCA sought out strategic partnerships with AIDS political organizations, most notably ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). ACT UP was a direct action organization dedicated to oppositional politics in the fight against AIDS. It began in New York City in the spring of 1987 with regional chapters and affiliative offshoots developing in nearly every major metropolis in the United States and around the globe.

¹⁰ The catch phrase "slash, poison, and burn" was both coined as a mode of critique by prominent breast cancer surgeon and activist Dr. Susan Love. The phrase is a reference to longstanding treatment regimes which were often unnecessarily harming and disfiguring. See Susan Love, *Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book, 5th Edition*, Fifth Edition, A Merloyd Lawrence Book edition (Cambridge: Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2010).

By 1990, ACT UP had gained national recognition for its very dramatic zaps, or protests, in response to restrictions on research funding and drug approvals in the FDA.

In June 1990, the Sixth International AIDS Conference held its annual meeting in San Francisco. ACT UP planned a number of non-violent demonstrations protesting not only the continued slow pace of AIDS treatment research and protocols but also additional social issues such as the United States ban on international travel by persons with HIV and the need to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act as a pressing matter for AIDS activism. The protest gained national attention, prompting the conference organizers to commit to only hosting the conference in countries which allowed for HIV positive travellers, as well as a greater commitment to the inclusion of consumers in the decision-making bodies effecting major research. Internal strife, however, caused the Bay Area chapter of ACT UP to splinter following the conference. From then on, the newly organized ACT UP/Golden Gate dedicated most of its effort to issues of treatment and research for HIV while ACT UP/San Francisco focused more on rejecting scientific claims as to the causes and relations of the HIV virus to AIDS.

Following their new formation, and just a few months after the founding of BCA, Pred met with ACT UP/Golden Gate leaders. From these meetings, Pred and other members of BCA received training on everything from how to use computers for research (in the very early days of the internet) to how to mobilize around patient empowered medical information.¹¹ One of BCAs first moves was to create a newsletter focused on patient empowerment. From its earliest days, the newsletter sought to bring medical research to the patient community. This model is similar to the *AIDS Treatment*

¹¹ Sharon Batt, *Patient No More, the Politics of Breast Cancer*, Underlining and Notation edition (London: Scarlet Press, 1994), 320.

News which began as a grassroots effort to disseminate information on research, clinical trials, and treatment protocols in the early days of the HIV crisis. Almost immediately, ACT UP and BCA began to collaborate on zaps, with their first major zap taking place on Mother's Day 1991 on the stairs of the state capital to protest the lack of government funding for breast cancer research.

Pred became a regular attendee of ACT UP Golden Gate's weekly meetings. After her death in 1991, Gracia Buffleben, a "heterosexual housewife and nurse," who was herself battling metastatic breast cancer, assumed Pred's position in ACT UP GG's "Treatment Issues Committee."¹² Buffleben and her husband, George, immersed themselves in ACT UP's model; they later recounted that their "mild culture shock" at the queer punk aesthetics of the group was quickly outpaced by the group's impressive knowledge of medical systems and treatment research. Buffleben became BCA's primary liaison to ACT UP, working with the group not only to collaborate on zaps and other direct actions but also joining ACT UP activists on trips to Washington to meet with officials and researchers at the National Institutes of Health and the National Cancer Institute. One journalist's account of Buffleben's work relays how she held a group of AIDS activists "spellbound" retelling her experiences in Washington, meeting with Robert Gallo, a familiar figure in the fights against AIDS, noting that she would likely die before any of the policies she was fighting for would be enacted, a refrain all too familiar to AIDS activists.

Both ACT UP and BCA were born in response not only to the state violences that were enacted through restricted funding streams and lack of access to experimental

¹² Bruce Mirkin, "Quiet Collaboration Between AIDS and Breast Cancer Activists Is Beginning to Pay Off," *San Francisco Bay Times*, March 10, 1994.

treatment protocols but also to the normalizing politics of more visible, and some might say more palatable, service organizations within the realms of these two diseases.¹³ A notable split had occurred when Larry Kramer, one of the founding members of ACT UP in New York, had left the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the premier HIV/AIDS service organization in New York, which he had also helped found at the beginning of the crisis, over his perception of the organizations' complicity in the continued epidemic level spread of the virus as well as their continued reliance on and acceptance of the mainstream medical model.¹⁴ Kramer accused the GMHC of putting patient services ahead of real political action and, thus, valuing profitability above real social change. While the bifurcations of the more politically oriented breast cancer organizations from more patient based ones were not so publically volatile, the differences between the work of groups like BCA and the more mainstream Komen Foundation highlight similar tensions in the breast cancer world as well.¹⁵ An interview with Gracia Buffleben recounts how many of the more established breast cancer organizations were weary, if not entirely dismissive, of such an aggressive politics.¹⁶

Another major catalyst in a specifically queer politics of breast cancer came with the declaration in the early 1990s that lesbians had a greater risk of breast cancer

¹³ For a history of ACTUP see Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*, 1 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁴ See Larry Kramer, *Reports from the Holocaust* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Putnam~trade, 1990). Kramer's role as a founding member of ACT UP is hotly contested. Indeed, Kramer himself has been a variably contested figure in queer politics since his publication of *Faggots* in 1978. Nevertheless, Kramer's distancing of himself from the Gay Men's Health Crisis is symptomatic of wider schisms in the AIDS activist movements, schisms that are similarly reflected in the splits I am discussing here within breast cancer activism.

¹⁵ For a good analysis of the kind of neo-liberal philanthropy as activism promulgated by the organizations like the Komen Foundation and their many state-based and corporate partners, see Samantha King, *Pink Ribbons, Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Mirkin, "Quiet Collaboration Between AIDS and Breast Cancer Activists Is Beginning to Pay Off."

diagnosis.¹⁷ In 1993, a study conducted by Suzanne Haynes sparked a controversy when she declared lesbians to have 2 to 3 times greater likelihood than heterosexual women of developing breast cancer. Drawing from the National Lesbian Health Care Survey, Haynes concluded that there was a higher incidence of some breast cancer risk factors, namely obesity, smoking, higher alcohol consumption, and nulliparity (no pregnancies) among lesbians than among their heterosexual counterparts. While the findings of the study have drawn considerable attention to lesbian health issues, and more specifically breast cancer, the misleading rhetoric of the claim has also led to widespread confusion. Haynes' study implied that there is a causal relation between lesbianism and breast cancer when, in fact, that relation is only correlative and deductive. In other words, certain health behaviors and outcomes, such as those mentioned above, are noted to be associated with breast cancer risk (though even this association remains correlative and not causative). Haynes's study noted that these specific health behaviors were known risks for breast cancer and were also reported at 2 to 3 times higher rates by lesbian women than their heterosexual counterparts. Taking this information together, Haynes deduced that lesbians, given their higher reporting of a number of these risk factors, would thus have higher risk of breast cancer. Despite the many problems that arise with this kind of glossing of the difference between causation and correlation, US media

¹⁷ An ongoing debate within the field of breast cancer research and prevention is the necessity of attention to differences between morbidity and mortality, specifically for racially and sexually marginalized groups. For example, a recent *New York Times* article notes the surprising, or, perhaps, all too unsurprising, statistic that African-American women are less likely than their white counterparts to experience a breast cancer diagnosis but they are more likely than white counterparts to die from breast cancer. See Tara Parker-Pope, "The Breast Cancer Racial Gap," *Well*, accessed August 28, 2015, <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/03/the-breast-cancer-racial-gap/>.

quickly picked up on these findings and made the lesbian breast cancer epidemic major news.

The associated press issued a news release on February 5, 1993 which announced: “Lesbians face one in three risk for breast cancer.” The article goes on to cite a statistic that lesbians are “80 percent more likely to develop breast cancer.”¹⁸ Susan Hester, director of the Mary-Helen Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer, is then quoted as stating: “When you compare these numbers with AIDS, it’s amazing. It’s more of an epidemic, but the numbers are not recognized yet. It’s absolutely a plague.” This comparison of lesbian breast cancer to AIDS as both an “epidemic” and a “plague” has the effect of defining breast cancer more in line with a kind of infectious agent, specifically one linked to a risky sexuality, which must be curbed through a personal and communal commitment to eradicating the modes of its spread. Curiously, on the same day the AP highlighted a report from The National Research Council contending that AIDS would not have the kind of widespread societal effects many imagined. Rather, the article states, AIDS would remain within the socially marginalized clusters in which it was already found and would not spread, plague-like, into the wider reaches of society. In many newspapers, the headline “Study: AIDS Won’t Shake Society” was found on the same page as the announcement regarding lesbians and breast cancer. The juxtaposition of these two articles presents a paradox wherein the claims for a lesbian breast cancer plague relies on the wider understanding of AIDS as a plague-like contagion while such an assertion is simultaneously being contested. The declaration that AIDS would not become the apocalyptic pandemic many feared was itself quite controversial for its

¹⁸ The Associated Press, "Lesbians Face Higher Risk of Breast Cancer," news release, February 5, 1993.

implication that the disease would run its course once it had wiped out those marginal communities it had most affected.

In the wake of Haynes's study, a number of scholars sought to contest the claims of personal risk by documenting the consequences of homophobic healthcare providers on gay and lesbian preventative care. This flip in rhetoric from breast cancer in lesbians as a result of individual behaviors to lesbian health risk being measured in the context of environmental and social factors mirrors developments in feminist and queer theory which argue that sexuality is either an individual identity or an event as mapped in a social world. In the next section, I will explore how gender and sexuality are imagined within a lesbian focused breast cancer politics that has been staked in relation to HIV/AIDS.

Gender and Sexuality

Breast cancer activism has often been deployed at the nexus of gender and sexuality. On the one hand, breast cancer has come to reign supreme as *the* women's health issue of our age. As Samantha King argues in *Pink Ribbon, Inc.*, the rise of breast cancer as a specifically women's issue represents a backlash against feminist threats to femininity, heteronormativity, and, even, capitalism. Breasts, King argues, are "a highly valued part of the human body that [are] both sexually charged...and symbolic of a woman's role in reproduc[tion]..."¹⁹ The tight imbrication of gender and sexuality has not been as readily apparent in the HIV/AIDS movements, though they most certainly are there. Consider, for example, as others have argued, that the homophobic responses to

¹⁹ King, *Pink Ribbons, Inc.*, 113.

HIV are tightly connected to fears of male sexual receptivity.²⁰ In this section, I argue that the rise of a lesbian based breast cancer movement challenges the easy articulation of breast cancer as a “women’s” movement based solely around gender.

At the time that breast cancer was being declared the lesbian epidemic, the public rhetoric surrounding AIDS was moving away from AIDS as a gay disease and toward a deeper understanding of the ways in which AIDS affected the most marginalized communities. The very public death of Ryan White in 1990 forced policy makers and the general public to acknowledge new populations which were affected by the disease and the manner in which social stratification contributed to its spread beyond marginalized communities. This shift in the understanding of HIV/AIDS—the shift from HIV as a viral contagion affecting only those who engaged in certain risky behavior to a global public health crisis—opened the possibility for health based political movements that understood social stratification based on sexual identity as equally important as any sort of biomedical causation, if not more so. That is to say, AIDS had made it possible to suture health (or sickness) to social identity. Breast cancer movements needed, then, to be able to articulate a similarly correlative effect.

The period in which AIDS politics became a catalyst for breast cancer political action, I argue, is representative of a switch point in the US cultural imaginary surrounding both AIDS and breast cancer, as well as the culmination of the medicocultural shift effected by AIDS crisis, with strong debts to earlier feminist health movements. While organizations like the Susan G Komen Foundation got their start in the early 1980s, it was the early 1990s that saw the rapid rise of breast cancer as a national health crisis. This is an image of the disease that has persisted to this day.

²⁰ See Bersani, *Homos*. And *Is the Rectum a Grave?*

Simultaneously, shifts in both government funding, better treatment regimes, and, some argue, the inevitable burn out of AIDS activists, produced a shift in the cultural imaginary of the AIDS crisis from marginalized risk behavior groups in the US to heterosexual transmissions on the African continent and in other developing nations. These switch points in conceptualizing the disease coincided with a switch point in the relations of gender and sexuality therein. Whereas breast cancer had been previously imagined as a private issue, the more mainstream “pink” campaigns took on much of the gay pride movement, including rhetorics of “coming out” and celebratory annual gatherings. Simultaneously, the AIDS imaginary shifted to one of a global heterosexual epidemic in so-called developing nations. With this switch, breast cancer has become the national health while AIDS has become representative of a colonialist imaginary of the savage other. But even the switch of concepts of gender and sexuality is evident. The elsewhere imaginary of AIDS—that is, the global crisis of AIDS on the African continent—most readily circulates around issues of reproductive education and choice, rhetoric most often connected to feminist health issues and women’s bodily autonomy. Similarly, the “pink washing” of breast cancer relies on a normative framing of femininity but one whose emphasis is on remaining attractive in a white, heterosexual framing as well as proscribing a kind of classed bodily comportment.²¹

Jackie Winnow did not claim, as others did, that breast cancer, or even cancer, was *the* lesbian health issue. Her assertion that breast cancer was emblematic of wider lesbian health needs relied on an association with AIDS movements and homosexual

²¹ Pink washing is a term mobilized by Breast Cancer Action (BCA) to describe the rise in a breast cancer movement that sutures pink ribbon campaigns to consumer products known to have a relation to cancer causing agents. I use the term here to describe the ubiquity of proscriptions of femininity implied by the association of pink with breast cancer survivorship.

identity (rather than on the social experiences of being a woman). Part of Winnow's rallying cry in her highly trafficked speech was a critique of how the demands of the AIDS crisis, and specifically lesbians' roles therein, relied on a perpetuation of *women's* roles as caretakers. Winnow acknowledges that lesbians stepped up in the AIDS crisis because of a shared sense that this was happening "in our community." Not only were lesbians witnessing and responding to the death of friends and loved ones, much like their gay brothers, they were also politically motivated by the perceived homophobia in the social and political responses to the crisis. Winnow's concern, however, was that lesbians had abandoned their earlier work with the women's movement and women's community. She lamented the defunding of women's health organizations, the right wing attacks on women's bodily autonomy, and the decrease in governmental spending on issues most prescient to women in the wake of the AIDS crisis.

Winnow's call to arms for a specifically lesbian health movement relies on the viability of a sexual identity based health movement, of the kind most readily apparent in the AIDS crisis, and, yet, her arguments track much more concretely around issues of gender. A paradox emerges in Winnow's argument: lesbians, she claims, are outsiders to both the women's movement, on account of their gayness, and to the gay movement, on account of being women, and, yet they find themselves torn between the demands of the two.²² In other words, lesbians need both the women's movement and the gay movements but they find no proper home in either. Doubly marginalized by way of both groups, Winnow argues that lesbians need to resist the insistence that they choose

²² This paradox is curiously reminiscent of the structuring of Kimberlé Crenshaw's articulation of the need for intersectionality. Exploring these resonances is beyond the scope of this paper but warrants further consideration. See Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1, 1991): 1241–99, doi:10.2307/1229039.

between their gayness and their femaleness, between their sexuality and their gender.²³ Breast cancer becomes for Winnow the emblematic site of this resistance.

While Winnow acknowledges the needs of women with AIDS in her speech, her introductory statistics serve to reinforce a notion that women, and specifically lesbian women, are dying of cancer at a rate that far outpaces the death rate of women with AIDS. Her call for a lesbian health movement stakes “lesbian” as a sexual identity that is the same as that of gay men, but when it comes to the “health” aspect of the movement, divisions need to be made within this sexual identity along the lines of gender, men and women. Lesbians may be *affected* by AIDS but they will not be *infected*. The sparse number of women living with AIDS in San Francisco, 100 by Winnow’s report, are not imagined to overlap with the 40,000 with breast cancer, including these 4000 lesbians. Gender here gets displaced onto the predominant frame of gay sexuality that shades Winnow’s tracking of AIDS even as Winnow makes the move to amplify the importance of women’s experience to any lesbian health movement.

Like Winnow’s lesbian health movement, Breast Cancer Action relied on the queer capital of the AIDS movement while also building bridges to civil rights movements and the feminist health movement. Nearly all of the profiles of BCA’s founder Elenore Pred note her long history as an activist with strong roots in the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements of earlier decades. It was these early activist roots that both inspired Pred and prompted her to make connections with ACT UP.²⁴

²³ It is important to note here that class is also a critical issue for Winnow. One of Winnow’s main arguments was that lesbians, women of color, and working class women did not have the financial capital to access the kind of complementary care that was on the rise at this time. Since many of the women Winnow worked with were uninsured, and even if they were insured, insurance often did not cover things like support groups.

²⁴ Klawiter, *The Biopolitics of Breast Cancer*, 172.

Although many of BCA's leaders were lesbians, BCA was not a named lesbian organization. Rather, BCA's connections to ACT UP were drawn through their shared investment in a kind of queering of health politics not simply across the axis of sexual identity. In the collaborations of the two organizations, AIDS and breast cancer became one and the same and the ability to parse the two diseases along the lines of gender or sexuality was not only difficult but also seemingly unnecessary. While both BCA and ACT UP worked against the stigmatizations that surround both diseases, stigmas that continued to feed the wider societal narratives of both breast cancer and AIDS, these two organizations were more centrally focused on disrupting the power hierarchies of medical knowledge that surrounded both diseases.

One of ACT UP and BCAs most noted collaborations was a zap staged at Genentech, a pharmaceutical company in South San Francisco, in December of 1994. At the time, Genentech was in the beginning developments of Phase III of the HER2 clinical trial and Gracia Buffleben, the "heterosexual housewife" liaison between BCA and ACTUP/GG, was spearheading an activist demand for both increased patient involvement in the trial design and compassionate release for the drug. Compassionate access to non-FDA approved drugs had been a hallmark of AIDS activism, specifically of the demands of ACT UP, in the late 1980s surrounding the ever-contentious AZT drug trials. Indeed, one of ACT UP's numerous rallying cries—"Drugs into bodies!"—argued that any adverse, or even fatal, effects of the drugs would be far outweighed by their potential positives, particularly for a group of people who were already dying. The HER2 trials at Genentech represented the first major breakthrough in breast cancer

treatment, and ultimately produced the now widely used breast cancer drug Herceptin.²⁵ At the time of BCA's Genentech zap Herceptin was in phase II of randomized control trials and rumors of its effectiveness had begun to spread by word of mouth from current participants. Buffleben had previously had success in persuading Burroughs Wellcome, producer of AZT, to provide compassionate use for Navelbine, another anti cancer drug in development.²⁶ She then moved to work on gaining compassionate use access to the Herceptin trials.

The action at Genentech began with a phone and fax zap aimed at halting operations of the company.²⁷ When that seemed to make little headway, and following the death of fellow activist Marti Nelson, Buffleben and ACTUP/GG organized "a fifteen car 'funeral procession' and staged a sit-in at the San Francisco headquarters of Genentech."²⁸ As Bazell reports, the action was attended by both breast cancer activists and gay activists affiliated with ACTUP/GG's breast cancer initiative.²⁹ The tactics of the protest followed the same tactics of countless ACTUP zaps: the funeral like atmosphere, the carrying of pictures of dead activists, the prominent display of those currently fighting the disease, all of which were meant to call attention to a cloud of death that shadowed those denied access to potentially helpful drugs. In this constellation, queerness was formulated through the pairing of death with radical, in-your -face

²⁵ Herceptin is the first targeted treatment regime for breast cancer. For a brilliant biography on the development of Herceptin and the activists who were so diligently involved in its production, see Bazell, *Her-2*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Bazell reports that BCA did not sign on as an official sponsor, though many of their members were active in the action. According to Bazell, a number of BCA members had secured a simultaneous meeting with leaders at Genentech but left rather quickly after being frustrated by the dismissive and "patronizing" attitude of the researchers in the meeting. See Bazell, *Her-2*.

activism. These activists were less concerned with how stigma attached to women or to homosexuality than they were with the knowledge and power disparities between those who were dying of the disease and the scientists and businesses that profited from withholding potentially vital treatments.

If AIDS was thought to be a disease connected to sexuality, specifically gay men, and breast cancer one that was connected to gender, specifically women, then the folding together of AIDS and breast cancer by way of ACTUP/GG and BCA enacts a folding together of gender and sexuality. The queerness of ACT UP and BCA was forged not in a specific identity politics but in their radical upending of the knowledge hierarchies which dominated the medical landscape. At the protest, members of both BCA and ACTUP held the infamous “Silence=Death” posters used in ACTUP demonstrations. As the story goes, the association of breast cancer with ACTUP propaganda made the executives at Genentech realize how serious these activists were.³⁰

For Winnow, breast cancer highlighted the paradox of lesbian identity as it was staked in both the AIDS health movement and the women’s health movement. In her conceptualization, lesbians were like gay men in regards to sexuality but they were also different based on their status as women. For BCA and ACTUP, breast cancer blurred the lines of gender and sexual identity, rendering any legibility along either axis irrelevant. For Haynes, however, lesbianism was not conceptualized as an identity but, rather, as a kind of practice, and a risk based practice at that. The connection was drawn to AIDS, then, in that both gay men and lesbians were thought to engage in behaviors related to their sexuality—or, perhaps measurable in relation to their sexuality—which marked them as at risk for certain health outcomes, namely HIV and breast cancer.

³⁰ Ibid.

Drawing a connection between lesbianism and breast cancer through certain health behaviors—behaviors that are noted to be bad because of their associations with a myriad of diseases and social ills, including but not limited to breast cancer—had the added effect of determining lesbianism to be a set of social practices—such as drinking or smoking—seemingly circulating around sexuality, but not sexual in and of themselves.³¹ In other words, lesbianism got coded as a risk behavior not because of specific sexual practices but because of specific social behaviors that were associated with this group identity.

Reconsidering The Gender/Sexuality Split Between Breast Cancer and HIV/AIDS

As I have shown above, the lines along which gender is defined as distinct from sexuality rely largely on the context in which such a distinction takes place. What's more, the very act of drawing these distinctions enacts a specific relationship between the two terms, a relation which may or may not hold as the context shifts. For Winnow and the Women's Cancer Resource Center, what maps lesbians with breast cancer to gay men with HIV/AIDS is not simply a shared homosexual identity but, rather, a similitude of discrimination: gender based for lesbians and sexuality based for gay men. This relation between gender and sexuality is articulated differently for Pred and the BCA. The activism of the BCA, particularly as conjoined with the work of ACTUP, mapped together the experiences of women with breast cancer and queers with HIV as outside of the knowledge hierarchies of biomedicine. For Haynes, by contrast, deviant sexuality is

³¹ Of course, many of the health behaviors noted here may be connected with lesbian bar culture that, itself, has historically been the site of lesbian political contestations around class respectability and the heteronormative implications of butch/femme dyads. See especially Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 1997).

linked across the realm of breast cancer and HIV/AIDS through a causal connection between certain social practices and specific health outcomes. In each of these movements, the pairing of breast cancer with HIV/AIDS worked in the service of mapping meaning to certain political goals. While the use of concepts of gender and sexuality differed across these movements, each needed the effect of the two terms to make their claims. That is, the separation of the concepts of gender and sexuality in service of the critical thinking of feminist and queer theory is not a single event in the histories of these fields but, rather, is a splitting that happens over and over, each time rendering the terms differently as they are paired in specific relation.

Breasts challenge the dichotomy of gender and sexuality. Iris Marion Young's phenomenology of breastedness first articulated this paradox.³² The sex/gender system, Young argues, can only understand breastedness through the patriarchal divide of sexuality and motherhood. This divide marks breasts as either an object of female sexuality or the marker of maternal responsibility but never both at the same time. While this paradox of breastedness figures very prominently in more mainstream breast cancer movements, the association between breast cancer and breasted femininity remains lodged within a heterosexual logic. Scholars from Audre Lorde to Barbara Ehrenreich have documented how the cultural narratives surrounding breast cancer and its concomitant rhetoric of survivorship reinforce a kind of infantilized femininity.³³ At the risk of sounding anachronistic, one cannot understand this kind of enforced femininity outside the social demands of compulsory heterosexuality. Even queer scholars like Lorde, and more recently S. Lochlann Jain, note how intimately these demands are felt

³² Young, *On Female Body Experience*.

³³ Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*; Barbara Ehrenreich, "Welcome to Cancerland," *Harper's Magazine*, November 2001, <http://harpers.org/archive/2001/11/welcome-to-cancerland/>.

even when one's sexual practices or pre-cancer gender presentation falls outside of the bounds of heterosexual femininity.³⁴

Breast cancer also produces femininity in contradistinction to sexuality. Again, Eve Sedgwick's declaration upon learning of her own breast cancer diagnosis: "Shit, I guess I must really be a woman."³⁵ This is a femininity, however, that is not only in service to a heterosexual alignment of gender difference but one that disrupts other sexual identities. For Sedgwick, this declaration of femininity is not in opposition to a sense of her gendered self but, rather, to her social, political, and community identifications with gay men, a figure explicitly marked through sexuality, sexual practice, and the collective trauma of AIDS.

The separation of sexuality from gender, understood as women, had deleterious effects in the early years of the AIDS crisis. Cindy Patton demonstrates that cultural narratives surrounding gender difference and appropriate femininity informed the manner in which women were understood as at risk, or not, in those early years.³⁶ Patton highlights an important paradox in which women were seen as both outside of the AIDS crisis and largely responsible for the virus's spread to heterosexual men and children. This paradox exists, Patton argues, because the social class of woman was bifurcated along race and class lines that had implications for the framing of women's sexuality. It was white, middle class heterosexual women who were understood as outside the epidemic whereas women of color, sex workers, and injection drug users, all groups who

³⁴ S. Lochlann Jain, *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

³⁵ See Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 262.

³⁶ Cindy Patton, *Last Served? Gendering the HIV Pandemic*, Writing in Book edition (Taylor & Francis, 1994).

have been connected to deviant sexuality, shouldered the blame for the virus's spread. Sexuality, in this way, has the effect of shifting the framing and understanding of gender.

The clear connection between breast cancer and HIV/AIDS in a socio-political realm is that both are fatal diseases that primarily affect coherent social groups. But a deeper scratch on this surface reveals that, in fact, what connects these diseases is the specter of death and its seeming inevitability for these social groups. In her essay "Welcome to Cancerland," Ehrenreich describes a kind of saturated femininity, espoused by what she calls the "cult of pink kitsch."³⁷ This cult, marked by the ubiquity of pink paraphernalia, serves to mask the realities of cancer as a kind of living death through a rhetoric of reclaimed femininity by means of sentimentality. As Ehrenreich's experience of the mammogram clinic's waiting room tells her: "femininity is death." Similar, yet different from, the ubiquitous "silence=death" slogan of AIDS activists, femininity in this instance does not simply stand side by side with death, it is not a precursor or cause of death, femininity, itself, *is* death, is the negative, is annihilation.

If femininity is death and sexuality is death, then the nexus of breast cancer and HIV/AIDS can tell us something interesting about the relationship between gender and sexuality as it is mediated through this relation of death. Lauren Berlant first spoke of this kind of "slow death" in her essay "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)."³⁸ Drawing from what we know about the positions of women and queers in US society, it is easy to lay claim to the kind of "wearing out" experienced by these communities on the basis of gender and sexuality. And, while gender and sexuality can tell us something about how both breast cancer and HIV/AIDS are framed in this context,

³⁷ Ehrenreich, "Welcome to Cancerland."

³⁸ Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (June 1, 2007): 754–80, doi:10.1086/524831.

the framing of both of these diseases can also help interpret our cultural conceptions of gender and sexuality.

As I have shown above, both gender and sexuality shift in relation to the surrounding concepts of disease. Sexuality maps as a social identity, as a form of resistance to biomedical power-knowledge, and as a risky health behavior. Gender, similarly, marks the dividing line between sexualities, or becomes irrelevant in the shared vulnerabilities of biopower, or is elided by the risky health practices of non-femininity (non pregnancy, for example). In our contemporary queer moment, as the proliferation, or virality, of gender tends to fall under the rubric of queer theory and sexuality studies—when the earlier splits between gender and sexuality are being reframed in debates around normativity and anti-normativity, refusals of futurism and utopic horizons—rather than pick teams in these oppositionally structured demands, we would do well to take seriously the productive work of these splittings, the contingencies that becomes apparent in our attempts for clear separation, and what is lost when we imagine these splits as definitive and complete.

Lesbian as a Biopolitical Subject

The past 30 years have seen a significant shift in the public health framing of the lesbian. The Haynes study marks one of the earliest attempts from a national body, in this case the National Cancer Institute, to measure health disparities in lesbian communities. While lesbians were often included, either implicitly or explicitly, in both the women's health movements of the 1970s and the HIV/AIDS fueled movements for gay and lesbian health in the 1980s, the early 1990s marked the first attempts to articulate

a specifically lesbian measure of health disparity. The data that informed Haynes's study were drawn from the National Lesbian Health Care Survey (NLHCS) which was collected over the years 1984-1985. The survey remained the largest data set on lesbian health and life until the early 2000s when sexual orientation measures began to be collected in national health surveys.³⁹ Researchers began publishing on and using the data from the NLHCS in the late 1980s. Haynes' study, in 1993, however, gained the most mainstream attention from the popular press and medical establishment. Almost immediately following the Haynes study, there was a large scale critique of the methods used produce a lesbian breast cancer risk ratio. While the NLHCS was the most comprehensive study of lesbian lives and lifestyle to date, no data was collected on cancer experience or incidence. Rather, the association between lesbians and breast cancer was drawn by highlighting lesbian engagement in social behaviors that were presumed risk factors for breast cancer. Nevertheless, the contestable methods gave a starting point—and provided the story necessary to secure the requisite funding streams—for numerous follow-up studies seeking to measure lesbian breast cancer risk, a research area that continues to this day.⁴⁰

³⁹ See Caitlin Ryan and Judith Bradford, "Conducting the National Lesbian Health Care Survey: First of Its Kind," *Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association* 3, no. 3 (September 1999): 91–97, doi:10.1023/A:1022240011658.

⁴⁰ See Stephanie A. Roberts et al., "Differences in Risk Factors for Breast Cancer: Lesbian and Heterosexual Women," *Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association* 2, no. 3 (September 1, 1998): 93–101.; Melissa Clark Ulrike Boehmer, "Using Cancer Registry Data for Recruitment of Sexual Minority Women: Successes and Limitations," *Journal of women's Health* (2002) 19, no. 7 (2010): 1289–97.; Ulrike Boehmer and Ronit Elk, *Cancer and the LGBT Community: Unique Perspectives from Risk to Survivorship* (Springer, 2015).; Catherine Meads and David Moore, "Breast Cancer in Lesbians and Bisexual Women: Systematic Review of Incidence, Prevalence and Risk Studies," *BMC Public Health* 13 (2013): 1127,.; Suzanne L. Dibble, Stephanie A. Roberts, and Brenda Nussey, "Comparing Breast Cancer Risk between Lesbians and Their Heterosexual Sisters," *Women's Health Issues* 14, no. 2 (March 2004): 60–68,.

Following Foucault, Steven Epstein defines a “biopolitical paradigm” as “frameworks of ideas, standards, formal procedures, and unarticulated understandings that specify how concerns about health, medicine, and the body are made the simultaneous focus of biomedicine and state policy” (17). Epstein identifies the paradoxical tension of “inclusion and difference,” that is, the necessity for socially marginalized groups to claim the need for inclusion in medical regimes through a recourse to difference, a difference that is constructed and demarcated on the basis of social exclusion. Many of the paradigms of inclusion and difference that Epstein highlights fall along the fault lines of race, gender, and sexuality. The AIDS crisis and the concomitant activism around access to drug trials and medical management is one such example. In many ways, then, the AIDS crisis marks the beginning of the gay citizen as a biopolitical subject. Or, to be more specific, the government and medical establishment recognition and subsequent inclusion of gay men in the biomedical regimes surrounding AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s marks the emergence of the gay biopolitical subject.

Maren Klawiter uses an analytic framework similar to Epstein’s to mark the emergence of breast cancer as a biopolitical regime that comes to include all women. Like Epstein, Klawiter documents the shift in understandings and approaches to breast cancer from “regimes of medicalization” in the 19th and early 20th century to the rise of the “regime of biomedicalization.” For Klawiter, the “regime of biomedicalization” names “the development of new screening practices, their expansion into asymptomatic populations, the reconstitution of normal, healthy women as asymptomatic, the virtually simultaneous reconstitution of asymptomatic women as risky subjects, and finally, the

gradual transformation of breast cancer from an either-or condition to an expansive *disease continuum* that included all adult women” (xxvii). Klawiter connects the rise of the biomedicalization of breast cancer to both the emergent technologies of the late 20th century as well as the concerted efforts of breast cancer activists. Within these regimes, Klawiter identifies three “cultures of action,” that mobilized different strategies of biopolitical discourse to make claims of breast cancer screening, intervention, and treatment.

In the nearly 25 years since the Haynes study, the field of lesbian health has shifted drastically. Whereas the first NLHCS was conducted largely at bars and in other lesbian identifies spaces, local and national health surveys now include measures of sexual orientation, measured through both identity and practice. The rise of gay and lesbian health centers in the wake of the AIDS/Crisis has also prompted a rise in targeted outreach to lesbian populations. Along the lines of breast cancer studies, there have been more recent attempts to conduct population based data collection using state-wise cancer registries.⁴¹ The increase in lesbian measurement has, at times, risked reinforcing cultural stereotypes. For example, there was recent media backlash after a study of lesbian obesity articulated high body-mass index in lesbian populations as a result of a proclaimed disregard of feminine aesthetics (a point I will return to in the next chapter).⁴² Aside from producing new knowledge on lesbian health behaviors and outcomes, the articulated need for lesbian health measurements continues to provide funding streams for LGBT based research under both federal and private oversight. Perhaps

⁴¹ See Ulrike Boehmer, “Using Cancer Registry Data for Recruitment of Sexual Minority Women.”

⁴² See Josh Hicks, “Why the Federal Government Spent \$3 Million to Study Lesbian Obesity,” *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/federal-eye/wp/2014/09/02/why-the-federal-government-spent-3-million-to-study-lesbian-obesity/..](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/federal-eye/wp/2014/09/02/why-the-federal-government-spent-3-million-to-study-lesbian-obesity/)

unsurprisingly, much of the research on lesbian health lacks an intersectional perspective that is able to consider the complicated intertwining of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Even in the face of continued concern for LGBT cancer rates, research tends to emphasize screening and survivor outcomes over causation such as an environmental exposure.

These shifts in the field of lesbian health follow what Foucault terms “ a power that exerts positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.”⁴³ The increasing measures of lesbian health and sexuality are mechanisms to promote life, to assure the persistence of a certain population within defined mechanisms of control. In the case of gay and lesbian health, this may be to curtail certain sexual and social practices. For the breast cancer survivor, these mechanisms compel an infantilized femininity. As I have discussed above, the public health promotion of life can often reinforce harmful cultural stereotypes. What’s more, the emphasis on body metrics can mask wider social and community issues that contribute to the inaccessibility of health for many. Even so, who and how certain groups come into the purview of public health surveillance offers great insight into changing social and political landscapes.

In this chapter, I have told the story of development of breast cancer activism in concert with HIV/AIDS activism in the early 1990s. My attention has been to the ways in which lesbian figures emerge or shift at the borders of these two diseases, specifically along the fault lines of gender and sexuality. Within this narrative, I have told the story of the emergence of the lesbian as a measurable position in the current biopolitical

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1978), 137.

regime of public health. The emergence of a specifically lesbian health movement, and with it the biopolitical lesbian subject, was catalyzed by associations with the AIDS crisis and HIV activism, but also required an articulated difference, or lesbian specificity, that breast cancer provided. Having demonstrated that the lesbian is now firmly situated as a subject that must live, I turn in the next chapter to consider the murderousness that is invoked when the lesbian figure is coupled with a politics of feminist separatism.

Chapter 2

Kill Daddy: Reproduction, Futurity, and the Violence of the Lesbian Feminist

A curious thing happens on the first day of my Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Courses. During my opening notes on the course, I ask students to define two terms: feminist and feminism. We begin with feminist. I ask students to describe a feminist, giving them permission to draw on cultural stereotypes as well as their own understanding of the term. Without fail, the following responses end up on the board: "lesbian;" "man hating;" "radical;" "extreme;" "opinionated;" "does not shave." Leaving these descriptors on the board, I then ask students to define feminism. Again, the answers are nearly always the same: "a commitment to women's rights;" "the belief that men and women should be equal." As a pedagogical exercise, I ask my students to explain how column 1 relates to column 2 and, not surprisingly, they are quick to come to the defense of feminism's insistence on equality and reprimand the negativity associated with the definition of a feminist. For the first day of class, this seems enough. The joy and intrigue of the exercise, for me, is how readily it highlights this persistent bifurcation of the figure of the feminist and feminism as ideology, with the clear distinction that the former is bad and the latter is good. What is even more apparent in this bifurcation is how the figure of virulent radical feminist, as the embodiment of feminism, persists so vehemently even in the face of a seemingly more palatable juridico-political definition of feminism as tethered to civil equality.

How does this figure of the radical feminist persist, indeed survive, in our current cultural moment? Furthermore, how has the radical feminist's survival as a malevolent

extremist enacted her effacement as a critical figure for contemporary queer and feminist theory? Building on these questions, how does the figure of the radical feminist precede a critique of reproductive futurity, as argued by Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive*?

The connection my students articulate between feminism and lesbianism is an interesting one. Of course, they are quick to recognize how such an association serves to discredit feminists by implying that their pro-woman values are rooted in a sexual preference rather than political goal. The use of the lesbian connection to discredit feminism is not a new phenomena. In *Feeling Women's Liberation*, Victoria Hesford presents the figure of the “feminist-as-lesbian” as a spectral trope that has served to both define and discredit the “women’s liberation movement.” This figure, which emerged in the early 1970s, served not only to demarcate the boundary between proper and improper (read: heterosexual) femininity but, furthermore, was a catalyst for certain schisms and shifts within the burgeoning women’s liberation movement. The lesbian, Hesford argues, “becomes the figure through which the emotive force of the attack on women’s liberation is generated...As a consequence, women’s liberationists are marked as anterior to normal women, with the lesbian the boundary figure through which that separation is made.”¹ Interestingly, Lee Edelman’s *No Future* proposes a very similar figure, albeit one coded as strictly male, in the sinthomosexual. Like the feminist-as-lesbian, Edelman’s sinthomosexual names the cultural fantasy of queerness as simultaneously abject other and a defining border of the normative political subject. Taking Hesford’s figure one-step further, however, I engage the association between feminism and lesbianism as articulated in the separatist commitments of early radical feminist movements. Following

¹ Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 27–28.

this similarity between the feminist-as-lesbian and the sinthomosexual, this chapter reads the two figures together in order to argue that the figure of the radical feminist persists as a sinthomosexual figure. Pushing Edelman's argument further, I aim to demonstrate that the radical feminist figures more violently than Edelman's sinthomosexual and, thus, is more closely aligned with the destructive forces of the death drive, which Edelman highlights.

Edelman's polemic takes to task an affirmative, humanistic political regime that grounds itself in an ever-deferred future that is staked on the symbolic logic of the Child, with a capital C. Edelman names this "structuring optimism of politics" reproductive futurism.² The queer, Edelman argues, figures in this logic as a negativity that "names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children,' the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism."³ The queer, then, names the constitutive outside by which reproductive futurity is defined. Put another way, the queer figure stands as the abject border of normative subjectivity in order to define the margin of the political center.

In order to make this argument, Edelman offers the neologism sinthomosexual, drawing together the Lacanian concept of the sinthome with the figure of the homosexual. The Lacanian sinthome, according to Edelman, is "the template of a given subject's distinctive access to *jouissance*...as the knot that holds the subject together, that ties or binds the subject to its constitutive libidinal career..." (35-36). Extrapolating from the subject, the sinthomosexual points to this constitutive site in the fabric of the social. While not meant to be literal, the sinthomosexual might be understood as follows. Much

² Edelman, *No Future*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

of what we do and claim in politics and in our social structuring is based on the premise of improvement and forward movement. The Child is the most frequently interpolated as the benefactor of this future oriented do-gooding. The sinthomosexual, by contrast, is imagined to evade this commitment insisting, instead, on present pleasures. By refusing the normative logic of futurity, the sinthomosexual opens other avenues of investment and thereby threatens the cohesion of this singular structure. In this way, Edelman positions the figure of the queer, as sinthomosexual, in “the place of the social order’s death drive” (3). The sinthomosexual names the threat of dissolution that the queer figures in the heteronormative mandates that put genetic reproduction at the center of the social. Edelman’s call to arms—though he resolutely refuses any proclamation of a proscriptive politics—is for the queer to take up that place of figural abjection, to proclaim its position as sinthomosexual, and, in this way, to disrupt the very apparatus sustained by the logic of reproductive futurism.

The feminist response to Edelman’s text has been primarily critical. Jack Halberstam, for example, identifies “the excessively small archive that represents queer negativity,” offering, instead, an “antisocial feminism” drawn from the work of Valerie Solanas, Saidiya Hartman, and Jamaica Kincaid, among others.⁴ Similarly, Jennifer Doyle takes to task Edelman’s reliance on anti-abortion rhetoric. Doyle critiques Edelman for his failure to recognize both the place of the maternal body in the logic of the Child and those women for whom such kinship claims are never possible.⁵ Chris Coffman argues that *No Future* offers a critique of reproductive futurism which also,

⁴ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 109.

⁵ Jennifer Doyle, “Blind Spots and Failed Performance: Abortion, Feminism, and Queer Theory,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 18, no. 1 (2009): 25–52, doi:10.1353/qui.0.0007.

albeit tacitly, critiques Lacan's definition of "sexual difference."⁶ Challenging Edelman's own challenge to sexual difference, Coffman demonstrates that the sinthomosexual maintains the symbolic structuring of sexual difference.⁷ Others have critiqued the nihilism evoked by Edelman's argument that queer occupies this figural position of negativity. Most famously, Jose Muñoz has countered Edelman's negation of futurity by figuring queer in the utopic space of the yet to come.⁸

I share in both the challenges and seductions that have made Edelman's text such a ubiquitous interlocutor for recent feminist and queer theory. I want to resist the impulse to either argue against Edelman or to simply contribute to the archive of the sinthomosexual. Rather, this chapter builds on that tension. I do not add the separatist feminist to the archive of the sinthomosexual solely to highlight Edelman's blind spots, rather I intend to push the figure of the sinthomosexual, and with it the myriad debates surrounding social negativity, further. My task here, then, is threefold. First, drawing on Hesford's work, I demonstrate that the separatist feminist occupies a sinthomosexual structural position. Second, I argue that separatist feminism's threat to futurity figures more violently than Edelman's sinthomosexual. I connect this violence to not only the destructive politics of separatist feminism but also to the material effects of some women's refusal of biological reproduction. I then move to reconsider the place of the sinthomosexual in the wake of feminism's destructive politics. I conclude by examining the roll back of reproductive choice politics in the era of gay marriage.

⁶ Chris Coffman, "The Sinthomosexual's Failed Challenge to (Hetero)sexual Difference," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 54, no. 1 (October 10, 2012): 56–73, doi:10.1080/14735784.2012.729704.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

In order to make this argument, I draw from three seminal separatist feminist texts. The first is Valerie Solanas's iconic *SCUM Manifesto*, the second is the lesser-known "C.L.I.T. papers," published anonymously as numerous essays in *Off Our Backs* and *DYKE: A Quarterly* between 1974 and 1980, and, the third is the calls to arms "Lesbians in Revolt," an essay which articulates the central ethos of the lesbian separatist collective The Furies. The Furies are perhaps one of the better known lesbian separatist organizations. Although the collective survived for only a year, the group's related publication, also called *The Furies*, was in print for at least another year. The "C.L.I.T. papers" have all but disappeared, available mostly in the archives of feminist media projects. What little is available in the secondary readings on the "C.L.I.T. papers" makes clear that they were highly controversial, precisely for their arguments in favor of full scale rejection of the social through the politics of lesbian separatism. *The SCUM Manifesto*, by contrast, is not typically recognized as a lesbian separatist manifesto and, yet, its survival as a classic feminist text cannot be separated, I argue, from the subsequent lesbian separatist movements the text influenced. The canonical status of SCUM speaks to a feminist identification with a politics of destruction, even if only on the level of the figural. The failure to survive on the part of C.L.I.T. follows the post early-70s bifurcation of feminism away from the vitriolic tone of SCUM and the controversial claims of lesbian separatism. Considering the murderousness that is implied in Edelman's discussion of the death drive, I invoke this figure of the radical feminist to demonstrate how the threat of feminist separatism as a destructive, perhaps even murderous, politics survives, even in occlusion, in our contemporary theoretical moment.

The Feminist-as-Lesbian

In *Feeling Women's Liberation*, Victoria Hesford names the event of women's liberation as a switch point in the U.S. imaginary of feminist politics. Returning to the archive of 1970, and, most specifically, to the widespread media attention given to women's liberation following the publication of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Hesford demonstrates that the emergence of the figure of the feminist-as-lesbian had a "defining effect on the way in which women's liberation in particular and feminism in general has been remembered and represented, in both the supracultural domain of the mass media and in the subcultural domains of popular and academic feminism and queer theory."⁹ The figure of the feminist-as-lesbian, Hesford argues, operates "as a ghost rather than an icon or symbol" due to "such overfamiliarity and hypervisibility."¹⁰ The ghostliness that Hesford names in this figure is exemplified in my students' quick moves to disavow the relation between feminism and lesbian. That may have once been true, they seem to say, but the persistence of this association is meant to scare rather than name. Beginning with Solanas and *The SCUM Manifesto* I turn here to consider the fright, indeed the terror, of what I will demonstrate is the specter of destruction that the figure of the separatist feminist carries.¹¹

⁹ Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹ I use the term "radical feminist" in reference to Alice Echols' *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*. Echols identifies radical feminism as a specific movement within feminism and as part of the larger movement of 1960s radicalism. Building on Echols, I define radical feminism as a movement built largely around an ideology of separatism, specifically lesbian separatism, rather than assimilation. In doing so, I also mean to separate these terms from current instantiations of radical feminism, particularly in their essentialist and trans-exclusionary practices.

The mark of radical feminism in the early 1970s was the refusal of femininity as conscripted by heterosexuality and the nuclear family.¹² Although mainstream feminist politics sought to reject the confines of feminine social positions through a liberal politics of assimilation, a radical, often separatist approach advocated a more violent form of feminism founded on a politics of destruction. Such feminism was enacted largely through manifestos, political writings, and direct actions.¹³ The association between feminism and destruction begins with the allegations of bra burning at the 1968 Miss America Pageant.¹⁴ The image of the burning bra has persisted as a metaphor for the violence of feminists; this image is posed in distinction to the good liberalism of feminism as an ideology of equality. Published around the same time as the infamous bra burning, Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*, has become, perhaps, the most read example of a feminist politics of destruction. Though most remembered for her advocating of a homicidal cutting up of men, Solanas's true target was the gender system at the center of a capitalist, bourgeois state. Solanas's weapon was her words, and the vitriol of her writing became a rallying point for a radical separatist movement.

Many feminists have connected Solanas to an anti-social politics similar to the one articulated in Edelman's *sinthomosexual*. In responding to Edelman's limited archive, for example, Halberstam offers Solanas as "an antisocial feminist extraordinaire."¹⁵ Similarly, Avital Ronell highlights the manifesto's "anti-social edge,"

¹² Alice Echols, *Daring To Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1989).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ The allegations of bra-burning at the 1968 Miss America Protest remains an apocryphal event in the history of women's liberation. For more on the debates surrounding the veracity of the bra-burning claims see W. Joseph Campbell, *Getting It Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 108.

and connects Solanas to “nonplace...the *non* bound by the *nom*, as Lacan would say.”¹⁶

In describing Solanas’s “antisocial practices” as a kind of refusal of “the burdens of social and sexual reproduction,” Hesford’s analysis draws Solanas most clearly into the realm of Edelman’s *sinthomosexual*:

The anti-social practices of SCUM are the actions of women “too childish” and too “uncivilized” to accept the burdens of social reproduction...Solanas’s outlaw women are subversive because they operate from “the gutter”—the spaces of social abjection and exclusion in which figures like the street hustler and dyke come to symbolize the breakdown of the internal frontiers of the nation-state—the borders that are meant to contain the middle class within a domain of hetero-respectability and racial orderliness. Solanas’s SCUM revolution won’t happen through marches and movements—through a protest that is also an appeal to the laws of daddy’s bourgeois society—but through the mayhem wrought by refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of those laws.¹⁷

SCUM gains its critical traction through an embodiment of the structural epithet that would seek to dismantle its claim. Laying claim to the space on the margins, in “the gutter,” SCUM refuses bourgeois politics invested in class ascendancy, in the political promise of social capital. The gutter represents not only as a rejection of the prescriptions of hetero-femininity, but also as militant uprising, what Hesford has labeled “a Solanasesque politics of refusal.”¹⁸ What is refused by Solanas’s SCUM is not only heterosexually-scripted femininity, as is often ascribed to the motives of radical

¹⁶ Avital Ronell, “The Deviant Payback: The Aims of Valerie Solanas (Introduction),” in *Scum Manifesto* (London ; New York: Verso, 2004), 2, 5, 23.

¹⁷ Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, 102.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 299.

feminism, but a wholesale refusal of politics bent on claiming a universal good. SCUM does not simply scoff at reproductive futurism. Rather, it calls for a homicidal revolt whose ultimate goal is not equality, assimilation, or recognition but the wholesale destruction of the male sex and with it any vestiges of biology, culture, and capital that would tie women to reproduction.

Solanas's central claim is not that men hate women but, rather, that men hate men. The representations of women as passive and penetrable, according to Solanas, is not a true representation but men's projections of their hatred of their own essential femininity: "Completely egocentric, unable to relate, empathize or identify, and filled with a vast, pervasive, diffuse sexuality, the male is physically passive. He hates his passivity, so he projects it onto women, defines the male as active, then sets out to prove that he is."¹⁹ The goal of SCUM is not simply to kill off all men but to convince men of their complicity in their own destruction, of the necessity of their elimination through embrace of their true femininity (faggots and trans women, for Solanas, provide the richest example that such a conversion is possible). This is not to say, as the manifesto insists, that men, and some women, will not literally die in the process. With the end of men, both literally and figuratively, Solanas insists will come the end of patriarchy and all its incessant baggage. As the manifesto's opening paragraph proclaims: SCUM will "overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex."²⁰ To call Solanas's manifesto vitriolic is an understatement. Often dismissed as the rantings of a schizophrenic, many have argued that Solanas is

¹⁹ Valerie Solanas, *Scum Manifesto* (London ; New York: Verso, 2004), 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

articulating the cultural projections of feminism with extreme hyperbole.²¹ Presumably, the elimination of men would bring with it the elimination of the entire gender system, the rearticulation of sexual relations, the complete annihilation of the family system, and with such an eradication the further elimination of the capitalist systems and class structures which work in concert with the nuclear family. One might also argue then that Solanas is aptly, if pugnaciously, articulating the stated goals of a radical feminist take over. Rather than argue for an equality politics, as has been the hallmark of liberal feminism, Solanas's Marxist approach to the gender system involves a radical destruction of all concomitant systems.

The SCUM manifesto takes radicalism as destruction to its limit. The politics of SCUM is a homicidal ideology. The bulk of the publication focuses on men's deficiency, their animalistic inferiority to women, and their self-annihilating commitment to fucking. But riddled throughout, and most pointedly in the final pages, Solanas calls on SCUM to destroy men in the most literal sense through men's own transition to women, through a technological overtake of reproduction assuring that only females are born, or, if necessary, through murderous means. Rejecting a politics of the status quo, denying that change can happen through protest or simply opting-out, Solanas calls for a kind of warfare against men, both men in the literal sense and all that the patriarchy has come to bolster.

²¹ See: James Penner, *Pinks, Pansies, and Punks: The Rhetoric of Masculinity in American Literary Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2011).; Laura Winkiel, "The 'Sweet Assassain' and the Performative Politics of SCUM Manifesto," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (Routledge, 2013).

The SCUM Manifesto has been called one of the most influential works of lesbian separatist writing.²² However, nowhere in the text does Solanas make any explicit references to lesbianism. Perhaps the association between the SCUM manifesto and lesbianism relies on an understanding of the effect of the elimination of men, and the resulting society inhabited only by women that would leave no other option than lesbianism. Or, perhaps, if Solanas herself was a lesbian, as she was known to proclaim, then her own identity would mark the text as explicitly lesbian. The question of Solanas's lesbianism, however, remains a contested point of her personal narrative.²³ As mentioned above, Solanas's manifesto may have disappeared into obscurity had she not shot pop-art icon Andy Warhol. Often understood as a literalization of her manifesto's intention, an accusation neither confirmed nor denied by Solanas herself, the shooting of Warhol thrust Solanas and SCUM into a national spotlight. Prominent feminists were quick to come to the defense of Solanas, hailing her as a symbol for a burgeoning movement. Rather than position SCUM at the beginning of a legacy of lesbian-feminist writings, I argue that Solanas made possible a shift in rhetoric surrounding women's liberation away from a polarity between equality feminism or a reversal in patriarchy to matriarchy, to a radical rethinking of a number of intersecting social stratifications. With the shooting of Warhol, Solanas made real the fears of a feminist revolt that could not be ushered away under the guise of liberalism.

The status of SCUM as the harbinger of this anti-social politics gains critical speed through Solanas's interpellation as a spokesperson of radical separatism. Indeed,

²² See: Winkiel, "The 'Sweet Assassain' and the Performative Politics of SCUM Manifesto."; Breanne Fahs, *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman Who Wrote SCUM* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2014).

²³ See Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*.

many of the most acerbic, destructive, and “man-hating” writings to come out of the separatist movement attribute their influence to Solanas’s SCUM. Among them are the “C.L.I.T. papers.” The “C.L.I.T. papers” were first published as a series in the radical lesbian feminist publication *Off Our Backs* and were then quickly republished in the lesbian feminist journal *DYKE*. Written by a group of anonymous lesbian feminists calling themselves Collective Lesbian International Terrors (C.L.I.T.), the “C.L.I.T. papers” took primary aim at the mainstream media whose use of the lesbian accusation was seeking to discredit and, perhaps, dismantle the movement for women’s liberation.²⁴ Published as two separate statements printed in *oob* in the May and July 1974 issues, the “C.L.I.T. Papers (#1 and #2)” outlined the forming of the collective, its goals and intentions, and the steps it would take to achieve its goals. Ultimately, C.L.I.T. sought the end of patriarchy through the destruction of heterosexuality. The means by which they sought this end, however, was with full withdrawal from the capitalist systems that were intricately bound with patriarchy and bolstered by the class ascendant, heterosexual, nuclear family. To begin, the C.L.I.T.s called for a lesbian boycott of the straight press, as writers, readers, or publishers. In doing so, they argued, the radical feminist movement could not only control their own dissemination of information, but, even more importantly, they would thwart the cooptation of a sterilized and neutered lesbian figure being pawned by the liberal-minded, humanitarian press.

The second statement, “Statement #2,” printed by the C.L.I.T.s in *Off Our Backs* in July of 1974, identifies the various ways the straight media has colluded to coopt the lesbian. Engaging cultural forms and figures as varied as drag queens, bisexuals, and straight women, C.L.I.T. outlined how the cooptation of the lesbian by straight media

²⁴ C.L.I.T., “C.L.I.T. Statement #1,” *Off Our Backs* 4 (May 1974): 16.

produces this figure as simultaneously menacing and sterile.²⁵ Although straight women, bisexuals, and gay camp may seem at first glance to be potentially allied with a lesbian driven radical feminism, C.L.I.T. articulates how the media, and the liberal minded culture's sudden acceptance of the lesbian through an avant-garde valuation of sexual liberation, seeks to placate this very figure in the maintenance of the hetero-patriarchy. The C.L.I.T.s take the cue from Solanas's SCUM, quoting from her manifesto and praising her shooting of Warhol, yet reverse her logic. Other women, according to C.L.I.T.—bisexual women, straight women, even lesbians who refused separatism—are not true women but men in disguise, unable to confront and exorcise the “prick within.” If Solanas wanted to cut up men, chew them to bits or remold them as women, C.L.I.T. sought to bleed them out.

The second collection of C.L.I.T. papers (C.L.I.T. Collection #2) had a much wider circulation and prompted a frenzy of response, both positive and negative, from within the wider feminist community.²⁶ Though the papers of the three original collective members were published in the July 1976 issue of *Off Our Backs*, a much wider collection was published in the burgeoning lesbian feminist publication *DYKE: A Quarterly*. The second collection, which begins with “C.L.I.T. Statement #3, articulates the groups investment in militancy. The paper opening states it all: “In the last year C.L.I.T. has moved from the purist form of Lesbian Separatism—no contact with men—to Lesbian Militancy, to a Lesbian Militant stance of active *confrontation* with the enemy.”²⁷ The use of war imagery is not a metaphor but, rather, a committed stance against the “Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD its real name) of capitalist and

²⁵ C.L.I.T., “C.L.I.T. Statement #2,” *Off Our Backs* 4 (July 1974): 12–14.

²⁶ C.L.I.T., “C.L.I.T. Collection No2,” *Dyke: A Quarterly*, no. 2 (n.d.): 41–85.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

communist cock superpowers.”²⁸ Although C.L.I.T never engaged in bodily violence with men, their intent was to terrorize and eradicate “the prick within.”

While Solanas’ SCUM manifesto is required reading for any engagement with the radical borders of the Women’s Liberation Movements, the C.L.I.T. papers are scarcely referenced in feminist accounts of the radical lesbian shifts of the early 1970s. Perhaps the greatest historical coverage of the C.L.I.T. paper comes from the reporting of the *Off Our Backs* collective. In their contributing chapter to *Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, part 1*, Carol Anne Douglas and Fran Moira reflect on the upheaval felt within the *Off Our Backs* collective in debating the publication of the papers.²⁹ The July 1974 issue of *Off Our Backs*, in which Statement #2 was published, included a lengthy justification and outline of the debates by the collective members.

The sentiments expressed in the C.L.I.T. papers are mirrored in a number of other separatist writings, manifestos, and organizations at the time. The Furies Collective is perhaps one of the most well known, or at least well documented, intentional communities of lesbian separatists.³⁰ Founded in Washington, D.C. in 1971, the original Furies Collective, also known as “Those Women,” included some of the most well cited lesbian separatists, among them Rita Mae Brown and Charlotte Bunch. A year after their founding, the group began printing a monthly newspaper, also called *The Furies*, which served as a forum for lesbian separatism in the burgeoning Women’s Liberation Movement. The cover of the inaugural issue told the story of The Furies (three figures of Greek Mythology described as “avengers of matricide, the protectors of women”) and

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ken Wachsberger, *Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press* (MSU Press, 2012).

³⁰ See Echols’s biography of The Furies in Echols, *Daring To Be Bad*.

their relation to origin of the Furies Collective.³¹ The Furies collective take their name as a demonstration of their anger, of being furious at the arrogance and persistence male supremacy. Because The Furies saw male supremacy as inextricably bound with not only sexism but racism and classism as well it was an end to the patriarchal system which, they argued, would ultimately topple the racist imperialism of capitalism. They rejected what they saw as the feelings driven weakness of contemporary liberal politics, most notably the more mainstream Women's Liberation Movement. Often described as a militant organization, The Furies insisted on strategy, a uniformity of practice, and a celebrated engagement with conflict. The two residences that they shared were meant to be a kind of experiment in tactical ideology which would ultimately be able to be replicated across the movement. As the story goes, the communal residences associated with The Furies were disbanded after an escalating series of in-house disagreements over the place of children in their movement. According to Echols, the conversations began around the place of male children, given the all-female commitments of the group, and quickly escalated to the place of children writ-large.³²

The inaugural issue of *The Furies* also contained the group's own manifesto, "Lesbians in Revolt."³³ By-lined by Charlotte Bunch, but presumably approved by the entire collective, the two page spread elaborated on their founding claims that lesbianism is not a sexual disposition but a political commitment. To recognize and engage lesbianism as a politics, according to the manifesto, was not simply a matter of declaring ones identity or affiliation. Rather, lesbianism as political practice required a

³¹ "The Furies," *The Furies: Lesbian Feminist Monthly* 1 (January 1972).

³² Echols, *Daring To Be Bad*, 235.

³³ Charlotte Bunch, "Lesbians in Revolt," *The Furies: Lesbian Feminist Monthly* 1 (January 1972).

commitment to a community of women, to a rejection of male domination, and an interrogation and repudiation of the privileges of race, class, and nationhood that were given by patriarchal lines of descent. The lesbian, according to Bunch, is the ultimate impediment to male domination. By demonstrating that women do not need men, socially, economically, or sexually, the lesbian provides the foil for male supremacy's claim on women's dependence. Lesbianism, then, cannot be a symbolic gesture but requires a committed and forceful withdrawal from and rejection of all tenets and effects of heterosexuality.

The Furies was in print for less than two years. Even so, Echols attributes the widespread influence of the collective, at least in feminist memory, to the important writings and debates that took place within its pages. The paper carried on for another year and its pages document the ongoing debates on the value of separatism and the thin border between lesbian ideology and man-hating. In the final issue of *The Furies* newspaper, two collective members attempt to outline the failure of the rag. Noted to be one of the first and only pieces published without consensus, the article also contained a bullet point list highlighting disagreements with the piece expressed by collective members. In a certain light, the very systems of capitalist dependence on societal structures that the collective was working against were also the very structures that, as a collective, they could not overcome. Class struggles were articulated as the hurdle that the group could not surmount.

Lesbian separatism reverses the imagined individuality of sexuality. The queerness of lesbian separatism—and, to be clear, the term queer is used often in their texts—is not born of an individual experience of alienation within the social but, rather,

seeks to alienate the very societal structures that would coopt the individual through the domestication of identity. Put another way, sexuality in these manifestos is not an element of subjectivity but a social dynamic that creates systems of oppression. But neither is lesbianism merely a matter of gender. To be woman-identified is to refuse to participate in male dominated structures and patriarchal practices. A refusal of the strictures of heterosexuality displaces a need define gender or sexuality in regards to each other, if even at all.

Political lesbianism is not sexuality in the identitarian or even practice based sense. Which does not mean, however, that it is simply an affiliative choice. Neither does it mean that political lesbians were not fucking nor that fucking was not a part of their politics. But fucking may not mean sex; they are fucking off and fucking shit up. For Solanas, for example, sexuality is purely a male pursuit, a drive more closely connected to animalism than human intellect. The end of sex, for this reason, will mean the end of men. Solanas's men are zombies, driven by one thing, the pursuit of pussy: "he'll swim through a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit, if he thinks there'll be a friendly pussy awaiting him."³⁴ Since all sexuality, for Solanas, is constructed in a male dominated world, all sexuality is male. As Fahs has argued, Solanas's end game of a kind of radical asexuality is not predicated on a pious positioning of women in relation to sex: "rather, asexuality is a consequence of sexuality, the logical conclusion to a lifetime of 'Suck and Fuck.'"³⁵ The disimbrication of sexuality from both men and reproduction, in Solanas, will allow women to engage new levels of creativity and productivity previously unimaginable.

³⁴ Solanas, *Scum Manifesto*, 37.

³⁵ Breanne Fahs, "The Radical Possibilities of Valerie Solanas," *Feminist Studies* 34, no. 3 (2008): 598.

For the C.L.I.T.s it is the image of the lesbian as an avant-garde sexual deviant that they reject. This liberal biased attempt at social incorporation, they contend, renders the lesbian part of a palatable, even enviable, subculture. Such a move is slanderous: “They are trying to smear our name. Guilt by association.”³⁶ C.L.I.T.s take aim at faggots, bisexuals, and queers of high culture who are content to accede to this position of recognition. Liberal inclusion is “a humanitarian rat trap,” that deludes social lesbians, fags, and women’s libbers into complacency. C.L.I.T.’s notion of a unified femininity is not a cultural feminist embrace of a valued sexual difference.³⁷ Indeed, sexual difference in any biological sense is not of interest to C.L.I.T.s. The “pricks” that most concerns C.L.I.T.s, are those inside their own heads, infiltrating the forms of capitalist, imperialist, and racist systems that maintain gender subordination through the mandates of heterosexuality. Lesbians are the true women, the logical outcome of a feminist revolution. The “heterosexual farce” is a power play that straight women play into just as much as men. According to C.L.I.T.s, straight women are an even greater risk to the goals of lesbian separatism than any men. Men are too deluded by their own worth to recognize the threat of lesbianism. Straight women, on the other hand, can grasp just how threatening separatism is to the system from which they benefit and, for this reason, are the greatest threat to true lesbians. The straight woman’s threat is twofold: she can infiltrate the separatist and she can also seduce the real lesbians back into the power play of heterodynamics.

For the Furies, lesbianism is a political choice. Lesbianism is not simply a rejection of heterosexuality, of male/female relations, it is also a rejection of the societal

³⁶ C.L.I.T., “C.L.I.T. Statement #1.”

³⁷ Ibid.

notions of woman. Lesbianism is political because sexuality is political, gender is political, and rejecting the social demands to be legible within these categories is also political. The radical lesbianism to which *The Furies* aspire rejects any notion of the political as an individual pursuit. The radical separatist politics that they espouse must be based first and foremost on a centering of necessity of relations and of the interconnectedness of multiple forms of oppression.

Some might attribute the seemingly brief heyday of radical separatist politics to its inefficacy. And, yet, the cultural association between separatism and feminism remains strong, perhaps even more so than any other radical movement. The extremism associated with separatist politics serves as fodder to dismiss feminism wholesale. But, even in many feminist or feminist affiliated circles, radical separatism is rejected as an aberrant past. I turn in this next section to consider how we might read these lesbian separatist moments through the logic of the sinthomosexual.

Separatist Feminism and the Sinthomosexual

The polemicizing force of Edelman's *No Future* is grounded in what has been called a suicidal politics, one that in refusing futurity, refuses survival. The *jouissance* that Edelman claims as queer is associated with a kind of excessive, orgasm driven sexuality measured mostly through practice.³⁸ And, yet, the figures that Edelman draws on are not marked by sexual excess in the way one might imagine but, rather, by a kind of callous and depraved disregard for an appropriate humanistic investment in the other that

³⁸ These practices, at least as they are taken up in queer theory, are tacitly understood as related to gay-male sex practices. And, I would argue, the implication is more readily connected to "risky" sex practices, such as barebacking, anonymous sex, and fisting, than to anal sex.

itself results in a kind of perverse pleasure.³⁹ Edelman's tacit insistence on *jouissance* as a kind of orgasmic pleasure linked to the fantasy of queer sexuality gets displaced by the murderousness that marks the sinthomosexual in his readings of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* and *The Birds*. When reading these figures, we find a different relation between *jouissance* and the death drive, understood through a kind of homicidal pleasure. The queer uptake of this spectral position of non-reproductive sexuality, as advocated by Edelman, tracks differently than radical feminism's mandated rejection and vehement refusal of the reproductive mandate. The terror of the death drive as a kind of murderous, annihilative force tracks well with the stated aims of lesbian separatism. In order to consider the sinthomosexual potential of radical lesbian separatism, I want to first consider the most salient and pointed articulation of Edelman's polemic:

Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kind on the Net; fuck laws both with capital Is and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop.⁴⁰

It is clear here that the fucking imagined to define the sinthomosexual is not simply or merely fucking in its most banal, copulative sense but in giving the proverbial finger to any demand that such fucking be made to have meaning in the "structuring optimism of politics."⁴¹ The gesture given in the "fuck" is a dismissal, a refusal, rather than an outward or aggressive attack. In this way, the sinthomosexual sidesteps the question of

³⁹ I am tempted here to call these figures "assholes." And, indeed, they are, particularly following on the anality that is so prolific in the so-called "anti-social" strand of queer theory. We might also call these figures "dicks," and, in doing so, perhaps, shift their role in the sinthomosexual logic considered through radical feminism.

⁴⁰ Edelman, *No Future*, 29.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

children as the bearers of futurity and turns elsewhere. The sinthomosexual, thus, does not figure as an active destroyer of children or even the future but rather as simply brushing such questions to the side in favor of other kinds of pleasures and indulgences. The radical separatist feminist, by contrast, continues to figure as a destructive, terrifying, even murderous threat to the cohesion of the social, to the family, to men, and, most pointedly, to male children.

In the first chapter of her book on motherhood, *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich shares the following anecdote:

In a living room in 1975, I spent an evening with a group of women poets, some of whom had children... We talked of poetry, and also of infanticide, of the case of a local woman, the mother of eight, who had been in severe depression since the birth of her third child, and who had recently murdered and decapitated her two youngest, on her suburban front lawn... Every woman in that room who had children, every poet, could identify with her.⁴²

That anyone, let alone a mother, would murder a child remains unthinkable today.

Unthinkable to most, that is, except for mothers. Recounting this anecdote, Jane Gallop reminds us: "*Of Woman Born* not only speaks to the secret of common maternal anger but treats that anger as a surface eruption of an even darker, deeper violence that systematically constitutes motherhood as a patriarchal institution."⁴³ The child, for these feminists, cannot be simply rejected or refused, the child, itself, is already the figuration of a thwarted future. As Jennifer Doyle has argued, Edelman's reliance on the child—

⁴² Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Norton Pbk. Ed edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 24.

⁴³ Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, Reprint edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 2.

particularly as the child is figured in one of Edelman's anecdotes as the larger than life fetus—elides the maternal body that is always connected to that child.⁴⁴ Edelman addresses this elision tangentially in a footnote. He notes: "The overwhelming presence of male *sinthomosexuals* in cultural representation reflects, no doubt, a gender bias that continues to view women as 'naturally' bound more closely to sociality, reproduction, and domesticating emotion."⁴⁵ Edelman goes on, here, to admit that there may be some female *sinthomosexuals*, particularly in Hitchcock's characters, though these figures are marked through an excess of "'love'—rather than a refusal of sociality and desire."⁴⁶ It is this connection of women to the emotional and domesticating sphere that both motivates the destructive impulses of radical feminism and makes such impulses so terroristically threatening. Furthermore, Edelman might insist that his *sinthomosexual* has no literal relation to any actual persons. And, yet, I argue, it is precisely the literal feminist refusal of reproduction—the threat to the actual, biological end of generations—that marks the feminist figure as dangerous.

The Child as the bearer of the future's potentiality is not a signifier that is available to women. Gayle Rubin's groundbreaking essay, "The Traffic in Women," makes this argument by connecting Engel's work on kinship systems and Marx's analysis of the reproduction of labor in the service of capital to Oedipal drama, via Freud and Lacan.⁴⁷ The kinship system, reinforced through heterosexuality, Rubin argues, is structured so as to assure the persistence of wealth and social capital for the patriarchal lineage. Articulated in Lacanian parlance through the symbolic of the phallus, this

⁴⁴ Doyle, "Blind Spots and Failed Performance."

⁴⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 165.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Rubin, "Thinking Sex."

inheritance is given through the exchange of the phallus in the Oedipal drama. As Rubin reminds us, “The girl never gets the phallus. It passes through her, and in its passage is transformed into a child.”⁴⁸ The child, then, does not promise a political or social future for all but, rather, becomes the instantiation of the father’s future via the phallus. The child is always the proto-father. We might also argue, by this Oedipal logic, that the girl is both always a child (i.e. women and children) and never a child. She fails to overcome the Oedipal drama because she is never able to become other than a woman, specifically a mother, and thus never able to be or have the phallus.

The lack of discussion of the Oedipal crisis in *No Future* is a curious omission. By being against children, refusing the mandates of reproduction, the sinthomosexual also refuses the Oedipal inheritance of the phallus. Without the Oedipal drama and its concomitant threat of castration, the law of the father, the motor of the symbolic, fails to inaugurate meaning. The figuring of the sinthomosexual as the excessive force of *jouissance*—figuring as it does as “insisting on access to *jouissance* in the place of access to sense”—derives from the sinthomosexual’s threat to the logic of the Oedipal drama that would serve to contain the sinthome.⁴⁹ The trouble here, however, is that this negation of the Oedipal does nothing to dismantle the privileged place of the phallus in the symbolic order. Refusing the promise of the phallus—that is to say, refusing reproductive futurity—inaugurated, as Rubin argues, in its passage from father to son, does not necessarily collapse its value. We might find here the kind of hopeful promise of a symbolic structured otherwise that Edelman so resolutely refuses to claim. By

⁴⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 37.

withholding the phallus and its promise of heterosexuality, the son-father imagines he can rescript the symbolic otherwise.

If Edelman reads the political promise of the future in the sentimental attachment to the Child—and, we might add, with the political investment in the phallic promise of the Oedipal drama—the project of radical lesbian-feminism takes aim at the structural position of Daddy. Both SCUM and C.L.I.T. want to kill Daddy. This murderous attack on Daddy pushes the reader to consider the limits of oedipalization. The destruction of the Oedipal triangle would not only dismantle heterosexuality but, with it, gender difference. SCUM and C.L.I.T. are the most resolutely Oedipal, taking aim at the father, oriented toward the destruction of femininity through the cessation of reproduction. It is Daddy that keeps women barefoot and pregnant, consigned and confined to the burdens of reproduction. By claiming lesbianism as a structural position, rather than simply a personal identity or sexual practice, radical separatist feminism names the threat that women's refusal of reproduction poses to the patriarchal machine inaugurated and reinforced through the law of the family.

The destruction of the symbolic is also the target of C.L.I.T. Tackling the Symbolic as language, C.L.I.T. called for a refusal of all cultural discourse that would seek to define and contain the lesbian. The liberal biased attempt at social incorporation—an incorporation enacted, as they argue by a media more invested in the promotion of the avant-garde sexual deviant—they contend, renders the lesbian part of a palatable, even enviable, subculture. It is not just mainstream media that would co-opt the signifying force of the lesbian but women's liberation and gay liberation as well. Rejecting the heterosexual "artifice" that ascribes gender difference, C.L.I.T. proclaims:

“Daddy is a piece of shit who demands respect.”⁵⁰ C.L.I.T. takes aim at drag culture: “males can afford to keep on laughing at momma, having no heart, no ability to empathize with momma who is the real victim of family life.”⁵¹ The family here is the marker of the rules of both heterosexuality and patriarchy, enforced through the law of the father. Rather than offer a refined image of the lesbian that might bring her into the confines of the familial, that might make her an identifiable subject of the properly social, C.L.I.T. proclaims: “It is far more important to become unintelligible.”⁵² Like the sinthomosexual, C.L.I.T. rejects “futurism’s logic of intelligibility” moving instead to “insist on the unintelligible’s unintelligibility.”⁵³ Refusing not only intelligibility, C.L.I.T.’s goal is, simultaneously, to become alienated from the intelligibility of the mainstream.

Beyond challenging the bounds of proper femininity, separatist feminism challenged the bounds of the properly political. It is here that we might find the most traction with Edelman’s overarching analysis of the modalities of social change. Edelman falls short of insisting on the murderous elimination of children, opting instead for a kind of passive approach, one Heather Love describes as “looking to throw out as many babies as possible with his bathwater.”⁵⁴ Edelman’s approach to politics is, in fact, not to approach it at all. The politics that Edelman eschews is governed by a logic of opposition that always promises a better tomorrow. This opposition, which relies on what Wendy Brown calls “wounded attachments,” seeks legitimation through the state by

⁵⁰ C.L.I.T., “C.L.I.T. Statement #2,” 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵³ Edelman, *No Future*, 106–107.

⁵⁴ Heather Love, “Wedding Crashers,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 1 (2007): 130.

means of a politics of identity.⁵⁵ Part of what is rejected in the sinthomosexual's acquiescence is not only a politics formulated on a linear narrative of progress but also a politics staked on empirical and tangible outcomes. If we are not fighting for rights, for the future, then what *are* we fighting for? This sense of hopelessness in the rejection of empirical, futural politics has been labeled by one of *No Future*'s reviewers as "political suicide."⁵⁶ Though the sinthomosexual never takes the plunge, the feminist separatist just might. There is something nihilistic about feminist separatism; it's not entirely clear what happens after society has been destroyed. The cultural memory of a specifically lesbian separatism tends to align this movement with a utopic politics of elsewhere. A 2009 *New York Times* article, for example, laments the loss of "lesbian land," that was so central to certain kinds of separatist movements of the 1970s.⁵⁷ Although the cultural nostalgia for separatism, perhaps mostly from within the women's movement, invokes a kind of rural utopia, the ongoing association between feminism and a nihilistic politics of destruction rests on the figure of the radical separatist feminist. Returning to Edelman's litany of those childish figures to whom the sinthomosexual offers a resolute "fuck you," we might imagine the feminist rejoinder as follows: Kill the patriarchy and the Man in whose name we are collectively terrorized; kill Daddy Warbucks; kill Jean Valjean; kill the predatory rapist; kill pricks both in your pants and in your head; kill the whole network of capitalist relations and the future that serves as its prop.

Feminism's Threat to The Child

⁵⁵ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁵⁶ Andrea Fontenot, "No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (review)," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 1 (2006): 252–56, doi:10.1353/mfs.2006.0024.

⁵⁷ Sarah Kershaw, "My Sister's Keeper," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2009, sec. Fashion & Style, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/01/fashion/01womyn.html>.

Christina Sommers' 2001 book, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*, opens with the following proclamation: "It's a bad time to be a boy in America."⁵⁸ (13). Sommers—who is also author of the polemic *Who Stole Feminism?*—marks the Columbine High School shootings of 1999 as "the defining event" for boys at the time.⁵⁹ She goes on to list numerous acts of kindness, support, and grief shared by several young men in the wake of Columbine in order to juxtapose these good boys with what she argues has become the "fashionable... pathologiz(ing)... of healthy male children."⁶⁰ Reading against a popular media narrative that named the actions of two male students at Columbine as symptomatic of a crisis of American boyhood, Sommers argues, instead, that it is feminism—and particularly an equality based feminism, one that puts the needs of girls ahead of boys—that is to blame for boys' subsequent lapse into second-class citizenship. The primary target of Sommers' critique is the marked rise in policies and rhetoric that, as she argues, position girls as the hapless victims of boys' willful patriarchal collusion.⁶¹ Sommers' portrayal of feminism vacillates between a politico-legal representation of equality feminism and a socio-cultural strategy of girl-power feminism.

Feminism's disregard for men, and its ensuing effects on boys, is echoed in Christy Wampole's *New York Times* opinion piece following the Sandyhook massacre. In her piece, "Guns and the Decline of Young Men," Wampole argues that it is feminism,

⁵⁸ Christina Hoff Sommers, *The WAR AGAINST BOYS: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*, 1st Touchstone Ed edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶¹ Of note, the 2011 reprint of Sommers' book changes the title from *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming our Young Men* to *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Policies are Harming our Young Men*.

along with the civil rights movement, that has robbed white men of their social position and driven them to destructive excess:

From the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and onward, young men—and young white men in particular—have increasingly been asked to yield what they'd believed was securely theirs. This underlying fact, compounded by the backdrop of violent entertainment and easy access to weapons, creates the conditions for thousands of young men to consider their future prospects and decide they would rather destroy than create.⁶²

Wampole's diagnosis of the crisis of young men adds a surprising twist to Edelman's sinthomosexual. We might find a better figure for the sinthomosexual in these mass murdering young men. Their sexuality, too, contests the borders of heterosexuality and the failure of an Oedipally mature genitality. Like the figure of the effeminate boy, the hypermasculinity figured in the acts of these young men, as Michael Kimmel diagnoses it, is connected to the perils of an enduring attachment to the mother.⁶³ Often imagined as recluses, persistent masturbators, holed up in their mother's basements, they fail to attach to the futural promise of the Child as they remain children themselves. Here, the sinthomosexual's rejection of the logic of futurity is not simply a turn away but, rather, a psychotic murderous rampage aimed at destruction. And, at its root is the wounding and castrating, indeed the destructive, effects of feminism. Feminist politics is intricately bound with questions of survival. Part of what is marked in the menace of radical feminism's commitment to destruction is the threat that is posed to the survival of others.

⁶² Christie Wampole, "Guns and the Decline of the Young Man," *Opinionator*, accessed March 1, 2015, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/17/guns-and-the-decline-of-the-young-man/>.

⁶³ Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

The sinthomosexual's dismissal of reproductive futurism marks the possibility of sexual meaning outside of hetero-reproduction, but it does not guarantee, or even suggest, its destruction. The threat of the radical feminist, on the other hand, is precisely this threat of the destruction of the future through both an outright refusal of reproduction as well as a pointed disregard for the maintenance of the political field. Put another way, it is only because feminism has posed such a threat to the nuclear family as the political center that our current future commitments are so thoroughly staked on the figure of the Child.

Part of what is imagined in the outcome of a queer refusal of futurity, per the sinthomosexual's acquiescence to his assigned social position, is a collapse in the internal logic of the social. Such a collapse does not, however, guarantee its cessation. The future will march forward, though, perhaps, it will be spun to a different horizon. Indeed, what I have attempted to show here is that we cannot measure the outcomes of social refusal through the logics in which they are embedded. By all accounts, patriarchy survives, as does capitalism, racism, and classism.

The association between feminism and the refusal of the conceptions of hetero-patriarchy, namely through a refusal of reproduction, I argue, has had the effect of shifting the plane on which the futural logics of liberal humanism are staked. Put another way, the centrality of the Child, which Edelman so astutely argues, is made possible because feminism has decentered the nuclear family as the central mandate of the "structuring optimism of politics."

Implied within Edelman's polemic is an understanding of an opposition between queer politics and assimilationist gay and lesbian politics along the line of the recent fight for

gay marriage. There has been surprisingly little attention within these debates to feminist critiques of and resistances to marriage as both a social and political institution.

Gay Marriage

On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that same-sex marriage is a protected right under the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Justice Anthony Kennedy, a swing voter known for his libertarian views on the protection of the private life of citizens, penned the majority opinion. Throughout the ruling opinion, marriage is described as personal and intimate *choice* that must be protected as a right of all citizens. The protection of choice becomes, in this majority opinion, the impetus behind the ruling. The opinion of the court is laid out thus: “Under the Constitution, same-sex couples seek in marriage the same legal treatment as opposite-sex couples, and it would disparage their choices and diminish their personhood to deny them this right.”⁶⁴ Choice is a familiar rallying cry of leftist politics built on rights to individual autonomy. Indeed, “choice” has become synonymous with a feminist insistence on women’s bodily autonomy, most namely protected access to contraception and abortion. The rhetorical power of this claim to choice is evidenced in Kennedy’s opinion when he analogizing the right to choice in marriage to women’s right to reproductive choice. This connection is made most explicit when Kennedy states: “Like choices concerning contraception, family relationships, procreation, and childrearing, all of which are protected by the Constitution, decisions concerning marriage are among the most intimate that an individual can make.”⁶⁵ The claim for the private right of individuals to choice in

⁶⁴ Anthony Kennedy, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 1, 19 (Supreme Court of The United States 2015).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

marriage relies on the immediate recognition of choice as an important tool of feminist claims to reproductive autonomy. Feminist rhetorics of choice, and the anti-choice backlash of the “pro-life” movement stand in as an emblematic moment in Edelman’s highlighting of the political power of the Child. Recalling an anti-abortion billboard “plastered (with) an image of a full-term fetus, larger in life than a full grown man...that bore the phrase: ‘Its not a choice; it’s a child’” Edelman finds himself, a gay man, hailed by the sign and its implicit “biblical mandate ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’”⁶⁶ Queer here seems to supersede the militant radical feminist as the infanticidal destroyer of futurity. But queer’s infanticidal gesture is bound up with the very thing that makes it enviable: a life without children, romantic attachments released from the confines of legal (and financial) commitments, a rejection of the prescriptions of heteronormativity. Indeed, it is not uncommon now to hear queerness claimed by otherwise heterosexually affiliated people on the basis of this refusal of reproduction and all of the social institutions that have been built around its protection.

Returning to my earlier anecdote regarding my students’ definitions of feminists and feminism, I might add a third column: feminist politics. Despite a popularized definition of feminism based on equality between the sexes, access to abortion is one of the most recognizable feminist political goals. Indeed, in addition to sexual violence, abortion continues to stand, at least in terms of legislative and policy based initiatives, as a pre-eminent feminist issue. Despite Justice Kennedy’s sideways reference to the protection of reproductive rights under the guise of individual autonomy, the decade between the first legalization of same sex marriage in Massachusetts and the 2015 Supreme Court ruling has seen some of the largest rollbacks in reproductive choice

⁶⁶ Edelman, *No Future*, 15.

legislation since *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. According to the Guttmacher Institute, the years between 2010 and 2015 saw the greatest roll back of abortion access since *Roe v. Wade*. In February of 2011, Barack Obama, following on a campaign promise from 2008, declared his unequivocal opposition to the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), making way for the ultimate repeal of DOMA and subsequent federal recognition of same-sex marriages. That same legislative year saw the passage of 86 laws restricting abortion access, by far the greatest number of legal roll backs in the 40 years of *Roe v. Wade*, and more than double the previous record for rollbacks set at 34 in 2005.⁶⁷ Of course, the 5 years since Obama publicly called for the repeal of DOMA has witnessed the overturning of Prop 8, DOMA's repeal, and the constitutional protection of gay marriage. The same five years has seen the rapid development of states that Guttmacher deems "extremely hostile" to abortion rights.

Though Edelman addresses gay marriage in a direct way only fleetingly, within the futural logic of the Child, gay marriage is the implied institution that allows gays and lesbians to make a claim on reproductive futurity. Indeed, much of queer pushback against gay assimilation is staked on the bounds of gay marriage. But, why? On the one hand, it has been argued that wider tolerance for gay relationships, particularly of the piously monogamous sort, is the inevitable fallout of the AIDS crisis. On the other, it could be claimed that gay marriage is a product of the post-60s and 70s radicalism's emphasis on expanded civil rights. And, yet, neither of these reasons articulate why gay marriage should be the polarity against which queer is drawn. There has been a significant amount of resistance to gay marriage in both queer politics and queer theory.

⁶⁷ The Guttmacher Institute, "Laws Affecting Reproductive Health and Rights: State Trends at Midyear, 2011.," accessed January 24, 2016, <http://www.guttmacher.org/statecenter/updates/2011/statetrends22011.html>.

By contrast, there has been limited feminist resistance to the conservative politics that undergird claims to gay marriage as a civic right. At the level of policy, the legacies of “second wave” feminism’s insistence on sexual freedoms are being rolled back enormously even in the face of seemingly liberal progress in the realm of sexuality. The normative swing of main stream gay and lesbian politics should be just as concerning for feminists as it has been for queers.

I want to push this feminist concern further by arguing that gay marriage is made possible not only by the normative claims of mainstream gay politics but also by the rejection of reproductive futurism that was the hallmark of radical separatist politics of the 1970s. Put more directly, gay marriage, as leftist political goal, concedes a certain breakdown of gender difference and sexual freedom while maintaining the capitalist and patriarchal structures of the nuclear family. My student’s association between lesbians and aggression as the negative pole of feminist identity makes clear that the destructive claims of radical feminism persist as a cultural trope. Gay marriage, I argue, is one effect of material defense against the potential of that destruction.

Radical feminism’s separatist politics mark feminists as dangerous. That is, feminist refusals of heterosexuality, marked through lesbian separatism, pose a real and literal threat to reproductive futurity. The danger of feminist refusals of and resistances to the heteropatriarchy is different from the danger of sexual violence that marked the feminist sex wars of the early 1980s, though the articulation of both may have related effects. I turn in the next chapter to examine the danger to women’s sexuality marked by the feminist sex wars in relation to an emergent politics of sexuality marked by the AIDS crisis.

Chapter 3

Around 1987: Sex, Politics, and Lesbian Bed Death

On a blustery October Sunday in 1987, the AIDS Memorial Quilt, containing nearly 2000 panels and spanning roughly the area of a football field, was laid out for its inaugural display on the Washington Mall.¹ Around the quilt, hundreds of thousands of gays and lesbians and their allies gathered for the Second National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights. Following the first march in 1979, this march took on new directions and a new sense of urgency against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis. By many counts, 1987 was a milestone year in the first decade of the AIDS crisis. Early that year, ACTUP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was founded in New York City. The federal government had finally begun to address the crisis as evidenced by President Reagan's first public acknowledgement of the disease. The FDA approved zidovudine, or AZT. The demands of the march reflected the growing public awareness of AIDS and, specifically, an attention to the government's slow response to the crisis. Among the demands of the protestors were civil protections for people with AIDS, increases to AIDS funding for research and care, a gay and lesbian civil rights bills, legal recognition for gay and lesbian relationships, and the repeal of sodomy laws. The organization of the march also reflected an intersectional commitment to issues of race, class, and gender. Among the organizers were Eleanor Smeal, then present of NOW (National Organization for Women), Cesar Chavez, labor organizer, and Jesse Jackson, at the time a candidate

¹ See <http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>

for the democratic presidential nomination. The group's platform also included demands for reproductive freedom and the end to sexist and racist oppressions.

Not far from the quilt, John D'Emilio and Sue Hyde had organized the weekend's "sex and politics" town hall bringing together activists and academics to reflect on the current moment.² Among those speakers was Jade McGleughlin who had just finished a master's degree in social work at Smith College. McGleughlin had long been a part of Boston's feminist and lesbian activist circuits. McGleughlin's speech that day echoed the demands of the organizing group while also acknowledging the challenges faced in queer and feminist circles in the face of both AIDS and the feminist sex wars. This speech has long been credited as the first public use of the term "lesbian bed death."³ McGleughlin employed the phrase "lesbian bed death" to name a challenge she identified in gay and feminist politics of the time. This challenge was the increased attention on sexuality and sexual practices in the wake of AIDS was narrowing the reach of sexuality in claims for privacy. Such a narrowing of the understanding of what constituted sexuality and sexual pleasures was in distinction to earlier feminist claims on sexual freedoms but also consistent with the increased reliance on juridical claims for privacy in the fallout of the feminist sex wars.

² John D'Emilio, *In a New Century: Essays on Queer History, Politics, and Community Life* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

³ Michelle O'Mara, "The Correlation Of Sexual Frequency And Relationship Satisfaction Among Lesbians." July 2012; Suzanne Iasenza, "Lesbian Sexuality Post-Stonewall to Post-Modernism: Putting the 'Lesbian Bed Death' Concept to Bed," *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 59–69, doi:10.1080/01614576.2000.11074330.

“Lesbian bed death” is a term that gained traction in in the late 1980s and early 1990s in both lesbian cultural circles and sexological debates on lesbian sexuality.⁴ In the argument I bring forth here, however, I do not take up “lesbian bed death” as an empirical claim on how much, or how little, sex lesbian couples are or were having. Rather, I am interested in how this term names a kind of cultural anxiety around the tensions of pleasure and danger, of queer and feminist that have continued to be such a rich ground of contestation. For this reason, I argue that an attention to lesbian sexuality at the time, and specifically to the origins of the term “lesbian bed death”— might provide a different bridge in the ongoing bifurcations of anti-normative queer theory and governance feminism.⁵

On the heels of the women’s liberation movements of the 1970s, in the history of U.S. feminist politics, the early 1980s is marked by the feminist sex wars. The feminist sex wars, broadly speaking, name the rise of the feminist anti-pornography movement of the time. The most visible event of the feminist sex wars is most often considered to be the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality and the vocal boycott of the conference by the group Women Against Pornography. One effect of the feminist sex wars was the resulting image of feminists, and feminism, as anti-sex. In the memories of feminist theory, much of the anti-sex sentiment of the time is attributed dually to Catherine

⁴ Iasenza, “Lesbian Sexuality Post-Stonewall to Post-Modernism”; Suzanne Iasenza, “Beyond ‘Lesbian Bed Death,’” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 111–20, doi:10.1300/J155v06n01_10.

⁵ I use the term “governance feminism” in reference to Janet Halley’s provocative and polemical work in *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break From Feminism*. In this text, Halley diagnoses the ways in which feminist projects have become wholly embedded within and reliant on the state. I mobilize the term here, in concert with Halley, to think about how feminist approaches to rape, sexual violence, and sexual harassment have, since the time of the sex wars, been largely conceptualized through recourse to the state and other such legislative powers, such as university campus disciplinary systems.

MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. While both were scholars in their own right, in the early 1980s they collaborated to influence the passage of the Minneapolis Anti-Pornography Ordinance.

Both MacKinnon and Dworkin are credited with the phrase “all sex is rape.” The phrase, which does not appear in either of their writings, has come to stand in for both of their theoretical moves at the time. The phrases “lesbian bed death” and “all sex is rape,” are both culturally ubiquitous and highly parodied, as well as often misrepresented in the origin.⁶ Rather than take these phrases at face value, I argue that they name an anxiety around the feminist demand to address the reality, and ordinariness, of sexual violence against the backdrop of queer and feminist claims for the expansions of recognitions of non-normative sexualities and sexual freedoms. For feminism, the time around the sex wars marks a shift away from a post-civil rights, liberties based legislative agenda—the equal rights amendment and *Roe v. Wade* being two hallmarks of liberal feminism of this time—to a more punitive legislative agenda as exemplified by the anti-pornography ordinances that are associated with the work of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. In other words, the legislative agenda became less about securing rights for groups and more about prosecuting individuals for harms imagined to befall certain groups. For queers and so-called sex positive feminists, the AIDS crisis heralded the need for civil protections of a variety of sexual practices as well as resistance to censorship and the eradication of queer public spaces.

⁶ The phrase “all sex is rape” is variously attributed to both Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. However, there is no clear citation to attribute the phrase to either thinker. Dworkin addresses this claim in the preface to the Tenth Anniversary edition of *Intercourse*. In her preface, Dworkin addresses the misattribution with the following rhetorical question: “If one has eroticized a differential in power that allows for force as a natural and inevitable part of intercourse, how could one understand that this book does not say that all men are rapists or that all intercourse is rape?”

The separation of feminist and queer commitments along these kinds of legislative lines, and the various theoretical and political commitments that have befallen each group in the wake of the sex wars, has been made most clear by Janet Halley in her polemic *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break From Feminism*. As one critic has noted, Halley sets up a firm opposition between “the presumed good of undifferentiated, decontextualized, and dehistoricized bodily pleasures, and...the allegedly pleasure-killing, paranoid, and moralizing power of feminism”.⁷ One central claim of Halley’s argument is to identify what she terms as “governance feminism” as *the* feminism, particularly in the U.S. social context. As Alice Echols argues in *Daring to Be Bad*, it was in the early 1980s that radical feminism was replaced by cultural feminist claims on women’s essential identities. It is against this backdrop that governance feminism emerges. Echoing a common genealogy of queer theory’s origins in Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex,” Halley makes clear that the cleaving of queer from feminist was not along the fault lines of gender and sexuality, as is often imagined, but, rather, along the lines of pleasure and danger.⁸

Certain strands of queer theory have reversed the terms of this debates. The so-called anti-social thesis, particularly as articulated by Bersani and Edelman, has argued

⁷ Mary Anne Franks, “What’s Left of Pleasure? A Book Review of Janet Halley’s *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism*,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, Winter 2007), <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1369354>.

⁸ *Pleasure and Danger* refers to the title of the collection published from the 1982 Barnard Conference. The collection was drawn from papers presented at the conference as well as in response to the boycott. See Editor/ Carol S. Vance, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, 1st Edition (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). During the writing of this dissertation, *Signs*, the leading feminist theory journal, under new editorial oversight, reframed its publication commitments to bring considerations of sexuality, via queer theory, more formally into its framework. This change in leadership and editorial commitment was marked by a call for papers for a special issue titled “Pleasure and Danger: Sexual Freedom in the Twenty-First Century.” The use of pleasure and danger to mark this shift further demonstrates that this couplet is often imagined to mark the borders between feminist and queer commitments, between the proliferation of sexual freedoms and the moralizing oversight of feminism.

that the pleasures of sexuality mark a danger to the normative demands of the social. Such a thesis echoes the claims of an early pro-sex feminism, specifically as articulated by the tenets of radical separatism which I have explored in the previous chapter. The association between feminism and sexuality as a threat to the coherence of the social gets evacuated when feminism is painted as the moralizing, conservative protector of good sexuality.⁹ But, as feminist responses to the anti-social thesis, including my own, have articulated, there is much left to be said for the value of bridging feminism histories with queer claims for the value of negativity.

Even as queer and feminist theories explore their relations to the critical potential of negativity, one realm of negativity remains under-explored: the question of sexual violence.¹⁰ I examine here three related events of 1987: the publications of both “Is the Rectum a Grave?” and Andrea Dworkin’s *Intercourse* as well as the use of the term “lesbian bed death” at the 1987 March for Gay and Lesbian Lives. I do so in order to trace some of the under explored ways in which the feminist sex wars continue to influence feminist and queer thinking today. Even more so, I am interested here in elucidating the evacuation of the figure of the lesbian from both feminist and queer political claims of the time. My argument is this: queer theory’s interest in the value of

⁹ The question of ethics and the effect of relegating feminism to a moralizing protector is a central theme of Lynne Huffer’s *Are The Lips A Grave: A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*.

¹⁰ To be clear. I am not suggesting here that the topic of sexual violence is under explored, especially in the histories of feminist thought. I am, however, arguing that sexual violence is underexplored, indeed, rarely discussed, in the conversations that fall under the rubric of queer negativity or the anti-social thesis. The history of feminist theory and sexual violence spans over 40 years. See, for example: Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, Reprinted edition (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993); Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 20 Anv edition (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Catherine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape*, 1 edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015); Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

abjection and debasement fails to address the insidiousness of ordinary sexual violence; even so, it is this strand of queer theory that might provide the necessary release from the persistence of rendering ordinary sexual violence legible only in juridico-legal terms. Put more simply, perhaps queer theory might find a more productive relationship with the governance/moralizing feminism it has been said to leave behind. And, relatedly, perhaps the specter of lesbian bed death—which I will demonstrate is an imagined response to feminism’s killjoy effect on women’s sexuality—can open up these questions of sexuality through the specific nexus of feminist and queer.

Lesbian Bed Death and Feminist Anxieties

In 1983, Pepper Schwartz and Phillip Blumstein published their now infamous study *American Couples: Money, Work, Sex*.¹¹ As Dorothy Allison notes in her review of the book for *The Advocate*, Schwartz and Blumstein quickly rose to the national stage, with guest appearances on a variety of daytime talks shows, to discuss the book’s controversial subjects.¹² Schwartz and Blumstein’s study focuses on four types of couples—married heterosexual, cohabitating heterosexual, cohabitating lesbian, and cohabitating gay—in order to explore a variety of relational negotiations and everyday habits of American couples in the second half of the twentieth century. Combining extensive survey data with over 300 in-depth interviews, *American Couples* focused specifically on “money, work and sex” as points of both intimacy and contention for enduring relationships. Much of the critical acclaim of the book came from the authors

¹¹ Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples: Money-Work-Sex* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985).

¹² Dorothy Allison, “Blumstein & Schwartz A Massive Study of American Couples,” *Advocate*, December 8, 1983.

frank explorations of non-heterosexual, non-marital pairings in the wake of both the sexual revolution and the women's liberation movement.¹³ Indeed, within the text, Schwartz and Blumfield rely on the terms "new man" and "new woman" to demonstrate the ways in which the political upheavals of the 1960s and early 1970s regarding both gender and sexuality fundamentally reshaped relationship dynamics.¹⁴ Now thirty-five years on, many references to the study concern a misattribution, often specifically to Schwartz, of the phrase "lesbian bed death."¹⁵ Although the term is nowhere to be found in the pages of the book, its legacy can be traced to Schwartz's and Blumstein's data-driven assertion that lesbian couples have less sex than the other three types of pairings and experience an even greater drop off in sexual encounters as the relationship progresses.¹⁶

¹³ See, e.g., Francesca M. Cancian, review of *Review of American Couples: Money, Work, Sex*, by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Journal of Sociology* 90, no. 3 (1984): 669–71.; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America, Third Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).; Norman Goodman, review of *Review of American Couples: Money, Work, Sex*, by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *Social Forces* 63, no. 3 (1985): 873–75, doi:10.2307/2578507.

¹⁴ "New man" and "new woman" are terms that came about to describe the shift in gender roles and expectations as a result of both the women's liberation movement as well as the shifting social landscape of post World War II America. For detailed account of the relationship between the United States shifting social land, the rise of feminism, and the development of the "new man," see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*, 1st edition (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1983).

¹⁵ See, for example, Iasenza, "Lesbian Sexuality Post-Stonewall to Post-Modernism"; Liza Mundy, "The Gay Guide to Wedded Bliss," *The Atlantic*, June 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/06/the-gay-guide-to-wedded-bliss/309317/>; Daniel Bergner, "Unexcited? There May Be a Pill for That," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/magazine/unexcited-there-may-be-a-pill-for-that.html>; Esther D. Rothblum and Marcia Hill, *Couples Therapy: Feminist Perspectives* (Routledge, 2014).

¹⁶ What is often left out of the conversation is Schwartz and Blumstein's further finding that lesbians experience more relationship turnover than the other three couples. So, even if one is to take the findings at face value, it does not measure a drop off in lifetime sexual encounters. To the contrary, such findings may point to lesbians having a greater overall sexual frequency if they are consistently in new relationships.

One of the primary reasons Schwartz and Blumstein offer for the dearth of lesbian sex is the influence of feminist critiques of sexuality as linked to patriarchal structures of oppression and coercion. In other words, feminist consciousness—that is, the political awareness that feminism has brought to individual women’s lives—has negatively affected lesbian willingness to engage in certain sexual behaviors: “Since lesbians have grown up learning society’s restrictive guidelines governing female sexuality, we feel their sex lives may be affected in many unconscious ways.”¹⁷ Blumstein and Schwartz interpret lesbians’ hesitancy around sex, specifically, oral sex, to a socialized taboo surrounding female sexuality. They note, however, that younger women, empowered through feminist movements, are likely to demonstrate more resistance to such social norms. While the topic discussed by Schwartz and Blumstein is the perceived persistence of feminine shame surrounding sexuality, the authors suggest elsewhere that sexual initiation is more fraught for lesbian couples both because their dual-female dyad is not governed by the same rules that expect and emphasize male initiation in sex as well as their own hesitancies around desire and coercion.¹⁸ In diagnosing these problems of lesbian sexuality, Schwartz and Blumstein are quick to remind readers that these are measurements of genital sexuality, whereas they “have learned that lesbians prize nongenital physical contact—cuddling, touching, hugging—probably more than other couples do.”¹⁹ Put another way, Blumstein and Schwartz recognize that they are diagnosing a problem of lesbian sexuality through the metrics of genitality. They are

¹⁷ Blumstein and Schwartz, *American Couples*, 239.

¹⁸ The ways in which the women’s movement has affected lesbian relationships is the focus of the case study of Natalie and Jill, two lesbians who met while living in a feminist, separatist collective. Within their case study, Blumstein and Schwartz highlight perceived and negotiated power differentials along the lines of both gendered expectations and class socialization. See *Ibid.*, 481–493.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

quick, then, to assure readers that lesbians may, indeed, experience sexual satisfaction through “nongenital physical contact.” This emphasis away from genital sexuality has a neutering effect on the figure of the lesbian, marking her as drawn to more feminine, perhaps even more childish, modes of physical relating such as “cuddling, touching, (and) hugging.” I highlight this point because much of the attention to lesbian sexuality in the wake of *American Couples* focused on the question of genitality and the phallogentrism that defines measurable sexual practices.²⁰ Furthermore, for the purposes of the argument here, I think it is important to note the ways in which lesbian sexuality as depicted in *American Couples* is thought to be associated with less dangerous, perhaps less threatening, forms of physicality.

Feminism, as it is discussed in Blumstein and Schwartz, is tacitly lauded as shifting the relational dynamics between men and women as well as heralding an age of more freedom of sexual expression and sexual pairing. Nevertheless, when associated with lesbians, feminism becomes less liberatory and more restrictive of certain kinds of sexual expression and experience. The argument becomes, then, that lesbians, owing to their socialization as women, suffer simultaneously from a feminized shame around sexuality as well as a reluctance to be the sexual initiator. Sexologist Susan Iasenza argues that this kind of “gender socialization theory,” is, itself, a product of the rise of feminist consciousness and the uneasy displacement of biological essentialism to a kind of social essentialism.²¹ The myth of lesbian bed death, according to Iasenza, is imbricated with other early 1980s theories of lesbian sexuality, most notably the concept of lesbian fusion. Lesbian fusion is a term that began to circulate in sexology circles as

²⁰ See especially Marilyn Frye, “Lesbian ‘Sex,’” in *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures: Issues in Philosophical Historiography*, ed. Jennifer Allen (SUNY Press, 1990).

²¹ Iasenza, “Lesbian Sexuality Post-Stonewall to Post-Modernism.”

interest in documenting and describing lesbian sexuality increased after the publication of *American Couples*.²² As the name suggests, the theory of lesbian fusion claimed that “lesbian couples, because they contain two women who are socialized to be more relational, achieve a greater degree of sustain intimacy...”²³ In other words, lesbians experience the “urge to merge,” like good women, generally valuing intimacy over desire, stability over passion. Such gender coding fails to read lesbian sexuality as complex in its own right or lesbian coupling as anything other than a feminized impulse to domestication. The concept of lesbian fusion, therefore, serves to reinforce a perception of lesbian relationships and lesbian sexuality—as mentioned above—as both hyper-feminine and childish in nature.

Despite over three decades of scholarship seeking to disprove or reorient the conventions of lesbian bed death, the trope persists today as a near given fact of lesbian sexuality. For example, a recent essay on compulsory sexuality and asexual identity cites “the identification of lesbian bed death as a problem within lesbian communities that may have increased sexual pressure on some women.”²⁴⁻²⁵ In the popular media, sex columnist Dan Savage, as a recent guest on the podcast of fitness guru Jillian Michaels,

²² For a comprehensive summary of the literature on lesbian fusion see: Sue Blyth and Gillian Straker, “Intimacy, Fusion and Frequency of Sexual Contact in Lesbian Couples,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 26, no. 4 (December 1, 1996): 253–56, doi:10.1177/008124639602600409; Laura Gold, “A Critical Analysis of Fusion in Lesbian Relationships,” *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue Canadienne de Service Social* 20, no. 2 (2003): 259–71; David M. Frost and Michele J. Eliason, “Challenging the Assumption of Fusion in Female Same-Sex Relationships,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 65–74, doi:10.1177/0361684313475877; Kathryn Greene, Vickie Causby, and Diane Helene Miller, “The Nature and Function of Fusion in the Dynamics of Lesbian Relationships,” *Affilia* 14, no. 1 (February 1, 1999): 78–97.

²³ Iasenza, “Lesbian Sexuality Post-Stonewall to Post-Modernism,” 60.

²⁴ Kristina Gupta, “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept,” *Signs* 41, no. 1 (September 1, 2015): 131–54, doi:10.1086/681774.

²⁵ Notably, the authors cited here are not making claims that the cultural stereotype of “bed death” put undue sexual pressure on women but rather that the insistence of specific lesbian dynamics, namely butch/femme and s/m were an attempt to throw off this negative stereotype.

articulated a kind of hybridized biosocial essentialism argument.²⁶ Savage claims that women, and thus lesbians, experience desire after sex has been initiated unlike men for whom desire prompts them to initiate sex. Herein, the challenge for lesbians is not only that they are women, and thus experience delayed desire, but also that they lack an initiating partner. What ties Savage, asexuality scholars, and others together is that they take for granted that long-term lesbian couples experience a drop off in sexual relations that is part and parcel of their lesbian identity and/or experience. Furthermore, these taken-for-granted assumptions about lesbian sexuality rely on both biological and social assumptions about women's sexuality.

Whereas some take lesbian bed death for granted, others continue to work to disprove its existence. Early responses to the claims of lesbian bed death included more philosophical engagements with the question of lesbian sexuality. JoAnn Loulan's *Lesbian Sex*, for example, highlights the numerous differences in lesbian lives that may contribute to their differential sexual activity, as compared to heterosexual counterparts, as well as noting the various ways in which lesbians engage in sexual intimacy that may be outside the purview of normative sexuality.²⁷ Similarly, Marilyn Frye's polemic response to the desexualization of lesbian sex—aptly titled “Lesbian ‘Sex’”—hinged on refuting a definition of sex based on male orgasm.²⁸ The vast majority of responses, however, tend more toward the sexological, relying on empirical data to display lesbian sexual statistics along the lines of desire, frequency, anxiety, and practice.²⁹

²⁶ jillian michaels, *OMG, Dan Savage Guests.*, The Jillian Michaels Show, n.d.

²⁷ JoAnn Loulan, *Lesbian Sex* (Spinsters Ink, 1984).

²⁸ Frye, “Lesbian ‘Sex.’”

²⁹ See, for example, K. A. W. L. van Rosmalen-Nooijens MD Student et al., “Bed Death and Other Lesbian Sexual Problems Unraveled: A Qualitative Study of the Sexual Health of Lesbian Women Involved in a Relationship,” *Women & Health* 48, no. 3 (November 25, 2008): 339–62,

It is hard not to read the influences of the feminist sex wars in the interpretive machinery of the *American Couples* study as well as its continued uptake in popular and academic sexology. If, following the work of MacKinnon and Dworkin, all sex was a matter of power differentials, in which men had the power and women did not—and, if all sex that involved power differentials, was always already bad for women—then, it would be not only understood but, even more so, expected that sex between women would either not exist or would always be bad and, thus, slowly eradicated.³⁰ The volume's publication came at a time when feminist gains in sexual freedoms, notably the legalization of birth control and abortion, were giving way to gay and lesbian fights for civil and social rights. The first national march for Gay and Lesbian Rights took place in 1979, bringing a more national voice to gay and lesbian demands for social recognition of their specific relations. This time coincided neatly with Schwartz and Blumstein's data collection. For many, *American Couples* brought legitimacy to gay and lesbian relationships, specifically those that fit into the neat confines of a cohabitating dyad.

The moniker “lesbian bed death” has origins in the nexus of the publication of *American Couples* and the fallout of the feminist sex wars. As discussed above, in both popular and academic literature, this phrase is often attributed to one of two origins: Pepper Schwartz and *American Couples* or Jade McLeughlin's speech given at the 1987 March for Gay and Lesbian Lives. Michelle O'Mara, a lesbian sexologist, however, tells the story slightly differently. Tracing these alleged origin stories, O'Mara follows the

doi:10.1080/03630240802463343.; Sara K. Bridges and Sharon G. Horne, “Sexual Satisfaction and Desire Discrepancy in Same Sex Women's Relationships,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy* 33, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 41–53, doi:10.1080/00926230600998466.

³⁰ Of note, Schwartz rescinded her own interpretation of lesbian sexuality and lesbian relations amidst the critiques of her study and the ongoing association of her name with the phrase “lesbian bed death.” See Iasenza, “Lesbian Sexuality Post-Stonewall to Post-Modernism.”

disavowal of many key players in the chain of events—among them Schwartz as well as comedian Kate Clinton and activist and author Joann Loulan—to a diffuse collection of women in and around Boston, MA in the mid-1980s from whom the phrase emerged as both parody and portent.³¹ O’Mara ultimately gets the story from Jade McGleughlin who, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, situates the origin of lesbian bed death in post sex wars discussions about the waning and shifting of lesbian communities and lesbian sexualities. More than a naming of the empirical decline of lesbian sex, McGleughlin, as summarized by O’Mara, recalls that lesbian bed death “captured the larger loss of a sexual community where women had grown accustomed to having a public space for sexual discussions, and the excitement of the sexually charged women’s movement.”³² In other words, the waning of feminist political space was shifting the role of community and activism in lesbian desire. McGleughlin was wary of the assimilationist politics of gays and lesbians at the time who were arguing for the legal protections of gay sexuality under privacy laws. The normative claims of gay marriage, for example, fail to protect and may even threaten the kinds of lesbian sexual publics made possible through the women’s movement. However, as the phrase spread across the U.S, this story got lost in the uptake of the debate over lesbian sexuality into the realm of the sexological.

When writing to D’Emilio and Hyde to propose a paper for the Sex and Politics Forum, McGleughlin had one guiding question: how “to address the contradictions between a rigorous discussion of sexuality within feminism and the continuing reality of

³¹ O’Mara, “The Correlation Of Sexual Frequency And Relationship Satisfaction Among Lesbians.”

³² Ibid., 83.

lesbian bed death.”³³ While McGleughlin was skeptical of the turn to sexology and the empiricism that was making a claim on lesbian sexuality, she was also weary of the shifting ground in the feminist circles to which she belonged. AIDS was radically changing the way that queer communities thought about and addressed the question of sexuality. Similarly, the feminist sex wars of the early 1980s were making feminist conversations about the place of sex in politics more fraught. McGleughlin wanted to reject the move that was being made in the fall-out of the sex wars to hold up lesbian sexuality as the exemplar of a power-free sexual dynamic rooted in relationality and egalitarian principles. At the same time, however, she found it difficult to make the space to address the ways in which women’s sexuality was historically conscripted through hetero-patriarchal structures of power and dominance. The rise of women’s space in the 1970s coupled with the central tenets of feminist politics, McGleughlin argued, had given women a space in which their own desires and subjectivities could be foregrounded outside of the gendered demands of heterosexuality.

Bridging the feminist insistence on an analytic of gender with her own observations of the waning of sexually charged feminist spaces, McGleughlin posited that it was the question of lesbian desire that propelled both intra and extra group anxieties about lesbian sexuality. More specifically, McGleughlin worried that the mainstream gay and lesbian insistence on sexual privacy in the wake of the Hardwick decision failed to recognize the ways in which sexuality, and specifically queer sexuality, was part of a wider community structure and not simply a private engagement between two

³³ Jade McGleughlin, “Proposal for the Sex and Politics Forum, 1987 March for Gay and Lesbian Lives,” n.d.

individuals.³⁴ Central to McGleughlin's argument is a recognition that for many women the realities of sexual violence and the manner in which these experiences had shaped their senses of self and sexuality continued to be a block to their understanding of their own desire. With the women's movement, she recalls, women were able to claim a kind of sexual agency and subjectivity of their own. McGleughlin does not connect this space to an overly sanitized claim on women's inherent relationality but, rather, to the sexually and erotically charged impulses of radicalism and community work. To this end, McGleughlin's rallying cry for her speech was: "In a dialogue that seeks to transform a discussion of sexuality largely focused on danger to one that can encompass, explore, and create new ways of articulating women's pleasure, we have to be talking about a revitalized movements that moves sexuality from the couple back into the community."³⁵

In 1987, Marilyn Frye authored a rebuttal to myth of the dearth of lesbian sex arguing instead for its unintelligibility. Frye's "Lesbian 'Sex'" centers on her contestation of the definition of sex.³⁶ Much like earlier feminist arguments—for example Anne Koedt's "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm"—Frye argues that the definition of sex used by Blumstein and Schwartz relies on a phallogentric emphasis on both penetration and orgasm as the defining parameters of sex proper.³⁷ Frye strongly contests Blumstein and Schwartz's claims regarding the dearth of lesbian sex based on their failure to define what it means to have sex when defining the "times" per week, month, and year that couples copulated. Frye's critique is both methodological—"How

³⁴ The Hardwick decision refers to the 1986 supreme court case *Bowers v. Hardwick* which upheld Georgia's sodomy laws effectively criminalizing homosexual sex.

³⁵ McGleughlin, "Proposal for the Sex and Politics Forum, 1987 March for Gay and Lesbian Lives."

³⁶ Frye, "Lesbian 'Sex.'"

³⁷ Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (Radical Feminism, 1970), 37–41.

did the lesbians figure out how to answer the questions ‘How frequently?’ or ‘How many times?’”—as well as a critique of the wider impetus to measure and define female sexuality.³⁸ Within the latter emphasis, Frye goes so far as to state: “I’m willing to draw the conclusion that heterosexual women don’t have sex either; that what they report is the frequency with which their partners had sex.”³⁹

Frye’s response represents a different engagement with lesbian sex than the multitudes of sexological studies that followed, and continue to follow, Blumstein and Schwartz.⁴⁰ Whereas many in the socio-psycho-sexual realm have reimagined the empirical side of the debate—whether measuring lesbian sex differently or simply offering new and different data—Frye questions why lesbians even want to be counted in the first place. The naming of the phallocentrism of sex is not new to Frye and, indeed, part of what she articulates is a shift in lesbian feminist concerns about the phallocentrism of sex in the 1970s to the 1980s demand for lesbian sex to “count” within this

³⁸ Frye, “Lesbian ‘Sex,’” 73.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a marked increase in sexological studies regarding lesbian sexual desire. For a representative sample, see: Demian A. Steven Bryant, “Relationship Characteristics of American Gay and Lesbian Couples;,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 1, no. 2 (1994): 101–17, doi:10.1300/J041v01n02_06; Blyth and Straker, “Intimacy, Fusion and Frequency of Sexual Contact in Lesbian Couples”; Greene, Causby, and Miller, “The Nature and Function of Fusion in the Dynamics of Lesbian Relationships”; Jennifer I. Downey and Richard C. Friedman, “Internalized Homophobia in Lesbian Relationships,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* 23, no. 3 (1995): 435–47; Keith Hawton, Dennis Gath, and Ann Day, “Sexual Function in a Community Sample of Middle-Aged Women with Partners: Effects of Age, Marital, Socioeconomic, Psychiatric, Gynecological, and Menopausal Factors,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 23, no. 4 (August 1994): 375–95, doi:10.1007/BF01541404; Lawrence A. Kurdek PhD, “Relationship Quality of Gay and Lesbian Cohabiting Couples,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 15, no. 3–4 (October 6, 1988): 93–118, doi:10.1300/J082v15n03_05; Susan McKenzie MA, “Merger in Lesbian Relationships,” *Women & Therapy* 12, no. 1–2 (September 14, 1992): 151–60, doi:10.1300/J015V12N01_12; Karlein M. G. Schreurs PhD, “Sexuality in Lesbian Couples: The Importance of Gender,” *Annual Review of Sex Research* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 1993): 49–66, doi:10.1080/10532528.1993.10559884; Sondra Smalley MA, “Dependency Issues in Lesbian Relationships,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 14, no. 1–2 (September 3, 1987): 125–35, doi:10.1300/J082v14n01_10.

phallogocentric frame. Lesbian sex, then, is not only a challenge of measurement but also a challenge of meaning. Following earlier feminist arguments about the inability of phallogocentric language to capture feminine experience, Frye contrasts lesbian sex to gay men's sex, noting the latter to be "articulate," consisting of "a huge lexicon of *words*: words for acts and activities, their sub-acts, preludes, and denouements, their stylistic variation, their sequences."⁴¹ Lesbian sex, by contrast, is "inarticulate," unable to be mapped to current structures of meaning. Frye's argument begs the question: What does lesbian sex mean? Or, more specifically, what did the supposed loss of lesbian sex mean for feminist and queer politics in the 1980s? How might the question of lesbian sexuality open up the question of pleasure and danger in both feminist and queer politics?

In the previous chapter, I argued for the figure of the lesbian as a site of unintelligibility that was heralded by a separatist politics of radical feminism. Here I move to examine how lesbian sex, or, more specifically, the cultural response to its supposed lack, names a wedge between a politics of pleasure and a politics of danger at the border of feminist and queer investment in sex cultures in the 1980s. In the fall out of the "sex wars" and the concomitant height of the AIDS crisis, both feminist and queer movements sharpened their focus on a politics of sexuality. The differences in these politics, however, are perhaps best codified in the now ubiquitous pairing of "pleasure and danger." Part of what I aim to argue here is that a certain feminist insistence on understanding and representing sexual violence had a killjoy effect on feminist engagements with a politics of pleasure. If, following Jade McGleughlin's claims, the moniker "lesbian bed death" names an anxiety around the evacuation of pleasure from feminist politics of the time, then lesbian bed death also names the wider cultural anxiety

⁴¹ Frye, "Lesbian 'Sex,'" 75.

that to take seriously the potentially violating aspects of power would be to risk eradicating the pleasure one may take in abdicating power.

“Suicidal Ecstasy”

Leo Bersani’s canonical essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” confronts the question of a politics of pleasure at the height of the AIDS crisis with an engagement with the work of both Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. Dworkin and MacKinnon have long been relegated as the antithesis to queer theory, perhaps because of Bersani, as well as the bad girls of the anti-pornography movements of the 1980s. Bersani invokes both authors as a bolster to his claim for the inherent power differentials present in sexual encounters, specifically those centered on anal and vaginal penetration, only to dismiss them as too “pastoralizing” in his bid for “the inestimable value of sex as—at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects—anticonmunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving.”⁴² Bersani’s commitment to the dark side of sex is best summed up in his well-cited insistence on the “self-shattering” experienced as a “*jouissance* of exploded limits.”⁴³ Or, to translate this sentiment in language on which Bersani and Dworkin are likely to agree: It feels good to be fucked (wherein “fucked” has the tongue-in-cheek double meaning of both the sexual act and the state of being).

Although the central figure of the essay arrives in a fleeting commentary, some of the great traction of Bersani’s essay has been connected to the figure of gay male anal receptivity described therein. Bersani recounts the story of a young Florida family run out of town after their three hemophilic sons are diagnosed with HIV. The fear engendered

⁴² Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 22.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

by the specter of AIDS in this family, Bersani argues, is intimately connected to the unconscious representation of “the infinitely more seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman.”⁴⁴ This image enacts a curious pivot from the essay’s title which is drawn from Simon Watney’s groundbreaking study *Policing Desire*. In *Policing Desire*, Watney argues that media representations of gay men and AIDS are feeding into the ubiquitous cultural depictions aligning gay sex with death.⁴⁵

Specters of death are thick in Bersani’s essay. The text was published in 1987 when the U.S. was at the height of the AIDS crisis and gay men, specifically, were dying at an unbearable rate. The association between gay men and death grounds the essay even as the modes through which that death is represented shift. The essay opens with an examination, drawing on Watney, of how AIDS has been represented in popular media and the government response. From medical mistreatment to government negligence, Bersani demonstrates “a general tendency to think of AIDS as an epidemic of the future rather than a catastrophe of the present.”⁴⁶ Very much situated in its time, the essay highlights the perceived and presumed disposability of the lives of gay men and IV drugs users as the U.S public confronts the spread of HIV to the seemingly innocent lives of hemophiliacs, blood transfusion recipients, and women. The original publication of the essay features a full page reproduction of the London *Sun* article entitled “I’d shoot my son if he had AIDS, says Vicar” accompanied by a photo of the father with a long barrel shotgun pointed at the young man. These specters of death suggest that gay men and IV

⁴⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁵ Simon Watney, *Policing Desire*, 2 Sub edition (Minneapolis u.a: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁴⁶ Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 5.

drug users' lives are already devalued to the point of not being worth the medical and governmental investment in their saving. Furthermore, the threat that the virus would cause to the lives of those outside this demographic, as is demonstrated in the spread to hemophiliacs, warrants extreme measures, perhaps even the murder, of those populations at risk for HIV for the protection of the greater population. The image of the vicar shooting his son, however, highlights the deeper seated fear of homosexuality that is attached to the threat of HIV and AIDS that Bersani seeks to highlight in the essay.

The question of suicide in Bersani's central figure shifts the specter of death pointed to therein. In other words, by calling his central figure suicidal, Bersani is now calling forth a kind of death as choice. Of course, there is the all too common assertion that gay men's sexuality at the height of AIDS was suicidal, that even certain death could not keep them from their wanton promiscuity. Here Bersani draws a connection to the imaginary of prostitutes and venereal disease in the 19th century. Bersani connects the specters of gay men and prostitutes through what is imagined as their shared and "unquenchable appetite for destruction."⁴⁷ The "suicidal ecstasy" which animates this appetite for Bersani's central figure may point to the biological death of pathogen or, as the essay goes on to demonstrate, is more readily connected to the psychic shattering that Bersani heralds. The suicidality of the figure connotes a chosen death rather than simple reckless endangerment or organic cessation. What's more, even beyond the bounds of the subject choosing such death, this reference to death erases the relation of the other. By this I mean: there is no murderer, no policing public, no vicar with a gun. To render this figure suicidal, even in the psychoanalytic sense which Bersani goes on to invoke, is to render it solo, without relation, a bottom with no top. But, of course, this suicidal

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

specter is watched, is invoked in the faces of hemophiliac children with HIV, the alleged casualties of this “appetite for destruction.” In this way, the figure is not simply suicidal—as it is not his own death that is imagined or fretted over—but also murderous. The plague, and its predicted innocent victims, is imagined to be unleashed from his desires. What’s more, this figure is not alone but, rather, about to be fucked, by a lover, by many lovers, or, perhaps, even, by the reader.

Like Bersani, I want to use this “seductive and intolerable” image to consider another angle from which we might think the relationship between sex and politics. Bersani sticks with the seductiveness of this image and the potentials for the values and pleasures in bottoming, that is in “being a woman,” in this very specific sexual act. I, however, want to think through the intolerability by thinking through what it is that the beholder of this image is imagined to be doing beyond spectating.⁴⁸ This image, I argue, points out a blind spot in queer theory’s ability to metabolize the sexual violence that has been so informative to certain strands of feminist thought. What’s more, I want to use the anxiety that is produced in talking about sexual violence, in both queer and feminist camps, to criticize the persistence of a crimino-legal framework for addressing sexual violence. This framework, with its overarching emphasis on consent, renders the sexual encounter a contractual engagement in which sex is commodified as the thing that one (or many) person(s) want and one (or many) person(s) can grant access to. What’s more, such a commitment, continues to only be able to imagine victims of sexual violence rather than perpetrators. Of course, at the surface, a rhetoric of consent seem helpful for assuring that one is not, in fact, perpetrating sexual violence. At a deeper scratch,

⁴⁸ Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 18.

however, recourse to consent as a legal framework continues to constrain both sex and interventions addressing sexual violence.

First, a note about sexual violence. There has been a recent surge in public conversation on the pervasiveness of sexual assault and sexual violence as a result of a number of highly publicized rape cases that have highlighted a culture of sexual violation among high school and college students. For example, the journalist Jon Krakauer recently published a searing exposition of the culture of sexual violence, and concomitant failures of both formal and informal justice systems, at the University of Montana.⁴⁹ A central theme to the conversations around sexuality and sexual violence among America's youth is the question of consent. Consent has become the primary rubric through which the border between a wanted sexual encounter and an act of sexual violence is defined. The consent model of addressing sexual assault is modeled on an idea that sexual violence is a contained event, that such events are the violation of a person's will by another (or groups of others), and that individuals should be given the authority and autonomy to speak against such acts and events before they occur. By contrast, there is a more radical genealogy of feminist views on rape, first articulated in a broad scale way by MacKinnon and Dworkin, which argues that sexual violence is the requisite by-product of a system of gendered power imbalances.

It is important to note the lack of simile in Bersani's figure. This is not a figure that is *like* a woman but, rather, this figure becomes a woman when experiencing the abjected position of submission. What is articulated in the bottom figure is a kind of unexpected transgression that allows for this pleasure. It is not only with his legs high in

⁴⁹ Jon Krakauer, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, First Edition edition (New York: Doubleday, 2015).

the air that this figures becomes woman but also in his deep pleasure in the act of submission. For Dworkin, this is the rub, so to speak. The position of submission is not something that women can cast off so easily or experience so selectively. For certain subjects—and this formulation for Dworkin may, in fact, include gay men—the eroticization of this submission is something prescribed to them, forced and reinforced through nearly all modes of social relation.⁵⁰ She argues: “It is a radical critique of the elements of social life that maintain intercourse as a right, as a duty, as pleasure, no matter what the cost of intercourse as such, no matter to whom...intercourse distorts and ultimately destroys any potential human equality between men and women by turning women into objects and men into exploiters.”⁵¹

Part of what Dworkin’s text asks is what are the limits of pleasure? Can one be shattered too much? It is one thing to experience another’s desire for your subordination in the controlled confines of a sexual scene. It is another entirely to have your everyday existence saturated with that desire. S/m theorizing, particularly that which addressed why rape survivors might be interested in such play, does a particularly good job of parsing these distinctions.⁵² However, the seemingly common praise of S/M’s ability to let us have our danger and eat it too does little to address the persistence of such saturation in the lives of women and those perceived to be already ascribed to the subordinate position.

⁵⁰ Dworkin’s identification as a lesbian in absence of any indications of lesbian practices leaves open the question of whether she agreed that an alternative mode of relationality, something akin to or modeled on a lesbian ideal, might offer an alternative.

⁵¹ Ariel Levy, “Introduction,” in *Intercourse*, 20 Anv edition (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 10.

⁵² Corie Hammers, “Corporeality, Sadomasochism and Sexual Trauma,” *Body & Society* 20, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 68–90, doi:10.1177/1357034X13477159.

Though not responding to Bersani's essay, Dworkin asks a question I have often found myself asking in relation to this suicidal figure, particularly in the context of understanding the rectum as a grave. For myself, the metaphorical association between rectum and grave begs that question of what is dead or buried there? To which, of course, Bersani would answer: "proud male subjectivity." But when we think this question in terms of the numerous specters of death that have been attached to this rectum/grave, I can't help but wonder how we imagine the phallic and penetrative force that catalyzes this shattering ascesis. Dworkin observes:

Remarkably, it is not the man who is considered possessed in intercourse, even though he (his penis) is buried inside another human being...disappeared inside someone else, enveloped, smothered, in the muscled lining of flesh that he never sees, only feels, gripping, releasing, gripping, tighter, harder, firmer, then pushing out: and *can he get out alive?* (emphasis in original)⁵³

It seems clear that in this phallic economy, only men can actively choose to identify with the non-phallic. This is not to imply that homosexuality is a choice but, rather, that the celebration of male penetration depicted here is valued precisely as this kind of choosing. There is, of course, still a phallic, or at least penetrative, interaction at the center. Part of what makes this figure so intolerable is not simply that it brings us face to face with men's penetrability but, rather, with the fact that men are able to be raped. Of course, one way we are able to understand this context is through work like Mackinnon and Dworkin. Dworkin is in agreement with Bersani that for men and women, tops and bottoms, the abnegation of self in this paradigm of power is pleasurable. She is not, though some may accuse her of this, arguing for a kind of false consciousness on behalf

⁵³ Levy, "Introduction.," 81.

of women. Rather, she thinks we should be wholly concerned with this pleasure in submission.

In her 1987 text *Intercourse*, Dworkin builds on her previous work on pornography to expand her analysis to reveal the rampant cultural associations between heterosexual intercourse and male pleasures in female submission. The central objects of Dworkin analysis are famous literary texts from *Madame Bovary* to James Baldwin's *Another Country*. The central claim of Dworkin's polemic is that literary and artistic depictions of heterosexual intercourse center on men's violent occupation of the female body which then becomes her central condition. The text builds stepwise through increasingly violent depictions of heterosexual intercourse by drawing the connection between women's abjection in intercourse and violence as constitutive of the female condition. In the concluding section, Dworkin draws the cultural analysis of the previous two sections into the realm of the law. In doing so, she aptly demonstrates how the numerous regulators of sexuality—religion, education, the state—work in concert to assure who is violated and who is not as a central condition of access to sexuality. Dworkin argues not only for the primacy of gender in any analysis of sexuality but, even more so, that regulations on sexuality in fact produce the gender system as we know it.

Dworkin takes sodomy law as one site of regulation that promotes and perpetuates women's sexual subordination. Regulating what bodies are able to engage in specific sexual practices, Dworkin argues, both relies on and perpetuates a sense of naturalness connected to a sexual act. In regard to sodomy laws she states: "Men being fucked like women moves in an opposite direction; so there is a rule against men being fucked like

women.”⁵⁴ In other words, the criminalization of sodomy is not simply a homophobic measure against male-male sex but, rather, stands to document who should rightfully, that is naturally, be in the position of submission and who in the position of domination. To loosen these assignments, Dworkin parodies, would be “a lessening of differences between the sexes, the conflation of male and female natures into one human nature.”⁵⁵ Dworkin, thus, reads sodomy statutes not as a protection against rape—as they are often invoked today—but, rather, as legislating who is rapable and who is not.

Dworkin has long been dismissed as a feminist extremist. Indeed, much of the disavowal of Dworkin has come from avowed feminists.⁵⁶ This disavowal is made as a defense against being labeled a prude or anti-sex—an anxiety that is readily apparent in the tropes surrounding lesbian bed death, a theme to which I will return shortly. Part of the misrepresentation of Dworkin as claiming “all sex is rape” hinges on a misplaced interpretation of women’s position as always already victims. Even more so, this misunderstanding requires that Dworkin’s claims regarding intercourse be read literally rather than a descriptive account of how meanings are assumed naturalized through recourse to the body. To leave with the impression that all sex is rape is to distill sex to the binary opposition of domination and submission, yes and no. In this way, sex is something good and pleasurable or bad and violating.

Rather than simply relegating to sex to such binarisms, however, Dworkin forces us to confront the messy, violent underside of the pleasures of abjection. In her

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ There has been a notable return to Dworkin recently. Specifically, a number of prominent 3rd wave feminists have begun to ask about the effects of this disavowal. See especially: Johanna Fateman, “Johanna Fateman on Andrea Dworkin,” in *Icon*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2014); Levy, “Introduction.” In *Intercourse* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

concluding chapter, Dworkin connects the violent connotations of heterosexual intercourse to both women's depictions as filth and sexuality's explicit connections to death. In her characteristic tenor, Dworkin states: "Sadism and death, under male supremacy, converge at the vagina: to open the woman up, go inside her, penis or knife. The poor little penis kills before it dies."⁵⁷ Drawing together these connections, Dworkin argues for the absolute ordinariness of the sexual abjection of women. She extrapolates from the embodied positions of intercourse through a whole host of cultural associations between submission, abjection, filth and death.

The anality that is necessary in Bersani's formulation is not simply the orgasmic potential of the now-called p-spot. Anal pleasure is no longer located exclusively in the gay male body. Both men and women's interest in anal play is indexed by the ready availability of anally coded toys and Bend Over Boyfriend ("pegging for beginners kits") now available at most feminist sex shops. But the image Bersani presents in "Rectum" relies on the kinds of associations Dworkin draws out of the heterosexual imaginary. Dworkin, however, offers Bersani's association in reverse. Reading Freud's assertion of the subject's early association of the penis and the fecal material held in the rectum, Dworkin asserts the easy association between the vagina and the rectum. She states: "the mucous membrane that the man touches in intercourse with his penis, the vagina, is dirty like the rectum...the vagina of the woman is not phenomenologically distinct from the mucous membrane of the rectum."⁵⁸ For Dworkin, however, this association is not the seat of pleasure in abjection but the constitutive association: "being excremental is the dimension of inferiority that legitimates and makes appropriate sadistic sexual acts that

⁵⁷ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 20 Anv edition (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 241.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

pass as simple sex, a cruelty in sex, the brutal domination through sexual subjugation of a worthless, essentially scatological thing.”⁵⁹

A framing question of this chapter, then, is the relationship between this flip in terms between the Bersani and Dworkin: for Bersani, intercourse is pleasurable because it is dangerous, for Dworkin intercourse is dangerous because it is pleasurable. Embedded within the question of the relationship between pleasure and danger is that question of violation. In Bersani sex is too much connected to practice. Dworkin, however, shows that sexual practice bleeds out into the cultural foray, ultimately informing a whole host of relational possibilities.

While Dworkin is often paired with MacKinnon in feminist critiques of the turn to the legal sphere to address sexual violence, *Intercourse* makes clear that Dworkin finds the emphasis on the criminalization of sexual violence dangerous. Rather, and especially when paired with Bersani, Dworkin forces us to confront the limits of *jouissance*. Like Bersani, she is interested in the ways in which we all participate in systems that are also the root of our oppression. In “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Bersani names the ways in which white, class privileged gay men found themselves shocked by the discrimination they experienced during the AIDS crisis even while they failed to be able to confront the systems of racism, classism, and sexism that led to such discrimination. Similarly, Dworkin pushes her reader to understand the multiple ways in which we all participate in a system that allows for sexual violence. Rather than name and address the ways in which sexual violence both produces and relies on the gender system, we continue to imagine sexual violence as aberrant, traumatizing, and criminal.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Rape as Death: The Killjoy Effect

Feminist legal scholar Karen Engle demonstrates how legal frameworks of rape, particularly as an international war crime, serve to both create and perpetuate the shame and stigma attached to the victims of sexual violence.⁶⁰ Part of Engle's analysis argues that the criminalization of wartime rape fails to take women's sexual agency into account. In doing so, such laws render all sex between opposing sides as always already criminalized. Engle is particularly interested in the case of wartime rape in the Bosnian-Serbian war and the question of genocide (a question made famous in American circles through Catherine MacKinnon's involvement in the early 1990s). Her essay "Judging Sex in War," opens with the following provocation: "Rape is often said to constitute a fate worse than death."⁶¹ While Engle is specifically situating rape as a wartime crime, the connection she draws between the stigma of rape and "a fate worse than death," can be easily extrapolated to many other scenarios. Indeed, part of the association between rape and "a fate worse than death," is the effect of relegating rape and sexual violence to the realm of the extraordinary and the criminal. It is this projection of rape and sexual violence to an extraordinary elsewhere marked through criminalized intent that Dworkin's *Intercourse* rejects.

In the second chapter, I explored how lesbian commitments to non-reproduction threaten the futurity of the social in a literal way in contradistinction to the emphasis on metaphoricity in queer theory. In the concluding section of this chapter, I want to return to the specter of "lesbian bed death" and ask how the anxiety it names forces us to confront the realities of the insidiousness of sexual violence. Even more so, I am

⁶⁰ Karen Engle, "Judging Sex in War," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2008), <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2157451>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 941.

interested here in the killjoy effect of a politics of sexuality that asks us to take seriously danger as something other than necessary for, or in opposition to, pleasure. Both Bersani and Dworkin can agree, there is a precipice at the nexus of pleasure and danger from which one can plunge too far. The question is for whom is this plunge possible, a choice in a range of choices, and for whom is it compelled.

Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* names the feminist killjoy as a troublemaker caught in a paradoxical relationship to the demands of happiness.⁶² On the one hand, Ahmed argues, the feminist killjoy is a figure who is assumed to squelch joy, inserting her politics into seemingly apolitical situations. On the other, she is viewed as a figure whose own joy is thwarted by the unhappiness represented in her politics. These competing narratives of the feminist's relationship to happiness present a paradox that displaces the political concerns of feminism onto the personal concerns of the feminist. As Ahmed reminds: "feminist are read as being unhappy, such that situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as *about* the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what feminists are unhappy *about*."⁶³ Following McGleughlin, lesbian bed death might name the difficult space in which one confronts the dangers of sexuality without evacuating a political insistence on pleasure.

"Lesbian bed death" might also name the anxiety that politics thwarts desire. For example, in the second installation of the Dykes to Watch Out For saga—Bechdel's 1992 *Dykes to Watch Out For: The Sequel*—Mo and Harriet are struggling to take their relationship to the next level. As the two prepare to move in together, the seeming decline in Mo's interest in sex is wearing on their relationship. As described in the

⁶² Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 67.

opening credits for the book, Mo is DTWOF's "principled anti-heroine (who) fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and other un-American ways."⁶⁴ Mo, recognizable by her iconic striped shirt, short hair, and round glasses, stands out in a cast of hyper-political feminist dykes, as the persistent killjoy. Even in the midst of more optimistic conversation, Mo is always quick to point out impending environmental devastation or the high fatalities of the gulf war. In this installation of DTWOF, Mo has entered therapy to address her ongoing anxieties. As Mo progresses in therapy, she is sometimes depicted with a calmer, perhaps happier, disposition. This shift in Mo against the backdrop of Mo and Harriet's waning sex life presents a conundrum: does politics fuel or thwart sex? The text leaves us with no answers; the final frame shows Harriet's frustration with Mo's ever building sense of impending doom.

The development of the term "lesbian bed death" has historical significance in that it names a very specific nexus of feminist and queer concerns regarding both the relationship of sex and politics and, even more so, the place of violence therein. I have told the story of lesbian bed death to highlight how the lesbian emerges as a warning figure of the killjoy effect of a feminist concern with sexual violences. Schwartz and Blumstein situate of lesbian lack of sexual desire within the wider context of the feminist sex wars and the cultural equation of feminism with an anti-sexual stance. The lesbian, then, becomes evidence that feminist concerns with sexual violence will thwart one's ability to actively engage with sexual desire. Jade McGleughlin's use of the term shifts this narrative, naming instead an erasure of lesbian sexual publics against the backdrop of both the feminist sex wars and the AIDS crisis.

⁶⁴ Alison Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out for: The Sequel : Added Attraction! "Serial Monogamy" : A Documentary* (Ithaca, N.Y: Firebrand Books, 1992), 4.

While feminism has long convinced us to be wary of the inherent dangers of sexuality, we might also pay mind to the over insistence on pleasure. In other words, queer theory's overemphasis on pleasure is just as risky as liberal feminism's overemphasis on danger. In so doing, such strong theories fail to conceive of sexuality in its most ordinary manifestations. One of the great lessons of queer politics in the wake of the AIDS crisis is that sexual publics and sexual practices can shift and adapt. Perhaps there is more to consider than the juxtaposition of pleasure and danger.

Chapter 4

Tough Titty: On Kleinian Negativity

In June of 1981, Audre Lorde gave the keynote address at the conference of the National Women's Studies Association. Her talk, titled "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,"—the seedbed for her later essay by the same name—served to name not only the way in which the NWSA was inaccessible for women of color but also to admonish white women for their fear of Black women's anger.¹ Lorde names these angers but she also names the mechanisms that keep white women from allowing and engaging these angers. One of the primary mechanisms Lorde names for not addressing anger is guilt. This failure of guilt is particularly true for white women; though, she notes that in a system that cannot metabolize the anger of women of color, they too are made to feel guilt rather than anger. When white women respond to Black women's anger with guilt they do not confront the work that that anger is doing or the systems that underlie that anger. Rather, white women's guilt is a defense mechanism that serves to both re-center white women's experience of racism and to foreclose anger's transformative potential. Lorde states: "guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness."²

¹ Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Reprint edition (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 2007).

² Audre Lorde and Cheryl Clarke, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Reprint edition (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 2007), 130.

In the work of Melanie Klein, guilt is a defense mechanism that both recognizes the destructive impulses of the subject while also defending against the damage done both by and to the subject through those destructive impulses. I open with Audre Lorde in order to begin to think through how we might mobilize the work of aggression in Melanie Klein. In many ways, drawing a connection between Black women's anger and a theory of aggression risks repeating a stereotype that has been used to both dismiss and parody Black women. By contrast, I want to mobilize Lorde to think through the usefulness of aggression, both that which we perceive from the outside and that which comes from within. To be clear, the guilt that is invoked in Lorde is very different from the guilt that arises through the reparative stance in Klein. Even so, as I will show, we can use Lorde's reproach of white women's guilt as an inlet to thinking about the limits of the reparative and the detrimental work of defenses against aggression.

This dissertation has moved through a number of archival tracings that align lesbian figures with death. It is my central claim that lesbian figures become aligned with death in ways that are conceptually and politically important and that differ, in productive ways, from their gay male counterparts. I have traced these alignments with death to the simultaneous invocations of lesbians with feminist political agendas. I move here to argue that these associations can be of use to the current stakes of both the anti-social thesis and the reparative turn. In order, however, to think the lesbian in this way, I turn to the work of Melanie Klein, specifically her conceptualization of aggression and the death drive.

In *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein*, Jacqueline Rose argues that a "Lacanian orthodoxy" of late 20th century critical theory

has “blocked access to Klein.”³ This “blocked access,” she argues, is not mere effacement but, rather, a defensive response to the disturbing theories put forth by Klein, particularly in her relation to violence and aggression. In line with Rose, I turn here to Klein, particularly her work on aggression, in order to engage this disturbance. The lesbian, figured through breast cancer, feminist separatism, and bed death, I argue, disturbs in much the same way. More pointedly, this disturbance is of immense value to feminist and queer theories that are interested in harnessing theories of aggression for their use or usefulness in understanding and engaging activist politics.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. First, I will lay out the apparatuses of the Kleinian system that help to understand aggression as disturbance, both a disturbance for our contemporary theoretical moment and a disturbance in the social. I will then explore how Klein has been taken up more recently in queer theory, specifically in what has been called the reparative turn following the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Building on this uptake of Sedgwick, I will demonstrate how the reparative has been staked in distinction to the anti-social thesis, where the former is defined in relation to an investment in the good and the latter an embrace of the bad. Finally, I return to Lorde to think through how we might disrupt these distinctions by aligning aggression with a Kleinian openness to relationality.

³ Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: B. Blackwell, 1993), 139. There has been a noted increase in feminist and queer work on Melanie Klein since Rose’s publication. See especially: Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*; Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2015); Esther Sánchez-Pardo, *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

The Work of Aggression in Melanie Klein

In the work of Melanie Klein, negativity is unequivocally related to and defined by violence. From the earliest moments, the infant experiences the world as a violent transgression of her sense of security and stability. This violence creates the conditions for an aggression that is necessary for the survival of the subject. In Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere's *Love, Hate, and Reparation*, Riviere's opening chapter begins with an explanation of the necessity of aggression in subject formation, relationality, and all forms of the self and the social.⁴ Aggression is the result of our necessary dependency on environments and others that remain beyond our control. Aggression is a revolt against this dependency, but it is also recognition of other's imbrication with ourselves in this social fabric.

One of Melanie Klein's most noted and most controversial contributions to psychoanalysis was her articulation of clinical evidence of the manifestations of the death drive in infants. From these observations, Klein makes the claim that sadism, which she connects to the death drive, is "endowed from birth," and is manifest in the extreme aggressivities of the infant and child. She connects these aggressivities to a harsh superego which must be tamped down in the process of ego development.⁵ In this way, Klein reverses the Freudian developmental narrative in which the polymorphous perversities of the libido are contained through the disciplinary prohibitions of the social and, specifically, of the Oedipal complex. For the Kleinian infant, it is the aggressive impulses that arise from the frustration of its libidinal needs that must be contained.

These aggressive impulses are experienced as the reaction to the threat of death,

⁴ Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere, *Love, Hate and Reparation*, Edition Unstated edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1964).

⁵ Hinshelwood, *Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 48–53.

represented not so much as an organic ceasing as an annihilative engulfing. These fears of annihilation are then projected outward, resulting in the splitting of objects, most notably the maternal breast, into good and bad. I turn here to explore this phantasy of annihilation and the constitutive aggressivity of the infant in relation to the death drive.

Jacqueline Rose, in arguing for the usefulness of Klein in critical theory, finds most useful Klein's disimbrication of the death instinct from any biological or organic death. Rather, Rose is interested in how object relations arise from an inassimilable aggression born from within the infant, but which must be projected outward, that is, into the "bad object."⁶ As Rose notes: "reference to death in the instigation of the object, an experience of unpleasure so intense that it cannot be 'killed' cannot be negatively hallucinated...the lost object is not, therefore, only the hallucinated object of satisfaction; it is also and simultaneously an object which, because of this failure of negative hallucination, is required—is actively sought after—in order to be bad."⁷ In other words, the developing ego needs not only to project its internal aggressions but it also needs for those aggressions to come back to it in the form of the annihilating bad object. It needs the aggression to come from the outside precisely so as to repudiate its annihilating force. So, in Klein, the death drive is not specifically a drive toward death, but rather the projection of internal aggressions out of the subject so that they can be dealt with constructively. Death in Klein is not a literal death, but the *feeling* of the threat of death.

In Klein's model, the death drive is at the seat of subjectivity; it is not an after effect of ego development but, rather, its very motor. Perhaps most controversially, she

⁶ Rose, *Why War?*, 136.

⁷ Ibid.

argues that the death drive is already up and running in the infant from the moment of birth. She identifies this early instantiation of the death drive as expressed in the aggressivity of the infant. This aggressivity, she argues, is the result of the persecutory anxieties experienced by the infant in relation to the maternal breast. The Kleinian infant is born into a world that is unable to be contained with the kinds of structures that will come with ego maturation. Whereas in Freud the infantile world is driven by the primacy of pleasures connected to the somatic experiences of nourishment, namely the mother's milk, in Klein, the infantile world is full of terror at the seeming lack of enough nourishment. At its most basic, the breakdown might go as follows. For the Freudian infant, the early experiences of the warm milk and its satisfying nourishment set the baseline for a kind of pleasure that, as the infant develops and matures, becomes the motivator for a whole host of mechanisms of development. For the Kleinian infant, on the other hand, the world is not fundamentally pleasurable, but fundamentally hostile. The experiences of hunger, cold, and abandonment are incorporated into the developing ego as an indicator of the extreme precarity, and enduring threat of loss, that accompanies any form of satiation.

The seeming non-plentitude of pleasure and nourishment throws the infant into crisis, instilling scenes of anxiety from the earliest moments of life. These early processes, which have immense implication for the later maturation of the ego, are spelled out most clearly in Klein's "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms." In this essay, she asserts: "I hold that anxiety arises from the operation of the death instinct within the organism, is felt as a fear of annihilation (death) and takes the form of fear of

persecution.”⁸ The anxiety that the infant feels at the lack of the mother’s breast is experienced as terrifying and potentially annihilating, and is intimately connected to the infant’s experience of satiation. In other words, negativity, experienced as the threat of annihilation, is both the product and producer of the experience of satiation. Through the lens of classic deconstruction, these two poles are mutually constitutive but they are also constitutive of the infant. The play between annihilation and satiation gives the infant its earliest tools for not only ego development but also for ego persistence.

The infantile experience of the breast serves as the prototype for the processes Klein calls projection and introjection. Projection and introjection name the ways in which the infant comes to interact with the world at the psychic level. The processes of projection and introjection manage the ego’s relationship to what Klein terms internal objects. These objects are perhaps one of the most difficult concepts to grasp in the Kleinian model as they are neither literal nor mere representation. The maternal breast is the first object with which the infant must grapple. The objects that populate the world of the infant are not simply representations but are felt, experienced, and dealt with as very much real objects by the infant. The objects are constituted and made real through what Klein calls *imagos*. *Imagos* name the multivalent constitution of objects through the tactile, somatic, affective, and psychic experiences of objects and their effects. Klein is most clear on the working of projection and introjection in her essay “A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states,” where she states:

The development of the infant is governed by the mechanisms of introjection and projection. From the beginning the ego introjects the objects ‘good’ and ‘bad’, for both of which the mother’s breast is the prototype—for good objects when the

⁸ Juliet Mitchell, *Selected Melanie Klein* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 179.

child obtains it, for bad when it fails him... These imagos, which are a phantastically distorted picture of the real objects upon which they are based, become installed not only in the outside world but, by the process of incorporation, also within the ego.⁹

Again, this is not a literal breast, but rather what Klein calls an imago, a kind of amalgamation of the infant's tactile experience of care and nurturing and somatic experience of satiation and need. These early imagos arise from the primacy of the Oedipal complex in early infantile life (again, a differentiation from Freud).

Unlike the Freudian model, Klein's Oedipal primacy is pre-genital, bound up with the holistic experiences of the infantile world. The Oedipal drama, then, plays out within the infant's internal battles with objects or imagos. As Miera Likierman notes, "Introjected imagos, created through an elaboration and assimilation of wordly events, were now seen to be protagonists in the internal drama of the unconscious phantasy, with crucial implications for the developing self."¹⁰ By introjection, here, Likierman refers to the process in which the infantile ego converts the somatic and tactile experience into meaning for the psyche. The breast that feeds—that is that provides nourishment, in essence, the breast that satisfies the infant's mortal needs—becomes the good breast. By contrast, the experience of lack or loss inaugurated by the infant's increasing feelings of hunger, bodily disintegration, and abandonment, comes to be contained by the bad breast. By taking in the experience of the good breast, often referred to as a gratifying breast, the infant begins to build a world. The infant's experience of the life and death instincts are intimately tethered to the experience of the good and the bad breast.

⁹ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰ Meira Likierman, *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context*, Reprint edition (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002), 9.

On the role of the good and bad breast in the infant's negotiations of a seemingly hostile world, Klein provides this succinct narrative:

From the beginning, the destructive impulse is turned against the object and is first expressed in phantasied oral-sadistic attacks on the mother's breast, which soon develop into onslaughts on her body by all sadistic means. The persecutory fears arising from the infant's oral-sadistic impulses to rob the mother's body of its good contents, and from the anal-sadistic impulses to put his excrements into her (including the desire to enter her body in order to control her from within) are of great importance for the development of paranoia and schizophrenia.¹¹

In other words, the early world of the infant is one of intense persecution that must be responded to through equally aggressive defense mechanisms. No infant escapes the violences of this world. Rather, the goal of ego formation is to begin to manage the very real, phenomenological experience of persecution. In order to do so, the infant must come to recognize her own aggressive impulses and begin to reconcile them with the variation between imagined or experienced persecution and experiences of satiation. This crucial detail of the Kleinian infant's phantasies is wholly lost in queer theory's investment in the reparative. It is not that the infant fears the destructive impulses from the outside but, most importantly, that it is an internal aggression, a destruction from within that the infant fears most. Further, the maternal breast is the primary site from which this play of projection and introjection is staged.

In Klein, the workings of the death instinct play out largely in phantasy. These are not conscious fantasies akin to daydreams but, rather, unconscious phantasies that are tightly bound to affective and somatic experiences. Unlike repression in Freud, Kleinian

¹¹ Mitchell, *Selected Melanie Klein*, 177.

phantasies are not simply buried narratives or repressed experiences. Rather, according to Spillius, et al, in *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, “they are the mental representation of those somatic events in the body that comprise the instincts, and are physical sensations interpreted as objects that cause those sensations.”¹² The inner world of phantasy is made of the various objects that the ego has both introjected and projected. As host to both introjections and projections, these phantasies are also fueled by the ego’s own aggressions as well as those that it seeks to defend against.

The Kleinian death drive eschews a narrative logic of temporality. For Freud, early theorizations of the death drive, as connected to the fort-da game, had to do with mastering—and, thus, overcoming—the trauma of a hostile world. The Kleinian death drive does not follow so causally through a chain of events. Rather, it is situated through a whole horizon of experiences that may exist side by side or that may strongly influence each other in unforeseen or unpredictable ways. In order to work through Klein’s development of the death drive, it is necessary to understand these differences in the Kleinian and Freudian logic.

The Reparative Turn

There has been an increased interest in the work of Melanie Klein in both feminist and queer theory of late. For many, it is the Kleinian contribution of melancholia and the vacillation of the depressive position with the paranoid-schizoid position, which has prompted her use in a turn to good affect. Much of the queer uptake of the reparative can

¹² Elizabeth Bott Spillius et al., *The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 1 edition (Hove, East Sussex ; New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.

be traced to Eve Sedgwick's call for reparative reading in contradistinction to a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" begins with a reflection on a conversation with fellow academic and AIDS activist Cindy Patton during the early days of the AIDS crisis. In the course of the conversation, Sedgwick asks Patton her opinion of the then ubiquitous rumors and conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus. As Sedgwick tells it, Patton responds rather coolly that, even if it were true that the virus had been planted in response to a wider governmental and societal disdain for queer people, people of color, and injection drug users, "what would we know that we don't already know?"¹³ Sedgwick goes on to link this kind of hermeneutics of suspicion to the paranoid/schizoid position elaborated upon in Klein.

The paranoid-schizoid position is one of ways in which the ego sets up defenses against encroaching anxieties and aggressors. As I have mentioned above, the earliest splitting happens in relation to the maternal breast as a result of the infantile phantasies and the produced responses of introjection and projection. The paranoid-schizoid position ensures that this splitting is maintained. The central work of the position is to isolate the good object from the bad object in order to maintain the idealization of the former and the rejection of the latter. Projective identification is often one of the results of the paranoid-schizoid position. By contrast, the depressive position is the point from which the ego can start to rebuild its relation to the objects through a reworking of introjected and projected objects. Central to this work of integration is an understanding of the other as individuated but also contingently constituted with the self. Put another way, the paranoid-schizoid position is overrun with phantasy and, thus, the battle

¹³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 123.

between the life and death instincts is amplified. If, however, the good object is able to be sustained enough to be introjected as an idealized attribute of the self, the annihilative fears inaugurated by the bad object can be tamped down and tamed. Only then can the ego begin the work of sustaining the idealized object. If the paranoid-schizoid position is marked by the violent, and often totalizing, splitting of the object into good and bad, then the depressive position is marked by the reparative work of integration. Reparation marks both the work that the self does to repair the object but, also, the recognition of the relation with an object that can be both good and bad. Both splitting and reparation are necessary defenses against the overwhelming anxieties produced by the death instinct. The more successful and sustained the reparation, the more easily mitigated anxieties become. Reparation, in other words, tempers paranoia.

Sedgwick mobilizes this play of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions in her critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Central to Sedgwick's uptake of Klein is the reparative motor of the depressive position. In doing so, Sedgwick diagnoses queer reading in particular, and progressive politics in general, as often operating from a paranoid position. This position, she asserts, focuses on anticipation situated from an "anxious(ly) paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as *new*"¹⁴ In response, Sedgwick argues for a theoretical mode that might work from a reparative position, one that develops strong integrative practices in order to sustain the necessarily overwhelming onslaught of new annihilative possibilities.

¹⁴ Ibid., 146.

The play of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions in the infant is called “psychotic” in order to portray the profound unmooring of the subject in this swing.¹⁵ Thus, the depressive position is not itself a developmental accomplishment. Rather, the subject’s ability to mobilize the depressive position and, thus, regulate the onslaught of anxieties, is the developmental goal. Sedgwick’s emphasis on the reparative as pleasure assuring glosses, however, the necessary role of anxiety and aggression therein. The trouble with the unacknowledged association between the death drive and organic death is the erasure of the violence that the work of the death drive names. We need look no further than Freud’s first observations of what he went on to call the death drive in the nightmares of war veterans. The threat of the death drive is not cessation but, rather, a violence that is constitutive of our living. What is largely absent in Sedgwick’s accounting of the reparative is an explication of guilt as the motor of the swing between the two positions.

In the Kleinian developmental narrative, the paranoid-schizoid position serves as a defense mechanism not only to project our own aggression elsewhere but also to keep it so that we always know who our enemies are. This paranoid tendency is juxtaposed with the schizoid tendency wherein the aggression is felt to be coming from all directions, both attacking and coming from within the subject. The freneticism of this swing between the paranoid and schizoid positions becomes metabolized through the reparative modes of the depressive position. In order to make a move to the depressive position we need the good object, an object which we both love and from which we have received love. Focus on reparative as love – part of what happens in the search for an object which will

¹⁵ Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

offer “nourishment and comfort”, as Sedgwick calls it, is an over sentimentalizing demand that things aren’t really, or haven’t always been, as bad as they seem. Sedgwick focuses on the need for introjection of good objects in order to move away from a skewed perception of completely bad objects. For Sedgwick, the complexity of the reparative means accepting the good in what had appeared to be annihilating. What she misses is that this also involves a recognition that we have sought to destroy and hate objects that can also be good and loving. This acceptance of nourishment and comfort involves depression and despair at our own aggressive, and violent tendencies. It also involves a decrease in vigor and energy that had been driven by fears of persecution. The reparative then collapses in derivative scholarship as seeing the good in our objects, a point to which I will return in the next section.¹⁶ This is a current trend in queer theory – one that does very little in pushing us to imagine new ways of knowing or new ways of being. To focus on the reparative as good or positive affect fails to account for the extreme despair that is necessary for such a position.

Many scholars since Sedgwick have begun to work in what they term a reparative mode. Indeed, one of the main channels through which the reparative turn has been taken up is at the border of feminist and queer.¹⁷ Sedgwick’s turn to the reparative has often been hailed in distinction to the anti-social thesis. Whereas the anti-social is invested in the negative, that is the bad affects, the non-redeemable qualities of sexuality and the social, many scholars have turned to the reparative as a voice for positive affects, for a sense of redemption in the social. For others, the reparative has occasioned an

¹⁶ I am especially grateful to Rachel Weitzkorn for helping me think through this important impulse in queer theory’s attachment to the reparative.

¹⁷ See Robyn Wiegman, “The Times We’re in: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative ‘turn,’” *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 4–25, doi:10.1177/1464700113513081a. for a succinct analysis of this turn.

opportunity to reexamine the archive of gay and lesbian pasts.¹⁸ Ellis Hanson, for example, in his essay “The Future’s Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick,” articulates the anti-social thesis, as exemplified by queer associations with the death drive, as their own kind of paranoid reading, producing ever more clear points of injury.¹⁹ Similarly, Robyn Wiegman connects the reparative to a turn to affect in both feminist and queer theory, specifically through a reading of many of the authors cited above who have used the turn to the reparative as an invitation to a kind of queer historical project.²⁰ By contrast, and notably earlier than Sedgwick’s work, Leo Bersani’s *The Culture of Redemption* pairs Klein with Proust to contest the redemptive force of reparation in both art and Klein. Herein, Bersani highlights Klein’s work on sublimation, which is very similar to Freud’s, as making the case for “the fate of sexual energies detached from sexual desires.”²¹ For Bersani, Klein’s use of sublimation in her early work pushes against the valorizing of reparation seen in her later work as well, I would argue, as the more recent uptake of Klein’s reparative theories.

There has been an increased interest in the work of Melanie Klein more broadly concomitant with the turn to the reparative inaugurated by Sedgwick. In *Cultures of The Death Drive*, for example, Esther Sanchez-Pardo uses a Kleinian framework to argue that “melancholia has a constitutive role in modernist sexualities.”²² Sanchez-Pardo applies a reading of Kleinian melancholia variously to texts such as Virginia Woolf’s *To The*

¹⁸ See, for example, Nishant Shahani, *Queer Retrosexualities: The Politics of Reparative Return*; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*; Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*.

¹⁹ Ellis Hanson, “The Future’s Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 1 (December 21, 2011): 101–19, doi:10.1215/00382876-2010-025.

²⁰ Wiegman, “The Times We’re in.”

²¹ Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (s.l.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 18.

²² Esther Sánchez-Pardo, *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 2.

Lighthouse, Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex*, Djuna Barnes' *Ryder*, and Countee Cullen's *The League of Youth*. Sanchez-Pardo's focus on the relationship between melancholia and the depressive position serves not only as a thorough overview of the entire Kleinian system, but also as a call for paying attention to the work of melancholia in modernist discourse. Similarly, Mira Hird uses Klein's theories on early ego development and infant identification in her work on intersex identity.²³ Hird's main goal is to contest the pressure on therapists and doctors working with individuals with intersex conditions to emphasize stable and coherent, and notably binary, gender identifications. Such pressure, Hird argues, reinforces the hetero/homo divide while also aligning unstable or non-binary gender identification with homosexual desire. Hird uses Klein to highlight a resistance to Freudian sexual teleology and focus, instead, on ambivalent identifications and the failure of coherent identity. Moving outward from the question of the commitments of the reparative and paranoid-schizoid positions, David Eng and Shinhee Han extrapolate from Klein's good and bad objects "an account of 'good' and 'bad' *racialized* objects."²⁴ Eng and Han connect these racialized objects to a racial melancholia that is the result of a splitting inaugurated by the subject's barred assimilation into whiteness. Their case study for the argument is the clinical presentation of first generation Asian American immigrants who must negotiate the model minority demands of partial assimilation with the loss of Asianness such assimilation demands.

Other scholars have utilized Klein to begin to think about the place of negativity and violence in the social. In her essay, "Queer Apocal(o)ptic/ism: The Death Drive and

²³ Myra J. Hird, "Considerations for a Psychoanalytic Theory of Gender Identity and Sexual Desire: The Case of Intersex," *Signs* 28, no. 4 (2003): 1067–92, doi:10.1086/343131.

²⁴ David L. Eng Ph.D and Shinhee Han C.S.W, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, no. 4 (August 15, 2000): 690, doi:10.1080/10481881009348576 Italics in original.

The Human,” Noreen Giffney presents the neologism “queer apocal(o)ptic/ism” in order to name “the apocalyptic moments at which the death drive becomes the destruction drive in the service of shattering an imposing illusion produced as a shifting signifier of heteronormative hegemony.”²⁵ In her argument, Giffney uses Klein to take to task Edelman’s project in *No Future*, through both his use of the death drive and the clear humanism proscribed in the figure of the child. Giffney offers to Edelman the Kleinian mechanisms of splitting in his understanding of the relationship between the Queer and the Child. Relatedly, in their dialogue on hope and hopelessness, Lisa Duggan and Jose Muñoz call attention to the ways in which the distinction between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions is hardly, if ever, able to be enforced.²⁶ As Duggan notes: “Queer vitality, Feeling Revolutionary, may require that we straddle the Kleinian paranoid schizoid and depressive positions, escaping and re-entering the scene of educated hope in a contrapuntal dance, moving always sideways, never growing ‘up.’”²⁷ If the depressive position allows the possibility of repair, of making our way in a world that seeks to annihilate, then, Muñoz argues, the paranoid-schizoid position is equally as important for “its negative force as an anti-normative resource for queer existence.”²⁸

Duggan and Muñoz’s provocation that queer political commitments should seek to hold the paranoid-schizoid and reparative positions in productive relation exemplify the ways in which Sedgwick’s call to reparative reading has been taken up as a new methodology in distinction to the bad, or perhaps stale, work of the paranoid. Indeed, as

²⁵ *Queering the Non/Human* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 58.

²⁶ Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (July 1, 2009): 275–83, doi:10.1080/07407700903064946.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 280.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

Muñoz notes above, we should not leave the paranoid behind, as if such a move were possible. In the concluding pages of *Gut Feminism*, Elizabeth Wilson takes up this impossibility in conversation with Edelman in *Sex, Or the Unbearable*. She rightly notes: “the legibility of reparation has been purchased through distancing it from the murderous splitting of objects that defines the paranoid position.”²⁹ Such a division misunderstands the impossibility of fixity in the Kleinian framework. More importantly, however, as Wilson explains, such a division allows the repairing subject too much distance from her own aggression.

The Kleinian death drive names the very real fears that the aggression we experience from the social carried with it the threat of annihilation. It is not clear in *No Future* why the position of the queer needs to be imagined as murderous rather than simply aberrant. The Kleinian fantasy of annihilation, however, opens a different space to imagine the needs for this murderous figure, the connection to death rather than simply failure. So, returning to how Edelman takes us one step beyond non-reproduction, an attention to the Kleinian death drive imagines a different kind of reproduction, one where queers not only refuse to the compulsion to reproductive futurity but where more and more queers come to take up the spectral space at the border of the social, the space marked by the sinthomosexual, effectively devouring the normative center. For Bersani, too, the internal aggressivities which are projected outward to his use of Freud’s *das es*, offer a different kind of death. Bersani connects *das es*, or the id, to a kind of death before the subject, a constitutive aggressivity that is fundamentally inassimilable to the sentimentality demanded from our current regime of sexuality. It seems to me that here

²⁹ Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 178.

is another place wherein Klein is helpful in thinking negativity as constitutive of the subject and not simply a by-product of the social.

Aggression is also a central theme in movements for social change. In the Kleinian system, as I have shown, aggression is not merely a bad behavior in need of tempering or tamping down. Similarly, aggression is not unidirectional. It does not move only from the ego outward but the ego is built under the continued threat of aggressive assaults. Direct action groups working for social change understand that aggression is not simply a needless act of violence but is a necessary motor of activism. Take, for example, The Lesbian Avengers, a queer, direct action group whose motto is: “We Recruit.” Born as an off-shoot of the New York Chapter of ACTUP, the Lesbian Avengers took aim at numerous anti-gay legislative ordinances, including those restricting school curriculum and civil rights, in the early 1990s as well as memorializing and responding to anti-lesbian hate crimes. The Lesbian Avengers are, perhaps, best known for their organizing of Dyke Marches, most notably the 20,000 strong Dyke March at the 1993 March for Gay and Lesbian Lives in Washington, DC, a practice which continues at Pride celebrations across the country today. At many of their actions, the Avengers were known to eat fire, passing torches among the protesters and downing the flames together.³⁰ As the Avenger chapters spread, Dyke Marches took on a political tone that remains in distinction to the increasingly corporatized and sanitized main pride parades. A hallmark of dyke marches is the bared breasts of dykes of all genders and styles. The baring of breasts was not only in rejection of local laws and ordinances but

³⁰ See Kelly Cogswell, *Eating Fire: My Life as a Lesbian Avenger*.

was furthermore a deliberate act of female aggression.³¹ The Lesbian Avengers know and mobilize the threat of their aggression.

Just as the paranoid-schizoid position has been set up as the undesirable place of bad affects, the “anti-social thesis” has been similarly hailed for its embrace of the negative. Indeed, part of the seductiveness of this line of thought has been its embrace of the aggressiveness named in the mode of being anti-, or against, the social. In this project, I have engaged the anti-social thesis largely in relation to the work of Lee Edelman’s *No Future* and Leo Bersani’s “Is The Rectum a Grave?” Both Bersani and Edelman use the Freudo-Lacanian death drive to name this place of aggression in the social. My ambition in this chapter has been to demonstrate the resources for such claims in the work of Melanie Klein. The anti-social turn in queer theory has at its root an aggressive, indeed anti-social, response to the violences enacted on gay men during the AIDS crisis. My goal in the wider project has been to bring the lesbian to bear on the mobilization of aggression in the turn to the anti-social.

In the first chapter, I have shown how organic death, namely that brought about by AIDS and breast cancer, becomes connected to understandings of both gender and sexuality through the work of the activist groups ACTUP and Breast Cancer Action. In the second chapter, I made a claim for the theoretical value of radical feminism and its commitment to an “anti-social politics” and a violent “politics of destruction” as providing a specific and terroristic threat to reproductive futurism that is more accounted for in the world of politics than Edelman’s limited sinthomosexual figure. In the third chapter, I focused on lesbian bed death as a way to acknowledge damage within the

³¹ For a history of breast baring as female opposition see Libby S. Adler “A Short Essay on the Baring of Breasts.” See also the more recent feminist activist group FEMEN: “an international women’s movement of brace topless female activists...” www.femen.org.

social without evacuating or giving up on pleasures. I conclude here by challenging the affective divides that have rendered lesbian aggression either unbearable or unrepresentable.

What might it mean to think aggression as an act of love? For Klein, love and hate are necessarily imbricated in both life and politics. Love in Kleinian terms, contrary to the sentimentality of Hallmark romance often attached to it, is a desire for persistence. Hate, by contrast, is a desire for ends, for destruction. The Kleinian division of love and hate is not about sentimentalized concepts of emotion most readily associated with these terms. Rather, love and hate, like their corresponding modifiers of good and bad, name an investment in those libidinal investments that we desire to have persist. Love, then, can manifest in forms that look like hate. Racism might be one place to turn to understand the tightness of this imbrication.

Audre Lorde's essay "The Uses of Anger" is an admonishment of white women's fears of Black women's anger. It is also a call to all women working against racism and sexism to recognize the use, and usefulness, of anger. The anger she names is many things: "the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation."³² One of the primary mechanisms Lorde names for not addressing anger is guilt. In Klein, guilt is a central feature of the reparative stance; guilt does not seek to destroy but rather to repair. Guilt, in a certain way, is self-soothing, it is an anxiety modification that we might say, in most basic terms, works to amplify good feelings and mitigate bad ones. But these mitigations happen only for the subject. In other words, guilt does not to change the conditions producing the bad feelings, it serves only to allow the subject to manage those

³² Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," 124.

bad feelings. Guilt does not, however, allow the subject to do the work to engage, and not simply placate, the ways in which the aggression it has identified in the paranoid-schizoid position is a reflection of its own aggressivities.

It is the guilt that will tamp down aggressivities, most specifically white guilt, that Lorde is speaking against. “Guilt,” Lorde reminds, “is not a response to anger, it is a response to one’s own action or lack of action...it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are...”³³ In the specific constellation that Lorde admonishes, guilt does nothing to address structural racism, it only serves to provide a felicitation to white feminists who are savvy enough to recognize racism but who fear its destruction. Fear is the primary mechanism that Lorde asserts thwarts the use of anger. This fear is a result of a distortion of anger and hatred. Like guilt, confusing anger with hatred serves only personal interest. When white women attribute Black women’s anger to hatred, they give themselves permission to dismiss anger as destructive. Destruction and annihilation are two major themes in Lorde’s speech. Anger provokes fear, most notably anger perceived as hatred, because it is assumed to be relationally destructive and it is all or nothing. If you hate me, then you don’t love me, and I need you to love me (guilt). The anger Lorde claims does not take relationships as its object but the structures that perpetuate racist systems. Anger, in fact, Lorde reminds, can maintain relation: “If I speak to you in anger, at least I have spoken to you: I have not put a gun to your head and shot you down in the street...”³⁴ Anger will destroy but it will also reconstruct (not repair) “anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone...”³⁵ Unlike a guilt driven reparation, which knows it is complete when the fear is assuaged,

³³ Ibid., 130.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 131.

temporarily, opening ourselves to destruction, to the uses of anger, requires that we get comfortable with being uncomfortable, that we put in the work, not knowing how or when, or even *if*, we will come out on the other side.

Coda: Are we post lesbian?

In August 2015, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival held its fortieth, and final, gathering in Oceana County, Michigan. The festival began in 1976 as one among many women's music festivals born in response to feminist calls for women's space. The last two decades of the festival saw increasing controversy over the place of trans women in the avowed "womyn-born-womyn" space. From the beginning, Michigan Womyn's Music Festival—or, Mich Fest, as its attendees refer to the event—has been a declared lesbian space. In 1994, activists held the first "Camp Trans" gathering down the road from the main festival. Camps Trans was born in response to the forced removal of trans women from the festival in 1992. Since that time, there have been numerous instantiations of Camp Trans, with different ethos and responses to the policies of the festival. Most notably, in 1999, a group calling itself Son of Camp Trans staged an action within the grounds of the festival. The result of this action was the first in-festival discussion of the "womyn-born-womyn" policy's implicit exclusion of trans women. The juxtaposition of lesbian space and trans-exclusionary policies has created false oppositions between the identities and experiences that can be grouped under the rubrics of either lesbian or trans.

In many ways, Mich Fest has become a lightning rod for accusations of lesbian anachronicity and transphobia.¹ In its final years, more and more performers and attendees began to boycott the festival in protest of the organizers' refusal to make explicit the

¹ For a succinct collection of publications related to the conversation around trans inclusion at Mich Fest in the late 1990s and early 2000s see: Emi Koyama, *A Handbook on Discussing the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival for Trans Activists and Allies* (Portland, OR: Confluere Publications, 2003).

inclusion of trans women. I say “make explicit the inclusion of trans women” because Lisa Vogel and the festivals organizers denied that Mich Fest was explicitly trans-exclusionary. Nevertheless, they continuously reiterated the “womyn-born-womyn” stance, an experience marker they tied to being identified as female at birth. As many observers noted, the organizers of the festival chose to end the event rather than expand their definition of woman.²

As festival goers celebrated the final days of Mich Fest, another major political movement was unfolding across the United States. August 8, 2015 marked the one-year anniversary of the shooting of African-American teenager Michal Brown by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri. During the summer of 2015, Black Lives Matter came to the fore as a major political and social movement both nationally and internationally. The Black Lives Matter movement developed out of twitter based activism surrounding the hashtag “#blacklivesmatter” in the wake of the killing of Trayvon Martin. The hashtag was first introduced by a trio of queer women of color. As the hashtag gained traction through twitter and other forms of social media, the women—Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors—began to translate their social media activism into collective action under the same header. In the days that followed Michael Brown’s murder Black Lives Matter became one of the main organizing factions in the response protests mobilizing people nationally and internationally to travel to Ferguson. While the hashtag and organization had been building prior to Ferguson, the

² Diane Anderson-Minshall, “Op-Ed: Michfest Founder Chose to Shut Down Rather Than Change With the Times,” *The Advocate*, April 24, 2015, <http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2015/04/24/op-ed-michfests-founder-chose-shut-down-rather-change-times>.

organization's strength and rhetorical power helped to make both Ferguson and Black Lives Matter a major catalyst in a shifting political age.

Black Lives Matter is an avowed queer, feminist, trans-affirming movement for social change that centers Black experiences and Black bodies in the fight for transformation and racial justice. In many ways Black Lives Matter marks a new era of social activism made possible by social media, the ready availability of video recording devices, and the rapid spread of information. As I have noted, Black Lives Matter began as a twitter hashtag and has expanded to international scale with chapters and meetings in nearly every major city in the U.S. On its website and throughout its media presence, the leading founders of Black Lives Matter connect their work to the histories of feminist, queer, and, mostly importantly, Black revolutionary politics. As Cathy Cohen notes in a recent conversation with Sarah J. Jackson through *Signs*, the importance of queer women leadership in Black Lives Matter cannot be understated.³ And, yet, she also warns that the media's attention to this queer feminist leadership as a new movement risks erasing the histories of Black, lesbian, feminist and queer leadership and action. Rather, it is of note that Black Lives Matter identifies themselves in citation to early queer, feminist, and Black revolutionary activists and movements.

I bring together these two events, that is the end of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and the rise to the political fore field of the Black Lives Matter movement, in order to put pressure on the question of being post-lesbian. The loss of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival has led some to proclaim the death of the lesbian.⁴ But, is

³ Cathy J. Cohen and Sarah J. Jackson, "Ask a Feminist: A Conversation with Cathy Cohen on Black Lives Matter, Feminism, and Contemporary Activism.," *Signs: Ask A Feminist*, 2015, <http://signsjournal.org/ask-a-feminist-cohen-jackson/>.

⁴ see: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/aimee-anderson/the-death-of-the-lesbian_b_7699284.html

Black Lives Matter not also a lesbian movement? While neither the three primary organizers nor the organizational literature identify the people or principles of the movement as lesbian, if the lesbian names a bridge between feminist and queer commitments she is every present in the movement. What's more, the absence of the lesbian signifier in this femme-centric, feminist, queer movement may signify a new relation between feminist and queer, a relation that no longer requires the lesbian as a middle term.

Across this project I have tracked the emergence of different lesbian figures at the borders between feminist and queer commitments. In the first chapter, I demonstrated how the association between breast cancer and HIV/AIDS, particularly as was made by lesbian breast cancer activists, had the effect of producing the lesbian as a bio-political subject. In the second chapter, I argued that the ongoing association of lesbians and feminism—particularly when such an association is used to dismiss or deride feminism—names the very literal threat that radical feminism's lesbian separatist politics poses to reproductive futurity. In the third chapter, I offered an alternative genealogy to the phrase lesbian bed death as a way to both expose and examine the division of feminist and queer political commitments along the fault lines of pleasure and danger. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I brought Melanie Klein's association between aggression and the death drive to bear on both the so-called anti-social thesis and the reparative turn in queer theory. I began with the lesbian as a biopolitical subject to begin to mark, I think, the evacuation of the venom of the lesbian claim as an aggressive political force. In other words, when the lesbian is marked for the promotion of life, she becomes another normative political subject. The exception, of course, being when she is marked by other untenable subject

positions. In the middle two chapters, I examined how the association between lesbian and feminism invokes a murderousness connected to radical feminism as well as the presumed killjoy effect of feminist concerns with pleasure and danger. The fourth chapter elucidates, via the Kleinian death drive, how aggression and anger can be useful for queer, feminist, and anti-racist projects.

The title of my project seeks to pique the reader's interest with the tagline "lesbian death in feminist and queer politics." I have tracked death across the project from the literal to the figural, from organic death to the death drive. I invoke death in my title for a number of reasons. I do so in order to preview those deaths that I trace. As a summative claim, the invocation of lesbian death is also meant to suggest the possibility of the end of the term, the figure, and, even, the identity.

I end, for this reason, with Black Lives Matter. On the eve of the 2016 presidential election, the Black Lives Matter organizers have made the persistent structures of a racist system, most notably police violence and mass incarceration, a central issue of the election cycle. Black Lives Matter is a feminist and queer and trans-affirming movement fueled by the anger of people of color and their allies. This is a movement that, as Taryn Jordan argues, mobilizes rage in the face of a politics of impossibility to mark a possibility.⁵ I want to mark the mobilization of feminist and queer commitments against the persistent violences of anti-Black racism as, perhaps, a new way to mark lesbian as well to suggest that such a constellation may point to the end of the usefulness of the term. To put it more clearly, perhaps the truly intersectional organizing

⁵ Taryn Jordan, "The Politics of Impossibility: CeCe McDonald and Trayvon Martin-the Bursting of Black Rage." (Georgia State University, 2014).

of Black Lives Matter renders the term lesbian an unnecessary bridge between feminist and queer. But that does not mean she is not there.

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