

**Desires for Form:
Modernist Narrative and the Shape of Queer Life**

by

Aaron J. Stone

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(English Language and Literature)
in the University of Michigan
2022

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Joshua L. Miller, Co-Chair
Professor Valerie Traub, Co-Chair
Professor David M. Halperin
Professor Nadine Hubbs
Professor Susan S. Lanser, Brandeis University

Aaron J. Stone

stoneaa@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-4127-5126

© Aaron J. Stone 2022

DEDICATION

*For my grandmother,
Emma Malinda Price.*

*Your love inspired
more than you knew.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I give thanks each day for my fabulous committee. I will never cease to be dazzled by your collective brilliance and generosity. Your voices have taken up permanent residence in my head, and I consult them constantly for wisdom and encouragement. Josh Miller, you have been a pillar of support since my earliest days in Ann Arbor. In my moments of deepest self-doubt, I could always rely on our meetings to steady my nerves and restore my confidence. Dean Hubbs, you have reminded me how exciting and invigorating queer studies can be. Thank you for sharing so many long talks after class, for your wry humor, for trusting me to help steer the Lesbian-Gay-Queer Research Initiative, and for ensuring that “Fuck Anita Bryant” lives rent-free in my brain. Sue Lanser, your incisive feedback is only matched by your warmth and generosity. Thank you for offering me so much of your time, whether that meant reading chapter drafts, humoring my weekend rants about Rebecca Hall’s *Passing* adaptation, or making space in your schedule to catch up at Narrative conferences. I hope we can share a vermouth-on-the-rocks toast soon. Valerie Traub, you’ve been a model of the kind of scholar, colleague, and educator I hope to be. You’ve challenged me to be ambitious without pretension, to celebrate myself and others, and to give back as much as I have received. I am forever grateful for your sharp editorial eye; for the vivifying food, wine, and conversations we’ve shared; and for reminding me that sometimes a concept map is all you need to sort things out. David Halperin, no expression of gratitude could begin to cover it. You’ve read countless drafts with astounding thoroughness,

candidness, and alacrity. You've believed in me; nurtured my work; shared your home, library, delicacies, and champagne. I cherish our conversations and our diffuse email exchanges. Thank you for being an unflagging mentor and friend.

This dissertation was completed with financial support from the University of Michigan Department of English Language and Literature, the Rackham Graduate School, and the U-M Institute for the Humanities. I couldn't have wished for a more supportive and stimulating scholarly environment. Special thanks are due to the wonderful people who have helped me navigate the program and the department, especially Aida Levy-Hussen, Thea Bude, Senia Vasquez, Denise Looker, Lisa Curtis, Jane Johnson, Lewander Davis, and Karena Huff. Sigrid Anderson has graciously placed countless orders for new library books on my behalf. The Women's and Gender Studies Department has been a warm and nurturing second home; many thanks to Kate Sechler for ushering me through the LGBTQ Studies Certificate requirements. I am deeply indebted to the Graduate Employees' Organization for tirelessly advocating for our health, safety, and remuneration. Numerous Rackham Interdisciplinary Workshops ensured that I was ensconced in intellectual community. The Modernist Studies Workshop has been a highlight of my experience; many thanks to the members, my co-founder, Hayley O'Malley, and co-coordinators, Amanda Greene and Alex Ramsey, for making it possible. I am also grateful to the many coordinators and members of Doing Queer Studies Now, Critical Contemporary Studies, and the American Studies Consortium for your invigorating conversations, programming, and workshops. The members of Danny Hack's summer publishing workshop profoundly reshaped an early version of this project's second chapter; I am grateful for their generous suggestions. The 2020–21 Institute for the Humanities fellows cohort was a rare and special gift in a dire year. Ghassan Abou-Zeineddine, Alaa Algargoosh, Caitlin Clerkin, Katie Dimmery, John Finkelberg,

Linda Gregerson, Bethany Hughes, Yael Kenan, Victoria Koski-Karell, Matt Lassiter, Ana María León, Megh Marathe, Janum Sethi, Anna Watkins Fisher, Jason Young, and our intrepid leader, Peggy McCracken—how could I not name you all?—you made scholarly community possible in the unlikeliest of circumstances. I miss our weekly Zoom conversations, your astounding intellects, and your keen feedback.

My research and writing have been indelibly marked by the extraordinary faculty I've had the privilege of working with at U-M. Andrea Zemgulys helped ease the transition to graduate studies and has provided ongoing encouragement. Jonathan Freedman cemented my love of Henry James and hosted fabulous parties. Gayle Rubin's vibrant stories reminded me that theory has a rich and messy history. John Whittier-Ferguson has taught me more about teaching and Virginia Woolf than I can say; I hope I have caught some of his infectious joy. Alisse Portnoy has helped me translate research into pedagogy and inspired me to be always evolving as an educator. Victor Mendoza has pushed me to think deeply about what theory is for. Scotti Parrish has been an encouraging presence, a generous reader, and an important resource. Larry La Fountain-Stokes has been an unquenchable flame of enthusiasm. Jason Fitzgerald has been an invaluable guide through academia's more arcane aspects.

Of the many members of the Kenyon College faculty who helped me to begin this journey, a few deserve special mention. Judy Smith fueled my passion for American literature; she reminds me still why I chose this path. David Lynn believed that I was cut out for academia and convinced me to believe that, too. Pashmina Murthy's kindness and brilliance guided me through an honors thesis that shaped this dissertation in ways that have astounded me. So much of this dissertation was made possible by Jesse Matz. He inspired my love for modernism, queer

theory, and narrative theory; trained me in the art of scholarly research; and has been a lasting friend and colleague.

I owe much thanks to those scholars whose paths I've crossed along the way for taking interest in my work and cheering me on. Benjy Kahan, your infectious enthusiasm has kept me going, and your ingenious work has opened exciting new doors. I'm so grateful to my trusty cadre of queer and trans studies enthusiasts from the Modernist Studies Association—Chris Coffman, Emma Heaney, Mat Fournier, and Grace Lavery—for sticking together for so many years. Thanks to Robyn Warhol for always finding time for lunch. Todd Nordgren, your friendship and support alone have made many a conference worthwhile. Ricky Rodríguez, Joseph Boone, and Brian Glavey, it's been a joy to know you and have your support from afar. I owe much to the attendees of the 2019 Sexual Modernities Conference; getting to meet you made all the planning worthwhile.

The colleagues in the English Department that I have had the joy to work beside have kept me afloat. I cannot thank you all as much as you deserve. Hayley O'Malley, you have given me more keys to success than I knew I needed; thank you for demystifying so much and for reminding me to pay it forward. My deep gratitude goes out to Tiffany Ball, Megan Behrend, Lauren Eriks Cline, Dory Fox, Kyle Frisina, Joey Gamble, Mason Jabbari, Matt Liberti, Elana Maloul, Kyle McCormick, Bret Moore, Olivia Ordoñez, LaVelle Ridley, Valentina Montero Román, Coni Contreras Ruíz, Yeshua Tolle, and many others for your advice, your friendship, and your feedback. Many thanks to Hannah Webster for covering for me at *MQR* while I was frantically revising.

I wouldn't have made it through without the love and support of dear friends, near and far. Elizabeth Harlow, your friendship has been a firm foundation amidst shifting sands; I'm so

grateful to have navigated so much of this labyrinth together. Alex Ramsey, thank you for talking me through many a crisis and for believing in me when I felt most like an imposter. Marc Arthur and Devin O'Hara, thank you for more gourmet meals, copious drinks, and joyous celebrations than I can count. Will Beischel, thank you for broadening my world in ways that I didn't know I desperately needed. David Vance, it's been a joy to learn and grow with you; I'm so proud of what we've both accomplished. Brooke and Abhinav, you've enriched my life in ways too numerous to list; I am a profoundly better person for having known you. Brett, Sam, and Austin, looking forward to our next reunion has propelled me through many difficult moments. Patience, you've propped me up, kept me on track, lent an understanding ear, celebrated me, consoled me, and so much more. Thank you for seeing me through.

My family has made all the difference. My grandmother Emma Malinda Price was a beacon of love and support. She paved so much of the way for me, and I miss her every day. My grandfather Burt Price taught me the value of a solid plan and a strong support system. My aunt Carolyn Koynock has been an unwavering friend and gracious host. My sister, Autumn Stone, has shared my joys, fears, and disappointments. My father, Roger Stone, taught me the value of a challenge and that the hardest things in life are the ones most worth doing. My mother, Lora Stone, has done more for me than I can ever say. Most importantly, she has taught me how to love hard.

Finally, to Ryan—you've seen me at my most frenzied and my most ecstatic; thank you for accepting the former and sharing in the latter. You've kept me nourished in every conceivable way. You are my home, my joy, my sense of wonder, my four-leaf clover. I am so, so lucky.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT.....	ix
INTRODUCTION What’s So Queer about Form?	1
PART I Desire for Intimacy.....	32
CHAPTER 1 Coveting the Couple: <i>Nightwood</i> ’s Reluctant Attachments	32
CHAPTER 2 Securing the Family: <i>Passing</i> ’s Potential Narratives	71
PART II Desire for Identity	108
CHAPTER 3 Trusting Gender: Effeminacy and Belonging in <i>The Young and Evil</i>	108
CHAPTER 4 Seeking Sexuality: <i>Gentleman Jigger</i> and the Art of Identification.....	153
CODA Scholarly Desires and the Limits of Form.....	207
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	213

ABSTRACT

Around the turn of the twentieth century, when sexual identity categories were acquiring new visibility, queer people began to construct communities around their shared experience of nonbelonging. Literary narrative was a crucial tool for queer individuals trying to forge senses of self and community. Scholars have argued that many avant-garde modernisms critiqued the sexual status quo and imagined convention-breaking modes of existence for queer people. Existing scholarship depicts nascent queer communities as triumphantly scorning social norms via their recourse to experimental literatures. Yet, many queer people found it difficult or unnecessary to abandon desires for traditional ways of life or for “conventional” literary forms. *Desires for Form: Modernist Narrative and the Shape of Queer Life* analyzes queer modernist narratives to explore how Black and white queer communities navigated both desires for new modes of living *and* attachments to conventionality. At stake here is an understanding of queer identity that accounts for and respects desires for legibility, intimacy, and belonging.

Desires for Form assesses how *narrative* form shapes representations of desire for stabilizing *social* forms through analyses of queer modernist novels informed by queer theory, narrative theory, and critical race theory. The dissertation contains two parts with two chapters each; each part juxtaposes a white-authored queer “experimental” novel with a “conventional” novel by a queer Black author. By explicating how each text defies critical expectations for traditional or experimental queer narratives, *Desires for Form* dispels the racializing assumptions that have historically separated white and Black modernisms. Part I, “Desire for Intimacy,” considers narrative representations of the social forms that structure personal relationships. Chapter 1, “Coveting the Couple,” examines Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936), demonstrating that the novel’s deviations from linear narrative do not enact a queer refusal of conventional forms but rather mourn modernity’s erosion of the couple form and traditional romantic scripts. Chapter 2, “Securing the Family,” argues that while the realist narration of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) seems to uphold middle-class Black respectability politics, the novel ultimately

accentuates how its protagonist has forcibly “straightened out” her own story, thus critiquing the very narrative teleology it employs. Part II, “Desire for Identity,” compares narrative modes of portraying queer longing for community. Chapter 3, “Trusting Gender,” analyzes the formal pastiche of Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler’s *The Young and Evil* (1933), asserting that the text’s heterogeneous narrative form underscores how queer femininity allowed members of the fairy subculture to forge stabilizing interpersonal bonds. Chapter 4, “Seeking Sexuality,” argues that Richard Bruce Nugent’s realist roman à clef *Gentleman Jigger* (written 1928–33, published 2008) takes the form of a queer Bildungsroman while tightly controlling readerly perceptions of its protagonist, whose identifications with queer sexuality are initially a superficial escape from Black identity but ultimately enable an artistic and unconventional theorization of queer subjectivity.

Desires for Form articulates a central paradox: within queer modernism, experimental narrative forms often reinforce traditional social structures, whereas narrative conventionality has facilitated radical reimaginations of queer ways of life. This insight disrupts the racialized hierarchies that have implicitly privileged the radical queer potential of white experimentalisms over Black realisms within modernist studies. By taking seriously queer desires for form, this dissertation also challenges queer studies to analyze how the longing for structure and stability has shaped queer subjectivity as profoundly as the desire to escape restrictive norms.

INTRODUCTION

What's So Queer about Form?

You don't know what love is said Karel turning his cheek over. You've never wanted me so that every line of me made you ache. . . .

But isn't love want?

But what want? What form is this want?

—Karel and Julian in *The Young and Evil*

While queer antiformalism appeals to me on an intellectual level, I find myself emotionally compelled by the not-quite-queer-enough longing for form.

—Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds*

Forms are at work everywhere.

—Caroline Levine, *Forms*

What does it mean to desire form? I use “form” here in a broad sense, building from Caroline Levine’s capacious definition of form as “*an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping.*”¹ Defining form through these three gerunds draws attention to the human toiling that exists behind orders, patterns, and shapes, a toiling that is driven by the desire for that which the idea of form promises. To desire form, to move toward it, is to seek out more of what it seems to offer: tangibility, stability, recognizability, beauty, meaningfulness. It is also to move away from objects or states associated with less form or weaker form: abstraction, insecurity, uncertainty, inorganization, nihilism. To be sure, the desire for form may be

¹ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3. Emphasis original.

accompanied by the knowledge that what one wants from form is often fantasy.² Our most cruelly optimistic attachments are often sutured to alluring forms.³ Seemingly solid shapes and structures—a life like this, a love like that—draw us in because they offer a reliable sense of order. That such an order exists only as an ideal may not dissuade us from wanting it; we often follow desire’s fixation on ideals in hopes of settling for less. I suggest not that form is unassailable or even that it does more good than harm, but that to examine without judgment the desire for form is to know both its limits and what it enables.

Why do so many of us crave form? To begin, there is value in the tangible. Such valuation can be capitalistic, to be sure—one cannot sell the idea of a painting quite as easily as a painting itself—but there is also personal value (which is not to say this is extricable from capitalist value). Walter Benjamin hints at this with his notion of aura, arguing that the physical presence of a beautiful thing yields pleasure that cannot be approximated by a mediated or reproduced version.⁴ The tangible promises to sustain in a way that the intangible cannot; desire for it is thus often metaphorized through comparison to appetite. We may devour love stories but thirst for a lover, consume pornography but crave contact. Form makes a promise to the body that it will supply what is lacking, gratify the senses, confer reality: it is through perception that the body most readily accepts reality, and to experience the tangible is to experience the reality of the self. The tangibility of form thus facilitates relationality, the constitution of the self

² My reasoning here is informed by discussions of queer negativity. See, for instance, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, who theorize “negativity . . . as resistance to the fixity of social forms” and “explore the valences of social intensities and fantasies, of the contradictory pressures implicit in established forms of relation.” *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), xiii.

³ As Lauren Berlant posits, an attachment is one of cruel optimism when the desired object is actually an impediment to one’s wellbeing. See *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁴ See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968).

through that which it can position itself with respect to. Insofar as the tangibility of form can be both literal and figurative, actually graspable and metaphorically vivid enough to be felt, its promise extends to both versions: the touch of a friend can comfort in ways that words cannot, just as the lucid memory of a past romance can grip the imagination more tenaciously than the abstract concept of love. It is not only that we desire form because of the tangibility it offers, but also that we are able to imagine more vibrantly that which we have already perceived. Our desires are thus actively structured by those forms we have encountered, hence the nostalgia for lost forms and the longing to recreate them.

This yearning to reclaim grasps at another of form's assurances: that it will confer stability. The desire for form may be a response to loss; we might hope that more and stronger forms will resist destructive forces. To invest in form where it can be found may alleviate the anxiety of instability elsewhere: the comfort of routine is often enough to propel one through a crisis of meaning. The concrete is both tangible and enduring; the enduring provides a foundation on which to build dreams, plans, structures. Form insists that it will not leave us, that it can be counted on, that we may trust it. We might fret over what to call a new lover, believing that to define is to commit to ongoing relationality. To give something a name is to give it form and thus to open oneself to attachment. This is why we are taught not to name stray cats and why many of us do anyway. More and stronger forms proffer deeper and more binding attachments. Many seek out marriage such that it might tether gauzy love to steadfast form. Form proposes to bear us with it into the future; we give words to our ideas in hope that they will last, and we through them. To cling to form is also to be anchored, to be protected from unpredictable currents, to say "I am here" and know what that means. Saying "I am here" is also to define oneself by claiming an identity, which stabilizes in no small part by conferring form.

Identity exists, for better or worse, as a social form. It purports to organize one's attributes into a meaningful shape, to define the subject through categories deemed socially significant. Identity becomes an object of desire when the subject takes pleasure in being identified. The popularity of astrology within contemporary queer culture seems to affirm the paradoxical comforts of identification: even a social group that has historically been marginalized by classification can take pleasure in fashioning enticing categories out of arbitrary details made meaningful through associated truth-claims.⁵ The fact that many casual practitioners of astrology acknowledge the artifice of its premises has little impact on their ability to derive pleasure from such identification. Identity offers pleasure through the promise of relationality: I share a quality with you and I deem that quality meaningful; therefore I am like you and I deem that likeness meaningful. Identity provides admission into in-groups. For marginalized groups, this provides protection and mutual trust through an identitarian solidarity: queer of color exclusive organizations exist, for instance, in order to organize around shared concerns that are not reflected in the experiences of non-members. Often, acceptance within such in-groups is predicated on adherence to a scripted social expectation, the embodiment of *proper form*. This is true of hegemonic and subcultural communities alike: the expectations of bourgeois respectability are no more rigid than, say, the subcultural expectation that a drag queen will walk, speak, and dress in a manner befitting their role as a larger-than-life performer (and this expectation does not cease when the wig is removed). The desire for identity, though, may also be touched by eroticism: I see someone I want and desire to be more like them. That is, I want their identity, not as an individual but as a social form. Perhaps I want to embody queerness in a

⁵ Michel Foucault acknowledges similar pleasures in his discussion of the confession. See *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990); and *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality, Volume 4*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 2021).

kindred fashion, to incorporate some element of their gendered habitus into my own.⁶ I desire to replicate what I admire in another such that it might inspire in others a similar wanting.

To emulate another's self-fashioning or to design from such models a personal style gestures toward the imbrication of form and aesthetics. To desire form is to acknowledge that shape, qua shape, can be pleasing; what shapes are deemed pleasing and to whom is often a matter of group consensus that affects individual desire. Style and taste derive from a negotiation between the idealized and the personal: What forms, admired by whom, suit who it is I believe—or wish—myself to be? The embodied aesthetics of self-fashioning encompasses obvious decisions such as wardrobe and hairstyle as well as subtler affectations and habits such as gait, posture, sitting position, the holding of the hands or lips at rest. To exhibit a personal style of being is to arrange the self into a shape that is pleasing to oneself and to others.⁷ Insofar as aesthetic forms—music, art, literature, fashion, architecture, and so on—inspire desire, they become satellites of the self, extensions amassed through attractive forces. The subject is thus reshaped by these forces, both because one is seen in constant relation to one's accumulated cultural ancillaries and because the individual often tends to emulate the qualities associated with their preferred aesthetic forms. These forms are desired not only for their own positive attributes but also for the social capital the individual can access through them.

⁶ I borrow the term “habitus” from Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2013).

⁷ I am thinking here of Foucault's account of “giving form and style to life” through an “aesthetics of existence”: “man's way of being and conducting himself, the aspect his existence reveals to others and to himself, the trace also that this existence may live and will leave in the memories of others after his death, this way of being, this appearance, this trace have been the object of his aesthetic concern.” Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II; Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2012), 161–62.

Arranging the self into a particular shape imparts a sense of meaning. This is true both in the sense that it communicates something to others and that it evokes a feeling of personal meaningfulness. The act of organizing life into a meaningful shape is often also a *narrative* practice. Thinking of life through narrative forms creates the comforting impression of directionality; what are otherwise a random series of choices, events, and misfortunes become, through narrative reimagining, steps on a path toward some outcome. The distortions of narrative's resignifications—transmuting arbitrary misfortune into obstacles triumphantly overcome, bad decisions into valuable lessons—become themselves objects of desire for their ability to imbue life with the idea of purpose. As such, the idea of narrative itself, as well as specific archetypal narratives—the heroic quest, the martyr's sacrifice, the marriage plot—are forms that we often desire to emulate and through which we may interpret events. Narrative addresses the longing for order and structure, providing the reassurance that might be found in imagining oneself as the hero of the story (and thus destined to emerge victorious from hardship) or in the sense of agency conferred by occupying the role of author (and thus controlling one's own life outcome through a series of intentional choices). We not only tell stories to make sense of what has already happened; we often also desire them as models that shape and expand our possibilities for imagining lives that are meaningfully and pleasingly arranged.

I offer these five qualities and effects of form—tangibility, stability, recognizability, beauty, meaningfulness—not as an exhaustive list of what we want from form but as an indication of the simultaneous capaciousness and detail that is necessitated by any study purporting to take the desire for form as its object. In the above meditation, I have previewed the key ways I conceptualize form in this project. Throughout, I attend to form as it manifests in three main registers: the *concept of form* and its associated qualities; *social forms*, or the

recognizable units through which relationality is structured; and *narrative form*, the methods by which stories are constructed and told. Whenever possible, I try to keep my analysis grounded in these last two, the concrete social and narrative forms, rather than form as an abstract concept. This enables more specificity around what particular units of social and narrative organization structure desire. However, the nature of desire is such that it often reaches out to an object not because of what that object is in itself, but rather because of the qualities or effects that object seems to promise. One might yearn fervently for a child because of a wish to replicate the social form of parenthood or to live out a host of narrative conventions that revolve around the inherent meaningfulness of reproduction. However, if the central motivating desire is to replicate the self in a tangible way that confers a sense of stability through the promise of continuation, this cannot be quite reduced to the desire for social or narrative forms: what is really at stake may not be particular forms themselves but the qualities that the concept of form itself seems to promise. As such, these three registers of form sound simultaneously, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in discord, such that to discuss one is to invoke the others.

As I have so far characterized it, the desire for form might seem at odds with queerness, defined most durably as “resistance to regimes of the normal.”⁸ How could the longing for stability, order, and recognition possibly square with a notion of queerness defined by the resistance to (sexual) norms? Is not the movement toward more form, or stronger forms, or traditional forms inherently in line with normativity’s controlling, regulatory impulse? Is what

⁸ Michael Warner, introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi. Cf. David M. Halperin: “Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.” *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

Elizabeth Freeman calls “the not-quite-queer-enough longing for form” simply a failure to do the properly queer work of enacting radical breaks from and refusals of form?⁹

It is easy to see why the desire for form evokes the threat of conservatism: security purchased through conformity, i.e., through being *with form*, can impede the momentum of progress away from that which has calcified. But what does progress aim for? Something with less form, perhaps, or weaker form; something plastic, malleable, supple? Or perhaps toward different strong forms, novel ideas for how to live that are themselves rigid in their opposition to that which we deem improper, unethical, unjust? Or toward more granular forms, local forms, tailored with more specificity and precision, more ornate detail, than their broad-stroked cousins? In any case, we certainly don’t conceive of progress as progress from form, moving *against* form itself, moving toward chaos or nebulosity, toward dissolution as an end in itself. So let us put aside the notion that to desire form is inherently conservative; in any case, such a notion is itself driven by a desire to concretize “form” into a single particularity.

Similarly, the idea that to be properly queer—indeed, properly critical—is always to desire the weakening of form relies on an understanding of form as an inherently disciplinary tool for maintaining relations of power. Indeed, forms certainly can and have frequently been such tools. This has been made eminently clear in Foucault’s substantial oeuvre, which has thoroughly documented how power solidifies itself and gains longevity through institutions, structures, and systems. Yet, just as Foucault has often been misread as positing the futility of resistance, to say that Foucault confirms the inherent disciplinarity of form itself is to miss how forms may be used for other purposes, for pleasure or resistance. He writes: “Where there is

⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii.

power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping’ it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? . . . This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance.”¹⁰ Moreover, “it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships.”¹¹ It is not, then, that forms exist only in service to power; rather, both power and resistance operate through “codification,” the creation, refinement, and deployment of forms and systems. The forms through which power operates are relational; as such, they are the same forms through which resistance must operate. To resist is not to dismantle forms so that we might rest assured that power will never again reside in them. It is to understand that forms, like power, will always exist, and that to resist is to improvise new strategies for managing how forms are put to use.

Take, for example, Foucault’s discussion of gay male femininity. Recounting that early psychiatric diagnoses considered same-sex desire to be a form of “psychic hermaphroditism,” Foucault describes “this kind of very complicated game in which all the takeovers [*prises*] that one wanted to impose through the intermediary of medical and psychiatric knowledge have been turned inside out. We’re all hermaphrodites? All right, let’s go! And I will be even more woman than the doctor claims I am. . . . This is what you want me to be? Well, then, I will be absolutely similar to what you want, I will be even more similar than you believe, to a point where you’ll

¹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 95.

¹¹ Foucault, 96.

be, in the end, completely flabbergasted.”¹² That Foucault describes this relation of power as a “game” is significant; a favorite metaphor of Foucault’s, the game implies a set of rules—a formal system—from which each player’s strategy must be derived. It is the players, not the rules, who direct the flow of power; the rules are merely the landscape in which a power struggle takes place. The features of that landscape may suggest particular strategies, but it does not determine the outcome. In this example, the psychiatrist deploys a gendered form to make a truth-claim to which the queer patient is subjected—“this man is psychically a woman, and therefore disordered”—but the patient’s queer resistance to this pathologization manifests not as refusal but as radical acceptance of that same form. As Judith Butler writes, gender “is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” given that “the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself.”¹³ By identifying defiantly with a queer gender, the homosexual subject improvises, resisting the power of another’s truth-claim by embracing the very form that was deployed from outside in order to constrain.

In laying out a new method for analyzing form, Caroline Levine argues that, while the prevalent scholarly suspicion of forms might be linked to Foucault, he also provides a model for understanding how forms might be put to good use. Observing that Foucault “points us to the remobilization of old forms for modern uses,” Levine extends Foucault’s argument to offer that “lots of other old forms might also be waiting around, available for reuse” in ways that are not necessarily aligned with the multiplication and solidification of power.¹⁴ As such, Levine questions the notion that “smashing or evading . . . forms has ever been the only or the most

¹² Michel Foucault, “The Gay Science,” trans. Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith, *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 395.

¹³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

¹⁴ Levine, *Forms*, 65.

effective means to advance the cause of social justice,” asking instead how the forms that we reuse or create enable human agency.¹⁵ By analyzing forms through their “affordances,” “a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs,” Levine posits that “each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities,” although “a specific form can be put to use in unexpected ways that expand our general sense of that form’s affordances.”¹⁶ Following Levine’s insistence on the importance of “attention to both aesthetic and social forms,” I pursue throughout this project an analysis of form’s affordances. In so doing, I add to Levine’s investigation of form’s pragmatic possibilities an examination of what *pleasures* it offers. Moreover, I ask what promises are latent in our ideas about form, promises which fuel our desires but do not always translate to the material affordances of the real forms that exist in the world.

The desire for form has long been of particular importance for queer subjects. Desiring form, as opposed to inhabiting it or eschewing it, indicates a lack: it may mourn one’s exclusion from existing forms and long for the stability they provide, or it may acknowledge the insufficiency of existing forms and attempt to imagine new alternatives.¹⁷ Lacking the same confidence in the abundance of models, scripts, and structures on which nonqueers rely to invest life with a sense of meaning, queers have historically been susceptible to experiencing a sense of formlessness with regards to love, desire, and identity. The queer desire for form can be harmful: it can lead, for instance, to the shame of not fitting into preexisting structures or to the

¹⁵ Levine, xii.

¹⁶ Levine, 6.

¹⁷ As Butler writes, “it seems crucial to realize that a livable life does require various degrees of stability. In the same way that a life for which no categories of recognition exist is not a livable life, so a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option.” *Undoing Gender*, 8.

acceptance of pathologizing explanations that seek to discipline and control queerness.¹⁸ But it can also be liberating and productive, opening a space for new forms of queer life, relationality, and representation.

Within the context of love and desire, form refers to those social scripts that define the contours of relationality: forms of relationships, the couple form, marriage, the nuclear family, as well as less traditional alternatives that have also solidified into recognizable shapes: cruising, polyamory, the chosen family. These forms both shape desire and become objects of desire themselves. Form is also linked to bodies and embodied identities.¹⁹ Conduct, comportment, and behavior are the forms by which bodies are made socially legible, and deviations from normative conduct often meet disciplinary resistance.²⁰ But queer communities and subcultures also develop their own forms of rendering queerness legible on the body: witness the butch who cups a cigarette in an overhand grip, the fairy who walks with “swishing” hips,²¹ the nuanced and wordless grammar of body language that has historically constituted the primary mode of communication in queer clubs and cruising spaces. The desire for gender heavily inflects these embodied forms: drag, gay male effeminacy, clone culture, as well as butch/femme, trans, and

¹⁸ For a collection of perspectives on how shame has organized queer experience, see David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, eds., *Gay Shame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Historically, the word “form” has often itself meant “body.” “form, n.” *OED Online*. December 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/73421?rskey=6Yj6f3&result=1>.

²⁰ As Foucault writes: “The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. . . . Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies.” *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 137–38.

²¹ This association of an exaggerated walk with homosexual effeminacy even produced “swish” as a slang term for a gay man. “swish, adv. and n.1.” *OED Online*. December 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/195954?rskey=iH5Uqq&result=5>.

nonbinary identities all exhibit the desire for gendered embodiment as a form of intelligibility.²² Forms of cultural production are also key to this discussion, as queers have long resignified mainstream culture through practices like camp in addition to generating new forms.²³

Insofar as form is imbricated with aesthetics, queer desires for form have also shaped and been shaped by artistic representation. Within an American context and elsewhere, modernism was a crucial arena in which to hash out various relationships between queerness and form. This project focuses on desires for form within queer modernist narrative because, while early queer communities were experiencing a social crisis of form—a reckoning with queerness as a legible social identity—a similar rupture was taking place at the level of literary form. This social crisis, emerging in the wake of what Foucault controversially identifies as the historical emergence of the homosexual as a “species” around 1870, concerns the gradual and uneven adjustment of various cultural ideas about same-sex desire—that is, the same process of adjustment that Foucault has been critiqued for glossing over.²⁴ Scholars investigating late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century discourses of sexuality have thoroughly demonstrated how complicated and messy the history of these discourses was. As David Halperin explicates, multiple conflicting models for understanding male same-sex desire—such as friendship, sodomy, effeminacy,

²² As Butler writes: “Although being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way, there is nevertheless a desire that is constitutive of gender itself and, as a result, no quick or easy way to separate the life of gender from the life of desire” (1–2). I also borrow the phrase “the desire for gender” from Robyn Wiegman’s *Object Lessons*, wherein Wiegman analyzes how field formations and cultural trends reinforce “the heteronormative insistence that gender serves as the privileged mode of signifying the meaning of sex” and how this insistence “is part of a broader, if contradictory, social and psychic desire for gender, a desire animated by profound, incommensurate, and proliferating investments in the look and feel, the language and symbolics, the erotic life and the everyday manifestation, as well as the mutability and transitivity of gender.” *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 323.

²³ For an analysis of how gay culture has produced its own recognizable forms, see David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

²⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 43. For this critique of Foucault’s “Great Paradigm Shift,” see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 44–48.

inversion, and homosexuality—did not merely supersede one another historically; rather, they overlap and intersect across various moments, geographies, and cultures.²⁵ As such, the elaboration and uneven circulation of new, often conflicting sexual theories in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century yielded more confusion than consensus regarding what queerness was, how it manifested, what it meant, and so on. Vigorous debates occurred over homosexuality's etiology and whether it was caused by poor breeding, corrupting influences, or other vices such as alcoholism.²⁶ Such discussions circulated in fields including sexology, race science, criminology, medicine, law, and literature, and these discourses took time to move out of their respective fields and into the popular imagination.²⁷ Moreover, these ideas were taken up unevenly across various social strata, with middle-class anxieties and schemas about the meaningfulness of same-sex desires only gradually shifting the ideas of many working-class communities throughout the first several decades of the American twentieth century.²⁸ Amid these convoluted discourses, queer subjects themselves were left to sort through these

²⁵ David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), esp. 104–37.

²⁶ On how modernist literature captured such debates around the topic of queer etiologies, see Valerie Rohy, *Lost Causes: Narrative, Etiology, and Queer Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Benjamin Kahan, *The Book of Minor Perverts: Sexology, Etiology, and the Emergences of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

²⁷ For a history of how scientific and medical discourses of homosexuality shaped popular ideas about sexuality in America, see Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For accounts of how race science and sexual science co-informed one another, see Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) and Melissa N. Stein, *Measuring Manhood: Race and the Science of Masculinity, 1830–1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). On the temporal lags between scientific discourse and popular discourse, see for instance Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

²⁸ See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic, 1994).

various, and mostly pathologizing, attempts to give form to queerness while also deciding how to shape their lives in response.

In the first several decades of the twentieth century, as these conflicting discourses about same-sex desire and gender nonconformity were circulating widely but far from resolved into any consensus, literary modernism was experiencing its own crisis of form. Summarized by Ezra Pound as the desire to “make it new,” modernist writers sought to break from tradition and to invent experimental methods of literary representation—e.g., fragmentation, circularity, non-resolution—meant to reflect the changing pace of modern life.²⁹ This narrative experimentalism coincided with the proliferation of discourse around queerness as well as new queer experiments in how to live; as such, it is tempting to map the social experiments undertaken by queer individuals and communities onto literary ones. However, this dissertation gives equal weight to texts published during this period that might be classified as “realist” or that depart from the narrow definition of formal experimentalism that has, until fairly recently, dominated scholarly accounts of modernism. In doing so, I aim to move away the idea that experimental form is inherently radical and instead ask why queer desires for form come to take such vastly different shapes. I do this in large part because the types of experimentation that white queer modernist authors are credited with inventing take much different narrative forms from the contemporaneous innovations of Black queer authors. This dissertation outlines how modernism as a literary schism intersected with attempts by queer writers to use narrative to imagine meaningful structures for their lives. It seeks to answer: What desires for form are expressed within queer modernist narrative and why? How did various narrative forms help queer people to organize and understand their experiences? How did the intersections of gender, sexuality, and

²⁹ Ezra Pound, *Make It New* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934).

racialization influence what social and literary forms were desired and employed by particular groups of queer people? What role did the modernist emphasis on experimentalism play in shaping queer desires for form?

My approach to these questions is indebted to those scholars who have shaped queer modernist studies into a robust subfield of its own. Heather Love has infused modernist studies with an attentiveness to how modernity positioned queers as “backward” and how critics, in glancing backward to the queer past, must resist the urge to repair its negative affects or recuperate it for the needs of the present.³⁰ Michael Trask’s insights on how modernity sutures together “immigrants, vagrants, casual laborers, and the marginal sexual populations” as well as Scott Herring’s analysis of the overlap between queer modernism and the practices and literatures of slumming have urged the field to take stock of the intertwinement of sexuality, transnationality, and class.³¹ Shane Vogel contributes an indispensable analysis of how the queer Harlem Renaissance constructed its politics and its literary forms against the dominant Black culture of respectability.³² Sam See’s notion that queer modernism seeks to establish a “queer mythology,” an attempt to create an illusory but unifying basis for queer community, gestures toward the desire for form that I see as motivating much queer modernism.³³ Like Benjamin Kahan, I maintain that modernist literature “furnishes . . . subjects with a vocabulary for

³⁰ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³¹ Michael Trask, *Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought* (Cornell University Press, 2003), 1; Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³² Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³³ Sam See, *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies*, ed. Christopher Looby and Michael North (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020). For an explanation of the concept of queer mythology that would have organized the late See’s second book, see Looby and North’s introduction to that volume.

narrativizing and narrating their sexual experiences, thereby fostering the development of sexual subjectivity.”³⁴

Within queer modernist studies, significant attention has been paid to the relationship between queer desire and experimental narrative form. Joseph Allen Boone’s groundbreaking *Libidinal Currents* (1998) set much of the tone for subsequent analyses of (queer) sexuality within modernism, laying out a modernist “poetics and politics of the perverse” through analyses of “fictional texts that . . . challenge unitary conceptions of narrative along with those of coherent identity or fixed sexuality.”³⁵ Without minimizing the brilliance and impact of Boone’s text—and what Paul Morrison rightly calls its “magisterial” expansiveness³⁶—it is necessary to note that Boone’s focus on texts that “challenge . . . coherent identity or fixed sexuality” and on the “varying shapes and functions that modern experimental narrative has assumed, especially in relation to issues of sexuality and psychosexuality” reinforces the tendency within (queer) modernist studies to privilege what is (sexually) radical about experimentalism, a tendency that I question in this project.³⁷ Similarly, Christopher Looby voices a question that underpins much of queer modernist studies—“Is the novel fundamentally inimical to queer sexuality?”—and, in answering it, suggests that “formal experiments” were often deemed necessary by those writers in the first half of the twentieth century who desired to represent “erotic scripts that ran counter

³⁴ Benjamin Kahan, *The Book of Minor Perverts*, 21.

³⁵ Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). 7.

³⁶ Paul Morrison, “Queer Modernism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*, ed. Brian W. Shaffer (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1002/9781444337822.wbetcfv2q001>.

³⁷ Boone, *Libidinal Currents*, 31.

to the novel's historically heteronormative bias.”³⁸ Brian Glavey, reading modernism and queer theory together as similarly formalist projects, helps us out of this bind of seeing form as either radically experimental or conservatively conventional, pointing out “our tendency to read modernist formalisms in all-or-nothing terms: to see them either as promising redemption or transcendence, on the one hand, or as symptoms of ideology or professional prestige, on the other.”³⁹ I adapt Glavey's approach to reading form as “a kind of productive confusion” while also shifting the emphasis to form's imbrication with desire.⁴⁰

My inquiries into what narrative form can teach us about queer desire are inspired and influenced by queer and feminist narratology. As Robyn Warhol and Susan Lanser lay out in *Narrative Theory Unbound* (2015), the emergence of feminist, queer, and contextual narrative theories in the 1980s argued for a revitalization of narratological tools that had been deemed outmoded for their connection to the totalizing and structuralist projects that characterized classical narratology.⁴¹ My approach builds on this field's combination of narratology's precise lexicon for describing narrative techniques with an understanding that these categories do not exist in isolation from the concerns of gender, sexuality, race, and class. As Warhol and Lanser assert, “narratives are critical to constructing, maintaining, interpreting, exposing and dismantling the social systems, cultural practices, and individual lives that shape and are shaped by performative acts”; as such, this project similarly aims to “identify and demystify the

³⁸ Christopher Looby, “The Gay Novel in the United States 1900–1950,” in *A Companion to the Modern American Novel 1900–1950*, ed. John T. Matthews (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 414.

³⁹ Brian Glavey, *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 167.

⁴⁰ Glavey, 167.

⁴¹ Robyn R. Warhol and Susan S. Lanser, introduction to *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, edited by Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2015), 1–20.

workings of those norms in and through narrative.”⁴² I also apply to my methods and analyses Robyn Warhol’s reminder that the “orderliness” involved in the study of narrative and forms “does not have to involve hierarchy,” that forms and formalisms are not inherently disciplinary in their ordering.⁴³

Understanding queer desire through narrative form is crucial because narrative is, in many ways, emblematic of the meaning-making value that we desire from formal structures. As such, it is routinely rendered suspect within queer theory. Judith Roof, for instance, argues in *Come as You Are* (1996) that “the sexuality of narrative is straight” because narrative formally follows a metaphorically (re)productive trajectory that reinscribes heterological norms.⁴⁴ In discussing what constitutes a “queer text,” Teresa de Lauretis has argued that one foundational criterion should be that it “works against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and the fulfillment of meaning.”⁴⁵ Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004) similarly proposes that queer theory should enact “a refusal . . . of history as linear narrative (the poor man’s teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—*as itself*—through time.”⁴⁶ As Valerie Traub recounts, recent trends toward “unhistoricism” in queer studies espouse a skepticism of narrative linearity that relies on an equivalence between linear chronology and straight

⁴² Warhol and Lanser, 7–8.

⁴³ Robyn R. Warhol, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 13–14.

⁴⁴ Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvi.

⁴⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2–3 (June 1, 2011): 244.

⁴⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

sexuality.⁴⁷ In light of these queer suspicions that explicitly link form, sexuality, and temporality, one might be tempted to disregard narrative form as a proper object of queer desire, let alone queer scholarship.

This critique of narrative follows from a broader impulse within queer theory to assess what forms are appropriate to queer life and representation, and much of this scholarship emphasizes queer resistance to form.⁴⁸ Elizabeth Freeman points out that “the dominant strains of queer theory have tended to privilege the avant-garde. . . . On this model, it seemed that truly queer queers would dissolve forms, disintegrate identities, level taxonomies, scorn the social, and even repudiate politics altogether.”⁴⁹ This privileging of the avant-garde and the dissolution of forms, while commendably acknowledging those queers who have turned nonbelonging into an opportunity for creative production (or destruction), dismisses desires to embody queerness in less triumphant ways. These concerns present a particular challenge for queer historiographical work as we labor to reconcile our present ideals of queerness with what we find in the past. Not to mention that the idealization of “truly queer queers” is at heart no less invested in the desire for form: delineating what “counts” as queer serves, in part, to provide models for what subversion or antinormativity should look like. Despite its best efforts to remain supple and elusive, “queer” itself has, for better or worse, become a form to be desired.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). See esp. chap. 3, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies.”

⁴⁸ See, for example, Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Lee Edelman, *No Future*; and Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), all of which emphasize queer resistance to various formal structures, including marriage, reproductive futurity, and systems of value, respectively.

⁴⁹ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xiii.

⁵⁰ For an account of “queer” as an object to be desired by “trendy and glamorously unspecified sexual outlaws who call themselves ‘queer’ and who can claim the radical chic attached to a sexually transgressive identity without, of course, having to do anything icky with their bodies,” see Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 65.

Rather than adjudicate what counts as queer form, this dissertation asks how the desire for form informs and reforms queer subjectivity and cultural production. Like Freeman, I'm interested in the "not-quite-queer-enough longing for form" and the places that this longing can take us.⁵¹ In exploring these places, I follow Kadji Amin's call to deidealize queerness "in order to analyze queer possibility as inextricable from relations of power" and "queer deviance as intertwined with normativity."⁵² By embracing such an ethic of deidealization, I examine the ways in which queer desires for form may brush up against normativity, but I eschew the dutiful impulse to condemn such proximities as complicities. This does not mean that I will be inattentive to the operations of power and coercive pressures that inflect such desires; rather, I posit that no form of queerness exists outside these influences. Today, critiques of homonormativities abound, and the importance of these critiques cannot be overstated: they have trained us to root out the capillaries of power that have slid into queer forms and which threaten to co-opt them to prop up normative agendas.⁵³ But this exclusive emphasis on critique and its espousal of what Eve Sedgwick calls "paranoid reading" trains our gaze away from analyses of desire that allow for ambivalent relations to normativity.⁵⁴ This dissertation is more inductive in its analysis, considering various textual representations of desires for form on their own terms for

⁵¹ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xiii.

⁵² Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

⁵³ Lisa Duggan first popularized the term "homonormativity" in *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 124–52.

what they can teach us about queer subjectivity in a particular historical moment.⁵⁵ I therefore take seriously the queer desire for certain forms that have been labelled as “conventional” in addition to those that signify as “radical.”

In this sense, *Desires for Form* contributes to a recent renewal of interest in questions of queer form that explicitly address its political relevance. As Warhol and Lanser’s 2015 collection attests, there is a vibrant array of new work within narrative theory that analyzes how narrative’s formal properties shape and are shaped by gender and sexuality.⁵⁶ Most recently, Tyler Bradway has challenged queer theory’s antinarrative tendencies, arguing for the necessity of narrative for queer relationality.⁵⁷ Speaking mainly of visual art but in terms that resonate with any study of form, Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy theorize a queer formalism in which it is possible, for instance, to “draw queer politics out of Minimalism” through its “the outright refusal of the rules of convention and medium.”⁵⁸ Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez similarly argue that we must continue to see form as engaged with queer politics: “*Form informs queerness*, and queerness is best understood as a series of *relations to form*, relations not limited to binary and adversarial models of resistance and opposition.”⁵⁹ They crucially trace “an

⁵⁵ My approach here rhymes with that of David Halperin in *How to Be Gay*, in which he sets out, in part, to “derive an account of gay male subjectivity from an *inductive* study of the history of gay male cultural appropriations rather than from a *deductive* application to them of psychoanalytic theory or some other theoretical dogma,” something that “very few queer theorists have attempted.” *How to Be Gay*, 125.

⁵⁶ Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser, eds., *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2015).

⁵⁷ Tyler Bradway, “Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form,” *PMLA* 136, no. 5 (October 2021): 711–27.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, “Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation,” *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (Winter 2013), <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=4468>.

⁵⁹ Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, “Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 228.

important parallel between . . . queer formalism and the impulse behind queer of color critique,” pointing to the two methods’ similar investments “in challenging how sexuality has been framed” and “illuminat[ing] questions of structure and epistemology.”⁶⁰ They entreat us to ask: In what ways can form still signify as queer, as political? What uses do queers have for form? How have queers embraced form, and to what end?

Desires for Form reexamines the relationship between queer identities and narrative form by focusing on a tight slice of time between 1928 and 1936 during the period of American modernism. At this time, sexual identity had become somewhat established as a social form with widespread meaningfulness, yet the contours of queer life were still hazy. At the same time, modernist experimentalism had definitively taken hold as a standard of high culture, with the styles of writers such as Pound, Eliot, Stein, Woolf, and Joyce shaping what was considered avant-garde literature.⁶¹ This project theorizes the role that narrative played in shaping the kinds of lives that queer people in this historical moment imagined for themselves. *Desires for Form* makes two counterintuitive claims: first, that experimental queer modernist texts often represent desires for traditional ways of life; and second, that ostensibly “conventional” narratives—a label most often affixed to texts by nonwhite modernists—have been equally essential to the project of queer worldmaking. Taken together, these contentions reveal that queer negotiations of form in this period almost always express contradictory desires, aching for traditional modes of life while also seeking to forge new ones. I explicate these claims through analyses informed by queer and trans theory, queer narratology, and critical race theory. My examinations of modernist novels by

⁶⁰ Amin, Musser, and Pérez, 231.

⁶¹ As Looby observes, “the late 1920s and the 1930s—the years of the Great Depression and its social upheavals—saw an unusual concentration of novelistic depictions of, explorations of, and literary reconfigurations of sexual cultures.” “The Gay Novel in the United States 1900–1950,” 428.

Djuna Barnes, Nella Larsen, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, and Richard Bruce Nugent chart how various narrative forms intersect with desires for stabilizing social forms such as the couple, the family, gender, and sexuality. Thinking intersectionally across sexuality and racialization, I theorize how narrative affected the emergence of queer culture and subjectivity during this period of American history while accounting for the social pressures that made traditional forms of life appealing to some and abhorrent to others. Such an analysis of the queer desire for form, I contend, is necessary for understanding the ways in which desire is not simply an unbounded and disruptive force, but one that shapes and is shaped by diverse forms. At stake here is an understanding of queer identity that accounts for and respects desires for legibility, intimacy, and belonging as much as desires for rupture, radicality, and experimentation.

Taking seriously desires to find forms that fit queer life, *Desires for Form* intervenes in queer theory by challenging the field's skepticism toward narrative and form and by infusing the analysis of queer subjectivity with attentiveness to the concept of form. Rather than dismiss inclinations toward stability as merely conformist, I posit that analyzing such desires presents a fuller picture of what queer subjectivity in the first half of the American twentieth century looked and felt like. My approach advances recent work calling for queer theory to recognize alternatives to the field's near-exclusive investment in critiques of normativity.⁶²

Desires for Form also contributes to recent projects within modernist studies that aim to expand the field's lingering overvaluation of the radical potential of literary experimentalism. This overvaluation is a relic of the modernist movement itself, which perpetuated a narrow definition of experimentalism that privileges radical originality, heroic defamiliarization, and the

⁶² See, for instance, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, eds., "Queer Theory without Antinormativity," special issue, *differences* 26, no. 1 (May 2015).

shattering of conventional forms. My interest in analyzing novels from the period that employ a wide variety of approaches to narrative form aims to advance the field's movement away from treating so-called experimental literatures as more complex and more politically relevant than "conventional" ones. Furthermore, because the literary avant-garde at this time was controlled by white elites, categories like "conventional" and "experimental" can reinforce racialized hierarchies. I break down such hierarchizing categories by placing novels by white authors that conform with this narrow definition of experimentalism in dialogue with seemingly traditional novels by Black contemporaries. In so doing, I reveal both the radical potential of "conventional" narratives and the traditionalist impulses that can underlie even iconoclastic texts.

Moreover, by extending and reworking the tools of narrative theory, *Desires for Form* contributes to queer interventions within that field by demonstrating the necessity of reading desire, queerness, and form as inextricably intertwined. I thus follow Susan Lanser's call for "a queer narratology in which questions of sexuality and the challenges sexuality poses to conventions of sex and gender become a telescope through which to seek narrative elements not before attended to or attended to differently."⁶³ However, as with modernist studies, the tendency to privilege experimentalism has long haunted narrative theory as a field.⁶⁴ By insisting that the analysis of narrative form should incorporate a theory of the desire for form, I model how narrative theory might reconsider the stakes of experimentalism and refine its methodologies. Furthermore, I demonstrate the need for more collaboration between the fields of narrative

⁶³ Susan S. Lanser, "Queering Narratology," in *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, ed. Kathy Mezei (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 259.

⁶⁴ In addition to classical narratology's focus on a structuralist approach to understanding modernist experimentalism, I am thinking here of influential new approaches to narrative theory that emphasize the antirealist tendencies of "unnatural" narrative. See, for instance, Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015); and Jan Alber, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

theory and queer theory, in line with Lanser's observation that, "despite work of extraordinary breadth and depth in queer literary studies, queer narratology itself remains underdeveloped."⁶⁵

Desires for Form employs a braided analytical method that attends to the interwoven nature of the three registers of form that I have laid out: the concept of form, social forms, and narrative form. Through close readings informed by queer theory and critical race theory, I consider how each text portrays queer subjects entangled in various relations of desire with these registers. Braiding these analyses of various registers together, I demonstrate how their co-constitutive nature necessitates simultaneous attention. In accounting for the interwoven desires of queer subjects for various forms, this dissertation will pay particular attention to narrative form and queer negotiations thereof. I thus turn to the toolkit of narrative theory to parse with more precision the affordances of various aspects of narrative form—such as story, plot, narration, voice, perspective, character, duration, closure—in representing queer subjects' desirous entanglements with form's social and conceptual registers. Moreover, I attend to the historical conditions that shape how these subjects experience desire in relation to the intersecting vectors of race, gender, sexuality, and class while also gathering the historical insights about queer desire that close reading can provide. In this way, I follow Elizabeth Freeman's assertion that "to close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these activities can allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm. . . . Close reading is a way into history, not a way out of it, and itself a form of historiography and historical analysis."⁶⁶ Like Freeman, I maintain that the fine-grained nuance that close reading

⁶⁵ Susan S. Lanser, "Queering Narrative Voice." *Textual Practice* 32, no. 5–6 (June–August 2018), 925.

⁶⁶ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xvi–xvii.

and narrative theory allow us to see is crucial to understanding how desire, form, and history are intertwined.

This dissertation is organized into two parts, each containing two chapters. Part I, “Desire for Intimacy,” compares experimental and realist modernist depictions of the longing for two traditional social forms of relationality: the couple in Chapter 1 and the family in Chapter 2. Part II, “Desire for Identity,” compares narrative modes of representing queer longing for community and self-knowledge. Chapter 3 examines the desire for gender, and Chapter 4 considers sexuality. Each chapter closely analyzes a single novel, and each part juxtaposes a formally “experimental” queer novel by a white author with a “conventional” Black queer novel, setting up an implicit dialogue. I use the terms “experimental” and “conventional” not to reify their meaningfulness but to draw attention to how the superficial aspect of formal difficulty present in modernist texts often shapes how critics understand their relationship to queerness. Whereas conversations about queer form have tended to privilege the kinds of experimentalism pioneered by white modernists, I demonstrate that an attention to narrative representations of *desire* for form disrupts this. My approach reveals that experimental narrative form affords potent representations of negative queer affect that are often underpinned by the desire for stabilizing social forms. At the same time, traditional or realist narrative forms that eschew overt experimentalism have afforded Black queer authors familiar and grounding narrative shapes in which to imagine unconventional social forms.

Chapter 1, “Coveting the Couple: *Nightwood*’s Reluctant Attachments,” shows that what critics have lauded as a queerly circular narrative also exhibits a traditional desire for the couple. Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* (1936) is often celebrated as a paradigm of queer modernist form, with critics pointing to its plotless and fragmentary representation of the Paris underworld as

evidence that modernist experimentalism can, for the sake of antinormativity, shatter both “conventional” narrative and traditional ideas about gender, sexuality, and relationality. Such accounts emphasize the novel’s unravelling of social and literary forms, but in so doing they ignore the longings for these very forms that *Nightwood* simultaneously expresses. This chapter elucidates the text’s paradoxical combination of disillusionment with and pining after traditional forms of relationality and narrative structure. An analysis of two of the novel’s central characters—Robin and Matthew O’Connor—reveals that their queer rejections of the couple form and the marriage plot are shot through with simultaneous cravings for the comforts that such structures afford, demonstrating that queer modernist disillusionment with traditional relationships and narratives does not preclude concurrent desires for these same forms. This chapter thus reads *Nightwood* and its own experimental narrative structure as an elegy to the couple form and its narrative manifestations, expressing cynicism toward them while also mourning their inhospitality toward modern queer subjects. By thus complicating extant readings of this influential text, the chapter offers a more nuanced portrait of queer modern subjects and the multiple competing vectors of desire they experienced in relation to traditional literary and social forms.

Chapter 2, “Securing the Family: *Passing*’s Potential Narratives,” argues that the seemingly conventional narration of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), often read as endorsing heteronormative Black middle-class values, is actually a queer narrative tool. *Passing*, though much lauded today for its subtextual insinuations of Black queer desire, is not generally read as being formally inventive or enacting radical critique. Rather, the novel’s formal conventionality is often viewed as running counter to and thus undermining its queer subtexts. This chapter argues that *Passing*’s ostensibly conventional form does not belie its queer content but instead

bolsters it. I read *Passing* as representing the process by which its protagonist, Irene Redfield, “straightens out” her own life story and renarrates it to herself in a conventional form that more closely aligns with the values expected of the respectable Black middle-class mother. Rather than uncritically deploying conventional narrative forms, then, *Passing* depicts the process by which racism, white supremacy, and normative gender roles place limits on the kinds of life-narratives that Black women are permitted to imagine. This reading posits that we may be able to locate innovative, critical, and queer impulses within “conventional” narrative forms, which may be uniquely suited to exposing deceptive promises of such forms from within.

In representing the Greenwich Village fairy subculture, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler’s novel *The Young and Evil* (1933) employs a pastiche of narrative modes; it is by turns both realist and surrealist, conventional and experimental, mimetic and abstract. Chapter 3, “Trusting Gender: Effeminacy and Belonging in *The Young and Evil*,” posits that this novel’s heterogeneity is meant to capture the interplay between the stabilizing forms that structured fairy society and the violent external forces that rendered fairy life precarious. Fairies’ desires for form, particularly for gender as a unifying social form, structure the novel—not, as most critics of the text have argued, fairies’ impulses toward the destructive forces of promiscuous amorality, antirelationality, or identity dissolution. Faced already with constant precarity and myriad threats from the straight world, fairies wanted belonging and stability. *The Young and Evil* imagines new ways of life for queers that are also tied to traditional social forms. Through the analysis of Ford and Tyler’s novel, this chapter elucidates how fairies used gender forms to establish a sense of trust through which they could improve their precarious social and economic conditions through positive community relationships and the avoidance of exploitation. The effeminate habitus of “fairy gender” allowed members of the community to establish clear signs by which trustworthy

friends might be identified. Contrary to queer theory's investment in fluidity, it was fixity and stability with regard to gender and sexuality that were crucial to this community. *The Young and Evil* additionally demonstrates that queer modernist writers have employed experimental narrative modes not only to shatter traditional literary and social forms but also to underscore the importance of shared cultural forms—like fairy gender—in establishing a modicum of stability for an otherwise precarious community.

Chapter 4, “Seeking Sexuality: *Gentleman Jigger* and the Art of Identification,” argues that Richard Bruce Nugent's novel *Gentleman Jigger* (written 1928–33, published 2008) deploys a tightly controlled narrative form that mirrors the desire of the novel's protagonist, Stuartt, for self-determination through queer identification, thus obtaining a control over his identity that Blackness has denied him. This identification with queerness originates as an insincere artistic persona, an alternative eccentric identity adopted to cancel out his overdetermination by his Black identity. As Stuartt dabbles in queer relationships, however, this motivation is betrayed by a surprising sentimentality: a more conventional desire for love, romance, acceptance, and recognition. This is reflected in shifts in narrational style, which is detached and distanced in the novel's first half but becomes internal and intimate in the second. The result is a queer Bildungsroman that portrays its protagonist's development from a cynical youth who strategically flirts with queer identity into a young man whose earnest desire for love occasions first an embrace of and finally a reimagining of sexual identity. Theorizing an artistic approach to identity, *Gentleman Jigger* demonstrates that social forms can provide rich raw material for creative self-cultivation.

The coda of this project, “Scholarly Desires and the Limits of Form,” refocuses the lens to consider desires for form within academic considerations of queer form. Examining a recent

scholarly theorization of queer narrative form, I ask: Do forms have agency? Or is this just something we want from them? This final section suggests some notes of caution and glimmers of possibility for future scholarly conversations about queer form, insisting on the importance of thinking form and desire together.

PART I: DESIRE FOR INTIMACY

CHAPTER 1

Coveting the Couple: *Nightwood*'s Reluctant Attachments

Very well—what is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance that we ever read. The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace—neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan! We love them for that reason. We were impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers, the sweetest lie of all, now come to be in boy or girl, for in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes the prince a prince—and not a man. They go far back in our lost distance where what we never had stands waiting; it was inevitable that we should come upon them, for our miscalculated longing has created them. They are our answer to what our grandmothers were told love was, and what it never came to be; they, the living lie of our centuries.

—Dr. Matthew O'Connor in *Nightwood*

Dr. O'Connor, the gender-nonnormative gynecologist and garrulous storyteller at the center of *Nightwood*, gives an account of the structures underpinning queer desire with his story of the “prince-princess in point lace.”⁶⁷ In doing so, he identifies the “Prince” of childhood

⁶⁷ Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New Directions Publishing, 2006), 145. Subsequent references to *Nightwood* will be cited parenthetically.

fairytale as the original template of all desired objects. Indicating that the prince is easily reinterpreted by the queer child through the lens of whatever gender they desire, he pinpoints the archetypal tale of “the Prince found,” which structures “every romance that we ever read,” as enduringly shaping queer desire. O’Connor’s invocation of the “romance” seems to conflate the medieval genre, which often included stories of courtly love, with the popular usage of “romance” that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century to refer to a narrative “which deals with love in a sentimental or idealized way.”⁶⁸ Either way, O’Connor evokes with this reference to the “romance” not only the Prince as love object but also the internalization of an archetypal love story, which promises that such a perfect object is due to us, that it will be delivered in the course of life on a “white horse” as it is in the romance to whoever gets the prince. This profoundly conventional ideal, the “answer to what our grandmothers were told love was,” structures queer desire despite its conventionality; the shift to a same-sex object does not in itself alter the basic structure. Whether masculine “Prince” or effeminate “prince-princess,” the love object is imbued by the genre of romance with the “sweetest lie of all”—O’Connor’s insistence throughout *Nightwood* on calling all stories “lies” suggests that he means it is the sweetest *myth* of all. It is upon this myth, O’Connor declares, that we are helplessly “impaled in our childhood”: the myth of an impossible romance that goes so “far back in our lost distance” culturally and personally that it continues to structure even queer desires with the false promise that we might one day reclaim a paradigmatic love “we never had.”

Of course, as O’Connor asserts, there is nothing salvific in this “living lie of our centuries.” The romantic ideal that such narratives pedal is little more than a model of desire’s

⁶⁸ “romance, n. and adj.1.” *OED Online*. December 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/167065?rskey=QIizdn&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

end, the fulfillment of which “never came to be.” And yet, the doctor puzzles, the desire to fit love to this particular model survives our disillusionment with it. While we may know better, the lie is still sweet: the love object still appears inevitably as the prince-princess whom “we have always been seeking” because “our miscalculated longing has created them.” Try as we might, O’Connor tells us, desire knows no calculation, and the longing that any love-object should correspond to the ideal of fulfillment inherent in the romance outlasts even the queerest repudiations of childish love stories.

Nightwood’s exploration of the forms that love takes stages a reflection on this paradox. The novel’s experimental narrative form corresponds to the disillusionment with conventional narrative’s “lies” that is voiced by O’Connor. Yet it also portrays a desire that survives beyond disillusionment. Disillusionment must render prior knowledge naïve, illusory, false for new knowledge to appear wise, laid bare, true. But what do we do with that excess of desire that pulls us back toward our illusions? How do we square our knowledge with our miscalculated longings? What does it mean for queers both to desire and disavow the forms that, however mistakenly, promise to bring meaning to our loves and our lives?

While *Nightwood* voices a modernist disillusionment with traditional narratives through O’Connor, it simultaneously represents lingering attachments to such forms. The novel’s characters desire to live out the narrative of fairytale romance that culminates in a teleological goal: the acquisition of a desired object. Robin Vote is figured as the elusive object of perpetual desire for each of three characters: Felix Volkbein, who marries Robin and raises a son with her until she leaves them both; Nora Flood, who becomes Robin’s obsessive and possessive lover after Felix; and Jenny Petherbridge, for whom Robin leaves Nora. Each of these characters desires to possess Robin in a way that aligns with conventional expectations for romantic

trajectories, even when such desires are same-sex: each imagines that their life with Robin will follow a linear narrative of pursuit, capture, and fulfilment. Against this, Robin's promiscuity and O'Connor's pessimistic monologues seem to offer a queer counterpoint. While it is tempting to read Robin and O'Connor as indicative of *Nightwood's* queer repudiation of normative relationship forms, I argue that even they retain attachment to and desire for these forms. These lingering desires, which I call the novel's "reluctant attachments," allow us to apprehend the novel's enactment of a dialectical relationship between queer negations of and desires for form. In this way, *Nightwood* theorizes the improbable coexistence of desire for and disillusionment with form.

When considering the desires for form addressed by *Nightwood*, we must attend to a few related meanings of "form." *Nightwood's* manipulation of narrative form has received much well-deserved attention. The novel is often looked to as emblematic of the queer potential of modernist experimental form because its circumlocutionary narration and absence of a traditional plot trajectory seem to repudiate the norms of "conventional" or realist narrative modes for the purpose of inventing new forms of narrative that might better capture queer experience. However, this easy equivalence between modernist experimentation and queer form might also raise a number of questions: What about the tendency for modernist formal experimentation to solidify into its own set of norms? What about the normative desires for heterosexual reproduction, domesticity, sexual ownership, and stereotypical gender roles that drive the characters of *Nightwood*? What about the tendency of even experimental narration to reproduce normative investments in truth, mastery, and meaning-making?⁶⁹

⁶⁹ As Heather Love writes, modernist form alone is not enough to make a text queer, as "the prominence of exile and alienation in even dominant modernism resonates with the outsider glamour of *queer*." "Introduction: Modernism at Night," *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (May 2009): 745.

Rather than adjudicate between what is and is not queer narrative form, I propose a shift in focus to *queer desires for form*. If some queers desire new, experimental forms of living and narrating life, many also desire forms that signify as normative. And these seemingly contradictory desires cannot simply be attributed to two opposed factions; rather, they coexist and inform one another in paradoxical ways. Indeed, as O'Connor suggests in his discussion of the romance, there may be something queer about desiring those normative forms more sincerely than they are normally desired. My analysis of *Nightwood* seeks neither to champion the text as a paradigm of antinormative queer form nor to unveil its hidden complicities with the normative. Instead, I ask: What might *Nightwood* tell us about the formal desires of queer subjects? How have queers negotiated the perceived contradictions between normative and nonnormative desires? How do queers understand their own desires for forms they know to be considered normative? What relation do these desires have to narrative and social forms? How does queer disillusionment with form deal with reluctant attachments to it?

These questions move us toward the other registers of form at work in *Nightwood*. Narrative often scripts the ways that subjects desire to live, as O'Connor's story about the prince-princess illustrates. These modes of life-structuring are shaped by social forms, such as gender norms and intimate relationship structures (e.g., monogamy, promiscuity, polyamory, marriage); modes of domesticity; and temporal structures.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the desire to fit life to a particular form is often linked to the desire for meaning, as I will elaborate later.⁷¹ Form as a structure of

⁷⁰ For discussions of the relationship between queer life, normativity, and temporal structures, see especially J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005) and Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁷¹ It is for this reason that queer theorists have argued for a rejection of the meaningfulness attributed to certain forms, such as the political meaningfulness attributed to reproductive futurism or those judgments of self-worth attached to narratives of success or failure. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*

meaning-making imbues certain life models with the promise of fulfillment, all of which is propped up by the narratives we tell. The interwoven nature of these various registers of “form” require that we attend to them together; in so doing, we can see that a better understanding of certain forms of life or structures of meaning-making are at stake in my consideration of narrative form.

As we consider the desire for form through these registers—narrative forms, life-structures, and the associated quality of meaningfulness—it is useful to ask what we expect “queer form” and “normative form” to look like at each level. A binary logic gives us the following schematization: desiring normative form entails a belief in the meaningfulness of conventional social forms (monogamy, marriage, reproduction, domesticity, adherence to gender norms, etc.) that can be linked to the desire to model one’s life after conventional narratives. By this logic, desiring queer form would correspond to disillusionment with the meaningfulness of conventional life-structures and perhaps a substitution of nonnormative social forms (e.g., polyamory, free love, promiscuity, nonreproductivity, the rejection of domesticity and gender norms), all of which corresponds to a rejection of conventional narratives and an embrace of experimental, nonnarrative modes of organizing one’s life and imagining its trajectory.

The reductionism of this binary sketch should be obvious, but it is worth lingering on if only to highlight what is less obvious: namely, what lies between these extremes. *Nightwood*, I argue, forces us to problematize this binary schematization. Although the novel is looked to as a paradigm of experimental queer form, it also exhibits the desire for highly structured ways of life and structures of meaning-making, even (and especially) if it also laments their failure.

(Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Experimental narrative, *Nightwood* shows, does not inherently rupture the attachments to life-structures or forms of meaning-making that are often critiqued as normative. My goal, however, is not to critique experimental queer narrative when it reveals hidden complicities with normative social forms. Rather, it is to show how desire disrupts a binary understanding of “queer” and “normative” form. Because *Nightwood* portrays queer characters and through an experimental form, we might be inclined to turn to *Nightwood* as a paradigm of “queer form.” But I contend that a discussion of queer form must not end with literary techniques; it must also contend with how queer people desire to structure their lives and make meaning. It is therefore equally important to attend to the desires for social forms that a text such as *Nightwood* represents. Does the adoption of experimental narrative necessarily stem from a desire to live life in a radically new way? Or might experimentalism also afford a mode of expressing despair about the impossibility of either recovering the lost objects to which we remain attached or finding new ones?

In this chapter, I argue that *Nightwood* demonstrates how experimental narrative can be paradoxically well-suited to representing queer desires for tradition, stability, and comfort. Rather than arguing that queers should repudiate traditional social forms, the novel instead mourns the fact that such forms have repudiated queers. The text’s experimentalism captures the pain of this repudiation and the desire for these lost forms. I begin this chapter by addressing how critics have desired a neat alignment between *Nightwood*’s narrative form and an advocacy for radically queer ways of life, such as promiscuity or gender nonconformity. My subsequent examination of Barnes’s own desires for monogamy informs my reading of *Nightwood*’s investments in the traditional couple form. I argue that Robin’s promiscuity involves a simultaneous attachment to the couple, demonstrating the enduring ways in which that form

shapes even nontraditional modes of intimacy. I then turn to Dr. O'Connor's pessimistic persona to show how even his disillusionment with form and meaning does not preclude reluctant attachments. Finally, I argue that reading O'Connor's own storytelling as an example of queer narrative voice reveals *Nightwood's* efforts to implicate readers in its reluctant attachments to narrative meaning-making. Taken together, these elements not only suggest a more ambivalent relationship to form than *Nightwood* is usually thought to have, they also allow us to theorize the paradoxical coexistence of queer negations of and desires for form.

Critical Desires for Nightwood's Queer Form

Since the 1980s and as recently as 2011, numerous critics have expressed desire for *Nightwood* to achieve something radically queer through its rejection of conventional narrative form. Teresa de Lauretis, in defining a "queer text," seizes upon *Nightwood's* ability to "frustrate both narrative and referential expectation,"⁷² while Judith Roof argues for *Nightwood's* queer potential to disrupt the heterosexual ideologies of conventional narratives.⁷³ Sarah Henstra reads *Nightwood's* "imaginative displacement of the symbolic system as a whole" as enacting a "radical challenge of identity categories."⁷⁴ For Donna Gerstenberger, the critical desire for *Nightwood's* destabilization of form even becomes the desire of the text itself: "the desire of Barnes's novel is freedom from the prison of meaning, and to accept this fact is to understand the

⁷² Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future," *GLQ* 17, no. 2–3 (June 1, 2011): 244.

⁷³ Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁷⁴ Henstra, Sarah. "Looking the Part: Performative Narrative in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Katherine Mansfield's 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français.'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 140, 144.

radical experience of narrative that is *Nightwood*.”⁷⁵ Joseph Boone, in *Libidinal Currents*, gives voice to the desire for *Nightwood*’s formal queerness to be a tool for representing its queer subjects: “It is the representation of the marginal, the queer, and the ‘inappropriate’ . . . that gives rise to Barnes’s distinctive brand of literary experimentalism, resulting in a text that is at once modernist, avant-garde, surreal, and expressionist.”⁷⁶ Attending to the ways in which Barnes uses textual surface and narrative temporality in deliberately queer ways, Boone suggests that queerness and experimental form go hand-in-hand. Scott Herring, following Boone, argues that it is *Nightwood*’s “queer narrative techniques” that allow the text to resist a pathologizing history of homosexuality and instead to imagine a queer underworld outside the confines of identity categories.⁷⁷ Boone additionally emphasizes how the novel’s “deliberate suspension of the rules of social order and class becomes a cause for celebration and revelry, as well as for anarchy and estrangement.”⁷⁸ This reading forces us to ask: who is celebrating in *Nightwood*? Boone’s desire for “the overall shape of *Nightwood*” to be “radically nongenerative and, by implication, productively queer” overemphasizes that which is triumphant for queers today about a novel that is primarily about queer sorrow.⁷⁹ My own approach to *Nightwood* is more aligned with Heather Love’s take on queer modernism in *Feeling Backward*, which reminds us to avoid rescuing the

⁷⁵ Gerstenberger, Donna. “The Radical Narrative of Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” in *Breaking the Sequence: Women’s Experimental Fictions*, ed. Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 138.

⁷⁶ Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 238.

⁷⁷ Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 177.

⁷⁸ Boone, *Libidinal Currents*, 235.

⁷⁹ Boone, *Libidinal Currents*, 241.

queer past from its negative affects by imposing a triumphant narrative upon it.⁸⁰ To this end, I aim to deidealize *Nightwood*, to borrow a term from Kadji Amin: rather than reading the novel as a paradigm of queer radicality, I explore the ways in which *Nightwood* fails to live up to queer ideals.⁸¹

A few critics have thus far begun to read *Nightwood* in ways that deidealize the text's ostensible queer formlessness. Christine Coffman comments that *Nightwood*'s "narrative fragmentation . . . is particularly well suited for providing an account of the cultural positioning of queers whose history has yet to be written, and for constructing a narrative, however fractured, of their struggles to emerge as subjects."⁸² In Coffman's reading, experimental narrative fragmentation is not necessarily a practice that marks the radical alterity of queerness and its repudiation of narrative altogether; it can also document the process by which queer subjects desire to arrange a narrative for themselves. Daniela Caselli's *Improper Modernism* provides an especially thorough study of how *Nightwood* fails to live up to its "alleged marginality" that has "secured its reputation as a provocatively avant-garde text" due to its attachments to "what is possibly the biggest of Modernist no-nos: sentimentality."⁸³ I build on Caselli's assertion that "Barnes's modernism is not radical, because the notion of radicality, with its associations to roots

⁸⁰ Love writes: "As queer readers we tend to see ourselves as reaching back toward isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them. It is hard to know what to do with texts that resist our advances. Texts or figures that refuse to be redeemed disrupt not only the progress narrative of queer history but also our sense of queer identity in the present. We find ourselves deeply unsettled by our identifications with these figures: the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the present." *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 9.

⁸¹ On deidealizing queer objects, see Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁸² Christine Coffman, *Insane Passions: Lesbianism and Psychosis in Literature and Film* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 112.

⁸³ Daniela Caselli, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 154, 175.

and belonging, of ever so slightly self-complacent and self-congratulatory knowledge of one's own position in the world, is what the text takes to pieces."⁸⁴ My analysis of the novel attends to its thwarted radicality and sentimental attachments.

Brian Glavey's reading of *Nightwood* through the lens of queer ekphrasis in *The Wallflower Avant-Garde* shares my concern with the text's formalism. Glavey reads *Nightwood* as embodying two kinds of formalism that are presented as being at odds with one another within queer theory: one formalism that aligns with queer negativity and one that is invested in the reparative. Reading *Nightwood* alongside Lee Edelman's *No Future*, Glavey argues that the two have in common a version of queer formalism that repudiates the futurism of politics and instead advocates for indulging in the solipsistic presentism of sterile aesthetic preoccupations. Glavey opposes this formalism to modernism's more redemptive brand, which posits that aesthetic form can repair through reinvention that which has been broken by modernity. According to Glavey, Barnes illustrates through *Nightwood* "this condition of being battered between the Scylla and Charybdis of these two visions," those competing visions being the reparative and the negative, the futurist and the presentist, the modernist and the queer.⁸⁵ My reading of *Nightwood* aligns with Glavey's insight that the text attempts to negotiate competing formal allegiances, but whereas Glavey's analysis focuses on drawing out the parallels between *Nightwood*'s queer negativity and Edelman's formalism, I ask what *Nightwood* can tell us about how the desire for traditional forms can survive queer negativity's intellectualized rejection of them.

⁸⁴ Caselli, 168.

⁸⁵ Brian Glavey, *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 56. See also Caselli, who similarly reads *Nightwood* alongside *No Future* to argue that "the radicality of queerness so badly needed by Edelman is undone by Barnes's inappropriate, fragile, impure corpus." *Improper Modernism*, 174.

Barnes's Monogamous Attachments

Despite the promiscuity for which *Nightwood* is often read as advocating, Barnes herself was apparently quite traditional in her ideas about relationships. In letters to Emily Coleman sent between 1935 and 1936, when the manuscript that would later become *Nightwood* was being considered by publishers, Barnes espouses conflicting views about sex and relationships: she is ostensibly unfazed by the notion of casual sex but also romanticizes the traditional couple form. These conflicting views are highlighted in her advice to Coleman regarding the latter's attraction to a man other than her current partner, Peter Hoare. Barnes writes to Coleman: "To begin with I must repeat that I do not, and can not have your attitude toward sex itself. I do not think it monstrous and evil. You should not despise the key, which is what it is, to all we ever really learn."⁸⁶ Barnes here insinuates that Coleman is old-fashioned with regards to sex, marking herself as sexually liberated, capable of casual sex, and dismissive of moral judgments about promiscuity. Yet, when it comes to the form that relationships take, she argues prescriptively that a relationship between two people should be self-contained and complete, and that anything else is lacking: "In any case I know from my experience with Thelma, that no one could have thrown me into any other arms, not even for the months when I had nothing whatsoever to do with her, not even after we had separated for a number of years, how many? two? three? I simply had no room for any other "terrible attraction," and that you have proved, it seems to me, that something is deadly missing."⁸⁷ For Barnes, desire that exceeds the couple form does not question the couple form itself, but only indicates the insufficiency of a particular pair: if Coleman still

⁸⁶ Djuna Barnes, Emily Holmes Coleman, and G.C. Guirl-Stearley, "The Letters of Djuna Barnes and Emily Holmes Coleman (1935-1936)," *The Missouri Review* 22, no. 3 (1999): 113.

⁸⁷ Barnes et al., 114.

experiences desire for others despite her relationship with Hoare, it must indicate a “deadly” deficiency between them. Barnes here demonstrates a belief in the couple form that is as strong as her desire for Thelma Wood herself. After Barnes and Wood had ended their relationship and Barnes had begun a new romance with Peter Neagoe (affectionately named “Muffin” in most correspondence), Barnes narrates in a letter to Coleman an incident when Wood spent an innocuous night at Barnes’s home. She writes to Coleman that sharing her home with Wood for a night was the beginning of the end of her relationship with Neagoe because she realized the insufficiency of their relationship in light of her ongoing desire for Wood:

She stayed with me last night, Muffin had been with me in the afternoon, I lay in bed looking across at her lying in the other, and I had the strangest feelings. Muffin seemed, for the first time, to be nobody[,] and my lover, (the only reality, and the untouchable and now unclaimable) seemed to be her, sleeping in that other bed. . . . I don’t quite know how to explain it. But I went over in my mind my feelings for him, and just the fact of her sleeping body across the room seemed to kill him like a powerful disinfectant.⁸⁸

For Barnes, her relationship with Neagoe literally cannot survive the thought of her continuing desire for Wood. Representing Wood’s presence as a “powerful disinfectant,” Barnes perceives that her desire for another negates her connection with Neagoe, reduces him to an infectious germ to be expunged. The metaphor of cleansing even resonates with the notion of purity traditionally associated with the couple form, at odds with Barnes’s casual treatment of sex and female-female desire.

While many critics have been rightly cautious about turning Barnes’s biography into an explanatory key for *Nightwood*, Barnes’s own desires for monogamy do shed light on *Nightwood*’s anxiety about the dissolution of the couple form. Furthermore, such a reading may be justified by Barnes’s own invitation, both in her frank acknowledgement that the novel was

⁸⁸ Barnes et al., 137.

her way of processing her relationship with Thelma Wood and her more general admission that *Nightwood* was deeply personal. When Emily Coleman suggested to Barnes in a 1935 letter that she was being too selective about those with whom she shared the *Nightwood* manuscript, Barnes responded: “Of course I think of the book as ‘myself.’”⁸⁹ Of her attachment to Robin as a representation of Wood, Barnes writes: “I love what I have invented as much as that which fate gave me—a great danger for the writer perhaps. . . . I come to love my invention more—so am able—perhaps—only so able—to put Thelma aside—because now she is not Robin.”⁹⁰ If Barnes’s desire for Wood became a fantasy embodied in Robin, it is worthwhile to investigate Barnes’s accounts of her own desires and the shape they take, if only to inform our reading of the desires represented in the novel itself.

Herring confirms Barnes’s attachment to the monogamous couple form in his biography, writing: “Djuna was proud that Thelma captivated other people through sex appeal, but she wanted theirs to be a monogamous relationship. . . . When Barnes could not have monogamy (and in the circles she frequented, fidelity was a concept found in dictionaries and practiced in the midwestern towns of their youth), she would for many years have nobody.”⁹¹ Barnes’s desire for monogamy comes despite its unfashionability within her own queer social circle and also despite her own family’s embrace of free love (although, as Herring suggests, her father Wald’s and grandmother Zadel’s advocacy of free love to the financial detriment of their family may well have poisoned Barnes against nonmonogamy).⁹² But whatever the reason, Barnes had a

⁸⁹ Barnes et al., 128

⁹⁰ Barnes, quoted in Phillip F. Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Viking, 1995), 216.

⁹¹ Herring, 160.

⁹² Herring, xvi.

strong desire for her relationship with Wood to fit a traditional form. Herring writes: “If there is a key to the Djuna-Thelma relationship, it probably lies at least as much in domesticity as in sexuality. . . . Djuna provided Thelma with a safety net, a structure within which she could live.”⁹³ She even gifted Thelma a doll every Christmas, which, if read alongside the doll in *Nightwood*, appears to be a simulacrum of the symbolic Child in whose name the normative investment in forms of life that uphold reproductive futurism is justified.⁹⁴ The doll’s memorable appearance in *Nightwood* both marks the relationship between Nora and Robin and symbolizes its dissolution. While Robin is most often read as queerly unattached, the doll she gifts to Nora and calls “our child” indexes the complexity of Robin’s own desires for and against the “safety net” of the couple form (156). The important detail that Barnes changes—having the ever-elusive Robin gift Nora the doll and call it their child—invites us to consider the conflicting desires for and against the couple form that the novel’s most “formless” character herself experiences.

The Couple, or the Secure Torment

Nora, agonizing over her lost relationship with Robin, narrates to O’Connor the night when Robin destroyed the doll that was the symbol of their relationship: “She picked up the doll and hurled it to the floor and put her foot on it, crushing her heel into it; and then, as I came crying behind her, she kicked it, its china head all in dust, its skirt shivering and stiff, whirling over and over across the floor” (157). It is tempting to read this scene as a literalization of Edelman’s queer outcry against reproductive futurism: “Fuck the social order and the Child in

⁹³ Herring, 161–62.

⁹⁴ See Edelman, *No Future*.

whose name we're collectively terrorized."⁹⁵ But the gesture is at once more mundane and more contradictory than this. Performed in a fit of drunken anger, Robin's destruction of the doll is meant to punish Nora, as Nora recounts to O'Connor, "because for once I had not been there all the time, waiting" (156–57). That the doll is destroyed in a fit of anger, not of cruelty or queer negation, gives us a rare glimpse into Robin's own motivations. Barnes offers Robin not merely as a queerly destructive force, as she is often read, but as a woman who is herself grappling with her desires for the couple form and its shortcomings. While Nora rightly characterizes the crushing of the doll as a childish tantrum born of unreasonable expectations—that Nora be there for Robin "all the time, waiting"—the destruction also points to Robin's desire that the couple form would provide her with omnipresent security, as well as her frustration when it fails to live up to that ideal. More than "fuck the social order," Robin's outburst seems to say: "fuck the desire I have for it." What might Robin tell us about the nature of that desire and about queer attachments to traditional relationship forms? How do these reluctant attachments coexist with the knowledge that the forms we desire are imperfect?

Nightwood's representation of the tumultuous relationship between Nora and Robin indicates that queer desires for and disillusionment with the couple form are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, as many critics point out, Robin seems to be the spirit of queer formlessness: unfixed, positionless, unmoored from the expectations of traditional relationship structures. Critics who have championed *Nightwood's* critiques of conventionality especially desire the novel to take an ethical stance against monogamy and the couple form. Joseph Boone states as much: "the absolute devaluation of the monogamous (and heterosexual) couple as the desired 'end' of love (or, for that matter, the ending of a novel), which is most forcefully

⁹⁵ Edelman, 29.

thematized in Robin's random promiscuity, contributes to the novel's deviating and deviant movements."⁹⁶ While *Nightwood* indeed tracks deviations from and failures of monogamy, it is less interested in taking an ethical position against monogamy than mourning the painful realization that individual desires for monogamy must also confront its shortcomings. In Lauren Berlant's terms, *Nightwood* documents the "cruel optimism" of its characters' attachments to conventional forms like monogamy that offer the promise of "'the good life,' which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless . . . find their conditions of possibility within it."⁹⁷ Nora confirms this when she says: "Suddenly, I knew what all my life had been . . . what I hoped Robin was—the secure torment. We can hope for nothing greater, except hope" (160). Nora's disillusionment, her recognition that, at best, the form of love she desires can offer no more than "secure torment," does not preclude the cruel optimism of her continuing "hope." Similarly, Robin's tendency toward promiscuity does not eradicate her desire for the couple form; rather, she shows us how even the most radical sexual subjects may grapple with reluctant attachments to romantic forms that both promise meaning and fail to deliver.

Barnes presents Robin not merely as the antithesis to the couple form, but as a someone who is pulled between conflicting desires for conventional relationship forms and freedom from them. In a description of Robin's budding relationship with Nora, we learn that "Robin told her only a little of her life, but she kept repeating in one way or another her wish for a home, as if she were afraid she would be lost again, as if she were aware, without conscious knowledge, that she belonged to Nora, and that if Nora did not make it permanent by her own strength, she would forget" (60). Robin is pulled simultaneously between wanting to belong to Nora and being fated

⁹⁶ Boone, *Libidinal Currents*, 241.

⁹⁷ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 27.

to wander. But although most readings of Robin emphasize her queer wandering and her elusive positionlessness, she is not immune to the desire for the mundane and domestic, even if her atavistic tendency toward the feral ultimately thwarts this: “in Robin there was this tragic longing to be kept, knowing herself astray” (63).⁹⁸ Nora is aware of the precarity of Robin’s attachment: “if she disarranged anything Robin might become confused—might lose the scent of home” (61). Robin’s “tragedy” is here figured as the conflict between a desire for secure intimacy and the inevitability of forgetting it. *Nightwood* espouses a belief in entropy, the tendency of the universe away from order and toward formlessness. Whereas Nora fights this tendency and is undone by it, Robin’s desire for form paradoxically coexists with her acceptance of its transience. When Nora sees Robin with Jenny for the first time, it is because, strangely enough, Robin brings the woman home, to Nora’s, indicating Robin’s equal pull toward and away from home. Nora feels “an awful happiness. Robin, like something dormant, was protected, moved out of death’s way by the successive arms of women” (70). Whereas her own desire to keep Robin would necessitate Robin’s death—figuratively the loss of her vitality but also literally the only way that Nora could stop Robin from wandering—Nora realizes that this promiscuous cruising is also the source of Robin’s vitality. This realization is both profoundly queer—Robin’s freedom from monogamy is a precondition to her life—and tragically so, as it means that Nora’s desire for a closed relationship with Robin will always remain an open wound. If *Nightwood* can be read as a meditation on Barnes’s own formal desires and her subsequent disillusionment, it might also be read as an elegy to form. *Nightwood* mourns the loss of stability that accompanies modernity’s

⁹⁸ For a feminist reading of *Nightwood*’s representations of the feral, see Lauren Benjamin, *Feral Modernisms* (unpublished dissertation).

proliferation of new relationship forms to a much greater extent than it relishes the queer possibility of breaking from convention.

Nora loses faith in Robin when she sees another doll that Robin has given to Jenny. The image of the doll haunts Nora; it is this that causes her the most pain: “I knew all the time that she could do nothing but what she wanted to do . . . I kept thinking, what else is it that is hurting me; then I knew—the doll; the doll in there on the bed. . . . when a woman gives it to a woman, it is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane” (150–51). It is not the possibility of Robin’s wandering, her promiscuity, that is most painful to Nora. It is the idea of Robin wanting the “life” with another woman that Nora wants with her, a life together modelled as closely as possible on the traditional ideal of the reproductive couple. As Michael Warner writes in *The Trouble with Normal*, the affective draw of the traditional couple form is that it is socially imbued with extraordinary meaningfulness: “People are constantly encouraged to believe that heterosexual desire, dating, marriage, reproduction, childrearing, and home life are not only valuable to themselves, but the bedrock on which every other value in the world rests. . . . Nonstandard sex has none of this normative richness, this built-in sense of connection to the meaningful life, the community of the human, the future of the world.”⁹⁹ For Nora, the couple form alone can promise “connection to the meaningful life” because the structures through which her desires are channeled are modeled on the heterosexual forms that she associates with a sense of meaningfulness. What’s more, Robin herself is not immune to this impulse: although she desires multiple women, her successive gifting of a doll indicates not a queer shattering of the

⁹⁹ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 47.

couple form but a serial tweaking of it. The queer formlessness we might desire Robin to symbolize turns out to be just another impossible idealization.

Valuable Lies

Like Robin, Dr. Matthew O'Connor seems at first glance to embody the queer impulse to shatter investments in traditional forms. He asserts that "There is no truth," and that to seek it out is to have "dressed the unknowable in the garments of the known" (145). O'Connor's dominant qualities in *Nightwood* are irony, suspicion, and detachment; this is most apparent in the Doctor's insistence that he is "the greatest liar this side of the moon" (144). He wears these qualities as a protective mantle against the pain of disappointment that *Nightwood*'s other characters experience through their attachments to formal structures for meaning. If *Nightwood*'s other characters are largely defined by their cruelly optimistic attachments, then O'Connor might seem to embody something more like "merciful pessimism": he attempts a paranoiac anticipation of loss by trying to stay one step ahead of his desires and refusing to let them become attachments. Insofar as desires and attachments often take the form of narrative, O'Connor especially embraces a suspicion of narrative forms of meaning-making. But what would it mean to take seriously, as few critics have, O'Connor's assertion that "I have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it" (104), to ask what genuine if reluctant attachments underlie his cynical exterior? If, as Daniela Caselli argues, part of *Nightwood*'s "improper" modernism is that "nothing is taboo or unmentionable, not even the mainstream, or normativity, or goodness," O'Connor allows us to see that even the queerest rejection of traditional forms does not preclude a simultaneous desire for them.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 174.

From O'Connor's earliest appearance in the novel, he espouses a commitment to exposing the flaws in formal structures of meaning-making. Admitting "I am no herbalist, I am no Rutebeuf, I have no panacea," he goes on to ask: "You know what man really desires? . . . One of two things: to find someone who is so stupid that he can lie to her, or to love someone so much that she can lie to him" (22–23). The two entities he's referring to, O'Connor clarifies, are the Protestant church and the Catholic church, respectively. His metaphor articulates his disillusionment with religion (and love) as forms of meaning-making. What is more interesting, though, is his admission that these lies are what one "really desires." It is not truth that sustains us, O'Connor argues, but illusions. Just as Felix calls O'Connor "a great liar, but a valuable liar" (33), O'Connor leaves room for the possibility that the forms we turn to for meaning—love and religion, in this example—hold value because we desire them, even if we also acknowledge their limits. Forms are always lies, according to O'Connor, because they cannot deliver the perfect and meaningful order that they promise, but this does not prevent them from sustaining us.

O'Connor's theorization of valuable lies rhymes with Nietzsche's account of Apollonian and Dionysiac forms, which he considers the two main functions of art. He defines the Apollonian as that which manifests as dream and illusion and through which "we enjoy an immediate apprehension of form"; that is, the Apollonian functions by taming the chaos of existence, organizing the world into meaningful categories.¹⁰¹ Apollonian forms, according to Nietzsche, are structures of meaning-making that are invented to give individuals a sense of order and control over a chaotic world. They are represented by "'naïveté' in art" because they perpetuate a utopian belief that forms and structures can allow humanity to overcome the

¹⁰¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 20.

essential cruelty of existence.¹⁰² Nietzsche's Apollonian forms include any systems that seek to give shape and meaning to existence: religion, science, art, philosophy, ethics.¹⁰³ The Dionysiac, by contrast, is that which shatters the illusive Apollonian forms. For Nietzsche, the problem with Apollonian forms is their tendency to calcify into the rigidity of sacrosanct norms. It is thus necessary to be reminded of the Dionysiac in order to reconnect with the intoxicating pleasures of existing in the present moment, to break the limits set by Apollonian forms, a process that results in "the shattering of the individual and his fusion with the original Oneness."¹⁰⁴ In this sense, what Nietzsche calls the Dionysiac impulse maps roughly onto queer negativity, which Lee Edelman defines in *No Future* as the repudiation of the politics of reproductive futurism to revel in the self-shattering *jouissance* of the now. However, whereas much of the debate around queer negativity has been staged in oppositional terms—pitting queer negation against normative structures of meaning-making—Nietzsche sees the Apollonian and the Dionysiac impulses as existing in a necessary dialectical relation. The Dionysiac invites us to apprehend the phenomenal actualities of being-in-the-world, while the Apollonian gives us the illuminating insight that allows us to give form and meaning to that world. The Dionysiac invites us to revel

¹⁰² Nietzsche, 31.

¹⁰³ For Donna Gerstenberger, these are precisely the forms that *Nightwood* radically repudiates: "All the conventional readings of experience, collective and individual, called history, philosophy, religion, can only create structures that substitute for a reading of life. They can only provide at best a rendering of agreements made by a collective desire for a realm of permanence and order, to which traditional narrative has become the handmaiden and language the pretender. Barnes, by questioning the narrative enterprise in the most radical way possible, has pushed her experiment further than all readers are willing to go, but those who can, those who do, no longer need a creation narrative, for all creation narratives predispose toward a desired end, one that limits and deceives. . . . The desire of Barnes's novel is freedom from the prison of meaning, and to accept this fact is to understand the radical experience of narrative that is *Nightwood*." "Radical Narrative," 138.

¹⁰⁴ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 56.

in the now; the Apollonian to grasp for what comes next. If the condition of human existence is Dionysiac dissonance, that dissonance requires the Apollonian “veil” of form and meaning.¹⁰⁵

This dialectical relationship between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac, I suggest, is central to understanding O’Connor’s attachments to form, and *Nightwood*’s more generally. The text seems to embrace a raunchy Dionysiac chaos; in Joseph Boone’s words, it enacts a “deliberate suspension of the rules of social order” that serves as a “cause for celebration and revelry, as well as for anarchy and estrangement.”¹⁰⁶ Less obvious, though, are its lingering attachments to the Apollonian forms that provide a veil of meaning that is both illusory and sustaining. Like Nietzsche’s assertion that we must hold in productive tension both Apollonian and Dionysiac forms, O’Connor admits that certain structures of meaning-making—those valuable lies—can be both illusory and sustaining.

If, as O’Connor claims, his “great virtue is that I never use the derogatory in the usual sense” (124), we must also consider that calling something a “lie” does not strip it of meaning. “As for me, I tuck myself in at night, well content because I am my own charlatan,” the Doctor boasts (103). O’Connor deals in makeshift meaning: his verbal virtuosity allows him to pull from thin air comforting fictions that can mollify temporarily the grief of living, especially for queers and outcasts like himself for whom normative structures of meaning-making have lost their power. As Sarah Hayden writes: “The doctor lends form and coherence to characters whose own outcast status is foregrounded through his identification with them.”¹⁰⁷ While O’Connor remains

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 28.

¹⁰⁶ Boone, *Libidinal Currents*, 235.

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Hayden, “What Happens When a Transvestite Gynaecologist Usurps the Narrator?: Cross-Gendered Ventriloquism in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*,” in *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices: Appropriating, Resisting, Embracing*, ed. Rina Kim and Claire Westall (Basingstoke: Houndmills, 2012), 76.

skeptical about “form and coherence,” aware that they are illusions, he also acknowledges that he can ease the suffering of others by “lending” them temporarily the sustaining myths that they require. When Nora comes to O’Connor to ease her heartbreak over Robin, she asks: “Doctor, I have come to ask you to tell me everything you know about the night” (86). Undone by her failure to find the meaning she desires in the couple form, she seeks from O’Connor a queer form of meaning-making to replace the traditional one that has failed her.¹⁰⁸ O’Connor readily obliges; he suggests an alternative value system of “the night” in which nothing is meaningful because the concept of identity is sacrificed to the untamable urges of unconscious desire: “Let a man lay himself down in the Great Bed and his ‘identity’ is no longer his own” (87). He goes on: “We are continent a long time, but no sooner has our head touched the pillow, and our eyes left the day, than a host of merrymakers take and get. . . . Their very lack of identity makes them ourselves. . . . Sleep demands of us a guilty immunity. There is not one of us who, given an eternal incognito, a thumbprint nowhere set against our souls, would not commit rape, murder and all abominations” (94). We might point out that O’Connor’s musings about the night-world resonate with contemporary anti-identitarian and antisocial strains of queer theory. Daniela Caselli notes this tempting connection, but ultimately rejects it: “*Nightwood*’s queerness lies instead in taking the risk of not being beyond reproach, of undoing even the anti-moralist position exemplified by Edelman.”¹⁰⁹ As Caselli suggests, part of what makes O’Connor’s “lies” not beyond reproach is that they are provisional and improvised, seductive though they may be. O’Connor tells Nora

¹⁰⁸ Scott Herring argues that Nora comes to O’Connor to go “slumming” in a queer world of nonnormative sexual identities. But Herring argues that Nora is primarily interested in “conventional enlightenment” and that she seeks to cure her heartbreak by seeking a sensational romp in Paris’s queer night world. I emphasize instead Nora’s dawning loss of faith in the meaningfulness of conventional relationship structures and her seeking to ameliorate her own suffering by seeking comfort in an alternative queer value system. See Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 178–79.

¹⁰⁹ Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 174.

what she wants to hear about the night, a story that fits her sorrow, not anything that he steadfastly believes. He admits as much when he says: “Do you know what has made me the greatest liar this side of the moon, telling my stories to people like you, to take the mortal agony out of their guts, and to stop them from rolling about, and drawing up their feet, and screaming, with their eyes staring over their knuckles with misery which they are trying to keep off, saying, “Say something, Doctor, for the love of God!” And me talking away like mad” (144). Even, and especially, O’Connor’s most form-shattering theories of inverted night-logic are more lie than wisdom, fabrications invented on the fly for the purpose of treating his patients. If we are to find O’Connor’s “narrative,” then, we must seek it in his own self-sustaining lies, in the stories he tells to himself, rather than those that he offers up to others.

Nora inadvertently invokes one such story when she asks O’Connor, after he tells her of the night, “How do you live at all if this wisdom of yours is not only the truth, but also the price?” (96). O’Connor’s immediate, obscure response—“Ho, nocturnal hag whimpering on the thorn, rot in the grist, mildew in the corn” (96-97)—is quickly and confusingly dismissed with an apology about his singing voice. It sounds, however, like a curse directed at Nora: this “nocturnal hag” has perhaps touched upon O’Connor’s own “thorn” by pointing out the “rot” and “mildew” that inheres in the lie he has tossed to her for sustenance. The question “How do you live at all?” dislodges O’Connor from the seductive night-logic in which identity is dissolved and sends him into a meditation on his own sustaining fantasies: “if I had to do it again,” he replies, “I’d be the girl found lurking behind the army, or up with the hill folk, all of which is to rest me a little of my knowledge” (97). O’Connor admits that the radical theories he spins—his “knowledge”—are not what sustains him; rather, it is the desire for a more traditional form of life, an Apollonian veil that can rest him of his knowledge of the Dionysiac. O’Connor declares:

I've given my destiny away by garrulity . . . for, no matter what I may be doing, in my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar. Is it my fault that my only fireside is the outhouse? And that I can never hang my muffler, mittens and Bannybrook umbrella on anything better than a bit of tin boarding as high as my eyes, having to be brave, no matter what, to keep the mascara from running away? (97-98)

While O'Connor's confession is stylistically of a piece with his usual campy demeanor, we cannot ignore the genuine pathos that underlies it.¹¹⁰ If, as Caselli argues, *Nightwood* "renders impossible either the knowingly well-meant rehabilitation of sentimentality (under the aegis of kitsch or camp) or its complete expulsion," we must attend to the reluctant attachments to conventional narrative trajectories that O'Connor here describes.¹¹¹ Felix's early impressions of the doctor also entreat us not to overlook the seriousness that underlies O'Connor's clownish façade: "The Baron, who was always troubled by obscenity, could never, in the case of the doctor, resent it; he felt the seriousness, the melancholy hidden beneath every jest and malediction that the doctor uttered, therefore he answered him seriously" (43). O'Connor's confession to Nora about his "wish for children and knitting" should thus be read as a crack in O'Connor's armor, through which we might glimpse the narrative that he challenges us to find. O'Connor's admission that he has given his "destiny away by garrulity" and that his daily life is a struggle "to be brave, no matter what, to keep the mascara from running" asks us to take semi-seriously his desire to trade the burden of his disillusionment, obtained through hardship, for a more traditional life as a housewife and mother. That he believes this to be his "destiny," coupled

¹¹⁰ As Sarah Hayden points out, *Nightwood* asks us to take this moment of confession as an admission of genuine desire: "Intensely aware of this lost potential in the form of another gender, Matthew constantly refers to himself as female. He does so 15 times in a novel just 239 pages long . . . in the doctor we witness an individual who not only acknowledges, but actively grieves for the femininity which has been socially foreclosed to him." "What Happens," 80–81. For a thorough reading of Dr. O'Connor's trans femininity, see Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

¹¹¹ Caselli, *Improper Modernism*, 184.

with his musings about reincarnation—“am I to blame if I’ve turned up this time as I shouldn’t have been?” (97)—imply his desire, despite his knowledge, to believe in a teleological trajectory: that he will someday turn up as he should be. O’Connor’s “wish” does not preclude his critique of the traditional feminine role that he so desperately wants: the doctor acknowledges the exploitative nature of traditional gender roles, in accordance with which a woman is confined to the domestic sphere of knitting, cooking, and child-rearing. Furthermore, his sardonic description of stereotypical femininity is hardly romantic; the interminable cycle of “every nine months by the calendar” is itself a pastiche of reproductive futurism. Knowing full well that this conventional narrative is not inherently more meaningful than the life he leads, the Doctor has every reason to dismiss his fantasy, yet he cannot sever his attachment to something that corresponds to it, which he cannot or will not articulate, except through the funhouse mirror of that pastiche. Like Robin, he desires the security of a “home” just as strongly as he desires his freedom from this attachment.

In another poignant moment of confession, O’Connor reveals that he has hidden his naïve desires—the stories in which he at some level wants to believe—beneath a cynical exterior that he calls knowledge: “I am an empty pot going forward, saying my prayers in a dark place; because I know no one loves, I least of all, and that no one loves me, that’s what makes most people so passionate and bright, because they want to love and be loved, when there is only a bit of lying in the ear to make the ear forget what time is compiling” (156). For most, the hope of finding meaning in love or another such form provides a sustaining force to combat the existential terror of “what time is compiling.” O’Connor here articulates that his feelings of emptiness come from clinging to the shell of his cynical knowledge. Something like love, he knows, will not sustain one forever because “no one loves” in such a way as to provide the

meaning we desire from it. O'Connor loves "least of all" because he has hidden such desires behind his skepticism. If it is the act of consciously wanting that "makes most people so passionate and bright," O'Connor, resenting the naïveté and sentimentality of his desires, has closed himself off from this possibility. He may have desires, but he does not entertain any hope of their fulfillment. Even if we admit that O'Connor's skepticism is warranted, we must also acknowledge the sustenance that the act of wanting provides. O'Connor here realizes that his attempts to short-circuit his own desire by staying one step ahead of it have neither succeeded in defusing it nor saved him from suffering. Unwilling to let go of his knowledge and unable to quash his desires, he is laid bare in an impossible state of wanting simply to want.

Dan Mahoney, the friend of Barnes on whom O'Connor was based, once wrote to Barnes: "I am always happier in rainy weather—less exposed somehow. When it is fine, I always feel like some poor old crustacean with its shell pulled off."¹¹² O'Connor and Mahoney share this fear of exposure; being glimpsed in his weakness and sentimentality, the doctor lashes out: "I was doing well enough . . . until you kicked my stone over, and out I came, all moss and eyes; and here I sit, as naked as only those things can be, whose houses have been torn away from them to make a holiday, and it is my only skin—labouring to comfort you. Am I supposed to render up my paradise—that splendid acclimatation—for the comfort of weeping women and howling boys?" (162). O'Connor lets his mask slip when he attempts to distract Nora from her suffering by relaying his own, a process that paradoxically both constitutes his protective verbal shell and erodes it. O'Connor's stories cut both ways: they can shield him to a certain extent, but eventually make him vulnerable. With his stone kicked over, he is made to reckon with the incommensurability of his reluctant attachments with the protective pessimism that has given

¹¹² Mahoney, quoted in Herring, *Djuna*, 213.

him refuge from serious introspection. O'Connor's vain attempts to comfort Nora with his skeptical "knowledge" reveals the Doctor's biggest sham: that his "wisdom," his queer logic of the night-world, is no less a "lie" than the desires he hides. That is, both serve as nothing more than sustaining fictions, makeshift and provisional. O'Connor's pessimism has allowed him to cope with his own romantic desire to live out a conventional narrative. But again he gives himself away by his garrulity, revealing too much about his own desires not only to Nora but to himself. As a result, his house is torn away: he must admit to wanting love, even though he knows better.

O'Connor acknowledges his vulnerability in terms of visceral embodiment: "A broken heart have you!" he cries to Nora; "I have falling arches, flying dandruff, a floating kidney, shattered nerves *and* a broken heart! . . . Keep out of my feathers; you ruffle me the wrong way and flit about, stirring my misery! What end is sweet?" (164). O'Connor's interjection about endings indicates that Nora has forced him to think about his own ending with the question, "And death—have you thought of death?" (163). Just as Nora had previously undone O'Connor with the question "How do you live at all?", O'Connor's shift to considering death forces him to contemplate what he desires from his own life and his own life narrative. O'Connor, excusing himself from Nora, says shortly after to himself at the bar: "Matthew, you have never been in time with any man's life and you'll never be remembered at all" (168). Here, O'Connor admits his desire to be remembered, to be preserved in narrative: a desire that is of a piece with his longing to bear children. Although he has labored throughout the novel to dismantle the meaningfulness of narrative, his confrontation with mortality cracks his pessimism, which turns out to be its own cruel attachment. He admits this with the words: "I've not only lived my life for nothing, but I've told it for nothing" (175). O'Connor mourns the fact that he desires meaning,

that there is none to be had, and that he has not allowed himself the passion of seeking out meaning, vain though the search may be. In light of this, O'Connor's words, "I have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it," read less as a challenge to decode modernist obscurity or queer radicality (104); rather, they aim to pique our interest, to plead with us to take notice, to remember. That is, O'Connor begs us to preserve him in legend, that most conventional of narrative forms. It is this same wish that constitutes O'Connor's first words in the novel: "think of the stories that do not amount to much! That is, that are forgotten in spite of all man remembers (unless he remembers himself) merely because they befell him without distinction of office or title—that's what we call legend and it's the best a poor man may do with his fate" (18). Coexisting with the Doctor's pessimism is this contradictory desire for meaning related through form: to be preserved and shaped by narrative, lie though it may be. O'Connor begs to be given a form by which we might remember him as the paradox that Barnes once used to describe herself: the "most famous unknown of the century."¹¹³

O'Connor asks us to reconsider the value of queer desires for form, even and especially for those forms that are illusory and naïve. If queers are supposed to seek out "queer form," to privilege over other desires newness or inventiveness or true queerness, they must also contend with the crisis of meaning that ensues. Rather than critique queer desires for form as naïve investments in normative structures of meaning-making, *Nightwood* suggests that we might instead ask: what value might form have for queers? What would it mean for queers to affirm the desire for form, even and especially when the forms we desire are the ones we aren't supposed to want?

¹¹³ Barnes et al., "Letters," 105.

Locating O'Connor's Narrative

By wanting readers to want to find O'Connor's narrative and thus preserve him, *Nightwood* seeks to implicate readers in O'Connor's reluctant attachment to narrative and his desire that he might be sustained through the stories he tells. I have thus far suspended comment on *Nightwood's* narrative form, privileging instead the way that ideas about narrative shape its characters' desires. This suspension is occasioned in part by my contention that to overemphasize *Nightwood's* experimental form is to draw attention away from other, more traditional social and narrative forms that it is in conversation with. In closing, I suggest that an underemphasized element of *Nightwood's* narrative form is its deployment, through O'Connor, of queer narrative voice.

O'Connor's desire to be remembered, to live on through narrative, occasions his frequent and lengthy storytelling within the text that renders him a sometime intradiegetic narrator.¹¹⁴ In a 2018 article, Susan Lanser suggests the importance of renewed attention within queer narratology to narrative voice, asking "under what circumstances narrative voice might be considered 'queer'; whether a text that fits some definition of queer might tend towards particular configurations of voice; what the study of narrative voice might gain from its queering."¹¹⁵ Lanser coins the term "closet narration," which is epitomized by "the delicacy of revealing and concealing" such as is attained by the "dance of paralepsis (saying too much) and paralipsis (saying too little)."¹¹⁶ Lanser uses "closet narration" to describe the 1877 "lesbian" novel *Deephaven*, written at a time when lesbian identity would not have been available as a

¹¹⁴ For a reading of O'Connor as usurping the novel's third-person narrator, see Hayden, "What Happens."

¹¹⁵ Susan S. Lanser, "Queering Narrative Voice," *Textual Practice*, vol. 32, no. 5–6, June–August 2018, 926.

¹¹⁶ Lanser, 928.

concept, let alone acceptable to utter, hence the necessity of “closet narration.” I ask, in turn: What happens with queer voice in *Nightwood*, wherein O’Connor, as an overtly queer narrator, desires to preserve his life within narrative but also to protect himself as a vulnerable subject from exposure? How should we square his various claims about the unspeakability, unfindability, or unreliability of narrative with his desires for it?

One way into understanding O’Connor’s narrative refusals is through “the unnarratable,” a term coined by Gerald Prince in his 1988 essay “The Disnarrated” and elaborated on by Robyn Warhol in 2005.¹¹⁷ As Warhol explains, Prince applies the term “disnarrated” to “those passages in a narrative that consider what did not or does not take place.”¹¹⁸ Warhol distinguishes this from the “*unnarrated*,” which “refers to those passages that explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator’s refusal to narrate.”¹¹⁹ Warhol then distinguishes four subcategories of the unnarratable: that which is *subnarratable* (too banal to tell), *supranarratable* (too ineffable to tell), *antinarratable* (socially unacceptable to tell), or *paranarratable* (outside the realm of possibility for a given form or genre).¹²⁰ Deploying the unnarratable as a lens through which to read the gaps in O’Connor’s stories, I suggest that the unnarratable becomes a feature of queer voice in *Nightwood* that provides O’Connor with a potent tool with which to navigate his desires to narrate his life.

¹¹⁷ Gerald Prince, “The Disnarrated,” *Style* 22, no. 1 (1988): 1–8; Robyn R. Warhol, “Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film,” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Hoboken: Blackwell, 2005), 220–31.

¹¹⁸ Warhol, “Neonarrative,” 220.

¹¹⁹ Warhol, 221.

¹²⁰ Warhol, 222.

In assessing O'Connor's deployment of the unnarratable, I set myself the naïve, ill-advised task of asking what might be gained by taking semi-seriously O'Connor's challenge that "I have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it." This meant sifting through those moments in which O'Connor discloses something about his own past, hoping to see what connections, if any, might exist among those fragments of self-narration that crop up amidst his rambling and digressive speeches. Knowing full well that my search was likely to be frustrated by O'Connor's self-professed status as "the greatest liar this side of the moon" (144), I suspended the impulse to dismiss O'Connor's stories as frivolous or disingenuous, focusing instead on what overarching narrative they constructed and how. In so doing, I came across a number of seemingly connected stories from O'Connor's life upon which critics have rarely lingered, likely because of the inconclusive or incidental nature of such stories. These include: O'Connor adopting his brother's children, marrying his brother's wife, and serving time in prison. These particular stories are embedded fragmentarily in O'Connor's lengthy speeches and in no way represent important elements of *Nightwood's* plot. They do, however, represent some of the few moments in the novel in which O'Connor narrates events from his own past.

About halfway through the novel, O'Connor recounts his first substantial personal story while embarking on a midnight carriage ride with Jenny and Robin, whose main role in this scene is to ignore O'Connor while he prattles on about himself. O'Connor, apropos of nothing, mutters under his breath: "Ah! . . . Just the girl that God forgot" (79-80). This epithet, which occurs a second time toward the novel's end (151), draws attention to O'Connor's genderqueer identity and his feeling that God has cheated him by not making him a woman, and specifically a mother. As he later says: "in my heart is the wish for children and knitting. God, I never asked better than to boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by

the calendar” (98). In the carriage, O’Connor’s story is actually initiated by *Nightwood’s* heterodiegetic narrator, who indicates that after O’Connor’s utterance—“Just the girl that God forgot”—he “seemed to be precipitated into the halls of justice, where he had suffered twenty-four hours” (80). The phrase “halls of justice” refers euphemistically to prison; given that this comes from the heterodiegetic narrator and not O’Connor himself, we are inclined as readers to believe that he has, in fact, done time—for what, we do not know. The reader is also led to anticipate that this “precipitat[ion]” will be explained by what O’Connor says next. This expectation is promptly frustrated. O’Connor says: “Oh, God help us . . . What manner of man is it that has to adopt his brother’s children to make a mother of himself, and sleeps with his brother’s wife to get him a future[?]” (80). By voicing this in a speculative third-person construction, O’Connor doesn’t let on that this story is about himself. However, knowing O’Connor’s desire for motherhood—which isn’t revealed until the next chapter but is figured here in the phrase “the girl that God forgot”—we can presume that this story about his brother’s wife and children relates to O’Connor himself. Given the quasi-incestuous overtones, we might venture that O’Connor’s “dance of paralepsis (saying too much) and paralipsis (saying too little)” marks the incident as antinarratable (that is, too taboo to tell).¹²¹ If the story is O’Connor’s own, we are then led to ask how it relates to the memory of prison that prompted the outburst. This connection is unnarrated, perhaps shamefully antinarratable. The legality of marrying one’s sister-in-law is highly dependent on where O’Connor was living; as he is described as an Irishman from San Francisco who has travelled broadly and settled semi-permanently in Paris, this is difficult to determine, especially considering that the narrative he tells contains no temporal markers. If so, O’Connor’s embarrassment about the incident might be

¹²¹ Lanser, “Queering Narrative Voice,” 928.

indicated later in the novel with a similar level of antinarratable euphemism: “Haven’t I eaten a book too? . . . And wasn’t it a bitter book to eat? The archives of my case against the law, snatched up and out of the tale-telling files by my high important friend. And didn’t I eat a page and tear a page and stamp on others and flay some and toss some into the toilet for relief’s sake[?]” (135). While this later statement is made with no reference to his confession in the carriage, the reference to his “case against the law” and the attempt to expunge it from the record indicate a shameful, antinarratable legal incident, which could refer back to his time in jail and his attempt to marry his brother’s wife. These fragments also lead us to wonder where his brother’s children are now, as they make no physical appearances in the novel. In any case, the gaps in O’Connor’s story represent a tantalizingly fragmented narrative, the salacious and antinarratable details of which he entreats his listeners, and *Nightwood*’s readers, to puzzle over.

Much later in the novel, O’Connor makes another reference to his brother while comforting Nora about her grief over her lost love. She asks: “Matthew, . . . have you ever loved someone and it became yourself?” (161), to which he responds: “My brother, whom I had not seen in four years, and loved the most of all, died, and who was it but me my mother wanted to talk to? Not those who had seen him last, but me who had seen him best, as if my memory of him were himself” (162). Here again, O’Connor gives us the outline of a narrative that contains significant gaps; this story provides a resolution without an explanation of the conflict that preceded it, leading us to wonder why he had not seen his brother in four years. Did O’Connor’s queerness alienate his family? Did he commit some unspeakable act for which his brother could not forgive him? Was his brother killed in the Great War, during which they were separated? Given the intense love for his brother that O’Connor here expresses, this latter explanation perhaps makes the most sense. Recalling O’Connor’s insinuation that he adopted his brother’s

children and married his wife, we might at first assume that this is related to their falling out. However, the new information in this passage implies that having “loved someone and it became yourself” is for O’Connor quite literal: by marrying his sister-in-law after his brother’s death, he took his brother’s place as a parent and spouse out of his love for his late brother and his desire to be a mother. This information seems to fill in some of the unnarrated gaps among O’Connor’s previous narrative fragments. However, the revelation is quickly followed up by the aforementioned rebuke of Nora for asking about it: “I was doing well enough until you kicked my stone over, . . . and here I sit, as naked as only those things can be, whose houses have been torn away from them” (162). Why does this particular confession cause this outburst? O’Connor here implies that he has been tricked into sharing more than he intended, that his true “naked” self is exposed. But why the shame at recounting his love for his brother? Was the grief of his brother’s loss too traumatizing to relive—trauma being another reason that Warhol gives for the antinarratability of certain events? Or does this new information reveal some inconsistency in prior iterations of his story?

O’Connor, fed up with Nora, retreats to the café that he frequents. Another regular, an ex-priest, comes to O’Connor with the hope that the doctor’s stories might distract him from his own troubles. The priest says: “I’ve always wanted to know whether you were ever *really* married or not,” to which O’Connor replies: “I’ve *said* I was married and I gave the girl a name and had children by her, then, presto! I killed her off as lightly as the death of swans. And I was reproached for that story! I was. Because even your friends regret weeping for a myth, as if that were not practically the fate of all the tears in the world! What if the girl *was* the wife of my brother and the children my brother’s children?” (169). O’Connor here recounts a past moment of disnarration—that is, telling what *didn’t* happen—in which he had been telling one of his famous

“lies” to the people of the café. Given his previous statement about adopting his brother’s children, we might read this as a lie of omission: in response to the priest’s question, O’Connor here seems to clarify that he was in fact married, but to his brother’s wife, presumably after his brother’s death, rendering into narrative the taboo marriage that was previously antinarratable. But he goes on: “Is not a brother his brother also, the one blood cut up in lengths, one called Michael and the other Matthew? . . . Who’s to say that I’m not my brother’s wife’s husband and that his children were not fathered in my lap? Is it not to his honour that he strikes me as myself? And when she died, did my weeping make his weeping less?” (169-170). With this turn, O’Connor finally reveals the missing piece of the puzzle, but instead of clarifying his narrative, the revelation undoes it. It is not, as he previously hinted, that he did in fact marry his brother’s wife after his brother’s death, but that his love for his brother led him to think of his brother as himself, and by turn, his sister-in-law as his own wife and his brother’s children as his own. It is unclear whether this explanation is true or whether it is merely his way of explaining away his callous choice to appropriate his brother’s story as his own. In either case, it throws the entire narrative we have just been constructing into the realm of the “disnarrated,” that which was told but did not “really” happen.

What can this circuitous, fragmentary, ultimately unreliable narrative tell us about queer narrative voice and O’Connor’s desires for narrative form? O’Connor employs disnarration to avoid revealing “the truth” about himself while simultaneously teasing readers with the specter of the antinarratable. He desires both, it seems, to be anonymous and to spark intrigue, to thwart the Foucauldian will-to-knowledge while also keeping his interrogators rapt with attention. So much is signaled by the exchange with the ex-priest that follows O’Connor’s admission that his marriage was a lie:

The ex-priest said, “Well, there's something in that [story], still I like to know what is what.”

“You do, do you?” said the doctor. “Well then, that’s why you are where you are now, right down in the mud without a feather to fly with, like the ducks in Golden Gate park . . . everybody with their damnable kindness having fed them all the year round to their ruin . . . , being too fat and heavy to rise off the water.” (170)

Comparing the priest to the ducks, too fat to fly because they have gorged themselves on the kindness of others, O’Connor suggests that the gluttonous Paris café-goers have gobbled up his stories only to demand perpetually more. By fabricating or appropriating intriguing lies, O’Connor is able to reap the benefits of social popularity while also protecting his private life from prying ears. In so doing, he transforms quotidian stories—like that of his brother’s marriage and children, arguably so commonplace as to be subnarratable, too banal to tell—into suspenseful mysteries through the “lies” of disnarration. O’Connor, then, reveals the plight of out queer individuals in the early twentieth century when it comes to their relationships to narrative: the strangeness and abjection of queer individuals in the minds of most people threatens to trap them in either complete obscurity or punitive hypervisibility.

O’Connor’s alternative to these extremes constitutes one important version of queer narrative voice: by employing narrative strategically—specifically, by disnarrating or telling that which never happened and provocatively alluding to salacious antinarratable events that may never have occurred—he employs unnarration, or the refusal to tell, as a camp practice that both centers the wit of the storyteller and protects them from further scrutiny. Such a practice of queer disnarration provides a survival strategy for queer individuals who distrust the pathologizing impulses of their readers yet still retain the hope that narrative might provide a space of ludic pleasure, perhaps even provisional meaning, amidst a hostile and prying dominant culture. If *Nightwood* implants in readers a desire to locate O’Connor’s story, O’Connor’s ultimate and

inevitable refusal reminds readers of our own desires to make meaning through the ordering of that which is only suggestive of the formal whole we want.

Nightwood's reluctant attachments to form highlight the tenacity of the desire for stability, one of the key affordances of form. O'Connor's stories work to destabilize intelligibility, Robin's promiscuity destabilizes others' fantasies, and *Nightwood*'s very narrative form seems to destabilize traditional modes of storytelling. Yet these serve mainly as diversions, reactions against the desire to find stability through form that only emphasize the centrality of such desire to *Nightwood*'s characters and to the narrative's very structure. For as much as destabilization may be seen as a hallmark of queer approaches to form, *Nightwood*'s reluctant attachments suggest that such approaches are often predicated on thwarted desires for the sense of security promised by forms such as the couple. This is especially true for those queer subjects, like the genderqueer Dr. O'Connor, whose extreme marginalization makes any amount of stability seem unattainable. The same is often true for racialized queer subjects. As we will see in the next chapter, security is often a precious commodity for Black queer subjects, so much so that maintaining it seems to require the sacrifice of all other desires—especially queer ones. But if *Nightwood* proves that narrative destabilization can be interwoven with queer desires for traditional forms, Nella Larsen's *Passing* will show how traditional narrative forms may prove unlikely vehicles for exploring queer desires to reshape conventional life trajectories.

CHAPTER 2

Securing the Family: *Passing*'s Potential Narratives

All the while, in spite of her searchings and feelings of frustration, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. . . . She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband.

—*Passing*

Despite her protestations to the contrary, Irene, with a cold, hard, exploitative, and manipulative determination, tries to protect her most cherished attainment: security, which she equates with marriage to a man in a prestigious profession, the accouterments of middle-class existence—children, material comfort, and social respectability. . . .

. . . Though, superficially, Irene's is an account of Clare's passing for white and related issues of racial identity and loyalty, under the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story—though not named explicitly—of Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare.

—Deborah McDowell

Queer *Passing* begins with Deborah McDowell. McDowell's 1986 essay on *Passing*—which serves as the introduction to the Rutgers University Press edition of *Quicksand and Passing*, the press's all-time bestselling book¹²²—initiated a wave of scholarly interest in the novel. And rightly so: McDowell was the first to read the 1929 novel as being as much about passing for straight as passing for white. McDowell's essay famously makes a provocative case

¹²² “*Quicksand and Passing*,” Rutgers University Press, accessed October 23, 2021. <https://www.rutgersuniversitypress.org/quicksand-and-passing/9780813511702>.

for Nella Larsen's risky inclusion of a lesbian subplot in an otherwise respectable novel that is ostensibly about a proper middle-class Black woman who, in service of the stability of her family, rejects the temptation to entertain the risky passing lifestyle that is dangled in front of her by a long-lost childhood friend. Pointing to the text's insinuation that these central figures, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, are trapped in sexless marriages, McDowell emphasizes Clare's attempts to seduce Irene and Irene's reciprocal but repressed lesbian desire, implied by both Irene's lingering over such details as Clare's "tempting mouth" and "glorious body" and the amorous "fire imagery" with which she associates Clare.¹²³ Today, it is taken for granted that we read *Passing* with an understanding of its queer themes.¹²⁴

The longevity of McDowell's groundbreaking essay—the Rutgers edition is still in print and McDowell's introduction is featured in the Norton Critical Edition of *Passing*—has given it enormous influence over how the novel is read. This is a boon for queer modernism, which now counts Larsen among its most canonical figures. Yet McDowell's reading also hinges on a devaluation of *Passing*'s narrative form. According to McDowell, Larsen "uses a technique found commonly in narratives by Afro-American and women novelists with a dangerous story to tell: 'safe' themes, plots, and conventions are used as the protective cover underneath which lie

¹²³ Nella Larsen, *Passing*, in *Quicksand and Passing*, ed. Deborah McDowell (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, [1986] 2004), 161, 240; Deborah McDowell, "Introduction," in *Quicksand and Passing*, ed. Deborah McDowell (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, [1986] 2004), xxvii. Subsequent references to *Passing* occur parenthetically.

¹²⁴ This has no doubt been helped by Judith Butler's famous essay, which shifts from McDowell's lesbian reading of the novel to a queer one. See "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. Barbara Christian, Helene Moglen, and Elizabeth Abel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 266–84. Butler's reading has been criticized for suggesting that "lesbian desire is at odds with a desire for blackness." H. Jordan Landry, "Seeing Black Women Anew through Lesbian Desire in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 60, no. 1 (2006): 27.

more dangerous subplots.”¹²⁵ According to this logic, there cannot be much of interest in these “safe” elements; they are merely a container for smuggling in a juicy drop of queer desire. Moreover, McDowell here implies that Black women modernists could only tell “dangerous” stories by making formal concessions. McDowell goes on to argue that *Passing*’s narrative conventionality ultimately defuses its queer subplot by insisting on narrative closure via the death of Clare, Irene’s would-be seducer. By surrendering to narrative convention, Larsen chooses “to punish the very values the novel implicitly affirms, to honor the very value system the text implicitly satirizes,” rendering the queer desire between Clare and Irene “a kind of sacrificial lamb on the altar of social and literary convention” and thus enforcing a normative value system by which “the radical implications of that plot are put away.”¹²⁶ In other words, the queer content we glimpse in *Passing* is only enabled by a capitulation to the normativity inherent in its conventional form and which expunges any “radical implications” of that queer content.¹²⁷

The trouble with this reading, I argue, is that it sutures queer radicalism to overt formal experimentalism. As I note in the introduction to this project, McDowell would not be alone in implying as much. Teresa de Lauretis proposes that a fictional text can be called “queer” if it “not only works against narrativity, the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and the fulfillment of meaning, but also pointedly disrupts the referentiality of language and the

¹²⁵ McDowell, “Introduction,” xxx. See also Hazel Carby, who writes: “the representation of Black female sexuality meant risking its definition as primitive and exotic within a racist society. . . . Racist sexual ideologies proclaimed the Black woman to be a rampant sexual being, and in response Black women writers either focused on defending their morality or displaced sexuality onto another terrain.” *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 174.

¹²⁶ McDowell, xxx–xxxi.

¹²⁷ Gayle Wald, arguing that Black identity is central to *Passing* and not merely a narrative device, discusses McDowell’s “widely influential 1986 essay on Larsen’s *Passing* that spurred scholarly interest in McDowell’s work” and critiques how McDowell “highlights the narrative agency of literary form and convention in mediating the cultural agency of black women writers.” *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 32, 33.

referentiality of images.”¹²⁸ De Lauretis’s argument resonates with that of Judith Roof, who asserts that “the sexuality of narrative is straight” insofar as the impulse to resolve disruption through the achievement of closure affirms the value of (re)productivity, the notion that narrative must generate something in order to reach a satisfying end.¹²⁹ D. A. Miller defines “traditional narrative” as “a quest after that which will end questing; . . . a distortion of what will be made straight; a holding in suspense or a putting into question of what will be resolved or answered.”¹³⁰ He later defines “gay fabulation” (comparable to what we might today call queer narrative form¹³¹) as being “inseparable from a series of experiments needing to tamper with the most deeply imprinted aspects of traditional narrative form.”¹³² In such formulations, textual queerness depends on experimental deviation from narrative and linguistic conventions. These arguments have provided a foundation for the arguments of many subsequent queer theorists: Lee Edelman’s rejection of reproductive futurism, Elizabeth Freeman’s critique of normative temporalities, and Jack Halberstam’s interrogation of success and failure all recapitulate the assumption that narrative conventionality undermines queer potential.¹³³

¹²⁸ Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future,” *GLQ* 17, no. 2–3 (2011): 244.

¹²⁹ Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvi.

¹³⁰ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 4.

¹³¹ I use “queer” throughout this essay to denote that which resists the norms of respectability politics with regards to sex. I thus invest in what David Halperin identifies as “the ability of ‘queer’ to define (homo)sexual identity oppositionally and relationally but not necessarily substantively, not as a positivity but as a positionality, not as a thing but as a resistance to the norm. Such resistance is not merely a radicalism for its own sake, a fashionable attachment to whatever may look new in the way of personal or political styles.” *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 66. Halperin writes of sexual identity, but this definition may also extend to the ideology of narrative form.

¹³² D. A. Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 46.

¹³³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

In their certainty about form, such theorizations invite us to ask: Is there queer potential in “conventional” narrative form? If, as I argue in the previous chapter, *Nightwood* employs a queer narrative structure despite its reluctant attachments to romantic notions of the couple, what should we make of a text whose ostensibly conventional narrative would seem to belie the desire for the queer way of life that it represents? Just as I question whether *Nightwood*'s experimentalism is necessarily aligned with a radical mode of living, I ask whether texts that narrate a linear plot, employ a straightforward temporality, or seek closure can locate queer affordances within these conventional elements of narrative form. What should we make of a text whose ostensibly conventional narrative seems to belie the desire that it represents for a queer way of life? What queer possibilities persist within narrative shapes that formally register as conventional? Furthermore, how has racialization shaped how Black subjects have approached narrative understandings of queer desire? How did traditional social and narrative forms influence how early-twentieth-century Black queer subjects imagined possible trajectories for their lives?

Questioning the assumption that the deployment of narrative conventions necessarily ratifies the normative ideologies associated with such structures, I suggest not only that we may be able to locate queer impulses within “conventional” narrative forms, but also that such forms may provide especially potent critiques of normativity by exposing the ideologies of form *from within*.¹³⁴ Understanding this is crucial to apprehending how Harlem Renaissance writers invented modes of literary dissent that, while often taking less overtly iconoclastic forms than

¹³⁴ I borrow the phrase “ideology of form” from Fredric Jameson. While the ideologies I refer to are those associated with heteronormative social ideals rather than those of particular modes of production, Jameson’s term efficiently captures the notion that cultural forms can be soldered to particular ideologies. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, [1981] 2015).

those associated with (mostly white) “high” modernism, provided no less potent critiques of sexual norms.¹³⁵ To see this, however, requires tools to identify a text’s self-reflexive critique of narrative norms. To read in such a way means considering not only the story a text tells, but also its self-conscious engagement with those alternatives it conspicuously leaves out.

In order to attune ourselves to reading in this fashion, I suggest a renewed attention to narrative’s ability to emphasize gaps and deviations within its own form.¹³⁶ These fissures expose what I call *potential narratives*, moments in a text that allude to other ways a story might have been constructed. When present, these potential narratives point out the alternative tellings that must be suppressed to maintain the coherence of a single *apparent narrative*. In narrative, what is left out is just as important as what is included; potential narratives can reveal themselves when a text’s narration draws attention to its own selectivity, to unnarrated events that, if included, would significantly alter the narrative’s shape. An ostensibly conventional narrative might thereby be in dynamic dialogue with a host of queerer potential narratives that it suppresses and in contradistinction to which it emplots itself as straight. A text that seems to employ a conventional form but explicitly dramatizes this dialogue, reflecting on the forces that

¹³⁵ For an account of the “dialectical construction of canonical ‘modernism’ and ‘modernist’ literary criticism within the academy” as having been historically defined “in contradistinction to ‘realism’ and other qualities embodied in New Negro writing” as well as a reading of Larsen as “unabashedly ‘realistic,’ in an almost old-fashioned sense,” see George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995), 118–19.

¹³⁶ In this sense, my methodology is influenced by the methodological premises of deconstruction, which aimed to reveal the ways in which seemingly cohesive structures also contained the seeds of their own unravelling. As Barbara Johnson puts it, this method “proceeds by identifying and dismantling differences by means of other differences that cannot be fully identified or dismantled. The starting point is often a binary difference that is subsequently shown to be an illusion created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down. The differences *between* entities . . . are shown to be based on a repression of differences *within* entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself. . . . The ‘deconstruction’ of a binary opposition is thus not an annihilation of all values or differences; it is an attempt to follow the subtle, powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of a binary opposition.” Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), x–xi. See also Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

have compelled the narrative it presents into a normative shape rather than queerer alternatives, draws our attention to the ideological pressures that have constrained and molded that narrative. This explicit manifestation of tension, I argue, is itself a matter of queer form.

Passing is one such text. Linearly plotted toward a neat resolution of its central conflict, *Passing*'s formal conventionality has been read by McDowell and others as a mask intended to draw attention away from its queer subtexts. While such readings suggest that *Passing*'s conventional form belies its queer content, I argue that attention to its potential narratives reveals the novel's queer form. *Passing* does not merely narrate the story of its central figure, Irene Redfield; it also alludes to how Irene herself shapes and structures that story. In so doing, *Passing* draws attention to the artifice of the linear narrative that it recounts. The novel's complex deployment of narration and perspective makes clear that what is conventional about *Passing*'s form is the product of Irene's attempts to mold her life into a conventional form—what I call her apparent narrative. As the novel's use of free indirect discourse permeates the third-person narration with Irene's own perceptions, *Passing* details how Irene's apparent narrative has been forcibly assembled by her organizing consciousness in order to suppress those queer alternatives that threaten to break through. The novel thus does more than merely represent the narrative of Irene's life as she understands it; by showing her role in its construction, the text performs an autocritique, denaturalizing this apparent narrative and emphasizing the queer potential narratives that undergird it. In so doing, the text represents Irene's competing desires for form: while her sense of identity is tied to the linear trajectory toward security and respectability that she creates for herself, her sovereignty over the shape of her own story is challenged by her unrationalized identification with the model of queer life presented by her friend and antagonist Clare Kendry. The novel ultimately suggests that the desire to model one's

life after the form of a linear narrative that culminates “respectably” in marriage and family might be wrapped up in the deferral of desires for a queerer way of life. *Passing*, I suggest, provides us with a model for reading not just for the sexual ideology of form, but for an immanent critique of sexual ideology *from within* form.¹³⁷

At stake here is a more capacious definition of Black queer experimentalism in modernist narrative and a crisper image of what forms such experimentalism takes. McDowell is right to suggest that Black women novelists faced severe consequences for writing dangerous texts, and thus it is all the more crucial that we identify the potential for Black queer experimentalism within conventional narrative forms. Without this, we restrict ourselves to experimentalisms that can announce themselves boldly and fearlessly. As Saidiya Hartman reminds us, stark omissions are made when we take a narrow view of early-twentieth-century experimentalism: “Experiment was everywhere. . . . There was nothing precious or unusual about seeking, venturing, testing, trying, speculating, discovering, exploring new avenues, breaking with traditions, defying law, and making it, except that hardly anyone imagined that young black women might be involved in the project too.”¹³⁸ Locating these usual, everyday experiments in Black queer literary “making” may mean readjusting the notion of experimentalism to include gentler verbs—“seeking, venturing, testing, trying”—along with the “breaking,” “defying,” and exploding to which experimentalism often gets reduced. Elizabeth Alexander makes a similar call to expand definitions of Black experimental poetry: “Who within the *literary* black tradition has . . . made

¹³⁷ In this sense, the method of reading I propose resonates with the idea of immanent critique popularized by the Frankfurt School, insofar as this mode of reading asks us to identify how a text “tests the postulates of orthodoxy by the latter’s own standards,” allowing for “orthodoxy’s premises and assertions [to be] registered and certain strategic contradictions located.” See David L. Harvey, “Introduction,” *Sociological Perspectives* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 5.

¹³⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: Norton, 2019), 60.

experimentalism more possible, and might we find some of those figures in the columns we call ‘canonical’ or ‘traditional’? I want to think about poets whose work we might not consider experimental and see how the innovations in that work begin to shift the ground beneath what we think of as ‘black experimental.’ . . . Experimental: that which breaks with the doctrinaire and lets the previously unimaginable happen. Sometimes the wolf arrives in sheep’s clothing.”¹³⁹ It is a small leap from Alexander’s poetic experimentalism to suggest that the careful “testing” of narrative convention that occurs in a novel like *Passing* might necessitate a similarly capacious definition of Black queer experimental narrative.

Black Respectability and the Nuclear Family Form

Seated at the rooftop restaurant of the Drayton hotel in Chicago, Irene Redfield struggles to maintain good form. Passing for white, she is shaken when she catches the eye of a woman whom she does not yet recognize as her estranged childhood acquaintance, Clare Kendry. Irene’s anxiety about the woman’s gaze drives Irene to scrutinize her own appearance for signs of slovenliness, checking “her hat,” “her face,” “her dress” before wondering with horror: “Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (149–50). Presented here is one of the novel’s most prevalent themes: the necessity of keeping up appearances in order to secure inclusion within respectable society (whether white or Black). Throughout the novel, “passing” in its many senses is shown to be a matter of form: it requires an adherence to norms and the flawless execution of a coherent self-stylization. Failing to meet these expectations carries the threat of forcible ejection. For Irene,

¹³⁹ Elizabeth Alexander, “New Ideas about Black Experimental Poetry,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 50, no. 4 (Fall 2011), 601. Emphasis in original.

“the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it,” is unbearable, and this fear influences every decision she makes (150). Her life is marked by the terror of giving herself away by unwittingly transgressing norms, failing to fulfill social requirements, showing poor form. It is this fear of ejection that motivates Irene to remain always within the safest of confines—the ordered, the acceptable, the normative—and to attempt to massage her life into the most respectable shape.

When Irene recognizes Clare at the Drayton, she is quickly reminded of Clare’s divergence from the path of a respectable life. Irene recalls the rumors that began to spread about Clare in the girls’ late teens, after the death of Clare’s father and her subsequent disappearance from Irene’s social circle:

There was the one about Clare Kendry’s having been seen at the dinner hour in a fashionable hotel in company with another woman and two men, all of them white. And *dressed!* And there was another which told of her driving in Lincoln Park with a man, unmistakably white, and evidently rich. Packard limousine, chauffeur in livery, and all that. . . .

And she could remember quite vividly how, when they used to repeat and discuss those tantalizing stories about Clare, the girls would always look knowingly at one another and then, with little excited giggles, drag away their eager shining eyes. (152–53, emphasis in original)

As these rumors show, passing for white and sexual promiscuity are sutured together in the novel’s depiction of the Black middle-class imaginary. To Irene and her friends, Clare becomes the symbol of deviation from respectability, and the “tantalizing” rumors surrounding her are both a source of titillation and a warning intended to keep young Black women on the straight and narrow. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes in her explication of turn-of-the-century Black respectability politics, “repeated references to negative black Others became central to,

indeed constitutive of, the social identity of the respectable black American.”¹⁴⁰ Irene shortly after describes Clare as “a woman whose life had . . . definitely and deliberately diverged from hers” (162–63). With this construction, Irene voices her belief in the naturalness of following a respectable life trajectory and posits divergence from this script as a willful choice—even as Irene diverges from it herself by passing at the Drayton. This hypocritical position goes unremarked in the narration, which naturalizes Irene’s perspective. Yet we notice the porous boundary between rejecting Clare’s way of life and desiring it when Irene recalls the childhood rumors. The girls’ “excited giggles” betray a fascination with a life they are told is so different from their own but from which they can hardly “drag away their eager shining eyes.” This commingling of derision and curiosity suggests that respectable Black life for Irene and her peers is defined in opposition to that which it desires but abjects: those ways of life that prioritize pleasure and self-advancement.

Clare, *Passing*’s “negative black Other,” embodies the queer threat to sexual normativity, social respectability, and straightforward life-plotting that define the respectable ideal of the middle-class Black woman such as Irene. The wife of a Black doctor, Irene’s social position depends on her inhabitation of the proper social forms. In the Jim Crow era, these were dictated by the politics of respectability, which sought to combat popular racist stereotypes that asserted “black women’s innate promiscuity,” positioned “the immoral black mother as responsible for the degeneracy of the black family,” and upheld “the widespread belief that black women were unclean.”¹⁴¹ Irene’s worries about a backward hat or makeup smudge are not mere vanity; such

¹⁴⁰ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 204.

¹⁴¹ Higginbotham, 190. See also A. B. Christa Schwarz, who adds that “black women were ideally positioned as ‘mothers of the race,’ responsible for the future of black America,” while supposed sexual deviants were

signs could brand her as deviant to a middle-class sensibility that encouraged hypervigilance over oneself and others. One had to be “ever-cognizant of the gaze of white America, which in panoptic fashion focused perpetually upon each and every black person and recorded his or her transgressions in an overall accounting of black inferiority. There could be no laxity as far as sexual conduct, cleanliness, temperance, hard work, and politeness were concerned. There could be no transgression of society’s norms.”¹⁴² Social uniformity was paramount, and deviation risked worsening the Black condition according to a respectability politics that “equated nonconformity with the cause of racial inequality and injustice.”¹⁴³ Under these constraints, Irene is left with few viable choices in the matter of how she should compose her life, and, despite the titillation of her childhood exposure to passing, her driving desire becomes the maintenance of the social forms that will secure her place as a suitable example of Black middle-class womanhood.

Passing’s brand of Black queer experimentalism depends on revealing the narrative *process* by which a Black woman is compelled to plot out her life in accordance with a respectable script, to desire a conventional narrative form in which security is the end goal of a lifelong quest. As Charles Scruggs notes, Irene chooses to suppress her sexual desires, investing instead in a quest for security within elite Black society and rejecting “Clare’s Dionysian energy

“consequently regarded as a disaster: they undermined the aim of racial uplift, posed a threat to African Americans’ future by rejecting a reproductive role, and were additionally suspected of corrupting black youth.” “Transgressive Sexuality and the Literature of the Harlem Renaissance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. George Hutchinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 143.

¹⁴² Higginbotham, 196.

¹⁴³ Higginbotham, 203.

for Apollonian order.”¹⁴⁴ Irene pursues “Apollonian order” by maintaining the forms of social propriety, any deviation from which carries the threat of being labelled, like Clare, as queerly out-of-step with the ideals of sexual, gender, and class respectability. She is, however, challenged throughout the narrative by her competing desire to experience something more, a desire that she intuitively links to her encounters with Clare. Irene explicitly acknowledges this conflict and her ultimate commitment to order in her meditation on security:

Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? And did too much striving, too much faith in safety and permanence, unfit one for these other things?

Irene didn’t know, couldn’t decide, though for a long time she sat questioning and trying to understand. Yet all the while, in spite of her searchings and feeling of frustration, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others, or for all of them, would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband. (235)

Irene here clearly articulates the values that have organized her life: “security,” “safety and permanence,” “tranquil[ity],” control over others, and the preservation of the nuclear family form. She outlines the socially reinforced binary logic that posits security for Black women as achievable only within the nuclear family and as being at odds with “happiness,” “love,” and the “wild ecstasy” she associates with Clare’s risky lifestyle. As Irene consciously forms her life around the ideal of security to the exclusion of these other values, despite her “feeling of frustration,” she takes care to attribute any curiosity she might harbor about things like “wild ecstasy” to the corrupting influence of Clare.

¹⁴⁴ Charles Scruggs, “Sexual Desire, Modernity, and Modernism in the Fiction of Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. George Hutchinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 160. See also my discussion of the Apollonian and Dionysiac in Chapter 1.

In *Passing*'s first scene, Irene receives a letter from Clare two years after their chance meeting at the Drayton. The novel begins:

It was the last letter in Irene Redfield's little pile of morning mail. After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender. Not that she hadn't immediately known who its sender was. Some two years ago she had one very like it in outward appearance. Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size. (143)

The letter that Irene receives from Clare is visibly marked as deviant; "out of place and alien" in its "long envelope of thin Italian paper" and "almost illegible scrawl," it stands out from the "other ordinary and clearly directed letters" in her pile. The epistle is not only "mysterious" and "furtive," it is—like Clare—"on the edge of danger" (143). The letter is dangerous not only because of its "contents," which are expected to "reveal" the carelessness which is Clare's "attitude towards danger" (143), but also because its formal aspects—"purple ink" and "foreign paper of extraordinary size"—draw too much attention to itself. It seems to be the epistolary form of a dandyish queer threat, "a little flaunting," dressed in a gauche fashion meant to mock the norms of respectable society. It is, in fact, the exact opposite of the letter that Irene would write; if the obsessiveness with which she orders and maintains her own life and family is any indication, we can assume that any letter from Irene would be immaculately "ordinary and clearly directed." In addition to the letter's showy appearance, its amorous language—attesting to a "wild desire" for and "longing to be with" Irene (145)—corresponds to the type of life that Irene eschews.

The narrator's description of the letter, however, vacillates between disgust and admiration; these opposite impulses mark Irene's ambivalence. One enumerates the formal qualities of the letter with some appreciation, calling it "foreign," "mysterious," "determined,"

“extraordinary,” and noting its “long envelope of thin Italian paper” (qualities that Irene notes out of both her appreciation for elegance and paranoia about detection). The other descriptive impulse seeks to interpret these qualities as sinister: “out of place,” “alien,” “furtive,” “sly,” “peculiar,” “flaunting.” This deluge of descriptors meant to induce readerly suspicion overburdens the missive with intentions read into its material form. The description seems to strongarm readers into being as distrustful of the letter as Irene is, which leads one to wonder: why is the narration trying so hard to convince us of the deviancy of this letter, even before we read it?

Queer Focalization

If we take at face value Irene’s desire for a respectably-formed life, molded in opposition to the dangers represented by Clare, *Passing* seems to be about the expungement of queer desire and the social inevitability of Black women’s striving for respectability within a racist society. But a different story emerges if we refocus on the tensions inherent in the novel’s narration. If we consider the opening description of Clare’s letter and its emphasis on the mischievousness of the missive despite a begrudging appreciation for it, we are drawn to the question of perspective. The narration’s judgmental style is, through free indirect discourse, aligned with Irene’s own voice: its insistence on the letter’s “furtive” nature is a projection of Irene’s perception of Clare as “catlike” (144). We might therefore read these opening lines not as an attempt to convince readers of the letter’s suspect nature, but as Irene’s attempt to convince *herself*. The description thus reveals itself as somewhat experimental: a representation of Irene’s attempt to reinforce her own negative interpretation of the letter, of her effort to stave off her attraction to its outré style.

This opening scene introduces how Irene influences the novel's narration throughout the text. This influence is most obvious when we consider the narrative's dependence on her memory for narratable material. After Irene reads Clare's letter, the novel performs an analepsis, jumping back two years earlier to Irene's initial encounter with Clare in Chicago. This flashback is preceded by a jarring single-line paragraph: "This is what Irene Redfield remembered" (146), which announces not only analepsis but also ellipses, events that occurred but which Irene does not remember and thus go unnarrated. The narration again announces its structuration by Irene's memory during the Negro Welfare League dance, which is narrated only through those "things which Irene Redfield remembered" (203). And lest we believe that Irene's memory reproduces the events with photographic accuracy, this chapter ends by noting that "except for these few unconnected things the dance faded to a blurred memory, its outlines mingling with those of other dances of its kind" (207). Similarly, the narration of Clare's famous fall that concludes the novel restricts itself to that which Irene "allowed herself to remember" (239). It is only Irene's consciously accessible memory that constitutes the basis for the narrated textual material, even when such is not explicitly stated, and this narrated material is coterminous with the straightforward life story that Irene wants to inhabit. The assemblage of Irene's "blurred" memories into a coherent and tightly structured narrative draws our attention to the narrational process, through which extraneous or inconvenient details might be smoothed over in favor of the story that Irene wishes to tell herself.

Passing's narrative is wholly dependent on the contents of Irene's memory and her own impulse to organize "what she allowed herself to remember" into a coherent story—that is, her desire for form. As I note above, the conventional and orderly properties of *Passing's* narrative form have influentially been read as a mask for the novel's queer content. However, we may also

read these properties as *crucial* to the novel's experimental queer form if we consider them not as elements uncritically deployed by the implied author but as reflecting Irene's self-imagining—and thus constituting a critique of the distortions to which linear narrative is prone when its conventions *are* uncritically deployed. Despite *Passing*'s third-person narration, the continuous use of free indirect discourse (FID) and the omnipresent influence of Irene's voice and memories teases readers with the impression that *Passing*'s narrator is Irene herself, narrating her life in the third person. This is not technically correct in narratological terms: Irene is a focalizing character whose idiom bleeds into the narration via FID.¹⁴⁵ Still, the narrator-like influence over a narrative's shape exhibited by a fixed focalizing character has been affirmed since early narratological considerations of perspective.¹⁴⁶ Wayne Booth argues that “any sustained inside view, of whatever depth, temporarily turns the character whose mind is shown into a narrator” and that “the most important unacknowledged narrators in modern fiction are the third-person ‘centers of consciousness’ through whom authors have filtered their narratives.”¹⁴⁷ That Irene feels like *Passing*'s narrator is confirmed by McDowell's calling her “the classic unreliable narrator,” despite Irene's not being technically a narrator at all.¹⁴⁸ Critics, nonetheless, have

¹⁴⁵ For classical narratological accounts of various methods of representing narrative perspective and/as consciousness, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press [1972] 1980), Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1978] 1983) and Hugh Kenner, *Joyce's Voices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). For an account of FID as “morphing,” see Laura Buchholz, “The Morphing Metaphor and the Question of Narrative Voice,” *Narrative* 17, no. 2 (2009): 200–19. For an account of how FID shapes distance and control, see Daniel Gunn, “Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in *Emma*,” *Narrative* 12, no. 1 (2004): 35–54.

¹⁴⁶ Fixed focalization occurs when “everything passes through” a central character, as opposed to shifting between multiple focalizers. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 189.

¹⁴⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1961] 1983), 164, 153.

¹⁴⁸ McDowell, “Introduction,” xxiv. Gabrielle McIntire phrases this in a more precise way, writing that “the text practically implores us to distrust its mode of narration” and that Irene “is closely identified with the narrator.”

continued to refer to her as such.¹⁴⁹ What McDowell reads as a “classic” narrative convention is actually more subtly experimental: through FID, the narrative naturalizes Irene’s perspective so that the lines between objective narration and Irene’s perception become blurred. Through this narrational mode, *Passing* shows Irene attempting to plot out her own life linearly and in contradistinction to the queerer form of Clare’s, for which Irene harbors a suppressed desire.¹⁵⁰ The plot of *Passing* and the events that it narrates from Irene’s perspective follow a similarly teleological, quest-like trajectory. *Passing*’s narrative form thus mirrors the forcible “straightening out” that Irene performs on her own life story. In this sense, *Passing*’s narrative form does not belie its queer content; rather, by depicting the distortions required to straighten out a story, it experimentally critiques narrative linearity from within that very form.

We can see the extent to which Irene’s voice melds with the narrator’s by examining a seemingly objective description: “After a breakfast, which had been eaten almost in silence and which she was relieved to have done with, Irene Redfield lingered for a little while in the downstairs hall, looking out at the soft flakes fluttering down. She was watching them immediately fill some ugly irregular gaps left by the feet of hurrying pedestrians” (230). This description of the breakfast includes the narrator’s report that Irene found the silence uncomfortable; the narrator here signals through the phrase “she was relieved” a separation

“Toward a Narratology of Passing: Epistemology, Race, and Misrecognition in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” *Callaloo* 35, no. 3 (September 2012): 780.

¹⁴⁹ Ann duCille notes the prevalence of reading Irene as an “untrustworthy narrator” as early as 1993. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 107. See also Valentina Montero Román, “Race, Gender, and ‘Real Brains’: Interrogating Unreliability in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* (forthcoming), which argues against this trend of reading Irene as an unreliable narrator.

¹⁵⁰ For a reading of how “Larsen’s representative fragmentation of Clare Kendry into indeterminate components of race, class, and sexuality reveals a modernist notion of subjectivity to be held in contrast with Irene’s stable, arguably ‘realist’ view of herself,” see Steven J. Belluscio, *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 245.

between the narrated material (Irene's emotions) and the narrator who presents them. This clear signaling obscures the subtler blending of Irene's voice with the narrator's that occurs in the subsequent description of the snow. The phrase "ugly irregular gaps" is almost certainly Irene's formulation. There is no reason for the narrator to consider footprints in the snow to be ugly; for Irene, however, their irregularity is unbearable: the pure white canvas of the snow is aligned for her with the fantasy of perfect order, the desire to cover over the messy irregularities of the world with aesthetic coherence and the social uniformity of white and Black values alike. It is the pedestrians, however, that threaten this purity: primed by the mores of respectability politics to be suspicious of others, Irene resents the blemishes they leave on the snow just as she resents anyone—like Clare—who tramples on the ideals of Black respectability that she has labored to uphold. Her perception of the "ugly irregular gaps" in an otherwise uniformly "soft" blanket of obscuring snow also alludes to her life's disturbance by her own troubling desires, of which she tries to absolve herself by blaming Clare, who, like the careless "hurrying pedestrians," tramples her calm. Even in this seemingly objective description of a wintry scene, the narrative's innovative focalization through Irene projects onto the narrator her own tendency to view the world in terms of orderly forms and "ugly irregular" threats.

From Desire For to Desire to Be: Potential and Apparent Narratives

Throughout the novel, Irene retroactively distances herself from her desires as if they come from someone else. Upon parting from Clare at the Drayton, Irene impulsively invites her on a weekend trip:

And then she had an inspiration.

“Clare!” she exclaimed, “why don’t you come up with me? Our place is probably full up—Jim’s wife has a way of collecting mobs of the most impossible people—but we can always manage to find room for one more. And you’ll see absolutely everybody.”

In the very moment of giving the invitation she regretted it. What a foolish, what an idiotic impulse to have given way to! She groaned inwardly as she thought of the endless explanations in which it would involve her, of the curiosity, and the talk, and the lifted eye-brows. It wasn’t, she assured herself, that she was a snob, that she cared greatly for the petty restrictions and distinctions with which what called itself Negro society chose to hedge itself about; but that she had a natural and deeply rooted aversion to the kind of front-page notoriety that Clare Kendry’s presence in Idlewild, as her guest, would expose her to. And here she was, perversely and against all reason, inviting her. (156–57)

Irene’s idea to invite Clare is initially an “inspiration,” exclaimed with joy and intended to secure herself more time with Clare. But the tone shifts violently toward regret, showing how Irene has trained herself to self-chastise whenever she does something that puts her in social jeopardy. Her self-talk is harsh (she calls herself “foolish,” “idiotic”) and tinged with suspicions of her own deviance (she acts “perversely and against all reason”). Furthermore, it reveals Irene’s ambivalent relationship to the norms of the Black middle-class society that she inhabits. Desiring to see herself as free from the “petty restrictions” of “Negro society”—that is, more like Clare—she must insist to “herself” that she isn’t a “snob” despite falling in line with those very restrictions she waves away. Irene’s longing to see herself as a volitional subject leads her to recast her internalization of Black social norms as a matter of personal taste: a “natural and deeply rooted aversion” to “notoriety.” Taken as a whole, the passage shows Irene’s instinctual desire to spend more time with Clare, her tendency to resist this desire in favor of a politics of respectability, her inclination toward self-debasement as if training herself to internalize the norms of “Negro society” despite simultaneously wanting to see herself as free from them, and, finally, her attempts to convince herself that enforcing these social forms is a matter of personal preference rather than social coercion.

As exemplified by Irene's invitation and subsequent regret, Irene possesses desires for and identifications with Clare that she is quick to disavow. In the moments before disavowal, though, Irene seems to consider what it would be like to live a life like Clare's, indifferent to the judgments of Black society and free to chase her own desires without regard for consequences. These "what if" moments, I suggest, are integral to *Passing*'s understated experimental form, alluding as they do to other life-narratives that Irene imagines. Irene quashes such imaginings as soon as they arise, refocusing instead on her preoccupation with maintaining the stability of her family, which corresponds to her self-conception as a model wife and mother, and on her involvement with organizations like the Negro Welfare League, which bolsters her image as a model Black citizen. A woman who has chosen continuously to pass for white, Clare has married the volatile racist John Bellew but begins over the course of the novel to expose herself riskily in Black society. Clare Kendry and her reckless lifestyle, so at odds with Irene's investment in security, attract Irene despite her resistance and "sense of irritation with herself" at not feeling unambiguously repulsed (162). We glimpse in these moments of identification Irene's uncertainty about her life choices and a curiosity about what it means to live, as Clare does, outside Black middle-class norms.

One such moment occurs as Irene is considering the letter from Clare:

And for a swift moment Irene Redfield seemed to see a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part, ineffectual. Sometimes he did manage to reach her. But only the fact that the child had edged herself and her poor sewing over to the farthest corner of the sofa suggested that she was in any way perturbed by this menace to herself and her work. (143-44)

That Irene "seem[s] to see" this scene raises the question: does she remember or imagine it?

Upon Irene's first adult encounter with Clare, she asserts that, after having been estranged from

Clare twelve years ago, “Clare had gone completely from Irene’s thoughts,” adding: “Besides, Clare had never been exactly one of the group” (154). These assertions do not square with Irene’s intimate vision: either Irene and Clare were so close in their childhood that Irene’s memory can summon up a vivid image of Clare’s day-to-day childhood experience in her abusive home, or she undertakes in this moment an uncharacteristically empathetic imaging thereof. If the first is true, Irene’s insistence that they had never been close is an attempt to bend her memories into a more convenient narrative in which she and Clare have much less history than they do. If the second, the vision serves as even stronger evidence for Irene’s identification with Clare: she reaches out empathetically to the image of the young Clare, feeling threatened and frightened on Clare’s behalf. In either case, there is something begrudgingly admiring in Irene’s description of Clare as almost imperceptibly “perturbed” by this outburst. Irene ostensibly summons up this scene as evidence that Clare was “stepping always on the edge of danger” (143), a quality that she identifies as distasteful. But the remembered or imagined scene, marked by a young girl’s studied indifference to her abusive father, is far from a perfect example of Clare’s willfully risky behavior. The scene instead exemplifies Clare’s ability to carry on with her life despite threats to her security, an ability that Irene lacks. Even in her attempts to criticize Clare, Irene seems to wonder how the shape of her own life might have changed if she had possessed Clare’s ability to pursue her own desires in the face of danger.

As Irene continues to wander through childhood memories, she also seems to envy Clare’s ability to fight back when challenged:

How savagely she [Clare] had clawed those boys the day they had hooted her parent and sung a derisive rhyme, of their own composing, which pointed out certain eccentricities in his careening gait! And how deliberately she had—
Irene brought her thoughts back to the present. (145)

Irene's breaking off here comes at a point when she almost expresses admiration for Clare; wishing that she could be as assertive and "deliberat[e]," she seems about to drift off into another memory of Clare's assertiveness in the face of danger but pulls herself "back to the present." This interjection typifies Irene's impulse to cut off her own thoughts when they veer into suspicious territory; because so much of the narration is soldered to Irene's conscious mind, *Passing's* plot itself is also forcibly yanked back into place by Irene whenever it veers off track. These reroutings remind us that the novel's narratable events are subject to Irene's control. *Passing* is thus structured around the ellipses that occur when Irene reimposes order on her wandering thoughts. It is as if Irene, afraid of what might happen if she allows herself to identify explicitly with Clare, attempts to exert authorial control over her own life narrative; as I discuss below, this authorial control also extends to the lives of her husband and son. Through this practice, Irene staves off the conscious fear that her desires might shape her life into something more like Clare's.

During moments when Irene fails to control herself, we glimpse a more complex and more experimental version of her story. At the Drayton, Irene loses track of time while reminiscing with Clare; it is only with the striking of a clock that she exclaims, "Oh, I must go, Clare!" (155). While with Clare, Irene's thoughts are directed toward the past: the realm of what might have been and the unfixity of youth. Spending time with Clare pleurably re-immerses Irene in all that she has grown out of, including the queer backwardness that is the refusal to grow up and commit oneself to a straightforward path.¹⁵¹ For an hour with Clare, Irene

¹⁵¹ I am thinking here in terms of Heather Love's discussion of the backwardness of queer historiography as interrogating narratives of progress as well as Jack Halberstam's consideration of childishness as a chaotic domain that works against disciplinary social norms. See Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

is able to detach herself from her present constraints and luxuriate in the nostalgic domain of potentiality. Despite herself, Irene lingers with Clare:

The waiter came with Clare's change. Irene reminded herself that she ought immediately to go. But she didn't move.

The truth was, she was curious. There were things that she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of "passing," this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chances in another environment. . . . But she couldn't. She was unable to think of a single question that in its context or its phrasing was not too frankly curious, if not actually impertinent. (157)

Irene holds back her curiosity about the risky business of passing for white, not wanting Clare to know that she is curious. This moment of curiosity allows us to see a fuller picture of Irene's desires: she allows herself to imagine a life like Clare's, wondering eagerly about the details of passing. Irene's curiosity indicates identificatory desire to imagine her own life being shaped more like Clare's, yet she restrains this desire for fear that being "too frankly curious" would be a show of poor form—rude in the context of the conversation and improper by the standards of Black respectability. Silent but enchanted, Irene remains longer still: "Though conscious that if she didn't hurry away, she was going to be late to dinner, she still lingered. It was as if the woman sitting on the other side of the table, a girl that she had known, who had done this rather dangerous and, to Irene Redfield, abhorrent thing successfully and had announced herself well satisfied, had for her a fascination, strange and compelling" (161). The "as if" here subtly marks Irene's denial of her eager imagining of other possible lives. "As if" is almost certainly Irene's phrase: it is unlikely that the narrator, who frequently reports on Irene's emotional status, would need in this case to speculate. Focalized through Irene, this sentence distances Irene from her own "fascination" through the use of "as if," which posits that what she feels seems like fascination—but couldn't possibly be. This distancing is further reinforced by the extraordinary syntactical separation of subject and verb: the thought "the woman . . . had for her a fascination,"

is too horrible to be uttered without an intervening string of subordinate clauses reinforcing the unthinkability of Irene's captivation by someone so "dangerous" and "abhorrent." Utilizing focalization in this experimental fashion, *Passing* depicts how Irene reinforces the coherent image of herself as Clare's opposite, even while confronting her attraction to Clare's manner of living.

When she finally wrenches herself away from Clare, Irene makes plans to see her again, which she immediately regrets: "Standing there under the appeal, the caress, of [Clare's] eyes, Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn't be the last. . . . Crossing the avenue in the heat . . . away from the seduction of Clare Kendry's smile, [Irene] was aware of a sense of irritation with herself. . . . She began to wonder just what had possessed her to make her promise to find time . . . to spend another afternoon with a woman whose life had so definitely and deliberately diverged from hers" (162–63). Clare's divergence from the linear life-narrative that Irene is determined to follow renders Clare a threat to that plot structured by Black middle-class norms. Yet despite Irene's efforts to distinguish her conventional life from Clare's experimental one, she cannot help feeling "the appeal, the caress," not only of Clare herself, but of Clare's approach to life, which, to Irene's mind, is driven by desire rather than conformity. Irene is swept away by Clare in the moment of encounter, but reimagines the experience in retrospect, recasting her own "desire" to see Clare as an impulse that could not possibly have arisen from Irene herself. Rewriting this scene, Irene seems to convince herself that "what had possessed her" was the "seduction of Clare Kendry's smile"; Irene thus externalizes her own longing to stray from the straight-and-narrow, absolving herself of culpability by casting Clare as an antagonistic temptress whose influence Irene must overcome.

Irene's connection with Clare, as this scene illustrates, is more than desire for her; it is a desire to *be* her, a desire to escape from the smothering security of her own conventional life.¹⁵² If we shift our attention from Irene's desire *for* Clare to Irene's desire to *be* Clare, the question of *Passing's* queer content morphs into one of its experimental queer form. *Passing* uses focalization to depict simultaneously Irene's abhorrence of her own attraction to Clare's nonnormative lifestyle and Irene's subsequent clinging harder to convention, revealing that the normative structuring of Irene's life is undertaken in direct contradistinction to Clare's own "queer form." Irene's reactive life-structuring reveals a simultaneous fear and desire to be more like Clare. That is, alongside Irene's likely erotic attraction to Clare is her attraction to the meandering, nonlinear, desire-driven narrative form that she maps onto Clare's life. Even as Irene asserts her distaste for Clare's mode of living, she cannot but envy that "in spite of her determined selfishness the woman before her was yet capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known" (195). In such moments, Irene imagines living a life like Clare's. The clarification of Irene's full name in this passage draws attention to the blurring of pronouns and identities that Irene allows herself momentarily to imagine before forcefully reasserting her own ostensibly stable identity as Irene Redfield—*not* Clare Kendry. Irene's desire to trade lives with Clare is as clear as her subsequent disavowal of it is forceful: "The thought . . . was gone as quickly as it had come" (195). Just as Irene's outward investment in normativity

¹⁵² Valerie Traub, in her reading of the film *Black Widow*, reminds us that we should be wary of cultural imaginaries about lesbian desire that "asser[t] the isomorphism of gender identification and erotic desire," arguing that "the belief that homoerotic desire depends on gender similitude obscures both the implication of gender in larger systems of power, and the role of *other* differences in erotic arousal." In my reading of *Passing*, I aim neither to ignore Traub's reminder nor to deny that *Passing* could be read as reasserting this isomorphism. However, I contend that Irene's desire to be like Clare is a separate issue from her desire for Clare insofar as her identification with Clare is more about seeing in Clare a model for a queer life that Irene might otherwise have led than about identification at the level of gender. See Valerie Traub, "The Ambiguities of 'Lesbian' Viewing Pleasure: The (Dis)Articulations of *Black Widow*," in *Out in Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 125, 126. See also Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

conflicts with a disavowed desire to structure her life after Clare's, *Passing's* ostensible deployment of a conventional, linear quest narrative conflicts with the queerer alternatives latent within it. Rather than reading *Passing's* conventional narrative structure as Larsen's cover for her novel's queer content, we might instead see it as a formal extension of Irene's ever-incomplete attempts to mold her own life in contradistinction to the queerer life she furtively desires.

Pressured to embody respectability, Irene feels she must disavow any longing for a life other than that of the model wife, mother, and citizen. It is only by attending to *Passing's* subtle experimentalism and scrutinizing the moments at which the narrative lets these other possible lives slip in that we begin to apprehend the work that Irene has done to keep them out. *Passing's* engagement with the lives Irene might have led urges us to rethink what constitutes the totality of a narrative.¹⁵³ The novel asks us to consider the role of the stories it doesn't quite tell, those shadow narratives that haunt the text but are conspicuously excluded. During the moments in which Irene contemplates the alternative paths her own life might have taken—those which may have led to unknown “heights and depths of feeling” (195)—she acknowledges the rejected lives on which her own is built.

This infinitude of queerer possibilities that Irene desires but rejects constitute *potential narratives* that emerge during “what if” moments in the novel. Irene's ideal version of her own life, by contrast, constitutes her *apparent narrative*. This simplified narrative is Irene's wishful imagining of life as a straightforward linear trajectory, one that provides her with a guiderail

¹⁵³ For more on the notion of “lives unled,” see Andrew Miller, “Lives Unled in Realist Fiction,” *Representations* 98 (Spring 2007). My thinking here is also influenced by possible worlds theory, especially Hilary Dannenberg's notion that counterfactualty in realist narrative structures plots through “what if” scenarios. See Hilary P. Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactualty: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008). See also Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

against those threatening desires and deviations—those potential narratives—the conscious acknowledgment of which she actively forecloses. Those elements of *Passing* that McDowell identifies as Larsen’s capitulations to narrative convention, then, are better understood as crucial components of Irene’s apparent narrative. Irene’s process of narrativizing her own life involves a methodical straightening-out that elides her own deviations; insofar as *Passing* represents this process of narrative construction, it refuses to naturalize Irene’s apparent narrative, instead encouraging readers to read it suspiciously, to ask what has been left out. *Passing*’s multiple narrative registers, perceivable in the tension between the apparent and potential narratives that it subsumes, render it a model of how queer experimentalism may exist within the structures of even the most conventional of narrative forms and how such experimentalism may critique its own formal structures.

Sexual Threat and the Black Middle-Class Family

The apparent narrative that Irene weaves follows one of literature’s most conventional plots: the protagonist’s secure family life is disrupted by a threatening figure whose timely death alleviates the conflict. Attending to *Passing*’s multiple narrative registers, however, allows us to see how Larsen critiques this tendency of certain narrative shapes to uphold normativity. In Irene’s apparent narrative, the idea of the inviolable nuclear family and its investment in the symbolic child is posited as the ideal of central importance, threatened by Clare, whom Irene casts as both a stereotypically unfit Black mother and a stereotypically lascivious jezebel bent on seducing Irene’s husband.¹⁵⁴ The implied authorial values behind Irene’s apparent narrative ratify the notion that individual desires should be sacrificed in order to preserve marital and

¹⁵⁴ See Lee Edelman, *No Future* for a discussion of the “symbolic Child” as the aegis of reproductive futurism.

familial stability. Furthermore, the conventions that govern Irene's apparent narrative dictate that Clare, as a threat to the family, must be eliminated to resolve with proper closure Irene's quest to stabilize her life. *Passing's* potential narratives, however, reveal a more ambivalent attitude toward the cultural centrality of the nuclear family and its associated values. The implied authorial values shift dramatically when we move between narrative registers: while Irene's apparent narrative ratifies normative Black middle-class perspectives on the family, the novel's potential narratives insinuate that possibilities for great pleasure, dangerous though they may be, lie outside the family form for those who are willing to chase their own desires. *Passing's* experimental use of various narrative registers thus refuses to naturalize the family values that seem to inhere in its narrative form; rather, it interrogates the very principles that it appears to affirm.

Clare's views on children further solidify her in Irene's mind as the antagonist who threatens to disrupt Irene's family life. As Michele Mitchell writes, adherents to a politics of respectability in the 1920s "seized the gauntlet of policing sexual behavior within the race as they poured their energies into ensuring that sex contributed to . . . the work of Afro-American reproduction. The very concept of 'racial destiny' emphasized later generations: it implied that biological processes of generation should result in an abundance of vigorous offspring."¹⁵⁵ The importance of children did not end with having them; equally crucial was the maintenance of a virtuous household that would foster a productive new generation. Mitchell describes the importance of domestic reform to 1920s proponents of uplift, as well as the influence of "euthenics—an early-twentieth-century 'science of controllable environment' inspired by

¹⁵⁵ Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 80.

eugenics,” which “powerfully shaped African American visions of residences and home life”:
“As euthenic theory had it, a child with excellent genes could be adversely affected by compromising habitats. . . . Conversely, a wholesome home life could improve the overall hereditary package of a child.”¹⁵⁶ While Irene’s self-conception as a dedicated mother is in line with these values, the prioritization of children over the self is rejected by Clare, who asserts: “Children aren’t everything. . . . There are other things in this world, though I admit some people don’t seem to suspect it” (210). Irene, sensing Clare’s criticism of her ostensibly devoted motherhood, is offended: “I know very well that I take being a mother rather seriously. I *am* wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can’t help it. And, really, I don’t think it’s anything to laugh at” (210, emphasis in original). Explaining her controlling approach to motherhood as something she “can’t help,” Irene endeavors to prove the naturalness of her maternal instincts. Clare’s response to Irene’s rebuff, however, subtly retools this logic: “It’s just that I haven’t any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have” (210). Clare sees through Irene’s apparent narrative, reframing Irene’s familial commitment as an exercise in self-discipline and conformity to what is “proper” rather than a natural outpouring of maternal desire. Irene tries politely to disagree with Clare’s self-representation as lacking morals but stumbles, finding herself “at a loss for an acceptable term to express her opinion of Clare’s ‘having’ nature” (210). Unable to utter in “acceptable” terms what she really thinks, Irene allows herself only to think of Clare in antagonistic terms, emphasizing Clare’s indifference to familial values and her “‘having’ nature” as that which Irene must oppose through a redoubling of her maternal commitments. In asserting the naturalness of her motherly role, Irene voices also a belief in the predetermination of her narrative and the teleological conclusion she assumes must follow:

¹⁵⁶ Mitchell, 147.

overcoming Clare's threat of "domestic chaos" and maintaining the ideal of the "orderly home life."¹⁵⁷

If we follow McDowell in reading Clare's death as Larsen's "act of narrative 'dis'-closure, undoing or doing the opposite of what she has promised," then Irene is ultimately, in the words of Ann duCille, "a protector of the precious domestic realm—defender of middle-class marriage, bourgeois home, family, fidelity, and above all, security."¹⁵⁸ Such a reading, however, privileges Irene's apparent narrative over *Passing*'s experimental deployment of potential narratives. Taken as a whole, *Passing* queers the family through an immanent destabilization of Irene's apparent narrative, which posits Irene as the paradigm of Black reproductive futurism. But *Passing* reveals Irene's failure to embody adequately this role. Irene's main concern leading up to her first encounter with Clare is an arduous errand meant to appease her son: "the drawing-book, for which Ted had so gravely and insistently given her precise directions, had sent her in and out of five shops without success" (146). Scouring five shops drives Irene to near exhaustion, forcing her to take refuge at the Drayton for tea (thus meeting Clare). Once she is safely ensconced in the comfort of the Drayton, saved from "feeling disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled," Irene's thoughts betray her resentment of her son (and, by association, her husband Brian): "Why was it that almost invariably he wanted something that was difficult or impossible to get? Like his father. For ever wanting something that he couldn't have" (148). The narration's focalization through Irene emphasizes her self-conception as the overworked altruistic mother who would push herself to the physical brink to satisfy her children's whims. She endeavors to present herself as a naturally devoted mother—"I *am* wrapped up in my boys

¹⁵⁷ Mitchell, 144.

¹⁵⁸ duCille, *The Coupling Convention*, 108

and the running of my house. I can't help it"—but this irruption of resentment toward Ted's and Brian's wants betrays her unacknowledged yearning to prioritize her own desires. Irene's construction of the apparent narrative in which she plays the maternal protagonist ignores her own dissatisfaction with the perfect mother role. While Irene's apparent narrative displaces her familial unrest onto others, the potential narrative hinted at by Irene's attraction to Clare's life free of such cares suggests an underlying weariness with her conventional, respectable life. Despite Irene's insistence that her family is a model of stability, her ambivalence indicates that she may consider middle-class familial norms to be more stultifying than stabilizing.

Irene's attempts to present herself as the ideal mother are further undermined by her frequent tendencies to reduce her family members to pawns in a strategic game. When Irene mentions Brian's "wanting something that he couldn't have," she is referring to his desire to move to Brazil to escape the drudgery of Black middle-class life and the daily experience of racism. This desire, abhorrent to Irene, threatens to disrupt "the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have remain as it was" (187). This arranging, though presented as admirable by the narration focalized through Irene, takes on a sinister tone as more of Irene's thoughts are revealed. Irene's hope that Brian's "discontent . . . would surely die, flicker out, at last" morphs into the resolve that she must author its elimination: "But it *would* die. Of that she was certain. She had only to direct and guide her man" (187–88). Plotting the demise of Brian's desire through "substitution," she creates a scheme to send their son Junior to a European school so that Brian might accompany him on the trip and alleviate his unrest through a more limited international excursion. This plot, aimed at maintaining the family's cohesion by momentarily providing a "legitimate" way for Brian's restlessness to be assuaged, juxtaposes Irene's need to exhibit apparent respectability to a willingness to fracture the nuclear

family by shipping half of it to another continent. Obsessed with fortifying her apparent narrative against the threat of perceived abnormality and social censure that would accompany Brian's move to Brazil, Irene's attempts to stabilize her family involve directing their every move. Maintaining her apparent narrative means that Irene, as author and protagonist, must manage her family as if they were troublesome minor characters.

Irene tries to manipulate Brian by invoking what she assumes to be their shared commitment to the norms of sexual purity. In her attempt to convince Brian to send Junior to a European school, Irene invents a story about the "queer ideas about things" that Junior has been hearing at school; Brian responds: "D'you mean ideas about sex, Irene?" (189). Brian here defiantly voices that to which Irene can only refer euphemistically, as if chastising her for prudishness. Refusing to be dictated to by middle-class norms, Brian takes the opposite stance on his son's education: "The sooner and the more he learns about sex, the better for him. And most certainly if he learns that it's a grand joke, the grandest in the world" (189). This statement provokes an unsurprising "extreme resentment" and "fury" in Irene (189). Irene's outrage is a reaction both to a personal slight and to the threat that Brian's statement poses to the foundation of her apparent narrative. If, as Brian would have it, sex *is* a joke, not to be taken seriously, then the importance placed on sex by the politics of respectability must also be misguided. The desires Irene has sacrificed to build her narrative around the ideal of the reproductive family as the only safe manifestation of sexuality would have been smothered for naught. For Irene to consider that social restrictions on sex might be arbitrary—might, in fact, be another "grand joke" engineered by white men to hold Black Americans in check—would be to undermine her entire apparent narrative.

Unable to control Brian, Irene imagines that it is Clare who embodies the biggest threat to her family. To Irene, Clare's seductiveness risks dragging both her and Brian off the path she has chosen. With Clare in the role of antagonist, Irene's quest must be to dispel the threat to her family, and her narrative is necessarily concluded as soon as the threat is done away with. Irene, adopting again an authorial role, contemplates a number of possible endings to the narrative, privileging the one that is happiest for her. Knowing that Clare's white husband would leave her if her Blackness were revealed, Irene wonders: "What if Bellew should divorce Clare? Could he? . . . If he divorced her—If Clare were free—But of all the things that could happen, this was the one she did not want. She must get her mind away from that possibility. She must" (228). As usual, Irene is unable to control for long her fascinated fixation on narrative outcomes that don't align with her desired goal. Considering "all the things that could happen," she poses as a preferable alternative the simplest possible conclusion to her apparent narrative: "If Clare should die! Then—Oh, it was vile! To think, yes, to wish that! . . . But the thought stayed with her. She could not get rid of it" (228). This, of course, is the very ending that Irene gets: Clare falls to her death at a party, and Irene's possible role in this becomes something she "never afterwards allowed herself to remember" (239). Irene's convenient lapse means we cannot determine her culpability, but her desire for this very resolution to her apparent narrative and her "sob of thankfulness" at its achievement strongly hints that she has had a hand in authoring it (241).

While Irene certainly desires—and potentially effects—such neatness in her apparent narrative, the resolution viewed in light of *Passing's* potential narratives accentuates the artifice of such closure. While the narrative resolves neatly only in Irene's mind, a host of questions persist: Who, if anyone, will be blamed for the death? How will the incident affect Irene and her family? Will Irene weaponize the presumed trauma of witnessing Clare's death to bind her

husband closer to her? Will the marriage disintegrate under Brian's suspicion of Irene? Will Irene meet others like Clare whose freedom she envies? What will happen to them if they do? While Irene's apparent narrative concludes with the tidiest of endings—the death of the antagonist, among “the most conventional fates of narrative history”¹⁵⁹—the prospect of actual closure remains a figment of Irene's perspective.

Although Irene's apparent narrative is not the only one that *Passing* represents, it does dictate, by virtue of the novel's focalization through Irene, *Passing*'s narratable content—including, crucially, where the narrative must end. In D. A. Miller's terms, that which exists beyond Clare's death is for Irene “a nonnarratable element,” defined by its “incapacity to generate a story.”¹⁶⁰ For Miller, the nonnarratable is what occurs after closure, once the quest is complete. But what about elements that are nonnarratable because they threaten to scatter the uniform motion toward a singular goal? These might be impulses away from closure, expressing a disillusionment with it. These might involve Irene's desire for something else, though she knows not what. Stumbling, errancy, wandering. This is “waywardness,” as Saidiya Hartman defines it: “the unregulated movement of driving and wandering; sojourns without a fixed destination.”¹⁶¹ Such waywardness is, in Hartman's terms, “a queer resource of black survival,” “an ongoing exploration of *what might be*” and “an improvisation with the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated, when there is little room to breathe.”¹⁶² It is that which Clare embodies and which Irene is drawn to but cannot fully imagine or articulate.

¹⁵⁹ McDowell, “Introduction,” xi.

¹⁶⁰ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents*, 5.

¹⁶¹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 227.

¹⁶² Hartman, 228. Emphasis in original.

It is *Passing* that gives form to this waywardness, which is also “a *beautiful experiment* in how-to-live.”¹⁶³

Passing does not share Irene’s quest; its central conflict exists among the life Irene is leading, the narrative about her life she constructs for herself, and those potential lives she desires but forecloses. This conflict, crucially, remains unresolved: we do not know whether Irene will stay on this path forever or whether she will become disillusioned with the conventional narrative shape into which she has tried to force her life. *Passing* is the narrative of Irene’s waywardness, told alongside her attempt to walk the straight and narrow. It is conventional insofar as it is coterminous with Irene’s apparent narrative, beginning and ending where hers does. But insofar as it exposes the potentialities beside that narrative, critiques conventional narrative form from within, and gives shape to the narrative waywardness that enables Black queer survival, we should consider *Passing* itself a beautiful experiment.

Whereas *Nightwood*’s overt attempts to destabilize narrative form are underpinned by the desires for stability it represents, *Passing*’s deployment of formal narrative conventions prove to be in service not only of Irene’s desire to attain security through form, but also of the desire to reimagine and reshape what a queer life trajectory might look like. To speak, then, of either text as an experimental or conventional queer narrative is to collapse the multilayered significations of form in such texts into one particular dimension. While I have argued that it is important to recognize what is experimental about *Passing*’s form and what is conventional about *Nightwood*’s, my point is to challenge longstanding assumptions about these texts and about the limitations of narrative form while also interrogating the usefulness of such designations as “experimental” and “conventional.” Each text discussed in this project exhibits an uneasy

¹⁶³ Hartman, 228. Emphasis in original.

mixture of conventionality and experimentalism constellated unevenly around axes such as narrative form, social forms, and the general concept of form. Reading into desire for form necessarily brings out such textual ambivalences, emphasizing how individual desires can align with, cut across, or reimagine completely from the affordances of particular narrative and social forms. If *Passing* and *Nightwood* both feature characters who desire stability through forms of intimacy, those characters also disagree as widely about how to achieve such stability as the texts themselves differ in their narrative representations of those desires. Necessarily bound up in both conventional and experimental impulses, queer desires for form may seek out traditional qualities—such as security and stability—by taking completely novel paths. They may also cover well-traveled ground in search of new and beautiful ways of life. As we follow these queer modernists in their explorations, we would do well to note both the affordances and limitations of our notions of the experimental and the conventional for analyzing the shapes of their desires.

PART II: DESIRE FOR IDENTITY

CHAPTER 3

Trusting Gender: Effeminacy and Belonging in *The Young and Evil*

Oh it isn't a world for scissors, for mallets; but for needle, thread and
for paste

—Karel, *The Young and Evil* (85)

I am waiting for the day Louis said when I can destroy all definitions.
But until then said Karel they are the most that matters.

—*The Young and Evil* (112)

In his encyclopedic *Gay New York*, George Chauncey paints a detailed portrait of the typical early-twentieth-century fairy.¹⁶⁴ With Chauncey's careful descriptions, elements that might otherwise seem to constitute a vague stereotype take shape as a concrete gender form.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Chauncey carefully parses the historical terminology of sexual subjectivity: while “fairy” applied “only to those men who dressed or behaved in . . . a flamboyantly effeminate manner,” “*queer*” was “essentially synonymous with ‘homosexual’” and “did not presume that the men it denoted were effeminate”; “trade,” by contrast, denoted “a ‘real man’ . . . who was neither homosexually interested nor effeminately gendered himself but who would accept the sexual advances of a queer.” *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic, 1994), 16.

¹⁶⁵ I follow Caroline Levine in defining gender as a form: “Although literary and cultural studies scholars do not typically refer to gender as a form, theorists such as Foucault and Butler have given us strong reason to do so. These thinkers have argued persuasively that gender does not emerge out of given or prior sex distinctions, but is repeatedly asserted and reasserted through attention to norms and deviations. . . . Thus it makes sense to think of

The social form that I'll call *fairy gender* is written on and through the body, according to Chauncey, in “the ways they cut, styled, and colored their hair, painted and scented their faces, and grew, shaved, penciled or tore out their eyebrows and other facial hair” as well in “the ways they walked, sat, spoke, moved their eyes, and carried their heads, hands, arms, and legs.”¹⁶⁶ In short, the formal markers of fairy gender were a carefully practiced set of attributes that shaped for this community everything from grooming habits to speech style to comportment. Such social forms were, as Chauncey writes, “central to the dominant role model available” to queer, and especially working-class, people assigned male at birth around the period 1890–1940.¹⁶⁷

Predictably, adopting *gender as a social form* opened fairies to extreme violence and social ostracization. “The men who became fairies did so at the cost of forfeiting their privileged status as men,” Chauncey writes.¹⁶⁸ This was especially true in terms of the police, who turned a blind eye to violence against fairies in addition to perpetuating it themselves. As such, “youths felt justified in brutalizing fairies,” considering them easy and guilt-free targets of assault, rape, and

gender as one of many iterable structures or patterns that are constantly shaping experience.” *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 94.

¹⁶⁶ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 54.

¹⁶⁷ It is important to note that the lack of an analogous category that corresponds exactly to contemporary understandings of transgender means that some who identified as fairies might be analogous to transgender women, while others are better understood as queer men and still others as nonbinary and others as gay. Because sex role and gender were in early twentieth-century America widely conceptualized as co-constitutive, to be a “fairy” might have meant being a woman, or being a woman in bed, or adopting a social persona that roughly corresponded to ideas of womanhood, depending on who you asked. It is thus important that we consider categories like “fairy” as neither monolithic nor as corresponding neatly to contemporary categories of gender and sexual identity. (See also Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017] for a thoughtful discussion of how we should approach nonnormative gender in modernist texts.) For related reasons, I also specify “fairy gender” whenever possible rather than “femininity,” as the gender markers adopted by fairies did not correspond completely to those associated with conventional womanhood; as Chauncey writes, they were more closely tied to the habits of women sex workers. See *Gay New York*, 61. When such a construction is unwieldy, I also employ “effeminate” to designate fairy gender because, while not a perfect term, its liminal positioning between “masculine” and “feminine” captures fairy gender better than other available terms.

¹⁶⁸ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 58.

robbery.¹⁶⁹

Given these consistent threats of violence, the question emerges: What made the public adoption of fairy gender something to be desired? In asking what it means for queers to desire gender, I aim to explore the affordances that gender as a social form offered to nonconforming subjects in the first half of the American twentieth century. By “gender as a social form,” I mean the embodied habitus that is socially interpreted as denoting a recognizable configuration of gender. I mean to imply neither that fairy gender was chosen nor that anyone needs a good reason to desire any particular gender form.¹⁷⁰ Rather, I acknowledge that the overt embodiment of fairy gender constitutes at least some degree of volition insofar as one chooses not to pass as gender conforming. Moreover, I mean to differentiate between having gender and desiring it, where the former denotes an ontological state and the latter implies an aspirational movement toward some ideal with the expectation that its achievement will afford pleasure along with possible other benefits. Why might one desire to embody fairy gender openly? What affordances did fairy gender provide? What kinds of pleasure, knowledge, and sociality did it facilitate, and how?

Inextricable from an investigation of a historical gender form are questions of representation. Much of what we know about fairy gender we know from literary narrative, as Chauncey’s liberal use of such sources confirms. In addition to asking what fairy gender as a social form afforded to members of that community, I ask what modernist narrative forms afforded to queer writers seeking to represent the lives of fairies. How did narrative form and

¹⁶⁹ Chauncey, 59.

¹⁷⁰ As Andrea Long Chu points out, we often desire the trappings of gender despite their enmeshments in systems of violence, discrimination, and commodity fetishism. See “On Liking Women,” *n+1* 30 (Winter 2018), <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women/>.

fairy gender influence one another? To what extent did fairy gender necessitate the invention of new narrative forms? Were radically experimental narrative forms required to capture the social radicality of fairy gender, or is the relationship between these social and narrative forms more complex?

Fortunately, we do not need to imagine what a modernist fairy novel might look like. While George Chauncey cites several texts that might be categorized as such, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's novel *The Young and Evil* is perhaps the most fascinating, formally unique, and candid narrative depiction of fairy culture.¹⁷¹ A roman à clef of Ford and Tyler's youthful time together in New York in 1930,¹⁷² *The Young and Evil* traces the quotidian happenings of a group of Greenwich Village fairies and their acquaintances. Its two central characters, the queer poets Julian and Karel, correspond to Ford and Tyler respectively. The novel details Julian's arrival in New York from New Orleans and his induction into fairy culture by Karel. Their poverty exacerbated by their status as fairies and the climate of the Great Depression, they spend their days drinking, cruising, socializing, and writing while trying to scrape together enough money for rent or inventing creative ways to avoid it. Julian and Karel find themselves entwined with Louis and Gabriel, a pair of grifters whose sexual identities are portrayed as ambiguous. Despite Karel's early warnings to Julian about the pair, Louis's persistence and masculine

¹⁷¹ As Steven Watson notes, the novel was "not the first American novel to present homosexual characters on its pages," but "it is the first American novel to take its characters' sexuality for granted." "Introduction," in *The Young and Evil*, ed. Steven Watson (New York: Gay Presses of New York, 1988), viii.

¹⁷² Ford and Tyler exchanged extensive letters before Ford sailed to New York from New Orleans; he remained in New York for half a year. After one aborted attempt at a sexual relationship, Ford and Tyler settled into a platonic friendship, and their escapades in New York became the material on which they would base *The Young and Evil*. Ford departed for Paris in 1931, where he either wrote or assembled from Tyler's letters—depending on whom you ask—the novel that would become *The Young and Evil*, with input from Djuna Barnes, his close friend, and Gertrude Stein, whose approval and patronage he craved. Unable to find an American or British publisher due to the novel's explicitly queer content, Ford and Tyler eventually settled on Jack Kahane of Obelisk Press, Paris, who published such racy novels as Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and, in 1933, *The Young and Evil*. Watson, "Introduction," xi, xvii.

attractiveness ensnare Karel himself as he falls into a tumultuous and exploitative relationship with him. The repercussions of the abusive relationship for Karel and for his friendship with Julian constitute the closest thing in the novel to an overarching plot, one which doesn't completely resolve until the novel's final sentence—and even then, not definitively. Between these depictions of violence and abuse, however, are moments of joy: parties, sexual trysts, nights out, a drag ball.

While not plotless, the narrative is driven more by episodic events than by a teleological arc, with chance encounters and misfortunes—fights, arguments, arrests—constituting most of the novel's conflict. Formally, the novel employs a pastiche of narrative modes—stream-of-consciousness ruminations, dreamlike surrealist hallucinations, manipulations of narrative time, prose-poetic renderings of dialogue—that connect the particularities of fairies' experiences to different literary forms. As I will argue, these narrative modes shift dramatically in response to characters' affective experiences, with different narrative modes mirroring gendered experiences of alienation, belonging, or intimacy.

Relatively little literary criticism has been published on the novel, although it has moved out of complete obscurity in the last twenty-five years and generated a handful of scholarly analyses. The most consistent themes in these studies are the novel's formal experimentalism and the connection of this form to its queer politics. Interest in the novel began to accumulate gradually after its republication in 1988 by Gay Presses of New York with an introduction by Steven Watson. Watson's thoroughly researched prelude to the novel makes great use of the extensive collection of Ford and Tyler's papers at the Harry Ransom Center to elucidate the details of the novel's status as roman à clef. While he has little to say in terms of the novel's form, his offhand pronouncement that its "extravagant style . . . could only have been created by

young men anxious to rebel in every arena, from sex to punctuation”¹⁷³ sets the tone for Joseph Boone’s analysis, published ten years later in *Libidinal Currents*, which is the first extended piece of criticism of the novel. Opening with this quotation from Watson, Boone extols the novel’s experimental form as perfectly suited to its radical queerness: “These characteristics of radical experimentation . . . are everywhere evident in the queer *textual* body of *The Young and Evil*, whose subversively avant-garde style and form, as well as its sexually explicit content, place it at the margins of official modernist practice, in a position comparable to that of the outcast queer fringe it brazenly represents.”¹⁷⁴ Similarly, Juan Suárez reads the novel as a paradigm of this outsider brand of queer modernism, emphasizing how the novel links modernist experimentalism with low, campy, popular forms that explicitly depict the gritty details of queer life.¹⁷⁵ Suárez and Boone agree that the novel’s experimental form and queer content place it in what Boone calls an “alternative niche” of modernism.¹⁷⁶ Others corroborate these claims about the novel’s modernist outsider status.¹⁷⁷ Sam See’s groundbreaking article, “Making Modernism New,” was the first to claim a spot for *The Young and Evil* in the modernist canon.¹⁷⁸ For See,

¹⁷³ Watson, vii.

¹⁷⁴ Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 264. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁷⁵ Juan Antonio Suárez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹⁷⁶ Boone, *Libidinal Currents*, 255.

¹⁷⁷ Rai Peterson collates the novel’s insults hurled against contemporary modernist celebrities like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein while Alexander Howard compares the “low” camp and “low” modernism of Ford and Tyler to the subtler “high” forms of these modes practiced by Virginia Woolf and others. Rai Peterson, “*The Young and Evil*: Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, E. E. Cummings’ Sassy Gay Friends,” *Spring* 21/22 (Fall 2015): 182–98; Alexander Howard, “Solid Objects and Modern Tonics, or, Who’s Afraid of the Big Camp Woolf?,” *Angelaki* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 32–47.

¹⁷⁸ Sam See, “Making Modernism New: Queer Mythology in *The Young and Evil*,” *ELH* 76, no. 4 (December 9, 2009): 1073–1105. This article is also republished in the posthumous collection of See’s work; it is this version that

The Young and Evil is definitively modernist in its ambitions; even if it does represent a queer brand of modernism, its “antirealist literary forms,” employing Eliot’s “mythical method” and Joseph Frank’s “spatial form,” are, for See, high modernism at its finest.¹⁷⁹

In this debate about the novel’s position vis-à-vis “high” modernism, what goes unexamined are the various queer social forms—or lack thereof—that critics have linked to its narrative form. Whereas most critics agree that the novel is experimental, they disagree on the implications of this. For Boone, the novel’s unconventional prose resembles the promiscuity of its characters and is meant to imply that fluid, polymorphous desires drive the novel in unpredictable ways, ultimately presenting a scathing critique of monogamy and, apparently by extension, an embrace of amorality: “The ease with which these characters discard relationships shares affinities with Robin’s promiscuity in *Nightwood*, for in both novels the denaturalizing of monogamous relationships becomes the sexual outcasts’ means of defying the normalizing pressures of the dominant order. One result of this spurning of conventional moral codes is the perceived *amorality* . . . that runs throughout this world.”¹⁸⁰ While See’s argument does not focus on amorality, he does support Boone’s claim for the novel’s promiscuous form when he reads Karel as “endorsing polyamory and promiscuity.”¹⁸¹ Suárez takes the “radical” implications of the novel’s experimentalism even further, reading it through the lens of the

I cite in subsequent notes. See *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies*, ed. Christopher Looby and Michael North (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

¹⁷⁹ See, *Queer Natures*, 197, 201. See also T. S. Eliot, “Ulysses, Order, and Myth,” *The Dial*, November 1923, 480–83; and Joseph Frank, *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

¹⁸⁰ Boone, *Libidinal Currents*, 259. Emphasis in the original. I address Robin’s and *Nightwood*’s misunderstood positions on promiscuity in Chapter 1.

¹⁸¹ See, *Queer Natures*, 206. Why See reads Karel as endorsing polyamory is unclear to me, as the letter See cites is Karel’s announcement of his temporary departure from Greenwich Village to live with Louis uptown due to his worry that Julian is encroaching upon the relationship.

antisocial thesis to argue that the novel's amorality extends to all forms of sociality it represents, thus theorizing the impossibility of relationality or community among queers: "it is precisely in the insistence on dissolution and undoing, and not in any form of coalition of marginals, that the particular queerness *and* (coextensive with it) political radicalism of *The Young and Evil* reside," Suárez argues, citing the novel's combination of high modernism and low popular forms as "emblematic of this negative moment in the text's articulation of queerness."¹⁸² See provides an opposite but tonally isomorphic reading, arguing that the novel represents queer collectivity as "foundational in the imagination but a falsehood in reality."¹⁸³ According to See, however, "the myth of a queer community is, for this novel, the precondition for imagining in art the very concept that it depicts as a fraught construction in historical reality."¹⁸⁴ In other words, while See considers queer community an "oxymoron,"¹⁸⁵ he reads Ford and Tyler's novel as an attempt to create a sustaining myth of queer community by paradoxically "defeating all expectations of stable identity, individual or communal" and then inventing community around the basis of nonidentity.¹⁸⁶ Others have been more optimistic about the social forms in which the novel is invested. Christopher Looby writes briefly but meaningfully that the novel's narrative form is structured in such a way as to invite readers into the subculture it depicts, "coerc[ing] readers

¹⁸² Suárez, *Pop Modernism*, 182.

¹⁸³ See, *Queer Natures*, 205.

¹⁸⁴ See, 197.

¹⁸⁵ In the "Statement of Scholarly Interests and Plans" prepared for his third-year review at Yale, See explains: "'queer community' and 'queer mythology' are oxymorons that attempt to contain the unity that queerness intrinsically fractures. Community and mythology both rely upon normative principles of inclusion and exclusion that, as with the 'house of difference' that Audre Lorde describes in *Zami*, queerness fractures so wide that it falls into its own fissures." Quoted in Christopher Looby and Michael North, "Introduction," in *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies*, ed. Christopher Looby and Michael North (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 6–7.

¹⁸⁶ See, *Queer Natures*, 215.

into sympathetic identification with the renegade sexual culture of the protagonists.”¹⁸⁷ In a similar vein, Michael Schmidt, while focused on the ways in which the novel uses experimental form to posit a communal way of life in opposition to the structures offered by capitalism, argues in opposition to Suárez that the novel’s “heterogeneous style” dares to imagine “a differently arranged social world” for queers.¹⁸⁸

At first blush, it appears that Ford and Tyler’s novel is suspicious of forms and traditions, both socially and narratively: the novel’s experimentalism and often surrealist prose, its depiction of stagnant and non-progressive temporalities, and its characters’ embrace of a freewheeling bohemian lifestyle all seem to point to the willful rejection of the conventional, ordered structures that forms supply. This rejection, in fact, is what the critical tradition, in all of its diversity, has celebrated in the novel. In contrast, I argue that the novel represents *a desire for gender* that reveals the ways in which fairy communities deployed gender as a stabilizing form that could provide a sense of groundedness amid a nebulous and threatening social world. In *The Young and Evil*, formal elements of fairy gender—encompassing speech, gestures, clothing, and cosmetics—are deployed by fairies to provide stability in a world that is otherwise dangerously uncertain, allowing fairies to determine who can be trusted and who is likely to take advantage.

Like Schmidt, I am interested in the material realities that the novel engages in order to modify and construct social forms, but rather than the materialism of commodity culture, I focus on the materiality of gender forms. In this sense, contrary to queer theory’s championing of fluidity and transitivity, it is stability and security with regard to gender and sexuality that are

¹⁸⁷ Christopher Looby, “The Gay Novel in the United States 1900–1950,” in *A Companion to the Modern American Novel 1900–1950*, ed. John T. Matthews (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 432.

¹⁸⁸ Michael D. Schmidt, “A Materialist Desire in *The Young and Evil*,” *Studies in American Fiction* 45, no. 2 (November 21, 2018): 215–16.

depicted as crucial to this queer moment. By contrast, looser or less defined embodiments of gender and sexuality allowed certain men to pass between queer and straight worlds, which registered with fairies as deceptive and threatening. Ford and Tyler additionally show how these gendered forms structured the relationship forms that fairies desired: because fairies' desires for masculine, straight-identifying men almost always subjected them to gendered violence, fairies were forced to imagine new forms of queer relationality through their bonds with other fairies. Through the novel's innovative form, Ford and Tyler both depict the vertiginous uncertainty of queer life for fairies and suggest that, by clinging to the subcultural forms of gender embodiment that unite them, fairies could find reprieve—albeit provisional—from the hostilities that too often targeted them.

In *The Young and Evil*, gender—as manifested on and through the body—is both the social glue that holds the fairy community together and the force that threatens its dissolution by attracting violence. The novel's heterogeneous narrative form—by turns both realist and surrealist, conventional and experimental, abstract and mimetic—is, I posit, meant to capture the interplay of the structuring forms and destructive forces that were seen to comprise fairy life. It is desire for the stabilizing properties of fairy gender as an intelligible and meaningful social form, I argue, that structures the novel—not the forces of promiscuous amorality, antirelationality, or identity dissolution championed in extant criticism. Such forces are present, but they appear as threats to the social forms on which these fairies rely for a sense of security. Men of ambiguous identity such as Louis and Gabriel threaten to dissolve relationality through their callous exploitations of fairies, but the stable identities of fairies allow them to forge complex and powerful networks of relationality and systems of knowledge in order to combat such violences.

In short, *The Young and Evil* imagines new ways of life for queers, but the aims of this

imagining are to create or bolster forms, not to smash them. “Oh it isn’t a world for scissors, for mallets; but for needle, thread and for paste,” Karel asserts (112). Karel echoes Virginia Woolf’s critique of James Joyce, whom she calls “a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows.”¹⁸⁹ With words that could apply as easily to narrative forms as social forms, Karel argues for the reparative over the destructive. He acknowledges that forms can do harm but also that the elimination of forms is an ideal that does not address the material realities of the present: to Louis’s “I am waiting for the day . . . when I can destroy all definitions,” Karel responds: “But until then, . . . they are the most that matters” (112). It is Louis’s destructive impulse toward formlessness, not Karel’s acknowledgement of the usefulness of forms, that threatens real and immediate violence to fairies in this novel. Indeed, *The Young and Evil* deploys its innovative narrative strategies in order to describe such threats and the methods employed by fairies to combat them.

The Young and Evil presents fairy life shuttling vertiginously back and forth between precarity and groundedness, alienation and community, thoroughly exploring the forces that threaten fairy life as well as the forms that steady it. In addition to their interest in stabilizing social forms, Ford and Tyler demonstrate a deep investment in narrative form, as evidenced by the novel’s frequent and not often flattering commentary on other experimental modernist writers. Consequently, the novel employs a diverse variety of formal narrative modes to represent this simultaneity of chaos and order.¹⁹⁰ Throughout this chapter, I detail the most salient of these modes to show how Ford and Tyler employ disparate narrative forms to present

¹⁸⁹ Virginia Woolf, “Character in Fiction,” in *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 52.

¹⁹⁰ See Suárez, *Pop Modernism* on the novel’s heterogeneous style.

fairies' particularly queer way of life. Four formal narrative modes are linked in the novel to different aspects of fairy experience: the narrative is (1) vernacular, direct, and most "conventional" when fairies are gathered in small, intimate groups; (2) surreal and nightmarish when characters are left alone with negative thoughts or memories; (3) polyphonic, impressionistic, joyful, seductive, and most "experimental" when fairies are gathered in large, communal groups; and (4) illegibly but delightfully idiosyncratic when displaying intimate ties between close friends.

Taken together, these various narrative forms serve to represent the stabilizing influence of queer collectivity against the threat of violence from oppressive forces and internalized shame. The novel's narrative-formal pastiche thus underscores that its characters crave stability amidst a chaotic world and find it through community. The novel literally becomes more legible, more readable, when characters are carousing together and freely expressing themselves. In turn, it lapses into a distorting surrealism when characters are alone, afraid, and doubting, with the form manifesting the content of the harsh effects of a hostile culture.¹⁹¹ If gendered and social forms are the tools that fairies employ to make meaning out of an otherwise precarious life, then disparate narrative-formal modes are Ford and Tyler's tools for dramatizing the various effects of the forces and forms that fairies experience and implement.

Recognition, Pleasure, Stability

Chief among fairies' daily concerns was determining whom to trust. As such, the ability

¹⁹¹ The main exception to this rule is the narration of the drag ball, discussed below, which contains both the novel's most experimental section and its clearest representation of a large queer community. The depiction of the ball is not, however, explicitly surrealist; rather, by taking the "found" dialogue of the ball-goers and organizing it into a rich, colorful prose poem, the novel imagines a utopia in which chaos can become an agent of beauty precisely because it is allowed to exist within the bounded and safe parameters of community.

to recognize other queers readily was of critical importance to establishing what I call a *gendered hermeneutics of trust*. By this, I mean the system of assessment that fairies and other queers deployed to interpret the trustworthiness of strangers and in which formal markers of gender played a key role. The use of makeup allowed fairies to signal instantly their identity to themselves and others. Because wearing makeup in public constituted for fairies a rejection of any attempt to pass for straight, it enabled immediate recognition, facilitating friendship and subcultural community through the establishment of mutual pleasures as well as shared precarity. Makeup rendered fairies more susceptible to targeting by police, but it also served the social purpose of making queers more readily identifiable to one another and thus easier to trust.

That makeup served as a calling card for fairies is emphasized on *The Young and Evil*'s first page, as readers are introduced to Karel through the impression that his appearance makes on other queers. Karel is in a cafeteria, a public space that commonly functioned as a social gathering place for queers in Greenwich Village,¹⁹² where he is approached by “a fairy prince and one of those mythological creatures known as Lesbians” and asked to come sit at their table.¹⁹³ The mythical elements of the *mise en scène* render the cafeteria—appropriately called the “Round Table” (11)—a utopian Arcadia outside time and, more importantly, the dominant culture.¹⁹⁴ Serving as what Michael Warner has termed a queer counterpublic, the restaurant provides a refuge from a social world dominated by straight persons and attitudes.¹⁹⁵ Such

¹⁹² See Chauncey, *Gay New York*, esp. 164–70.

¹⁹³ Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, *The Young and Evil* (New York: Gay Presses of New York, 1988), 11. Subsequent references to the novel appear parenthetically.

¹⁹⁴ For more on the importance of the mythical in this scene and the novel as a whole, see Sam See, “Making Modernism New.”

¹⁹⁵ See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002).

establishments were not exclusively queer, however, so the fact that Karel is immediately hailed by this group of strangers as a friendly face indicates the power of his makeup, which we are told he constantly wears, to communicate not only affinity with these other queers, but also immediate friendship. Introductions are not made, questions are not asked; rather, Karel is seamlessly integrated into a table full of “smiling happy faces” (11). The conversation that ensues emphasizes that it was indeed Karel’s embellished face that drew their interest:

A little girl with hair over one ear got up close and said I hope you won’t be offended but why *don’t* you dress in girls’ clothes?

The Lesbian said yes your face is so exquisite we thought you were a Lesbian in drag when we first saw you and for two long hours they insisted that he would do better for himself as a girl. (11)

While we should note the potential for this conversation to be read as an attempt to police Karel’s genderqueer presentation—he pairs traditionally masculine (if dandyish) clothes with a made-up face—into a binary gender position, I read it as a friendly affirmation of Karel’s effeminate beauty that is meant to bolster his confidence and encourage him to explore even more feminine expressions. Gender transgression emerges as a shared social value within this group, and the fact that he stays for a full “two long hours” suggests that his embodiment of fairy gender signals immediately to the lesbians his trustworthiness.

When Julian first arrives in New York to meet Karel, whom he knows only from letters, Julian is able to recognize him immediately: “He knew that this was Karel. For one thing he expected eyelashes made up with mascara” (15). Karel’s makeup—which, as he had written to Julian, he applies “achingly but unobtrusively” (16)—is for him a way of life, “aching” because it is a stable aspect of his appearance that he painstakingly maintains. One incentive for doing so, as these recognition scenes make clear, is to communicate his gender nonconformity immediately to other queers. This allows other queers to approach him without any doubt as to

his belonging and gives a strong indication of his potential trustworthiness, at least with regards to institutions like the police to which his appearance makes him equally vulnerable.

Embodying fairy gender as a social form thus facilitates the worldmaking work of creating queer counterpublics and extending queer relationality. For this queer community, stability is a valuable attribute that must be fought for and forcibly brought into the world, even if it invites discrimination and violence. In this dangerously uncertain world, gender fixity becomes a form in which queers invest, in part because it affords them the means to combat the threats that a deceptive fluidity brings. Associated with this desire for a stable form is a desire for social legibility: these fairies desire that their gender expression will communicate something meaningful to other queers (solidarity and trust) and that others' gender expressions will communicate the same to them—that is, will function as a criterion by which trustworthiness can be measured. Effeminacy, then, does not carry a purely aesthetic or identificatory or romantic function; rather, its social function is also hermeneutical and even protective insofar as it provides queers with crucial pragmatic information: who can be trusted, to whom one is making oneself vulnerable, and with whom one can associate without fear of violence or exploitation.

The Young and Evil also portrays makeup as a pleasurable rite of initiation within the New York fairy subculture. Karel takes it upon himself to perform this ritual for Julian on the occasion of the first party he hosts in New York:

Karel, as he had promised, came by three hours before the others bringing his box of beauty that included eyelash curlers, mascara, various shades of powder, lip and eyebrow pencils, blue and brown eyeshadow and tweezers for the eyebrows. [. . .]

I'll make you up to the high gods Karel said to the *high*...When he was through he regarded the result with a critical and gratified eye. Julian's rather full mouth now had lips which though less spiritual were not quite lewd. His eyes were simple sins to be examined more closely or to be looked at only from a distance. (55–56, emphasis original)

Arriving a full “three hours” ahead of the party, Karel indeed makes Julian up “to the high gods,”

with his aesthetic choices for Julian's face described as partaking of the exaggerated style that characterizes "high" drag. Julian's features are redrawn to just a shade below caricature, with his lips bordering on "lewd" and his eyes best observed "from a distance." Karel thus ensures that Julian's "coming out" into the society of New York fairies is unmistakable, as is Julian's sexual availability, as signaled by these "lewd" and "sin[ful]" features.

By introducing Julian to the basics of makeup, Karel highlights the formal aspects of fairy gender. Belonging in the fairy community requires looking the part, which includes learning to paint one's face. Julian ascertains as much and continues to practice the craft; later in the novel he is commended as having "mastered the art of makeup" (154). Karel also teaches Julian that the formal practice can be a source of pleasure. After Karel has applied his own makeup, Julian questions why he holds his lips in a particular manner, to which Karel responds, simply: "Because I think it looks adorable" (56). Not only because others think so, but because Karel himself does; the formal aspects of embodying fairy gender enable both recognition by others and self-recognition, in the sense of taking pleasure in one's own ability to manifest a self-image.

During the party that follows Karel and Julian's making up, the novel's narration maintains a realist, "conventional" form in comparison to other scenes. This formal conventionality characterizes most of the novel's scenes in which fairies are gathered together joyfully in small groups. In the novel's narration of the party, short, direct sentences with active constructions abound, with minimal narratorial commentary:

Osbert and Santiago entered during the cries of Karel who had turned to lay Frederick out for smoking a cigarette of marijuana. Frederick said that he was his own mother and please, Karel, after all.

The curtains were up and when Gabriel and Louis came in, though they had not been invited, Julian went to fix some more drinks. He came out to hear Frederick ask of Louis where are you bleeding? You must be bleeding somewhere for the groans you are

emitting.

Osbert was already well filled with wine which he drank habitually in large quantities. Santiago, after dancing at the Tavern, had been known to find Osbert on the floor of a wine cellar in need of Physical Aid (though not Financial since Osbert was to take Santiago on a European tour the next summer). Osbert interrupted the cockney story he was telling K-Y to giggle profusely at Frederick's rebuke to Louis.

Julian asked who wanted gin and who didn't want gingerale. (61)

In the scene, the reader is treated like Julian himself: as a new inductee into this community of fairies and their friends. The narrative focus shifts abruptly and often, as one's attention at a party might be redirected toward a new person entering the room, an amusing anecdote being told nearby, or a loud question being asked by the host across the room. Special attention is paid to amusing quips like Frederick's assertion that "he was his own mother and please, Karel, after all." In this instance, the dialogue is neither signaled with quotation marks nor even directly quoted; such unmarked speech blends into the scene, contributing to a thick ambiance that vibrates with stimuli. As such, the narratorial attention is free to flutter from object to object, alighting momentarily before flitting elsewhere. The effect is immersive: the reader is plunged into a vivacious scene and driven forward in narrative time at high speed. Consequently, rumination is discouraged: rather than unpack what is going on, the reader dances across a glittering surface of campy jokes and amusing interactions. This refusal of depth should not be mistaken for simplicity: plenty of inscrutable and ambiguous psychology exists elsewhere in the novel. These lighter moments of collective revelry serve to cover over the haunting anxieties that creep out once the party is over. As such, these moments serve a function isomorphic with that of the makeup Karel painstakingly applies to Julian's face before the event. Covering up the blemishes and wrinkles written into the skin, cosmetics direct attention to the fleeting moment, to the beauty that exists in the here and now, acknowledging but not lingering on what lies beneath. Direct narration of group interactions highlights the joy that is to be found in the collective and

the momentary.

The emphasis in such scenes is on situational immediacy and thus eschews “difficult” formal experimentalism: these moments are characterized by outward-facing, dialogue-driven narration in which solipsistic psychological rumination is significantly absent. Whereas modernists such as Virginia Woolf represent experimentally the excessive chatter that takes place in the mind as a conversation is presently happening—recall Clarissa Dalloway’s pages-long detours from her conversations with Peter Walsh, which innovatively slow down narrative time almost to a pause as she relives entire scenes from her past¹⁹⁶—Ford and Tyler represent conversations among queer friends as necessitating an immediacy in time, in part because of the quickness of wit required to maintain campy banter. This performative aspect of group interactions takes on an almost meditative presentness, during which time is often accelerated. Such narrative moments welcome readers in, inviting us to laugh along. Indicating psychological ease both inside and outside the diegesis, they enact the comfort and familiarity of a gathering of friends, thereby soldering positive queer affect to a non-experimental narrative form.

Elsewhere in the novel, Ford and Tyler use such group settings to stage amusing and catty commentaries on contemporary writers and literature. Just as the narration of the party maintains a focus on immediacy, the narration of these discussions is limited to reported and quoted speech—primarily taking the form of flip pronouncements—and minimal descriptions of scenic action. As such, emphasis remains on the moment, highlighting the level of attention and quickness that is required to sustain the witty banter that characterizes such discussions:

Karel had been reading Cummings’ play which he had seen at the Provincetown theater. He took the book from one of the suitcases. The most important event in American literary history of the last decade he said is the fact that *Him* was produced a few hundred yards from Washington Arch, New York City.

¹⁹⁶ See Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego: Harcourt, 2005), esp. 39–47.

Louis closed his notebook and said Cummings is the only comic poet America has ever had. He's made underdone meat seem tender.

Julian was making coffee behind the partition. America doesn't know how to be comic he called; it knows only how to be Freudian. (111)

The tone here is playful and witty, driven by amusing dialogue that emphasizes the ludic potential of the momentary. Camp as a mode of mock seriousness predominates as self-conscious hyperbole (“The most important event in American literary history of the last decade”), quip (“He's made underdone meat seem tender”), and aphorism (“America doesn't know how to be comic”) take the place of more conventional literary criticism.¹⁹⁷ Julian's observation that America reads for Freudian depth rather than comic surface provides a cautionary metacommentary on the scene and the novel as a whole, dissuading readers from confusing seriousness with depth. Like the conversation itself, the narration glides easily across this slick surface, pulling the reader along on a fanciful detour from the threatening straight world lying just outside these queer gatherings. Such moments of whimsy and playfulness do not form the dramatic centerpieces of the novel, but they punctuate its darker moments with the transient pleasure that accompanies the gathering of friends. By defaulting to a direct, dialogue-driven narrative mode in these instances, Ford and Tyler emphasize the restorative function of such interactions in the lives of fairies. They also highlight the usefulness and desirability of conventional narrative forms for depicting queer pleasure.

Communal Pleasures

Fairies' legible gender presentation simultaneously renders them precarious and facilitates their survival by enabling them to recognize trustworthy friends, establish close and

¹⁹⁷ For a discussion of Ford and Tyler's relation to E. E. Cummings, see Peterson, “*The Young and Evil*: Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, E. E. Cummings' Sassy Gay Friends.”

protective bonds with those friends, and come together in solidarity. In addition to these modes of survival, fairy gender provides an occasion for pleasure and revelry in the form of community gatherings. Chief among these is the drag ball.¹⁹⁸ At such an event, the rich and thriving community that is the New York fairy subculture is on full display, and fairies are given the opportunity to feel like a part of something larger, to experience the pleasures of participating in subcultural community and queer worldmaking. Furthermore, admission to the in-group is relatively straightforward, as anyone who consents to leave the house in drag or makeup is instantly recognizable to other fairies as belonging. Paradoxically, their mutual precarity fosters an increased sense of shared experience and unity. *The Young and Evil* portrays community events like the drag ball as sources of immense pleasure, the kind that is only possible in those rare spaces in which everyone is trusted.¹⁹⁹

The novel's first descriptions of the ball are marked by wonder and awe, likening the gathering to a religious experience that arranges its attendees into a heterogeneous but unified congregation. Shocked at first by the scene of so many queer people in one space, Julian and his friend Frederick soon grow accustomed to the ball's splendor. The narrator's descriptions emphasize the sublime surroundings and sense of community: "They had to wind up a long gold-banistered staircase above which a terrible racket was taking serene form" (151–52). A "terrible racket taking serene form" is perhaps a perfect description of a ball's transformation of abjection

¹⁹⁸ For a discussion of the drag ball as a space of collective identity, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 291–99.

¹⁹⁹ As Heather Love reminds us, we should be wary about romanticizing the queer past in an attempt to resolve its traumas. I do not mean to suggest that balls and other occasions of queer celebration undo or heal the daily traumas that formed the foundation of fairy life. Rather, I see these instances as rare and utopian imaginings of a differently arranged world. The limitations of time and space that confine such occasions for free expression underscore the deficiencies of society outside the ball and mark such occasions as a necessary oasis within an otherwise hostile world. Still, the pleasure, freedom, and belonging that such gatherings engender, albeit in measured doses, facilitates queer survival. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

into a glittering, glamorous display. The image applies equally well to queer life writ large: what seems like formless “racket” from a distance is revealed upon closer inspection to be a highly structured set of social forms. The sense of many voices resolving into “serene form” further communicates the idea that the diverse crowd, brought together by social marginalization and proximity to nonstandard gender forms, is joined so as to create something whole and unified. This unity is underscored by the words: “The ball was too large to be rushed at without being swallowed” (152). The assembly of ball-goers seems to merge into a singular unit, a mass teeming with vibrant queer life, such that newcomers are instantly incorporated, forming a collectivity of many.

Taking place in Harlem, the ball is also comprised of a racially mixed community, implying that queerness here at least partially creates coalition across the color line: with everyone “swallowed” up by the unifying force of the ball, they are joined in a singular multiracial community where shared vulnerabilities and desires trump racial distinctions.²⁰⁰ This sense of incorporation, of creating a collective body in which individuals are indistinguishable, is depicted as an unfamiliar—even at first uncomfortable—feeling for Julian and Frederick: to lose oneself in a collective identity threatens the ego and its boundaries.²⁰¹ Furthermore, the nature of the gathering necessitates that everyone in the space be afforded a certain trustworthiness: after

²⁰⁰ This notion of the coalitional potential of queer communality is influenced by Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (May 1997): 437–65. On the Harlem drag balls, see Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989), 318–31. It is also important to note that the novel’s position on racial unity is contradictory: elsewhere, instances of casual racism (though not by main characters) are depicted without much commentary.

²⁰¹ This idea is central to theory of queer negativity. See Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). On the orgiastic imbrication of the sexual and the social, see Michel Maffesoli, *The Shadow of Dionysus: A Contribution to the Sociology of the Orgy*, trans. Cindy Linse and Mary Kristina Palmquist (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

all, they are all vulnerable to arrest for merely attending. As Julian and Frederick adjust to the space, their perceptions are colored with a sense of awe: “The dancefloor was a scene whose celestial flavor and cerulean coloring no angelic painter or nectarish poet has ever conceived” (152). As the narration lapses into knowing camp with a profusion of tawdry adjectives to match the lavish ball-wear, their tentativeness gives way to reverence for a profoundly beautiful object absent from traditional artistic forms. Frederick comments: “It’s lit up like high mass,” and the ball becomes a hidden source of divine beauty and grandiosity that can summon the power of ritual to unify a diverse gathering of people through a shared countercultural form.

Settling in, Julian and Frederick locate a group of acquaintances. As inexperienced newcomers, they are subjected to good-natured ribbing for not dressing in elaborate drag. One turns to Julian and remarks: “Mary what you look like in that outfit”; another says to Frederick: “you look like something Lindbergh dropped on the way across. Dry yourself Bella!” (153).²⁰² While Julian and Frederick’s comparatively shabby outfits give away that they are not yet ensconced in the social forms that structure the ball, their attempts to fit in are acknowledged: Tony calls Julian “Mary” and “her” while Vincent names Frederick “Bella,” indicating their acceptance into the in-group of queens.²⁰³ Despite their imperfect embodiment of the social forms that the ball demands, Julian and Frederick are deemed unequivocally part of the community, indicating the power of the ball to extend belonging and trust.

Observing the mass of fairies and drag queens, Julian comments to his friend K-Y: “They all ought to be in a scrap-book Would blood, paste and print make them stick together?” She responds: “No There is no holding people back. It will go on until it stops and then

²⁰² This quip alludes to aviator Charles Lindbergh, who completed the first solo transatlantic flight in 1927.

²⁰³ On some fairies’ use of she/her pronouns and women’s names, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, esp. 56–58.

there will be something else” (155). Her answer opposes Julian’s impulse to pin down the event, emphasizing instead the value of the momentary experience over the urge to represent it in some artistic form. For the most part, the narration of the ball follows K-Y’s assertion, utilizing the realist narrative forms that characterize most queer gatherings in the novel, which privilege a sense of immediacy over attempts at mimetic capture. But just after K-Y denies that the ball could be represented in all its complexity, the narration makes a dramatic and sustained shift into one of its most experimental sections. This section, which goes on for a full ten pages, tries to recreate the din of voices that Julian hears as he observes the ball-goers. Its being put down here with “paste and print” literally attempts to transmute a “terrible racket” into “serene form” (152).

Many of the novel’s readers have rightly placed great emphasis on this lengthy digression which represents the novel’s most explicitly experimental section.²⁰⁴ What I wish to emphasize, though, is how this sizable section of the novel depicts fairy community as vibrant and joyful as well as complex yet unified. It is the novel’s most experimental yet most mimetic moment: whereas elsewhere experimental form signifies solitary and nightmarish interiority, here it represents the literal experience of hearing a group of fairies chattering away in a crowded ballroom. As such, it blurs the line between individual and community, its form both polyvocal and univocal: distinct voices are present, but a shared language, tone, and camp sensibility bind the speakers together. Furthermore, it demonstrates the shared affect of open, uncensored, communal, raucous joy that unites the ball-goers, inviting the sympathetic reader to join the party.²⁰⁵

This singular form of this section employs something like M. M. Bakhtin’s notion of

²⁰⁴ See, for instance, Looby, “The Gay Novel in the United States 1900–1950,” and Suárez, *Pop Modernism*.

²⁰⁵ For a reading of the novel’s invitations to readers, see Looby, “The Gay Novel in the United States 1900–1950.”

heteroglossia,²⁰⁶ but rather than keeping individual voices distinct, they meld into something unified: a univocality of many. The section opens with the following lines:

shut your hole watching
them for a moment but when she opened her upstairs cunt and started to belch the
greetings of the season I retired in a flurry her boyfriend with the imperfect lacework in
the front of his mouth
was a thunderclap could indeed would have been
gentler Fairydale Bedagrace a prize bull in the 2000 pound class and his proud
owner is Harry A.
Koch (155)

This section is one of the novel's most legibly queer insofar as it employs a sustained style of speech that, to an insider, is instantly recognizable as belonging to the fairy community. But it is simultaneously inscrutable, actively frustrating readerly attempts to make meaning of the words that are arranged haphazardly into something like found poetry. Incomplete phrases without discernible beginnings or endings, patternless line breaks and enjambments, a lack of punctuation and capitalization, and the refusal to disentangle overlapping speakers all thwart intelligibility. Readers who try to parse the dialogue will find themselves inevitably frustrated: is "shut your hole watching / them for a moment" a complete thought with a few words colloquially omitted or multiple voices interrupting one another? A few phrases jump out as partially complete, like "a thunderclap could indeed would have been / gentler," but with no referent they fail to signify narratively, gesturing instead toward a story that will remain incomplete. Because the text does not differentiate among speakers or represent any story in full, the ball-goers are blended into a singular yet heterogeneous voice. This extended passage becomes the voice of a community wherein individuals are neither distinguishable nor effaced.

²⁰⁶ Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as "a multiplicity of social voices" that are "always more or less dialogized" in novels. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 263.

As such, the ball is the novel's clearest articulation of a unified queer culture, complete with shared language, interests, desires, and passions.²⁰⁷ While this culture is certainly glimpsed elsewhere in the novel, it is here presented as a wide-reaching, thriving, and robust collectivity.

Besides serving as a compilation of queer argot—terms like “trade” (157), “queer” (159), “tea-room” (160), “69” (162), “bugger,” and “fairy” (163) abound—the open and candid talk shows a queer community that can utilize the safety of the ball to speak openly in a semi-public realm about sex itself. This sex-talk is not only free, it is *tempting*: only able to overhear snippets of conversation, the reader is drawn in by narrative fragments only to be disappointed by their incompleteness:

he held my arm my dear as we walked back after I had petrified four or five males who
walked into the tea-room two standing before the urinal dying to and yet so embarrassed
waiting for my permission to pull their things out and another said standing still on
entering my leg being strung across the wash
basin blind as a bat screaming for the
daylight excuse me for putting this bromide in pink curlpapers take them off in
the
morning (160)

The tantalizing story about sex in a tea-room intrigues the reader with its details but is interrupted before any apparent bodily contact or climax is reached. Such scraps of narrative entice the reader to invest energy in an overheard story as it starts to get fleshed out, but the ability to follow the action is jolted by an interrupting, unrelated voice. The result is a provocative form of narrative edging that leaves the reader always wanting more and never quite getting to the finish. In this way, the reader's desire to lean in, to become one with this community, is stoked much as it might be by a coquettish beloved. This experimental narrative form thus does much more than mimic the aural qualities of a ballroom full of tittering fairies—it

²⁰⁷ For a reading of the vernacular “low” camp of this section, see Suárez, *Pop Modernism*.

beckons the intrigued reader to become part of the in-group, learn its language, and join in.

Threatening Ambiguities

Whereas these moments showcase the pleasures associated with large queer gatherings, *The Young and Evil* also shows that in both friendships and romantic relationships, fairies were required to judge carefully who could be trusted. In general, the shared position of mutual precarity meant that others living openly as queer or gender-nonconforming were the most easily trusted. These are contrasted in the novel with difficult-to-classify men who befriended or pursued sexual relationships with fairies in order to exploit them financially. As such, the novel's fairies are wary of men whose gender presentation does not immediately signify a legible sexual type. A normative masculine gender form, that is, could correspond to a straight man who has sex with women, a straight-identifying man who has sex with women and effeminate queer men (i.e., "trade"²⁰⁸), a non-queer-identifying man who preferred to have sex with men but always in the insertive role (i.e., a "wolf"²⁰⁹), or a homosexual man who passed for straight (i.e., a "queer"²¹⁰). As Chauncey writes, wolves, who were often predatory, "occupied an ambiguous position in the sexual culture"; as such, it was both difficult and necessary for fairies to identify potentially untrustworthy wolves.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ According to Chauncey, "the term *trade* originally referred to the customer of a fairy prostitute . . . ; by the 1910s, it referred to any 'straight' man who responded to a gay man's advances." *Gay New York*, 70.

²⁰⁹ Wolves "abided by the conventions of masculinity and yet exhibited a decided preference for male sexual partners." Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 87.

²¹⁰ "Most men who were more involved in [the straight middle-class] world sought to pass in it by adopting the style of queers, who typically displayed their homosexuality only in more private settings or by using signals that were less easily recognized by outsiders than those of the fairy." Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 102.

²¹¹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 87. Chauncey also quotes a letter from Tyler insinuating that he avoids sexual advances by wolves on principle; see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 58.

Thus the necessity for fairies' hermeneutics of trust: those whose masculine gender embodiment allowed them to live or pass as straight men inherently held power over fairies, because normative systems and structures would work for them in ways that they wouldn't for fairies. *The Young and Evil* demonstrates that, for such individuals, the trust of fairies was often hard-won. While contemporary queer theory is quick to champion gender transitivity as inherently good for queers, gender *intransitivity* actually facilitated fairies' hermeneutics of trust. Stable, identifiable markers of fairy gender signaled trustworthiness; it was those with malleable identities—in this case, individuals who lived as straight men but could pass as covert queer or queer-friendly men—who were the most threatening, as they could abuse fairies' trust in order to take advantage. As such, the promise of romance could lead to the failure of fairies' hermeneutical efforts. As very few feasible romantic options existed for fairies, systems for establishing trust could be undermined by the decision to make exceptions for a desired object. *The Young and Evil* illustrates how desire could short-circuit the need for caution, leaving fairies vulnerable to exploitation.

In the novel, Karel and Julian reluctantly accept the friendly advances of Louis and Gabriel, a pair of grifters who also claim to be poets. Karel even falls for Louis despite his own firm warning to Julian about the duo: “do not adopt them. I don't trust them. They are not to be tolerated. Remember, *do not*. They are magnificent in the abstract but in the concrete dangerous” (31–32). This assertion comes close on the heels of Julian's first introduction to the pair, which emphasizes both their untrustworthiness and the masculine gender forms they replicate. The narration of their respective appearances lends the reader the eyes of Julian, who, in sizing them up, delicately notes what is not quite queer about them. The narrator, focalized through Julian, describes Gabriel: “Gabriel was an Italian, born in New York. . . . He had black eyebrows that

almost met in the center. His eyes were remote but his smile exhibited friendliness” (30). Gabriel’s masculinity is immediately communicated by the state of his eyebrows, the fullness of which contrasts with the carefully plucked brows of nearly all the novel’s fairies. Karel’s own perfect brows are one of the first things Julian notices about him upon their initial meeting: “Karel had written that he used makeup achingly but unobtrusively. His eyebrows though Julian thought might cause an Italian laborer to turn completely around” (16). Just as Julian’s comment about Karel marks the distinction between fairies and trade, he pays special attention to Gabriel’s Italianness; “born in New York” and thus likely a second-generation immigrant, he fits the precise type of the “Italian laborer” that he expects Karel’s effeminate appearance would attract. Combined with his ungroomed brows that mark an unambiguously masculine appearance, these qualities communicate to Julian that Gabriel is unlikely to identify as queer, although he may occasionally play the insertive role in sex with queer men.²¹²

Moreover, there is a tension between Gabriel’s “remote” eyes and his smile, which “exhibited friendliness,” the “exhibit” suggesting that he is donning the appearance of geniality purposefully rather than genuinely. As Gabriel’s masculine appearance casts doubt on his trustworthiness, Julian carries his suspicions into his analysis of Gabriel’s facial expression. Likewise, Louis is described as having “a deliberately soft voice” (30), implying that Julian perceives Louis’s vocal tone as imitating an affected, effeminate style of speech, perhaps masking his usual timbre in order to endear these fairies to him by passing as queer. Karel suggests as much after his warning to Julian that they are not to be trusted: “They are always

²¹² See Chauncey: “In the dominant turn-of-the-century cultural system governing the interpretation of homosexual behavior, especially in working-class milieus, one had a *gender* identity rather than a *sexual* identity or even a “sexuality”; one’s sexual behavior was thought to be necessarily determined by one’s gender identity.” *Gay New York*, 48.

acting and not always scientific” (32), implying that their attempts to communicate their trustworthiness to fairies might easily be seen through. Already suspicious of them, Karel sidesteps the duo’s thinly veiled attempt to shake them down:

It’s too fucking cold to be running around trying to raise fifty dollars Gabriel said.
For what? Karel asked.
For an abortion Gabriel said.
Karel said how strange. (31)

Instead of having the intended effect of inducing pity, Gabriel’s ostensibly casual plea for money is brushed off by Karel, whose “how strange” serves both to ignore the implied request and to mark Gabriel’s unlikely story about the abortion as a specifically heterosexual problem that belies the pair’s pretenses to queer camaraderie. As Julian and Karel’s efforts to determine Louis and Gabriel’s trustworthiness demonstrate, the ambiguity of masculine gender forms—that is, the difficulty of differentiating straight men from trade from wolves from queer men—rendered fairies’ gendered hermeneutics of trust a crucial tool for queer urban survival.

Later, arriving uninvited at Julian’s apartment, Gabriel and Louis attempt further to manipulate Julian and Karel through questionable appeals to mutual precarity. Gabriel attempts to bond with Julian and Karel by recounting his own experience with homophobic violence:

You’ve heard the expression to have the shit scared out of you. Such a thing was demonstrated to me to be based on truth... About dawn I was walking along Fourth Street when a car of four gangsters who had come out of the coffee pot on Fourth and Sixth drove toward me. They saw me and called out hey faggot! as they passed by. I kept walking but when I heard them turn the car around I started to run. They sped up and were even with me when I ran inside a building I knew and locked myself in the toilet in the back of the hall. I was just in time for both the locking of the door and the toilet... I suppose I would have been raped by those bastards. (45–46, ellipses original)

If true, Gabriel’s story does imply his vulnerability to the same kinds of assaults that fairies faced on a daily basis. But his telling of the incident, apropos of nothing, also implies a calculated ploy to convince Julian and Karel that he is a fellow outcast and worthy of their pity. Karel seems to

communicate this sardonically in his melodramatic response: “lay[ing] down on the couch” in a mock swoon, Karel exclaims: “My God Gabriel think of me! Oh, the fiends!” (46). Gabriel’s assumption that such an encounter represents a singular act of violence rather than a commonplace occurrence for queers undermines his attempt to seem relatable. Moreover, even in his attempt to find common ground, Gabriel cannot quash the compulsion to reassert his masculine privilege: “They were probably drunk or I don’t see how they mistook *me*” (46, emphasis in original). Julian seizes upon this opportunity to confirm Gabriel’s straight appearance, emphasizing his distance from queerness even as Gabriel has just sought to assert his proximity: “Yes you do have a face like a truck-driver” (46).

Despite his misgivings, Karel allows himself to be seduced into an ongoing relationship with Louis. Although he knows that it will replicate an exploitative gendered hierarchy and fears that Louis will prove to be a wolf, Karel holds out hope that Louis might come to identify as queer—and thus consent to a long-term, exclusive relationship with Karel. When Karel realizes that he is enraptured with Louis, he reconciles himself to the fact that Louis will take financial advantage of him: “Karel was willing he should profit, anyway at first, for that was the only way it could be done” (50). Karel knows that Louis expects something in return for sex while remaining optimistic that Louis will realize his queerness and remain with him in a closed, mutual relationship.

Their relationship begins with Louis moving in with Karel and relying on him for money. As Karel spends more time with Louis, he fancies that he can see “Louis turning queer so beautifully gradually and beautifully like a chameleon like a chameleon beautifully and gradually turning” (124). Karel’s repetition of this hope implies his belief that that Louis might assimilate to queerness if Karel wishes for it hard enough. It is also a fantasy, however, that Louis actively

sustains. Just as Gabriel had tried to insinuate himself into queer society by claiming his own victimization by homophobia, Louis has submitted to being integrated into queer life by serving as an accessory to Karel. Louis does not shy away from being seen in public with Karel; it is during a symposium populated by queer artists that Karel, seeing Louis among a mass gathering of fairies, wonders if he sees “Louis turning queer.” Louis frequently goes out of his way to stoke Karel’s hopes; after the symposium, as the group is considering the art on display, Louis flirtatiously interjects: “You guys ought to start taking pictures . . . Photograph each other. Julian take a photograph of Frederick and Gabriel like this—” before shoving the two into a position that makes Frederick uncomfortable enough to dodge Louis’s arranging grasp (125). Such suggestive and playful gestures from Louis seem calculated to be (mis)read as queer flirtation and belonging. While Frederick’s discomfort signals that Louis’s queer affectations are neither welcome nor convincing, they seem sufficient to perpetuate Karel’s hopes for Louis’s ongoing chameleonic change.

Ultimately, Karel’s hopes that Louis would turn queer are dashed. When Karel says “you know I’ve been trying to keep you,” Louis scoffs at the notion:

What gave you the idea that I was queer?
Oh—so you’re not. I suspected that.
Louis smiled broadly and reached out.
Karel didn’t take the embrace but said don’t.
You know you like me to do it. Don’t you?
Karel shrugged. Of course. Under the proper circumstances.
You guys aren’t realists. (144)

Although Karel has “suspected” all along that Louis was not in fact “queer,” he chose to trust him anyway, hoping for an exclusive bond of mutual respect and physical passion that proves to be a self-consciously idealistic fantasy. However, we must also account for Louis’s active role in sustaining this fantasy, knowing that Karel had such hopes and never explicitly denying his

queerness until Karel brings up the future. Recoiling from Louis's touch, Karel insists that the "circumstances" of the relationship are fundamentally altered by Louis's refusal to be interpellated as queer. Without Louis "turning queer," Karel realizes, the ideal relationship he imagines can never take shape; he will always just be the fairy Louis is fucking. Louis intuits the source of Karel's changed attitude, asserting that fairies "aren't realists" because they can't accept their own second-class status or the unwillingness of "straight" men to give up their privileges in exchange for the precarities of queer life. Karel admits that his love for Louis was based on the sustaining fantasy that Louis could turn queer:

Whatever value you give certain things, Louis, doesn't affect their existence.
What do you mean doesn't affect their existence?
I mean that you're destroying an illusion.
Louis was serious. Destroying an illusion? Yes, I am. But you ought to be above that. You're not like these other homos—you're intelligent.
That makes no difference. (145)

Karel owns up to the fantastical nature of his desires, the sustaining "illusion" of a mutual queer relationship that he entertained, insisting that the illusion had "value" for him even if it didn't for Louis. As with the characters of *Nightwood*,²¹³ Karel makes the conscious choice to build up meaningful illusions despite knowing better, turning to "needle, thread and . . . paste" while knowing that the product of such efforts will necessarily be patchwork and provisional (85). Taking the opportunity to reassert his unaltered prejudices against "homos," Louis insists that Karel is too "intelligent" for illusions, and therefore an exception to the class of abjected "homos"—to which Karel responds by averring that intelligence "makes no difference." Insisting on the necessity of illusions for imagining a better life, Karel had allowed himself to imagine that Louis was "turning queer," ignoring that Louis was *passing* for queer in order to manipulate

²¹³ Discussed in Chapter 1 of this project

Karel by sustaining his idealistic hopes. With Louis's overt admission that he is not and will never call himself queer, Karel recognizes that his hope for this relationship was misplaced, that his suspension of distrust has resulted only in the same old cycle of exploitation.

In the argument that follows Louis's disavowal of queerness, Louis actively weaponizes gender, dismissing Karel's concerns as feminine caprices. Karel reveals that he knows something about what Louis has been saying behind his back: "What made you tell Gabriel and those girls that I was whoring for you?" Karel asks (146). The significance of Louis's statement is that it performs a disaggregation of Louis from the fairies with whom he interacts, fucks, and forms relationships. By (mis)representing his relationship with Karel as the relationship between a pimp and a whore, Louis not only reframes his romantic tryst with Karel so these women will not think him queer; he also asserts his masculine dominance such that Louis's financial reliance on Karel might be (mis)read as an employer/employee relationship, thereby concealing the masculine deficiency that would characterize Louis's economic dependence on a fairy. In response to Karel asking him to account for the hurt this caused, Louis simply responds, "I should have remembered you're sentimental" (146).²¹⁴ It is evident that Louis's treatment of Karel stems from Louis's deeply rooted misogyny: he tells Karel that he only said those things "to make an impression on the women" and that Karel shouldn't pay them any mind, dismissing the women with a misogynistic slur (146). It is difficult to tell from Louis's words where fairies and women respectively lie on his hierarchy of gendered value. In one moment, the importance of "impress[ing]" the women takes precedence over doing justice to Karel. But when speaking to Karel, Louis is happy to reduce these women to nothing more than a misogynistic epithet.

²¹⁴ On sentimentality and/as effeminacy, see Robyn R. Warhol, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003).

Karel later returns to Louis after repeated entreaties. When Louis's cruelty causes Karel to cry, Louis sneers: "So you're being a woman. I'm not interested in your tears" (212). Rather than admit wrongdoing or acknowledge Karel's pain, Louis rehearses the masculinist deferral of responsibility onto the injured party for having the audacity to feel.²¹⁵ Fairies, like contemporary gay men, are portrayed as being both attacked with the misogyny that devalues feminine feelings and denied the very right to have those feelings. This is the case for Karel, and Louis knows that the promise of love and use of guilt can thus be wielded against him. Entreating Karel for money, Louis demands, "If you loved me you'd be willing to leave Julian, you'd see that I didn't starve... You're a harlot!" (214, ellipsis in original). With this, Louis plays on Karel's desire for a closed relationship, displacing the failures in their romance onto Karel's supposedly promiscuous femininity. With this, Louis portrays himself as a victim in an attempt to control Karel, both financially and with regard to his other relationships. Wielding the misogynistic discourse of whoredom against Karel while claiming victimization and financial need, Louis acrobatically manages to both subordinate Karel as a lowly "harlot" and claim that Karel owes him love, monetary support, and exclusivity.

Lest we believe that this trick is too tired to work, Karel readily responds with "Louis, I tell you I'm going to help you" before submitting to Louis's attempts to undress him; what appears to be an erotic disrobing is actually an attempt to steal his suit (214). This, significantly, is where the novel ends: Karel is splayed out on the bed with his suit removed while Louis

²¹⁵ Louis here deploys what D. A. Miller describes as "the double bind of that femininity to which our culture on the one hand obsessively remands [homosexuality] (for definition, understanding, representation) but on the other ruthlessly prevents it from laying the slightest legitimate claim, even in the concessive form of a 'woman's prerogative.'" Miller further illustrates this example by describing the aftermath of an incident in which a man in a restaurant spills a drink in his lap: "When I failed to show adequate gratitude for his apology, he said to his dinner companion, another man: 'She'll get over it.' My 'gay rage': not that I had been feminized, but that *even so*, I was not entitled to a woman's concern for her clothes." *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 10, 11. Emphasis original.

begins “kissing him” until suddenly he feels “the bite” and screams in pain (215). To my eye, it is obvious that Louis begins to perform fellatio—thus teasing Karel with what he so badly wants: for Louis to be queer and express mutual desire for Karel²¹⁶—before biting his penis, perhaps even biting it off. Critics, however, consistently insist that Louis bites Karel on the neck, a reading that is neither invited by the text nor commensurate with the *mise en scène*. I submit the novel’s full final paragraph for consideration: “Karel’s lips pouted and quivered. He did not resist having his topcoat taken off, then his jacket, then his vest and, lastly, falling over on the bed, his trousers. Louis leaned over and Karel saw him kissing him before he felt the bite. Then Karel screamed” (215). Given that Karel is lying prone while Louis “lean[s] over” to kiss him in a manner that is visible to Karel before issuing a scream-inducing bite climactic enough to end the novel, I am inclined to believe that the myth of the neck-bite has passed unquestioned from critic to critic despite the much more logical and satisfying likelihood of a cock-bite.²¹⁷ Literally eaten up by the big bad wolf,²¹⁸ Karel is consumed by his willingness to suspend distrust for the hope of love.

Sisterhood as Relational Form

After first ending things with Louis, Karel reflects on the ways Louis has exploited him, temporarily acknowledging the need to orient himself toward different types of love. He resolves

²¹⁶ Cf. Louis, speaking to Karel: “you think I’m not thinking about *your* symbol [penis]. What gave you the idea that I was queer?” (144).

²¹⁷ Such a reading seems further warranted by Julian’s comment that America “doesn’t know how to be comic . . . ; it knows only how to be Freudian” (111). What could be a better sendup of Freud than to end with a literal castration?

²¹⁸ Cf. the novel’s opening line—“Well said the wolf to Little Red Riding Hood” (11)—and “wolf” as a term for men who prey on fairies.

to guard his heart ever more fiercely from those who wish to do harm: “Karel must squeeze his own heart into another shape, it had attracted wolves and burglars or for what had Louis come?” Karel regrets the trust he placed in Louis, despite knowing better. Lamenting that he allowed his heart to take the wrong “shape” and expressing a need to “squeeze” it into another, Karel acknowledges that the form of relationship he wants—a mutual romance—is perhaps unattainable, that chasing it leaves him too vulnerable to exploitation by “wolves and burglars” like Louis. This reflection indicates the necessity for fairies of steeling oneself against untrustworthy types and pressing the heart into “another shape”; that is, seeking out different forms of love. But it also suggests the extent to which Karel has internalized the blame that Louis meant to heap on him: rather than blame the individuals who would take advantage or even the social forms that enable power disparities, Karel assumes the problem is one of his own orientation, his turning toward romantic objects who will always end up harming him.²¹⁹

In the next breath, though, Karel literally “turn[s] to Julian,” as if seeing in him for the first time the possibility of a love between fairies that suggests the potential for a redemptive alternative to his exploitation by Louis:

He turned to Julian, crested with a sunlit comb. The sunlight hit Julian no matter where he was standing, and if he moved from the dark it was with a hello of closed lips. His lips were seen first and then the sunlight and then Julian. Julian had come and been and strangely he had ignored him, then had thought of him with pleasure. He could still not understand Julian’s love for him as he did not know from what it derived, where it was or when it would come, as it did sometimes, from nearer the sky than the earth. (193–94)

Julian and his love are described with a somewhat otherworldly awe from Karel’s perspective.

²¹⁹ I take this definition of orientation as “turning toward” from Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

Julian is “crested with a sunlit comb,” likening him to paintings of Apollo.²²⁰ He is bathed in sunlight “no matter where” he stands, as if he radiates warmth and light. His lips are prominent in this description, suggesting a sensuous and desirable visage. Karel thinks on the love that Julian has expressed toward him, a “mental love” that is not sexual but not quite aromantic (72). Karel’s lack of understanding indicates that he does not have a readily accessible schema for interpreting that kind of love, but he still looks upon it with curiosity and “pleasure.” Julian’s love seems to come “from nearer the sky than the earth,” highlighting something divine about it—a type of love that is not based on subjection and hierarchy, but transparency and mutual understanding. It is furthermore their shared gender position that both enables such a love and precludes its manifestation as romance: the love comes from a place of complete understanding and trust that the novel depicts as being only possible between fairies, but gender similitude prevents their sexual compatibility. *The Young and Evil* presents this bond, unlike Karel’s fraught “earth[ly]” affair with Louis, as stable and unconditional.

In this sense, the fairies’ shared gender form also enables a particular form of relationality: sisterhood.²²¹ This is shown to be characterized by the deep understanding and care that comes from the experience of inhabiting fairy gender as a shared social form. Coming home to find Karel distraught after ending his relationship, Julian asks where Louis is, to which Karel responds: “Love? . . . Horror! Has that word escaped my lips again?” (170); he reprises this denunciation shortly after: “What could be bitterer than love or stink worse on a cold day” (172). Julian, however, tempers Karel’s distress by summoning a campy quip and offering physical

²²⁰ See, for example, Gustave Moreau, *The Chariot of Apollo, or Phoebus Apollo*, c. 1880, oil on canvas, 21 7/8 × 17 1/2” (55.5 × 44.5 cm), Jack Kilgore & Co., New York, https://www.kilgoregallery.com/content/feature/9/image_standalone19/

²²¹ Chauncey remarks on the “sense of kinship such men felt toward one another, which they expressed by calling themselves ‘sisters.’” *Gay New York*, 43.

comfort. To Karel's question of what could stink worse than love, Julian replies with the name of a mutual friend: "Mrs. Dodge of course Let me get in with you" (173). Julian reaches out to console Karel both verbally and physically, extending the comfort of a joke while crawling into bed with him. Karel is immediately reinvigorated, his "speech [coming] to life" as he resumes his usual glib demeanor (173). As the conversation drifts back to love, Julian simply and directly confesses his feelings for Karel with the words "I love you" (174). Karel at first responds skeptically but reveals some definitional inconsistencies at the heart of "love":

You don't know what love is said Karel turning his cheek over. You've never wanted me so that every line of me made you ache.
What does my love mean then?
It may be some minor pathology. Whether it is or not I love it.
You love my love for you.
Yes. It is a little curious and a little strange. Believe that I am perfectly truthful now.
But isn't love want?
But what want? What form is this want? Is it affection or something mystic?
Where is the line between the strange and the common?
Perhaps love is loneliness Julian said. Simple, honest loneliness.
But that would be common.
My love isn't wholly common. (174–75)

Karel questions Julian's love on the basis that it is not grounded in erotic desire, but Julian insists on its reality and that it must mean something. Karel co-opts the language of sexologists to joke that Julian's love is a "minor pathology," but he admits with breathtaking simplicity that he loves Julian's love for him. Inquiring into the *forms* of desire and love, they reveal the insufficiency of such words to define any of the various forms they subsume: infatuation, eros, romantic love, familial love, love between friends. While Karel does not want to admit that love is common, wanting it to have a tragic and poetic loftiness,²²² Julian makes the simple but insightful claim that love is loneliness, which is to say that what love wants is not to be alone. Julian's love for

²²² What Michael Warner calls love's antinomianism; see *The Trouble with Normal*, esp. 101–3.

Karel is a bastion against loneliness, an anchor in an otherwise unfeeling world. Karel admits his own tepid love for Julian, one that is not alight with the same passion he felt for Louis, but which has been cultivated in response to their mutual tenderness and connection: “I do love you but only because you do not disturb me, you face the way I do and you are moving in that direction, and so turn to me with sweet words in your throat that are altogether for me, addressed to no one else. Maybe that is the way you feel about me” (175–76). While Julian protests that this explanation is “too cold” (176), it is not as cynical a conception of love as its comparison to the “hot” ideal of passionate romantic love would imply. To be moving in the same direction implies stability both temporal (they will not be separated anytime soon) and ethical (they do not clash), as well as a shared orientation toward the world: “you face the way I do.”²²³ Moreover, it is Julian’s ability to prove his intimate understanding and care for Karel through “sweet words” that are meant only for him that provides the foundation for their love. The strength of that foundation provides the very structure of this scene, as it is Julian knowing the right thing to say that brings solace to them both. If the life of fairies is inextricable from loneliness, they might at least take comfort in knowing that they are loved by others who face the same direction, understanding one another’s pain and loneliness, and using that shared experience to forge a love that endures despite (or because of) its difference from romantic ideals.

Julian’s comment that “love is loneliness” underscores the isolating experience of inhabiting fairy gender and the importance of sisterhood as a balm to such isolation. Throughout the novel, fairies’ experiences of loneliness are portrayed through singularly experimental narrative forms. While *The Young and Evil* deploys, as I have shown, direct and realist narrative forms to emphasize the joyful embrace of pleasure and presence that fairies experience when

²²³ See Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, esp. Chapter 1: Orientations Toward Objects, 25–64.

they gather together, it lapses into surrealist quoted monologue when characters are alone. The surrealism signifies both the idiosyncrasies of the individual mind and its tendency to distort perception and memory. After the drag ball, Julian, feeling ill from overindulgence, remains in the bathroom so long that the hall is deserted when he leaves. As he finds his way home alone, he reflects pessimistically on love and how he fits into the queer community. This altered tone is a marked departure from his previous invigorated joy at the ball. While the pleasures of community provided him a necessary coping mechanism, fears and doubts about queer life creep back when he is left alone:

Am I a doll he thought or some kind of ghost believing in everything I have believed in do I know what marriage is what new texture is in it anything more than a tongue and lips and inexpert teeth . . . the stalk up the poor lavender buds clinging to it their mouths closed yellow in the green and dug clean for anything I've found in the oystergrey marrow to hell with all junior disorders what are they my next lover must teach me to swear love is a thing to know more of and deeper of or nothing is lost? nothing can be helped is better life is made up of crossing sticks and time.

The crying in him was because everything was all wrong and he knew it as all learn it sometimes: wrong yet magnetic, prolonged yet brief. (169)

Stuck in a spiral of worry that he will never find love, Julian's distorted thought patterns seem to erase the transient pleasures he had enjoyed mere moments ago during a sexual tryst at the ball, focusing instead on the mechanical awkwardness of his "tongue and lips and inexpert teeth." Julian's reflection on his inexperience with love takes a dreary tone in contrast to that with which the ball is narrated. His thoughts contain fits and starts; mid-sentence truncations are not signaled by any punctuation. This meandering quality is linked in part to Julian's intoxication, which seems to amplify his anxiety. One thought trails off as attention is abruptly diverted by another: the pointed question "do I know what marriage is" forcefully interrupts a more abstract thought about beliefs. This disorienting prose style mimics how anxiety—especially when combined with intoxicants—short-circuits logical thought patterns and fixates on unhelpful distortions that are

“wrong yet magnetic.” Most salient, however, is the layered and complex network of affect that this thought-poem depicts—and it is a poem being written, as confirmed by Julian’s real-time edits: “love is a thing to know more of and deeper of or nothing is lost? nothing can be helped is better.” This affective bundle might be described as frustrated, mournful, despairing, and desperate; such is communicated by the abstract image of “poor lavender buds” with “their mouths closed,” stuck in the stasis of not-quite-blooming, as well as that of “oystergrey marrow,” which taints Thoreau’s famous *carpe diem* with an unappetizing materiality.²²⁴ Narrative time slows and perhaps even loops here, with thoughts being replayed and revised, emphasizing Julian’s distraught belief in life’s monotony and pointlessness, being “made up of crossing sticks and time.” This abrupt shift in tone and form from the lively immediacy of the ball that precedes it presents fairy life as dangerously bifurcated: the pleasures of community are all too fleeting, providing only a brief reprieve from solitary doubts and fears. As in *Nightwood*, it is romantic love that is the great source of vulnerability, danger, misery, disillusion, unhappiness.

In contrast, when Karel and Julian are alone together, the surrealist qualities of their individual utterances become intertwined. The novel utilizes dialogic narrative forms to represent sisterhood as a course-correcting force against the solitary form of internal monologue, which is deployed to represent loneliness spiraling into despair. Whereas solitary monologue is used to emphasize the deepening of a single negative affect, dialogue between Julian and Karel serves to twist the directionality of affective vectors, thus tempering rather than deepening negative thinking. This occurs clearly when Julian, returning in his lonely state from the drag ball,

²²⁴ Cf. Thoreau: “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), 143.

encounters a distraught Karel mourning the end of his relationship with Louis:

Have you any ideas about happiness Karel?

Not really said Karel. Even when ideas about happiness amount to common morality they are no less important than mine but I'm talking morality anyway and morality is rotten.

Why?

Because it's a stage of rot. It's the skin beginning to fall off.

Yes but about happiness can't we argue ourselves somehow into it?

Happiness is Being not Knowing and let it go but I say Knowing is not quite but almost happiness. Being can go where it pleases said Karel.

Let it go Julian said. One begins to have ideas about happiness as soon as one sees that happiness is impossible. (172–73)

Prior to this exchange, Julian and Karel are both in sorry states, but Julian's question about happiness provides the pair an opportunity not only to commiserate, but also to transmute their woes into more philosophical musings. Knowing Karel well, Julian seems to understand that such a transformation is possible, and thus asks Karel to expound upon his abstract "ideas about happiness." While Karel's response remains bleak, speaking of "rot" and "skin beginning to fall off," he shifts to the poetic mode that his conversations with Julian often take, moving the emphasis away from the realities of his own lovesick suffering. Julian coaxes him further out with additional questions, knowing that Karel will follow. Gradually their speech begins to meld, resembling something like the improvisational poetry that characterizes their conversations: the non-sequitur "let it go" that Karel utters is picked up by Julian in call-and-response fashion as the two seem to riff on each other's lines.

In such exchanges, Julian and Karel are represented as deploying idiosyncratic linguistic constructions. While these are barely intelligible to readers, Julian and Karel seem to understand one another perfectly. Karel seems to acknowledge this when he says: "I do love you . . . , you face the way I do and you are moving in that direction, and so turn to me with sweet words in your throat that are altogether for me, addressed to no one else" (175–76). "Addressed"

“altogether” to Karel and “no one else,” the exclusive intimacy that characterizes Julian and Karel’s sisterhood is represented narratively through the experimental form of dialogic surrealist poetry that both signals to the reader the characters’ mutual understanding and places the reader just outside it. Just as fairy gender yields novel linguistic forms—the codes, slang, and speech styles unique to the fairy community—Julian and Karel’s personal sisterhood becomes the soil from which poetry emerges as they craft an insular argot of two. Ford and Tyler thus deploy surrealist-poetic dialogue as a novel narrative form in order to illustrate the necessity, for fairies, of assembling novel social and narrative forms: novel forms, that is, of gender, relationality, speech, and literary representation.

As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that Julian’s words have begun to uplift

Karel:

If I went down entirely I could be happy, knowing nothing, but his mouth drew away and I’m still here Karel said. Here, Mr. Policeman, here do what you will with me.

And speaking of deceptive appearances I think of all the live people wearing death so impassively Julian said.

My YES would have to be beaten up with the white of an egg and set to chill on his body. Karel laughed as though he were still weeping. (174)

Julian’s esoteric comment about “people wearing death so impassively” cues Karel’s equally abstract response. Taken by itself, it’s a poetic and erotic image: “YES” seems of a piece with Joyce’s Molly Bloom;²²⁵ its combination with an egg white turns the sexual “YES” into something decidedly semenlike, which being “set to chill” on someone’s (perhaps Louis’s) body evokes postcoital ejaculation. Setting the statement’s meaning—or lack thereof—aside, the image significantly evokes laughter from Karel despite his previously defeated demeanor. This,

²²⁵ James Joyce’s *Ulysses* famously ends with Molly Bloom recalling the moment she fell in love with her husband, Leopold; the novel ends with the words “yes I said yes I will Yes.” *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler (New York: Vintage, 1986), 644.

along with the acknowledgement that his “weeping” has ceased, indicates the effectiveness of Julian’s stratagem. While the denotative significance of such lines is lost on anyone else, these nearly nonsensical constructions indicate the intimacy that Julian and Karel share and which allows Julian to say just the right thing in this moment to pull Karel out of his ruminations on lost love. The remedy works, and Karel continues in a similar vein:

Let me go on, life. How many understand cadence Karel said.
Do you?
One can’t do anything about medieval statues can one the same of Eliot. That sentence is a study in cadence.
You are always untrue if you go far enough said Julian. (176)

Whereas Karel had, moments ago, expressed little desire to “go on,” his exchange with Julian seems to have rekindled his hope. Emerging from his slump, he turns his attention to poetry and the formal considerations of cadence to distract from his suffering. Returning to the irreverent and whimsical tone that most often characterizes their conversations, the narrative offers their bond as a resolution to, perhaps even a substitute for, romantic disappointments. Through these shared, idiosyncratic linguistic forms, *The Young and Evil* represents the social affordances of the shared gender form that cements Julian and Karel’s bond of trust, a bond that serves to ground them, even as they are surrounded by wolves in sheep’s clothing.

In addition to the aesthetic pleasures of embodying a gender presentation that one finds beautiful, recognizability and mutual understanding emerge in *The Young and Evil* as important affordances of fairy gender as a social form. By facilitating community bonds and relational forms such as sisterhood, recognizability and understanding also unlock access to degrees of stability that gender nonconforming subjects would otherwise lack. While Karel and *Nightwood*’s Matthew O’Connor share similar desires for and disillusionment with the couple form, *The Young and Evil* showcases community and sisterhood as alternative and original

relational affordances of gender nonconformity that may partially alleviate disappointments with more traditional relational forms. *Nightwood* represents only O'Connor's desires for marriage and motherhood; if he has sought out anything like sisterhood, it is completely absent from the text. *The Young and Evil* represents these multiple possibilities for finding relationality through gender—some successful, others not; some traditional, others novel—through a formal narrative pastiche. This too contrasts with *Nightwood*, which is formally quite uniform in its unconventionality. If *Nightwood*'s narrative form emphasizes how queer desire for form can manifest as thwarted fixation on traditional relationship structures, then *The Young and Evil*'s form suggests that the desire for identity can also lead queers to experiment with a wide variety of possibilities for inventing new, pleasurable relational forms. This desire for identity is further complicated in Richard Bruce Nugent's *Gentleman Jigger*, the subject of this project's final chapter. As we will see in that text, the intersection of Black racial identity and queer sexual identity can yield complex new desires for form that emphasize playfulness and originality, combining desire for existing social forms with the adaptation of such forms to suit one's personal style.

CHAPTER 4

Seeking Sexuality: *Gentleman Jigger* and the Art of Identification

Alex handed him a match . . . he glanced at his companion apprehensively in the match glow . . . he was afraid that his appearance would shatter the blue thoughts . . . and stars . . . ah . . . his face was a perfect compliment to his voice . . . and the echo of their steps mingled . . . they walked in silence . . . the castanets of their heels clicking accompaniment . . . the stranger inhaled deeply and with a nod of content and a smile . . . blew a cloud of smoke . . . Alex felt like singing . . . the stranger knew the magic of blue smoke also . . . they continued in silence . . . the castanets of their heels clicking rhythmically . . . Alex turned in his doorway . . . up the stairs and the stranger waited for him to light the room . . . no need for words . . . they had always known each other

as they undressed by the blue dawn . . . Alex knew he had never seen a more perfect being . . . his body was all symmetry and music . . . and Alex called him Beauty . . .

—Richard Bruce Nugent, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade”

“Have a cigarette.” Stuartt offered.

The boy took one and accepted the light. For a moment they puffed in silence. Stuartt was feeling inadequate. He knew this was an attempt at conversation and felt his own ineptness giving the appearance of unfriendliness. . . .

Stuartt tried again to speak normally. But his lips were dry. How could he let this boy know his inexperience? Suddenly that became the most embarrassing admission he’d ever had to make. . . . But not speaking was an even greater embarrassment, so Stuartt gathered his courage and wet his lips, his cloak of sophistication dropping from him.

—Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gentleman Jigger*

Two gay cruising scenes, two boys with cigarettes, two wildly different forms and outcomes. The first, from the 1926 short story that spanned seven pages in the first and only issue of the experimental Black literary “quarterly,” *Fire!!*, is heralded as “the first work by an

African American to feature an openly bisexual character.”²²⁶ The second is from the novel of over three hundred pages that Nugent composed between 1928 and 1933. The scene in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” is a dreamlike fantasy of desire effortlessly attaining its ideal: two strangers with “no need for words” silently ascertain a mutual desire “they had always known” and fall into bed together. Like the body of the boy called “Beauty,” their erotic bond is “perfect,” “all symmetry and music.” The scene’s fragmentation by regular ellipses (these persist in like fashion throughout the entire story) is at odds with the seamlessness of the connection it depicts. Shane Vogel, writing of the “Cabaret School” of Harlem Renaissance writers in which Nugent is included, considers such techniques to be “queer manipulations of form that rupture the smooth surface of the text and think outside the confines of normative social relations and normative literary form.”²²⁷ Certainly these ellipses “rupture the smooth surface of the text,” but do they, as Vogel argues about the Cabaret School’s “queer kind of formalism,” “contribute to the deformation of literary structures of respectability” and “disrupt the fixed and coherent subject of bourgeois realism”?²²⁸ I hesitate to attribute so much grandiose queer radicalism to such a typographical choice. Without foreclosing the possibility of experimental form housing radical queer thought, I reject an easy equivalency between the two. As Brian Glavey observes, “Nugent’s ellipses could be replaced with more conventional punctuation and the result would be perfectly legible. . . . The difficulty evoked by the story’s experimental punctuation is less a matter of interiority—as the logic of stream-of-consciousness would suggest—than a matter of

²²⁶ Darryl Dickson-Carr, *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 75.

²²⁷ Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 30.

²²⁸ Vogel, 31.

surface. We might say that the function of the ellipses in ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade’ is . . . strictly superficial.”²²⁹ This unconventional narrative form, calculated as it is to inject a “strictly superficial” impression of “difficulty” through “experimental punctuation,” is little more than form for form’s sake. It is as if the author, worried that the story would appear too simple on its own, included the ellipses to give the impression of a redacted complexity. The narrative form does little to elevate the scene from its representation of a “perfect” relationality that is, other than that it occurs between two men, perfectly conventional.

What the passage from *Gentleman Jigger* lacks in formal experimentalism it makes up for in the convolution of its depiction of desire. The “silence” that punctuates both scenes could not be more different; in *Jigger*, it is not the unspoken understanding of perfect recognition but the mortified muteness of an eager and embarrassed novice. Just beneath his thin “cloak of sophistication” is a turbulent interior life, churning with hope, self-doubt, panic, and deep longing. We witness, with Stuartt’s worry that he is “giving the appearance of unfriendliness,” his frantic wish that he will do the right thing, say the right words that will turn this awkward encounter into a scene of erotic fulfillment like that of “Smoke.” Stuartt gropes for a script that will guide him to the desired outcome and finds nothing but silence.

Stuartt’s desire for form—both for a script and for the kind of idealized, effortless fantasy that “Smoke” illustrates—is much more compelling and complex than that of Alex, who wants only “Beauty” and gets it. It is also, I suggest, much queerer insofar as it represents an awkwardly interrupted sexual encounter that, because of its unscripted structure, necessitates a rethinking of the very forms of relationality. That *Jigger* represents this queer complexity

²²⁹ Brian Glavey, *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 78.

without recourse to the superficial difficulty of experimental form attests to the affordances of the traditional novel. By virtue of its extended and clearly articulated interrogation of queer desire, *Jigger* eschews the simple perfection of fantasy for the messiness of verisimilitude, and, as I will show, it achieves a rich specificity in its theorization of the desire to inhabit queerness as an identity and a way of life. As such, the novel demonstrates that queer complexity is not the exclusive product of modernist difficulty.

Published posthumously in 2008, *Gentleman Jigger* is part satire, part roman à clef, and, I argue, part queer Bildungsroman. The novel is organized into two very different books. The first portrays Stuartt Brennan (a fictionalized version of Nugent) moving from Washington, D.C. to Harlem to join a movement of Black artists comprised of a younger Black generation seeking to capitalize on the New Negro movement by producing iconoclastic work that breaks from the conventions set by their elder Black contemporaries. In its portrayal of this avant-garde coterie of artists, *Jigger* itself eschews the group's characteristic experimentalism and modernist obscurantism, opting instead for a linear plot and a straightforward narration that avoids interiority. In addition to satirizing the ambitions of this literary movement, *Gentleman Jigger* presents a careful character study of young Stuartt, a flamboyant eccentric who delights in stirring intrigue by initiating uncomfortable conversations about race and sexuality. Stuartt's own sexuality is presented ambiguously in this first book, though he labors to create suspicion about his sexuality by making queer art and adopting effeminate mannerisms. The transition into Book II contains a dramatic shift in content and narrative form: it presents much more of Stuartt's interiority (though still avoiding the overt experimentalism associated with modernist interiority) while tracing his process of sexual self-discovery and self-cultivation. The second book follows Stuartt's exploration of gay sex, identification as overtly queer, and pursuit of a series of

relationships with Italian men connected to organized crime. Through this litany of fulfilling love affairs, Stuartt develops his own understanding of queer desire and reshapes his sense of self in response to it.

Since its publication in 2008, *Gentleman Jigger* has occasioned a moderate critical response. A number of critics express a primary interest in reading the novel for its historical insights as a satirical roman à clef that adds to insight to Wallace Thurman's attempt to capture the Harlem Renaissance in *Infants of the Spring* (1932).²³⁰ Among these critics, Darryl Dickson-Carr posits that *Jigger* "extends Nugent's innovations from 1926's story 'Smoke, Lilies, and Jade' by analyzing sexuality, race, gender, and ethnicity in overlapping relationships," but in his focus on the novel's satire of the Harlem Renaissance, does not engage further with *Jigger*'s discussion of these identities.²³¹ Furthermore, his comparison of the text to the "innovations" of "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" implies a lack of attention to the vast differences between the two texts' ideas about and formal portrayals of queer sexuality. He goes on to write: "Unfortunately for our purposes, *Gentleman Jigger*'s second half contains very little satire in any appreciable form. . . . While I have no desire to minimize the novel's general significance, this shift removes the second half to an entirely different genre and mode."²³² This dissatisfied observation implies that *Jigger*'s formal bifurcation is an unfortunate flaw that necessitates separate treatment of its

²³⁰ See, for instance, Steve Pinkerton, "'New Negro' v. 'Niggeratti': Defining and Defiling the Black Messiah," *Modernism/modernity* 20, no. 3 (2013): 539–55; Jeremy Braddock, "The Scandal of a Black *Ulysses*: Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, and the Harlem Reception of Joyce," *ELH* 84, no. 3 (2017): 741–63, and Sinéad Moynihan, "Romans à Clef of the Harlem Renaissance," in *A History of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Rachel Farebrother and Miriam Thaggert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 125–43.

²³¹ Dickson-Carr, *Spoofing the Modern*, 75.

²³² Dickson-Carr, 76.

two halves. This lack of interest in the novel's formal aspects runs through the criticism.²³³ I suggest instead that this two-part form yields particular affordances as a queer Bildungsroman à clef (if I may), namely the ability to narrate a dramatic change in Stuartt's approach to sexual identity and self-understanding.

Those critics who have engaged *Gentleman Jigger*'s examination of queer identity tend to read the novel as an anti-identitarian queer refusal that extends a radical theory of fluidity. J. Edgar Bauer champions *Jigger* for its radically anti-identitarian impulses, arguing that the novel attempts through "transgressive ambiguities and theoretical shifts" to "dissolve the hiatus between maleness and femaleness as well as the resulting disjunction between heterosexuality and homosexuality," thereby representing Nugent's "views on the fundamental fluidity that sexuality and race share."²³⁴ Brian Glavey asserts that the novel "sheds important light on Nugent's reconceptualization of queerness" as "a sexuality tied not to an essential feature of one's identity but rather to the things that one enjoys."²³⁵ Dorothea Löbbberman echoes Glavey's assessment, emphasizing Nugent's advocacy for "sexual fluidity" through Stuartt's "refusing to be pinned down to one sexual identity."²³⁶ Vogel similarly asserts that the Cabaret School as a whole "was less interested in presenting a fixed or transparent sexual identity than it was in challenging the calcification of racial and sexual identities and the use of those identities in

²³³ Discussing Nugent's novel alongside Joyce's *Ulysses*, Jeremy Braddock notes simply of *Jigger*'s form that it "critiqued the avant-garde moment" of the Harlem Renaissance through the "conventionally modernist . . . form of the roman-à-clef." "The Scandal of a Black *Ulysses*," 749.

²³⁴ J. Edgar Bauer, "On the Transgressiveness of Ambiguity: Richard Bruce Nugent and the Flow of Sexuality and Race," *Journal of Homosexuality* 62, no. 8 (August 3, 2015): 1035, 1041.

²³⁵ Glavey, *Wallflower*, 95.

²³⁶ Dorothea Löbbermann, "Richard Bruce Nugent and the Queer Memory of Harlem," in *Race Capital?: Harlem as Setting and Symbol*, ed. Andrew M. Fearnley and Daniel Matlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 229–30.

strategies of social order.”²³⁷ These critics are not wrong to suggest that *Jigger* theorizes identity in novel and exciting ways, but I wonder whether this emphasis on fluidity and anti-identitarianism is more indebted to queer theory than to Nugent’s novel. As I aim to show in this chapter, refusal is only one aspect of the multilayered examination of sexual and racial identity that *Jigger* lays out.

I argue that *Gentleman Jigger* portrays ambivalent and dynamic desires for sexual and racial identities as social forms, at times consenting to and at times reimagining the idea that the individual might be shaped by pre-existing social categories. Moreover, it is through an unconventional version of the Bildungsroman that *Jigger* inhabits and reshapes existing social and literary forms. The novel does and does not follow the conventional plot shape of the Bildungsroman, does and does not portray the desire for queer identity. It is true that *Jigger* is about the transition of a cynical and naïve iconoclast who maintains a playful sexual ambiguity into a self-aware and successful artist who publicly embraces a queer sense of self. At the same time, the novel deviates from the Bildungsroman’s conventional telos of assimilation to dominant norms, narrating instead a process of queer self-discovery that tries on and re-forms essentialized notions of sexual identity, landing ultimately on an approach to identity that can only be described as artistic. Stuartt’s desire for queer identity is initially implied to be motivated by his desire to embody a shocking, radical, experimental social persona that is commensurate with the iconoclastic art he creates—all of which is occasioned by his rejection of Black respectability politics and his refusal to be defined by an essentialist notion of Blackness. He desires instead queerness as an alternative identity that will direct focus away from being interpreted through race. As he dabbles in queer relationships, however, this motivation is

²³⁷ Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, 19–20.

betrayed by a surprising sentimentality: a sincere and more conventional desire for love, belonging, and acceptance. This is reflected in shifts in narrational style, which is detached and distanced in Book I but becomes more focused on interiority in Book II. As Stuartt refines his understanding of his desires through various relationships, he maintains a notion of queerness as a crucial element of his identity, yet he does not embrace wholesale the existing social forms of queer identity. Instead, he undertakes a creative adaptation of his Blackness and queerness, refining them to fit his own style. The result is his theorization of a composite outcast identity that he terms “antisocial” and which is shaped by, but not reducible to, his relationship to Black and queer identities. *Gentleman Jigger* thus lays out the full range of pitfalls and affordances that lie at the intersection of Blackness and queerness as social forms, exemplifying a strategically creative approach to the desire for identity.

Black Queer Childhood and Self-Satirizing Narration

Gentleman Jigger begins with an almost Victorian recounting of family histories. Rather than following standard versions, however, *Gentleman Jigger* rearranges this novelistic convention by emphasizing the racial and sexual contours of these histories. Beginning with Stuartt’s parents, the narration parses the colorism of “the oldest and most aristocratic” Black families: “the brown and handsome Charles Henry Brennan had succeeded in marrying the pale and personable Palma Minerva Stuartt—against all precedent, for it was the motto of the new race and social order to marry as near white as possible.”²³⁸ These distinctions of color are narrated with tongue firmly in cheek, establishing the narrator’s distinct voice, which grows

²³⁸ Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gentleman Jigger*, edited by Thomas H. Wirth (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2008), 3. Subsequent references to the novel appear parenthetically.

especially sardonic when discussing the norms of Black high society: “Palma possessed in great majority the necessary number of polymorphonuclearleucocytes to assure the anemic and inbred pallor of true aristocracy in her offspring.” The use of the scientific name for a type of white blood cell (more commonly spelled polymorphonuclear leukocytes) is the narrator’s ironically scientific invocation of the socio-legal concept of “white blood.” Of course, no scientific knowledge is required to pick up on the narrator’s nose-thumbing attitude toward the “anemic and inbred” Black aristocracy’s perpetuation of colorism. Similarly bold is the narrator’s flouting of the conventions of sexual respectability, at the level of both the literary and the social. Palma’s mixed racial background is distastefully, albeit colorfully, described as containing “an Indian skeleton . . . fornicating with a Negro wench somewhere in her family’s closet” (4), and the narrator seems to report her concessions to normative maternalism with a rolling of the eyes: “Palma had left normal school, the better to cope with the business of having children—a talent inherited directly from her mother—one a year, as convention proscribed” (4). Lest we read “as convention proscribed” as imparting neutrality, the preceding appositive accentuates, with more than a hint of misogyny, the absurdity of pursuing a “talent” of childbearing for any reason but the uncritical capitulation to normative tradition. Stuartt’s father, on the other hand, is described through his sexual wanderings. He is said to have “philandered a trifle (as men sometimes do),” the parenthetical pointing out the sexual double standard on which the heteronormative couple is erected, and his homosexual exploits are alluded to in the form of “certain peculiarly affectionate and possessive gentleman” whose attention he enjoys (5). Taken together, these barbs exemplify the narrator’s self-positioning outside the norms of racial and sexual respectability.

The novel’s central character, Stuartt, is aligned in many ways with the narrator’s playful dismissal of upper-class Black social and sexual values. Defying his parents’ wishes for him to

“become a capitalist” (8), a young Stuartt debates whether moving South or becoming famous would better spite his parents, settling on the latter because “to be famous was far less painful than being lynched” (9). This casual “decision” certainly reflects the relatively privileged, light-skinned Stuartt’s disconnectedness from the material horrors of life in the Jim Crow South, but it also importantly frames Stuartt’s pursuit of an artist’s life as at least partially motivated by a desire to escape his racial and class identities, to break the mold of these social forms. If remaining in the Black aristocracy is to be conscripted into the “abhorred capitalist class” (90), and quitting it entirely is to risk the racialized violence from which the Black upper classes are, however tenuously, protected, then the life of an artist and the promise of fame presents the possibility of self-determination, a chance to avoid the determinism of racial and class identity. The eccentric artist’s life—eccentric in the sense of its positionality outside the center of the expectations imposed on social identity categories—also affords Stuartt an escape from sexual identity forms. When Stuartt happens upon “Krafft-Ebing and the regrettable similarity between the symptoms manifested in one-hundred-and-twenty-seven cases and himself,” Stuartt takes refuge in the idea of an artistic identity, for “all artists were strange, or at least they were expected to be” (11). Such expectations are key to the novel’s theorization of social forms: Stuartt intuits that the eccentric artist is not a formless identity, not free from scripted expectations, but the constitutive outside against which the center is defined.²³⁹ That is, Stuartt chooses to be an artist knowing that to do so is to conform to the expectations of a social category but taking refuge in the artist’s expected nonconformity to the norms imposed on his Blackness, aristocratic upbringing, and sexuality. Stuartt thus embraces a strategic positionality

²³⁹ My formulation borrows from Butler: “Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside.” *Undoing Gender*, 29.

vis-à-vis social forms, selecting those that best negate the expectations of his other intersecting identities.

However much Stuartt is aligned with the narrator's rejection of upper-class Black mores, he is also stamped by his aristocratic family in ways that cut against the grain of the narrator's implied values. This is perhaps most obvious in his choice to go by "Stuartt," his mother's aristocratic maiden name, rather than his given name (Jerome) or surname (Brennan)—all despite the fact that "his particular ancestral line originated with a Stuartt household slave" and thus the Stuartt name came to him via a white slaveholder (256). Furthermore, when the young Stuartt decides to "flout every convention of his hometown" and move to Harlem with the poet Tony (the novel's analog for Langston Hughes) to join the New Negro Renaissance, Stuartt's internalization of his family's colorism is swiftly revealed. Tony introduces Stuartt to Raymond "Rusty" Pelman (a version of Wallace Thurman), whom Stuartt decides is "not to be trusted" because he is "too black" and, as the narrator points out, "Stuartt was the totality of his chauvinistic upbringing" (20). Though Stuartt realizes his prejudice and regrets it, his apology is similarly framed by the narrator's exacting commentary: "Stuartt felt safe, in the way slave owners felt safe facing the chattel they may perhaps have mistreated," and he proceeds with the "assurance . . . that his apology would, of course, be accepted" (22). From this early point in the novel, the narrator draws sharp attention to Stuartt's character flaws, including his arrogance, sense of superiority, and superficiality. In so doing, the narrator positions himself at a significant distance from the novel's central character.

The narrator's unflattering assessment of Stuartt persists through the novel's first half. This is complicated by the fact that Stuartt's style, voice, and sense of humor tend to overlap significantly with the narrator's. Add onto this the novel's status as *roman à clef*, and the lines

between Stuartt, the narrator, and Nugent become significantly blurred. One of the novel's chief formal peculiarities, then, is that its central character is meant to be a version of the novel's author, with the novel's narrator mediating between the two to provide commentary that is, we assume, aligned with the values of the implied author. As readers furnished with this knowledge, we are led to speculate about the process by which Nugent, in representing a fictionalized version of his own life, reimagines and reinterprets an idea of himself through narrative. The novel suggests that narrative provides a powerful tool for self-understanding, especially in cases wherein self-understanding through racial and sexual identity categories is fraught. This is not only because the knowledge that the novel is a roman à clef leads readers to imagine Nugent-as-author looking judgmentally at a young, naïve version of himself; the text also draws attention to Stuartt's tendency to imagine himself as a character in a novel as a mode of self-assessment. His apology to Rusty is predicated by one such imagining: "The more he thought of the magnitude of the injustice he was doing Pelman, the more disgusted he became with himself. It was a situation which, had he been confronted by it in something he was reading, would have left him only one reaction to the character in his own position—a great disgust and complete lack of sympathy" (21). *Gentleman Jigger* thus shows its investment in the idea that narrative imagining can be a tool through which self-knowledge is accessed and self-transformation may be achieved: though Stuartt's apology is flawed, it does represent a gradual shift in behavior aimed at reshaping himself into a more sympathetic "character." As such, the novel directly addresses how the practice of imagining the self through a narrative form can restructure one's sense of self and the shape of one's life.

Race and Shock Value

Stuartt's first interaction with Rusty seems to imply that Stuartt is deeply invested in the meaningfulness of color, but throughout the novel he proves much more likely to treat the topic of race with an irreverent, satirical tone. It is perhaps too much to say that Stuartt's acknowledgement of his prejudice against Rusty precipitates a radical shift in his attitude; rather, when Stuartt speaks about Blackness, he does so in a "casual, cynical fashion," and he is prone to "tart remarks about Negroes" that make him seem "as though he didn't consider himself one" (31). As I will discuss in more detail later, Stuartt's ambivalent identification with Blackness is predicated on his desire not to be defined through it.²⁴⁰ Stuartt's "casual, cynical" comments are calculated both to shock and to caricature the essentialist generalizations through which race is often discussed. While speaking with Rusty about the marketing of their avant-garde New Negro magazine, Stuartt makes one such "tart remark": "The Negro is used to being sold. It's practically a painless procedure" (31). The nonchalance and irreverence with which Stuartt invokes the horrific economy of chattel slavery is representative of his sardonic, shocking sense of humor with regards to Blackness. His use of the category of "the Negro" to make obviously false generalizations that trivialize the trauma of enslaved people would be more at home in the mouth of a white supremacist. Uttered by Stuartt, the words become the blackest of black comedy: the joke is calculated to be in bad taste, to alienate and offend, and to make the listener marvel at Stuartt's transgression of basic moral boundaries. In short, Stuartt's humor is designed to exhibit poor form.

²⁴⁰ It is tempting to read Stuartt's ambivalent identification through José Esteban Muñoz's notion of "disidentification," but to do so would be somewhat imprecise. Muñoz's use of "disidentification" referred specifically to the idea of desiring to inhabit an identity category that is somewhat hostile to you but attractive nonetheless, an identification despite misgivings. More casual usage of "disidentification" to describe the rejection of an identity category that has been thrust upon one dilutes the specificity of Muñoz's term, so I avoid using "disidentification" in this chapter to describe Stuartt's desire to escape from Blackness as a salient identity. See *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

The aim of Stuartt's tasteless humor is to draw attention to himself; his choice to do so at the expense of his race indicates his willingness to defy the liberal social expectation that to be Black necessitates a commitment to racial uplift and the politics of respectability.²⁴¹ As such, he consents to being identified as Black but evacuates that identification of its presumed meaningfulness and social commitments. For Stuartt, Blackness becomes a social form drained of content. Stuartt thus frees himself to wield Blackness opportunistically to generate discomfort in others and to solidify his own reputation as a transgressive eccentric. At the same time, he parodies the sort of racial generalizations that would essentialize Blackness as a stable, cohesive identity category.

Stuartt finds an opportunity to extemporize on race when he meets Sieg "Bum" Borjolfson, a recent transplant to New York by way of Canada. Stuartt begins: "First of all, Bum, I suppose you have never known a Negro before. That's the usual defense. And you expected to find us more or less uncivilized denizens of some great jungle city, believing in witch doctors and black magic and all that. Well you're right. Or maybe you've read Harriet Beecher Stowe and feel sorry for us. Do. . . . You know, Rusty, it really is too bad we aren't more different. What a disappointment we must be" (37). Stuartt's lengthy tirade, calculated to make Bum uncomfortable, places himself and Rusty (who joins Stuartt) at the center of attention; they take turns speaking so as to leave little room for others to interject. Although Bum has only asked politely to hear more about the New Negro movement, Stuartt immediately accuses him of defensiveness, outlining what he guesses are Bum's prejudiced ideas about Blackness. Stuartt

²⁴¹ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the politics of respectability. Stuartt faces similar social pressures as *Passing's* Irene Redfield; he flouts the idea of conforming to such pressures whereas Irene feels irreconcilably pulled between her commitment to racial uplift and her desire to escape from such constraints. On the "Cabaret School" of Harlem Renaissance writers and its opposition to the politics of respectability, see Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*.

ironically affirms each prejudice, ridiculing the idea that Black Americans are “uncivilized” and pitiable, before asserting that there is no radical alterity inherent to Blackness with the words “it really is too bad we aren’t more different.” Rusty, speaking alongside Stuartt like “a single machine,” argues that if Bum had a son in America, he would be raised to “fit into a scheme and not be an eccentric” (38); so too, says Rusty, do Black Americans “ape the culture that surrounds us” (39). He continues: “We go to your colleges, learn your lessons, and have Goya, Velazquez, and Rembrandt thrown at us. Scott, Keats, and Tennyson are poets we must know. . . . Why then is it such a mystery that we should be so like every . . . ?” (39, second ellipsis in original). For Stuartt and Rusty, American culture consists of compulsory forms that are both aesthetic and social. Even among Black Americans, standards for artistic greatness are based on white European painters while English poetic traditions continue to shape ideas about “high” literature. Referring to aesthetic forms to illustrate the American imperative of assimilation, Rusty and Stuartt articulate that to be American is to either “fit into” this “scheme” or to “be an eccentric.” If being American (at least, an American of a certain class) is a matter of compulsory form, white supremacist notions of Black alterity also generate Blackness as a misdefined social form, one that is always-already eccentric, uncivilized, and threatening; as Stuartt later argues, “We are made to seem strange if we behave in any way that is even slightly different. And we are seen as equally strange should we be similar in our behavior to whites” (137).²⁴² As such, Black Americans are shaped by education to fit white norms of behavior and culture yet defined in advance through essentializing, white-supremacist ideas about Blackness.

²⁴² These ideas also provide the foundation of queer of color critique, which suggests that racialization and queerness are co-constitutive: Blackness, for example, is defined in part against white sexual norms, rendering it always-already queer insofar as it is presumed to be unassimilable to the norms of respectable white sexuality. See Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

Stuartt and Rusty express all of this in a playful mode that is somewhat serious and somewhat exaggerated. This is especially true of Stuartt, who is notorious for his “ability to find himself as well as others ridiculous” such that “it was always a little hard to tell” whether Stuart “might be serious” or “making fun” of his “audience . . . and himself” (31). (As I have hinted at above, it is similarly “a little hard to tell” whether Nugent is, through Stuartt, making fun of himself.) The narrator further reports that Stuartt’s “lazy way with humor” operates on the notion that “words were things to play with. To confuse with. And sometimes to prate the truth with” (39). Rusty and Stuartt’s insights into America’s racialized social forms hits on something truthful, but they are also—at least for Stuartt—primarily made for effect, a performance for Bum (and at his expense) of Stuartt’s flamboyant and captivating verbal abilities. This is to say that, if Stuartt sees Blackness as a form without content, he views speech in a similar fashion: while he may sometimes “prate the truth,” his doing so is an almost accidental byproduct of his desire to play a rhetorical game that is about form over substance. Stuartt desires only that what he’s saying is provocative, that it test the boundaries of acceptability. This leads him to take things further than Rusty in their game of generating white discomfort, which is especially clear when Stuartt discusses at length his thoughts about the n-word.²⁴³

One of the first things Stuartt tells Bum is the name of their literary group: “You know, Bum, I’m enlarging on and improving Mr. Webster. Since the Negro Renaissance, I find that new words should be coined . . . For instance, Rusty and I and five others comprise the New

²⁴³ The word in question is liberally used by Stuartt throughout *Gentleman Jigger*. (The novel’s very title is a reference to the word: as Thomas H. Wirth points out in his introduction to the novel, “Gentleman Jigger” ends the first line of a racist rhyming couplet about mixed-race identity; see “Introduction,” in *Gentleman Jigger* [Boston: Da Capo Press, 2008], xi.) As a white scholar, I do not share Stuartt’s investment in deploying the word for its shock value or even reproducing it for its argumentative value. However, it is impossible to avoid the word in a discussion of the novel’s disruption of social norms. As such, I have chosen to stylize it as “n—r,” (or “n[—]r” when quoting directly from the text that spells it out), as an imperfect attempt to hollow out a word the potency of which defies any such evacuation.

Sepia Literati. So we call ourselves the N[—]ratti” (36).²⁴⁴ The coinage, which Nugent and Thurman themselves used, is meant to be a volatile mixture of the high and the low, a sendup of the literary elitism that insists on teaching “Scott, Keats, and Tennyson” and refuses to acknowledge Black art. Stuartt, in taking dubious ownership of the term,²⁴⁵ insists on the centrality of outré linguistic inventions to their new literary movement and half-seriously lauds his own ability to conjure experimental coinages that are as clever as they are in poor taste. For divulging this inside joke to their white guest, Stuartt is roundly silenced by Rusty, who draws the line at the n-word, entreating Stuartt to “shut up and leave Bum alone” (36). Stuartt professes to care not a whit for maintaining such appearances, instead delighting in the chilling effect the n-word has on white and Black audiences to like. Addressing Rusty, Stuartt prates:

We just have to admit we are an embarrassing and embarrassed minority. Suppose I were to say “n[—]r” while I’m talking instead of “Negro” (with a capital “N”). You’d be worried to death over what Bum and Leslie would think. . . . I can get a lot of fun out of going to dinner with both Nordics and Negroes, all of whom have forgotten that they belong to different races, and let drop the word “n[—]r” rather casually, and then watch. All of the Nordics blush and feel uncomfortable at our discomfort, and all of the Negroes become self conscious and find speech difficult, talk fast to cover my hideous mistake and try to recover that feeling of equality that they were so consciously and falsely enjoying. . . . If I should take it for granted that “n[—]r” is an ordinary word . . . I immediately become a bad fellow. No delicacy. An enemy to better relations between the races. (40)

In defining Black Americans as “an embarrassing and embarrassed minority” while positioning himself as a willful source of such embarrassment, Stuartt purports to have transcended that affect. Wanting to appear beyond embarrassment, he delights in generating it in others and thus being labelled “a bad fellow.” This negative attention is a boon to Stuartt: he gladly sacrifices the responsibility of fostering “better relations between the races” to cultivate a rebellious reputation

²⁴⁴ See previous footnote.

²⁴⁵ It is usually attributed to Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston. Braddock, “Scandal of a Black *Ulysses*,” 748.

and critique the conformity of others to those norms of interracial conduct meant to generate “falsely” a “feeling of equality.”

Desiring Experimental Forms

If, in this instance, it appears that Stuartt’s faux pas are primarily meant to serve as principled social critiques, a comparison to his artistic transgressions proves that such critiques are secondary to Stuartt’s goal of achieving notoriety. Hailed by Rusty as “Stuartt-Stein-Joyce” (31), he seeks to align himself with these (in)famous (white) experimentalists by pursuing literary and artistic endeavors that are shocking in both form and content; Stuartt’s fidelity to these role models is signaled again by the placement of “an opened copy of Joyce’s forbidden novel, *Ulysses*” in a prominent location during an exhibition of his paintings (127).²⁴⁶ Stuartt’s attraction to the New Negro movement stems in large part from his interest in the radical, form-breaking spirit it symbolizes, an ethos that might do for him what the success of Stein and Joyce did for them: transfigure the leaders of a literary movement into “active revolutionaries” “whom everyone knew” for promising to usher in a “New Order” (26). To achieve this, Stuartt pitches a new literary magazine; Rusty enthusiastically lauds the potential for the publication to overthrow the current Black literary elite, “that gang of outmoded reactionary tyrants” headed in the novel by Dr. Parke (Alain Locke). Stuartt’s main vision for the new quarterly is to make it as irreverent and unconventional as possible so as to attract the most attention.

The journal, titled *The Current*, is a barely fictionalized version of *Fire!!: A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*, which published its only issue in November 1926.

²⁴⁶ For an account of the importance of *Ulysses* as a symbol of avant-garde cultural capital for the younger generation of Harlem Renaissance writers, see Braddock, “Scandal of a Black *Ulysses*.”

Considering their titles together provides a succinct account of the radical modernist ethos they collectively embody: torching the conventional to make room for a wave of something new. *Gentleman Jigger* describes the N—ratti school as taking pleasure in instigating “the battles waged against them by the older and more sensible (or, as they thought, more conventional and narrow-minded) schools” and lobbing ever new projectiles in hopes of inspiring more “return fire” (75–76). This war imagery and emphasis on conflict adds alongside the anarchistic arsonism conjured by the title *Fire!!* a second meaning: the militaristic command to pull the trigger. Like queer antinormativity, this instantiation of the New Negro movement defined itself by what it negated; moreover, in both cases, sexual respectability is a central site of this conflict.

The first issue of *The Current* bucked sexual and literary conventions on principle. Rusty and Stuartt contribute “sexually off-color” narratives written “with the intent to shock,” while others’ contributions are described mainly by their respective levels of experimentalism: the issue includes “drawings . . . not in the conventional manner” and verses that feature “departure from poetic conventions” (79–80); its more disappointing selections are described as “fairly readable and conventional,” “too conventional, too circumspect” (80). The narrator’s impoverished language, describing these contributions only as “conventional” or not, draws attention to a certain hollowness within the issue’s formal experiment. In *Gentleman Jigger*, the N—ratti’s brand of experimentalism claims to usher in new forms—indeed, to establish a “New Order” (76)—but does so mainly for the sake of seizing power from the old. This new order is described by the novel’s distanced, ironizing narrator as hungrily seeking “proof of their importance,” viewing “the stir they were creating” through a “nearsighted vision” such that “it took on gargantuan proportions” (75). This sense of self-importance hinges mainly on the conviction that the magazine’s experimentalism in and of itself renders the journal “the first

Negro ART magazine”; the narrator is quick to add: “That it was amateurish did not matter. The N[—]ratti were satisfied” (79). The novel strenuously avoids any articulation of the group’s motivating beliefs; in lieu of this, we get: “It was revolution! Revolt against reaction, and everything was reaction that did not agree with them. They were the New Negroes. But mostly they were Rusty and Stuartt” (88). As *Gentleman Jigger* portrays it, this short-lived literary endeavor is all form and no substance, purporting to forge a new direction for Black art but instead embracing oppositional forms for the sole purpose of elevating the movement’s leaders. Ironizing through his narrator the very movement that brought him literary fame, Nugent establishes his own distance from what he portrays as the empty iconoclasm of New Negro experimentalism.

In planning the journal’s content, Stuartt advocates for a departure from conventional forms and respectable themes in order to cause the biggest possible stir in the name of art. He suggests to Rusty that “the first piece must be a shocker. You’ll do that, of course. About prostitutes or something. Something taboo. . . . And I could do a piece for somewhere in the middle of it. After everyone has almost gotten over the shock of yours and is expecting that nothing could be more reprehensible” (31). Stuartt already has a sample prepared, which he reads to Rusty; it begins:

That blackness—a something lonesomeness
Was that night?
That blackness—cold . . . sounds
Darkness torn by sounds
Voices . . . laughter
Kisses-in-the-evening-hey-hey
AND WHEN THE WOMAN SAW THE TREE WAS
GOOD FOR FOOD
That square of light . . .
Could one feel sound . . . voices . . . laughter? (32)

The prose-poem that Stuartt reads continues in this fashion for a page and a half. The piece is notable mainly for its unconventional form: center-aligned and italicized, the fragmented text portrays a cabaret-like scene punctuated by a surplus of ellipses (thus invoking “Smoke, Lilies and Jade”) and all-caps quotations from Genesis about the tree of knowledge. The piece achieves something mildly scandalous in its juxtaposition of the archetypal myth of temptation with an experimental portrait of the descent into a cabaret underworld complete with the “*Snare of drums*,” “*Wine . . . gin . . .*,” “*Kisses . . . perfume . . . noise . . .*” (32–33). Rusty, listening to Stuartt read, grows excited by the “experimental” piece and begins to fantasize about the fame their avant-gardism will yield: “After all, it isn’t every young man of twenty-one who was the editor of a world-stirring experiment” (33). Rusty’s fetishization of experimentalism stems from his hunch that it is a quick way to fame; the minor scandal of the content of Stuartt’s poem is elevated into something “world-stirring” by its deviation from literary convention.

Rusty pushes Stuartt even further on this: “what we need—really need—is something different,” he insists, “something we might even be censored for, yet so sound it can be defended honestly on artistic grounds. That would give me lots of publicity” (34). Stuartt himself is more interested in the pleasures of disruption than literary fame and ignores Rusty’s self-centered desire for publicity. Yet Stuartt delights in the opportunity to capitalize on Rusty’s ambition by publishing something as ludicrous as possible. Stuartt suggests: “I might write a novel of lesbian love. Print it in caps, and have the first part in the first issue. Then everyone would want to get the next issue to see how far we’d go. Or a short story. Make it a myth—a sort of Zeus-Ganymede affair. I might even be able to write it prettily. Like an Androgyne. . . .” (34, ellipsis original). Homosexuality, for Stuartt, holds pride of place in the realm of the unpublishable, guaranteed to shock in its affront to sexual respectability. As Stuartt discusses his idea, however,

it becomes clear that the formal elements of his proposed composition take precedence over the subject matter. Rather than undertake a principled and sincere consideration of homosexuality, Stuartt deems “a novel of lesbian love” to be virtually interchangeable with “a myth” representing “a sort of Zeus-Ganymede affair,” indicating that he views queerness primarily as an archetype and a tool with which to offend public morals. He is mostly interested in whether he can get away with something sexually taboo by dressing it up as experimental art. He insists that the text should look striking on the page, perhaps printed “in caps,” and that the unconventional style should give the impression of authenticity, perhaps written “prettily,” “like an Androgyne,” such that the style raises questions about the gender of the implied author.²⁴⁷ To Rusty’s query, “But would you dare sign it?” (34), Stuartt happily assents, signaling his eagerness to deepen his own perceived eccentricity by penning a queer story in an androgynous form. Stuartt craves a scandal, but he prefers that it be committed in the proper style: “if you’re serious, Rusty, and I’m afraid you are, let’s be a little more artistic—more as if we were naively and sincerely ‘art-for-art’s-sake.’ No need to advertise that we are asking to be censored” (34). To be *too* obvious, “asking to be censored,” ruins the appearance of sincerity. Rather, Stuartt posits that there is enough heft in “artistic” form to justify a sexual and literary experiment that, inartistically presented, would be baldly distasteful. The young Stuartt wagers that exploring queer social forms through experimental literary ones might, at least for some readers, argue convincingly—albeit “naively and sincerely”—that queerness is redeemable on artistic grounds.

²⁴⁷ Stuartt’s writing “like an Androgyne,” besides rhyming with Woolf’s notion of androgynous writing in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), poses an addendum to Robyn Warhol’s question: “What happens to a text when the writer is *writing as a woman*?” See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989), esp. chapter 6, 95–114; Robyn R. Warhol, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 18. Emphasis original.

The Queer Art of Living

Stuartt, content to play semi-seriously the role of queer advocate, is happy to accept the suspicions of queerness that consequently dog him. Stuartt and Rusty both attain local infamy for their sexually outré stories; having “succeeded” in their “intent to shock,” they find themselves “persons to avoid,” “looked upon in askance by the more or less respectable people in whose company they found themselves thrown with less and less frequency. They were more in demand than ever at the downtown parties. They were curiosities, like the Siamese twins or the fat woman at the circus” (80). Stuartt and Rusty are thus rewarded for their transgressions with a sort of queer clout: thumbing their noses at the respectable elites, their status as social outcasts surrounds them with an air of freakish novelty considered hip, or at least intriguing, in certain circles. For Stuartt, such attention aligns perfectly with the eccentric persona he has long been cultivating: “He was generally liked and despised as an attractive oddity. . . . One could always depend on him to say the shocking thing with a naiveté which was both charming and disarming. . . . Stuartt had discovered the advantage of proving that he was immoral in an amusing way. . . . He was an exhibitionist and had found his most perfect stage” (73). Having embraced his status as an “attractive oddity” and augmented it by learning to say “shocking” and “immoral” things in a “charming” manner, Stuartt has made a career out of his “exhibitionist” tendencies that can only be advanced by his new notoriety as the author of experimental queer fiction. Furthermore, his mode of living is isomorphic with his mode of artistic expression: without bothering much about whether he believes in what he’s selling, Stuartt delights in finding out how “shocking” an idea he can express if it is dressed in an “attractive” enough package.

Stuartt’s approach to sexuality in both life and art gives the impression that he is beyond embarrassment, adding to his flamboyant mystique. Stuartt invites suspicions about his gender

and sexuality by living as a Wildean decadent, making avant-garde “erotic” “art stuff” (33), continuously brandishing a “pink Tom Collins” instead of “a man’s drink” (47), and flirting with male waitstaff consistently enough to make his friends wonder whether he “is more attracted to speakeasies by the bartender than by liquor” (105). When his friends make such statements, Stuartt fuels rather than dismisses their suspicions. Stuartt comes off as disreputable, sexually suspect, but intriguing, allowing him to flirt with queerness by means of its cultural signifiers—decadent dress, soft voice, girly drinks. His queer performance allows him to benefit from the fascination he stirs in others while keeping his actual sexuality out of reach. His flirtation with queerness is primarily formal.

Stuartt’s formal flirtations with queerness point to his experimental reworking of another social form: the hierarchy. As Caroline Levine discusses, hierarchies are forms insofar as they “arrange bodies, things, and ideas according to levels of power and importance”; as such, “the most consistent and painful affordance of hierarchical structures is inequality.”²⁴⁸ However, Levine also posits that “as they collide with other hierarchies and an array of other forms in social situations, hierarchies often go awry or are rerouted.”²⁴⁹ While others attempt to enforce a hierarchy of sexual respectability and compulsory heterosexuality, Stuartt delights in imposing alternative hierarchies and rerouting hegemonic ones. We have already seen him do as much in his literary work, deploying experimental narrative forms to elevate both disrespectable queer subjects and always-already lowbrow Black writing to high art. Whereas the norms of respectability seek to rigidify and enforce existing hierarchies of racial and sexual valuation, Stuartt’s cultivated eccentricity turns him into a living inversion (pun intended) of racial and

²⁴⁸ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 82.

²⁴⁹ Levine, 85.

sexual hierarchies, casting aspersions on what is conventionally valued while rendering glamorous all that is traditionally disparaged. All this is achieved through Stuartt's charming disposition, his ability to apply good form to questionable objects. For instance, when Stuartt is at a bar "full of the hardest looking specimens" and is harassed by a patron who, in order "to poke fun," orders "in an exaggerated soft voice . . . 'a Tom Collins, please,'" Stuartt takes it upon himself to step behind the bar and mix up a whole round of delicate pink cocktails and serve them to the crowd of "roughnecks" (107). Stuartt neither shrinks from the insults nor disengages from the group of working-class men whose provocations seek to mark him as an effete bourgeois; he instead offers as an olive branch the effeminate signifier they have scorned, extending an alcoholic version of "don't knock it till you've tried it" while also adopting temporarily a service role to signal that he does not consider himself above the working-class crowd. With this, Stuartt interrupts the gendered hierarchy that the men seek to reinforce with a gesture of generosity: a free drink is a free drink, and mixed by Stuartt, so too does queerness become palatable, perhaps even enjoyable, to those who would otherwise scorn it.

While Stuartt happily displays various social markers of queerness, he stops short in the novel's first half of indicating any actual homosexual desire. His flirtations and flamboyances, coincident as they are with this eccentric demeanor and unserious attitude, amount only to circumstantial evidence of his queer desire. This drives mad the likes of Leslie Prentiss (whose sanctimonious white savior complex Stuartt finds almost as insufferable as amusing) and Bum Borjolfen, Stuartt's most moralizing (and, not coincidentally, white) acquaintances. Both endeavor to trick Stuartt into a confession of his "true" sexual identity, the knowledge of which he delights in denying them. When Leslie, "so serious," asks Stuartt whether he is queer and attracted to men, Stuartt casually replies: "Yes, don't you? And women, too. And I'm very fond of eats. Does that

make me queer?” (113). As Stuartt lazily sidesteps Leslie’s earnest query, the narrator ironically invokes traditional narrative suspense with his own (deliberately naïve) questions: “Had Leslie really cornered the always-victorious Stuartt?” (113). Of course, he has not, and Leslie comes away “silenced,” denied the truth he had sought to extract. Just as Stuartt delights in creating literary provocations that hint at the author’s sexual deviance through an obscuring experimental style, so too does he pepper his life with irresistible queer hints that never quite cohere into legibility.

As these instances show, Stuartt outwardly treats sexuality as an unserious matter throughout the novel’s first half. Although we are told early on about Stuartt’s youthful identifications with the “one-hundred-and-twenty-seven-cases” studied by “Krafft-Ebing” and his decision to adopt an eccentric artistic identity as a smokescreen (11), this early reference to homosexual desire is quickly left dangling by the narrative, which continues without any further concrete evidence of Stuartt’s homosexual desire or behavior for the entirety of Book I. Stuartt does court queerness by adopting its social markers but neither confirms nor denies that he is attracted to men. As such, he capsizes his own presumed heterosexuality, actively denying himself the benefits thereof. That is to say, he refuses to claim genuinely any particular sexual identity, preferring instead to keep others guessing. In so doing, Stuartt appears to embrace an anti-identitarian position with regards to sexuality, one that exhibits resistance to the idea of sexuality as a regime of power through which individuals are disciplined.

However, Stuartt cannot be said to exhibit that principled refusal of identity through which queerness is sometimes defined. By espousing queer social forms, Stuartt actively invites others to read his behaviors as symptomatic of his “true,” essential sexuality. As we have seen, this is not coincidental, but rather an effect that Stuartt actively seeks in order to generate

intrigue and speculation, ensuring that he remains at the center of attention. By appearing not to care about sexual identity, indeed to be careless in his imperfect concealment of telltale signs, Stuartt actively curates a persona that capitalizes on popular assumptions about sexuality. As such, he treats his own life, or at least his social persona, as a composition to be arranged, an artistic form that can be manipulated through particular shapes to create a desired effect. From what we can tell in the novel's first half, Stuartt desires queerness in form only: to be *perceived* as more deviant, eccentric, and erotically interesting than he actually is. At the same time, he works quite deliberately to create this effect; by working seriously to maintain queer form in the social realm (as well as the literary), he belies the aura of carelessness that he seeks to present.

Stuartt's approach to sexuality as presented in the novel's first half is distinct from his relationship to Black identity. As we have seen, Stuartt straightforwardly claims Blackness as a "fact" of his existence, yet evacuates that identity category of meaningfulness, positing that Blackness is only defined through white supremacist essentialisms. By contrast, Stuartt apparently affirms the meaningfulness of an essentialized queer identity by embracing it as something to be desired for the attention it brings and the provocative assumptions it inspires. He consents to being judged in sexual identity terms while refusing similar judgment on the basis of race. For Stuartt, Blackness represents a closed form, too *much* form, a form that precludes more than it facilitates. In contrast, queerness exists for him as a potentiality, a site of possibility that, in its existence as a social form, allows him to control how he is perceived.²⁵⁰ If Blackness signifies for Stuartt an *a priori* concession to others' assumptions—he cannot control whether he

²⁵⁰ Cf. Muñoz: "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality." José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

is perceived as Black—queerness as social form allows him to attain a degree of agency over how he is seen. So long as Stuartt can present his presumed queerness in a palatable package, he can curate an image that is primarily defined through an eccentricity that confers, in the right circles, the social capital he craves.

The narration of *Gentleman Jigger*'s first book also works to keep Stuartt's "true" sexuality hidden from readers. Here, Stuartt is mostly presented from an external perspective: either through the distanced, critical gaze of the narrator, who is and is not Nugent, or through the variously puzzled, amused, admiring, and frustrated standpoints of his friends and acquaintances. The hints of suspense that the narrator deploys are also meant to tease the reader into desiring a "gotcha" moment wherein Stuartt's true sexuality is revealed. Even more than this, though, the narration labors—much like Stuartt labors socially—to construct him as an enigma whose "true" perspective, true thoughts and feelings, are concealed beneath his stylized, never-quite-serious exterior. We should remember that it is the narrator who, presenting Stuartt's early ideas for *The Current*'s contents, states: "Stuartt sounded as though he might be serious. Or making fun of their intended audience. It and himself. It was always a little hard to tell. Stuartt's ability to find himself as well as others ridiculous was persistently disconcerting and confusing" (31). The narrator reports with this description not his own confoundment with Stuartt but the impression Stuartt makes on others, denying readers access to Stuartt's mind and placing them in the thwarted, uncertain position of those acquaintances who puzzle over him. Even setting aside the expectation that Stuartt's being a fictional version of young Nugent would occasion access to his interiority, the narrator's demonstrated omniscience elsewhere in the novel emphasizes the deliberateness of this withholding. In a few isolated moments early in the novel, the narrator reports Stuartt's more banal thoughts and feelings about, for instance, the epigrams he labors to

invent: “His own cleverness amused him. I must remember that for a moment when it really fits, he thought” (29). For the most part, however, the narrator denies readers access to his omniscience in order to render Stuartt as opaque as possible, leaving readers as confounded as the novel’s other characters when it comes to judging if, when, and to what extent Stuartt ever believes or genuinely feels anything.

In this sense, *Gentleman Jigger* reveals in its first half an investment in using narrative form to achieve a type of mimesis. Rather than present others’ confusion about Stuartt from a knowing, insider’s perspective, the narration forces readers to experience his opacity themselves. At the same time, *Gentleman Jigger* does not generate opacity by utilizing formal experimentalism as does, for instance, *The Young and Evil*. Ford and Tyler use their surrealist style to portray the internal ruminations of Karel and Julian, leaning on sentence-level and linguistic defamiliarization to represent the characters’ stream-of-consciousness internal monologues. The effect is that, by being thrust into these characters’ mental raw material, we are given an intimate glimpse of their thought patterns, but one that is more obscuring than clarifying. The impression given is that these characters’ inner workings are too complex, too convoluted to be interpreted fully in their uncooked form, thus imparting to Julian and Karel an air of intellectualism and intrigue through formal difficulty. *Gentleman Jigger*’s first half shrouds Stuartt in a similar aura of intrigue, but it does so by placing readers mimetically in the position of his acquaintances: utilizing formal devices consistent with conventional realist narrative, this first half presents Stuartt primarily from the outside, as his friends would see him, rendering him similarly opaque. However, Stuartt’s opacity is presented not as a result of the author’s formal narrative choices but of Stuartt’s formal social ones. Whereas we are given the “truth” of Julian and Karel (their minds are revealed as being impenetrably complex), Stuartt’s

opacity, constructed as it is through his own social performances and unalleviated by the narrator, creates the effect of narrative suspense. The narrator's withholdings generate in readers the same effect that Stuartt's generate in Leslie and Bum: the desire to know the truth behind his external form.

Interiority and Queer Bildung

If "Book I: Washington to Harlem" is characterized by Stuartt's surface performance of self and subsequent opacity, then "Book II: Greenwich Village to Chicago" represents an abrupt transition in the narrative's form to directly presenting Stuartt's (and others') thoughts and emotions. Not only does this result in increased intimacy and transparency, it also reveals a Stuartt whose approach to queer love and sex is surprisingly earnest, delicate, and sentimental. As such, the narrative's sudden revelation of Stuartt's thoughts shocks readers by shattering the aloof and unserious exterior that Stuartt has established throughout Book I. Whereas Stuartt's performative flirtations with queerness in Book I seemed to indicate his desire for queerness as a purely superficial social form, Stuartt reveals in Book II an equally if not more pressing desire for the types of relationality that sexuality as a social form can facilitate when one employs it as an interpretive tool for self-understanding. This is demonstrated through Stuartt's extreme embarrassment at his sexual inexperience with men, his intense infatuation with a series of male lovers, and his explicit declarations of identification with the queer subculture. Stuartt is thus shown in Book II to possess not merely a strategic relationship to queer sexuality but also an earnest desire for it.

Book II opens with the stark announcement that the narration is situated within Stuartt's consciousness. Brooding in the bath, "rather despondent and thinking the many tumbled thoughts

of confused people,” Stuartt is beginning to realize that the queer pretenses he has been maintaining “ring an unrealized chord within” himself (171). Stuartt, heretofore so conceitedly self-assured, is suddenly “despondent” and “confused” over the relationship between his social persona and his sense of self. He recalls having thought that his playful hinting at homosexual desire was “merely a conversational escape at the time, perhaps,” “just a couple of words which, when accepted simply as words to be enjoyed only through the incongruous pictures they might conjure forth, would create a bizarre hilarity” (171). This meditation implies that Stuartt himself had indeed not taken these words particularly seriously, had only been interested in the superficial conjuration of “incongruous pictures” and “bizarre hilarity.” Stuartt faces a personal conundrum, however, now that he had “found himself believed” and “men had begun to approach him in a suggestive manner, challenging him to follow through” (171). The narrator reports Stuartt’s embarrassing situation: “he was not, in fact, as homosexually experienced as his witty conversation had implied,” rendering “the myth that cloaked him vulnerable” (172). At this point, it appears that Stuartt’s concerns are still mainly about keeping up appearances: he worries that he will be caught in a lie, that the air of mystery and eccentricity with which he has surrounded himself through “his carelessness of dress” and “unconventional behavior” will be penetrated and his true self found wanting (172). Moreover, he worries that he will be revealed to be much more normal and less transgressive than he has managed to convince others that he is.

Crucially, the process of narrating Stuartt’s anxiety over the external form into which he has shaped his life requires the narrator to breach Stuartt’s unserious exterior in the way that Stuartt worries others will if his homosexual inexperience is found out. Besides constituting an amusingly inverted epistemology of the closet—Stuartt endeavors to keep others convinced that he has an open secret so as to conceal the truth of his heretofore normative (or nonexistent) sex

life—this revelation of his thoughts shows the extent to which for Stuartt, still a young man, sexuality has largely been a matter of appearances.²⁵¹ And so, absurdly enough, Stuartt’s first legitimate interest in having an affair with a man comes from his determination to “rarify his new aura and appear . . . as the shimmering, unreal thing they expected” (172). At the same time, he expresses an interest in achieving a self-knowledge that he has hitherto avoided: “he was determined to fathom himself,” “he did not even know this thing he had named himself” (172). With this admission, we are prompted to reread the significance of Book I’s narrative form, which presents Stuartt almost entirely from an external perspective. While this mode of narration does indeed describe Stuartt mostly through how others see him, Stuartt’s admission of his lack of knowledge of “this thing” indicates that Stuartt has mostly seen *himself* through his effect on others. Stuartt’s opacity, then, is not just his opacity to others but to himself. In this sense, the dramatic change in narrative form that takes place in the novel’s second half quickly makes clear that the narration of the first half withholds information about Stuartt’s interiority in part to mirror his own lack of self-knowledge.

Given this focus on knowledge acquisition, the unique narrative form of *Gentleman Jigger*’s second book urges us to consider the novel as a queer Bildungsroman. In the traditional Bildungsroman, a central character goes through a process of formation (*Bildung*) and maturation through which they overcome childish incompatibilities with normative social expectations, ultimately finding ways to assimilate to normative society, thus becoming a “well-adjusted” adult. As such, the Bildungsroman as narrative form has been thoroughly critiqued for its normative investments, which require the expungement of queer deviations from a normative lifestyle. *Gentleman Jigger*, however, inverts this formula, portraying the development of a

²⁵¹ Cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

young man whose words hint superficially at a disrespectable sexuality into an adult who actualizes queerness. As such, *Gentleman Jigger* reconceptualizes the Bildungsroman as a narrative form that can valorize the achievement of deviance, rather than conformity, through the harnessing of social forms.

Queer Tutelage

Stuartt's first forays into homosexuality demonstrate—not without an element of irony—that queerness is a social form insofar as it is something one must learn.²⁵² Just as Stuartt's first introduction to the idea of homosexual desire came from Krafft-Ebing, his first exploration of gay sex relies on his commitment to an “academically sound” approach: “purchasing and reading the erotic lessons in the practice of love as written by the Indian, Vatsyayana, in the lavishly illustrated *Kama Sutra*” (173). Whereas Stuartt has labored to present himself as careless and haphazard in his approach to life, his desire to read up on the theory and mechanics of gay sex before trying it out in practice betrays a serious and meticulous side of him that has heretofore been concealed. That this is Stuartt's first instinct further solidifies his desire for form in his approach to sexuality: Stuartt relies on the idea of having a structured script so that he might continue to keep up appearances all the way through his first homosexual encounter. Stuartt thus takes refuge in the idea that, if he knows enough to feign experience—as he has heretofore been successful in doing through his words—he will be able to gain the experience he desires without admitting to anyone the “vague shame that prohibited him from contacting the various friends

²⁵² This is, of course, not to say that same-sex desire is learned, but that the trappings of queer identity are: from the modes by which one acts on that desire to the mechanics of queer sex to the forms and structures of queer relationships to the cultural signifiers attached to queerness (the last of which Stuartt has already learned to emulate). See David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), esp. 3–32.

whose interest in him, he believed but was not certain, was more than casual” (173). His “shame,” of course, is not that of queer difference but of queer inexperience.

As the narration grows more intimate with regards to Stuartt, readers are introduced to the depths of sexual insecurity that underlie and necessitate his arrogant exterior. Stuartt identifies Kris as “a likely prospect” for his first homosexual encounter but struggles “to say the proper thing,” to organize his desire into linguistic form, despite his usually glib demeanor (173). Stuartt’s default defense mechanism here becomes a liability: around Kris, “Stuartt had always become nervous and timid—a fact he hid under an exterior so calm and extreme that Kris’s ardor cooled” (173). Stuartt’s aloof exterior, elsewhere so crucial to his successful performance of artistic eccentricity, proves a turn-off when it comes to establishing the intimacy required for a successful romance. As Stuartt comes to realize, sincerity is key to early-twentieth-century queer courtship: when interest must be established through unspoken cues, an air of ironic detachment risks making one appear untrustworthy.²⁵³ In order to communicate the depth of Stuartt’s “untranslatable fear,” the narration shifts to an extended section of free indirect discourse, placing the reader inside Stuartt’s anxious thoughts: “Suppose he had been reading Kris’s interest wrongly. Suppose Kris resented his advance. Or worse, suppose he laughed” (173–74). Stuartt’s insecurities are here baldly presented in a direct narration of his thoughts, a narrative form that is almost entirely absent from Book I. The tone seems calculated to inspire pity at Stuartt’s deep self-consciousness with regards to romantic matters, displaying with the repetition of the word “suppose” his anxious tendency to imagine a proliferating series of bad scenarios. Stuartt concludes that he must change his external presentation despite its deeply habitual status: “He must learn to say things without that little smile of his that rendered even his most intimate

²⁵³ See Chapter 3 for a prolonged discussion of the importance of trust in early-twentieth-century queer culture.

or suggestive remark ambiguous and left the one to whom he uttered it even more uncertain. He realized that one needed encouragement of some sort, and he knew that that smile of his left the other with a feeling that any intimacy suggested by word or gesture might be laughed at. And Stuartt knew only too well the fear of being laughed at. It was the very reason for his smile. His smile was his protection” (174). Stuartt realizes that he has been relying on this suave but opaque persona, synecdochically represented by “that little smile of his,” not only as a form of self-protection but as a barrier to intimacy. While it has helped him to make a lasting impression as a careless and aloof artist, it will also preclude his exploration of queer desire. With this realization, Stuartt starts down the path of self-cultivation, of queer *Bildung*.

The narrative’s disclosure that Stuartt has been using a stylized persona in order to control his public appearance makes clearer the purpose of *Gentleman Jigger*’s comparatively conventional narrative form. Stuartt’s obsession with maintaining control over how he is perceived is mirrored by the level of control that the narrative is able to obtain over readers. In Book I this is attained through withholding information and generating, both in other characters and in the reader, a sense of suspense and a desire to know more about Stuartt. By Book II, it becomes clear that this external mode of narration, which presents Stuartt as impenetrably glib, has reached the limit of its usefulness: any more of it and Stuartt would become irredeemably unlikeable, just as his aloof presentation forecloses queer intimacy. The novel’s shift toward reporting Stuartt’s internal monologue and representing it through free indirect discourse deploys a different but still conventional mode of narration, this time encouraging a sympathetic view of a previously unsympathetic character by spelling out in no uncertain terms his pitiable feelings:

embarrassment, fear, self-consciousness.²⁵⁴ By way of contrast, the experimental approach to the representation of consciousness undertaken in *The Young and Evil* gives up a good deal of control to the reader: difficult to interpret, often unsympathetic, and largely ambiguous, the slurry of thoughts, memories, and feelings presented in that text seem explicitly unconcerned with generating readerly pity or even straightforward interpretability. *Gentleman Jigger*, however, utilizes a bifurcated narrative form—a withholding narration in Book I that abruptly shifts to an intimate one in Book II—to maintain as tight a control over readerly interpretation of its central character as that which Stuartt himself maintains over others. The result is a queer modernist novel that exhibits its desire for form both narratively and thematically. Not unlike *Passing*, though to much different effect, *Gentleman Jigger* deploys a tightly structured narrative shape to represent its central character’s desires to achieve such control in his own life.

Needing to supplement his purely academic studies and to “find a more aggressive person to launch him on this career,” Stuartt takes to Washington Square to observe the cruising grounds of “Italian hoodlums” and “painted boys” (174). It is significant that Stuartt chooses the word “career” to refer to the queer way of life he desires (the word is Stuartt’s as signaled by free indirect discourse), as “career” emphasizes its formal qualities: queerness as a set path to be followed, complete with discernible milestones and proper ways of doing things. Indeed, Stuartt begins to pick up on these formal components of queer life through his interested observations. He notes the flamboyantly masculine “Italian hoodlums in exaggerated clothes creased to razor sharpness, with dark, sallow skins and oiled hair, strutting with clicking heels and a cocky grace which was almost vulgar, but which was strangely attractive” as well as the “painted boys who

²⁵⁴ While the feelings explored in Book II of *Gentleman Jigger* are not those dramatically “ugly feelings” discussed by Sianne Ngai, they represent a similar collision of the affective and the aesthetic represented through narrative form. See *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

ogled the hoodlums hungrily and lowered their eyes in false modesty and brazen coquetry as they passed, leaving trails of perfume” (174). Familiarizing himself with these queer types, Stuartt catalogues their formal attributes, including race/ethnicity, dress, deportment, grooming, nonverbal signals, and scents. He marks the “attractive” qualities of the masculine queers while considering the fairies (“painted boys”) to be “blatant travesties” that were “distasteful, but fascinating” (174), indicating his own desire to triangulate his queerness in relation to these types as one who is interested sexually in the former but does not share the latter’s identification with an effeminate fairy gender.²⁵⁵ Contrary to his usual experience, Stuartt finds himself treated as completely unremarkable in this space: he experiences “a disappointment that confused him when they passed with the most casual of glances, as though he were an empty bench or a tree” (174). Failing to fit the standard gendered forms through which queerness is interpreted, even Stuartt’s eccentric sensibilities fail to attract attention here. Instead, he finds himself iteratively “shamed and resentful, but attracted” to “some assured and arrogantly masculine” specimen, while at the same time “feeling an emotion very akin to envy” of the “boy,” “delicate and effeminate, walking with obnoxious complacency beside” such a man. Almost as soon as Stuartt’s exploration of queer sexuality begins, he recognizes ambivalent desires for the relational forms that he observes; seeing such a couple produces attraction, envy, as well as disavowal of effeminacy. The experience provides Stuartt a schema through which to interpret his own desire, consequently generating in him “a nostalgia for something he had never known” (175). Such emotions continue to be communicated through a narrative directness that

²⁵⁵ See Chapter 3. It is worth noting here that the choice of the word “travesties,” from the Latin *trans-* and *vestire*, to describe the fairies highlights the word’s etymological connection to gender nonconforming dress. This does not reduce the phobic implications of the statement; Stuartt elsewhere asserts: “I hate painted, screaming sissies” (235). “travesty, adj. and n.” *OED Online*. December 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/205300?rskey=B8BrJ5&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

emphasizes Stuartt's vulnerability, desperate loneliness, and longing to replicate certain aspects of the queer relational forms he encounters while doing so in his own way.

Stuartt's first successful sexual encounter is initiated as a result of his overcoming his detached demeanor and successfully adopting an air of sincerity and vulnerability. Hiding behind "a cigarette," "his greatest camouflage," Stuartt observes a few young men whom he thinks might be fair game (176). Having learned from his observations the group's nonverbal signs—he knows that their looking "ostentatiously away from him" indicates that they are "in reality watching him" (176)—he deploys such forms appropriately, at first pretending "to not notice" but then permitting "himself to look" as they draw near and exchanging "a quick smile" with one member of the group (176). Stuartt's successful control of his gaze, indicating interest without seeming overeager, combined with a well-timed smile, allows him to communicate the appropriate amount of approachability and demonstrates his nascent proficiency with nonverbal queer codes. Endeavoring to maintain a cool but friendly air, Stuartt offers the young man a cigarette, trying to chat pleasantly but finding himself at a loss for words: "Stuartt was feeling inadequate. He knew this was an attempt at conversation and felt his own ineptness giving the appearance of unfriendliness" (177). Usually so glib, in the context of an actual sexual overture Stuartt's attempts to express himself with casual pleasantries rather than polemical opinions find him untrained and overwhelmed by his nervousness.

It is ultimately Stuartt's vulnerability that facilitates the desired outcome. When Stuartt gets the young man, Ray, to his apartment, Stuartt is overcome by "a state of extreme nervousness" and consequent embarrassment at being able to "neither move nor speak" (179). Lacking any script for what to say, he becomes unbearably awkward, terrified to admit his inexperience. Finally, he is forced, for lack of knowing the proper way to initiate a sexual

scenario, to drop his “cloak of sophistication” and “protective coloring” to admit that this is his “first time” (179). Stuartt thus gives up control to Ray, who turns “scornfully superior” and begins to undress, ultimately leading Stuartt into the bedroom where they spend the night together. Stuartt’s embarrassment, though, persists well into the following morning: he experiences the “same feeling of intense embarrassment creeping over him that had crippled him the night before” and tries desperately “to conquer his embarrassment, which embarrassed him” (182). As much as the night before, Stuartt is at a loss for any existing forms which might map for him the trajectory of a homosexual encounter, including what to do the morning after.²⁵⁶ Yet, Stuartt finds it in himself to be open to Ray about his insecurities, admitting his uncertainty about whether Ray expects money and apologizing for his lack of sexual prowess. Ray is frank in return, affirming that Stuartt was “lousy” and explaining that he usually only sleeps with men because he “need[s] money quick” (183, 187). Their mutual honesty proves sufficient to establish a connection, and Stuartt, eager to become acculturated to queer social forms, accepts Ray’s offer to give him “a few lessons”; Ray adds: “maybe after you seen me a few times I can learn you something” (189). Thus establishing a pedagogical relationship with Ray, Stuartt is able, by giving up some of the control he has long worked to maintain, to lay the groundwork for his own initiation into the social and sexual forms of queer life.

The self-cultivation that Stuartt initiates in this pivotal encounter is in large part achieved by his recognition and acceptance of his own sentimentality. While waiting for Ray to awaken, Stuartt realizes “that a great factor” in his extreme embarrassment is “his sentimentality” and that he is “ashamed of sentiment” despite the fact that “he had in reality always been very

²⁵⁶ This same conundrum is illustrated in Neil Bartlett, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1990). See also David M. Halperin, “Queer Love,” *Critical Inquiry*, 45.2 (Winter 2019), 396–419.

sentimental” (181). Stuartt’s realization is that his concern with perfecting “his attitude” (181), his external presentation of self, has come at the expense of introspection. As we have seen, Stuartt has shown himself to be preoccupied in Book I with shaping himself superficially, much like an artistic composition, into an analog of his experimental, shocking modernist work. These attempts to mold himself into the “attitude” expected of him by those who know his art have resulted in his suppressing those aspects of himself that failed to fit neatly within that form, including certain emotions, which he terms his sentimentality. We should recall from my first chapter that it is also a latent sentimentality that threatens to undo *Nightwood*’s cynicism. In *Nightwood*’s case, this cynicism is a lynchpin of the narrative’s ostensibly queer experimentalism, which, once removed, dismantles the novel’s formal appearance of antinormativity. In *Gentleman Jigger*, the novel’s narrative form, shifting as it does between external and internal presentation of Stuartt, depicts Stuartt’s dismantling of his own superficial commitment to antinormativity. Allowing himself to “analyze his emotions,” he opens himself to being “surprised at the sensation” of feeling “frightened and dependent” at the thought “that Ray might never come again” (181). By acknowledging this long-held sentimentality, Stuartt begins to embrace qualities that contradict the rigidly cynical persona he has been constructing and to locate within his queer desire a surprisingly conventional desire for romance.

Taking Sexuality Seriously

Stuartt’s embrace of his emotions, including his affection for Ray, coincide with an earnest desire to pursue a queer way of life. Concerned as always about his public persona, Stuartt begins to wonder after his night with Ray about “the various sorts of regards in which he could now expect himself to be held” (181). Of course, living a covert queer life was never an

option for Stuartt, for whom the idea of sexual nonnormativity was always an extension of his artistic glamour. Yet, he worries about what queer identity will mean for his reputation, especially if his queer exploits take him into unfamiliar social scenarios. Stuartt admits “that he would now definitely be considered a member of a group beyond overt social acceptance” and imagines “there was little or no respect to be expected for the group with which he would now be classed by Ray and his associates after last night”; furthermore, “he knew he couldn’t expect a person whose every contact and tradition had taught him the inferiority of persons who performed as Stuartt had ever to have more than a contemptuous appreciation for, or curiosity toward him” (181). Acknowledging already a shift in identity, at least in the minds of others, Stuartt almost immediately prepares himself to be socially legible as “a member of a group” defined by queer sexuality. Despite having sought out Ray in part to bolster this identification, he seems not to have anticipated the social disadvantages that could accompany identifying as queer. He acknowledges that these disadvantages could function differently in different circles. Besides anticipating the general lack of “social acceptance” afforded to queers by the “tradition[s]” inherent in the middle-class sexual norms with which he is most familiar, he further worries that “Ray and his associates”—straight-identifying, masculine, Italian working-class men—will deny him “respect” by associating him, presumably, with the gendered inferiority attributed to receptive partners.²⁵⁷ Stuartt’s concern points to his interest not only in forging a serious relationship with Ray based on “respect”—not often afforded to receptive male partners by working-class trade—but also in continuing to forge connections with others of a similar class. Stuartt’s identification with queerness and his desire to gain acceptance within

²⁵⁷ See my discussion of this in Chapter 3 as well as George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic, 1994).

working-class immigrant communities both indicate his continued commitment to upending hierarchies. Moreover, by seeking to forge his own ways of being queer—to embrace queer identity while still commanding respect—he expresses an interest in navigating between extant queer forms and his own particular queer style.

Stuartt quickly overcomes his concerns with how he will be perceived by the various groups in which he circulates (or hopes to) and openly embraces “his own sexual nature” and banishes his “residual belief” that it is “somehow ‘abnormal’” (182). This rejection of abnormality seems to belie his initial motivation for flirting with queer identity: the establishment of an eccentric persona through an espousal of antinormativity. Stuartt’s need “to have respect,” “too familiar a commodity for him to do without” (181), seems to necessitate his pursuit not of respectability politics, but of a paradoxical, unexpected merging of the queer and the acceptable—exemplified by his attempt to forge a conventional, mutually respectful relationship with Ray. It is through this mixture, this *stabilizing* of queerness, that Stuartt aims to overcome the “monstrous, nebulous and unpleasant obstacles” that accompany his queer identification (181). Stuartt’s fear of the “nebulous” crucially signals his desire for form: to concretize sexuality in a statement of identity is to meet uncertain “obstacles” with a certainty of self, to count on sexuality as a meaningful and meaning-making form.

As such, Stuartt shortly after announces his infatuation with Ray and identification with queer sexuality to Rusty and Bum, solidifying his earnest embrace of a queer sense of self. Stuartt’s friends are “surprised at the seriousness” of Stuartt’s assertion (193), questioning him with the expectation that he’ll admit to making an elaborate joke. Instead, Stuartt confesses that, although when he “started this business about being homosexual” he “didn’t take it seriously” (195), he is now happy to consider “queers” to be “the group I’ve identified myself with” (194).

Stuartt's assertions lead his friends to wonder privately how he has shifted so dramatically toward being "honest and unembellished," "not synthetic" (198), and embracing "earnestness" (196) with regards to love and sexuality. Stuartt furthermore avers the importance of owning this identity when he criticizes Rusty and Bum for hiding their own attractions to one another: "You don't know what to do about it. . . . You know it can't be a physical attraction, because you merely allowed that after discovering it was an essential element in attaining this other nebulous contact you want" (195). Stuartt thus expresses exasperation at Rusty and Bum's inability to give form to the queer attachment, the "nebulous contact" that exists between them. While they predictably protest, Stuartt assures them: "It's a safe secret; I don't give a damn. But I *am* interested in thrashing out this thing about Ray and myself" (195). Unlike Rusty and Bum, whose commitment to secrecy seems to preclude sexual self-examination and understanding, Stuartt articulates the necessity of openly identifying with his queer desires in order to do the work of "thrashing out" that might lead to the queer Bildung of self-cultivation. Bum even privately admits admiration for Stuartt's approach. When Rusty grumbles that Stuartt is "making too big an issue of this homosexuality stuff," Bum replies: "I have a feeling that Stuartt is getting to something. He's clearing up something that is essential to clear up. And he's got the guts to make a concrete issue of something that is nebulous and intangible and censured in Boston" (198). This business of "making a concrete issue" of a desire "that is nebulous" is to do the work of "clearing up" that leads to sexual self-knowledge.

Whereas the Stuartt of Book I indulged a "properly" queer cynicism about identity, dismantling Blackness and toying with queerness, his turn in Book II toward sincerely embracing queer identity as a social form illustrates his shift from a merely destructive impulse to something more creative. That is to say, if Stuartt at first merely deployed queerness for shock

value, as a superficial experimentalism meant to tear down critical expectations of him as a Black artist, his earnest identification with queerness facilitates a practice of approaching living itself as a work of art. Shortly after his announcement of queer identification, Stuartt asserts that “living is the only art I really profess” (203). Openly exploring queerness thus becomes part of Stuartt’s practice of self-cultivation, of building a life that is pleasantly arranged—both for his own enjoyment and for others to see.²⁵⁸ Indeed, just as his superficial posturing had once drawn critical attention, so too Stuartt’s newfound sincerity propels him into the spotlight.

Shortly after beginning his relationship with Ray, Stuartt begins “making the headlines” where he is lauded as “one of the most modern of the moderns” (189) for his recent paintings. His admiring critics seem as much drawn to his aura as his art: he is labelled “a strikingly handsome young man” and a “fit model for a beautiful youth” who exhibited “sincere modesty” (190). It is soon also made clear that this is not just Stuartt’s usual charm, but a true “aura,” “a sort of shining” that he has acquired since meeting Ray (191). With the narration briefly shifting focalizers to present Bum’s assessment of Stuartt, we get a clear picture of “the attraction that seemed to emanate from him”: “Although there was certainly nothing feminine in Stuartt’s grace, Bum was sure it caused men to notice, possibly with a little shame when they could not ascertain the exact cause of the attraction. And although there was nothing feminine or even androgynous about Stuartt’s features, they seemed to glow with—and Bum was hesitant to make and embarrassed by the comparison—the same sort of glow that in literature suffuses a beautiful girl who was living her first love” (191). Bum’s insistence on disavowing anything “feminine or

²⁵⁸ Discussing the aesthetics of existence, Michel Foucault observes that, in modernity, it became accepted that “the artist alone, as artist, must have a singular life, which is not entirely reducible to the usual dimensions and norms” and “must in some way be a manifestation of art itself in its truth.” *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II; Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2012), 187. See also Foucault on the cultivation of the self, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 2012), esp. 37–68.

even androgynous” about Stuartt’s changed appearance while failing to resist a comparison to “a beautiful girl” constitutes a significant protesting-too-much, even as it suggests a difference from the typical fairy form. What Bum struggles to describe is strongly suggested to be Stuartt’s particular queer form composed of attention to style and comportment. That is, it is not, or not only “love that lends him beauty” (202); rather, the experience and acceptance of queer love specifically has effected a change in his physical presentation. Stuartt’s new form, acquired so suddenly, can only be a change in deportment, his way of holding and conducting himself. That it “caused men to notice” and even to experience “attraction” points to Stuartt’s having learned, through his new exploits and experience, how to move and position his body so as to inspire such fascination. Stuartt himself later professes proficiency with the physical forms that make a man attractive: “There is the stride of the man, the way his legs show through his trousers and cause them to hang. His feet and the way he places them when he walks or plants them when he sits. His gestures, the way his hair falls, the way he glances, and the set of his lips” (297). His easy enumeration of these forms indicates his own successful deployment of them; Stuartt’s queer art of living, even in its early stages, transmutes his body into a more beautiful form. Moreover, as a “model for a beautiful youth,” Stuartt holds the ability to inspire in others the desire to emulate him; the narration reveals that “just watching Stuartt produced in Bum a rebellious nostalgia” (191), “rebellious” in its impulse away from normative conceptualizations of beauty to those of a queer form that is distinct from the fairy form. Bum further attributes Stuartt’s change to a “love of life—naïve, fatalistic love acquired through having learned and accepted things that most of us can’t” (202). It is Stuartt’s studies in queer being, having “accepted” this part of himself and having “learned” how to embody it with grace, from which his “love of life” and artful self-fashioning has stemmed.

Antisocial Hoodlums and Creative Identification

As Stuartt settles into an understanding of his own desires, he expresses a significant preference for Italian men. Stuartt's essentialist preference provides crucial insight into how Stuartt's desire for queerness intersects with his uneasy inhabitation of Blackness. What Stuartt sees (or thinks he sees) in Italian men is a willingness to treat people as individuals rather than as representatives of a particular identity. In Ray, whom Stuartt labels as "what's known in the vernacular as 'rough trade'" and "a hoodlum" (194), Stuartt sees someone who is "not cluttered up with a lot of do's and don'ts that creep in, in other classes," a valuable refusal of the "conventional narrowness of the middle class" (197). This fetishization of the working-class immigrant as "simple," "wholesome and clean" for his distance from the "conventional" "do's and don'ts" of the middle class is also a desire to seek out alternate value systems that do not prejudge Stuartt for his Black and queer transgressions of normative middle-class values. Speaking on his preference for Italians, Stuartt declares: "They are so much more capable of accepting me. Of allowing me to be an individual with my various individual methods of expression" (204). What Stuartt values is the idea of not being reducible to the identity categories he inhabits, not being defined in advance by white supremacist expectations about Black Americans. Stuartt draws attention to just this when he compares Ray's treatment of him as an individual to Bum's interpreting him always through the lens of Blackness—in Stuartt's words, "always throwing in the tradition of my sorry little African drop to color completely my others. As it, of course, does" (206). What Stuartt has been missing in other areas of his life, he has gotten from Ray: a relationship in which his value is not predetermined by the social identities he inhabits. As such, exploring queer identification paradoxically allows Stuartt to move away from

feeling dictated by identity. Identity still matters as a social form—Stuartt admits that “it, of course, does”—but Stuartt finds that inhabiting queerness affords opportunities to escape the shadow of a priori expectations for his Blackness.

Toward the end of the novel, Stuartt elaborates on this quality that he appreciates in the Italian men that he has loved. In a letter to Bum, he writes: “I find that I prefer people like Ray, Frank, Orini—Italian hoodlums. . . . It may only be that we are all anti-social, and so really instinctively recognize each other as *paisani*. They are each individuals. So am I. The only thing binding us into a separate group, into a kind, is our anti-social tendencies, outlook, and behavior” (295). On this notion of the “anti-social,” he elaborates: “Can it be that I am also anti-social? We all are, you know—criminals, artists, homosexuals, cripples, etc. Some sixth or seventh sense seems to make artists known to artists, criminals to criminals, etc., before a word has been spoken” (298). Stuartt here uses “anti-social” in a way that invokes Cathy Cohen’s notion of coalition: those who exist outside the “charmed circle”—to borrow a phrase from Gayle Rubin—of normative respectability standards are bound together as outsiders.²⁵⁹ The emphasis is not, as in Bersani’s notion of queer antisociality, on the self-shattering that reveals the impossibility of relationality through the dissolution of the ego.²⁶⁰ Rather, Stuartt articulates a notion of identity that is constituted through otherness, one that is legible to other members of an outcast in-group through a “sixth or seventh sense” and that is anti-social only insofar as it rejects social normativity. What he likes about the “Italian hoodlums” with whom he has been romantically

²⁵⁹ See Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (May 1997): 437–65; Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 152.

²⁶⁰ See Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). See also Laruen Berlant and Lee Edelman’s clarification of the term “antisocial” in reference to queer negativity. *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), xii–xiii.

involved is that, although “they have their veneer of popular convention to an extent,” convention “is more easily relegated to its proper subordinate place. Other conventions have been broken by them in their anti-social (or criminal) lives” (302). If anti-Blackness and anti-queerness are constitutive elements of “popular convention,” then an “anti-social (or criminal)” positionality from which “other conventions have been broken” opens the possibility for new forms of identity outside normative expectations. That is, whereas Stuartt’s Blackness would seem to preclude him from being part of the “*paisani*” in-group—a term used by Italian Americans to mean “fellow countrymen,” specifically reserved for other Italians²⁶¹—his being judged as an individual leads not to a dissolution of identity as a social form but to a queer resignification of identity as an “anti-social” positionality outside the norm.

This complicates the discussion of social forms we have so far been pursuing. It is not, as was the case in *The Young and Evil*, that Stuartt desires gender or sexuality as rigidly prefabricated forms through which he will be easily legible as a type. He rejects what might be the expected social form for his presumably receptive sexual predilections: “I’m not a ‘fag,’ you know. I hate painted, screaming sissies” (235). Disagreeing aesthetically with the “distasteful” appearance of “painted boys” (174), Stuartt is happy to align himself with queerness but only on his own terms. As his new “aura” suggests, he is not opposed to queerness being legible on the body so long as it takes a form that is particular to him, one that is recognizable but not on-the-nose. This desire for queerness as a social form, then, is a desire to own queer sexuality as a meaningful aspect of selfhood while inventing novel ways in which to inhabit it.

²⁶¹ “paesano, n.” *OED Online*. December 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/246962?redirectedFrom=paesano&> (accessed February 04, 2022). Nugent, perhaps mistakenly, uses the Spanish spelling instead of the Italian *paesani*.

This approach to queer identity is markedly artistic. As such, it is elucidated by Stuartt's discussion of the incorporation of African forms into contemporary art. Contradicting Rusty's assertion that "Howard has taken the essence of African art and converted it into modern form" (109), Stuartt argues: "Howard is his teacher. . . . And it is his teacher who is influenced by African art—African art and Picasso, who is likewise influenced.²⁶² Howard is just a sponge. He has absorbed a technique invented, or discovered, as you will, by his teacher. He promptly adopts it and perfects it, and it becomes 'Howard's Art'" (112). Stuartt expresses disdain for imitation: adopting a form wholesale as it has been taught renders one profoundly unartistic, "just a sponge." Even the process of perfecting a borrowed technique is not enough; despite his innovations, "Howard is his teacher" and nothing more. In Stuartt's estimation, "The artist is continually evolving from what he has created in the past. He is a sieve through which all things pass, and only the finest remains to be used and then sieved again. The artist is continually advancing until, in later pieces, one cannot see the tiniest trace or similarity to his earlier work" (112). This sense of the artist as "continually evolving," as engaged in *Bildung* (formation), does not necessitate an eschewal of existing forms; rather, as a "sieve" and not a "sponge," the proper artist receives raw materials from outside the self but refines rather than absorbs them. Through this process, the artist produces forms particular to their own "continually advancing" style, influenced by those forms that exist beyond the self but not reproducing them.

Stuartt's definition of the artist also dictates his approach to identity and to life-as-art. He desires fervently to learn from Ray and others what it means to be queer: how to have queer sex, understand "the vernacular" (194), carry oneself so as to attract the attention of men. At the same time, Stuartt endeavors to craft his own unique version of this form, to keep "only the finest" of

²⁶² Howard in *Jigger* corresponds to the artist Aaron Douglas. See Wirth, "Introduction," xv.

what he has observed and integrate this into his unique style such that both style and form are altered in the process. As such, Stuartt's notion of queerness is one that holds space for elements borrowed from conventional sexual and romantic forms, remixed with elements of queerness to yield experimental and novel ways of being. He expresses this in his letter to Bum: "I would like to understand other things. Really know and understand instead of following the leader and doing as they do. . . . So, the question I would like to pose is how, or rather, what, is the attraction one man can possibly have for another. I mean, of course, when that attraction takes on the more active expression that supposedly accompanies heterosexual relations" (295–96). While on the one hand remaining critical of accepting wholesale any set of conventions, of "following the leader," Stuartt on the other hand admits to desiring a queer love that is modelled after the form of the straight couple, "the more active expression that supposedly accompanies heterosexual relations." While Stuartt's "supposedly" still carries a bit of cynicism, he nonetheless expresses a desire for a form of love that is based on traditional ideals of romance, a "love as literature presents it" that he had earlier disavowed (196). He furthermore posits that his own success with men might be attributed to his ability to combine the most useful elements of queer and straight, conventional and clandestine relationship forms: "I've learned lesson by lesson how to excite and satisfy physically, whereas most women learn merely to be good wives in the approved, conventional sense. . . . They are always either the wives and mothers or the subversive mistresses. Seldom are they at once the exciting and new yet familiar and known. . . . Seldom are they the wife-and-mistress, providing the safeties and dangers, the challenges and securities of both combined. . . . I like being one who can be whatever I am asked to be" (298–99). Stuartt's having "learned lesson by lesson" the art of queer pleasure, combined with his traditional attachment to the "safeties" and "securities" of "approved, conventional" relationship

forms, allows him to imagine and inhabit an experimental romantic position that is at once “familiar” and “subversive.” Stuartt’s desire for queerness thus does not preclude borrowing from “heterosexual relations,” or at least the ideal thereof, that which might enhance the life he is crafting.

The final, and perhaps most surprising, element of Stuartt’s combinatory approach to romantic and sexual forms is his eventual double marriage to a wealthy white woman, Wayne Traveller, and the powerful Italian crime boss Mario Orini (based on Lucky Luciano).²⁶³ Mere pages after proposing to Wayne on a whim during a bout of gambling, Stuartt and Orini confess their feelings for one another and Stuartt presents a ring engraved “Stuartt-Orini 1929” (291). In his letter to Bum, Stuartt anticipates his friend’s shock at his marriage to Wayne: “I know—you’re thinking you’re going to give me hell. What right have I to get married? I’m eccentric. I’m that—outside thing” (294). Yet, he feels no need to give an extensive excuse for this conventional decision: “I love her. I mean, in the way I think love is really love—through being friends, through liking the same things and each other, through being mutually excited pleasantly (and with restraint) sexually” (305). Stuartt sees no reason to question his love for Wayne based on its correspondence to conventional romance or to question his queerness because of it. Admitting that he also experiences occasional desires for women, Stuartt asserts: “There is no point in pouncing upon that statement to prove that I am in truth a heterosexual and only find it smart and decadent to play at homosexuality. I believe that man, and I mean the gender rather than the specie now, plays at *all* sex” (303). Stuartt thus reasserts the seriousness of his queer identity—it is not something to “play at”—while also articulating a belief that bisexual urges do not preclude his being properly queer. Indeed, he goes so far as to argue that his homosexual

²⁶³ Wirth, “Introduction,” xv.

desires queer his relationship with a woman: “I truthfully believe that my verbosity about the male vis-à-vis the male (as applied to myself) is a newer, stranger—and hence more intriguing and less understood—angle for me to play with mentally. But I *do* see that the mere fact that I *have* that angle must affect any ‘normal’ relationship as well—must render it even more not-‘normal’ than the more definitely ‘abnormal,’ because it seems more subtle, even devious” (303). According to Stuartt’s artistic approach to life, to combine straight and queer forms is to invent new ways of living that privilege individual desire over the social expectations of any one group. Moreover, whereas queer desire represents a “definitely ‘abnormal’” form, *Gentleman Jigger* provocatively suggests that experimental approaches to sexuality, those that float between various existing models, may in fact be queerer, “more not-‘normal.’”

In building a life that is a pleasing shape, Stuartt undertakes a process of reinvention that incorporates new and old forms, seriousness and play, tradition and the unconventional. These novel ways of being that Stuartt constructs from forms both queer and conventional become crucial tools in his plot to frustrate hierarchies of value. Stuartt’s final move against hierarchy is to trade his fame, success, and newly minted marriage to Wayne for an unambiguous espousal of Black identity. With this, *Gentleman Jigger* also satirically rejects the conventional happy ending, achieving instead a sendup of traditional narrative closure. By the novel’s end, Stuartt has become “a ‘great’ artist, one of America’s ‘important young modernists’” while also “passing, but without trying” (293). Knowing that he is presumed white by many, Stuartt donates the incredible sum of \$3000 to the Scottsboro Boys, the nine Black teenagers embroiled in a legal battle in the early 1930s over false accusations against them. When questioned by a reporter, Stuartt knowingly declares: “it’s news if a Negro helps a Negro, I suppose” (321). With the revelation of his Blackness soon publicly revealed, Stuartt’s career and contracts evaporate,

leaving him awash in “his *pleasure* in this unexpected happening” (326, emphasis in original). So, too, are we left to presume that his marriage is over, as “for all her uninhibited exuberance, Wayne’s was also a world of ‘other people,’ and their deeply-rooted prejudices could not be dismissed” (330). Stuartt thus rejects the hierarchy of success/failure, sacrificing a career enabled by a white-passing persona for one that he finds more pleasing: that of the Black queer provocateur. This choice is not motivated by any feeling of ethical obligation to identify as Black, but by being both unashamed of his Blackness and desirous for the novelty of the “unexpected.” As such, Stuartt’s final act is a commitment both to sincerity and to the notion of life-as-art. It is thus that Stuartt epitomizes the *desire* for form: rather than remain satisfied with any one shape his life has achieved, he demonstrates a Black modernist desire to inhabit ever-new forms, to control the terms by which he is judged, and to treat his relationship to identification as an element of his ever-evolving artistic style.

Stuartt’s ambivalent and shifting desires for identity circulate around various affordances of that social form, namely stability, recognizability, beauty, and meaningfulness. He expresses throughout the novel various orientations toward these affordances, paying particular attention to how they manifest differently with regard to racial identity and sexual identity. Throughout most of the novel, racial identity represents for Stuartt a form that affords too much recognizability, meaningfulness, and stability: being identified as Black subjects Stuartt to others’ assumptions that they know something about him by virtue of his race, that his race holds great importance in understanding him as a person, and that those characteristics identified with his race are durable and immutable. Queer identity, by contrast, allows Stuartt to tap into recognizable features of that form, such as eccentricity and delinquency, while substituting the rigid stability with which racial identity is interpreted for a more loosely defined identity form. As such, Stuartt is able to

adapt existing models of queer identity into new forms that hold beauty for him as an individual, eventually even inspiring him to reintroduce Blackness into his public persona once his identity has stabilized for a moment too long. The novel captures this unique approach by itself mixing traditional and experimental elements of narrative form, not in a pastiche like that of *The Young and Evil*, but in a controlled blending, as an artist might carefully mix and select hues for a painting. The result is an approach to form unlike anything we have seen in the other novels, one that manipulates social forms at the level of character and literary forms at the level of narrative structure so as to exploit the affordances of the traditional and experimental alike while adopting a protean resistance to form's tendency to calcify. The queer desire for form expressed in *Gentleman Jigger*, then, is one that is fully aware of the benefits and pitfalls of various forms and thus manages, through continuous remixing and rearrangement, both to inhabit existing forms and to reshape them for one's own purposes and pleasures.

CODA

Scholarly Desires and the Limits of Form

As I observe in the introduction to this project, queer theory has exhibited a longstanding allergy to form and narrative. However, we should take note of a budding interest in rethinking this aversion within the field. Aligning himself in a new *PMLA* article with “the recent emergence of queer formalism,” Tyler Bradway draws attention to queer theory’s history of antinarrativity and proposes a rethinking of this.²⁶⁴ He argues that narrative is equally crucial to queer theoretical methods and to the proliferation of new ways of queering the social. As an antidote to queer theory’s narrative skepticism, Bradway suggests “theorizing narrative as a form that fosters queer relationality.”²⁶⁵

The preceding pages have made clear that I am sympathetic to reconsiderations of such skepticism. I agree with Bradway’s claim that “narrative affords important agencies for queerness,” and I too aim to think beyond versions of queer theory that posit “a universally antagonistic relationship between queerness and narrative.”²⁶⁶ I agree that such attacks on narrative seem to lack of a robust theory of narrative. That the word “narrative” is often

²⁶⁴ Tyler Bradway, “Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form,” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 136, no. 5 (October 2021): 712.

²⁶⁵ Bradway, 712.

²⁶⁶ Bradway, 712, 711–12.

popularly used to indicate a maliciously biased and misleading arrangement of events similarly reduces the vibrant array of formal and representational techniques inherent in storytelling to a caricature. Moreover, as Bradway rightly points out, some of the most vocally antinarrative queer theorists themselves rely on narrative to provide evidence for their theories. I heartily echo Bradway's assertion that we are long overdue for a reconsideration of queer theory that incorporates narrative theory's vast and supple toolkit.

As an example of the form that such reconsiderations might take, however, Bradway's approach raises an important methodological question for queer narrative theory. Do we in fact agree that "narrative as a form *fosters* queer relationality," that it tends to "encourage, cherish, harbour fondly, nurse" queerness?²⁶⁷ The verb "to foster" evokes the image of narrative as an altruistic parental figure who takes in and nurtures abandoned queers. In reclaiming narrative for queer theory, Bradway seems to overcompensate in an attempt to repair narrative's bad reputation: it is, after all, a good parent! This seems an odd personality to tack onto narrative *tout court*, for much of narrative is not such a capable queer caretaker. Even if we resort to the most figurative sense of "to foster," to say that narrative is "favourable or conducive to" queer relationality is to say much more than that narrative does not foreclose such a thing or even that narrative is suited to representing it.²⁶⁸

Is Bradway's "fosters" merely a casually chosen verb? I don't think so. Rather, I suspect that Bradway's insistence on narrative's agency reveals his own desires for narrative as a form. He proposes "a queer narrative theory, which asks how narrative—and other forms thought to

²⁶⁷ "foster, v." *OED Online*. December 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/73857?rskey=FXuugz&result=4>.

²⁶⁸ "foster, v."

abet heteronormativity—*elicits*, *arranges*, and *sustains* queer bonds.”²⁶⁹ It is difficult to ascertain what these rather active verbs signify in context. Are we meant to understand that narrative *itself* draws out queerness by virtue of its formal attributes, forges queer connections, and provides for their continuation? Bradway provides some case studies of particular narratives, but we are left to wonder about these broader claims. He goes on to assert that he is “not claiming that narrative has grandiose agency. It cannot, on its own, overthrow heteronormativity. But narrative has agencies, and queer theory draws on these agencies even when it does not acknowledge its debt to narrative form.”²⁷⁰ This disavowal of the grandiose draws the line at narrative overturning entire cultural systems “on its own,” but this does not help us to answer the question: What *can* narrative do *on its own*? Bradway does not say outright, but we might infer that he means the work of fostering, eliciting, arranging, sustaining. It seems to me, however, that such a level of agency still qualifies as grandiose.

Can a form, *on its own*, foster anything? I venture to say that it cannot. Returning to an example from this project’s introduction, should we say that psychiatric definitions of homosexuality as psychical hermaphroditism fostered the experience of a pleasurable relation to queer effeminacy? Or, perhaps as a more comparable analogy, that gender as a social form fostered such relations? I venture not; rather, it is in the hands of queer actors that these forms become repurposed for queer possibility. To say that narrative fosters queer relationality misattributes to a form the labor of queer subjects to render narrative hospitable to queerness.

This is not to say that a form is reducible to its deployer’s intention. Any individual form will be better suited to some purposes than others; others still, queerer and more ingenious, may

²⁶⁹ Bradway, “Queer Narrative Theory,” 712–13. Emphasis mine.

²⁷⁰ Bradway, 715.

lie latent within it. A cucumber, by virtue of its form, might be sustenance, decoration, or a sexual accessory depending on the desires of whoever holds it. Indeed, even Bradway's case studies affirm this. Despite his assertions about narrative's own agency, it is individual texts and authors that do the work: Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* "offers the nuptial as an alternative narrative form for queer attachment," while Renee Gladman's *Calamities* "develops a narrative form called the 'calamity'" such that "*in Gladman's hands*, narrative gives form to . . . ineffable and dynamic relational economies."²⁷¹ To ask what a form might foster seems much less relevant than to ask what it might afford to the desire of whoever activates it.

In the particular theory of narrative that Bradway proposes, narrative form itself becomes an active advocate for queer relationality. As I demonstrate in the preceding chapters, in contrast, the desire for form often attaches to objects that it expects will nurture queer bonds only to discover the empty promises of form. In *Nightwood*, narrative provides no possibility of queer relationality. Conventional narratives only haunt the text with false platitudes that cannot be trusted. Experimental narrative form in *Nightwood* proves well-suited to describing a sense of loss, but it does not actively enable relationality. Even *Gentleman Jigger*, the most optimistic about narrative form of the novels I discuss, suggests that narrative must be deployed both playfully and with great deliberateness lest it calcify into something that defies the wishes of its user. Must not narrative affordances, then, be contingent, accessed or foreclosed based on the desires that are brought to and represented in the form?

It is crucial that any queer narrative theory retain an emphasis on formal affordances rather than inherent nurturances. The trouble with "theorizing narrative as a form that fosters queer relationality" is the misleading implication that narrative is *more* prone to queer nurturance

²⁷¹ Bradway, 720, 722. Emphasis original.

than to disseminating normative or phobic ideas. Moreover, we must not dismiss the valid insights derived from a queer skepticism toward narrative. As my discussion of *Passing* makes clear, there is a hair-thin line that separates a narrative form that insists on the expungement of queer desire in the name of respectability and one that subverts such insistence while still deploying similar narrative conventions. And it cannot be overlooked that narrative forms have, for centuries, been shaped and refined by heteronormative ideals. This is not to affirm the fundamental and irreducible normativity of narrative but to remember that narrative has a history.

As scholars, we must be cautious that our own desires for form do not overlook form's messy contingencies. In attempting to reshape and nuance the queer theoretical position against form and narrative, the desire to construct a triumphant ideal of narrative as an actively queer force risks substituting the dismissal of narrative with an idealization of it. The wish that narrative will foster queer relationality imbues that form with a promise that is enticing. However, this is not so different in structure from queer theory's desire for narrative to be the form that enforces normativity. Both positions are predicated on scholarly desires for form: the desire to have an airtight theoretical structure as well as the desire for narrative form to bear the responsibilities for the promises it makes. The problem may be that narrative is more like Robin Vote: mercenary, promiscuous, whimsical, and able to be influenced only temporarily by those who dally with it.

Or perhaps it is the case that this tendency to anthropomorphize is the real impetus for our misplacement of desire onto forms. In laying out the fantasies that structure desire for form in the very introduction to this project, I indulge in a similar anthropomorphization in order to dramatize how the desire for form is interwoven with erotic desire: "Form insists that it will not

leave us, that it can be counted on, that we may trust it.” Perhaps it is seldom forms we want at all and only the individuals or relationships toward which we imagine them gesturing. Perhaps the desire for narrative to foster queer relationality, a desire to which I cannot claim to be immune, derives from that sense of refuge that narrative affords to so many struggling queers, a refuge that many of us longed for in friends and family but feared we would not find or did not deserve.

I have tried to take such desires for narrative seriously. It is my intention that this dissertation model an approach to narrative, and to form more generally, that accounts for the enmeshment of form with the desires of those subjects who come into relation with it. This includes a keen awareness of our *own* scholarly desires for form. Of course, the intention of this is not to sacrifice such desires in the name of objectivity, as if such a thing were possible.

Awareness of scholarly desires does not prevent them from shaping our questions, and such desires may even lead us to new methods if we acknowledge and embrace them.

Acknowledgment of our desires allows us to differentiate what is constitutive of form itself and what is a wish we bring to it. The work of theorizing is always made messy by our desires. I propose that the analysis of that longing, as I have begun to carry it out here, can help us understand better how queer, literary, and even scholarly histories have been shaped by that desire many of us have for form.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Alber, Jan. *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016.
- Alexander, Elizabeth. "New Ideas about Black Experimental Poetry." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 50, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 598–621. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0050.424>.
- Amin, Kadji. *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Amin, Kadji, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez. "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social." *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (July 31, 2017): 227–39.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.
- Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*. New Directions Publishing, 2006.
- Barnes, Djuna, Emily Holmes Coleman, and G. C. Guirl-Stearley. "The Letters of Djuna Barnes and Emily Holmes Coleman (1935–1936)." *The Missouri Review* 22, no. 3 (1999): 105–46.
- Bartlett, Neil. *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1990.
- Bauer, J. Edgar. "On the Transgressiveness of Ambiguity: Richard Bruce Nugent and the Flow of Sexuality and Race." *Journal of Homosexuality* 62, no. 8 (August 3, 2015): 1021–57.
- Belluscio, Steven J. *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

- Berlant, Lauren and Lee Edelman. *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Bersani, Leo. *Homos*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Boone, Joseph Allen. *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Braddock, Jeremy. "The Scandal of a Black Ulysses: Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, and the Harlem Reception of Joyce." *ELH* 84, no. 3 (2017): 741–63.
- Bradway, Tyler. "Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form." *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 136, no. 5 (October 2021): 711–27.
- Buchholz, Laura. "The Morphing Metaphor and the Question of Narrative Voice." *Narrative* 17, no. 2 (2009): 200–219.
- Butler, Judith. "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge." In *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, edited by Barbara Christian, Helene Moglen, and Elizabeth Abel, 266–84. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- . *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Carby, Hazel. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Caselli, Daniela. *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2009.
- Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940*. New York: Basic, 1994.
- Chu, Andrea Long. "On Liking Women." *N+1* 30 (Winter 2018).
<https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women/>.
- Coffman, Christine. *Insane Passions: Lesbianism and Psychosis in Literature and Film*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.
- Cohen, Cathy. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (May 1997): 437–65.
- Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

- Dannenberg, Hilary P. *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. "Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2–3 (June 2011): 243–63.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015.
- Doan, Laura. *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
- Doyle, Jennifer, and David Getsy. "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation." *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (Winter 2013).
<http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=4468>.
- duCille, Ann. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Duggan, Lisa. *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Eliot, T. S. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." *The Dial*, November 1923, 480–83.
- Ford, Charles Henri, and Parker Tyler. *The Young and Evil*. New York: Gay Presses of New York, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel. *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality, Volume 4*. Edited by Frédéric Gros. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 2021.
- . *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- . *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 2012.
- . *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II; Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*. Edited by Frédéric Gros. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2012.
- . "The Gay Science." Translated by Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith. *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 385–403.

- . *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Frank, Joseph. *The Idea of Spatial Form*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Fuss, Diana. *Identification Papers*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Garber, Eric. "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem." In *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, edited by Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, 318–31. New York: New American Library, 1989.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Gerstenberger, Donna. "The Radical Narrative of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*." In *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fictions*, edited by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 129–39. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Glavey, Brian. *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Gunn, Daniel. "Free Indirect Discourse and Narrative Authority in *Emma*." *Narrative* 12, no. 1 (2004): 35–54.
- Halberstam, J. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Halperin, David M. *How to Be Gay*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- . *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- . *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- . "Queer Love." *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 396–419.
- Halperin, David M. and Valerie Traub, eds. *Gay Shame*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. New York: Norton, 2019.
- Harvey, David L. "Introduction." *Sociological Perspectives* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 1–10.

- Hayden, Sarah. "What Happens When a Transvestite Gynaecologist Usurps the Narrator?: Cross-Gendered Ventriloquism in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*." In *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices: Appropriating, Resisting, Embracing*, edited by Rina Kim and Claire Westall, 74–92. Basingstoke: Houndmills, 2012.
- Heaney, Emma. *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017.
- Henstra, Sarah. "Looking the Part: Performative Narrative in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Katherine Mansfield's 'Je Ne Parle Pas Français.'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 125–49.
- Herring, Phillip F. *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes*. New York: Viking, 1995.
- Herring, Scott. *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Hutchinson, George. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.
- Johnson, Barbara. *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Edited by Hans Walter Gabler. New York: Vintage, 1986.
- Kahan, Benjamin. *The Book of Minor Perverts: Sexology, Etiology, and the Emergences of Sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Kenner, Hugh. *Joyce's Voices*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
- Landry, H. Jordan. "Seeing Black Women Anew through Lesbian Desire in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 60, no. 1 (2006): 25–52.
- Lanser, Susan S. "Queering Narrative Voice." *Textual Practice* 32, no. 5–6 (August 2018): 923–37.
- . "Queering Narratology." In *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, edited by Kathy Mezei. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand and Passing*. Edited by Deborah McDowell. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

- Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Löbbermann, Dorothea. "Richard Bruce Nugent and the Queer Memory of Harlem." In *Race Capital?: Harlem as Setting and Symbol*, edited by Andrew M. Fearnley and Daniel Matlin, 221–40. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Looby, Christopher. "The Gay Novel in the United States 1900–1950." In *A Companion to the Modern American Novel 1900–1950*, edited by John T. Matthews, 414–36. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Looby, Christopher and Michael North. "Introduction." In *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies*, edited by Christopher Looby and Michael North, 1–8. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020.
- Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- . "Introduction: Modernism at Night." *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (2009): 744–48.
- Maffesoli, Michel. *The Shadow of Dionysus: A Contribution to the Sociology of the Orgy*. Translated by Cindy Linse and Mary Kristina Palmquist. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- McDowell, Deborah. "Introduction." In *Quicksand and Passing*, edited by McDowell Deborah, ix–xxxv. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.
- McIntire, Gabrielle. "Toward a Narratology of Passing: Epistemology, Race, and Misrecognition in Nella Larsen's *Passing*." *Callaloo* 35, no. 3 (September 28, 2012): 778–94.
- Miller, Andrew. "Lives Unled in Realist Fiction." *Representations*, no. 98 (Spring 2007): 118–34.
- Miller, D. A. *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- . *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Mitchell, Michele. *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- Moynihan, Sinéad. "Romans à Clef of the Harlem Renaissance." In *A History of the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by Rachel Farebrother and Miriam Thaggert, 125–43. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

- . *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Francis Golffing. New York: Doubleday, 1956.
- Nugent, Richard Bruce. "Smoke, Lilies and Jade." In *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, edited by Thomas H. Wirth, 75–87. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- . *Gentleman Jigger*. Edited by Thomas H. Wirth. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2008.
- Peterson, Rai. "The Young and Evil: Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, E. E. Cummings' Sassy Gay Friends." *Spring* 21/22 (Fall 2015): 182–98.
- Pinkerton, Steve. "'New Negro' v. 'Niggeratti': Defining and Defiling the Black Messiah." *Modernism/modernity* 20, no. 3 (2013): 539–55.
- Pound, Ezra. *Make It New*. London: Faber & Faber, 1934.
- Prince, Gerald. "The Disnarrated." *Style* 22, no. 1 (1988): 1–8.
- Richardson, Brian. *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, and Practice*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015.
- Rohy, Valerie. *Lost Causes: Narrative, Etiology, and Queer Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Roof, Judith. *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Rubin, Gayle S. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." In *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, 137–81. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Schmidt, Michael D. "A Materialist Desire in *The Young and Evil*." *Studies in American Fiction* 45, no. 2 (November 21, 2018): 213–33.
- Schwarz, A. B. Christa. "Transgressive Sexuality and the Literature of the Harlem Renaissance." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by George Hutchinson, 141–54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Scruggs, Charles. "Sexual Desire, Modernity, and Modernism in the Fiction of Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by George Hutchinson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- . “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You.” In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 124–52. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- See, Sam. “Making Modernism New: Queer Mythology in *The Young and Evil*.” *ELH* 76, no. 4 (December 9, 2009): 1073–1105.
- . *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies*. Edited by Christopher Looby and Michael North. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020.
- Somerville, Siobhan B. *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Stein, Melissa N. *Measuring Manhood: Race and the Science of Masculinity, 1830–1934*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Suárez, Juan Antonio. *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- Terry, Jennifer. *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892.
- Thurman, Wallace. *Infants of the Spring*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2013.
- Trask, Michael. *Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought*. Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Traub, Valerie. “The Ambiguities of ‘Lesbian’ Viewing Pleasure: The (Dis)Articulations of *Black Widow*.” In *Out in Culture*, edited by Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, 115–36. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- . *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Vogel, Shane. *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Wald, Gayle. *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Warhol, Robyn, and Susan Sniader Lanser. *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015.

- Warhol, Robyn R. *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989.
- . *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003.
- Warner, Michael. "Introduction." In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, edited by Michael Warner, vii–xxxii. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- . *Publics and Counterpublics*. Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002.
- . *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Watson, Steven. "Introduction." In *The Young and Evil*, edited by Steven Watson, v–xxxvii. New York: Gay Presses of New York, 1988.
- Wiegman, Robyn. *Object Lessons*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Wiegman, Robyn, and Elizabeth A. Wilson, eds. "Queer Theory without Antinormativity." Special issue, *differences* 26, no. 1 (May 2015).
- Wirth, Thomas H. "Introduction." In *Gentleman Jigger*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2008.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1989.
- . "Character in Fiction." In *Selected Essays*, edited by David Bradshaw, 37–54. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *Mrs. Dalloway*. San Diego: Harcourt, 2005.