

## THE USES OF ABJECTION

**David Kurnick**

*What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity*

David Halperin

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007. 167 pp.

*R*isk, the word anchoring the subtitle of David Halperin's frequently profound and occasionally baffling new book, has at least two meanings. Explicitly, Halperin is talking about sexual risk, prompted by evidence of rising HIV infection rates among men who have sex with men. Halperin chooses, provocatively, to begin making sense of these statistics by delving into the "distinctive properties of queer subjectivity" (4)—and the risk that often feels most threatening here is the one queer critics run in talking about gay subjectivity at all. Halperin is acutely aware of how the accident of AIDS gave a grim energy to the association of the queer psyche with morbidity. Wary of colluding with such logics, Halperin makes clear that he is not presenting the truth of the gay subject; he is particularly eager to avoid "the presumptively objective, theoretically elaborated, scientific languages of psychology and psychoanalysis" (104). The book culminates by proposing abjection as a model for a sociohistorically sensitive account of queer subjectivity. Conscious that abjection is hardly devoid of psychic implications, Halperin offers a number of adjectives—"aesthetic" (82), "existential" (103), "ethical" (57), "social" (71), "phenomenological" (104)—to distinguish his approach from psychoanalytic ones. The imprecision here is the point: Halperin combines discrete conceptual lexicons to resist the authority of any vocabulary in particular.

The book opens with a meticulously documented analysis of gay men's sexual risk taking. The figures Halperin marshals demonstrate how infrequently condomless sex between men testifies to some ineffable gay will to self-destruction. Halperin argues that what looks to mainstream media like the reckless abandon

of “barebacking” figures in other contexts as the prevention tool of “serosorting.” Halperin is doubtful about the effectiveness of serosorting—especially when men don’t know their status or come to sexual encounters with varying assumptions about what it means when their partners offer to fuck without latex. But he makes it clear that repeating the panicked question “What makes them do it?” is unlikely to help us recognize—and profit from—the self-preservative resources of queer culture. In the book’s less successful middle sections Halperin analyzes a 1995 *Village Voice* article in which Michael Warner candidly discussed his own unsafe encounters. Halperin commends Warner for making serious proposals about why gay men take sexual risks but faults him for letting his analysis slip into psychological terminology. But on the evidence of Warner’s article (reprinted in an appendix), Halperin misconstrues Warner’s tone. Warner remarks that the headiness of unsafe sex made him feel that “[his] monster was in charge,” but this description of an unsettling experience doesn’t upstage the careful social analysis that follows; when Halperin labels this a “flirtation with gay demonology” (61), the melodrama is his, not Warner’s. And Warner’s use of concepts like “ambivalence,” “identification,” and the “unconscious” leads less to Halperin’s point about the difficulty of “detach[ing] psychoanalytic reasoning from normative thinking” (60) than to the conclusion that we don’t need a purified lexicon to do vitally queer thinking. Halperin has little to say about the current therapeutic reality in the developed world, although he acknowledges that Warner’s article was published just before antiretroviral cocktails made HIV manageable for some. But today’s reality on the ground, in which the uneven but widespread availability of drug combinations makes the connection between unsafe sex and HIV infection—and between HIV infection and illness—harder to assume, is surely a factor in assessing how men understand sexual risk.

The most powerful part of the book is an excavation of the concept of abjection in the work of Jean Genet. Halperin describes abjection as an “involuntary, inverted sainthood” (73)—a process in which outcasts defiantly revel in the terms of their social exclusion and find a modicum of safety and power in their collective freedom from acceptance. Halperin offers attentive analyses of two exhilarating and weird scenes of humiliation in Genet’s work (including one involving a tube of mentholated vaseline). His readings trace an alchemy of mortification into joy that seems at once peculiar to Genet and instantly recognizable as a widespread affect of queer solidarity. Abjection, Halperin argues, accounts for “generalized effects of social oppression” without turning to individualizing accounts of “unique psychic damage” (76), and it emerges convincingly here as “an existential survival strategy” (72). The reading culminates in the speculative suggestion that gay men’s

sexual risk taking may be “a scary but inspired expression of antisocial solidarity with their sick or dead comrades in ignominy” (90). The use of this possibility for HIV prevention strategies, Halperin acknowledges, may be hard to see (especially among men who may not understand themselves as gay in the first place, let alone understand risk as an expression of comradeship). Still, Halperin’s observation that abjection can conceptually “de-dramatize the practice of sexual risk” (96) is valuable and provocative.

These insights are formulated under the very real pressure of a moment when every twist in the epidemic invites popular speculation about what is wrong with gay men. But Halperin seems to perceive the urge to psychologize as emanating equally from within queer theory. He claims to write “against the intellectual monoculture of psychology” (105), but the only psychoanalytic critic he regularly quotes is Tim Dean. Halperin argues persuasively against Dean’s recourse to the death drive as an explanation for gay men’s risk taking. But the existence of Dean’s work hardly justifies the suggestion that psychoanalysis is close to becoming “the only show in homo-town” (98). Moreover, Halperin’s sympathetic engagement with the work of Warner, Douglas Crimp, Didier Eribon, Leo Bersani, Lauren Berlant, and Michel Foucault (not exactly small fry) sits oddly with the embattled tone of much of his book. *What Do Gay Men Want?* is not nearly as lonely in its commitments as Halperin appears to believe. He sometimes writes as if this book, with its refusal to pathologize queerness, its determination to find sociohistorical explanations for queer behavior, and its passionate investment in collective forms of queer existence, inhabits the outer margins of queer theory; I would place it instead in its best tradition.

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## TRANSPARENT FIGURES

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*Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*

Heather Love

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. 206 pp.

Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* contributes a perspicuous and often eloquent set of literary analyses to the ever-fomenting discourse of queer negativity. Love's study complicates (rather than reconsolidates or differently hypostasizes) a possible politics of negative feeling, in part to the extent that its theoretical vocabulary adheres to (rather than anticipates) the particularities of the authors at hand. Through readings of Walter Pater, Willa Cather, Radclyffe Hall, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, Love argues for a politics capable of preserving and learning from the contretemps that make such a politics necessary in the first place.

*Feeling Backward* arises from Love's troubled sense that queer studies has inoculated or alchemized an archive of negativity, thereby emptying that past, that "queer history," of the negative qualities by which it was constituted. Despite the dexterity of Love's local arguments, the specific occasion for Love's intervention feels less persuasive, more familiar. The book's opening gambit is to claim that "many contemporary critics dismiss negative or dark representations entirely, arguing that the depiction of same-sex love as impossible, tragic, and doomed to failure is purely ideological" (1). *Feeling Backward* is peppered with formulations such as "contemporary critics," "recent critics," "a long [critical] tradition," but when it comes to those critics and participants of queer studies who imagine "utopian desires . . . at the heart of the collective project of queer studies and integral to the history of gay and lesbian identity" (3), these critics go unnamed. Does it go without saying that we know who these critics are?

Love is not alone in conjuring this spectral queer "utopian" critic (I think, for instance, of the work of Ann Cvetkovich, Lee Edelman, and David Eng, whom Love cites as influences). But Love's readings are strong enough on their own not to require the straw figure of a sort of criticism that doesn't (as far as I'm concerned) so self-explanatorily exist. This is to say that *Feeling Backward* feels most persuasive as a complication of negativity's own terrain rather than as an interven-

tion in the mirage of utopian queer thinking—which may at most be analogous but by no means equivalent to an “upgrade in gay, lesbian, and transgender life in the United States during the last couple of decades” (189).

The pas de deux between thought and action—texts and lives—recurrently strikes me as one of this study’s most interestingly undertheorized sites. It is interesting, as opposed to debilitating, insofar as this dance is *Feeling Backward*’s theoretical and methodological heart. How to learn from the relationships between characters (or authors and characters, or authors and readers, etc.)? How to move from the rhetorical to the ontological when Love seeks even in the moment of movement to recalibrate the terms and conditions of both categories?

Sometimes, as in her tendency to describe her book’s terrain as modernism’s “dark side” (4)—a formulation that conjures a queer Darth Vader (as though Darth Vader weren’t already queer)—Love admits that her archive of negativity is ineluctably, rhetorically imbued. Love likewise telegraphically suggests that feeling backward is itself a “figure of figuration” (5). Other times, however—as in her claim that “sometimes damage is just damage” (27)—*Feeling Backward* intimates a preference for the nonrhetorically tautological over the rhetorically transformative. What does it mean for damage to be “just damage”?

That a referent and its referend could “just” align themselves with each other overlooks the extent to which these readings are predicated on “figures of figuration.” If we are speaking of loss at the level of text (which seems safe enough a guess, given the book’s literary provenance), then the slippage or nonslippage of referents *does* seem a pertinent issue. *Feeling Backward* tries to have it both ways (figure of figuration/damage = damage) by positing “figures of backwardness as allegories of queer historical experience” (5). Without, however, a keener sense of figuration (not to mention allegory), I am left wishing for more explicit an account of the interstices and avenues between one side of any given equation (allegories) and the other (“queer historical experience”).

For instance: Love offers a thoughtful analysis of Pater’s first essay, “Diaphanéité,” and exhorts the possibility of heuristically culling from Pater’s nonphenomenology of diaphanousness a model of politics founded on revaluations of withdrawal (rather than activism as conventionally understood). That the movement from textual exemplar to lived model is in fact *non*-diaphanous suggestively arises in Pater’s *own* text. Rather than inhabit this particular textual nontransparency, however, Love’s reading overlooks what is *not* transparent, thereby missing an opportunity by which her own vocabulary of a politics (or poetics) of the shrinking figure might be honed. Love cites these lines from Pater’s essay: “Over and over again the world has been surprised by the heroism, the insight, the passion

of this clear crystal nature. Poetry and poetical history have dreamed of a crisis, where it must needs be that some human victim be sent down into the grave. These are they whom in its profound emotion humanity might choose to send” (61). Love continues: “Pater’s crystal character is defined not only by his transparency but also by his status as victim. Heroism, insight, and passion are here all bound up in an experience of martyrdom, even scapegoating, as this figure is sent to the grave by all of humanity” (61). This figure however is *not*—at least in Pater’s writing—sent to the grave. He *might be*. The disappearance in Love’s reading of Pater’s subjunctive (its own form of figurative shrinking) echoes the disappearance in Love of the crisis’s actual scene: not only a dream but the dream of poetry and poetical history.

How is a dream of crisis different from a crisis? How is a person’s dream different from poetry’s dream? *Feeling Backward* importantly challenges the nontransparency of negativity. As helpfully, Love’s book asks of its readers how we might further think about the nontransparency of figuration—and the nontransparency of a straw figure’s own suspicious diaphanousness.

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## OF LESBIANS AND TECHNOSPERM

**Laura Briggs**

*Queering Reproduction: Achieving Pregnancy  
in the Age of Technoscience*

Laura Mamo

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. xi + 304 pp.

In *Queering Reproduction*, Laura Mamo invites us to think about the place where “sex with reproduction meets reproduction without sex” (23) in lesbian biotechnological reproduction—donor insemination and IVF. It’s a set of questions that, for better or worse, has a huge influence on lesbian life and has interestingly different histories for lesbians and gay men. For both these reasons this is an important book. Mamo steers a course between two compelling earlier arguments—Kath Weston’s, that in their chosen-ness, queer families are rewriting the script of kinship, and Ellen Lewin’s, that lesbians, in becoming mothers, become more fully women—normalized and mainstreamed.<sup>1</sup> Mamo enters the fray by saying, well, both: lesbian bioreproduction is a hybrid social process, one that both queers the family and draws lesbians into alliance with the heteronormative, state-sanctioned nuclear family.

The book begins with a wonderfully textured recent history of lesbian reproduction beginning with the decidedly low-tech, inexpensive models of the 1970s and 1980s: turkey basters and a male friend willing to jerk off in your bathroom. Knowledge of how to get pregnant without sex was passed along in the workshops and informal networks of the women’s health movement. Fast-forward thirty years, and we find lesbians paying astonishing amounts of money for frozen sperm samples, taking hormones, and visiting the offices of fertility specialists. The Oakland Feminist Health Center is now the Sperm Bank of California.

The heart of the book is its fascinating interviews with lesbians attempting pregnancy. We hear individuals reflecting on their negotiations with their partners (or deciding to go it alone), going to therapy (for self-actualization), and maximizing their financial well-being. They reflect on decision points—moving “up” the interventionist ladder from home to doctor’s office, from donor insemination to IVF, from candles and romance to technoscientific rationality. They discuss the

decision to quit or to do things (like hormones) they thought they'd never do. Some chose donors from among their own circles and friends of friends; others used sperm banks. In the transition from doing it ourselves to high-tech methods, Mamo argues, we got caught up in a matrix that includes genetic determinism, medicine, capitalism, insurance coverage, and heteronormativity.

Why the change from low-tech to technosperm? The fact that sperm banks opened their doors to lesbians was a big factor, as was the HIV/AIDS epidemic (a problem that, Mamo points out, reprotect in the United States could mitigate but does not: European labs are washing sperm to remove HIV, U.S. labs are not). But the thirty-six lesbians whom Mamo interviewed mostly gave a single answer to the question of why high-tech: unequivocal legal rights to their children. A number of bad court decisions have found donors to be legal fathers, even granting donors' parents ("grandparents") more legal standing than lesbian partners. It's too bad that Mamo didn't follow her informants down this road. Granted, it would have changed the book—from one about biomedicine to one about family law—but her informants persuaded me that this is the real story about how reprotect constitutes lesbians as activists, not soccer moms, or maybe both. If lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s were guerrilla fertility doctors, Mamo's twenty-first-century lesbians are guerrilla lawyers, passing around photocopies of donor agreements, expounding the legal benefits of sperm banks (donors don't have parental rights), citing legal cases. One couple she interviewed even tailored their reproductive strategies to make themselves a test case for the Center for Lesbian Rights, using one partner's egg and the other partner's uterus, to try to get both of them on the birth certificate.

By failing to think rigorously about law, the book gets in trouble. Mamo writes things like, "Because gay and lesbians have never been able to marry legally, their relationships are outside the scope of family law" (113), even as she notes Massachusetts's gay marriage statute three pages later. She writes, "Second-parent adoption is the primary way for lesbian co-parents to secure parenthood for the nonbiological mother" (69), and goes on to lament the unfairness of this, citing fees and the intrusiveness of home studies—without noting that this legal route to parenthood is not possible in the majority of states in the United States. This is a big story to miss in a book on lesbian reproduction, even if she does note in passing, forty-seven pages later, that second-parent adoption is only (fully, reliably) legal in thirteen states. (Despite the unfairness of this, all but the most destitute of us living without second-parent adoption would be more than happy to pay three thousand dollars for the right to authorize medical care for our children, pick them up from school without a note from biomom, or worrying about losing

our kids in a breakup or with a partner's death.) Even though all her informants are in California, setting their experience in the context of life in the other thirty-seven states would have strengthened the book. Thinking of the legal process as a subject of contestation and activism also would have helped her avoid the ways the book is already dated—marriage and civil unions are allowing “other mothers” to be registered as “fathers” on birth certificates, and even strong domestic partner statutes, like California's as of 2004, have mooted the question of “second parent” adoption in a number of states.

The book's strength is its smart, rich, and textured understanding of the past and present of lesbian communities' negotiations of reproduction, an account that will seem deeply familiar to some readers and not at all to others. This written account of a largely oral and memory-based narrative is a tremendous resource for students and anyone who has not been inside or in close proximity to urban lesbian communities since the mid-1980s in the United States. While Mamo's book leaves some loose ends, it is surely an invitation to other scholars to pick up where she left off.

#### Note

1. Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Ellen Lewin, *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

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## PROGRESSIVE HAUNTINGS

**Elizabeth A. Castelli**

*Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*

Molly McGarry

University of California Press, 2008. xiii + 269pp.

*Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*, a revision of the author's 1999 New York University dissertation, takes readers on a remarkable tour of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America's affective and relational engagements, engagements embedded simultaneously in personal spiritual virtuosity and communal commitments to social reform and transformation. The book is highly original in its conception, reflects exhaustive archival research, and breaks new ground in its innovative reframing of the American Spiritualist movement in new and illuminating terms. *Ghosts of Futures Past* promises to make a significant and lasting contribution to the field of American religious history and to theoretically inflected work in the history of religion as a whole.

*Ghosts of Futures Past* makes an argument both multilayered and complex: it situates American Spiritualism, a movement that some might wish to push to the margins of American religious history as an embarrassing and perhaps even hysterical aberration, at the critical meeting point of a whole range of concerns that animated nineteenth-century American politics, culture, and religion. The movement, at an almost metaphysical level, sought to inaugurate a grand experiment that challenged conventional notions of temporality, linking a seemingly lost past to a vibrant present and promising future. (One wonders if this openness with respect to time was not a kind of uncanny echo of the spatial openness that westward expansion represented in the nineteenth-century American imaginary.) The technological innovations of the nineteenth century, especially the invention of the telegraph and photography, became conduits through which Spiritualism articulated its powers of mediation. Spiritualists sought to resolve the tensions that seemed to reside in the conflict between an emergent discourse of science and the

long-dominant ideological frame of religion by claiming that their spiritual practice was, in fact, itself a science.

But the history of Spiritualism is also a history of sentiments, and as McGarry so eloquently argues, the movement helps us understand how many nineteenth-century middle-class white Americans sought to deal with the experience of loss and grief by creating a medium for mourning—by creating a place in their lives for mediums who had the capacity to channel the spirits of the dead. Yet the history of Spiritualism also reaches out into the culture and politics of its time, influencing numerous strands of nineteenth-century political and cultural history with Spiritualists' involvement in everything from reform movements and abolition to women's suffrage, free love, and advocacy for Native Americans. In McGarry's retelling of the history of Spiritualism, we encounter a much more nuanced, layered, subtle portrait that moves far beyond many earlier scholarly explorations. McGarry shows us the forces of gender, race, sex and sexuality, colonial status, and technological innovation, all emerging as critical features of a religious movement that crystallized the most pressing issues and concerns of its time.

By the last chapter, McGarry brings the history of Spiritualism into conversation with the theme that has animated so much recent scholarly discussion of religion—that is, the category of secularism. The book offers a model for how theoretically engaged scholarship on a particular exemplar or empirical example drawn from the history of religion can open up a wide range of deeply compelling theoretical questions that extend far beyond the historical example itself. *Ghosts of Futures Past* should end up on the reading lists of every theory and method course in academic religious studies as an exemplary model for students trying to understand how theory works by supplementing the hard labor involved in any focused empirical study.

For readers of *GLQ*, chapter 5 (“Secular Spirits: A Queer Genealogy of Untimely Sexualities”) will perhaps be of most obvious interest. In this chapter, McGarry explores the interweaving of the history of secularism and the history of sexuality, tracing the intersections of discourses of difference—both religious and sexual difference—across a broad terrain of domains from medicine to law to poetry. If Spiritualists shared with their evangelical neighbors a belief in the perfectability of social relations, they also shared with utopian visionaries of their time a commitment to shaking off the constraints of conventional gender and sexuality, opening themselves to the transgression of all sorts of difference. At the level of social life, these commitments included, for example, an openness to the tenets of the free love movement. At the level of spiritual experience, they underwrote

a willingness to embrace the receptivity of virtuosic mediums who channeled spirits of all genders. McGarry draws important contrasts in this chapter between the Theosophical movement's affinities with emergent sexological discourses and Spiritualism's more fluid notions of identity.

As compelling as any ghost story, *Ghosts of Futures Past* is also theoretically sophisticated, rich in detail, and beautifully written. In an uncannily mimetic turn, the book manages to bring the shadowy past of Spiritualism alive and, for some readers at least, mobilizes a desire to reach across time to encounter the amazing cast of characters who inhabit McGarry's spiritualist world. If the spiritualists offered their clients emotional consolation, McGarry offers us some intellectual version of the same: an abiding sense that we have come by a valuable deposit of knowledge and have learned things we would never have known had we not encountered the virtuosic gifts of this book's author.

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## SCRIPTING SEX IN THE OTTOMAN MIDDLE EAST

Howard H. Chiang

*Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900*

Dror Ze'evi

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. xv + 223 pp.

Anyone attempting to write a history of the history of sexuality will quickly realize that North America and Western Europe remain the central focus of the field's leading theoretical and empirical preoccupations. In the world outside twentieth-century Europe and North America in particular, the existing literature on the history of Middle Eastern sexuality is even more impoverished in comparison with, say, the history of sexuality in East Asia. In *Producing Desire*, Dror Ze'evi has not merely established himself as the Ottoman equivalent of Bret Hinsch on China or Gregory Pflugfelder on Japan.<sup>1</sup> In responding to the theoretical-historiographical implications of Michel Foucault's work more explicitly, what Ze'evi accomplishes is remarkably unique in providing historians of sexuality, working on Western regions or not, a perspective on Ottoman Middle Eastern sexuality and, with that, a golden opportunity to reflect on their existing methodological concerns.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, the book is undoubtedly a timely and even sorely needed intervention.

In adopting a *longue durée* historical approach, the book argues a rather counterintuitive thesis: open discourses of sex were gradually erased over four centuries in the Ottoman Empire, which stretched from North Africa through the Arabic-speaking lands of the Fertile Crescent and into Anatolia. To quote Ze'evi's concluding remark, "By the beginning of the twentieth century . . . a veil of silence had descended on sex in Middle Eastern culture" (170). The sources that Ze'evi draws on include medical treatises, legal texts, the literature on morality debates, dream interpretation manuals, the actual scripts of plays performed in the Ottoman shadow theater, and European and Middle Eastern travelogues. Each source type defines what Ze'evi calls a sexual "script," a concept he borrows from the sociologist John Gagnon and defines as "a metaphor for the internal and external blueprints in our minds for sexual quest and sexual actions" (10). Accordingly, the book is structured around six main chapters, each devoted to a type of sexual

script. Middle Eastern historians might find the book's latter half more innovative than the first, partly because the source base in these later chapters offers us fresh angles to view the sexual past of the region and period under consideration.

In analyzing the six different sexual scripts, Ze'evi never loses sight of the theme of homoerotic sex. In the realm of medicine, the multiple systems of Ottoman law, Sufi morality debates over the beauty of beardless boys, and the science of dream interpretation, open discussions of male homoeroticism, and in some instances even female homoeroticism, were gradually silenced by the nineteenth-century onset of the intensification of the European–Middle Eastern cultural encounter. When European travelogues were eventually translated into Turkish and Arabic, for instance, Ottoman writers responded by fashioning “a clear, new, and comprehensive sense of bounded sexuality with a heteronormal center and ‘deviant’ margins” (168). This strikes a strong resonance with Afsaneh Najmabadi's recent observation of the heteronormalization of love and the feminization of beauty in the modern Persian world.<sup>3</sup>

A key strength of this succinct monograph lies in the author's careful incorporation of sufficient, rather than overwhelming, historical background material. This allows readers not familiar with Ottoman history to appreciate the historical significance of the various sexual scripts under discussion. However, with respect to the conceptual framing of the book, there are two major criticisms. One concerns how Ze'evi employs the analytic concept of script. One wonders, by the end of the book, whether Ze'evi has underspecified its operational definition on the level of historical analysis. Are “sexual scripts,” as the term is used throughout the book, simply discursive fields of sexual *representation*? What is “counter” about “counter-script,” a term Ze'evi uses to describe the cultural narrative of the shadow theater? Is it “counter” with respect to its mere social function or actual content? This is one area where Ze'evi could have expanded the scope of his analysis, perhaps by engaging with the notion of “queer counterpublics” developed by Michael Warner, especially given that both authors deal at great length with the history and theory of the public sphere.<sup>4</sup>

Another potential problem with the book's framing concerns the historicization of the very concept of sexuality. For instance, as Arnold Davidson has demonstrated, it would be rather anachronistic to use sexuality as a category of historical analysis outside the conceptual space associated with what he calls the “psychiatric style of reasoning” that emerged only in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it would be interesting to see how Ze'evi's study speaks to the subsequent substantiations of Foucault's claim rather than Foucault's work alone. Despite this reservation, perhaps this book's biggest problematic as set up

by the Foucauldian labyrinth of social constructionism could also be the very cradle of its most original historiographical intervention. Unwinding the veil of silence that descended on sex in Middle Eastern culture, *Producing Desire* is a rare book that opens our eyes to an alternative history of sexuality outside the modern world of Euro-America, and, in doing so, opens up our mind to the possibility of forgiving the discourse for its Foucauldian entanglement.<sup>6</sup>

### Notes

1. Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Gregory Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
2. I am specifically referring to the insights of Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).
3. Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). See also Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
4. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002).
5. Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
6. Matt Kuefler, “Forgiving Foucault” (paper presented at the 122nd annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Washington, DC, January 3–6, 2008).

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## HIGH MEDIEVAL ALLEGORY AND COERCION

Anna Klosowska

*Allegory and Sexual Ethics in the High Middle Ages*

Noah D. Guynn

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xii + 218 pp.

Noah D. Guynn's new book is a step removed from the history of sexuality: it's a history of discourse. Guynn is well known to all of us in medieval queer studies from his early article on the subject published in *GLQ* in 2000.<sup>1</sup> Other significant articles followed. His first, long-awaited book is not focused on queer studies in the same way, or directly; rather, as the title announces, Guynn shows that "medieval allegory and sexual ethics operate as discursive regimes: they internalize difference, deviation, and dissent within figurations of truth, goodness, and belief, and then use the resulting crisis of meaning, knowledge, and belief to legitimate coercive, violent forms of discipline" (171). A strength of the book is Guynn's command of a wide and exciting range of readings condensed to their essential elements; often, although the names are familiar, the texts are not. Although I disagree with the "Foucauldian" view of history that Guynn adopts, a view where the French Revolution constitutes a paradigm break separating the ancien régime from the emergent modernity, I recognize in his book many of my favorite writers: the philosophers Chantal Mouffe, Louis Althusser, and Giorgio Agamben, as well as U.S. medievalists and early modernists such as Jody Enders and Gordon Teskey, among others.

Guynn's book is clear and forceful, its analyses well observed and written, but I think its omissions mean that the topic (high medieval allegory, specifically in relation to coercion) is too large for one book. To take the first and third chapters, for example (Hugh of Saint-Victor, Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Alain de Lille): Guynn's omission of Abelard and Héloïse is important, especially in view of Guynn's sustained interest in women and Aristotle (via Agamben). Abelard's and Héloïse's famous interventions in the twelfth-century debate on meaning (that debate is Guynn's main topic) would modify in essential ways the conclusions that Guynn draws in these chapters. After reading these two chapters, I am not convinced that I grasped the issue of allegory in the High Middle Ages,

partly because there is little attempt on Guynn's part to locate geography, history, or intellectual genealogies (for instance, Guynn does not connect the texts he discusses with Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*, perhaps the most widely read and taught high medieval allegory). This doesn't make Guynn's book wrong, just more abstract. Moreover, his treatment of Augustine and Aquinas is mainly secondhand, a pity considering how acute and inspiring his readings of *Enéas* and other texts are in this book. One suggestion: a reference to the political situation that produced fourteenth-century French translations of Augustine (a confluence of politics, ideology, and literary activity—precisely the cluster anticipated by Guynn's definition of allegory as a literary device in service of the state and other institutions) would help bridge the period discussed by Guynn (the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) and his isolated example of prosecution of sodomy as a crime against the state (almost sixteenth century), which is out-of-period but essential for his discussion.

#### Note

1. Noah D. Guynn, "Eternal Flame: State Formation, Deviant Architecture, and the Monumentality of Same-Sex Eroticism in the *Roman d'Enéas*," *GLQ* 6 (2000): 287–319.

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## SUPERBAD SEX OBJECTS

Jill H. Casid

*Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*

Jennifer Doyle

Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. xxxi + 184 pp.

I remember reading that when “feminism meets queer theory,” our encounter begets “more gender trouble.”<sup>1</sup> In “Against Proper Objects” (her introduction to that 1994 special issue of *differences*), Judith Butler runs interference in the custodial restriction of gender to women’s studies and sex to lesbian and gay studies, to clear the way for a profoundly troubled sense of gender that cannot be cordoned off from sex. A genealogy of queer theory might trace its inception to Teresa de Lauretis’s effort to activate feminist theory from within lesbian and gay studies and thereby insist that feminism is already a constitutive part of queer theory. However, the face-offs between women’s and lesbian and gay studies continue, particularly over our objects—whether proper or bad.<sup>2</sup> What will it take to get the encounters between feminism and queer theory we deserve?

One answer might be the critical embrace of superbad sex objects that informs Jennifer Doyle’s *Sex Objects*. Here contact with those messy, category-defying versions of sex and the ways in which sex “happens in art” is inextricable from our embodiment as feeling and thinking critics, the problematics of capital, and the constructions of race and sexual difference. While Doyle’s trafficking in the border zones of feminism and lesbian and gay studies is far from unprecedented, what distinguishes her contribution is in part her transgression of the disciplinary etiquette that would dictate that the proper object of women’s and lesbian and gay studies be identity and that we somehow be what we study.

Doyle’s critical positioning as a “fag hag” and her extension of her own cross-gender and cross-sexuality friendships to develop the “forms of intimacy that take shape between women (straight and gay) and gay men” (xxv) into not just the object of her work but also its method importantly and productively expand identity-based criticism. This version of the encounter between feminism and queer theory comes close to answering de Lauretis’s call that queer theorizing involve the “imaging and enacting of new forms of community by the other-wise

desiring subjects of this queer theory.”<sup>3</sup> Mobilizing a fag hag optic allows Doyle to bring other “other-wise desiring subjects” and objects into view. Doyle occupies a place within queer theory as one of those “other-wise desiring subjects” whose strong attachments to gay men and elective affinities for homoerotic representations far exceed our Noah’s ark taxonomies and transform how we read our desired objects.

In the central chapters of this wide-ranging work, Doyle imaginatively plays the favored hag to Andy Warhol’s fag (102). The payoff of this queer feminist perspective is most pronounced in the chapter on women in Warhol’s films of the late sixties. In one of the many transhistorical interpretive gestures that distinguish this study, Doyle looks again at these films and the role of women in them from the vantage of the female figure in “the twenty-ninth bather” section of *Leaves of Grass*, whose admiring gaze sets up one of the most explicitly homoerotic scenes in all of Whitman’s work (81).<sup>4</sup> Framing our view in this way enables Doyle to argue that because these women are “framed by a gay male context, [they get] to be something other than the straight sex object” (72), and Warhol and Whitman can be seen as protoqueer feminist in their situation of women as those “other-wise desiring subjects.”

Like the women in Warhol and Whitman whom Doyle demonstrates to be both “irrelevant, and absolutely central” (71), Doyle activates the minor throughout her readings to demonstrate how the margin is centrally destabilizing to the “proper objects” of American literary and art historical study. The book’s provocative preface sets the stage, telling a personally implicating origin story for her formation as a queer feminist critic that links a pornographic photograph of a black man’s dick and an L. L. Bean sweater emblazoned with a whale to Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, troubling the distinction between (“high”) art and (“gay”) porn. As the chapters unfold we see the “boring parts,” the ancillary figures, and the paratexts fundamentally alter hallowed objects of the canon.

Doyle coedited an anthology of queer readings of Warhol titled *Pop Out*, and it is not just the Yayoi Kusama rowboat fitted up with phallic protrusions which Doyle mobilizes here that makes me want to call this book “Pop Up” to characterize the uncanny effects of reading it.<sup>5</sup> Doyle’s relational reading practice stages cross-time, cross-gender and -genre, cross-race, and cross-class encounters between unlikely suspects that also call our attention to the relations between the ways that texts and images hail their readers and to the way Doyle’s critical “I” functions as a vehicle for our own. When Doyle writes that “sex happens in art,” we are also confronted with the ways that sex, desire, boredom, and pleasure take place between work and reader. The more Doyle writes such passages as

“*Moby-Dick* asks us to take the book off its representational hinges, to touch it as Queequeg touches his book,” the more palpable becomes Doyle’s own experiment in performing the effects of intimacy, sentimentality, and pornography that she analyzes.

The queer feminist aesthetics of its style appear also in the cheeky, confessional play with academic book structure. In the customary location of a conclusion come the acknowledgments in which we read about Doyle’s sisters, the sisters with whom she grew up, and a “larger community of friends” (141). This complicitous solicitation of us as virtual intimates may work to sustain and expand the queer feminist critical community required to continue to give us the encounters of feminism and queer theory we deserve. I do find myself left with some unfulfilled wishes—for example, that the itinerary of Doyle’s criticism would take off in the direction of a more transnational version of queer feminist criticism, move beyond black and white, and (though I recognize the incommensurability) stir some ways to be critically smart about not just the fag hag but also the dyke tyke. But prompting such wishes that map where the encounters of feminism and queer theory may go is to be encouraged.

### Notes

1. Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects,” *differences* (Summer–Fall 1994): 1–26.
2. Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities, An Introduction,” *differences* 3 (Summer 1991): iii–xviii.
3. de Lauretis, “Queer Theory,” xvi.
4. Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Norton, 2002), sec. 11, ll. 199–216.
5. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Muñoz, *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

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## THE FIGURE OF THE BLACK FEMME AND HER RADICAL ELSEWHERE

Stacy I. Macías

*The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*

Kara Keeling

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. ix + 209 pp.

In *The Witch's Flight*, Kara Keeling seeks to reveal through analyses of black film how cinematic processes structure the experience of our globalized twenty-first-century reality. Keeling focuses on black cinema with a keen eye directed at the rarely seen, just negligible, or violently eclipsed black femme, a spectral figure who—surviving under the yoke of common sense, black cultural nationalism, and cinematic reality—represents a possibility of disrupting the regime of the visual and its hegemonic prescriptions. Set to its own musical soundtrack with firm instructions on when to push play, Keeling's book excavates without compunction from mainstream black cinema an alternative archive of temporality, affect, and ultimately reality. For Keeling, to apprehend an alternative social reality where the processes rationalizing dominant notions of memory, perception, time, labor, race, gender, sexuality, and capital are brought into sharp relief means to find and follow the trajectory of the cinematic presence and absence of the black femme. Along the path of encountering the black femme and all her problematic and sublime offerings, we must also contend with the force of *the cinematic*, “a term through which to shuttle a complicated aggregate of capitalist social relations, sensory-motor arrangements, and cognitive processes” (3).

In the first two chapters, Keeling introduces the elaborate conceptual framework she uses to critique black visual culture. Contextualizing the theoretical insights of Henri Bergson (affect), Gilles Deleuze (the cinematic), Antonio Gramsci (common sense), and Frantz Fanon (temporality), Keeling invents a highly intricate theory to argue that via the cinematic, sensory-motor schema tend to overlay present perception with past images and in so doing achieve familiar recognition in the form of common sense, or cliché, which circumscribes any radically different perception of the future. In other words, when film viewers imbibe a common

memory image projected on a screen, the capacity for critical thinking to overcome the power of habituated affect is potentially halted. Imagined futures, alternative becomings, and radical elsewheres consequently dematerialize within the logic of the cinematic and its impulse to advance global capitalism and achieve consent via the facade of redistributive justice. Common sense, however, is never only monolithic or depotentializing; shielded within it are the “seeds of good sense” that “may enable another type of mental and/or motor movement to occur, thereby enabling an alternate perception” (22, 14).

The book’s following chapters offer original analysis of how black cinematic productions unwittingly reproduce and inadvertently create hegemonic and counterhegemonic common senses often to the detriment of the black femme figure. Beginning with a consideration of the commonsense black nationalism paramount to Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa* (1993), Keeling describes how it relies on a conscientious albeit predictable narrative of slave resistance commensurate with the image of the black male subject, which renders black femininity and the black femme—often indexing black existence to passivity, sexual availability, and inhumanity—a present impossibility. To recall Joon Oluchi Lee’s relevant insight, “the specific femme style of a racialized, *black*, girl, like the castrated boy, has its origin in violence.”<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 4 I found one of Keeling’s most evocative arguments on the (f)utility of black nationalism’s masculinity, one that may rattle black feminist theorizations. Black Panther Party members—as “blacks with guns”—appearing on television news and in print media catalyzed an alternative image of the Black who was not inferior but forthrightly armed to break with hegemonic black common sense. Ushered into this visual economy were black women as “blacks with guns,” thereby signaling an emergent and radically configured masculinity detached from strict black male inhabitation. As part of the horizon of possibilities for alternative structures of existence, black nationalism’s masculinity—before it was habituated—recognized the subjectivity of black women, who had been virulently denied the protection of femininity afforded to pious, pure, and domestic white bourgeois women.

The second half of *The Witch’s Flight* considers the blaxploitation films made from 1970 to 1975 and the cable drama *The L Word*; ghettocentricity and lesbian butch-femme in the context of F. Gary Gray’s film *Set It Off* (1996); and an encrypted slave past in Kasi Lemmon’s *Eve’s Bayou* (1997). In this latter portion, the black femme materializes on screen as a vector for nonheteronormativity, as substantiating black female masculinity, and finally as “the black femme func-

tion” that “mark[s] a potential for creativity and self-valorization within affectivity that also is useful to the reproduction of cinematic reality” (144).

What Keeling commits to in her critique of black cinema exemplifies one of the book’s overall critical values and strengths: it situates historically our contradictory, unconscious desires for calling up the past. For Keeling, the commonsense black nationalism informing black cultural production occurring from the 1960s onward is not only indicative of a minoritized community’s response to a vicious history of disenfranchisement beginning with slavery but is a product of the U.S. state’s deeply embedded relationship with cinematic reality and its delimiting temporality, where “chronological time posits one true past that has led to one true present that will lead to a true, if indeterminate, future” (77). Like other queer engagements with temporality, *The Witch’s Flight* takes seriously the political and cultural implications of nonnormative time for imagining how hidden forms of social relations, knowledges, and systems of becoming fleetingly captured in film can flourish outside it.

Methodologically, *The Witch’s Flight* fits squarely on the shelf with other film, visual, and media studies scholarship while also straddling critical U.S. historiography, queer theory, women’s studies, and critical race studies. And yet, its methodology represents more than an example of interdisciplinarity precisely because it uniquely embodies a field of thought working to understand its own implication in reproducing global capitalism, neoliberalism, and the ruse of representation.

By Keeling’s own admission, *The Witch’s Flight* can be cumbersome to manage theoretically and thus will require nonremunerative intellectual labor and attention. Fortunately, we have become so bewitched by the flight of the black femme that the reward is the relentless intellectual acumen with which Keeling carves out an irresistible, alternate future.

## Note

1. Joon Oluchi Lee, “The Joy of the Castrated Boy,” *Social Text*, nos. 84–85 (2005): 41.

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## OF CANINES AND QUEERS

**Christopher Peterson**

*Melancholia's Dog: Reflections on Our Animal Kinship*

Alice Kuzniar

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. x + 215 pp.

*In Year of the Dog* (dir. Mike White, 2007), a forty-something secretary named Peggy (Molly Shannon) descends into an almost paralyzing state of mourning after the untimely death of her pet dog, Pencil. Refusing to acknowledge the depth of this loss, Peggy's coworker Layla (Regina King) coldly suggests that "maybe your dog died so your love life can live." Obsessed with the rituals of heterosexual courtship and marriage, Layla articulates one of the film's central concerns: the tension between normative, heterosexual love and Peggy's seemingly aberrant love for animals. Layla's concern with her friend's deviant sexuality recalls the hysterical proposition that the legalization of gay marriage will legitimate all sorts of nefarious sexual practices, including bestiality. Yet the film's denouement adopts a sympathetic tenor toward Peggy's decision to reject the heterosexual injunction, abandon her dreary office job, and run off with a new dog to pursue a career as an animal rights activist. The film thus explores how love might live not at the expense of the animal's death but in the form of alternative, interspecies kinship arrangements.

Although not overtly concerned with the politics of queer kinship, Alice Kuzniar's *Melancholia's Dog: Reflections on Our Animal Kinship* poses a number of questions that interrogate the social shame that is often imposed on those who appear inordinately attached to their pets. As Kuzniar observes, "one of the most unutterable aspects of closeness with pets is the shamefulness about intimacy with them, as if it might be construed as bordering on bestiality or as if to love dogs betrayed an inability to love humans" (10). One consequence of this shame, Kuzniar maintains, is the melancholic disavowal of human attachment to animals, a recognition and refusal of the human/animal bond that is exacerbated by the transience of dog lives (compared with human life expectancy): "During the life of pets the propensity is to deny to some degree the intensity of the bond," leading humans bereft of a language to express their grief on the occasion of an animal's

death (138). Kuzniar's emphasis on the unspeakable and ungrievable character of dog love intersects with the work of scholars in race, gender, and sexuality studies who have worked to expose the larger cultural violence through which minorities become especially vulnerable to an untimely death.<sup>1</sup> Such an overdetermined affinity with death is compounded, moreover, by the frequent characterization of such deaths as unworthy of grief.<sup>2</sup>

Offering nuanced readings of a wide assortment of literary texts, films, photographs, and paintings by Franz Kafka, J. M. Coetzee, Rebecca Brown, Sally Mann, William Wegman, David Hockney, and Sue Coe (among others), and engaging with a rich panoply of philosophical writings on the human-animal question—Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Søren Kierkegaard—Kuzniar offers a compelling and often moving account of human relationships with dogs. For instance, in her reading of *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (a collection of poems written in 1906 by Katherine Harris Bradley and her niece and lover, Edith Emma Cooper, and published in 1914 under the nom de plume Michael Field), Kuzniar suggests that the authors' expression of grief for their lost dog links "the love that dare not speak its name" to an interspecies love that defies societal norms. In these poems, "sadness is exalted and grief stylized into a worship of the deceased that beatifies the love between the two women" (161). And in her reading of Brown's *The Dogs: A Modern Bestiary*, Kuzniar observes that the narrator's relationship with her dogs "adopts a queer dimension" insofar as its required secrecy (the landlord prohibits pets) mimes the closeting of the narrator's sexuality (130).

While *Melancholia's Dog* displays careful attention to the practices of interspecies grief and mourning, the book's focus on dogs might strike some readers as arbitrary. Kuzniar chooses to interrogate the human-animal divide "precisely via the animal with which the human has the closest contact, namely, the dog" (5). Lovers of cats, fish, horses, snakes, rabbits, and potbellied pigs (the list is necessarily unlimited) would certainly take issue with the assumption that "humans have the most empathetic bond" with dogs (7). This emphasis on proximity, moreover, does not square easily with the book's other emphasis on "the radical alterity of animal being," a theoretical position that Kuzniar adopts from Derrida (18). In her efforts to legitimize and make legible the intimacy and loss that accompany human-dog relationships, Kuzniar does little to challenge the ideal of intimacy itself, and therefore leaves intact its pretensions to nearness and dialectical union. This sublation of alterity is especially evident in her suggestion that estrangement might be understood as fostering intimacy rather than as undoing its fantasy of inwardness and mutual recognition (122). How might our relationship to

the “radical alterity” of nonhuman animals contest, instead of simply reaffirm, our normative conceptions of intimacy? What might the alterity of nonhuman animals have to teach us about the alterity of those human animals with whom we imagine the most intimate kinship?

Despite these reservations, *Melancholia's Dog* is a welcome contribution to ongoing discussions on the timely theme of animality, a subject that has produced a wealth of scholarship in recent years at the intersection of literature, philosophy, history, film studies, and cultural theory. Particularly admirable is Kuzniar's bravery in insisting on the relevance of her subject matter, which, as she notes, is often “presumed to be unfit for serious scholarly investigation” (1). Kuzniar demonstrates not only that the topic is worthy of intellectual attention but that its discussion is long overdue.

### Notes

1. See Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Karla Holloway, *Passed On: African-American Mourning Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Christopher Peterson, *Kindred Specters: Death, Mourning, and American Affinity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
2. For more on the subject of ungrievable lives, see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

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