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The Caribbean Chapter of the College English Association (CEA-CC) is a branch of the national College English Association in the United States. Although the Chapter encompasses the entire Caribbean, Puerto Rico has been the most active island in terms of participating in and organizing conferences. Throughout the years, conferences hosted by the Caribbean Chapter have tended to focus on literary and cultural themes as well as pedagogical ones. Even though the Caribbean Chapter was extremely active as an organization from the time it was founded in the 1960's through the 1980's, it was the advent of the Internet that enabled us to publicize our conferences more widely, and in the past decade we have seen increasing international participation and interest in the organization. We now attract participants from a wide geographical radius, and we hope to continue doing so without sacrificing the strong foundation we have among academics and scholars in the Caribbean. Our past few conferences had been so successful that we felt it would be a shame not to have some permanent record of them, and it was with this goal in mind that we decided to begin publishing the proceedings of our conferences. This volume represents our maiden voyage into the world of publication as an association.

“Transgression and Taboo” was the topic of the CEA-CC Spring 2005 conference. The topic was particularly timely, reflecting the interchange between the promotion of pluralistic perspectives and the reinforcing of conservative politics that has characterized the past few years. It seemed that within the turmoil of political and cultural dynamics, new boundaries were constantly being crossed and redrawn. This has been seen in the wide acceptance and prolific exposure of subjects that had once been considered taboo in popular culture and the social sphere (such as the mainstreaming of pornography, the extensive figuration of gays and lesbians in prime time TV shows, and the acceptance of same-sex marriages in Spain), on the one hand. On the other, Spring 2005 was also memorable for increasingly conservative and despotic institutional tendencies in international politics, most memorably in the implementation of various reactionary policies and procedures by the Bush Administration, such as the invasion of privacy justified by the Patriot Act in the U.S., and the policies brought
to public attention by the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prison scandals, as well as the repeal of same-sex marriage legality in the U.S.

This volume was initially conceived as a “Proceedings” of the conference. Realizing, however, that the topic had been too large to be completely covered at a two-day conference, and that certain facets of Taboo and Transgression had remained less than fully addressed—and without which a volume of essays on Transgression and Taboo would be incomplete—we decided that we would have a fuller treatment of the topic by supplementing the Proceedings with separate essays that addressed issues raised at the conference itself.

One of the main questions to be addressed at the conference was the relationship between transgression and taboo. For instance, several papers addressed the issue of homosexuality as taboo, raising the question of whether same-sex sexual orientation could indeed still be considered either taboo or transgression at the dawn of the 21st century. Within this context, the consensus seemed to be that transgression and taboo do not exist in a vacuum; they are context-specific and therefore the act of transgression can only be judged within its specific socio-historical context. Focusing on the cultural constructions of masculinity in the Caribbean and its diaspora, Dorsia Smith’s and Veronica Crichlow’s papers (included here) both examined the transgressive nature of sexuality that crossed the heteronormative masculine boundaries of the Caribbean, with Smith’s paper focusing on Jamaica Kincaid and Crichlow’s on Piri Thomas and Miguel Piñero. At the conference, Serena Anderlini D’Onofrio’s paper (not included here) examined the bisexual and poly-amorous relationships in Josiane Balasko’s film French Twist, claiming that the film shows “the cultural and personal transformations by which Loli and Laurent, a conventional heterosexual couple in the Provence region, and their lover Marijo, a butch lesbian from Paris, become an elective family of three loving adult parents and three children, whose harmony is a beacon to the surrounding communities.” Also examining the issue of homosexuality, the final presentation of the conference, by performance artist Peter Toscano, was titled “Talking Trash in the Homo No Mo’ Halfway House--Looking at Language and Life in the Ex-Gay Movement.” Speaking about his experiences in the Ex-Gay movement (an organization that claims to “cure” gay people), Toscano provided a lively presentation in which he impersonated various characters that might have been part of such a program.
On a different level, an equally important topic raised at the conference was the issue of the dialectics of transgression. Does transgression actually transcend the boundaries it purports to violate or does it merely reinforce them? Vartan Messier’s essay (included here) examined the transcendent value of transgression and its redeeming possibilities in the writings of Georges Bataille. Using Bataille’s *Histoire de l’oeil* [Story of the Eye] as an illustration, the paper demonstrated that the theoretical foundation of Erotisme (Eroticism) as transgression formulated by Bataille bridges the gap between savoir (knowledge) and jouissance (bliss). Nereida Prado’s paper (not included here) also examined the issue of transgression as transcendence through brother-sister incest in Pauline Melville’s *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, showing that the Guyanese writer Melville transcends colonialism by confronting the “Amerindian myth of brother/sister incest resulting in the creation of the sun and the moon” against the prohibitions of Catholic missionaries and the Western social and religious taboo on incest. In contrast, Laura Eldred’s essay (included here) shows the failure of incest to become a transcendent symbol by comparing it to colonial hybridity in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*: for the children in these novels, “alienation from the family is occasion for grief and for regret. As a type of hybridity that seeks to return to an origin, and of course cannot, these uses of incest could be read as commentaries on the failure of cultural nationalism. Furthermore, perhaps the example of incest displays one way in which the magic pill of hybridity fails to achieve the desired effect. These novels show, instead, possibilities for hybridity’s spectacular failure by articulating the family as a space that should, ideally, be unified and coherent: the introduction of hybridity becomes a potential move toward the family’s ruin.”

A number of essays in this volume examine the way in which transgression has been used by women to cross traditionally-constructed gender taboos. Pointing out that lyric love poetry has traditionally been the domain of men, Susan Bower’s essay “Transgressing Taboos: Tess Gallagher’s Erotic of Grief” shows how Tess Gallagher’s poetry breaks the taboos of necrophilia, cannibalism, incest, and gender to dismantle barriers. Noting that the particularly transgressive nature of incest in Sapphire’s *Push* was not the rape of a daughter by her father, but the daughter’s confession of physical pleasure during the rape, Elizabeth Donaldson’s essay points out that the confession “may nevertheless have the potential to alter a dominant
discourse” and “at the very least, disrupt the enforced silence that surrounds violations of the taboo against incest.” Examining the claim that “the blues offers excellent fodder for theorizing the reclamation of black women’s bodies,” Lorna Wheeler’s essay shows how “Lucille Bogan’s repertoire offers us the ideal space in which to do so. Transgressive voices like Bogan’s hold the capacity to extend and complicate our ideas about the blues as an art form while reshaping our understanding of the place of queer female desire in the larger Harlem Renaissance movement.” Thea Leticia Mateu’s essay evaluates the success of the popular play The Vagina Monologues in bringing feminism and female-defined sexuality to the masses: “What Cixous, Irigaray, Emily Martin, Greer, and other influential theorists have written about—lack, the Marxist model of gynecology, écriture féminine, writing the body ... all the stuff even academicians have a hard time reading—Ensler manages somehow to convey in a popularly accessible performance.”

The intersections between gender, culture and transgression were explored at the conference by Trimiko C. Melancon and Ileana Cortes-Santiago, who both examined the way in which women have crossed the boundary between community and transgression. Melancon’s paper, “The Dialectics of Transgression and Belonging: Individuality and Socio-Communal Activism in Alice Walker’s Meridian” (which could not be included here), explored the way in which Alice Walker’s 1976 novel engages a “dialectic of transgression and belonging with regard to (black) women, individuality and community.” As she pointed out, the eponymous heroine’s “ability to function in this mutually (co)operative manner differentiates her from other characters whose transgressive behaviors invariably dislocate or isolate them in/from their communities.” Likewise, Ileana Cortes-Santiago’s paper, “The Woman-Healer in Judith Ortiz-Cofer’s The Line of the Sun” (which could also not be included here), also looked at the dialectic role that gender plays in crossing the boundaries of community and transgression. Her paper examined the duality of the santería woman-healer or curandera, whose “ambiguous cultural locations” produce “both taboo and admiration.”

Examining the nature of taboo, Steven Helmling’s essay notes that “it is axiomatic, in the enlightened ethic of unmasking taboos, that a taboo not merely excludes something, but that the exclusion distorts what is included: what is repressed exerts its force on what is expressed.”
He shows that although Adorno usually used the word taboo “to connote a denial or evasion or hypocrisy of the ideological type,” there were two related taboos that Adorno did indeed observe: the “representation of utopia” and “the Bilderverbot of Judaism’s First Commandment: the proscription against graven images.”

Richard Middleton-Kaplan (whose essay we could not include here) examined the issue of taboos within the context of colonialism. His paper “Tattoos and Other Taboos in Melville’s Typee” showed that by “reversing the identification of white/European with civilization and cannibal with savage, Melville transgresses a cultural norm far more pervasive, insidious and entrenched than any etiquette of clothing, eating, or sexual coupling.” Likewise, Anita Raghunath’s essay shows how “the Caribbean became a reference point in British culture for the carnivale and the transgressive,” in a number of literary forms during the eighteenth century. Explaining that “this archive would be drawn on repeatedly to examine the hidden side of the British psyche; those carnal impulses that were taboo for the British to display,” she demonstrates that “Britishness evolved in the eighteenth century as an image of imperial glory and morality in contrast to the Caribbean, through the use of metaphors of carnival and transgression.” Agnes Nicholas also examined taboos within a colonial context, focusing on the linguistic implications that the “constant back and forth ownership” of the island of Dominica between the English and the French, which “left an indelible mark on this island: the acquisition of a new language.” Her paper, “To Speak or Not to Speak Creole: The Prohibition of French Creole on the Island of Dominica” (not included here), showed that the resulting product, French Creole, “was seen as the language of the slaves and was thereafter stigmatized. It was widely discouraged among the elite and those who strive to become literate through mastery of the ‘Queen’s English.’”

David Leonard and Carmen Lugo-Lugo question the equation of shock and transgression, particularly within popular culture. Beginning with the premise that “transgression for the sake of transgression is both empty of meaning and dangerous in consequences,” or that “transgression with the sole intent of ‘having fun,’ ‘being funny,’ or ‘being cool’ takes away the very power of the ‘transgressive’ act,” their essay claims that “counter hegemonic behavior like [Janet] Jackson’s ‘choice’ to expose her taboo breast within a sacred American space is not inherently transgressive, in the same way that Madonna’s
kissing Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera and toying with the notion of marriage are not transgressive acts."

Perhaps the principal question to be raised in any discussion of transgression is a definition of the term. While most members of the audience at the conference agreed that transgression implied the breaking of a socially-constructed taboo, some asked whether shock was an essential component of transgression. Could any such rupture be considered transgressive or was it necessary for a transgressive act also to be subversive? This volume reflects both views: while some papers specifically equate transgression with subversion, implying that an act of transgression ultimately aims to subvert certain dominant ideologies, others argue that transgression can operate quite independently from subversion.

This collection of essays aims to be neither exhaustive nor complete. The final question-and-answer session of the conference addressed the question of whether a conference on “Transgression and Taboo” was actually an indication that most of the taboos up for discussion had already been crossed and could therefore no longer be considered taboo. Some taboos had received less representation than others: Cannibalism, for instance, is often considered the most serious breach of the human bond, often linked with the taboo on incest as a marker of the beginning of social organization and moral restriction. Could the word at some point disappear from mainstream usage and be replaced by “anthropophagy”? Likewise, could the word “bestiality” be replaced by the already existent term “zoosexuality” or coined even more neutrally as “inter-speciel sexuality”--acts of this nature no longer taboo but seen as transgressive acts of anti-speciesism or anti-anthropo-centrism? The final discussion also touched on other sexual taboos (such as necrophilia and pedophilia), as well as other, more garden-variety dietary taboos, which had not been represented at the conference and which have not been directly addressed in this volume either. What follows therefore is not encyclopedic: it is a sample of the many views on how taboo can become transgression. The volume is in itself a demonstration of the situated nature of categories as well as their rupture.

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Mayagüez, Puerto Rico
TRANSGRESSING TABOOS: TESS GALLAGHER’S EROTIC
OF GRIEF

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Taboos are a means of social control. Anyone who transgresses the boundaries set by societal standards risks entering the realm of the abject, which, as Julia Kristeva has shown, constitutes a fundamental threat to identity as it pulls one “toward the place where meaning collapses” (230). Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz defines the abject as “the underside of the symbolic. … what the symbolic must reject, cover over and contain” (89). Moreover, according to Kristeva, what is abject and what is taboo are closely related, for both involve filth, corpses, and exclusion (243). When a writer seems to celebrate transgression of taboos, his or her work invites speculation about the role of that transgression. Tess Gallagher is such a poet. Some of her subjects challenge taboos of incest, gender, necrophilia, and cannibalism to such an extent that many readers are made extremely uncomfortable. Freud would say that this discomfort stems from the frightening exposure of “secretly familiar” things that have been repressed (947). While it is significant that their transgressions occur in the context of love poetry, the effect carried out by Gallagher’s poems is a dramatic energy that compels readers’ thoughts to linger on their narratives.

Love, of course, is the most clichéd of subjects. The genre of love poetry can be either perilous, unavailable, or unsuitable for a contemporary woman poet. Indeed, Jennifer L. Jenkins asserts, “Because it defies the cultural containment of women, female desire is often treated as suspect and associated with insanity, violence, or worse” in late 19th-century fiction (168). In most traditional love poetry, the erotic is depicted in binary terms—subject and object, body and mind, male and female—that reduce its complexity and blur its nature. The genre has been defined for the most part by heterosexual men. Love poetry suffers with lyric poetry in general from what Rachel Blau Duplessis characterizes as “the deep imbedding of gender narratives” and stereotypical gender images (“Manifest” 35, 37). Jonathan Culler concurs: “Lyric poetry has been less amenable than the novel to feminist critique” (178). Any authentic expression of the erotic by a woman poet requires radical strategies before the gender narratives
and stereotypes of the lyric poem can begin to be dismantled. I want to argue that the presence of the abject in Gallagher’s love poetry is her guerilla tactic for beginning to write “otherhow” (Duplessis 49) than the master narratives of the male poets throughout the ages.

Why the abject? Kristeva has pointed out that “creative juices” flow from the domain of the abject, including the revolutionary possibility of poetic language (25). Since the abject is beyond the control of the symbolic, it affords innovation. It also is a source of great intensity—Freud compared taboo actions to “objects charged with electricity; they are the seat of a tremendous power which is transmissible by contact” (20). One of the challenges of writing love poetry is finding a way to render the intensity of the feeling.

The best way to appreciate Gallagher’s treatment of the abject is to look closely at the poems where she engages it. The earliest poem in which taboo is “entertained” is “Each Bird Walking,” which appeared in the 1984 volume Willingly. The poem uses a narrative device that Gallagher will use again in other taboo-breaking poems: she frames the story with a conversation between lovers. The context for “Each Bird Walking” is the man’s response to his female lover’s request, “Tell me … something I can’t forget” (lines 50-51). His story is of how as a grown man he had to bathe his critically ill mother, touching her everywhere, “there being no place on her body he shouldn’t touch because/he had to” (9-11). The poem tells of his

... opening
her thighs and running the rag firmly
and with the cleaning thought
up through her crotch, between the lips
over the V of thin hairs-- (16-20)

Incest, of course, is taboo in almost every culture. Freud considered the repression of incestuous desires fundamental for the development of the individual psyche (29). Claude Levi-Strauss regarded the incest taboo as “the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished” (24), while Alan Richardson insists, “Literary violations of the incest taboo ... are anything but casual: they broach the fundamental laws of society” (553). “Each Bird Walking” does not actually violate the incest taboo, but skirts around it. However, even though the son is providing a tender, necessary service for his mother, the lines feel dangerous
because of the strength of this particular taboo. The son’s “cleaning thought” in Gallagher’s poem obviates the “uncleanness” associated with the taboo. But the presence of the taboo brings a drama to his actions that allows him to demonstrate love for his mother in a more powerful way than mere words could achieve. The sacredness of the mother-son relationship is not violated but enhanced.

Indeed, there is something exquisite about the son’s touching his mother “softly at the place of his birth-light” (22). In fact, Freud no doubt would have appreciated this poem, as his comments about female genitalia suggest:

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This unheimlich [strange, frightening] place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings ... There is a joking saying that ‘Love is home-sickness’ (947).

An expanded vision of the erotic—beyond its usual confines within romantic love—is presented in this Gallagher poem both as it involves the son and his mother and as it impacts the two lovers whose conversation frames the poem. The female lover (who is the first-person narrator of the poem) announces at the end of the poem that the story allows her to “love him another way” because it allows the two of them to enter a sacred space:

... Not of the body alone, or of its making, but carried in the white spires of trembling until what spirit, what breath we were was shaken from us. Small then, the word holy. (34-39)

Notice the reference to “the white spires” of country churches and the puzzling reference to the word ‘holy’ as “small then.” It is not unusual for love poetry to characterize lovemaking as creating a sacred space, but Gallagher is not referring to bodily contact between the lovers. It is the telling of the story that sanctifies, that has enabled the lovers to enter a state in which the mundane has been stripped away: a state, simply, of ekstasis, the Greek word for rapture that means “standing forth naked.” Why is the word ‘holy’ small? Perhaps it is an ironic reference to the contrast with its customary use in the context of the
institution of religion. This experience occurs outside any institutional setting: the ‘white spires’ are not material, but metaphoric of the couple’s reaction to this intimate revelation.

The poem depicts several crossings of borders that become gifts: from son to mother, mother to son (affording him the opportunity to reverse the usual direction of nurture), and lover to lover. The power of the taboo is extraordinary: it is violated only in a very literal sense, but not at all in spirit, yet its presence in the story has a phenomenal effect upon the lovers.

In a personal interview, Gallagher explains that she sees her poetry as not phallocentric, but what she calls “mouth-centric” in reference to the power of the voice in her poems (Gallagher, Personal Interview). In “Each Bird Walking,” the narrative voice is what creates the condition for rapture. Another facet of this poem that is significant for Gallagher’s forging of an authentic love poetry by a woman is its rhythm. A number of male scholars have claimed that the act of intercourse is the underlying paradigm of all literature: the escalating tension, climax, and resolution. However, that assertion is clearly founded on the male sexual experience, which is directed toward orgasm. Women can experience pleasure both clitorally and vaginally and have multiple orgasms, so that the rhythm of their sexual experience is radically different from men’s. The music theoretician Susan McClary has noted that composers in the 17th century who were interested in the invention of erotic metaphors used two very different kinds: images of desire, which created an artificial need for a particular sound by withholding it, and images of pleasure, which had a quality of timeless, sustained hovering—which could be produced through the popular device of the ostinato. In the ostinato, each potential moment of closure is the very same moment that guarantees continuation, so that there is a continual refusal of closure. Obviously, the ostinato was seen as characteristic of much female sexual experience (125). The rhythm of double narrative of “Each Bird Walking” has the quality of the ostinato: an erotic hovering.

After “Each Bird Walking,” Gallagher did not publish other taboo-breaking poems until Moon Crossing Bridge and Portable Kisses, the two volumes she wrote after the death of her husband, Raymond Carver. Carver was a highly celebrated fiction writer whose death was noted throughout the world. He was diagnosed with lung cancer in September 1987 and died August 2, 1989.
“Fresh Stain” duplicates the narrative frame of “Each Bird Walking,” a conversation between lovers in which one tells a story to the other. However, in this case, it is the woman who tells the story. The narrator relates an incident from her girlhood when she and another girl were picking raspberries and the son of the berry field owner, a boy their age, came out in a white shirt. The girls pelted the boy with the berries because “His/ white shirt outside his jeans [was] so tempting.” The girls are prepubescent: they have “buds/of breasts.” In their sudden attack they are “two blurred dancers who didn’t need paradise.” When they are finished, the boy’s white shirt looked “as if / we had kissed him until his own blood / opened” (lines 19-21).

The taboos are various in this poem: rape, reversal of gender roles, multiple partners, and menstrual. The assault is a metaphorical rape, but here the victim is male while the aggressors are two females. The poem is an interesting reversal of the defloration of a young girl, and the stains on the boy’s white shirt are evocative of both hymeneal blood and the menstrual blood the young girls have yet to shed. The innocence of the girls contrasts with the violent eroticism of their behavior—the narrator remembers, “We refused every plea and/were satisfied” (21-22). The sexual relationship that frames the story heightens the electricity: the narrator’s male lover “can almost remember” her as the girl who “leans into the vine, / following with pure unanswerable desire, a boy / going into the house to change his shirt” (30-32).

Gallagher claims that “Fresh Stain” records an actual conversation between herself and Carver: “I wanted him to know me before I had an actual beginning of sexual activity. This was a pre-moment of sexuality. It was on the edge, on the boundary. I wanted him to know me all the way back then. In the poem I’m carrying love to love” (Personal Interview). Ironically, Carver died before the poem was written, making poignant the phrase “pure unanswerable desire.”

One of the important qualities that “Fresh Stain” brings to Gallagher’s re-invention of the love poem is liminality. The girls’ adolescence gives their desire a purity—sexual desire for them is indeed “fresh.” The spontaneity of their action and its quality of adult violence masked by child play also are marked by liminality. The crossing of boundaries in this poem is both innocent and potentially malevolent. In fact, the gender reversal is actually somewhat troubling from a feminist perspective. When a woman poet imagines herself in a
male role, as Duplessis notes, “One might say that a woman poet must fantasize herself as the inseminating figure, and ‘take the phallus.’ This is a hard issue, the playing at ‘male’ performance, and while it may offer some plausible strategies, gender asymmetry can also rebound and boomerang back” (39-40). The potential boomerang is the use of the rape metaphor since it could be seen as undercutting the seriousness of sexual violence.

The fact that “Fresh Stain” appears both in Moon Crossing Bridge and Portable Kisses has an important ramification: it is a different poem in each volume, and not because the lines are any different, but because the context is. Moon Crossing Bridge was the first to be published; Portable Kisses followed in less than a year. The first volume was more closely tied to the poet’s grief; in Portable Kisses Gallagher strives for a level of lightheartedness. Moreover, in Moon Crossing Bridge, “Fresh Stain” takes on particular meaning as part of a series of poems leading to what Gallagher has called “a re-creation of heart” (Personal Interview): these poems were written to enable her to love someone else after her husband’s death. She has said, “The heart that I had in love with Ray wouldn’t serve the new love. I had to make the new heart, yet he was very necessary to that” (Personal Interview). Here is yet another crossing of boundaries: using the poem about the story told to the dead lover to make way for intimacy with the new lover.

It is in Moon Crossing Bridge that the poet violates the most dangerous, powerful threshold of all, the boundary between life and death. Taboos surrounding the dead are particularly virulent in primitive societies and persist in contemporary culture. Kristeva argues that the dead “show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (231) and that because the corpse “no longer signifies anything,” it reveals “the breaking down of a world that has erased its / borders” (231-232). The boundary between life and death obviously is the most salient for humans, yet Gallagher violates taboos surrounding not only death, but also between sex and death several times.

In “Wake,” the narrator describes lying beside her husband’s body, which lay in their home for three nights, having climbed up “onto our high bed, bed/ we’d loved in and slept in, married/ and unmarried” (lines 5-7). Not only does she violate the taboo against touching the dead, but she places that contact within the context of sexual passion. The juxtaposition of death and passion is symbolized
by the “halo of cold” around the body versus her “own warmth” (8-10). She crosses the threshold between life and death because of her love, which seems to allow her to move from the outer profane space in which she is a live woman lying beside a dead man into an interior sacred space where the two are together again:

... We were dead
a little while together again then, serene
and afloat on the strange broad canopy
of the abandoned world. (12-15)

The serenity is enabled paradoxically by the protection of the living world, which has been abandoned temporarily by the woman (and permanently by the man), and by the stillness of the world beyond it. The danger surrounding the taboo is what makes this poem work: the woman willingly accepts risk of death’s contagion in order to be near the body of the man she loves.

The title of this poem, “Wake,” can be read in more than one way. Obviously, it refers to the Irish tradition of celebrating a dead person’s life (usually in a party), but it also is an ironic pointer to the grieving lover’s state as she lies beside the “sleeping” man. The fact that the lovers are “afloat” on the “canopy” of the abandoned world” is another sign of how things are upside down in this poem: a canopy is what is overhead—the canopy of a bed or the leafy tops of trees in a forest. It’s also significant that the world is described as “abandoned,” as if both of them had made a deliberate decision to leave it. “Wake” probably is an allusion to one of Carver’s last poems, “Wake Up,” which describes practicing for death. But the (trans)gression of Gallagher’s poem is also (trans)cendent, for it allows the lovers to transcend death. Gallagher has remarked of “Wake,” “This idea that I’m involved in trespass is important to the idea of voice because I think voice can go everywhere. For a woman to be able to go everywhere is pretty powerful” (Personal Interview).

Another poem in Moon Crossing Bridge seems to be even more dangerous than “Wake” because it suggests necrophilia even more strongly. “Red Poppy” describes the journey of the lover’s dying from the first warnings of terminal illness to just beyond the moment of death. The image of the red poppy was chosen carefully. It is both the lush flower whose sensuousness Georgia O’Keefe made famous and the attribute of the Greek god of sleep, Hyphos, and of Morpheus, the
god of dreams, and of Night personified (Gallagher is very conscious of myth and often uses mythical references). The red poppy is also, of course, associated with remembrance, especially of war veterans. Its petals have a fragile paper-thin beauty, and they fall away from the seed pod when the flower is ripe. The pistils and stamens at the center of the poppy are an inky black and remain on the seed pod after the petals have dropped.

Early in the poem, when the lovers are sleeping while holding hands through the bars of his hospital bed, the narrator declares, “when the poppy lets go I know it is to lay bare/ his thickly seeded black coach/ at the pinnacle of dying” (lines 8-10). The poppy here is Gallagher’s symbol of the abundance and richness of life, which has death at its center. As her lover is dying:

... the real gave way to
the more-than-real, each moment’s carmine
abundance, furl of reddest petals
lifted from the stalk and no hint of the black
hussar’s hat at the center ... (19-23)

Much of what makes the red poppy so strikingly beautiful is the contrast of the red petals with the black center. In the poem, the awareness of her husband’s approaching death has intensified the beauty of his life. When his breathing stops, the narrator kisses his lips “to know an ending” (24):

... Tasting then that plush of scarlet
which is the last of warmth, kissless kiss
he would have given. Mine to extend a lover’s right
past its radius (25-27)

With the kiss of the dead lover Gallagher violates the death taboo dramatically. That the kiss is taken, not given, could be considered a violation of mutuality.

“There are as many nuances and inflections for kisses as there are lips to kiss and moments in which to bestow them,” claims Gallagher in her introduction to Portable Kisses (9). She adds, “Kisses, especially as they are written down, seem to carry entire worlds. They are communications beyond and including the sexual” (9). The kiss in “Red Poppy” is indeed a bridge between worlds. Freud wrote that the persons or things that are the objects of taboo “may be liberated with
destructive effect if the organisms which provoke its discharge are too weak to resist it” (32). For the narrator of “Red Poppy” to attempt to bridge the worlds of life and death at the very instant of the transition is a dangerous maneuver. One of the purposes of the poem appears to be to demonstrate that she is strong enough to withstand the tremendous power discharged by the violation of the taboo. Thus it is significant that she takes the kiss. He cannot give it, although she knows that he would have if he could. So she extends “a lover’s right past the radius” (line 27) to become both giver and receiver. The locution “a lover’s right” is an important key to the significance of what Gallagher is doing in this poem—she is claiming that a lover has the right to go “past the radius,” that is, into the world of the dead, for this last kiss. The claim substantiates the power Gallagher asserts for love even in the face of death. Moreover, this was not a kiss of mere affection, but clearly one of passion. Its status is supported by the sensuality of the poppy image (every moment has a “carmine abundance” [20-21]) and the fact that she tastes the “plush of scarlet” (25).

Finally, it seems to me that at the heart of the transgression in “Red Poppy,” as in her other taboo-breaking poems, Gallagher is pointing to the presence of the erotic in the sacred and vice versa, an idea that Georges Bataille argued in his classic text Erotism (“My purpose is to see in eroticism an aspect of man’s inner life, of his religious life, if you like” [31]). To seal with a kiss the very instant in which the lover crosses from life to death is to claim the “unclean” of the taboo as the sacred. That claim in itself can be considered transgressive in a culture in which the erotic usually is far removed from the sacred.

In the midst of poems such as “Wake” and “Red Poppy” is a poem that is shocking for its sarcasm about the husband’s death, which might also be considered a violation of taboo regarding the need for solemnity in an elegy. In “Breeze” the narrator asks the dead man if he doesn’t think she’s “tired of tragedy” (line 1) and complains that “they” (the poetry world/the media?) have applied “ghost-talcum/to us. We’re comic strip. Kill one / of us and a legion of lovers / steps forward” (3-6). This poem works because of its double edge; although the narrator depicts a ghostly intercourse—she shakes her “crepe tassels” (9) after he “soar[s]”(8) into her, the reader is aware that the gesture is grotesque. Although “Breeze” provides comic relief in this series of grief poems, it is also poignant because it captures the tone of wit that apparently
characterized much of the couple’s conversations. A friend of the couple, Greg Kuzma, wrote of them while Carver was still alive, “What they offer each other is a tenderness, a delighting in simple things, an acknowledgement of the difficulties of living, the willingness to accept the truth, even if it be a hard one” (362). The “us against the world” theme of “Breeze” serves to focus the spotlight on the couple, as opposed to the narrator’s grieved longing.

The final taboo-breaking poem of Moon Crossing Bridge is one of the last ones in the volume, “Picking Bones.” The context is a visit to Carver’s grave with a Japanese friend, who had translated his poems into Japanese. The friend and the narrator prepare vases of roses and light candles at the grave; they feel Carver’s “presence palpable as we crouch there” (line 15). The friend describes the Japanese ritual after cremation of “picking bones” (22), using chopsticks to lift each bone from the ash and drop it into an urn.

Her friend relates how much grief and emotion he had experienced upon viewing his father’s body, but during the ritual of picking the bones from the ash, “lifting shards of a father,” felt “the lightness, the / necessary discrepancy of translation” (27-28).

... For a moment we are held
precariously as a morsel on the way to any mouth.
‘Don’t
pick bones! the mothers warn children caught
lifting the same piece of food. We pull
ourselves up from the low black table, from
the ivory clicking. (28-32)

The taboo here is the connection between the bones of the dead and food: cannibalism is more than implied by the references to the chopsticks, the mothers’ warning, and the grave stone as a “low black table.” But the poem also joins all of our fates to the dead man’s: “For a moment we are held / precariously as a morsel on the way to any mouth.” Gallagher uses the electricity discharged by the taboo to explore a new kind of relation of the living to the dead. First, as the visitors to the grave talk quietly, comes the reference to the translation of the husband’s words: “That overlay too of new sound Emiko has given/ his poems in Japanese” (16-17). This description permits the translation of body into ashes and spirit to be understood in the context of poetry, including the “necessary/ discrepancy” (27-28). Then, the
presence of the dead man’s spirit is imagined as food, and from there the idea of that spirit nourishing those who loved him is not a very big leap. The idea of translation is significant for this stage in the grieving process because it signifies a new form for the same substance; the new form requires a new method of relating to the substance. To consume the substance of her husband is to incorporate him into her being. In fact, tribes that practice cannibalism of ancestors and loved ones consider it a sacred practice. “Picking Bones” speaks to how the dead writer’s spirit has nourished Gallagher’s creative work.

Taboos usually involve the human body—abjection is “an insistence on the subject’s necessary relation to death, to animality, and to materiality” (Grosz 89). It is not surprising to find Tess Gallagher writing fully-bodied poems about death and grieving, for she always writes out of her body. She writes by hand in order to have “the feel of my energy coming not only out of my brain but also out of my body” (Personal Interview). That energy is what gives her the strength in Moon Crossing Bridge to confront the reality of death, absorb its meaning, and to take the risks involved of violating taboos and thus inventing a new kind of love poem.

Gallagher’s poems of grief are reminiscent in some ways of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s In Memoriam, at least in the way that they mirror stages of the grieving process, except that Gallagher deliberately transgresses societal norms, while Tennyson tries not to see his “elephant in the room”—the nature of his socially aberrant love for Hallam. But the most important models for Gallagher’s transgressive poems in the face of grief are the Irish institution of the wake, that raucous grief-defying party that can continue for days, and the work of contemporary Irish poets who contest the political borders that gave rise to the “troubles.” Gallagher not only has Irish heritage, but also maintains close contact with several activist Irish poets.

It is significant that in the eleven months between Carver’s cancer diagnosis and his death, Gallagher suspended her own writing to help Carver put together the final volume of his poetry, A New Path To The Waterfall, which was published in 1989. She had showed him the epigraph from Saint Theresa that she had used for one of the books of poems: “Words lead to deeds ... they prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness” (“Yet Why Not” 43). She continued to work on the book after his death, arranging the poems, and did not begin to write her own poetry again—what would become
Moon Crossing Bridge and Portable Kisses—until January 1989, six months after Carver’s death. Thus the poems of the two volumes mark a significant new beginning for Gallagher.

The poems of Moon Crossing Bridge, in particular, are both love poems and elegies. Actually, the two genres have a great deal in common, since both seek to “make the absent present,” as Peter Sacks has written of the English elegy. The ancestors of elegies are Greek vegetation myths (Shuster 110), thus the insistence on life going on despite the death being mourned. Adonis, who often personifies Eros, is a vegetation and fertility god who was resurrected after his death. Finally, Gallagher’s familiarity with Irish literature contributed to the construction of her own elegies. As Donna Decker Shuster points out, “Irish literature has a long, elegiac history. In the past hundred years, political conflict, nationalism, and behaviors of mourning have become infused in Irish artistic representation” (110).

It is no coincidence that the title Moon Crossing Bridge is a reference to an enigmatic crossing—the title is a translation from the Chinese characters for the Togetsu Bridge near Kyoto and an allusion to the moon crossing the night sky. These poems explore transitions and transactions between worlds that are indeed mysterious. Gallagher’s practice of crossing boundaries can lead to revelatory moments similar to Virginia Woolf’s moments of being, in which the reader can suddenly arrive at the sort of ekstasis that Woolf’s Bernard in The Waves (“The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed” [238]) and the lovers in Gallagher’s poems experience. As Kristeva writes, “The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth” (236).

Reading Gallagher with a consciousness of what appears to be a feminist agenda to re-invent the love poem allows us to appreciate the broader significance of her transgressions. The timing of her taboo-breaking poems in the decade of the 1980’s and early 90’s coincides with the emergence of what Marjorie Perloff calls poets of “minority groups”—women, African-Americans, Native Americans, and gay and lesbian poets (104). It was a time of change in American poetry, and Gallagher was one of the change-makers. The alternative models and images of experiencing pleasure and sexuality that she suggests can help us to appreciate a different kind of erotic energy than the one that is driven only toward satisfying a lack—only toward orgasm. However,
although Gallagher’s poetry of mourning has received some recognition for its insight on the grieving process, the significance of her taboo-breaking poems in the love poetry genre has not been noted previously. We need to think of Gallagher in terms of Myra Jehlen’s observation in 1991 (about the time Gallagher was writing most of these poems): “The female territory might well be envisioned as one long border, and independence for women not as a separate country but as open access to the sea” (582). Gallagher’s erotic of grief has dismantled some of the barriers to that access.

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RUNNING DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS AND SEX: BENDING MASCULINITY IN DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS AND SHORT EYES

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Homosexuality is one of the most taboo issues in Latino culture, especially in the male sphere. Within Latino culture, the strong, assertive, and aggressive male image, or caro palo (i.e. “hard face”) is the norm. Men are expected to “act like men” and be actors, not passive, weak and receptive, terms that are commonly associated with women. Thus, for a Latino male, homosexuality is a terrible stigma. Piri Thomas and Miguel Pinero, in their respective works Down These Mean Streets and Short Eyes, examine in different ways the issue of male sexuality and images of masculinity.

Piri Thomas’ autobiographical novel of his teenage years as a gang member involved in fights, drugs, and crime, takes place primarily on the streets of New York City, where the social dynamics are in some ways similar to those in Miguel Pinero’s prison setting. Like prison, the mean streets of Harlem force Piri and his boys to assert constantly their macho reputations via displays of physical strength, aggression, and domination. In both arenas, exhibiting the slightest bit of weakness leaves one vulnerable to exploitation, or even worse, death. In both pieces, the way in which male weakness, as defined by the characters, manifests itself is through homosexuality. However, acts of homosexual sex, where the male is the actor and not the recipient are not tabooed; on the contrary, the usual rule of degrading homosexuals/homosexuality is bent if the goal is money, drugs, and liquor as in Mean Streets, and for pleasure and/or release as in Short Eyes.

Piri’s encounter with a homosexual act occurs, as Marta Sanchez claims, as a “test that presumably will reaffirm [his] masculine identity” (123). Because he was just initiated into the gang, he still had to prove his strength and confirm his macho reputation, for as a gang member, one always had to be tough and open to any challenge. The invitation to the transvestites’ apartment is actually a direct challenge to his masculinity when Alfredo says:
Say, man, let’s make it up to the faggots’ pad and cop some bread. Whatta you cats think? Oh, shit, don’t tell me you ain’t down. [Then Piri narrates] The stud snapped his fingers, as if to say, ‘Motherfuckers, who’s a punk?’ Without a word we jumped off the stoop and, grinning, shuffled toward the faggots building. (55)

Although Piri notes in great detail the feminization of the transvestites’ voices and behavior in an attempt to make the situation tolerable and as close to heterosexual as possible, he cannot overlook the fact that they are still very much male and gay, declaring “Ain’t those faggots the sickest motherfuckers yet” (55).

Despite his reservations, Piri receives fellatio while he is extremely drunk on high-proof whiskey and high on marijuana. Inebriated, Piri is unable to escape but able to feel; despite his mental aversion to the pleasurable experience, his body does not react in kind. Therefore, to separate his mind from the body and to emphasize his virility to himself, Piri repeats in mantra form, “I like broads, I like muchachas, I like girls” even as the “roughness of his [Concha’s] tongue both scared and pleased” him (61).

Sanchez argues that the transvestites have put Piri and his crew into the passive, receptive position (with the exception of Alfredo, who penetrates La Vieja) because the “economic overdetermined the sexual” (124). The boys had initially gone to the transvestites’ apartment to alleviate their boredom and to prove to Alfredo that they were not cowards. In addition, it appears that the transvestites offered them money in exchange for sexual favors, and thus, when the opportunity to get money occurs, Piri, broke, is willing to bend his heterosexual normative thinking. While it may be true that Alfredo is not in the passive, receptive position, for it seems he went for the sex, it is not the case for Piri; he is there because he does not want to punk out and be labeled weak by his friends. Nevertheless, the unspoken acceptance of the acts as long as it was for economic gain, not love, bends their normative reasoning that homosexuality is taboo and makes for a weak, feminine man.

This willingness to bend normative reasoning of masculine sexuality is also seen in *Short Eyes*, a play which focuses on the struggle of men to assert their masculinity in prison, a world where they
are the objects of oppression. The difference with Piri’s text is that in Pinero’s, homosexual sex is a means to assert domination, as much for pleasure and/or release. This exception is important, for in the prison world, it determines the manner in which the characters act; the more aggressive and dominant he is, the more “masculine” he is perceived to be by his peers. Thus, the men who are not aggressive and dominant become the recipient of homosexual acts, and by extension, viewed as weak men. The receiver, who becomes feminized and a prey for others unless protected, substitutes for the female in the all-male prison world—but the inmates are heterosexual, and hypocritically, viciously punish those they deem deviant such as Clark Davis, an inmate who was accused of child molestation, and in jail awaiting trial.

Arnaldo Cruz-Malave notes that in Short Eyes the men are victims who victimize in return:

one could say the “queen,” the “faggot” are not so much the antithesis of their “macho” characters … as that “proximate others” in whose likeness the latter see reflected the catastrophic condition of their own manhood. They either penetrate or be penetrated.

As such, they must engage in over-masculinized behavior to reaffirm their virility. One such example is the catcalling to the drag queens, where Omar and Ice try to best each other, yelling out “Oy, baby…hey sweet mama … Over here, check this out … ten inches” and “Fuck that, check this out … Thirteen inches” (72). The men’s behavior toward the drag queens who are paraded through toward their cells mirrors that of crude catcalling toward females on the street; sexually charged and exaggerative, it briefly enables the men to feel like men on the street, but also reinforces the concept of laying claim to the “fresh meat” to reinforce domination over another. When Juan asks if Ice is into “that scene” he replies, “a stiff dick has no conscience” (72). This glib remark is actually quite loaded. Like Piri who succumbed to peer pressure, the implication is that the men have succumbed to their primal sexual urges and no longer draw strict lines—as long as it is strictly for domination and pleasure (i.e. not for love). The drag queen incident is also reminiscent of Piri’s insistent notation of the feminization of the transvestites to render the sexual acts as heterosexual as possible.
Within the prison system, the men use sex to dominate others and to release the tensions and oppression they feel in lock-up. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the men on the ward pursue those who appear to be weaker and are classified as “effeminate,” again to make it easier to bend the norm of masculinity and render the homosexual act acceptable within that paradigm.

The men, especially Paco, desire Cupcakes, the most sought after male on the ward because he is young and handsome. However, Cupcakes is also the character who most vehemently denies participation in any homosexual act. When Paco pinches his behind and later kisses him on the neck in the shower, Cupcakes is quick to react with a firm “I don’t play that shit” (65), but does not physically back up his assertions; this is viewed as weakness by Paco who threatens “Push comes to shove, I’ll take you” (68). Omar, witnessing the exchange, later tells Cupcake he needs to just swing on Paco and “let him know you’s a man” (69-70). The allusion to physical violence as a means of affirming masculinity parallels the “penetrate or be penetrated” mentality that Cruz-Malave puts forth. The notion follows through with Paco’s continued manipulations to try to get Cupcakes to be his receiver; despite his sweet-talking, Cupcakes is not willing to bend his image of masculinity. In a fit of anger, Paco exclaims, “He [Juan, El Raheem, Omar] wants to fuck you too. He’s calling you a girl. Cupcakes … Wasn’t that your woman’s name on the street, Ice?” (89). Despite the pressure, Cupcakes never gives in to the sexual advances of the others to become a receiver.

Ultimately, the lustful desire the men felt for Cupcakes is turned into rage and acted out upon Clark Davis, a character who is the epitome of a weak man because he does not defend himself either verbally or physically. This is further heightened by the fact that since he is a supposed child molester, the men perceive him to be sexually deviant: “a diseased ‘other,’ a dirty, diseased germ that threatens to infect their manly systems” (Platizky 86). According to Cruz-Malave, Clark Davis is killed because he is their mirror and reveals what they do not wish to admit: that they too, are considered sexually deviant according to normative, heterosexual reasoning. Although Juan, Paco, Ice, and Omar bend the normative heterosexual rules for pleasure, their masculinity is in question for one who participates in sex acts with a person of the same sex is perceived by mainstream society to be homosexual, a label the men cannot and will not accept.
Neither Thomas’ nor Pinero’s characters (with the exception of Paco) freely involve themselves in homosexual encounters. Some social force drives each to it, be it peer pressure, boredom, and economic gain, or the need to dominate and/or release tension due to lock-up in prison in an attempt to maintain reputation as a man on the streets. The images of stereotypical masculinity—physical strength and sexual prowess—do not change but are bent in certain social incidents to allow the men to save face and maintain their macho reputations.

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RADICAL MOMENTS: JANE BARKER AND MARY SHELLEY
ON INCEST

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“I was a Wretch incapable to receive Service or Succour; a Monster unfit for human Conversation” (I: 31), says Clarinthia after her father tries to rape her in Jane Barker’s Exilius, or the Banish’d Roman, written between 1680 and 1714 and published in 1715. Over a century later, Mary Shelley’s Mathilda declares: “I believe myself to be polluted by the unnatural love I had inspired, and that I was a creature cursed and set apart by nature” (238).¹ Penned 100 years apart, both these texts offer unparalleled insight by recording the daughters’ reaction to the incestuous desire of their biological fathers. While incest is an often-used literary device in the long eighteenth century,² Exilius, Mathilda and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s The Cenci are the only three texts I have found in the period in which the daughter speaks of incest involving her biological father³ and while it may be a common subject in con-

1 Mary Shelley’s text was written in 1819 but not published until 1959.
2 I see these texts as part of the long eighteenth century, 1660-1830, rather than from the more distinct neoclassical and romantic periods. I do so because incest is defined as based on marriage prohibitions throughout this longer period and both of these texts adhere to this definition, a position that begins to transform at the end of this period as notions of child sexual abuse are developed. Also, the texts form part of an ongoing literary debate within the novel about marriage and filial obedience that crosses the boundaries between neoclassicism and romanticism.
3 Many texts of this century feature incest but often the incest, particularly in father-daughter narratives, dissipates at the text’s moment of crisis. The type of incest that occurs within the fiction includes guardian-ward, uncle-niece, father-in-law and daughter-in-law, mother-son, brother-sister. Many are threatened or averted although there are a number in which the incest takes place, such as the three featured in this essay. The incest narratives concerning guardians and wards include Delarivier Manley’s The New Atalantis (1709) (also includes brother-sister incest); Eliza Haywood’s Love in Excess (1719-20); Elizabeth Helme’s Louise, or the Cottage on the Moor (1787); Elizabeth Inchbald’s A Simple Story (1791); Mary Darby Robinson’s The False Friend (1799); Sarah Sheriffe’s Correlia, or the Mystic Tomb (1802) (also includes half-sister and brother incest). The texts featuring daughter-in-law and father-in-law incest include Eliza Haywood’s The Fatal Secret; Or Constancy in Distress (1724); Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764); and Mrs Carver’s The Horrors of Oakdale Abbey (1797). Uncle-niece incest appears in Henry MacKenzie’s Man of the World (1773); Ann Radcliffe’s The Romance of the Forest (1791); Eliza Parson’s Castle of Wolfenbach (1793); Ann Radcliffe’s The Italian (1797); Joseph Fox’s Santa-maria, or, the Mysterious
temporal literature, it is most unusual for that period. These passages present a central concern of their texts—father-daughter incest is socially unacceptable because it transgresses, that is violates, the law of the land, the social, legal, and in the case of Exilius, religious laws.

Earlier incest writings tend to rely on a narrator. Giving the daughter a voice renders the subject more abhorrent; the victims speaking for themselves carries more weight than the distanced effects described by a narrator. While Mathilda and Clarinthia do find ways to tell their stories, they are circumspect about who they tell—Clarinthia’s story is told to two men who save her from execution and Mathilda’s will be told in a letter to her friend Woodville, a letter he will not receive until she is dead. Beyond the transgressive desire felt by Turpius and Mathilda’s unnamed father for their daughters, both texts contain moments that jolt the reader causing them to pause and question the texts. I will call these “radical moments” because they unexpectedly position the daughter in relation to their father’s incestuous transgression; the response from these two daughters are unorthodox not only among texts of the long eighteenth century but put forth positions rarely explored in contemporary incest literature. These moments,

Pregnancy (1797); RMP Yorke’s The Romance of Smyra (1801); T.J. Horsley Curties’s Ancient Records (1801) and St Botolph’s Priory (1806). Mother and son incest is found in Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones (1749) and Horace Walpole’s The Mysterious Mother (1768). Brother and sister incest is particularly prolific and is a theme in Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1722); Henry Fielding’s Joseph Andrews (1742), A Journey From This World to the Next (1743) and Amelia (1751); Sarah Fielding’s The Adventures of David Simple (1747-1748); anonymous, Genuine Memoirs of the Celebrated Miss Maria Brown (1766); Sophie Briscoe’s The New Clarissa; or, the History of Miss Melmouth (1771); Fanny Burney’s Evelina (1778); Sophie Lee’s The Recess (1783-85); Mary Robinson’s Vancenza (1792); Eliza Fenwick’s Secrecy (1795); Matthew Lewis’s The Monk (1796); and William Hill Brown’s The Power of Sympathy (1798). Surrogate brother-sister incest appears in Stephen Cullen’s The Hated Priory (1794); Eleanor Sleath’s The Orphan of the Rhine (1798); May Meeke’s Midnight Weddings (1802); Francis Latham’s Astonishment!!! (1802); Mrs S. Sykes’s Margiana (1808); Anna Mackenzie’s The Irish Guardian (1809); Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park (1814); John William Polidori’s Ernestus Berchtold, or, The Modern Prometheus (1819); Thomas Gaspey’s The Mystery, or, Forty Years Ago (1820); and Francis Jamieson’s The House of Ravenspur (1822). Father-daughter incest is averted in Elizabeth Holme’s The Farmer of Inglewood Forest (1796); and Elizabeth Sophia Tomlins’s Rosalind de Tracy (1798). There are also many novels where incest incidents are referred to in passing but are not a prevalent part of the text, for example, in Eliza Haywood’s Memoirs of a Certain Island Adjacent to the Kingdom of Utopia (1725) a father and daughter are suspected of incest but the narrator decides not to discover whether it is true. There are also many texts with incestuous overtones rather than conclusions such as Charlotte Smith’s Emmeline where the first cousin wants to marry Emmeline.
particularly that of Mathilda, then are radical within the genre of father-daughter incest fiction. In Mathilda, the radical moment is the realisation that she returns her father’s incestuous love. Mathilda makes a suggestion that aims to see her and her father transcend the taboo by being united in death. In Exilius, that radical moment comes when Clarinthia forgives her father for his attempted rape. While this outcome may be the goal of modern psychoanalysis and psychotherapy regarding forgiveness as having the capacity to release the victim, presented as it is in Exilius, it is uncomfortable for the reader thus signaling a need to reinterpret the text. That reinterpretation brings to light a Jacobite political position in the text. This essay will explore the frameworks available for interpretation and the notions of taboo before examining these radical moments.

The passages presented in the opening of this essay are part of what anchors these two texts within the larger body of women’s incest writing. Feminist work in the past 40 years has unveiled generations of such texts, which can now be assembled into a continuum. It is a continuum rather than a genealogy because, as Karen Jacobsen McLennan argues, “Generations of women without knowledge or access to their literary ancestors gave familiar and repeated voices to the incestuous experience and its consequences” (1). Despite the works of each generation of writers being lost or suppressed there are similarities in the depictions of father-daughter incest. “[T]he authors reveal the recurrent incest themes of self-blame, social condemnation, and cultural exile” (1), notes McLennan, they also feature absent or dead mothers, and the daughters often share an uncanny likeness to their mothers.

Traditionally, incest texts, particularly those penned by women, are read within a similar framework, as “unique to the author’s personal experience” (McLennan 6). Thus, they are either read as social documents at the most elementary level or as autobiography. This is particularly the case with Mathilda. The most prevalent interpretation of the novel, an interpretation established by Elizabeth Nitchie, the first editor of the text, is autobiographical. Mathilda is read as Mary, the father as Shelley’s father William Godwin and Woodville as her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley. Godwin’s suppression of the text has come to be interpreted as supporting this view. Shelley sent her text to her father for publishing and, although he needed money, he refused to publish or return the manuscript. Shelley asked her friend
Maria Gisborne to retrieve the novel from her father but she never managed to do it. Gisborne describes Godwin’s reaction in her journal:

[Godwin] thinks very highly of some of the parts; ... The subject he says is disgusting and detestable; and there ought to be, at least if [it] is ever published, a preface to prepare the minds of the readers, and to prevent them from being tormented by the apprehension from moment to moment of the fall of the heroine; it is true (he says) that this difficulty is in some measure obviated, by Mathildas protestation at the beginning of the book, that she has not to reproach herself with any guilt; but, yet, in proceeding one is apt to lose sight of that protestation; besides (he added with animation) one cannot exactly trust to what an author of the modern school may deem guilt. (Jones 44)

While Godwin’s suppression of the text is generally interpreted as his own fear that Mathilda would be read as biography, here he made it clear that he believed Mathilda’s protests from early in the text were forgotten, implying that readers would see that Mathilda loved her father, a transgressive suggestion. While incestuous desire is understood to transgress the taboo on incest, the notion that the daughter could return a father’s incestuous desire is radical, as it pertains to the taboo on speaking incest. The incestuous desire in a father-daughter relationship is generally understood to emanate from the father; any desire felt by the daughter is barely exposed or contemplated—she is merely victim. Perhaps this is what Godwin finds most disturbing, the fact that Mary Shelley has written of incest in a different light—as the daughter’s returning her father’s transgressive desire. While Shelley’s text was suppressed, Barker’s text disappeared for a different reason. Kathryn King argues that Barker’s work was marginalised because she was a Jacobite, a Roman Catholic and a woman. Of course, the existence of a number of incidents in this text—there is brother-sister incest as well as the father-daughter incest—is likely to have contributed to this loss. As McLennan argues, the taboo on speaking incest often affects the survival of texts in similar ways to the taboo felt by their protagonists.

Incest texts need to be interrogated from all angles, not just thought of as biography or social comment. Moreover, texts of the long eighteenth century also need to be placed within their historical context so that they are not simply overlaid with a twenty-first century ideology
and perspectives of incest as child sexual abuse. In fact, in the long eighteenth century, definitions of incest are based on marriage prohibitions making it quite different to twentieth and twenty-first century notions that connect incest with child abuse. Definitions of incest in the long eighteenth century are drawn from ecclesiastical notions of incest developed from Leviticus in The Bible and printed as the Table of Kindred and Affinity in The Book of Common Prayer. The Table essentially details all relationships for which marriage was prohibited. Incest in this era, then, was a problem, at least in most of the fiction, for the daughter of marriageable age, unlike incest stories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that focus mainly on the girl-child. Although Mathilda and Clarinthia—the young women in these incest stories—are children by modern standards because of their age, in their historical moment they were of marriageable age. The setting of the sexual age of consent at 16 is relatively new. As Louise Jackson points out, it was only in 1885 that the British Parliament raised the age of consent from 13 to 16 and it had only been 13 since 1875 when 13 replaced 12 as the age of consent (Jackson 3). In earlier centuries, this age was aligned to notions of marriageable age.

At times, the trauma for daughters might be similar across generations but their narratives are marked by historical particularities that make them distinctively different. While contemporary stories of incest focus largely on the father and daughter, with some consideration of the mother, those in the long eighteenth century include a suitor. The suitor alerts the father to the fact that his daughter of marriageable age is sexually desirable and shows that the daughters are of an age at which they too can desire. Thus Mathilda and Clarinthia have an

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agency (what kind is a debate in itself) but it raises questions about their status as “desiring subjects.” Clarinthia loves and desires her suitor and saviour Asiaticus and while Mathilda feels nothing for the unnamed suitor who is driven away by her father, she comes to desire her father.

The marriage exchange—the moment when a daughter is passed from her father to her husband and into her new family—is carried out through the marriage ceremony. In her article “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex,” Gayle Rubin outlines the function of marriage as the outcome of the exchange of women to ensure the expansion of kinship groups or shore up political alliances. The taboo on incest then is part of the regulation of this exchange. Rubin argues that:

In pre-state societies, kinship is the idiom of social interaction, organizing economic, political and ceremonial, as well as sexual activity. One’s duties, responsibilities and privileges vis-à-vis others are defined in terms of mutual kinship or lack thereof. The exchange of goods and services, production and distribution, hostility and solidarity, ritual and ceremony, all take place within the organizational structure of kinship. (169-170)

While kinship systems vary from culture to culture, women remain the item of exchange. Rubin finds that two of Levi-Strauss’s ideas “are particularly relevant to women—the ‘gift’ and the incest taboo, whose dual articulation adds up to this concept of the exchange of women” (171). For Levi-Strauss, marriages are the most basic form of gift exchange. He argues that the incest taboo is the mechanism that ensures such exchanges take place between families and groups, and that the relationship established “is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship. The exchange partners have become affines, and their descendents will be related by blood” (Rubin 173). Drawing on the work of Gayle Rubin, Lynda Boose suggests that the marriage ceremony is an essential part of the enforcement of the incest taboo. She argues that:

By making the father stand at the altar as witness that he knows of no impediments to his daughter’s lawful union and by then forcing him to watch the priest
place her hand into that of her husband, not only does the ceremony reaffirm the taboo against incest but it levels the full weight of that taboo on the relationship between the father and daughter. (69)

Boose also expands upon Rubin’s suggestion on the affinities between exchange partners:

Although the daughter was clearly regarded as legal property inside the family, she has never been a commodity to be bartered in the same way as an ox or an ass. She is explicitly a sexual property acquired not by economic transaction but from the father’s sexual expenditure and his own family bloodline—which makes the father’s loss of her a distinctively personal loss of himself. Furthermore, since her worth as property is synonymous with her sexuality, retaining her is problematically invested in that same value … The very fact that culture has needed to impose a taboo to ensure an exogamous exchange of its daughters and the fact that it has evolved a ritual of husband-wife marriage that is primarily a father-daughter separation rite both suggest that the father-daughter relationship has no effective internal mechanisms for negotiating its dissolution. (46)

The daughter’s movement across the “threshold” (46) into marriage “threatens” (47) the father with “loss” (47)—such loss is found in Exilius and Mathilda. Order is restored when the “daughters have been incorporated into the socially legitimized role of wife/mother” (67). In Mathilda, the daughter never attains that “legitimized role” (67) and the familial space becomes sexualised and polluted. The domestic space is also threatened in Exilius, but by the end Clarinthia occupies the “legitimized role.”

In Exilius and Mathilda the marriage exchange goes wrong either at the point of negotiating a marriage alliance or just as the father realises that his daughter is of marriageable age. In Exilius, Turpius comes to desire his daughter Clarinthia sexually as he tries to negotiate a marriage alliance for her. He wants her to marry her half-brother Valerius, an alliance she rejects because it is incestuous. The marriage exchange goes wrong for two reasons—first, because the father’s
suggested alliance is incestuous and, secondly, because he tries to rape his daughter. Clarinthia’s confusion over the attempted rape is increased by her attraction to the man who apparently killed her father while saving her. Throughout her adventures, which following the attempted rape take her to Sicily and Africa before she finds her way home to Italy, Clarinthia remains dependent on other people to keep her alive. Asiaticus saves her from the attempted rape, the sailor saves her from drowning by tying her to a plank after Lysander’s ship begins to sink, and, Exilius and Ismenus—to whom she tells her story—save her from being burned alive after being sentenced to death in Africa. Her virtuousness and filial obedience make her worthy of being saved as well as a worthy wife to Asiaticus.

In Mathilda, the unnamed father, who had abandoned Mathilda as a child on the death of her mother and returns to her life when she is sixteen, realises that he loves and desires his daughter when a suitor appears:

when I saw you become the object of another’s love;
when I imagined that you might be loved otherwise than as a sacred type and image of loveliness and excellence; or that you might love another with a more ardent affection than that which you bore to me, then the fiend awoke within me. (209)

Rather than denying his feelings and desires and offering Mathilda’s hand in marriage, he banishes the suitor and removes her to the countryside where he alone has her company while he tries to overcome his desire. Thus, the father’s desire for Mathilda means that the marriage exchange never takes place. But neither will the father have the daughter; he commits suicide after revealing his incestuous desire to his daughter and she exiles herself to the Northern heaths of England where she tries to come to terms with her fall from innocence and with her own love for her father. There she meets Woodville to whom she will address her story. Mathilda’s story is of a fall. Her father’s declaration of incestuous desire takes her from innocence to a world of guilty knowledge. All her innocent statements about her love for her father suddenly take on new meaning and become tinged with the sexual. With the fall comes only the possibility of death; Mathilda is burdened by her new knowledge and unable to overcome the effects of the fall, for her innocence cannot be restored.
The social implication of incest in these two novels is that the social processes that ensure the future of society (i.e. marriage) do not or may not take place. In what follows, I will consider the notions of the taboo on speaking incest as it presented in these texts. Clarinthia faces two threats of incest—the first is the possibility of being married to her half brother Valerius, the other is the attempted rape by her father. Once her mother is dead, her father listens to the urging of his mistress that Clarinthia should marry “his Bastard Son Valerius,” a proposal that Clarinthia argues is “such a Piece of Incest, that I could not shew the least Complacency, much less Obedience to the Proposal” (I:26). Her father ascribes her refusal to love for a young Roman rather than any “Principle of Virtue” (I:26). Clarinthia protests that she knows her duty to her father and to heaven too well to have entered into any correspondence with a young man. Her father does not believe her protestations and so she is “persecuted with the Courtship of Valerius” (I: 27). Most of the negotiations about marriage to Valerius take place between Clarinthia and Turpius and the more strenuously Clarinthia rejects her father’s proposition, the more she fears him. The text makes clear that there is no one to whom she can speak of this incestuous plan. Her father begins to treat her with “Importunities and Menaces” (I: 28), gradually becoming so angry that he vows she will never see the sun again until she accepts his demands. Trapped within the familial home there is no escape, especially when a new and “unheard of Calamity befell” (I: 28) her:

[Contrary to all Morality, and the Laws of Heaven, my wretched Father became inamoured of me, and express’d the same with as much Assurance as if it had been no way criminal; and when I urged the Illegality of this heinous Passion, and that he would cause the Vengeance of the Gods to descend on him, and render him at once miserable and infamous: To which he made Answer, That the Notion of Deities was a Chimera infused into my Fancy by my Mother, and a customary Education; and that all the World were misled into such Opinions by Priests and Potentates, whose Interest it was to engage their Inferiors into a Belief of some invisible Power, thereby to keep them in Subjection. (I: 28-29)
Clarinthia asserts that this is a “heinous Passion” (I: 28), a “criminal” (I: 28) act, and that the Gods will seek vengeance. Her father, however, enters into a theological discussion with her asserting that there are no deities, they are in fact created to keep the general population in “Subjection” (I: 29) and hence, she should not fear their vengeance.

Clarinthia’s fear of her father grows. She believes he will not stop until he satisfies his sexual need. Her melancholy grows alongside her fear, which proves founded when three men in disguise enter through a secret door and abduct her from her bedchamber. They carry her on horseback for about an hour to the great forest where they threaten to “violate mine Honour” (I:30). This scene removes the attempted rape from the domestic sphere to the wilds of the forest, which comes to represent the rapist’s unbridled desire. The ravisher also aims to conceal his identity, which once he is knocked down is revealed by the stranger, destroying Clarinthia’s relief at being saved:

The Stranger taking off the Vizards which disguis’d these Miscreants, in order to give Air, if any Life, yet remain’d, whose Faces I no sooner saw, but I knew ’em to be my wretched Father, and one of his Servants. O ye Gods! What Surprize and Confusion then seized me? Which I express’d in bitter Cries and Lamentations; in the mean time the unknown Person did all he could to restore him to Life but he expir’d with these Words, Forgive me Clarinthia. (I: 31)

Clarinthia’s confusion and surprise are palpable; she can do nothing but cry and lament as her father asks forgiveness as he takes his last breath. Suggesting that Clarinthia’s story “develops a rich fantasy of fear, guilt—and revenge—in relation to the father as a figure of unpredictable and implacable power,” Eleanor Wikborg claims that the romance plot provides “the wish-fulfillment of instant retaliation” and that, “in addition to the symbolic execution, Clarinthia is given satisfaction of hearing her father repent before he dies” (15). I would argue that this repentance and death come to haunt Clarinthia throughout the novel rather than bring her satisfaction. She believes her life is ruined because of her father’s death.

Clarinthia tries to send her saviour away believing she is no longer fit for human society. Although physically unharmed, Clarinthia is not the same person: instead of a daughter with marriage prospects
she is now a “Wretch,” a “Monster unfit for human Conversation” (I:31), who can only move among and inhabit the world of the wildest and most savage of creatures. Her saviour tries to “soften” her “fury” (I: 31), eventually persuading her to go with him. She has two misgivings—she should not be alone with a stranger and his hands were “wreaking” (I: 32) with her father’s blood. For “as wicked as he was he was still my Father” (I: 32), she says. Clarinthia’s dilemma is clear—she is attracted to her father’s murderer. She and the stranger share responsibility for a crime from which they cannot be exonerated unless she tells what happened, but what is she to do? How can she make public this dark domestic tale, and who would believe her if she tried? Thus, she articulates the taboo on speaking incest; although it sets her apart from others, now she feels she has to keep silent:

How can I ever declare to the Senate what detestable Crime caused my Father’s death? Or if I do, perhaps I shall not be believ’d: If I do not, I expose my self, and this noble Stranger, to the Fury of the Laws, and his Honour to everlasting Infamy. I am in a Labyrinth so intricate, that even the Line of Reason is not able to conduct me through its wild Mazes. On every Hand I see nothing but Danger and Distress, such as confound my Resolutions, and non-plus my Courage. On this side a rapid Stream of persecuting Laws, on that a Precipice of perpetual Shame; one to ingulp, the other to dash mine Honour in a thousand Pieces. (I: 35)

What people will see is the body of Turpius slain by a stranger in Clarinthia’s presence. They cannot see what Clarinthia knows, the violent genesis in kidnapping and attempted incestuous rape. Thus while the incest is a “detestable Crime” (I: 35), she believes the “Fury of the Laws” (I: 35) will come down on her for her father’s death. She knows her word does not carry the weight of a patriarch’s. Her confusion is evident as she represents herself as being in an intricate “Labyrinth” or a “wild” maze, seeing nothing but “Danger and Distress” (I: 35) as she tries to weigh up the “persecuting Laws” against “perpetual Shame” (I: 35). Clarinthia is ashamed of what has happened to her, blaming herself for both her father’s desire and his death. Thus, feeling the full force of the taboo, Clarinthia feels scarred, marked with “Shame, Horror and Infamy” (I: 36). She is only able to tell her story to Ismenus
and Exilius after they save her from death and to explain why she intends to become a nun and shut herself away from the world.

It is clear from Barker’s Preface—she declares that she has heard of such “transactions” as incest in her time—that she is representing one of the “real” dangers in the world for young women. In this way, incest functions partly like the harm narratives of twentieth and twenty-first century incest stories. Despite its differences, it offers a female response to these dangers. Such a reading is particularly pertinent to Barker’s novel, when she gives the central voice in the incest story to the female character, the daughter. The father is voiceless in the sense that he does not get to speak for himself except through conversations with others or reports from the narrator. The female voice is thus privileged. Yet, while the daughter gets to speak her incest experience, it is not a declaration to the law of the land but rather to a select few trusted friends, for Clarinthia knows her status as woman and daughter silences her beyond intimate circles.

On another level, Mathilda’s father’s incestuous act is a declaration of incestuous desire rather than rape or attempted rape; however, a sexual threat is revealed after the declaration when he approaches her bedchamber. Although he does not enter, Mathilda feels threatened and vulnerable. As mentioned previously, Mathilda’s father’s declaration brings about Mathilda’s fall and makes her examine her own love for him in a new light. Her fall from innocence introduces her to knowledge and the ways in which language can be inflected with sexual desire even if a speaker/listener/writer is unaware of such levels of meaning. The effect is to draw out the sexuality latent in her language until she and the reader begin to see sexual desire hovering over hers as well.

Mathilda and her father see each other for the first time since Mathilda was a baby when she turns sixteen. They become inseparable until the father’s mood changes with the entrance of the suitor. After he has dismissed the suitor, Mathilda’s father takes her to the family estate in Yorkshire, left unchanged since her mother’s death at Mathilda’s birth. There, Mathilda becomes determined to understand the “cause of his sorrow” (196). She imagines a scenario involving guilty desire and is not far from the truth—he has fallen in love not with an

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5 see Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering From Stein to Sapphire*. 
“unworthy” person but with his daughter. When he declares his love, 
Mathilda immediately feels the weight of social rules fall on her; incest 
is unacceptable, a forbidden sexual desire, a transgression of societal 
morality. Mathilda believes in the retelling of the story that her father 
would have triumphed over his feelings had she not been “foolish and 
presumptuous” (197) and “hurried him on until there was no recall, no 
hope” (197). She sets out to lighten his struggles through winning his 
secret from him. She takes him into the Garden of Eden and there 
tempts him to tell her his woes. She begs him to tell her his secret, 
saying she cannot endure the agony any longer. She wants to soothe 
his despair. He tells her that she is “presumptuous and very rash” (199) 
and if she is patient, despair will pass away but she demands to know if 
she is the cause of his unhappiness.

Soon he cannot resist her pleading any more telling her that 
she is the “sole,” “agonizing cause” (200) of his suffering. Mathilda’s 
father knows that speaking out is not always good and useful. The 
daughters in these two texts both struggle to articulate their experience 
of incest, yet here is a clear example of how speaking out can be 
detrimental and destructive. Finally, he tells her to be silent, to beware 
and not to urge him towards her destruction—he is getting closer to 
giving into temptation. Nevertheless, she insists that telling her will 
bring “peace, not death” and that their “mutual love” will give them 
“wings to pass it.” She begs him to speak so that they “shall love each 
other as before, and forever” (200).

He is angry telling her he is “quite mad” and that if he utters 
his “strange words” they will be lost forever: “I tell you I am on the very 
verge of insanity; why, cruel girl, do you drive me on: you will repent 
and I shall die” (200). However, she refuses to let go believing he no 
longer loves her, that in fact he hates her. Finally, he answers with 
violence:

Yes, yes, I hate you! You are my bane, my poison, 
my disgust! Oh! No!” And then his manner changed, 
and fixing his eyes on me with an expression that 
convulsed every nerve and member of my frame— 
“you are none of all these; you are my light, my only 
one, my life.—My daughter, I love you!” The last 
words died away in a hoarse whisper, but I heard 
them and sunk on the ground, covering my face and 
almost dead with excess of sickness and fear: a cold
perspiration covered my forehead and I shivered in every limb. (201)

There is an extreme contradiction in her father’s emotions, she is both his poison and his great love. When her wish comes true—for “My daughter, I love you!” are the very words she earlier longed for him to say—and he divulges his secret, but the answer does not bring the fairytale ending for which she had hoped.

Her father’s declaration of his incestuous passion sends Mathilda into a spiral of despair. She wanted their relationship restored to what it was before the suitor first joined them in London; she was not ready to think that her father had fallen in love with her. She is confused because, on the one hand, she is horrified by his declaration and on the other, as will become clearer in the examination of her response to incest, it is what she wants. Mathilda thinks about her future, declaring she must never see or speak to her father again. She contemplates becoming a nun so that she might be shut away and live in solitude enabling her to repress her sexuality, which is similar to Clarinthia’s wish after the death of her father. Then Mathilda thinks of being reunited with her father, wondering whether it is possible for her father to overcome his love and passion. She recognises that he is a virile man with a sexual appetite, wishing for the day when “youth” (204) will be dead within him:

Let thy hairs be as snow; thy walk trembling and thy voice have lost its mellow tones! Let the liquid lustre of thine eyes be quenched; and then return to me, return to thy Mathilda, thy child, who may then be clasped in thy loved arms, while thy heart beats with sinless emotion. Go, Devoted One, and return thus! This is my curse, a daughter’s curse: go, and return pure to thy child, who will never love aught but thee. (204)

She wants to be clasped in his arms without the threat of the sexual, she wants “sinless emotion” and hopes that this may be possible when he is older. She suggests that with age purity can enter their relationship because it can be non-sexual. She acknowledges that she cannot love anyone else because she loves her father alone.

Clarinthia’s and Mathilda’s linguistic representation of the incest is strikingly similar with notions of pollution, and monstrousness
filling their articulations. Their description of incest and their reaction sees them at their closest to later incest stories, such as those of the late twentieth century. The impact can be similar despite differences in social situation and outcomes. Mathilda learns the danger of speaking incest through her father’s declaration but still she feels the need, as Clarinthia does, to unburden by telling her story. It is only on her death, however, that it will become public and then she addresses her “dark tale” (239)—in its letter form—to one man only: her friend and poet Woodville. There is a clear compulsion for the young women to speak of incest despite the difficulty of articulation.

Exilium and Mathilda also contain what seem to the reader as “radical moments.” As explained, these moments force the reader to question their assumptions about the representation of incest and the way it is read and interpreted. They jolt the reader into accepting that these texts are presenting incest in a particular manner: Exilium presents an instance in which incestuous desire can be forgiven, opening the way for a political Jacobite argument and Mathilda expresses the transgressive possibility that the daughter can love or sexually desire her father. As already argued, it is more acceptable to attribute incestuous desire to the father but not the daughter. Yet here, Mathilda not only returns his love but is expressing that love, although such love is doomed. From their radical moments, Exilium and Mathilda move forward in ways of their own; but both question societal structures and boundaries as well as the nature of the incest taboo.

Barker’s question about whether there are any conditions under which incest can be forgiven is radical. The circumstance under which Clarinthia forgives her father is not straightforward. To the end, Clarinthia blames herself for his incestuous desire; she believes that something she has done has caused the events that have changed her life. For the reader this is a particularly difficult passage. Clarthinia’s ease of forgiveness is troubling; how can the vile and violent act of attempted rape be so easily forgiven? This is not the psychological realism of domestic fiction; this would not be asked of the readers of a Jane Austen novel for instance. Instead, this ending is just one part of the novel’s Jacobite outlook. By the time Clarinthia forgives him, Turpius is no longer the man who attempted to rape her. Like Rochester at the end of Jane Eyre, he is physically scarred, a “miserable spectacle of Deformity” (II: 103). He is outwardly the monster of his acts but inwardly repentant. This is perhaps the most radical point in the novel, the
daughter believes herself the monster who inspired the deed, the father at the end looks like a monster capable of carrying out incest. His outward appearance declares his sins to all. The forgiveness of incest and attempted rape is not just a necessary resolution to this story; it is necessary so that Clarinthia can marry the great hero of the text, Asiaticus. The story also operates at an allegorical level, in which Turpius comes to represent James and Clarinthia, England.

The attempted rape of Clarinthia throws light on issues of obedience and allegiance to the father explored throughout the novel: to whom do daughters pledge allegiance—the husband or the father? This came into question for Jacobites because Mary gave her obedience to William of Orange who usurped her father’s throne. Paul Monod argues that for the Jacobite, the father retained obedience because he holds the paternal power in line with God. Thus William and Mary’s crime of taking the English throne was seen as “parricide”:

Mary was anathematized in Jacobite verse as “The Female Parricide,” a “monster” unique in history except for the Roman Tullia and King Lear’s daughter Goneril. Arthur Mainwaring, a Jacobite poet who later converted to Whiggery, was the author of “Tarquin and Tullia,” a mythic story of usurpation set “In times when Princes cancell’d nature’s law ... /When children used their parents to dethrone.” Murdering one’s father was no simple crime, even before Freud’s Oedipus ... For the Jacobite poet, however, it was an unnatural act; “nature’s law” stipulated obedience to fathers. Patriarchy was a divine rather than a human institution and violating it was an offence against God. (55)

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6 Kathryn King argues that Exilius is “a fittingly pro-Stuart response to the succession crisis of 1714. Turning on a bewildering array of returns from exile, its plot organized around crises of obligation and authority displaced onto a variety of father-child relationships, Exilius develops the themes of loyalty, constancy, and obligation beloved of Stuart supporters in the seventeenth century and their Jacobite successors in the next ... By reaffirming these old-fashioned royalist virtues and celebrating a determination to remain faithful at all costs, Barker offers in Exilius a fiction designed, it would seem, to strengthen Jacobite resolve to resist the House of Hanover and bring home the true king” (Jane Barker, Exile 150-151). Thus she argues that behind Exilius’s outward guise is embedded an argument about Jacobite politics. I would argue that the father-daughter incest has a key role in the core argument of the novel demonstrating Barker’s political commitment to bringing the Jacobites home.
This view of the daughter as committing parricide is not the perspective within *Exiliius*. Clarinthia does not kill her father—who of course, in the end has not even died but only “feigned” death—even though she believes she is in some way to blame for the fact that he “dies” as a result of attacking her. As a result, she is reluctant to ally herself with Asiaticus, her father’s slayer. Clarinthia, unlike Mary, remains obedient to her father throughout all her trials thus signaling the importance of family alliance and loyalty. She does not let herself simply accept her love for Asiaticus; she would rather consider life as a nun than marry the man who killed her father. The overall message of the text is clear: the daughter always owes obedience to her father. This is the crux of Clarinthia’s angst. She is unable to love her rescuer because she believes he has killed her father. Taking a life (even in defence) is portrayed as worse than attempted rape. Clarinthia is in a bind: she cannot contemplate the stranger as her lover and thus possible husband because he has slain her father, the first object of her obedience.

*Exiliius* is about exiles returning and being taken back into the fold. Forgiveness is necessary for this to be possible despite the gravity of any action between daughter and father. James II could not come home without a resolution between him and his daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange. Looking back across time it seems highly unlikely that such a feat would have happened. Nevertheless Barker espouses the crux of the Jacobite problem.

The radicalism of *Mathilda* takes a different form. This text’s radical moments support the possibility of love and sexual desire between father and daughter. Twenty-first century prejudices and extensive findings from disciplines such as anthropology and psychology mean that contemporary readers resist such possibilities. Readers of Shelley’s time, had they access to the novel, would simply have expressed their concern or disgust using different terms. Mathilda’s expression of disgust, feelings of alienation and monstrosity makes it easy to accept modern medical and psychological readings of incest texts. The ambiguity Mathilda feels—in love with her father, disgust with her father—is read as consistent with the feelings that girls experience when they are abused. However, a reading that takes into account all the ambiguities could plausibly find more. The family depicted in *Mathilda* is under stress because the boundaries between “natural” and “unnatural” have been blurred by both father and
daughter. By the time Mathilda admits her love for her father, they cannot be together because he is dead.

Mathilda admits her love for her father three times in the text. The first instance comes the morning after his declaration, when she reads the letter of remorse and farewell that he has left while she slept:

He must know that if I believed that his intention was merely to absent himself from me that instead of opposing him it would be that which I should myself require—or if he thought that any lurking feeling, yet he could not think that, should lead me to him would he endeavour to overthrow the only hope he could have of ever seeing me again; a lover, there was madness in the thought, yet he was my lover, would not act thus. No, he had determined to die, and wished to spare me the misery of knowing it. (211)

She acknowledges here that he is her lover—as mad as the thought is. This is the most overt acknowledgement in the text that she returns his love.

Secondly, she chooses death in order to share a union with her father—a rather transgressive thought on the part of Mathilda considering that love between father and daughter is constrained by society. She wants a “pure” love not hampered by the sexual, thus not polluted, something she envisages is possible in death. As she contemplates death, she thinks of going to her father as his bride, taking pleasure in the union that is to come:

In truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more pleasure in contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs are already enwrapt in their shroud: is it not my marriage dress? Alone it will unite me to my father when in an eternal mental union we shall never part. (244).

She seeks an “eternal mental union,” something more lasting and more important than any earthly union. Thus she suggests a way to transcend the transgression of that taboo.

Mathilda’s final admission comes almost at the end of the text. She says: “It was May, four years ago, that I first saw my beloved father; it was in May, three years ago that my folly destroyed the only being I
was doomed to love” (246). She desires her father as he desired her. For the reader this is abhorrent and seems impossible.

Clarinthia’s forgiveness and Mathilda’s love/desire jolt the reader, but as products of their historical context they present incest as the result of the marriage exchange gone wrong. Caroline Gonda argues that whether the “threat was fulfilled or not” (38) incest was a “standard literary device by the late eighteenth century” (38). She believes that the “father-daughter relationship in all its passion, perplexity and murkiness” was central to the developing novel (1):

much of what the reading daughters learned from “daughters’ fictions”—heroine-centred novels of family, life, courtship and marriage—might bolster rather than undermine familial and social order … [T]he focus on the family as the primary unit of social order makes it impossible for the emerging novel to represent conscious and deliberate incest, especially between father and daughter. An age which insists so vehemently on the love between father and daughter must also insist on the purity of that love. (xvi)

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that when texts do explore “conscious and deliberate incest” as in the case of Exilius and Mathilda, they are, as McLennan argues, fated to be “suppressed, forgotten or never read” (1). Exilius has largely been forgotten, having only been in print once since 1743 and as a folio edition in 1973 as part of Garland Publishing’s Foundations of the Novel series. Mathilda, although penned in 1819, was published in an academic text in 1959 only making it into public circulation in the 1990s. These two texts were perhaps even more fated to have remained from view. Their representations of incest push the boundaries of a subject barely considered suitable to be spoken. The taboo on incest operates not only within the text, where incest is clearly depicted as offending and transgressing social rules, but perhaps outside it as well.
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“HANDING BACK SHAME”: INCEST AND SEXUAL CONFESSION IN SAPPHIRE’S *PUSH*

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This discussion begins in the classroom, when I was teaching Sapphire’s *Push* near the end of a course on Black Women Writers. Most members of the class responded enthusiastically to this compelling story about an illiterate teenage mother learning to read and simultaneously to deal with her past sexual abuse. On the class evaluations, many students even identified *Push* as their favorite text from the course. However, during one class discussion, one student, very hesitatingly, said: “Well, I can’t say that I liked the book. When she gets to the part where she has an orgasm while her father is raping her, well, I just cannot go there. That’s where I have to stop.” This is where I’d like to begin. This student’s comment has had such a resonance with me because I think it reveals a unique challenge that *Push* poses to a college literature classroom. Her comment also foregrounds the double bind of sexual confession in Sapphire’s *Push*. Among other things, *Push* illustrates the on-going difficulties confronting women who attempt to write in opposition to patriarchy by testifying against sexual violence. As Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*, such testimony in the form of a sexual confession reinscribes the power of the confessor. Yet at the same time, Foucault’s own political critiques, which seek to unmask institutional power, suggest that the confession may nevertheless have the potential to alter a dominant discourse. These types of confessions, at the very least, disrupt the enforced silence that surrounds violations of the taboo against incest.

The first sentence of *Push*, “I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver,” taps into a well-known theme within African American literature: father-daughter incest (3). Gayle Jones’ *Corregidora* tells of a slave master who makes incestuous generations with his family of slave women. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* includes the story of Jim Trueblood, who has impregnated both his wife and their daughter at roughly the same time. Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* also focus on incestuous relationships and childhood sexual abuse. But *Push* is different. *Push* is, in fact, located within two discernible traditions: 1)
African American literature and 2) contemporary self-help and recovery texts. Sapphire blends these two seemingly disparate genres in order to emphasize their underlying continuities: the challenge to ideologies of oppression and the complexity of articulating the formerly inarticulate subject. As a self-consciously realistic version of *The Color Purple* and a simultaneously fictionalized rendition of *The Courage to Heal*, a classic of the incest survivor self-help tradition, *Push* transgresses generic boundaries in order to depict technologies of the self which constitute a speaking subject's indoctrination into literacy. At the same time, *Push* depicts a subject's disciplinary rupture of the official discourses which contain her.

After getting kicked out of school for being pregnant, *Push*’s narrator, Precious Jones, reads *The Color Purple* in an alternative school program taught by Ms. Rain, depicted by Sapphire as the ideal teacher. Identifying with the story of sexual abuse presented in the novel, Precious frequently compares herself to *The Color Purple*’s Celie:

> We reading *The Color Purple* in school. Which is really hard for me. Ms Rain try to break it down but most of it I can't read myself ... But how Ms Rain hook it up I am getting something out of the story. I cry cry cry you hear me, it sound in a way so much like myself except I ain' no butch like Celie. (*Push* 81)

Alice Walker quickly becomes one of Precious’s role models. In her new home, a room at a halfway house for battered women, Precious adds Walker to her makeshift shrine of black heroes: “New picture on wall now. I got Alice Walker up there with Harriet Tubman ‘n Farrakhan” (*Push* 87). In addition, *The Color Purple* and Celie become a touchstone for Precious: “I love *The Color Purple*, that book give me so much strength” (82).

However, the comparison between Celie and Precious cannot be pushed past a certain point. Just when Precious thinks “Things going good in my life, almost like *The Color Purple*” (82), her mother comes to visit her in the halfway house. She comes to tell her that her father, Carl, has died of AIDS. As Precious realizes that her father might have infected her and her infant son, she turns back to *The Color Purple* for strength but in contrast to Alice Walker’s novel, where Celie is raped by her stepfather, Carl is Precious’ biological father. This is where the connection to *Color Purple* breaks down: “Song playing in
my head now, not rap. Not TV colors flashing noise pictures in on me, scratching and itching in my brain at the same time. I see a color I don't know the name for, maybe one like only another kind of animal thas not human can see” (87; emphasis added). Alice Walker's picture may be on the wall, but Precious believes that “she can’t help me now” (87).

Elsewhere in the novel, Sapphire presents the difference between *Push* and *Color Purple* as a tension between realist and escapist fiction. Precious states:

> Ms Rain say one of the criticism of *The Color Purple* is it have fairy tale ending. I would say, well shit like that can be true. Life can work out for the best sometimes. Ms Rain love *Color Purple* too but say realism has its virtues too. Ism, smizm! Sometimes I wanna tell Ms Rain shut up with all the IZM stuff. But she my teacher so I don’t tell her shut up. I don’t know what “realism” mean but I do know what REALITY is and it’s a mutherfucker, lemme tell you. (83)

In a certain sense, *Push* is a realist, urban version of the romantic, pastoral *Color Purple*. Despite Precious’s faith in fairy tale endings, Carl is her biological father and she is also HIV positive.

In addition to this explicit juxtaposition with Celie, Precious Jones might also be productively contrasted with another well-known incest victim in black women’s fiction: Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. The differences between Pecola’s story and Precious’s tell us much about how to approach Sapphire’s text. While *Push* begins with: “I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver” (3), *The Bluest Eye*, in contrast, begins in the silence constituted by the incest taboo: “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow” (5). As Morrison explains in the afterword, this “quiet” is intended to evoke an “intimacy” with the reader and to create the feeling that a “secret is being shared” (212). Yet it is crucial to note the terms of this intimacy: Pecola, the incest victim, cannot tell her own story. When we finally hear Pecola speak at the end of the novel, she speaks to an imaginary friend. Her madness prevents an intimate dialogue with the reader, and
even in her madness she barely acknowledges her rape. Although the secret of the incestuous rape is divulged in the novel, it is told through the perspective of the father/rapist. In contrast, Sapphire’s decision to write in the first person, from the point of view of an incest survivor, has a powerful, emancipatory effect: Precious has a political agency that Pecola can seemingly never attain. Sapphire’s decision to write from this perspective and to write realistically about incest is in some ways a self-conscious departure from the treatment of incest in novels by black writers, in which the shame surrounding incest structures a similar silence in its victims. Instead, the treatment of incest in Push has more in common with a tradition of survivor and recovery literature, a tradition in which the Big Blue Book of Alcoholics Anonymous is probably the best known example.

In a 1991 interview, six years before the publication of Push, Sapphire speaks in her usual frank manner about her own experience of incest:

I first began to suspect my father had abused me when I wrote my poem “Mickey Mouse” in which I felt compelled to use the word “pedophile” in connection with him. And this revelation is part of the reason why I trust my writing so deeply! I believe in it, because that’s when the memories first surfaced—from the writing. When I’m writing, I know what lies are … That’s when I know the truth—when I’m writing. (Interview 167)

In other words, writing makes access to memories of childhood abuse possible. Writing and literacy are also, of course, central to Push. As Ms. Rain, her teacher, advises, writing is the key to Precious’s survival: “If you just sit there the river gonna rise up drown you! Writing could be the boat carry you to the other side. One time in your journal you told me you had never really told your story. I think telling your story git you over that river Precious” (97). After she discovers she is infected with HIV, Precious spends more time in meetings: “Body Positive” meetings for women who are HIV positive and “Incest Survivor” meetings. At the request of her therapist, she also spends more time writing about her early childhood in her journal. When she reaches moments in therapy when she can no longer speak of her past abuse, she is directed to write about it.
Precious Jones eventually follows the advice of the teacher and writes her life story, which is the text we are reading when we read the first 140 pages of *Push*. The emphasis on writing and personal testimony in *Push* is clearly influenced by Sapphire's own background in survivor and recovery literature. In an early interview, Sapphire asks, “Have you ever read *The Courage to Heal* by Ellen Bass? It’s a book for rape survivors, and in the back are personal testimonies. I read them all—you know how you’re always looking for your own story?” (Interview 166). The format of *Push* replicates this structure and Precious Jones’ story is the main text. Following that is a section titled "Life Stories: Our Class Book," which is a portfolio of student writings from Ms. Rain’s class. Thus *Push* mimics the form of *The Courage to Heal* and at the same time presents itself as an artifact of an adult literacy class.

In recovery texts like *The Courage to Heal*, survivors’ stories have cathartic functions and establish a common bond among group members. Unlike Pecola’s isolating madness, these testimonies seek to establish an intimacy among readers/listeners. In *Push*, Sapphire’s project is to speak plainly about the shame surrounding incest and about a female sexuality that cannot be passive and refuses to be silent. She does so in raw, graphic language: “my twat jumping juicy, it feel good. I feel shamed” (24). However, as my student's comments illustrate, this is a risky move that not all readers are prepared to participate in partly, I think, because we have structured a silence around sex, the body, and violence, especially in the literature classroom. As Precious remembers having sex with her father, her sexual pleasure is the foundation for her shame and, potentially, for the reader's shared sense of shame: “I get so confuse. I HATE him. But my pussy be popping. He say that, ‘Big Mama your pussy is popping!’ I HATE myself when I feel good” (58). Later on, even the memory of having sex with her father is enough to bring her shameful, hurtful sexual desire:

I tell counselor I can't talk about Daddy now. My clit swell up I think Daddy. Daddy sick me, *disgust* me, but still he sex me up. I nawshus in my stomach but hot tight in my twat and I think I want it back, the smell of the bedroom, the hurt … Afterward I go bafroom. I smear shit on my face. Feel good. Don’t know why but it do. I never tell nobody about that before. But I would do that. (111)
By smearing feces on her face, Precious symbolically makes her most private business public. The hidden becomes manifest; the unspeakable is spoken. This would be a much simpler story without Precious’s most intimate confessions. Precious could focus on hating her father. The reader could focus on hating her father. Perhaps then my resisting student could more easily come to terms with this novel. But, these descriptions are here, and one cannot do justice to the novel without paying close attention to how these descriptions function.

In a talk entitled “Sexual McCarthyism?” Michael Warner, the self-proclaimed “venerable suffragette of sex radicalism,” speaks of the need to examine critically the politics of sexual shame in American culture. He suggests that a queer politics which only addresses the stigma of a gay identity loosened from sexual activity reinforces the shame surrounding sex, and this unwitting reinscription of sexual shame poses a dilemma for queer culture. I think that a similar argument can be made regarding Sapphire’s political project in *Push*. We are forced by the text to confront sexual shame. While it would be all too easy to avoid discussion of orgasm during incest, to do so indirectly reinscribes, through the silenced body of the incest survivor, sexual shame. As Sapphire explains: “Sometimes in my writing I’ve felt I was *re-victimizing* myself by exposing so much! But I know that I hadn’t done anything wrong and had nothing to be ashamed of; that I wasn’t *re-victimizing* myself—it just *felt* like that. The reality was: I was handing back shame that wasn’t mine” (Interview 176). In *Push* this shame does belong to Precious; it fuels her self-hate: “I HATE myself when I feel good” (58). I think that one of the places to begin thinking through these very difficult issues of sexual shame in *Push* may be in Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which is Not One*. Irigaray’s attempt to displace male-centered language and her conception of an alternate female language and feminine *jouissance* may be close to what Sapphire attempts in *Push*. As Sapphire states:

> I don’t want their language; I don’t want their linear male “murder mind.” I’m not trying to be another Shakespeare or Henry James--I’m trying to find the blackest, bloodiest, female-est form of expression I can! I’m not aiming to be as good as a white man; I’m aiming to find the *Heart of Darkness*, the very thing they’ve tried to suppress … which they claim is ugly and valueless, then spend half their time imitating and
Sapphire’s exploration of the “blackest,” the “bloodiest,” and the “female-est” leads her to the primal scene of incest and sexual abuse. Irigaray’s warnings about sexual shame and its effects on our language are pertinent here. In “When Our Lips Speak Together,” she writes:

How can I tell you that there is no possible evil in your sexual pleasure … That the fault only comes about when they strip you of your openness and close you up. Marking you with signs of possession; then they can break in, commit infractions and transgressions and play other games with the law. Games in which they—and you?—speculate on your whiteness. If we play along, we let ourselves be abused, destroyed. We remain indefinitely distant from ourselves to support the pursuit of their ends. That would be our flaw. If we submit to their reasoning, we are guilty. Their strategy, intentional or not, is calculated to make us guilty.

(211)

Playing this game, submitting to this reasoning, or learning this language, describes the double bind of sexual shame that traps Precious Jones and causes the tough rub of *Push*. Her sexual experiences with her father are noteworthy, in part because of the strange talking that he does: “I hate hear him talk more than I hate fuck” (35). “‘I’m gonna marry you,’ he be saying … First he mess up my life fucking me, then he mess up the fucking talking” (24). Her father’s talking prevents her from enjoying the escapist day dreams she tries to engage in while they are having sex. Her orgasms are scripted by him, despite her attempts to take ownership: “my pussy be popping. He say that, ‘Big Mama your pussy is popping’” (58). Her father, therefore, determines how she thinks of her orgasms and her sexuality. Language predicated on a rape culture, as Sapphire might argue, must certainly function this way.

Perhaps this is the central contradiction *Push* strives to resolve or at least to examine; this is a story about a woman finding her identity, power, and voice while becoming literate in a language that in many ways encodes her oppression. Much like Frederick Douglass’s narrative, literacy is the key to Precious Jones’ freedom: “It’s 26 letters in the alphabet. Each letter got sound. Put sound to letter, mix letters
together and get words. You got words” (64); “Them words everything” (66). In her journals “A is for Africa”: Precious learns her alphabet, writes poems, engages in word play. But ultimately, the ABC’s share a striking similarity with the acronyms of disease--HIV and AIDS. And while Precious revels in her ability to teach her son to read and in her choice to name her son, Abdul Jamal Louis, he is still Abdul Jamal Louis Jones, her father’s son: “He’s a good baby. But he’s not mine. I mean, he is mine, I push him out my pussy, but I didn’t meet a boy ‘n fall in love, sex up ‘n have a baby. I think I was rape” (68). The novel’s title, *Push*, refers to the act of pushing during childbirth and is itself a controlling metaphor for the novel. Precious Jones must push during childbirth and must push herself to learn to read and write. Through writing, she figuratively gives birth to her self. But this is still writing inspired by and structured by rape: “I push him out my pussy.” Years before *Push* was published, Sapphire claimed: “Incestuous abuse is the underpinning for our culture—this is what we’re built on. We’re a rape culture” (Interview 170). As Precious Jones echoes later: “He [Abdul] is a rapists’ baby. But that’s OK, Miz Rain say we is a nation of raped children, that the black man in America today is the product of rape” (68-69). How can one, then, achieve freedom through literacy when the language itself is structured this way?

Part of Sapphire’s project in *Push*, I would argue, is to project on a more public level the dynamic of community building and self-affirmation that one finds in a private recovery group and to disturb the familiar silence about incest that US culture seems to condone. The challenge of teaching *Push* is a challenge to disciplinarity, to the curriculum of English studies, and the all-too-often institutionalized absence of women’s voices and perspectives that this curriculum enacts. Within the college literature classroom, *Push*’s mixture of diverse genres reveals how the disciplinary divisions in the university may structure a silence about sexual violence against women. This is why, I would say to my wary student, we should listen to Precious’s testimony, even (or especially) to those parts of the text which make us uncomfortable. If we don’t, if we ignore discussing those places in the text where normative modes of reading break down, then we are complicit in the discourse of oppression. Our silence, then, becomes one of the master’s tools.
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


BREAKING THE “LOVE LAWS”: SIBLING INCEST IN
MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN AND THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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The family, in some ways like colonial authority, seeks to create and to mold children into particular roles. In his essay “Signs Taken for Wonders,” Homi Bhabha considers the formation of colonial identities, but at the same time, his articulation can also be usefully applied to the development of a child’s identity. The child seeks the comfort of authenticity in familial origins alongside the freedom of a separate identity: “the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (Bhabha 169). The child, balancing between family and individual identity, is essentially hybrid—similar to a postcolonial identity caught between origins and separation. Within a less than totally coherent family, these twin demands on identity may produce anxiety, and a child may seek to eliminate hybridity and instability through a return to origins, an attempt to graft the self back onto the family stock, to become original—in short, through incest. The child, however, like any postcolonial subject, cannot return to origins; the urge toward incest merely becomes a further fracturing, further hybridity, a destructive attack on the family. The desire to reject the split between family origins and individuality, to return to the family via incestuous union, fails, as any desire to return to origins—hybridity merely produces itself, and will undermine the family: “The display of [incest]—its peculiar ‘replication’ terrorizes [the family] with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery,” (176) argues Bhabha, “the paranoid threat of [incest] is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of a self/Other, inside/outside” (177).

Thus incestuous desires produce a doubly hybrid, destructive child. When Bhabha suggests that hybridity produces a “spectacular resistance” to the colonial state, he offers a site of hope and worthwhile rebellion. In the case of the family, however, this subversion of power has similar, less positive effects—the destruction of the family unit. Incest proves a fertile if taboo ground for considering these issues of identity and family within two novels, Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things and Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, which both
investigate the pressures of family life upon identity. Neither book presents the consummation of incestuous longing as generating any worthwhile results; rather, incest becomes a misled urge to stabilize and identify with the family.

Salman Rushdie’s 1980 novel, *Midnight’s Children*, features the theme of sibling incest. The stage is set similarly to Roy’s text—the author presents an account of ancestry and lineage; the individual must struggle with the force of history; the family emerges as a fractured site; and incest between the only two siblings, a boy and a girl, reveals a desire for the mother and for a cohesive family. The two differ, however, in Rushdie’s creation of the family as an essentially hermeneutic space, which requires acts of interpretation for its cohesion, and in which acts of interpretation may render it unviable. Saleem’s parentage and birth parallel that of the Indian nation, a fact that he is quite aware of throughout the novel. He was born at the exact moment of Indian independence and comes to discover that he, along with all other Indian children born at that time, has special powers. His apparent connection with the nation leads him to insist on his centrality and relationship with history; he also underscores his ties to his family. However, as a teenager, Saleem discovers that he was switched at birth—his parents are not the Indian couple he had believed them to be, but a colonial Englishman, William Methwold, and a neighbor, Wee Willie’s wife Vanita. He is thus not actually related at all to his mother Amina, his father Ahmed, or his sister Jamila (aka the Brass Monkey). Saleem, then, belongs to the family he was raised in only through an interpretive act; his lack of shared blood creates anxiety and produces alternative parents to replace the lost originals. It instigates a distance and a longing brought to fruition in Saleem’s unspeakable sister-love, for which he seeks to interpret himself out of the family in order to tie himself more closely, sexually, to it. This act of hermeneutical balancing fails, however, and sets the stage for later, failed interpretations and fissures, especially regarding the un/death of his sister.

Saleem’s relationship with his family is complicated by his need for relevance as well as his need for narrativity; he notes, “above all things, I fear absurdity” (4). He achieves centrality through a particular imagined relationship with larger forces. He is “mysteriously handcuffed to history” and was “already beginning to take my place at the center of the universe” as a baby (3, 143-4). Saleem’s story, his
autobiography, becomes a record of his significance, describing the relationships between himself, history, and his nation, consistently placing him at the core. He succeeds, somewhat; the novel indeed, encompasses “virtually all of [the] twentieth century Indian history,” according to R.S. Pathak’s essay “History and the Individual in the Novels of Rushdie” (120).

This need for centrality and relevance, coupled with his own anxiety regarding that relevance, creates a need to control the flow of the narrative and to be able to interpret events such that they support his thesis about his own life. This calls for an artist, or a writer—someone who creates through interpretation. At the close of the book, Saleem acknowledges that: “[he] fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one’s memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred” (510). Saleem presents his facts with some interpretation, with some filters, in order to show us his own significance and centrality.

Saleem gains significance through his relationship with the nation, through being “handcuffed to history” (3). He imagines this inescapable bond as a kind of family relationship; history provides an alternative father for Saleem. Including himself in their number, he notes “the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history” (132). This example illustrates Saleem’s perception of the correspondence between the family and the nation, and between fathers and the larger social world. The collision of these two forces, national and personal history, is further elaborated by Ron Shepherd in “Midnight’s Children as Fantasy,” who notes that Saleem’s need for centrality reflects “a regression to childhood where the child stands at the center of his world,” so that a key role in history substitutes for his later familial problems: if history is his father, presumably history will stay his father, unlike Ahmed Sinai (41). Saleem later escapes to the womb-like space of the washing chest “concealed from the demands of parents and history”—the two equated and listed as equals, as also in The God of Small Things (177).

Thus, Saleem seems poised between these demands. Saddled with a need for significance and a habit of interpretation, Saleem enters the family space, but not before a long period of gestation. The history of the extended family, specifically of the patriarch grandfather (though on the maternal side), reveals Saleem’s investment in his ancestry. He
offers an extensive account of his grandfather’s and mother’s lives before getting around to his own birth over one-hundred pages after the opening of the novel: “I must commence the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began, some thirty-two years before anything as obvious, as present, as my clock-ridden, crime-stained birth” (4). He urges readers to see him as a continuation of those who came before, as an inheritor of looks, of anxieties, and of desires—as a product of his lineage.

If the long account of Saleem’s pedigree failed to alert a reader to the importance of family, Padma does through her impatience during the 129 pages before Saleem’s birth. When Nadir Khan appears in the narrative, Padma exclaims, “That fat soft cowardly plumpie? Is he going to be your father?” (52). For Padma, the heart of the tale is Saleem, and the interesting thing to know about him is his parentage; when Saleem’s revelation of his true parentage shows this lineage to be false, Saleem placates the angered Padma: “I was still their son; they remained my parents. In a kind of collective failure of imagination, we learned that we simply could not think our way out of our pasts” (131). The tie between Saleem and his ancestors is here revealed as a product of interpretation, thinking, and time—not genes.

When “Even a baby is faced with the problem of defining itself,” the family provides a site of potential definition, of alternative modes of being that a child may choose to imitate (147). For Saleem, this dialogue is complicated; his family is not his family, and he discovers various alternatives and possibilities in other potential parents.1 Able to “invent new parents for myself whenever necessary,” Saleem proves able to experiment with various identities and possible families. According to Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère’s Origin and Originality in Rushdie’s Fiction, “Relationships are therefore established through the poetic logic of word-play and literary allusion rather than via a linear, biologically grounded process” (14). His alternative fathers—his by acts of interpretation—provide entrances into historical events. The Sabarmati affair emerges from Saleem’s

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1 Though Saleem, for most of the time that he’s engaged in choosing alternative parents, does not know that he was switched at birth, the narrating Saleem certainly does. The narrator provides the terms identifying these friends and family members as replacement parents.
relationship with Schaapsteker, who told him “You must think of me as another father” (295). With Uncle Zulfikar, Saleem overthrows a government: “Proving my manhood, my fitness for sonship, I assisted my uncle as he made the revolution” (332). Picture Singh, “the last of this noble line” of alternative fathers, doesn’t quite fit the bill. Saleem tries to imagine him as “the very avatar of Mian Abdullah,” but he creates no revolution, and Saleem wonders, “perhaps it was all an illusion, born of my attempt to bind him to the threads of my history by an effort of sheer will” (490). Saleem’s all-important tie to history operates partially through his proliferating fathers, while his mothers provide a smaller, more intimate world, one he associates with both nurturance and sexuality.

Saleem asserts that Mary, in switching him with Shiva and making him a member of the Sinai family, “made the last and most important contribution to the entire history of twentieth-century India from the time of my grandfather’s nose-bump until the time of my adulthood” (115). Saleem is “her own unconceived and inconceivable son,” Mary’s virgin birth (235). He never blames her for her faults, perhaps because he never sees her as a sexual being; like Mary, she’s immaculate. Other alternative mothers are not so lucky, and bear the guilt of Amina’s treachery and Saleem’s desire. His aunt Pia became “the next in the long series of women who have bewitched me and finally undone me good and proper”—“Women have fixed me all right” (276, 220). Thus, while Saleem’s alternative fathers often provide an entrance into important historical events, his alternative mothers are generally blamed for his problems and failures.

Though Amina certainly bears the brunt of Saleem’s oedipal wishes, they get spread around to other family women such as his aunt Pia and his sister Jamila Singer. Such desire even finds precedent in Aadam’s relations with his mother and his daughter. The scene in which Aadam massages his mother’s muscles suggests their physical closeness as well as the mother’s jealousy of the son’s future wife: “His mother lay on her bed, spreadeagled on her stomach. ‘Come, come and press me,’ she said ... She grunted, twitched, relaxed. ‘Lower

2 The incestuous desire for a sister is generally interpreted as the oedipal complex revisited—the sister is perceived as more sexually available than the mother and thereby a useful substitute. See Blair and Rita Justice’s *The Broken Taboo: Sex in the Family* or Santiago’s *The Children of Oedipus: Brother-Sister Incest in Psychiatry, Literature, History and Mythology* for more on sibling incest.
now,’ she said, ‘now higher … I have worked in shops and been undressed by the eyes of strangers so that you should marry that Naseem!’” (22). Saleem’s compulsive history of his lineage provides incestuous precedent for his later longings.

Saleem’s relationships with his mother and his alternative mothers are similarly characterized by desire and a certain confusion of roles. The urge to hide himself in his “mother’s large white-washing chest” in her “enveloping soiled linen” reveals his desire to return to a sort of womb or enclosed maternal space: a “hole in the world, a place which civilization has put outside itself, beyond the pale” (173-77). The sight of the “gigantic, black Alfonso mango” discloses the mother as a sexual, physical object and creates such anguish that Saleem’s telepathic gift reveals itself (184). Following this incident and his suspicions of his mother’s unfaithfulness, he “began to dream dreams of revenge,” a desire that is not paralleled in his reaction to his father’s inconstancies; Saleem obviously has a double standard for the two parents (250). Even from the comfortable position of an older, wiser Saleem, the narrator fails to trust his mother: “because of her weakness for me who resembled Nadir Khan, could she have … in her odd frame of mind, and moved by the seer’s illness, might she not … ‘No!’ Padma shouts furiously. ‘How dare you suggest? About that good woman—you own mother?’” (97). His relationship with his aunt Pia reveals a similar collision of desire and anger:

One-handed, I begin to caress her, not knowing what I’m doing, I’m only ten years old and still in shorts, but I’m crying because she’s crying, and the room is full of the noise—and on the bed as two bodies begin to acquire a kind of rhythm, unnameable unthinkable, hips pushing up towards me, while she yells, ‘O! O God, O God, O!’ (286-7)

He later categorizes Aunt Pia as one of the women who “have bewitched and finally undone me,” blaming her for this moment of grief and confusion: demonstrating again his tendency to blame his alternative mothers for his failures, while his fathers (associated with his entry into wider historical worlds) are never similarly blamed (276). The difference seems to be desire; as with his aunt Pia, his mother and his alternative mothers become sexual objects to Saleem, and his desire makes him uncomfortable, and apparently quite willing to cast those women as manipulators and witches. Certainly such confusions
provide incestuous precedent for Saleem’s later attempt to become romantically involved with his sister. As in *The God of Small Things*, incest is already present within the extended family group, and it takes the specific form of a desire to cement relations within a fractured and incoherent family.

Thus, we are prepared for the entrance of Jamila Singer, aka the Brass Monkey. A lone sister, “as beautiful as I was ugly,” offers Saleem an avenue toward securing his place within the family (172). After the revelation of Saleem’s birth, both his mother and sister attempt to assimilate this new information:

She held me tightly one night and said, ‘Love, my child, is a thing that every mother learns; it is not born with a baby, but made; and for eleven years, I have learned to love you as my son.’ But there was a distance behind her gentleness, as though she were trying to persuade herself … a distance, too, in the Monkey’s midnight whispers of, ‘Hey, brother, why don’t we go and pour water over Zafar—they’ll only think he’s wet his bed?’—and it was my sense of this gap which showed me that, despite their use of son and brother, their imaginations were working hard to assimilate Mary’s confession. (328-329)

Saleem becomes aware of a gap between the facts and the interpretation of those facts; he is not literally a son, but the family has accrued meaning over time, meaning that is hard to destroy. It becomes, however, a hermeneutical construction rather than an entirely social or biological one. If, as Jaina Sanga points out in *Salman Rushdie’s Postcolonial Metaphors*, Rushdie here “directly questions the fixity of identity,” he does so with something less than celebration (88). Saleem’s ambivalence in the family—the “split screen” of himself-as-son and himself-as-stranger—causes him anxiety and loneliness by depriving him of a concrete space for identity formation (Bhabha 175). The father at this point does not participate in this re-imagining of Saleem’s role; following the revelation of Saleem’s birth, he stays in India while Amina, Jamila and Saleem travel to Pakistan. This is notably a time of anxiety for Saleem who wishes to “prove myself worthy of their kinship,” and it is around this time that he discovers his desire for his sister (329). Saleem had assumed the coherence of his family unit for some time; he had engaged in Oedipal desires for his
mother and aunt, he had participated in history and the world through his potential fathers.

Without the basis of biology, the incest taboo seems less relevant; oedipal desires could be acted upon with the sister. The sister, on one level, provides a substitute for the mother. As pointed out in Otto Rank’s seminal tome on incest, *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend*, “one’s relationship with siblings is revealed by psychoanalytical research to be a ‘second edition,’ less intense but unchanged in content, of the etiologically earlier relationship with one’s parents” (563). For Saleem, the family has no biological basis, and he seems to worry that the structure of the family could be destroyed. He becomes insecure in his role as son and brother and seeks to “prove” himself “worthy” of his family. Both of these lines of reasoning—desire for the mother, and desire to be fully integrated into the family—create a desire for the sister, as that person upon whom Oedipal desires could be enacted, and that person who could cement his place within the only family he knows through identification and love. Saleem, however, still needs to convince Jamila that incest is an acceptable option:

... but even as he spoke he could hear his words sounding hollow, and realized that although what he was saying was the literal truth, there were other truths which had become more important because they had been sanctified by time; and although there was no need for shame or horror, he saw both emotions on her forehead, he smelt them on her skin, and, what was worse, he could feel and smell them in and upon himself. (371–2)

The gap between the literal truth and an interpreted, mediated truth for once works against Saleem. Even with the assistance of the love charm, Saleem proves unable to persuade Jamila from her belief that he remains her brother. This failure violates both Saleem’s wishes—he cannot consummate his love for his sister (and thus for his mother), and he has seriously impaired the cohesion of the family. The attempt to solidify his role in the family through incest has failed miserably.

Saleem subsequently tries to offer his readers an interpretation of this love: “I realized that my truly-incestuous feelings were for my true birth-sister, India herself, and not for that trollop of a crooner who
had so callously shed me” (444). He suggests an easy correlation between desire for family and desire for nation, the one being a microcosm of the other. This interpretation, however, appears doubtful. Most notably, it reeks of anger as Saleem engages in name-calling; once again, his desire for women has led to blaming them as the Brass Monkey becomes that “trollop of a crooner.” It is also hard to swallow Jamila as a symbol for India, as she proved much more attracted to Pakistan, having fallen “under the insidious spell of that God-ridden country” (334). In fact, Dutheil de la Rochère sees Jamila as much closer allied to Pakistan, and suggests that the incest reflects “the incestuous union of wealth, politics, and religion in the Land of the Pure” (16). While such an analysis might be attractive, it fails to account for why Saleem would desire Jamila. Saleem’s incestuous longing is much more easily understood as an attempt to cement his place within the family by interpreting himself out of the family so that he can consummate a relationship with Jamila—a hermeneutical balancing act that fails for both Jamila and himself.

This failure of interpretation occurs again when Saleem hears of Jamila’s disappearance and supposed death. Saleem does not believe what he hears, and instead imagines a scenario that preserves both Jamila’s virginity and her life. However, his tale reveals that he doesn’t even trust his own interpretation. Saleem previously noted that “no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own,” and so he constructs his own version of Jamila’s fate, but, on some level, he seems to realize that he’s telling himself stories (242):

Jamila did not disappear into the clutches of the State; because that same night, I dreamed that she, in the shadows of darkness and the secrecy of a simple veil, not the instantly recognizable gold-brocade tent of Uncle Puffs but a common black burqa, fled by air from the capital city … nuns are opening doors as she cries sanctuary, yes, there she is, safely inside, doors being bolted behind her … I know, I know, I know. How do I know? A brother knows; that’s all. (453)

The hallucinatory stream-of-consciousness and repeated “I know”s seem to reveal desperation rather than certainty. His later visions of Jamila’s decomposing face suggest both his guilt and his underlying knowledge of her death:
Jamila who was (I know it!) safely hidden in a Karachi nunnery was suddenly also here, except she had undergone a dark transformation. She had begun to rot, the dreadful pustules and cankers of forbidden love were spreading across her face. (456)

The fact of the phantasmal sister’s decomposition certainly appears to suggest that she’s dead—that Saleem cannot quite interpret himself out of an awareness of her death, despite his best efforts. He later tries to account for these visions by forcing a gap between his idea of his sister and the betrayer, Jamila Singer, which would allow him to believe Jamila to be dead, while his sister remains alive: “always turning into that of my distant, vanished sister … no, not my sister … into the putrid, vilely disfigured face of Jamila Singer” (462). Again, this attempt at interpretation seems forced and unlikely, the lies of a desperate mind to itself. He finally places his sister within the throng of dead relatives waiting to greet him at his own demise, though he again tries to qualify his knowledge: “there is Jamila who has left her nunnery to be present on this last day” (532).

Thus, Saleem’s acts of interpretation seem to come unraveled around his sister. Though he relies upon his hermeneutic powers to support his own relevance and centrality within his memoir, these powers fail him in the end. Within a family that is only his through acts of imagination, Saleem seeks to solidify his position through a relationship with his sister. Following that rejection, the family quickly disintegrates, or is squashed by a falling building. The news of his sister’s death forces a visible gap between the real and his beliefs. The reader becomes able to see Saleem’s interpretive acts as, perhaps, false, or the creations of a diseased mind. Thus, incest fails to secure Saleem’s position within the family, and becomes associated with failed interpretations and the demolition of that family. For Rushdie, then, incest, as the attempt to solidify one’s role in the family, is ultimately unsuccessful.

On the surface, Roy’s *The God of Small Things* might seem to present a different vision of incest, in which the sexual bond between sister and brother—paralleled to the bond between Ammu and Velutha—shows the possibilities for breaking the “love laws” as a useful rebellion against a repressive state. Such interpretations usually revolve around the twins’ “single, Siamese soul,” for the two-egg twins Rahel and Estha share remarkable similarities; they participate in each
other’s dreams and nightmares, they finish each other’s sentences, and finally they commit incest together. Caught between the demands that family and history place on identity, the two depend upon each other for comfort and relief, for some foothold of stability in a monstrous world. Their final union seems like a moment of hope in the midst of their hideous grief, a moment of choice and identification, an affirmation of their oneness, their desires, and their potential strength. It seems a rebellion against those agents of family law, of historical necessity, of Freudian morality that would separate and dominate the twins. But the novel’s narrator reminds us, again and again, of differences in the twins, of their two-ness despite the appearance of a single soul—that they are, after all, separate people and brother and sister. Their reaction against the hybrid forces of family and history is to collapse categories and identities, to assert their interdependence, to assert their one-ness. But this very act of assertion denies their possibilities for individuality, for a future trajectory, by turning back to the family and back to history, by only paving over the same road of perversion and grief, recreating a twisted family through their denial of their double, individually hybrid existence. Roy’s use of incest explores the roles of the family and history in setting the stage for Rahel and Estha’s consummation; the family becomes a sexualized and hybrid space, in which incest has already reared its head. History appears as a tyrannical force that sweeps the twins into the undertow of its official versions. Between these two forces, family and history, Rahel and Estha try and fail to establish their own identities.

Until the Terror, the setting of politics remains a blurred backdrop for the children. The interactions of the immediate family seem much more real. Rahel and Estha look toward their mother and various possible fathers for attention and affirmation. Though Ammu asserts her ability to occupy both roles, she doesn’t seem to succeed, as the twins search for alternative fathers or the restoration of the original. Their two substitute fathers, Chacko and Velutha (their mother’s brother and lover, respectively), cannot ultimately fit the bill. The twins would welcome Chacko as a surrogate patriarch as Rahel was “pleased to have Chacko mistaken for her father. Like a normal family” (76). Though Velutha loves them so much that love’s fist clenches inside him, his love extends no comfort after his death. Even their mother’s project to love the children “double” appears to fail, as when she (admittedly, in a moment of severe stress) cries out, “I should have dumped you in an orphanage the day you were born! You’re the
millstones around my neck!” (239). Without any secure source of affection, the twins seem adrift, and no one else in the family seems to care.

Mammachi, their maternal grandmother, conceives of the group as a revelation of lineage, as the current version of an entity that stretches backward far into time. Family history, of her own line and of others, occupies a central role in her conception of the individual, as revealed in her typical wedding chatter: “The bride’s maternal grandfather was my father’s carpenter, Kunjukutty Eapen? His great-grandmother’s sister was just a midwife in Trivandrum. My husband’s family used to own this whole hill” (160). Her reaction to Ammu’s rebellion reveals the alternative fear of ongoing degradation: “She had defiled generations of breeding … For generations to come, forever now, people would point at them at weddings and funerals” (244). Ammu rebels against the association of lineage with identity as she contemplates walking down to the river to find Velutha:

She paced up and down for awhile. Restless. Feral. Then she sat on the wicker chair below the moldy, button-eyed bison head and the portraits of the Little Blessed One and Aleyooty Ammachi that hung on either side of it. Her twins were sleeping the way they did when they were exhausted—with their eyes half open, two small monsters. They got that from their father. (314)

In the midst of these familial markers, Ammu listens to a song about rebellion, sex, and fantasy, and decides to pursue the one-armed man of her dream. She shrugs off the disapproving gaze of her illustrious ancestors in pursuit of her desire and forces a gap in history.

Doing such, however, costs her a great deal, and appears not to ensure a similar break for her twins. Ammu, after all, only follows family precedent; as the narrator informs us, “They all break the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory” (31). Rahel and Estha, though untied to the demands of family respectability, remain within the confines of this lineage. They even follow a pattern of incestuous relations established by their uncle and grandmother. Chacko is Mammachi’s “man” and “[h]er only love”; as for Chacko, “[he] needed his mother’s adoration. Indeed, he demanded it, yet he despised her for it” (160, 236). Thus, the twins’ act of incest, while it
extends the precedent of the family, remains within its established parameters of broken rules and incestuous longing.

Escape from History proves similarly difficult. The Official Version of History, that published in the papers, often fails to recognize the small, personal truths that set events in motion, writing over the lost watch buried by dirt and time. Pillai “merely slipped his ready fingers into History’s waiting glove” and Velutha waits for “History’s twisted chickens” to “come home to roost” (267, 268). The police, “history’s henchmen,” seek Velutha with “[f]eelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear” (292). History seems stupid, brutal, and even a bit ridiculous.

Twenty-three years after the Terror, this kitsch edge seems taken to extremes in the remodeled History House, renamed “Heritage,” where artists perform mutilated dances, and “Toy Histories” are provided to “rich tourists” (120). Providing recycled, repackaged, watered down versions of culture, the house merely acknowledges its own hybrid past as the domicile of an English pedophile gone native, whose ghost now sits stuck to a tree, asking passersby for cigars. The site of History is also thus the site of strange mixture, of English identity and a fascination with native culture, of sexual perversion and frustrated desire. The outward shows of History, as seen through its henchmen, enforce conformity and repetition, while the foundation beneath rests upon an essentially hybrid foundation and acts of perversion. This closely parallels the family’s emphasis upon the importance of lineage, paired with the family’s history of hybrid identities and incestuous mixtures. Both the spaces of family and history seek to articulate themselves as whole, as authoritative, as authentic, but reveal a basis of hybridity.

This monstrous version of History tends to ignore or demolish the smaller versions: “Small God (cozy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity” (20). The twisted-chickens version of History, as impersonal and stupid, may supplant the more individual knowledges of history’s participants, as in the version of Velutha’s story printed in the papers. The truth, that Rahel, Estha and Ammu “had loved a man to death,” isn’t recorded: “That wasn’t in the papers” (287). History writes over the personal, leaves it buried like Rahel’s watch, and advances its own versions in the paper or in a new History theme park.
Gaps in history appear, possibilities for escape, moments when the big monster seems blindsided. For Ammu, this is a moment of possibility, revelation, and fear: “History was wrong-footed, caught off guard. Sloughed off like an old snakeskin. Its marks, its scars, its wounds from old wars and the walking-backwards days all fell away. In its absence it left an aura, a palpable shimmering that was as plain to see as the water in a river or the sun in the sky” (167-8). That second of fracture leaves open the possibility for more fractures. It leaves behind a “history lesson for future offenders”—an example to eschew or to follow (307). And the final pages of the book seem replete with hope, with the speaking of the future in her last “Tomorrow,” and with the History House’s spider, initially cocooned in various bits of dust and debris:

Chappu Thamburan, Velutha called him. Lord Rubbish. One night they contributed to his wardrobe—a flake of garlic skin—and were deeply offended when he rejected it along with the rest of his armor from which he emerged—disgruntled, naked, snot-colored. As though he deplored their taste in clothes. For a few days he remained in this suicidal state of disdainful undress. The rejected shell of garbage stayed standing, like an outmoded worldview. An antiquated philosophy. Then it crumbled. Gradually Chappu Thamburan acquired a new ensemble. (320)

Ammu and Velutha’s addition to history forces the spider, Lord Rubbish, out of his old clothes, his “outmoded world-view,” and into a new and different set of garments. History can be shrugged off and changed; the world may splutter and act angry, but eventually things progress. Things might get better, and perhaps Ammu’s act—loving a man she is forbidden to love—becomes part of that process.

In the light of the forces of family and history, and the possibilities for rebellion, how should readers interpret Rahel and Estha’s incestuous act? As the second key violation of the Love Laws, it could be seen as a similar rebellion with a similar possibility for revolution and change, or an inevitable resolution of their one-ness. Throughout the story, Roy peppers descriptions of their similarity, their “single Siamese soul” (40). They seem to share an identity; can their
Such an interpretation is tempting, but Roy inserts parallel examples of their differences and separate identities. Most notably, the two are *not* identical; they are "two-egg twins" "[b]orn from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs" (4). Estha is older, and they do not resemble each other. Baby recognizes their differences when she chooses Estha to betray Velutha: "Knowing him to be the more practical of the two. The more tractable. The more farsighted. The more responsible" (302). This underscoring of their differences reveals the gap between their identities, the gap of actually being separate people, brother and sister instead of clones. This dialogue between similarity and difference characterizes most descriptions of Rahel and Estha. The urge to explain away or elude that difference, to somehow become one, to find a haven and a moment of eclipsed identity, becomes the urge toward incest. And, in fact, as far as Estha’s incestuous desires go, they have nothing to do with achieving oneness with Rahel. Instead, his descriptions of Rahel prior to and during their incestuous union reveal his need to recapture his mother: "Their beautiful mother’s mouth, Estha thought. Ammu’s mouth” (284). This origin is truly irrecoverable; Ammu’s death leaves Rahel, another version of Ammu with more lustrous eyes and a separate identity, as an approximation that fails to coincide cleanly with the original. Ultimately, Rahel and Estha are *not* the same person, and Rahel is *not* his mother; the groping toward comfort and loss-of-self implied in their sexual union is a failure, an attempt at rebellion that produces no effects. Estha feels the world re-encroaching on him, but he felt that before they consummated their relationship. The "dam had burst and savage waters swept everything up in a swirling” well before the final sex scene (16).

Rahel and Estha’s union, as an attempted rebellion against the strictures on identity enforced by family and history, fails. They merely repeat and re-engage the family and history, participating in incestuous acts already suggested by Chacko and Mammachi, invoking the sexual perversion already inherent in the origins of the History House. Instead of breaking from lineage, they double back on it as Estha seeks a return to origin and wholeness through the imaging of Rahel as the mother. Within the strictures on identity placed by an essentially hybrid family and history, the two seek identity and one-ness, a rejection of
separation and hybridity in an act of union—an act of "hideous grief" rather than useful rebellion (311). It is thus problematic to equate the two separate breakings of the love laws too closely—while readers are encouraged to see Ammu’s sexual union with Velutha as a positive and useful act of rebellion, the twins’ sexual union does not operate in the same way.

The origin, wholeness, a fixed identity: all these prove irrecoverable. Their act of union, then, becomes repetition of the unproductive sexuality already inherent in the family and in the history house—without any suggestion that future generations might learn a “history lesson” from them. Bhabha’s idea of hybridity as “spectacular resistance” seems irrelevant; there’s no spectacle, no one notices. Baby, within the house, remains unaware of their actions. They become a “pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative. Stumbling through their parts, nursing someone else’s sorrow. Grieving someone else’s grief” (182). Trapped within the demands of family and history, they merely re-engage those demands and strictures. Lost in repetition, their rebellion becomes the equivalent of the old dog peeing between the house and the outdoors. Just being liminal, being between siblings and lovers, or attempting to be both, isn’t enough.

In both these novels, the authors present an elaborated lineage as one key to the development of the main characters. Family intersects with history and ancestry in the creation of a site for identity, one in which children seek to maintain family bonds while forging their own paths. This dual goal, an inherent hybridity in identity through history and ancestry, might become perverse within an incoherent family. For Rahel and Estha, the father is absent; for Saleem, the family is not his own. Both these problems generate anxiety for these children; their space within the family is unclear. Rahel, Estha and Saleem all seek to solidify family bonds through forging incestuous unions. None of these are successful. Rahel and Estha share “hideous grief” while Saleem’s failure to convince his sister leads to his own exile and (indirectly) the collapse of his family.

As investigated in the early pages of this essay, the development of a child’s identity maps fairly cleanly onto Bhabha’s articulation of the hybrid colonial subject, split between origins and difference. As colonial hybridity may undermine the state, incestuous hybridity undermines the family, but this kind of hybridity does not
correspond with the positive effects of political revolution. For all these children, alienation from the family is occasion for grief and for regret. As a type of hybridity that seeks to return to an origin, and of course cannot, these uses of incest could be read as commentaries on the failure of cultural nationalism. Furthermore, perhaps the example of incest displays one way in which the magic pill of hybridity fails to achieve the desired effect. These novels show, instead, possibilities for hybridity’s spectacular failure by articulating the family as a space that should, ideally, be unified and coherent: the introduction of hybridity becomes a potential move toward the family’s ruin. These novels thus suggest that hybridity, far from being a magic solution to all national or personal problems, could instead be responsible for the destruction of desirable and necessary institutions.

**Works Cited**


ADORNO’S TABOO—AND ITS TRANSGRESSION

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Adorno usually uses the word “taboo” to connote a denial or evasion or hypocrisy of the ideological type that intellectuals like ourselves, post-Marx, -Nietzsche, -Freud, etc., make it our particular business to unmask or transgress, bringing light to concerns that prevailing cultural imperatives keep in the dark, keep “repressed,” or “unconscious.”

Yet Adorno himself insists on one major proscription for which the term “taboo” seems quite apt: the representation of utopia. Most immediately, this scruple expresses the hope that utopia will be so radical a break from present conditions that any attempt to anticipate it by way of present powers of thinking and imagining could only profane it. Adorno accrues gravitas to this problematic in his frequent assimilation of it to the Bilderverbot of Judaism’s First Commandment: the proscription against graven images. For Adorno, then, the ban on images or imaginings of utopia is a uniquely privileged taboo, one by which Adorno agrees to bind himself and his work.

Axiomatic in the ethic of unmasking taboos, however, is not merely that a taboo excludes something, but that the exclusion distorts what is included: what is repressed exerts its force on what is expressed. This paper explores some of the representational and stylistic consequences for Adorno’s writing of his repressed longing for the utopian: its asceticism, its difficulty, its stylistic, tonal and expressive “unhappy consciousness.” In particular, I want to explore how the taboo against utopia plays out in Adorno’s thinking about, as well as his practices of and against, narrative in critique.

“UNHAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS”

“Unhappy consciousness,” of course, is a phrase from Hegel, Adorno’s most potent influence (in effect, his “covering cherub”). Hegel's project is nothing less than the overcoming of “unhappy consciousness,” which as “physician to the [modern] age,” Hegel means both to diagnose and to cure. Hegel's project is unabashedly
“utopian”—but in the wake of the miseries of the 20th century, Hegel has seemed not merely naive, but delusional in his Panglossian utopianism. The implication of Hegel's historicism not only in Stalinism, with its official “optimism,” but in all the ideological fantasias from communism through liberal-ism to Nazism gave utopia as such a bad name, as witness the preponderance in 20th century culture criticism—Mann, Freud, Spengler, T. S. Eliot, Ortega y Gasset, Lionel Trilling—of accents from pessimism to despair. In such a climate, the “strong pessimism” of Nietzsche seems unseemly, a kind of boast. For a critic with the “after Auschwitz” sensitivities of an Adorno, to claim to have transcended “unhappy consciousness” would seem an ideological abjection, “an imaginary solution to a real contradiction,” a scruple Adorno’s “after-Auschwitz” ethos intensifies to a compulsion. But for Adorno, it's not merely that our current false consciousness is too compromised to project a credible image of utopia: it’s also that the public sphere is already polluted by competing ideological utopianisms whose patent falsity now discredits in advance any utopianism whatsoever. From left to right, from Stalinist orthodoxy through liberal meliorism to the violent apocalyptic fantasies of fascism, the ideological menu available in Adorno’s day conjured historicist happy endings as “inevitable,” even as the carnage and the gore of ever more fully technologized violence produced ever-mounting levels of bloodshed.

(ANTI-) NARRATIVE

In Adorno's work, “unhappy consciousness” manifests itself most immediately as tone or voice or style—instantiating that the taboo against utopia proscribes much more than just images. Adorno seems very much a “modernist” in the self-consciousness of his writing practice, that is, the degree of his insistence that what critique is saying must be conditioned on how critique is written. His best-known methodological formula, for example, “constellation,” is as much a literary device as a critical thought-instrument—and as such, it has obvious affinities to cubist collage, Eisensteinian montage, the Poundian “ideogram,” the Joycean “epiphany,” T. S. Eliot's “medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.” One thing all these “modernist” aesthetic devices share is that they are not narrative, and indeed often encode a more or less deliberate refusal of narrative. Adorno’s is one of the more deliberate—something like (for the sake of argument) a
“taboo against narrative.” Adorno borrowed the figure of “constellation” from Walter Benjamin, whose other best-known critical-methodological gambit, the “dialectical image,” was meant to freeze temporality altogether, to discompose narrative moments into discrete frozen images of history petrified, as if under a critical “Medusa-gaze,” as mimesis of a historical moment in which all the promise of the 19th-century’s grand utopian narratives appear as stalled, in what Benjamin famously called a “dialectics at a standstill.”

The attenuation of narrative as an interest in 20th-century fiction was at the heart of the lifelong debate between Western Marxism’s modernists (Brecht and Bloch, as well as Benjamin and Adorno) and their antagonist, defender of 19th-century realism (and also of Soviet orthodoxy), Georg Lukács. For Lukács the enfeeblement of narrative in writers like Joyce and Proust was a “symptom” of bourgeois decline, a falling-off from the critical power latent, Lukács thought, in narrative realism, even in conservative or reactionary novelists like Scott and Balzac. Adorno defended the modernist arts as “critical” in a whole new way: as not merely diagnosing from a distance, but suffering within, the very pathologies of the modern age. Hence the formula, in Adorno and Benjamin, of “immanent critique”: critique from “inside” the critical problem. Adorno and Benjamin give the arts a role analogous to that of the Freudian psychoanalyst, whose efficacy involves not the provision of reasoned “insight,” but something more experiential or (Freud’s word) “transferential”: a reactivation of the complaint, the neurosis, in the feelings as indispensable prerequisite to a “making conscious” that might lead to a more lucid, and freeing, relation to them.

Freud wrote case histories, but they are less “narratives” in the 19th-century sense—a complete recitation of events in a manner to “explain” the passage from one to another—than juxtapositions of particularly cathected moments. This more “modernist” sense of developmental processes dissent from older “historicist” styles of explanation much as Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals dissent from his century’s style of exhaustive history-writing, or as Joyce’s Ulysses dissent from 19th-century “realism,” as Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of World History”—recall the opening image of the puppet with the dwarf inside—dissent from the providential historicizing critique claiming descent from Marx. (Marx mostly deserves these disciples, though he occasionally anticipates Benjamin, as in, e.g., the “tragedy/farce”
configuration of the opening to the *Eighteenth Brumaire*). But my point here is that Adorno, in his critical methods, is deliberately non-narrative, even anti-narrative. Let me advert here to what might seem Adorno’s most narrative text, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* he co-authored with Max Horkheimer. In form this book looks like a small-scale replica—even a “mimesis”—of the ur-text and epitome of historicism and of historicizing critique as such, Hegel’s *Phenomenology*: both books begin in pre-classical antiquity, move rapidly through a foreshortened history of the West to the “Enlightenment” and the present of the authors’ own time (in Hegel, the Napoleonic Wars; in Horkheimer and Adorno, World War Two: both texts end with a “Golgotha of the Spirit”). Formally, Horkheimer and Adorno’s largest departure from the Hegelian template is the pages of inconclusive “Notes and Sketches” that follow the main text, and emphasize, against Hegel’s cadenza on “Absolute Knowledge,” the non-closure of its narrative, or rather, of its non-narrative.

For it’s not enough to say that Adorno and Horkheimer re-tell Hegel’s story ironically, as a nightmare rather than a theodicy. Rather, they re-stage Hegel’s narrative of historical change and progress as instead a static nightmare—precisely not a narrative, rather a steady-state—of chronic barbarism, in which “narrative” itself is implicated as an ideology, a false consciousness, a lie that mystifies the nightmare of history with smiley-face assurances of a “progress” that turns out to be wholly illusory. Thus the faux- or mock- or quasi-narrative of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* actually enact or performs the theme it announces throughout, namely that “The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression” (*Dialectic* 28). We get not a historicizing narrative of World-history, telling the story of how we rose from the savagery of the past and can confidently expect further enlightenment (i.e., utopia) in the future, but rather a “dialectical image” of the blur and flux of Western history’s “dialectics at a standstill,” a story that fails not merely to deliver on its promises of progress and improvement, but a story that fails to achieve narrativity as such, if the sine qua non of narrative is change deserving to be demonstrated in chronological, before-and-after terms. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* indicts not merely the failure of the particular “grand narrative” of the Western enlightenment, but narrative as such as a category of the human mind, a sort of conceptual Achilles heel, prone to, perhaps even the very source of, the illusion of change and progress—which is to say, the illusion of the utopian as such. In this, *Dialectic of*
Enlightenment does to Hegel's Phenomenology and the tradition of historicist critique descending from it something like what Joyce did to Homer and to the realist novel.

**COUNTER-EXAMPLE: ADORNO'S MAHLER**

If the exception proves, in the sense of probes or tests, the rule, I want now to turn to an exception to what I have posed as the non- or anti-narrative rule of Adorno's practice: Adorno's short book on Mahler, entitled *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*. It is a “late” work, unique in Adorno's corpus in staging itself explicitly as narrative, with all the baggage I have made that term bear above. In it, most tellingly, the return of what we might call a narrative repressed entails as well the return of a utopian repressed. The book treats Mahler's oeuvre as itself a development to be narrated, and as an oeuvre enacting problems in a narrative way; accordingly, Adorno's discussion must also conduct itself narratively. The book stages itself, indeed, as a narrative, and quite a dramatic one at that. Its first chapter is called “Curtain and Fanfare,” quite as if, in this opening movement, the book itself appropriates the quickening and excitement of the moment when house lights go down, and the orchestra begins to play as the curtain rises—and the chapter goes on, indeed, to narrate the course of Mahler's oeuvre. Scene one (so to speak) opens on the opening of Mahler's First Symphony, and narrates the development to “the height of the movement,” when suddenly, what had been a distantly-heard fanfare “explodes.”

It is not so much that this crescendo has reached a climax as that the music has expanded with a physical jolt. The rupture originates beyond the music's intrinsic movement, intervening from outside. For a few moments the symphony imagines that something has become reality that for a lifetime the gaze from the earth has fearfully yearned for in the sky. With it Mahler's music has kept faith ... If all music, with its first note, promises that which is different, the rending of the veil, [Mahler's] symphonies attempt to withhold it no longer, to place it literally before our eyes (*Mahler* 5).
I like to “imagine” that Adorno means “the symphony” here to mean the whole genre and its history, not merely Mahler’s First—indeed, that the whole of art, and of non-art too, feels the force of this transfiguration, since Adorno dares to evoke it in terms (“beyond the music’s intrinsic movement, intervening from outside”) that clearly make this utopian “rupture” more than “merely” aesthetic. We have to do here not with some mere evocation or mimesis or representation or expression of that “rending of the veil” that the earth has been “fearfully yearning” for: No, Adorno insists, Mahler has here managed “to place it literally before our eyes.” Mahler’s art achieves a “rupture,” a “breakthrough,” to something “beyond” mere art, even “inimical to art.” But, of course, there’s a “but”; there always is:

But Mahler’s primary experience, inimical to art, needs art in order to manifest itself, and indeed must heighten art from its own inner necessity. For the image corresponding to breakthrough is damaged because the breakthrough has failed, like the Messiah, to come into the world. To realize it musically would be at the same time to attest its failure in reality. It is in music’s nature to overreach itself. Utopia finds refuge in no man’s land. … In the entrapment that music would breach, it is itself entangled as art … Music as art transgresses against its truth; but it offends no less if, violating art, it negates its own idea. Mahler’s symphonies progressively seek to elude this fate (Mahler 6).

The second of these two quotations puts the predicament of art (and of critique: of Geist at large) in terms any reader of Adorno will find familiar. The novelty is in the first quotation. If the second passage rehearses the thematics of the “broken promise,” the first, quite daringly, limns something of what the promise in its unbroken form would deliver. Or never mind “would,” as if the promise were conditional or contrafactual: Adorno asserts unequivocally that Mahler has “kept faith”; and hence the success, genuine however short-lived, of the “breakthrough” vouchsafed to him and, through his symphony, to us; as Adorno puts it later in the book:

… because Mahler’s music keeps the promise, because it is truly consummated where other music … attains its climaxes and then, disappointed and
disappointing, starts again from below, a yearning is fulfilled with which the unfettered spirit really approaches all music and to which the fettered one only believes itself superior as taste because it has again and again been cheated of it, and most of all in the greatest works of art (Mahler 43-4).

But back in “Curtain and Fanfare,” Adorno foreshadows the story of how Mahler “gradually concretizes” the dialectic of his utopia with the ideological condition surrounding and compromising it:

Aware at the musical level of the crude abstractness of the antithesis between the world’s course and the breakthrough, Mahler gradually concretizes it, and so mediates it, through the internal structure of his compositions (Mahler 9).

This is the story Adorno’s opening chapter tells, the story of Mahler’s oeuvre as it develops from symphony to symphony, a story that begins in hope that redemptive powers—of art, of affect, of sympathy with the downtrodden and the impotent—can achieve a “breakthrough” that will intervene in “the course of the world” (i.e., ideology, repetition, “fate”) in “Messianic” fashion (Mahler 6). This hope animates Mahler’s first four symphonies; but with the Fifth, a new sense of fatality and despair—of the futility and the limitations of musical mastery itself—enter Mahler’s dialectic (Mahler 11), and the hopes of the younger Mahler’s work now commence to take on the tinctures of Adorno’s chronic thematization of “the broken promise.” In Adorno’s telling, this story turns on the Fifth Symphony, in which a crucial “breakthrough” fanfare, rather than renewing the (so to speak) naive “breakthrough” so potent in the earlier symphonies, enacts, as if conscious of it for the first time, the becoming-aesthetic—merely “aesthetic”—of this hitherto so much more-than-aesthetic gesture. Here the attempted breakthrough only reveals the impossibility of the possible even in the midst of mastery. The apparition is marred by appearances. What ought to be entirely itself bears the mark of consolation and exhortation: reassurance from something not present. Impotence attends manifested power; were it the promised and no longer the promise it would not need to assert itself as power.
Nevertheless, symphonies Five through Nine do not altogether despair: Adorno finds in them, and praises, accents of hope that persist despite, and beside, full acknowledgement of the “the course of the world” that stands in antithesis to the ethos of “breakthrough”—and so, in the Fifth Symphony, and prophetically for the rest of Mahler’s work,

The end has not been achieved. The utopian identity of art and reality has foundered. But it is to this failure that Mahler’s music henceforth addresses itself, no less earnestly in its technical progress than in its disenchancing experience. The artistic obligation that occasioned his aversion to the program constrains him to elaborate the breakthrough in strictly musical terms, to shed his naïve hostility to art, until the breakthrough itself becomes an intrinsic element of form. However, his concept is not inviolable. It is in the logic of composition to criticize what it seeks to represent; the more achieved the work, the poorer grows hope, for hope seeks to transcend the finitude of the harmoniously self-sufficient work. Something of this dialectic is present in all that is called maturity, unqualified praise of which is always corruptible by resignation. This is the affliction of aesthetic judgment. Through the insufficiency of the successful work the insufficient one, condemned by that judgment, becomes significant (Mahler 11-12).

The paradox, or dialectic of the aesthetic: to the extent that the aesthetic will-to-“harmonious self-sufficiency” succeeds, the aesthetic becomes a “finitude” that will require a “breakthrough” to transcend, except that by then “breakthrough” itself will have been aestheticized—routinized or domesticated—into a “strictly musical” effect, a mere “intrinsic element of form.” Aesthetic “success” becomes a kind of failure, to be transcended only by a renunciation of artistic mastery that must then appear as a kind of failure, to be redeemed, if at all, in the failure having been deliberate: a protest against the familiarizations of “aesthetic judgment.”

But lest we be detained by Adorno’s account here of this success/failure dialectic, let us return to the larger point, which is that Adorno stages all of this narratively, as a story that he has here
appointed himself to tell, this very story we are reading, in which narrative figures as both a principle theme and as, itself, a narrative actant. This is emphatically not a half-conscious default to a storytelling mode. In *Mahler* Adorno explicitly thematizes, “makes thematic,” the issue of narrative and of what is at stake in it. Adorno identifies as “essential genres in [Mahler's] idea of form” (*Mahler* 1) the narrative, and narrative-making “categories” (41, 44) of “breakthrough,” “suspension,” and “fulfillment”; elsewhere in the book, further elaborations of these basic “categories” (e.g., “rupture” [5], “collapse” [45], “intervening from outside” [5]) abound. And frequently the various actants of the story Adorno tells act as subjects of the verb par excellence of narrative, “become”—e.g., in the book's first paragraph: “Instead of illustrating ideas, [Mahler's symphonies] are destined concretely to become the idea” (4). The book's third chapter, called “Characters,” urges that Mahler's musical forms be seen as just such actants—“characters”—conferring on musical “form” itself a kind of (narrative) “agency” (cf. what Adorno elsewhere calls “the agency of form” [Notes 114]). The next chapter of the book is called “Novel,” as in the literary genre, and argues that Mahler's work is novel-like in making itself from the bottom, rather than on the top-down model of the compositional practice of Beethoven. In part this seems an opportunity granted by a certain decadence in the symphonic form itself; Mahler's brilliance (says Adorno) was to achieve a liberty from precedent conventions of sonata form akin to that of the breakout of the novel from the stylized conventions of romance:

Immediate and mediated elements are coupled because the symphonic form no longer guarantees musical meaning, both as a compelling set of relationships and as a repository of truth, and because the form must seek that meaning. From a kind of basic musical existence, popular music, are to be derived the mediations by which alone existence is justified as meaningful.

In other words, Mahler's refusal to assume any “justification” *a priori* aligns him with materialism: “Thus, in historical-philosophical terms, Mahler's form approaches that of the novel” (*Mahler* 61). Adorno promptly adduces “the novel of novels, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*” —a first indication that Adorno here restores to the novel as a genre all the heroic (and utopian) credit of the golden age of
19th-century “realism,” and in terms that Georg Lukács himself could endorse. The novel figures here as the genre that escapes genre, the literary instrument for kinds of exploration whose findings won’t be, cannot be, given in advance. It is a commitment to discovering the novum, the not already-known, that is, so to speak, meta- to mere narration:

It is not that the music wants to narrate, but that the composer wants to make music in the way that others narrate. By analogy with philosophical terminology this attitude would be called nominalist. The movement of the philosophical concepts begins from the bottom … with the facts of experience … instead of composing from above, from an ontology of forms [as does, e.g., Beethoven]. To this extent Mahler works decisively toward the abolition of tradition. At the bottom of the musical novel form lies an aversion that must have been felt long before Mahler, but that he was the first not to repress. It is an aversion to knowing in advance how the music continues. Knowing it offends musical intelligence, spiritual nervousness, Mahlerian impatience (Mahler 62).

In short, “knowing in advance how the music continues” rules out in advance, the novum, the “new,” the not already known: that which can be reached only through breakthrough” and “rupture,” which is to say, everything whose advent or event can be conceptualized, let alone realized, only narratively, in before-and-after terms. And clearly the passage to that future novum is modeled in Mahler’s Utopian “breakthrough.”

An index of Adorno’s enthusiasm for Mahler here is that it can make him seem to derogate from two of his “classical” idols, Beethoven and Schoenberg. But the chronology is telling here: Mahler, as a “materialist” composer of what Adorno calls “novel symphonies” is both preceded and followed by “classical” composers, Beethoven and Schoenberg, whose work is (as we’ll see in a moment) “incapable” of Mahler’s drama of “breakthrough” and “rupture” because their “classical” ethos of composition obeys the “economic principle” of bourgeois “equivalence exchange.” That reified and reifying “classicist” musical practice, writes Adorno, “is consigned to the past by Mahler” (Mahler 14)—but only temporarily, it seems, since the sequel is the
great modernist “classicist,” Schoenberg. The 20th century “progressed”
to utter regression, in ways the non-narrative faux-narrativity of
_Dialectic of Enlightenment_ attempts to enact. As would, in Adorno’s
account, the compositional closed systems of Schoenberg, the
“dialectical composer,” Adorno calls him, whose achievement is that
“he brings dialectics to a halt” (_Philosophy_ 124). (Schoenberg
epitomizes that non- or anti- narrative ethos Adorno poses as the only
possible response to the condition of “dialectics at a standstill.”)

**NARRATIVE, MUSIC, PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY**

Mahler’s “novel symphonies,” in short, intervene between the
closed (non-narrative) compositional systems of Beethoven before him,
and of Schoenberg after him. In _Mahler_, Adorno improvises a
“historical-philosophical” scheme—a narrative constellation, we might
say—that sets Mahler in relation not only to these “classicist” composers,
but also aligns the resulting array with masters and master themes (e.g.,
Kant and “philosophical idealism”) in philosophy and the philosophy
of history. When Adorno says that “In historical-philosophical terms,
Mahler’s form approaches that of the novel” (_Mahler_ 61), he is
preparing a “historical-philosophical” constellation—Kant, Beethoven,
the novel, Schoenberg—in which everything is the context for
everything else, in whose arrangement each element illuminates all of
the others. Speaking as a non-philosopher, I will admit that among the
very most difficult parts of Adorno’s project for me to digest is his
career-long attempt to coordinate or constellate philosophy and music.
His effort to find the ozone where the two domains interfuse produces
some of his most stratospheric and impenetrable writing, and I often
simply cannot follow his impassioned pursuit of the senses in which
each of these two activities could be said to be the other by other
means. In _Mahler_, Adorno’s efforts in this regard yield to my
understanding as almost none of his other such efforts do—perhaps
because, again, of the book’s narrative habitus: here, the dialectic of
music and philosophy is rendered as a story, integrating to its
“philosophy” as well another (more familiar, and perhaps
familiarizing) art form, the novel. These passages offer a historical-
philosophical motivation for Adorno’s own practice at large, as well as
themselves enacting a narrative illustrating Adorno’s historical-
philosophical point.
The first of the two principle passages I will consider comes early, in the book's first chapter. Adorno is explaining that even as early as the First Symphony, Mahler's art “reveals but does not resolve the tensions” within the music—a practice that departs from the totalizing compositional habitus of Beethoven in which all elements are integrated, reconciled, “harmonized.” Beethoven thus elaborates a structure; his “development” is not a narrative development. Beethoven's compositions are temporal, but (so to speak) “as if” synchronic. Mahler's musical unfoldings are narrative, and Mahler thus achieves a novum whose novelty—whose “breakthrough”—enacts itself diachronically, in the unfoldment of something unforeseen at the outset, something not a compositional donnée from the start:

The recapitulation after the breakthrough cannot be the simple recapitulation formally required. The return that breakthrough evokes must be its result: something new. To prepare for this musically, a new theme is evolved in the development ... and then ... it dominates the later development to emerge retro-spectively, as it were, at the return of the tonic, as the main theme which, at the time, it never was ...

Viennese classicism was incapable of this antithesis, as was any musical attitude to which the concept of philosophical idealism could be applied. For Beethoven's mighty logic, music composed itself as a seamless identity, an analytical judgment. The philosophy informing such music began, at its Hegelian apogee, to feel the spur of the new idea. In a note ... in [Hegel's] Science of Logic, the grounds of scientific thought ... are criticized for not moving “off the spot,” amounting to tautologies [cf. this theme in Dialectic of Enlightenment] ... If music indeed has more in common with dialectical than with discursive logic it seeks in [Mahler] to attain what philosophy [i.e., Kant, and more successfully, more narratively, Hegel] strives with Sisyphean labors to wrest from traditional thought, from concepts hardened to a rigid identity. [Mahler's] Utopia is the forward motion of the past and the not-yet-past in becoming. As it was for Hegel in his critique of the principle of identity,
truth for Mahler is the Other [i.e., the non-identical] …
To be is to have become, as against merely becoming. The economic principle of traditional music, however, its kind of determination, exhausts itself in exchanging one thing for another, leaving nothing behind. It “comes out” but has no outcome. Anything new that it cannot assimilate it shuns. Seen in this way even great music before Mahler [i.e., even Beethoven] was tautological. Its correctness was that of a system without contradictions. It is consigned to the past by Mahler (Mahler 13-4).

Just as Hegel broaches the “new idea” by narrativizing Kant, and moving beyond his (merely) “analytical judgments,” Mahler achieves a dynamic that departs from Beethoven insofar as the development of the whole is not given in advance, implicit in the opening themes, but achieves breakthrough and rupture, such that new themes incite a reevaluation, well into the piece, of just what it was the opening movements portended in the first place. “Philosophical idealism,” in making mind the origin of everything, reinvents the apparatus of Platonic “realism” so as to reinscribe its “discursive” or “analytic” (not “dialectical”) “logic” in which the law of non-contradiction reigns supreme, in which the novum that cannot be assimilated is shunned, tensions or contradictions are repressed or falsely resolved, and the labor of thought devolves into tautology. If the mind originates all, then all development is in some sense “known” (if only to God) in advance. Hegel’s historicized inversion of all this, in which Absolute knowledge is not the arché but the telos, models a process in which there is scope for the genuinely “new” to appear, in successive unfoldments.

Hegel thus anticipates, and Mahler enacts in music, the particular World-historical mission whose principle agent or actant is the novel, the narrative art form par excellence. As we have seen, Mahler composes “from the bottom … instead of composing from above, from an ontology of forms”; like the novel itself, Mahler’s “musical novel form” evinces a “nominalism, which no longer permits any harmonious synthesis with a preconceived totality” (Mahler 62). Beethoven’s compositional practice of “development”—an epitome of “composing from above, from an ontology of forms”—enacts sheer structure (“discursive logic”), setting whole and part, universal and particular, in necessary relations that are temporal, but without being
narrative. (I am here summarizing a central premise running throughout Adorno’s *Beethoven*). Adorno does suggest, however, that at the very end of his career, in the late quartets, Beethoven anticipates something like the “nominalist” and “materialist” narrative temporality of the novel and of Mahler’s “musical novel form”; Adorno passes directly from that observation to a “historical-philosophical” assimilation of the novel to Mahler and to Nietzsche:

What induced [Beethoven], after the grandiosely retrospective first movement of the ninth Symphony, to write the last quartets may not have been entirely different from the obscure instinct that motivated Mahler long before the years of his mastery: he was clearly profoundly impressed by the late Beethoven, above all by op. 135. Since Kant and Beethoven, German philosophy and music had been a single system. What it could not embrace, its corrective, took refuge in literature: the novel ... until the category of life, etiolated as *Bildung* and usually reactionary, also became assimilable to philosophy around the turn of the century. In contrast, the originality of Mahler’s music takes up Nietzsche’s insight that the system and its seamless unity, its appearance of reconciliation, is dishonest. His music takes issue with extensive life, plunges with closed eyes into time, yet without installing life as a substitute metaphysics [as in Schopenhauer and Wagner], in parallel to the objective tendency of the novel. His potential to do so derived from the partly pre-bourgeois feudal, partly Josephinistically skeptical Austrian air, untouched by German idealism, while symphonic integrity was still present enough to protect him from an attitude to form that made concessions to a weakly atomistic mode of listening. ... In the productive conflict of the contradictory elements his art flourishes. That is why it is so foolish to patronize him as a composer caught between ages. (*Mahler* 64-5)

A few pages on Adorno remembers Mahler’s investment in Dostoevsky (*Mahler* 69); cites Balzac and Scott as pioneers of the nominalist/
materialist ethos Mahler shares with the novel (Mahler 71); and in a
dozen or so scattered references passim, some explicit, some implicit,
Adorno assimilates Mahler to his other great utopian favorite, Proust
(see especially Mahler 145-7). But the “classicist” ethos of composition
returns, and Mahler’s Dostoevskian, Nietzschean, Proustian experiment
is itself left behind, as if a mere interlude in a still-prevailing Cartesian
stasis:

The classical idea of the symphony takes for granted a
definite closed multiplicity just as Aristotelian poetics
assumes the three unities. A theme appearing as
absolutely new offends its economic principle, that of
reducing all elements to a minimum of postulates, an
axiom of completeness that music has made as much
its own as have systems of knowledge since Descartes’s
Discours de la méthode. Unforeseen thematic com-
ponents destroy the fiction that music is a pure tissue
of deductions, in which everything that happens
follows with unambiguous necessity. In this, too,
Schoenberg and his school were truer to the classical
ideal ... than was Mahler. ... [Whereas in the
“classical”] the precedence of the whole over the parts
is the uncontested priority of becoming over being ... in
Mahler, conversely, the thematic figure is no more
indifferent to the symphonic flow than are the
characters in a novel to the dimension of time within
which they act. ... Time passes into [Mahler’s]
characters and changes them as empirical time alters
faces ... [whereas the classical symphony] beguiles
time by converting it into spirit ... (Mahler 71-2)

Adorno here elaborates, too lengthily to quote, a rich meditation on
time, narrative, and “duration” versus non-narrative temporality.
(“[Mahler’s novel symphony] enjoys time to the full, abandons itself to
it, seeks to make physically measurable time into living duration.
Duration is in itself the imago of meaning ...” [Mahler 73]) But our
point here was to exhibit Adorno lifting his ban on the utopian, noting
its coincidence with his lifting of the ban on narrative. The point about
Schoenberg isn’t of course, that Schoenberg could have composed in
Mahler’s fashion and failed to; it is that in Schoenberg’s historical
moment, the utopian possibility had passed, and now composers must
seek new ways to make the devices and usages of “classical”
composition enact a (critical) “dialectical mimesis” of bourgeois
culture's “dialectics at a standstill.” Schoenberg's example is of course
exemplary for Adorno himself; his unique resort to narrative gestures in
Mahler constitutes its own kind of homage to what he regards as
Mahler's unique “breakthrough” achievement. After Auschwitz and
Hiroshima, evocations of “utopia” seem especially questionable,
especially liable to pose “false consolations,” “imaginary solutions to
real contradictions.” Adorno's homage, late in life, to Mahler, however,
implicitly dares to conjure utopian hope as at least a memory, and a
still-stirring image of what might yet be: at once an acknowledgement,
one more time, of the taboo against utopia, and a return to a
still-credible instance of its transgression.

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INTRODUCTION: TRANSGRESSION, PEDAGOGY, AND POPULAR CULTURE

We begin this paper with the assumption that transgression for the sake of transgression is both empty of meaning and dangerous in consequences. That is to say, transgression with the sole intent of “having fun,” “being funny,” or “being cool” takes away the very power of the “transgressive” act. Similarly, transgression being “performed” only when/if it feels comfortable, can also have a vacuous effect. However, as we will discuss below, uncritical acts of “transgression” are potentially hurtful not only for the “transgressor” him/herself, but for those associated with the act of transgression as well. For this discussion we are characterizing transgression as a critical social project aimed at contesting/challenging/overcoming established norms or expectations (at the very least), and living conditions (at the very most).

As teachers, we function explicitly within the realm of cultural work. Our attempts to engage students are constructed of specific modes of textual, verbal, and visual practices, which we hope will provoke particular forms of communication, comprehension and interest. Building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passerson, who offer the idea of symbolic violence as “power which manages to impose meanings and to impose as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu and Passerson 4), we use the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards and 2004 Super Bowl to not only explore the conceptualization of transgression and disruption within recent culture wars, but how, in these specific instances, the violation of cultural norms and hegemonic values serves the interest of status quo, ultimately reinforcing racial and gendered otherness.

Thus, building on the work of Henry Giroux, who challenges scholars to examine the ways in which popular culture teaches race,
gender, nation, and a range of identities, and the work of Abigail Solomon Godeau, whose *Photography at the Dock* explores the textual and subtextual dimensions of photos, our examination of the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards and 2004 Super Bowl seeks to “understand how politics is inscribed within the form and act of representing itself” (Giroux 94). Given the role of popular culture as an agent of socialization and as a reproducer of ideologies involving race, gender, sexuality and nation, a pedagogy of Ethnic Studies must first acknowledge and second contest the “wisdom” our students acquire by their constant consumption of popular culture.

To fully understand the racial/gendered/heterosexual melodramas unfolding in popular culture, it is critical to examine issues of power. That is, image and representation must be understood beyond stereotypes and into the ways in which cultural texts affirm or potentially challenge dominant racial ideologies. For instance, in his study of material objects, such as cookie jars and salt and pepper shakers, Steven Dubin examines the ways in which popular culture continues to “represent black people in a degrading, stereotypical manner—as subservient, powerless and often with gross caricature features” (123). Repelling structural approaches that reduce examining popular cultural artifacts to a purely textual exercise, Dubin situates his discussion of material culture within structures of power and widespread violence. We would like to extend Dubin’s discussion to include popular culture among the material culture situated in structures of power and violence.

Because of its adverse history of race, gender, sexual and class relations, popular culture in the United States has created a space for the reproduction of societal ideologies. As Douglas Kellner tells us: “the artifacts of media culture are thus not innocent entertainment, but are thoroughly ideological artifacts bound up with political rhetoric, struggles, agendas, and policies” (93). Ideologies notwithstanding, we recognize that popular culture in the US has been historically replete of efforts to transgress established ideologies. In fact, it could be argued that the history of popular culture in the 20th century was constructed, to an extent, by consistent efforts to transgress racial, class, political, gender, and sexual barriers. Indeed, meaningful acts of transgression can serve as a tool for substantive and even progressive social change. One powerful example would be the music developed during the Civil Rights movement in the US in the 1960s, and similarly, the music
developed during the anti-war movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Songs like “Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” (by James Brown) and “The Revolution will not be Televised” (by Gil Scott-Heron), for instance, captured the sentiment of the former, while Bob Dylan’s “The Times They are A-Changin’” and John Lennon’s “Imagine” are examples of the latter, evidencing popular culture’s torrid flirtation with social change.

Similarly, in the last decade or so, we have witnessed an overwhelming number of efforts to contest established social norms/rules in US popular culture itself. Primetime (network and cable) TV alone has provided us with an array of these efforts when it comes to sexuality: from the first lesbian wedding (Friends—NBC), the first openly gay black male character on a show (Spin City—ABC) and the first sitcom led by a lesbian character (Ellen—ABC), to having the apppellative “queer” in the title of a show (Queer as Folk—SHOWTIME, and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy—BRAVO) in more recent years. We have also seen a number of “black shows” where the main characters are productive individuals without necessarily behaving like white folks in black face (The Bernie Mac Show—Fox, The Tracy Morgan Show—Fox, Eve—UPN, etc.), as well as the first situational comedy with an overwhelming Latino cast (The George Lopez Show—ABC), not to mention the first black President of the United States (24—Fox). One can argue that during the last decade, US primetime TV has seen it all. Our students actually use these examples to “educate” us about how “things are getting better” for folks of color. The product of an “I’m not a racist,” and a purported colorblind mentality, our students interpret the proliferation of black, Latino, and gay characters and shows as an indication that these groups are progressing in US society, and thus, are being more accepted (or perhaps, vice versa, that since these groups are being treated more fairly and equally in US society, they are also being represented in television). Regardless of the direction in which the argument is made, the bottom line for our students is that change has taken place, and change is always good. For them, change is also always transgressive.

In this paper, we examine by way of television and with a critical eye, the underlying messages we find in popular culture. Moreover, we argue that events/acts that can be seen as transgressive on the surface are actually reproducing ideologies that are racist, sexist, and homophobic at a deeper level. We call these acts “pop trans-
gression,” for in the end, they: (1) do not have a purpose beyond the act itself (beyond having fun, beyond their “shock value”), and/or (2) are performed exclusively under comfortable circumstances. We have also noticed that in many cases profuse public apologies, explanations, and statements of contrition follow these performances/ events, subtracting from the value the performance may have had as a transgressive act in the first place, and reproducing ideologies that deem minoritized groups in racist, sexist, and homophobic ways. Needless to say, “pop transgression” carries regressive consequences.

These consequences derived from “pop transgressive” acts are particularly meaningful (and even painful) for minoritized groups, for they serve as a latch for our white supremacist and heterosexist society to hold onto, as a latch for a society that perpetuates ideologies of racial and sexual supremacy. In order to illustrate these points, we will discuss two relatively recent “pop transgressive” acts: the Madonna-Spears-Aguilera-Elliot performance at the August 2003 MTV Video Music Awards ceremony and the Jackson-Timberlake performance at the February 2004 Superbowl halftime show. Something to keep in mind is that we treat these performances not necessarily as separate events, but as two related instances of the pervasiveness of vacuous “transgressive” practices and their role in perpetuating oppressive ideologies.

OF GOOD GIRLS DOING BAD THINGS: THE VMA PERFORMANCE

Superficially, the performance by four contemporary female icons of popular music in the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards may perhaps be seen as earth shattering, for we are talking about four women (Cristina Aguilera, Missy Elliot, Madonna, and Britney Spears) “making history” in a traditionally male-dominated industry. The performance’s “transgression” can be seen as more significant when we take into consideration that it defied gender roles and expectations when Madonna and Elliot both dressed as grooms (or perhaps as groom and best man?), while Aguilera and Spears dressed in bridal gowns, insinuating with their four-woman performance a kind of same-sex wedding ceremony. The idea of a marriage ceremony was highlighted by other elements of the performance. For instance, two flower girls preceded Britney Spears, who opened the act with a rendition of Madonna’s “Like a Virgin” from the top of a gigantic
wedding cake in the middle of the stage. Aguilera joined her after the sound of wedding bells, and when they finished their (re)interpretation, a wedding march announced Madonna’s emergence out of the wedding cake in her groom attire, singing “Hollywood,” one of her new songs. Spears and Aguilera then joined Madonna in the rendition of the song, while playfully flirting and dancing with her, as if celebrating their three-way wedding. At one point Madonna even slid a garter from Aguilera’s thigh, just as grooms do after a wedding ceremony.

The playful flirting we saw at the MTV Video Music Awards between brides Spears and Aguilera, and groom Madonna was, in effect, an interesting tweaking of gender roles and societal expectations about marriage (which becomes especially meaningful within the context of a society fiercely debating same-sex marriages and civil unions). This point was highlighted when Madonna French-kissed Spears (first) and Aguilera (second), in what has become one of the most infamous “stunts” in MTV’s primetime history. On the surface, and given this country’s climate involving the rights and visibility of same-sex couples in recent years, it could be argued that the mere allusion to a same-sex anything (let alone a same-sex wedding—albeit “fake,” and a not-so-fake same-sex kiss) was highly transgressive. However, that was the extent of the pop transgression that night.

It is important to point out that none of the things we just discussed about the Aguilera-Elliot-Madonna-Spears performance involving a same-sex union theme were noted by the media; except, of course, the kiss between Madonna and Spears. Two blond women kissing as part of a performance was, apparently, more than the media and the US public could handle, overshadowing everything else that happened that night. Interestingly, the kiss between then-brunette Aguilera and Madonna went almost unnoticed, as it did not make it to the media mill, at least, not with the same intensity as the kiss between Spears and Madonna. In fact, the video is listed on the MTV website as the “Madonna Britney Spears Performance.”

The Madonna-Spears-Aguilera-Elliot performance ended with the four women singing the following lines from Madonna’s song “Hollywood”: “Music stations always play the same songs/ We are bored with the concept of right and wrong.” The last statement, halfheartedly shouted by the performers, is of utmost importance in this discussion as it gets to the core of transgression for the sake of
transgression (or “pop transgression”). In this case, boredom explained the “trans” attire, the same-sex flirting, the mocked same-sex wedding, and the same-sex kiss. They were “bored” (not outraged, not hurt, not moved to action, just bored) with the rules that determine what is right and what is wrong. Is that how we (the public) were supposed to interpret the performance? As their own personal way of dealing with the boredom of rules? And then what? An out-of-the-ordinary performance for the sake of “boredom” allowed the women to entertain the audience in a comfortable environment (weird things are supposed to happen on the MTV Video Music Awards, after all) without having to worry about things such as social and political change. In other words, their heterosexuality, the location of the class, and the induced pleasure meant that performance provided no transgression, ultimately validating dominant norms and expectations of white female (homo) sexuality. Sarah Warn acknowledges the progressive potential of the controversial kiss, stating “It probably won’t change anyone’s minds overnight, but it does (briefly) raise lesbian sexuality to a new level of visibility in a way that may ultimately benefit those of us for whom lesbian sexuality is not just a performance.” Warn, nevertheless, does not fail to acknowledge the role of celebrity (race, gender, class) privilege in the display: “If it had actually been lesbian or bisexual women kissing on national television, it would have been even more powerful – but then, you’d be hard pressed to find any out lesbian pop stars with the collective clout of Madonna, Britney and Christina, either.”

We, however, don’t see the heterosexuality of these women as inconsequential, thereby failing to normalize lesbian sexuality, but instead reifying hegemonic visions of lesbian fetish, masculine visions (and pleasure) of white lesbians. In the end, any potential that the performance could have had for sending a message about hermetic ideologies involving race (relations), gender (roles), and sexuality, was drowned by the self-absorbed plea for attention. We must remember that in the end, when it comes to same-sex unions, gays and lesbians are not asking for state-acknowledgement of their relationships out of boredom, but out of a need to have their families recognized and protected by the state. A few months after her performance, Madonna herself recognized that rebelling for the sake of rebelling is not helping anyone. “The stance of a rebel is, ‘I don’t care what you think.’ But if it’s just for the sake of upsetting the apple cart, you are not really helping people,” notes Warn, “You turn the apple cart over and then
what? Then everyone’s looking at an apple cart that’s turned over and they’re like, well, now what do I do?” (“Demure Diva”).

**OF WARDROBE MALFUNCTIONINGS: THE 2004 SUPER BOWL HALFTIME**

During the 2004 Super Bowl half time show, Janet Jackson (along with Justin Timberlake and their overseers) shocked America with what appeared to be a transgression of American sports and popular culture. At the conclusion of their performance, which included a series of sexual lyrics and choreography, Timberlake reached across Jackson and removed the molded right cup of Jackson’s bustier, revealing most of her bare breast, except for a starburst-shaped covering held in place by a nipple piercing. Their finale, later described as a “wardrobe malfunction,” not only sparked the intended interest and coverage, but days of debate and dialogue about the transgression of society’s standards within today’s world of popular culture.

**OUTRAGE AND CONDEMNATION TO THE RESCUE: POST SUPER BOWL REACTIONS**

Before the Patriots kicked off in the second half, the controversy surrounding “breast gate” had exploded on the Internet, on the airwaves, in newspapers, and within every political circle. Regardless of ideology and political orientation, the sight of Janet Jackson’s partially covered breast prompted outrage throughout the nation. Carson Daly, an MTV VJ who’s no virgin to selling sexuality on television, captured the spirit of the moment: “This particular event might be, for the moment, the straw that broke the camel’s back on the patience of the audience” (“Jackson Stunt”). Others were not so diplomatic, expressing their outrage and disgust for the performance, Janet Jackson (rarely for Justin Timberlake), MTV, CBS, and popular culture in general. Daniel Weiss, Media and Sexuality Analyst for Focus on the Family, one of the leading voices within these ongoing (racialized) culture wars, expressed his outrage in the strongest possible terms: “No child—or adult—should be assaulted by such a profane and indecent performance. It was nothing more than a high-tech striptease foisted on tens of millions of unsuspecting Americans” (“Family Groups”). Others, equally angered by ubiquitous displays of
sexuality beyond Janet’s breast, demanded accountability and action from Michael Powell and the Federal Communications Commission (“FCC Chair”). Tony Perkins, President of the Family Research Council, another soldier within this reactionary army, called for immediate action in a letter to Powell, head of the FCC: “CBS would do well to adhere to the adage: If you sleep with dogs you’ll get fleas. I am sure there is a lot of scratching going on at CBS today. We’re glad the FCC has thrown a flag on the half-time show, but it should not take long for the agency to determine that rules were broken, and that fines are necessary” (“Family Groups”). One theme that played through the spectrum of reactions, regardless of political ideology or representative constituency, was how the halftime show represented an assault on America’s children. The outrage targeted kids and the potential dangers that Janet Jackson’s breast posed to young children; to ignore the issue was to ignore the welfare of children. Robert Knight, president of Concerned Women for America, captured the essence of this discourse: “It’s impossible for CBS to scramble its way out of this, and we are encouraged to see the FCC taking immediate action to investigate. Even if the Jackson stunt was a surprise addition, the network should be held responsible for its inability to protect the innocence of millions of kids and teens during TV’s biggest night” (“Family Groups”).

The question of its impact on kids is central to this discourse, and a larger debate about popular culture. In answering a chatter’s claim that the halftime show was no worse than Temptation Island, Paradise Hotel, or half the shows on television, another chatter placed kids front and center: “The difference about the Janet & Justin stunt is thousands of children were watching the game. I am not surprised by the inappropriate acts which are conducted on other shows ... however, I do have the ultimate control knowing this upfront. Their actions were inappropriate at the Super Bowl” (“What’s Wrong”). As others described the event as an assault on family values, or a pollutant of a “cozy family gathering” (Keenan) necessitating action to “protect young people against indecency,” chatters and commentators reduced the entire halftime show to Janet Jackson as an assailant against children.

Of equal importance in the discourse of outrage was the corruption of an American institution: the Super Bowl. The Super Bowl is not merely an American sporting event, but a symbol of American identity; it is a day in which families gather around the television to
celebrate, as if it was a national accomplishment. At least, this is the line offered by the dominant media. More importantly, the Super Bowl has become one of America’s most powerful global advertisements. From the commercials to the displays of military prowess, the Super Bowl offers the world a glimpse of the greatness of America. The alleged “wardrobe malfunction” did not fit within America’s desired advertising plan. Amid the War on Terror and an effort to spread further American values (and products) around the globe, Janet Jackson’s breast sent the wrong message about America. Both the sanctity of the Super Bowl and the penetration of black female sexuality into this “American” space proved to be too great a threat, prompting much debate and calls for surveillance.

Out of all the reactions, that of Michael Powell best embodies the nature of America’s public outrage. He decried the showing of Janet Jackson’s breast during the Super Bowl halftime show as “a classless, crass and deplorable stunt.” In a quickly released statement, Powell protested:

I am outraged at what I saw during the halftime show of the Super Bowl. Like millions of Americans, my family and I gathered around the television for a celebration. Instead, that celebration was tainted by a classless, crass and deplorable stunt. Our nation’s children, parents and citizens deserve better. I have instructed the commission to open an immediate investigation into last night’s broadcast.

Focusing on family and values, Powell, like much of the discourse, constructed the Halftime show, particularly the exposure of Janet Jackson’s breast, reduced the event to a transgressive assault on his family and the rest of America.

“EATING THE OTHER”

From the Internet, the political podium, airwaves, and America’s newspapers, it was clear that the nation was outraged, appalled, disgusted, and almost dumbfounded by that night’s event. Yet, America could not get enough of Janet Jackson’s bare black breast. “The now infamous ‘wardrobe malfunction’ has proven to be the most searched event in the history of the Internet,” reported Aaron
Schatz, who compiles a daily list of top searches for Lycos.com. The day after the Super Bowl, Jackson received sixty times as many searches as the Paris Hilton sex tape, and eighty times as many as Britney Spears. Similarly, at Yahoo.com, Jackson’s performance proved to be a record-setter as well, amassing nearly twenty percent of all terms searched on the site, with the next closest term being “the super bowl,” which garnered 2.7 percent; TiVo reported that the halftime show was the most recorded show in its history. Despite the aura of anger, Americans still yearned to get a peek at this salacious footage by any means necessary (Poniewozik).

Reflecting both love and contempt, and a desire to consume and police this black woman’s body, the immediate reaction reflects longstanding discourse surrounding black female sexuality, putting into question the presumption of this being a transgressive act that elicited both a frenzy generated by those seeking pleasure and those motivated by a moral panic. As Cornel West argues, “Americans are obsessed with sex and fearful of black sexuality.” This observation was no more evident than in the days following the performance, which saw a public flogging of Jackson, simultaneous to a campaign of peeping at her beautiful black breast. Carla Williams, co-author of “The Black Female Body,” describes the event in powerful terms:

Black women’s breasts, their bodies and their sexuality remain the great taboo and American culture can deny it or exaggerate it, but God forbid we actually consider the history of their bodies over which, starting with slavery, they have had little control, particularly in how they’ve been represented. In photography—the Super Bowl’s one-second peep show has instantly become a series of flipbook-like still photographs freely available for download—there are numerous precedents to help understand why a breast isn’t just a breast when race is involved (“Body Baggage”).

Before re-centering the interplay between race, gender, and sexuality within both the performance and the subsequent reaction to the Super Bowl halftime show, we want to highlight those cultural (amateur and professional) critics that articulated as much outrage toward the reaction as the actual performance. While less powerful and relatively silent, the frustrations of those demanding action provides insight into
this discourse beyond the reactionary comments offered above, demonstrating the absence of transgression here—the presence of a moral panic and articulations of fear do not necessitate transgression. The oppositional voices sounding off against the hegemonic reaction of outrage tended to focus on its hypocrisy. Citing the ubiquitous levels of sexual content on television, from *ER* and *Sex and the City* to *Temptation Island*, *The Real World* and a host of dating shows, some critics blasted executives and television critics for feigning shock and outrage. Referring to the diminished clothing of NFL cheerleaders, a Super Bowl commercial in which a horse farted in a woman’s face, and the sexual content throughout prime time television, James Poniewozik identified the halftime performance as just another example of today’s world of popular culture (73-74). By questioning the authenticity and honesty of the outrage and shock emanating from corporate partners in the halftime show, Poniewozik and others described the event and reaction as much ado about nothing.

Yet critics like Poniewozik describe this overreaction without any reference to the interplay of race, gender and sexuality. The condemnation of both Janet Jackson (and her breast) and the halftime performance reflects the ways in which race and gender operate within public discourses and texts. One notable exception was a posting on the *Mother Jones* website that analyzed how discourses of race, gender and sexuality worked together in reactions that denounced Janet. The chatter states, “Throughout American history there’s always been a taboo of interracial sexuality, i.e., between African Americans and white people” (“Discussion Forum”). The taboo of interracial sexual relations is exemplified by the historic rape of black women by white men, and the peculiar positioning of black sexuality within the popular, white American psyche: it is ok to look, but not touch. “African American sexuality is okay and acceptable when the races don’t mix sexually on television or in the movies” (“Discussion Forum”). Taking inspiration from this post and the writings of Carla Williams, as well as the works of bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and others, the next section explores how race, gender and sexuality affected the reaction, as well as how these social/cultural realities influence our understanding of this racial melodrama, all of which points to how this appearance of a moral violation ultimately reified dominant conventions and values.
POLICING BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY

In her book *Black Looks*, bell hooks offers a powerful reading of the American marketplace, demonstrating how the history of black representation and inclusion within popular culture is a story of hyper-sexualization and fetish, of contempt and surveillance, and of “selling hot black pussy.” Moreover, hooks argues that the majority of these popular images reify longstanding images of black female sexuality that once served to justify slavery and explain away rape, and now work in concert with larger discourses on poverty, criminality and inequality:

As we enter the dessert place, they all burst into laughter and point to a row of gigantic chocolate breasts complete with nipples—huge edible tits. They think this is a delicious idea—seeing no connection between this racialized image and the racism expressed in the entry way. Living in a world where white folks are no longer nursed and nurtured primarily by black female caretakers they do not look at these symbolic breasts and consciously think about ‘mammies.’ They no not see this representation of chocolate breasts as a sign of displaced long for a racist past when the bodies of black women were commodities available to anyone white who could pay the price. (61-62)

Through both the criminal justice system and popular culture, black women are constructed as hypersexual, without morals, and un-trustworthy; images and narratives leave “their honesty in question and their word discarded” (Alexander 3-5).

As evident in the performance itself, in which Justin Timberlake sings, “Gotta have you naked before the end of this song,” as Jackson seductively dances around the stage, black women exist for the sexual pleasure and imagination of white men. This, and other cultural/racial projects, demonstrate that “sex between a black woman and white man is almost always prompted by her insatiable sexuality ... her erotic proclivities” (Carby 263). Moreover, the post-show discourse that located blame and ownership on Jackson, in that she orchestrated the hypersexual act of revealing her breast, further reiterates the hegemony of a hypersexual black woman’s body and her “insatiable sexuality and erotic proclivities.” In this sense, the perfor-
mative display of Janet Jackson’s single breast, and the discursive articulations of dismay and contempt, reflect various racial projects, where racial meanings are inhabited, disseminated, and transformed by hegemonic or common sense ideas of race, gender, and sexuality (Omi and Winant 58-60).

The dominant discourse of reaction surrounding the Super Bowl halftime show would have one believe that Jackson’s actions challenged dominant norms and values—it violated societal mores and accepted decency. Yet history reveals that the unmasking and over-sexualizing of black bodies is longstanding and central to American popular culture. Jacqueline Bobo states that “Representations of black women in mainstream media constitute a venerable tradition of distorted and limited imagery” (33). Rather than constituting black women as “specific victims of the lust of [white] brutes,” dominant representations have posited black women as sexually deviant, aggressive, domineering or wretched victims—as mammys or jezebels (Hansberry). The show itself reifies these dominant notions, all of which are transparent in the ubiquitous descriptions of Jackson as a slut and a danger to America’s children. Fulfilling longstanding ideologies of black womanhood, which historically justified rape, abuse and enslavement, as well as facilitating systemic curtailments of welfare and sustained efforts to sterilize women of color, the performance at the 2003 Super Bowl did not offer a transgressive moment, one that violated societal norms through the exposure of the taboo black breast, but reified hegemonic visions of black femininity.

According to Bobo, Patricia Hill Collins and others, the most resilient image has been that of the jezebel, the “sexual siren.” From Nina Mae McKinney in Hallelujah, and Dorothy Dandridge in Carmen Jones, to Tracy Camilla Johns in She’s Gotta Have It and Janet Jackson during the Super Bowl, black women’s sexuality has been demonized, pathologized, policed, and ultimately consumed. Whether because of condemnation, calls for the state to monitor and control black women’s sexuality, or the obsessive downloading of her chocolate breast, it should be clear that this performance was not transgressive, but inherently hegemonic; it is another incident in the long history of black women’s sexuality in America. This history obviously has had a tremendous effect in the way U.S. society today sees black sexuality, including the way(s) it reacts to “displays” of black sexuality.
A compounded element to this discussion has to do with historical constructions of the black female body. That is to say, black women’s bodies have historically garnered negative attention in the public sphere; the black female form has posed as both a threat and a cheap, yet addictive, commodity within American culture. For instance, before the “wardrobe malfunction,” Janet Jackson’s breasts, like Jennifer López’s and Beyoncé’s butts, have garnered incredible amounts of commentaries (more than their actual “talents”). Janet’s breasts have always superceded interest within popular culture. Whether in debates surrounding possible plastic surgery, or her voluptuous look in the much-ballyhooed “Miss You Much” music video, Janet Jackson’s body has been constantly on display and universally under scrutiny. As with bell hooks’ discussion of the public consumption of black butts within popular culture, the culminating display of Janet Jackson’s chocolate breast at the Super Bowl “[does] not successfully subvert sexist/racist representations,” rendering the black female body as “expendable,” over-sexed, and existing for white (male) fantasies (hooks 64). In other words, the text (and subtext) of the performance, along with the post-game reactions, embody yet another example of the hegemonic “colonization and appropriation of the body as its own production/consumption” (hooks 71). Cornel West writes, within Race Matters, that “white fear of black sexuality is a central ingredient of white racism” (86).

The mere sight of Janet Jackson’s breast sent America into a moral/cultural frenzy, even as television watchers salivated in the fulfillment of its fetish of the dark-skinned other, demonstrated the simultaneity of both love and hatred of black women’s sexuality. “White Americans may have been repulsed by a black sexuality that they redefined as uncivilized ‘fucking,’” writes Patricia Hill Collins, “but the actions of white men demonstrated that they simultaneously were fascinated with the black women who they thought engaged in it” (Collins 101). Michael Powell and others surely expressed their outrage through statements and investigations, whereas (white) male America expressed their sentiment through downloads, chatrooms, expressions of yearning, and TiVo.
CONCLUSION: FINAL THOUGHTS ON KISSING BLONDS AND A BLACK BREAST

In wake of the “Britney-Christina-Madonna kiss” or “Janet’s flash,” public debates ensued as to which event was more shocking and troubling. Invariably critics and respondents alike concluded that the sight of Janet Jackson’s breast was more surprising and disturbing. While social critics may view various polls and the discursive reactions as signs of progress, of the acceptance of lesbian sexuality (or more accurately, straight performers pretending to be lesbians), we see the desperate reactions against Janet Jackson’s performance as signs of the interplay of race (and racialized bodies) and taboo. Mainly, the cultural imagination that allows for a comfortable visual of two (or three) white women kissing is perhaps not as comfortable with a kiss between a black woman and a white woman (or two). We are certain that including Missy Elliot in the kiss exchange would have produced different reactions from the crowd and from viewers. Where a kiss between two white women, known to be heterosexual, ideologically raises fewer eyebrows, we must put that again in the context of a society infatuated with “woman-on-woman action,” where heterosexuals don lesbian face within porn and strip clubs, all of which is part of the cultural construct of lesbian chic. On the other hand, an interracial sexual exchange (culminating with the exposure of the black body) raises much ideological outcry, a fact that challenges notions of progress where race, sexuality, and gender are concerned. However, neither challenges dominant values/ideologies or conventional norms—the varied outrage, explained by the persistent meaning of racialized sexuality, among other things, and moral panics, is not evidence of a transgression, or an assault on America’s moral fabric, but rather because of the position of black women’s sexuality and homosexuality within the American landscape, ultimately contributes to the legitimation of the status quo.

In Discipline and Punish, Michel Foucault argues that power is not necessarily a consuming structure, in that cracks of opposition and morsels of agency enable counter positions. Similarly, Stuart Hall notes that “the effort is not to conceptualize this ‘presence’ in terms of power, but to locate that power as whole external to us—as extrinsic forces, whose influences can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skins” (Hall, in hooks 116). Unfortunately, an oppositional gaze or agency is not totalizing since, for instance, counter hegemonic behavior like
Jackson’s “choice” to expose her taboo breast within a sacred American space, is not inherently transgressive, in the same way that Madonna’s kissing Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera and toying with the notion of marriage are not transgressive acts. The fact that a person challenges dominant norms and values does not mean that person is transgressive or subversive in his or her challenge; Jackson, Madonna, Spears and Aguilera represent quintessential rebels without a cause. In the case of the Jackson/Timberlake performance, by presenting a “desirable” sexual assault, and by apologizing for the “wardrobe malfunction,” they successfully negotiated the hegemony of Super Bowl etiquette and mores, ultimately complying with the policed normativity of clothing and sanitized white sexuality. Thus, even though they challenged the power of the FCC, CBS, and America’s puritanical values, they were unable to transgress the discursive boundaries of the hegemonical racial order, which is why the reactionary rhetoric we discussed above unfolded the way it did. Similarly, the MTV performance only served to perhaps one up the clichéd fantasy of two women kissing. A three-way kiss between women, though certainly a novelty, is still part of the ideological landscape that allows that to happen as long as those women live a “straight” life off the stage. As Britney Spears told CNN on September 4, 2003, when asked about her image post-MTV performance, “I think I’m still clean living. I mean I don’t go home and have orgies or anything like that.” In fact, when asked whether she would kiss a woman again, she responded: “No, I would not do it … maybe with Madonna” (“Britney”). She is still heterosexual, and marriage is still for heterosexuals only; just as black bodies are still subject to surveillance, violence and the white male gaze.

In the end, we need to reexamine uncritical notions of transgression and representation as they are used to describe popular culture, for in the case of racial and sexual minorities representation does come with taxation. That is to say, popular culture has a profound impact on specific groups of people. This is the message we need to get to our students when teaching them about the need to examine popular culture with a critical eye, beyond mere issues of representation. More importantly, we need to begin to interrogate how the commodification of difference, the erasure of the powers and privileges of race, gender and sexuality, and the appearance of transgression within popular culture helps to legitimize the status quo. Our students need to understand that in many instances, these representations come
with a price for the groups being represented: these representations have the potential to create a further schism between cultural expectations (or cultural imaginations) and reality. It is this schism (and the implications embedded in it) that, as teachers, we need to help our students appreciate.

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EVE ENSLER AND THE SUBVERSIVE VAGINA

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“Write yourself. Your body must be heard.” Hélène Cixous

Eve Ensler’s play *The Vagina Monologues* has been more than a theatrical event, more than a text; it has been the springboard that has led to a slew of cultural phenomena and changed the face of feminism, one can hope, for at least a season or two. In reply to those who have questioned her decision to keep the title despite its being, in their view, controversial, transgressive, and alienating, Eve Ensler retorts, “I say Vagina because I wanted people to respond.” And respond they have.

The play has been called “vulgar and offensive” by critics, religious leaders and university administrators. One cybercritic vehemently criticizes the play at length in a review titled “Pudendic and Pathetic”:

*The Vagina Monologues*, has to be seen to be believed. It's unrelenting male bashing. It's also lesbian pornography deceptively packaged as revolution. Most strikingly, it is a celebration of stupidity. Not just any old stupidity, but the breathtaking, mindless, god-forsaken female variety that men have known about all along, the sort of stupidity that would have destroyed humanity during the Pleistocene if not for the firm and wise authority of heterosexual males. It's the ultimate statement that without men and male authority, humanity fails to prosper.

I cite this review at some length, because aside from its obvious eloquence, it aptly illustrates a trend from armchair critics, who use the internet as a medium to disseminate their reviews. Before one entirely dismisses their reviews as mere inconsequential babbling, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that their websites get hundreds of hits per day. They are the vanguard of popular criticism and more influential than most academics could ever hope to be in reaching the average individual. His review evidences not only a common response to *The
The Vagina Monologues grew out of a series of interviews with women, as well as Ensler's experiences as a feminist and activist working in a variety of different contexts. The play is divided into various monologues and touches on numerous issues related to the experiences of living in a female body and especially vaginas. For example, one monologue retraces the story of a woman who is infantilized by the lover who insists she shave her pubic hair, another tells of an old woman who has never seen her vagina and who speaks of shame and fear related to a sexual fiasco in her youth. In a monologue titled "The Flood" she describes how she became aroused while kissing a boy in his car. She refers to her wetness as a flood, a "river of life just flooded out of [her]" (27) damaging the boy's new car and earning her the label of "stinky weird girl" (27). She describes her vagina as wearing a sign reading "Closed Due to Flooding" (30) and is never able to have a sexual experience with a partner. There are also stories of menarche ranging from girls being slapped as an introduction to womanhood to the girl who received a card from her father reading "to my little girl who isn't so little anymore" (35). The monologues also address rape in a Bosnian war camp, childbirth, and angry vaginas rebelling against the establishment that seeks to convince women their bodies are smelly, dirty and, in need of restraint and perfume. The Vagina Monologues is democratic in its representation of vaginas, including empowering and devastating life experiences as part of the same female continuum and addresses both heterosexual and lesbian relationships. It is important to note the variety of areas touched on by the monologues, for all kind of different vagina stories are given a voice in this play.

On a biographical note, Ensler grew up in an upper middle-class home with a sexually, physically and emotionally abusive father. She acknowledges the creation of The Vagina Monologues as coming out of her healing process, seeking to reaffirm her sexuality and her female body (Fernández 31). After interviewing hundreds of women, she proceeded to write a feminist manifesto of corporeality and empowerment. Ensler started performing The Vagina Monologues in New York City's "Here," a Soho theatre, in 1996 to great popular acclaim, and the play went on to win an Obie award in 1997. Ensler has ceded rights to The Vagina Monologues in order that it may be performed one
day per year around Valentine’s Day. These performances have taken place on college campuses across the United States and internationally, in cities like London, Athens, Bombay, Jerusalem and many, many others. All proceeds go to support the V-day movement to prevent violence against women, founded in 1998 as a direct outcropping of Ensler’s performances of *The Vagina Monologues*. She says in her introduction to the monologues that many women were coming to her after performances relating stories of abuse, and that she felt “nothing was more important than stopping violence toward women—that the desecration of women indicated the failure of human beings to honor and protect life ...” (xxxii).

As a result of its overwhelming appeal *The Vagina Monologues* has been performed by popular Hollywood and other big name artists such as Whoopi Goldberg, Glenn Close, Susan Sarandon, Lily Tomlin, Winona Ryder, Marisa Tomei, Calista Flockhart, Alanis Morissette, Roseanne, Kate Winslett, Jerry Hall, and many others and has been supported by feminist organizations such as Ms., Feminist.com, etc. This political move increased the visibility of the play by the general public. As the word got out about *The Vagina Monologues*, along with the awards and ticket sales came protests, boycotts, and censors.

The Cardinal Newman society, a conservative Catholic group, has been behind a national effort to ban/boycott performances of *The Vagina Monologues*. They have a website updated with lists of performances, dates, and contacts organizing to stop the performances. This website carries an editorial warning about “graphic content and offensive language” which is present in the play and reflected in their articles. The word “Vagina” is apparently offensive to Catholics, as the monologues in general seem to be. The monologues do not address the Catholic Church’s history of dysfunctional treatment of sexuality nor do they attack the church in any way. Critics such as Wendy McElroy have objected to the V-day movement as well, taking issue with the shattered innocence of women who “rather than taking 24 hours to celebrate romantic love, are admonished to ponder rape and domestic violence.” College campuses have seen protests ranging from fraternity men interrupting performances to administrators pulling support at the last minute in fear of protests and lawsuits. There have even been sexual harassment lawsuits brought against universities. As a performance, *The Vagina Monologues* have managed to shock and offend a wide spectrum of groups and individuals.
There have been waves of Feminism(s) to liberate women from their domestic imprisonment, give them a “room of their own” and organic, unbleached, asbestos-free tampons. Why, if I may be permitted the pun, would vaginas cause such a rise all of a sudden? Where has feminism taken our society? How can the public at large be so easily shocked?

In her book *Outlaw Culture* bell hooks attributes the shaping of current feminist thought and the wave of conservative feminists partly to the fact that the media hijacked the feminist movement. She argues that the media is more interested in “promoting the views of women who want to both claim feminism and repudiate it at the same time” (20), women such as white conservative feminists\(^1\) like Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphi, anti sex Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. As feminism moved out of private homes and consciousness raising groups into women’s studies classroom, it became the property of the privileged, and was assimilated by the mainstream. There was a time when calling oneself a feminist meant that one assumed a political stance. It now seems only to mean that one theoretically supports equal pay for women or that one agrees with Camille Paglia date rape does not exist and that women should just quit whining about inequality. The popularity of this watered down variety of feminism is partly to blame for the retrograde reaction to harmless (subversive) vaginas.

How can we still be shocked by vaginas? Enticed? Certainly. Perplexed? Sure. Drawn to, seduced by, fascinated by, but horrified or offended? Is that genuinely possible? Apparently so. With the critical response to *The Vagina Monologues* reaching a fevered pitch, interviews began to be requested by newspapers, magazines, Leno and Letterman, who incidentally was unable to say the word “Vagina” on the show, not because of censorship but apparently due to his own discomfort. Even more so, in a ten-minute special on the play, CNN managed to avoid using the word “vagina” at all. One has only to watch a main-

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\(^1\) The term Conservative Feminism is used here to indicate the trend observed by hooks of women who identify themselves as feminists while espousing ideas that seem contrary to any variety of feminism: for instance, women receiving media attention for denying the validity of date rape as an issue pertinent to women, women who speak out on the woman’s role as submissive wife or who declare that women are essentially and biologically weaker than men and ill suited for life in public domain. These currents of thought seem to want it both ways, to cater to the status quo while embracing a controversial label. It should also be noted that the term Conservative Feminist is used by some women to separate themselves from other Feminists.
stream TV channel for a prime time hour or two to see explicit sexual behavior, violence, gore, as well as all but nudity in popular shows such as ‘The OC.’ Bikini-clad twins gyrate for the camera to sell beer. Ads for cell phones and soft drinks feature skimpy outfits and giggling “girls.” The news shows us images of public humiliation and sadism in the name of war. We are shown the carnage of the Middle East as evidence of the USA’s greatness. In consideration of this bombardment of morally questionable content in popular television shows and news, it seems that the critical response to Ensler’s monologues is somewhat hypocritical. Why is it more acceptable to show public beheadings than to use the word “vagina”—a scientific and medical term that has never needed excision from dictionaries or text books. To quote Ensler’s evaluation of the word, “[...] a totally ridiculous, completely unsexy word” (5). The word “penis” is not so consciously omitted on TV, such as in news stories where women, usually battered women, mutilate their lovers’ scientifically and medically defined penises.

Ensler’s deliberate use of the word “vagina” in the title and content of the play makes it impossible to shy away from the discomfort and political reactions talking about vaginas seems to invoke. The performance has been boycotted on college campuses across the United States, and the text all but banned in a number of states and cities. It seems that the censors and protestors have picked up on something that women have known since time immemorial regardless of whether or not mirrors were being straddled: vaginas are powerful. Vaginas are subversive. They are frightening and mysterious with their secret folds and crevices. As Germaine Greer wrote well over thirty years ago in *The Female Eunuch*:

Women’s sexual organs are shrouded in mystery. It is assumed that most of them are internal and hidden, but even the ones that are external are relatively shady. When little girls begin to ask questions their mother provide them, if they are lucky, with crude diagrams of the sexual apparatus, in which the organs of pleasure feature much less prominently than the intricacies of tubes and ovaries. I myself did not realize that the tissues of my vagina were quite normal until I saw a meticulously engraved dissection in an 18th century anatomy text-book. (32)
The female genitals are seen as either invisible, or as simply inferior to the prominence of the phallus. Or, as Luce Irigaray also exposed in *This Sex Which is Not One*, “Women’s erogenous zones never amount to anything but a clitoris—sex that is not comparable to the noble phallic organ, or a whole envelope that serves to sheathe and massage the penis in intercourse: a non-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing” (23).

Having the name of a body part be dissociated from shame, secrecy or sensationalism can apparently wreak havoc on the very fabric of society. The argument being proposed is that Ensler is desensitizing the public to the word, which, the critics imply, can bring a backlash of degradation and violence. Why should the word “vagina” by any more sensitive or be preserved from overuse? Is the word “penis” so sacrosanct? Are we concerned with the word “penis” losing its power to move us? By looking to preserve the word “vagina,” which despite the process of desensitization attributed to Ensler, many people still feel the need to utter in hushed voices, are we essentially looking to preserve the sanctity and secrecy of the vagina itself? I would argue they are simply trying to keep those folds inviolate and unexamined, hence preserving the silence that has led to internalized misogyny.

If the word “vagina” is to be protected and preserved as an American linguistic treasure, what word shall be used in its place? It is precisely what Ensler attempts to do in the opening monologue:

I’m worried about vaginas, what we call them and don’t call them. In Great Neck they call it a pussycat. A woman there told me that her mother used to tell her ‘Don’t wear panties underneath your pajamas dear; you need to air out your pussycat.’ In Westchester they called it a pooki, in New Jersey a twat. There’s “powerbox,” “derriere,” a “poocchi,” a “poopi,” a “peepe,” a “poopelu,” a “poonani,” a “pal,” and a “piche,” “toadie,” “dee dee,” “nishi,” “dignity,” “monkey box,” “coochi snorcher,” “cooter,” “Labbe,” “Gladys Seigel-man,” “VA,” “wee wee,” “horsespot,” “nappy dugout,” “mongo,” “pajama,” “fannyboo,” “mushmellow,” a “ghoulie,” “possible,” “tamale,” “tottita,” “Connie,” a “Mimi” in Miami, “split knish” in Philadelphia and “schmende” in the Bronx. I am worried about vaginas. (6)
This list of terms obtained during interviews with women is both comical and disturbing. It illustrates the lengths to which some people go to avoid addressing vaginas by their name and the lack of effective equivalents to the word. Perhaps the word “cunt” should be used instead.

One monologue that has made even some liberals squirm momentarily is titled “Reclaiming Cunt.” Just as her use of the word “vagina” is intentionally meant to provoke, the monologue “Reclaiming Cunt,” points to the unwillingness to offer vaginas their proper dignity by allowing them to be called by their proper name, or if nothing else, by more flattering ones than the offensive and or secretive ones currently in vogue. This naming of the vagina is a theme Ensler takes on throughout the monologues. The unwillingness to call vaginas by positive names points to a larger problem of misogyny and prudery. Germaine Greer argues that “part of the modesty about the female genitalia stems from actual distaste. The worst thing anybody can be called is a cunt” (32). In the 70’s feminists tried to reclaim the word, including wearing Cunt Power buttons but it didn’t seem to take (Dodson notwithstanding). “Cunt” is still a word that carries a power to shock and offend unequaled by any other word in current usage. Cunt makes people uncomfortable, or even aggressive, the Women of Faith and Family organization’s website argues. A review sponsored by this organization and published in several mainstream Christian publications pointed out the immorality of the Vagina Monologues, particularly its being shown on Valentine’s Day where “girls” on college campuses would encounter “No hearts and flowers. Instead a porno circus masquerading as ‘consciousness-raising’ theater” (Hull). What makes this statement all the more ironic is the choice to use the images of ‘hearts’ and flowers, both recognizable as yonic symbols.²

“Because He Liked to Look At It” is one of those monologues, among the many, found objectionable and pornographic:

This is how I came to love my vagina. It’s embarrassing, because it’s not politically correct. I mean, I know it should have happened in a bath with salt

² The yoni is the female counterpart to the lingam or phallus in Hinduism. It is represented by a flowerlike shape an oval or a triangle which is identifiable in our representation of hearts and flowers, incidentally associated with love and romance as in Hull’s allusion. In Western society, however, there is no term equivalent to phallus to represent the vagina as anything other than a sexual organ.
grains from the Dead Sea, Enya playing, me loving my woman self. I know the story. Vaginas are beautiful. Our self-hatred is only the internalized repression and hatred of the patriarchal culture. It isn’t really. Pussys unite. I know all of it. (53)

The self-conscious allusions to the feminist movement make this monologue both humorous and, more importantly, emblematic of feminism’s failure to reach average women. The speaker then goes on to elaborate how she had disconnected from her own vagina to the extent that she was only able to visualize her vagina as objects:

I imagined furniture-cozy futons with light cotton comforters, little velvet settees, leopard rugs—or pretty things—silk handkerchiefs, quilted pot holders, or place settings—or miniature landscapes-clear crystal lakes or moisty Irish bogs. Whenever I had sex with a man, I pictured him inside a mink-lined muffler or a red rose or a Chinese bowl. (54)

Those of the “pornographic circus” school of thought do not see as problematic the painful disconnect between the woman’s vagina and her Self, the painful process of self-objectification. They object to the moment when her lover Bob, who loves to look at vaginas, gazes adoringly at hers for “over an hour” (54). As he admires her vagina the woman gradually moves from discomfort and embarrassment to full sexual arousal and sensual pleasure in being thus admired by her lover’s gaze. Bob says of her, “You’re elegant and deep and innocent and wild” (54) reading her vagina as one would read the lines on a palm. In this case the lover’s eyes come to represent the mirror being straddled in the ultimate consciousness-raising experience.

Consciousness-raising as a concept has been an object of much ridicule from the jaded, cynical perspective of the 90’s and the 21st century. It’s a joke used to denigrate and deride Feminism and often linked to New Age touchy-feely crystal healings and aura cleansings. In the eyes of mainstream culture it’s all nonsense. But consciousnesses were raised. Women gathered together to talk about oppression, to talk about their experiences as women, or even to look at their vaginas, some for the very first time. Consciousness-raising was a democratic movement taking place at kitchen tables and living rooms of working class women as well as middle class ones. bell hooks argues in
Feminism is for Everybody that when feminism was moved from the consciousness raising groups to Feminist Studies classrooms, 'regular' women, working class women, homemakers, lesbians, women of color lost their voice and got disconnected from the movement. hooks goes on to argue that “Overall women in our society are forgetting the value and power of sisterhood” (27).

Ensler invokes this power when she states that her vagina “needed a context of other vaginas—a community, a culture of vaginas” (7). One of the monologues takes place during a “vagina workshop” much like mirror straddling consciousness raising groups of olden days:

I found it quite unsettling at first, my vagina. Like the first time you see a fish cut open and you discover this other bloody complex world inside, right under the skin. It was so raw, so red, so fresh. And the thing that surprised me most was all the layers. Layers inside layers, opening into more layers. My vagina amazed me. (46)

Within this community of vaginas she is able to explore her own femaleness with an adolescent thrill that has been criticized by some feminists who feel their own experience has been negated. As one member of Feminist.com puts it, “what about those of us who have been playing with ourselves for years and performing pelvic self-exams.” But, this omission notwithstanding, the average woman connects with the vagina monologues. The Vagina Monologues has achieved something theoretical feminists have not been able to do thus far. While the premise may seem overly simplistic and the monologues are not by most definitions a great literary accomplishment, as a cultural phenomenon they are entirely redeemable. What Cixous, Irigaray, Emily Martin, Greer, and other influential theorists have written about—lack, the Marxist model of gynecology, écriture féminine, writing the body ... all the stuff even academicians have a hard time reading—Ensler manages somehow to convey in a popularly accessible performance. The performance has accomplished what feminists have been trying to do for a long time, it has brought feminism and sex to the public attention. While still primarily performed on college campuses and in private theatres, both of which imply an ability to pay, the text has been widely circulated, the articles, interviews, sitcom references, jokes, famous artists all serve to bring vaginas to the masses. More than a
performance or a text, *The Vagina Monologues*’ importance lies in its assimilation into the resistant mainstream, whether in positive or negative terms.

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Georges Bataille was never held in high regard by his contemporaries. He was excluded from the surrealist group by André Breton, who dubbed him “an excremental philosopher,” and later in 1943, Jean-Paul Sartre declared that Bataille’s work offered no more than “the pleasure of an alcoholic drink or the sensation of sunbathing.” After his death in 1962, however, Bataille’s philosophical and literary writings were reassessed by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva, among others, which canonized him into a community of avant-garde writers. These prominent intellectuals have all celebrated Bataille’s œuvre and in particular his theories on *Erotisme* and transgression. In both his critical and fictional work, Bataille articulates thought-provoking concepts by investigating the affinity between language and experience, *jouissance* (or bliss) and *savoir* (or knowledge), and unleashing the dialectical possibilities of the erotic power of violence and the violent power of the erotic.

Before undertaking an in-depth look at Bataille’s theories, it would seem appropriate to retrace some more common and popular notions on transgression and taboo. In *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*, Anthony Julius observes that whereas for theologians, “transgression” means primarily an offense against God, the word “transgression” has undergone several shifts in meaning since it entered the English language in the sixteenth century. From this historical overview, Julius draws a multilayered definition of transgression. He concludes that “four essential meanings emerge, then: the denying of doctrinal truths; rule-breaking, including the violation of principles, conventions, pieties or taboos; the giving of serious offense; and the exceeding, erasing or disordering of physical or conceptual boundaries” (19). It is important to keep in mind that these categorizations are not mutually exclusive; it is possible to transgress in more than one aspect. However, transgressions that are taboo-breaking are perhaps the most common for they are specifically directed towards the widest possible

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1 This term has been translated as “Eroticism” in English.
audience and closely mirror the accepted characterization of the transgressive as that which exceeds established boundaries of the permissible and the tolerable within society. The exposure of certain taboos is perceived as potentially offensive, embarrassing, subversive, or harmful according to moral and social guidelines. Similarly, the violation of taboos commonly produces shock because it directly involves the audience’s sensitivity and tolerance.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud analyzes the various implications of taboo practices and their violations. Having traced the origins of the word to its Polynesian roots, Freud claims that “for us the meaning of taboo branches into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us, sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean” (*Basic Writings* 821). Ironically, Freud also points out that “[taboo] prohibitions concerned actions for which there existed a strong desire” (831), and that as a result of social and cultural norms, these desires undergo repression. In this process, repressed desires—instinctual drives of sex and violence traditionally linked with prohibitions of incest and murder—are screened, or “filtered,” by the Conscious system as dictated by societal morality, and are safeguarded in the Unconscious. More precisely, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud asserts that repressed wishes dwell in the Unconscious and that the Conscious system opposes their fulfillment by suppressing them. He insists, however, that the process of repression does not destroy such wishes; they actually survive by remaining in the Unconscious (288). In fact, Freud maintains that humans entertain an ambivalent relationship with taboos, which is maintained by our unconscious desires and the conscious processes that prohibit their fulfillment.

While Freud elaborates in “The Uncanny” on the compelling power of transgressions that are taboo-breaking as they appear in literature, Kristeva refers to this property as the “abject”: “the abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of the animal” (12). Although Freud, for his part, appeared to be much more accepting of a return to primal urges in his earlier writings, he seemed gradually to have distanced himself from his former views in his later work. Conversely, the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault advocate that by breaking social taboos and exposing repressed instinctual drives stored in the Unconscious, some transgressions may carry certain beneficial implications.
Nietzsche scorns the establishment of boundaries on intellectual freedom by institutions of morality and reminds us that “truth” is not solely to be found within the narrow confines of the permissible. Quite on the contrary, he believes that elevation of spirit can also inhere in the “radical other” of transgression: “severity, violence, slavery, danger in the street and in the heart, secrecy, stoicism, tempter’s art and devilry of every kind,—that everything wicked, terrible, tyrannical, predatory, and serpentine in man, serves as well for the elevation of the human species as its opposite” (31).

In “A Preface to Transgression” Foucault contends that sexuality, in particular, seems to represent the pinnacle of all taboos even within a so-called “liberated” society:

We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have, to be exact, carried it to its limits: the limit of consciousness, because it ultimately dictates the only possible reading of our unconscious; the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of universal taboos… (30)

Within the perspective that transgression is a rupture in language as articulated in The Order of Things, Foucault aligns himself with the Nietzschean imperative regarding the death of God. He traces the origin of his argument in part to the works of the Marquis de Sade:

From the moment that Sade delivered his first words and marked out, in a single discourse, the boundaries of what suddenly became its kingdom, the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent, and where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression. (31)

In advocating the power of language, and more specifically, the appearance of sexuality in language, Foucault argues that eroticism leads to a questioning of language as a system of meaning (50). This elevation into the “night” of which he speaks is no other than a “limitless” realm of thought into which the transgressive propels its audience as it sets its own limits. More specifically, Foucault argues that transgression is not related to the limit as an oppositional binary, rather, that it is both “pure and complicated,” for not only is it
detached from the properties of shock and transgression, it confirms its own existence outside of any conventional system of thought:

Transgression is neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world) … Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being—affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time. (35)

Within this paradigm, Foucault focuses his attention on the writings of Georges Bataille. Through depictions of sexuality as transgression, the fiction of Bataille effectively creates the experience of what Foucault calls: “an immediacy of being,” or as Bataille himself would say, “of being without delay.”

In his critical work, Bataille focuses on attempting to reveal the philosophical implications offered by the transgressions of fundamental taboos, and more particularly, through the extreme experiences of pleasure and pain, which are to be found in what he defines as “Erotisme.” Bataille asks, “What is truth, if we think that which exceeds the possibility of thought?” (Erotism 268), and he demonstrates how such possibilities can be unraveled at the point of fusion between sexual excitements and death: “la petite mort”—“when Eroticism is assenting to life even death” (11). While Foucault recognizes the value of sexuality as transgression, for Bataille, sexuality—and especially, in its most abhorrent manifestations—holds the key to self-knowledge, for it produces that “immediacy of being” which Foucault considers remarkable. Moreover, Bataille argues that individually, human beings are discontinuous beings, and through the “fusion of beings” (both physical and spiritual) Eroticism produces, it breaches this discontinuity by creating a bond, a community (21-3).

Like Foucault, Bataille departs from the common traditional patterns of knowledge and argues that although philosophy and Eroticism coincide, philosophy is confined within its own language, for language sets limits. In that sense, philosophy “sets itself against transgression” and he maintains, “if transgression became the foundation-stone of philosophy (this is how my thinking goes), silent contemplation would have to be substituted for language” (275). Bataille values experience over language, which is driven by excess to reach a point of rupture, where this rupture becomes what Roland Barthes would call
jouissance or “bliss”: the expression of the inexpressible. In order to breach the confinements of expression, to reach the eternities of possibilities, one needs to strive for the horizon where experience replaces language, where language becomes experience. Language sets its own limits; as a system of meaning, it is confined, whereas experience is not.

It is in part due to these concepts that the Tel Quel group, to which Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, and Sollers all belong, considers Bataille to exemplify the unity of social and linguistic practice:

The general economy, including language, should not be separated from the actual social process. It is this point which distinguishes Bataille from his immediate contemporaries, Sartre (for whom social practice eliminates all questions to do with language) and Breton (for whom exactly the opposite applies). (qtd. in Chatain 37)

By borrowing an image from “the most violent of poets,” Arthur Rimbaud, Bataille argues that these limitless possibilities, which are attainable only through Eroticism, are also reachable through literature:

Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death and continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea. (Erotism 25)

This notion of fusion between two opposing forces—the sun and the sea, or more specifically in the writings of Bataille, death and sexuality—echoes the notion of transgression as blurring traditionally accepted distinctions between the high and the low, the denotative and connotative modes of language, object and subject, and the signifier and signified, whose final aim is the rapprochement between a philosophy of life and the act of reading/writing as experienced through creation and Eroticism.

Bataille recognized the potential of the work of the Marquis de Sade well before Simone de Beauvoir, Foucault, and other post-structuralists. “Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established

2 Elle est retrouvée/Quoi? L’éternité./C’est la mer allée/Avec le soleil (qtd in Bataille, Erotism 25).
patterns, the patterns of regulated social order (18),” asserts Bataille, and alongside Nietzsche, he rejects the over-emphasis on morality and its prejudices, arguing that there is some tangible value in exposing (and sometimes indulging in) repressed wishes. In “The Use Value of D.A.F. De Sade,” Bataille explains how society, through material progress, “leads [humanity] to a disagreeable and terminal stagnation” (92) and preaches “revolt” as a means to bring this stagnation to an end. Furthermore, by advocating how the limits imposed on the Unconscious need to be broken, Bataille also alludes to the Nietzschean concept of a “herding-animal morality”:

The participation in everything that, among men, is horrible and allegedly sacred can take place in a limited and unconscious form, but this limitation and this unconsciousness obviously have only a provisional value, and nothing can stop the movement that leads human beings toward an ever more shameless awareness of the erotic bond that links them to death, to cadavers, and to horrible physical pain. It is high time that human nature cease being subjected to the autocrat’s vile repression and to the morality that authorizes exploitation. Since it is true that one of a man’s attributes is the derivation of pleasure from the suffering of others, and the erotic pleasure is not only the negation of an agony that takes place at the same instant, but also a lubricious participation in that agony, it is time to choose between the conduct of cowards afraid of their own joyful excesses, and the conduct of those who judge that any given man need not cower like a hunted animal, but instead can see all the moralistic buffoons as so many dogs. (Visions of Excess 101)

In other words, Bataille argues that the value of abiding to moral guidelines is significantly restrictive and necessarily temporary, that humanity needs to (and eventually will) transgress these boundaries in order to free itself from its dog-like condition.

In his discussion of taboo, Bataille emphasizes that the privileged subject is the link between death and sexuality, erotic desire and pain, sex and violence: “[i]f a taboo exists, it is a taboo on some elemental violence, to my thinking. This violence belongs to the flesh,
the flesh responsible for the urges of the organs of reproduction” (Erotism 93). Bataille focuses almost exclusively on exploring the complex, multilayered, and ambivalent intersections between the experiences of sex and death, not so much to attempt to create a rapprochement, but rather as simultaneous experiences, whereas one is inevitably linked to the other. Bataille quotes Sade in noting, “There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image,” and he argues, as noted above, “Eroticism opens the way to death. Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives. Without doing violence to our inner selves, are we able to bear a negation that carries us to the farthest bounds of possibility?” (Erotism 24). For Bataille, not only does Eroticism hold the potential to reveal inner truths, sexual transgressions that break taboos also call for an upheaval against arbitrary systems of meaning by blurring conventional borders and by defining their own philosophical language, which is precisely the point made by Foucault that I have mentioned above. In other words, transgressions of a sexual nature not only break taboos, they also challenge norms and conventions and establish new paradigms.

If we consider the introduction of sexuality within social, cultural, and political discourses, the incorporation of pornography represents perhaps the most challenging and thought-provoking, for it specifically blurs the established boundaries between high and low culture. While it may be difficult to come to an unambiguous definition of pornography for it is heavily reliant on the audience’s pre-dispositions, it could be argued that the difference between erotica and pornography, to be concise, is that while the former encourages intellectual contemplation, the latter merely aims to provide physical pleasure, some type of instant gratification, which is superficial and contains no underlying, redemptive artistic or moral figuration. Because its goal is different from the traditional goal of art, pornographic material has been excluded from the various lists of canonical works and confined to popular culture. However, it is specifically when pornography is incorporated into high cultural productions that it reveals its subversive potential; pornography is potentially transgressive, but like all transgressive material it does not act subversively when its appearance is predictable.

While it is true that mainstream pornography solely intends to arouse desire without provoking intellectual speculation, the porno-
graphic tradition embraced by the likes of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille is deeply rooted in a philosophy which regards sexually graphic material as a means to confront, challenge and undermine notions of order and propriety by calling in an experience which rises beyond that of the limits imposed by convention and morality. As Bataille puts it in his foreword to Le Bleu du ciel [Blue of Noon]:

> Le récit qui révèle les possibilités de la vie n’appelle pas forcément, mais il appelle un moment de rage, sans lequel son auteur serait aveugle à ces possibilités excessives. Je le crois: seul l’épreuve suffocante, impossible donne à l’auteur le moyen d’atteindre la vision lointaine attendue par un lecteur las des proches limites imposées par les conventions.³

Likewise, Susan Sontag makes a similar argument for the power of pornographic fiction, which she calls “one of the extreme forms of consciousness” in her essay “The Pornographic Imagination” (46). She values pornographic fiction specifically for the effect it produces on its readers: “The physical sensations involuntarily produced in someone reading the book carry with them something that touches upon the reader’s whole experience of his humanity—and his limits as a personality and a body.” Pornographic literature, as she sees it, is not rendered ineffectual because it produces arousal; instead, this most visceral of reader’s responses renders pornography more cogent in that it aims at “disorientation, at psychic dislocation” (47). Hence, Sontag relates the power of pornographic fiction to Bataille’s objective of creating the fusion between language and experience, which is precisely Kristeva’s perspective when she argues that Bataille is trying to heal the divide between savoir and jouissance by addressing at the same time the knowledge of eroticism and the eroticization of knowledge (“Bataille” 282).

However pornographic, the texts of Bataille do not lose sight of their dialectic purpose. Roland Barthes considers them to be “texts of bliss” for they adequately fit his definition: “[the text of bliss] imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point

³ The text which reveals the possibilities of existence is not necessarily compelling, but it calls for a moment of rage without which the author would be blinded to the possibilities of excess. I believe: only the experience which is suffocating, impossible, gives the author the means to reach the distant vision expected by a reader who is fed up with the limits imposed by convention (Translation mine).
of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (14). In *Madame Edwarda*, which Susan Sontag considers “the most original and intellectually powerful pornographic prose fiction I’ve read” (39), *Le Bleu du ciel*, or more specifically in *Histoire de l’oeil* [*Story of the Eye*], Bataille transgresses the traditional boundaries between philosophy and language, the sacred and the profane, religion and sexuality, and in the process, he articulates the concepts of a philosophy based on excess and transgression by using pornography as a means to conflate *savoir* and *jouissance*, knowledge and bliss: the texts of Bataille—as they transgress all traditional orders of exchange, as they produce bliss and define themselves from within their own system and generate knowledge—point towards a concept of transgression that is both unique and innovative.

Perhaps more than any other text, Bataille’s novel *Histoire de l’œil* aptly illustrates his theories. The story recounts the sexual odyssey that the narrator had with a girl named Simone when they were both teenagers. After they involve their friend Marcelle in a series of sexual acts that frequently incorporate Simone’s fascination with eggs, Marcelle hangs herself. Simone and the narrator escape to Spain where they join a libertine named Sir Edmond. There, they go to a bullfight where the bullfighter gets gruesomely killed and Simone inserts a dead bull’s genitals into her vagina. They visit a church where Simone has sex with a priest, before they rape and kill him. At Simone’s request Sir Edmond removes one of the priest’s eyes from its socket and after the narrator has sex with Simone, she inserts the eye into her vagina. The novel ends as the three lovers flee the country on a ship in disguise.

John Hoyles’ observations on *Histoire de l’œil* closely reflect Foucault’s emphasis on the role of language in transgression. He points out that “the words operate autonomously. They do not refer back to a consciousness. They become the unconscious object” (62), and he quotes from the text, “she played gaily with words, speaking of broken eyes and broken eggs” [“elle jouait gaiement avec les mots, ainsi elle disait tantôt casser un œil, tantôt crever un œuf” (126)] to argue that “it is wordplay of this kind, cumulative and recapitulative, which structures Bataille’s text and prevents the pornographic incidents from becoming merely picaresque and isolated” (62-63).
While the wordplay is certainly remarkable, the theoretical foundation based upon the conflation of oppositional binaries in depictions of sexuality is also put into practice. According to Elliott Vanskike, the dialectic of *Histoire de l’œil* can be perceived as a conflict between two opposite entities: “[the] opposed realms of heaven and earth can represent respectively the infinite and the finite, the divine and the human, the spirit and the flesh. Bataille, though, is not content to perpetuate these stable oppositions; he instead seeks to destabilize them” (50). I would argue furthermore that Bataille does not merely seek to destabilize these oppositions; he perpetually creates interchanges between them by collapsing them. This is particularly true in the final scene when the narrator looks into Simone’s vulva:

> I drew her thighs apart, and found myself facing something—I imagine—I had been waiting for ever—in the same way that a guillotine waits for a neck to slice. I even felt as if my eyes were bulging from my head, erectile with horror; in Simone’s downy vulva, I saw the wan blue eye of Marcelle, gazing at me through tears of urine. Streaks of come in the steaming hair helped give that dreamy vision of a disastrous sadness. I held the thighs open while Simone was convulsed by the urinary spasm, and the burning urine steamed out from under the eye down to the thighs below. [Translation mine] (168)

Apart from the striking conflation of the oppositional binaries of death and sex into wordplay (the “tears of urine” the “eyes erectile with horror”), this passage also demonstrates how the high and the low, heaven and earth, *savoir* and *jouissance* can reach the point of fusion. Here, in its specific positioning, the eye—the “supreme” organ, the “window of the soul” as it is commonly dubbed, and a strong subject of taboo since any violence done to it is certain to provoke a reaction of horror (as in Luis Buñuel’s *Le Chien Andalou*)—blends in with the base organs of reproduction; it not only represents death (of Marcelle and of the priest) in the living, “steaming” reproductive organs of Simone, it also creates that conflation of *savoir* with *jouissance* that is fundamental to Bataille’s theories of transgression. If we follow the perspective that Eroticism expands the possibility of thought, the eye, in this case, not only produces a view of the outside and the inside, but
a view from the inside to the outside, from the inner-self—the unconscious—to the outer-self—knowledge.

In assessing the dialectics of transgression in Bataille, John Hoyles observes that it is multilayered and holds the potential to trigger a wide range of physical, psychological, and emotional reactions:

In Bataille’s case the transgression is linguistic and literary as well as ideological. Fantasy transgresses the dominant realism, just as the primal obscene transgresses the received Enlightenment of wisdom on sexuality (Rousseauist, Freudian, Liberal). The arousal of sexual response transcends the conventional Pepysian furtive lubricity and seeps into the larger modernist enterprise of deranging the consciousness via the device of linguistic estrangement. Against the Aristotelian imperative to edify and entertain, this kind of literature does what Plato both loved and feared: it fascinates, outrages and enthralls (Trotsky would say ‘infects’). It thus fulfills Rimbaud’s call for a systematic disordering of the senses (58).

Rimbaud’s “disordering of the senses” is indisputably one criterion for literary greatness, and hence, the contributions of Bataille to twentieth-century literature is undeniable. As Foucault points out in his introduction to a volume of Bataille’s collected works, “Bataille est l’un des écrivains les plus importants de son siècle … Nous devons à Bataille une grande part du moment où nous sommes; mais ce qui nous reste à faire, à penser et à dire, cela sans doute lui est dû encore, et le sera longtemps”⁴ (“Présentation” 5). In both theory and practice, Bataille’s philosophical underpinnings are most pertinent; his views on Erotisme as transgression offer an unparalleled perspective on depictions of death and sexuality, and in the process, he invites his reader to open the doors of the unconscious as a source of self-knowledge and a tool for emancipation.

⁴ Bataille is one of the most important writers of his century … We owe to Bataille a great part of the time and place at which we are, but what remains for us to be done, to think and to say, this is probably still owed to him, and will be for a long time to come (translation mine).


Eric Williams, in his work *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), written over sixty years ago, investigated the effects of the triangular trade on global economics. This seminal text demonstrated how the Caribbean was the single most important economic site for the development of European empires, describing the Caribbean islands as the “most precious colonies recorded in the whole annal of imperialism” (52). The economic dependence of Britain on the Caribbean islands was well documented both during the colonial period, as well as by contemporary historians, and although Williams’s claims have been moderated by more recent research, the overall significance of the Caribbean for British economic development in the eighteenth century is still regarded as a central factor.¹

In addition to this economic picture, however, there existed what I shall call a ‘parallel cultural exchange’ between Britain and the Caribbean which was a very significant aspect of this cross-cultural relationship. Through an examination of cultural images of the Caribbean in the diaries of visitors to the islands in the eighteenth century, as well as representations of the Caribbean planters in fiction, it can be argued that British culture became equally as dependent on a cultural image of the Caribbean as it was on the wealth generated through trade. The Caribbean was inscribed as a site of colonial Otherness, both a reflection and a sign of difference, through which it consolidated its own cultural and national identity in the wake of the

Act of Union in 1707. According to Linda Colley, “They [the British] came to define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores” (6). It can be suggested that, more than any other region in the eighteenth century, the Caribbean provided this reflection.

The Caribbean became a cultural symbol of carnivalesque transgression for British culture in order to provide a reassuring referent against which Britain’s cultural progress and self-satisfied images of control could be validated. Britishness evolved in the eighteenth century as an image of imperial glory and morality in contrast to the Caribbean, through the use of metaphors of carnival and transgression. In turn, the Caribbean was defined as an atavistic region with a medieval identity that became a cultural gauge against which the positive projection of Britain’s cultural evolution could be measured. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival was the unofficial, sensual second life of the people in medieval society, which was expressed through a set of festivals that existed on the boundaries of legitimacy within a feudal structure, and which gave perspective on and release from the strict social organisation (213-221). The reading of the Caribbean as the space of the Carnival ‘second life’ that Bakhtin describes is complex primarily because, although Carnival was excessive and full of the imagery of violence and excess, the Caribbean was seen to be in a perpetual state of transgression and misrule.

As early as 1655, Henry Whistler’s journal (of Barbados) gave an account of the English settlers in Barbados that, typical in its content, did much to shape the nascent image of the colonial community.

The genterey heare doth liue far better than ours doue in England: thay haue most of them 100 or 2 or 3 of slaues apes whou they command as they pleas: heare they may say what they haue is thayer oune: and they haue that Liberty of contienc which wee soe long haue in England foght for: But they doue abus it....This Illand is a Dunghill wharone England doth cast forth its rubidg: Rodgs and hors and such like peopel are thos which are gennerally Broght heare. A Rogde in England will hardly make a cheater heare: a Baud brought ouer puts one a demuor comportmont,
a whore if handsome makes a wife for sume rich planter. (146)

Whistler illustrated the fact that these rogues and low characters that populated Barbados were actually more fortunate than decent Englishmen because they had religious freedom. In addition he outlined the paradox that although they had extensive liberties, they enslaved hundreds of Africans who were denied even the most basic freedom. Half a century on, the poet Thomas Walduck demonstrated how little this image had changed and described the Caribbean, like many of his contemporaries, as a site of hedonism and debauchery.

Barbarity and ill got wealth thy glory
All Sodom’s sins are centred in thy heart
Death is thy look and Death in Every part. (qtd. in Dunn 340)

Through his descriptions of Barbados as a locus of sin and greed it is clear that Walduck reflected the views of his metropolitan readership. His critical comments expressed a new moral censorship of the Caribbean that was current in the early part of the eighteenth century.

This image of the planters as diametrically opposed to the new values of Britain was successively compounded through various accounts of the lewdness of these English “wild men” who were morally corrupt and this continues, unchanged, to the end of the eighteenth century. The West Indies, shown in Daniel Mackinnen’s *A Tour through the British West Indies in the Years 1802 and 1803* (1804) appeared to be both corrupting and dangerous: “The climate, and perhaps their associations with the blacks, has not a little relaxed in them the strength and integrity of the British moral character” (19). Add to this, the widespread tales of piracy and the stories of sexual relations between the European population and the slaves, and it is clear how the planters came to occupy a place of transgressive immorality in the psyche of eighteenth century society. Nevertheless, this was a multi-faceted identity. On one hand a negative picture of Europe reduced to a state of semi-barbarism, whilst on the other they enviably appeared to have great freedoms, not only in terms of sexuality and lack of moral censure, but also in the opportunity to gain immense wealth. Therefore, The West Indies became a rather complex site for the British. They were representative of her wealth and global dominion, but also of physical instability and excess, and those Britons
who colonised the Caribbean were socially marked and transformed through the imperial process.

The accounts and experiences of contemporary travellers to the Caribbean, such as J.B. Moreton, Lady Maria Nugent and Matthew Lewis both engendered and supported the image of the Caribbean as a site of cultural anteriority. They presented the Caribbean through a vocabulary of medieval discourse complete with feudal lords and carnivals. In addition, as they carried with them Enlightenment notions of the linear progress of humanity, the experience of the Caribbean for these travellers was negotiated through a temporal, as well as a geographic, displacement.

Although Lady Maria’s journal was a factual depiction of her years as the colonial Governor’s wife, her whole account was underpinned by the sense of unreality, fear and temporal disruption she associated with Jamaica. She was entering a site of carnival and feudal masquerade, which contrasted strongly with her own notions of propriety and acceptability. This was made explicit from the beginning of her text when she arrived in Jamaica to be greeted by Lord Balcarres, the incumbent Governor. His description seemed to suggest that she had entered into a carnival world-turned-upside-down. Lord Balcarres’s official residency was filthy, as he was himself:

I wish Lord. B. would wash his hands, and use a nail brush, for the black edges of his nails really make me sick. He has, besides, an extraordinary propensity to dip his fingers into every dish. Yesterday, he absolutely helped himself to some fricassee with his dirty finger and thumb. (1:25)

Nugent depicted him as a repulsive figure who was not only of doubtful personal hygiene, but really seemed to be a ridiculous caricature, followed around by his “extraordinary pet ... a little black pig that goes grunting about to everyone for a tit-bit”(26). Lord Balcarres was also known to be a single man who had a reputation for womanising and having sexual relations with black women. Indeed his carnival-king image was outrageous in Nugent’s British moral view. She mentioned that she was disturbed and affronted by his behaviour which contradicted her own expectations of a British official, and voiced her complaint thus:
[I was] left alone part of the morning, with Major Gould who entertained me with an account of Lord B's domestic conduct, and his ménage here altogether. Never was there a more profligate and disgusting scene, and I really think he must have been more than half mad. (1:87)

Apparently, Balcarres had been living like a debauched planter, and Nugent revealed a very British disgust at his lack of self-control.

Nugent's emphasis on the excessive consumption of food and drink in Creole society was also another indication of the way in which she read the society as a carnivalesque environment. In fact, for Nugent, the planters seemed to be in a perpetual state of saturnalia that was deeply offensive to her concepts of Protestantism, restraint and sobriety; and the Jamaican habit of loading the table was one example of their lack of civilised restraint. This contrasts strongly with the opinions of the Jamaican planter Bryan Edwards who in his own account of Jamaican life of the period read this excess as a sign of their innate generosity (2:8). However, for Nugent, such propensity for consumption was clearly un-British or rather hearkened back to an antiquated time when such feasting was acceptable:

I don't wonder now at the fever the people here suffer from: such eating and drinking I never saw! Such loads of all sorts of high, rich and seasoned things, and really gallons of wine and mixed liquors as they drink! I observed some of the party, today, eat of a late breakfast as if they had never eaten before: a dish of tea, another of coffee, a bumper of claret, another large one of hock-negus; then Madeira, sangaree, hot and cold meat, stews and fries, hot and cold fish pickled and plain, peppers, ginger sweetmeats, acid fruits, sweet jellies— in short, it was all as astonishing as it was disgusting. (1:135)

Her whole account was littered with depictions of excess, "a profuse and overloaded table, and a shoulder of wild boar stewed, with forced meat, etc, as an ornament to the table. Sick as it all made me" (1:156). Nugent’s seemingly endless cycle of breakfasts and dinners are described as unrelentingly oppressive:
Our dinner, at 6, was really so profuse that it is worth describing. The first course was entirely of fish, excepting the jerked hog, in the centre, which is the way of dressing it by the Maroons. There was also a black crab pepper-pot, for which I asked for the receipt—... The second course was of turtle, mutton, beef, turkey, goose, ducks, chickens, capons, ham, tongue, crab patties—etc, etc.—The third course was composed of sweets and fruits of all kinds.—I was really sicker than usual, at seeing such a profusion of eatables. (1:169)

However the link between this over abundance and the commonplace imagery of feudal banqueting tables was clear in Nugent’s work. What she suggested was that the Creole was living in the Dark-Ages, in a culture that was ante-British, ante-modern and ante-Enlightenment. For Mikhail Bakhtin, Voltaire’s “enlightened” reading of Rabelais precisely reflects this wholesale disgust and rejection of the medieval pleasure of wallowing and luxuriating in excess and superfluity. He suggests that the thinkers of the eighteenth century were unwilling to embrace bodily pleasure and that with the progress of modern rationalism, the Carnival, and any related celebration of the sensual world, were rejected and read as intolerable transgressions of social values. According to Bakhtin:

The Enlighteners had a lack of historical sense, an abstract and rationalist utopianism, a mechanistic conception of matter, a tendency to abstract generalization and typification on one hand and to documentation on the other hand. They were quite incapable of understanding and appreciating Rabelais; to them he was a typical representative of ‘the wild and barbaric sixteenth century’. This point of view was clearly expressed by Voltaire. (116)

What is significant is that Nugent read the Creole society in a similar way; she viewed it as a barbaric society that often moved her to physical nausea. In her criticism of Creole culture Nugent demonstrated those elements of Caribbean society that reflected Rabelaisian immoderation. The similarity is striking. Her nationalist British cultural agenda served to dissociate her from the Creole culture, which was described as decayed and scandalous and, most importantly,
discordant with modern thinking. Nugent’s commentary, like that of Voltaire with regard to Rabelais, was characteristic of modern enlightened attitudes. Bakhtin notes that “In the sixteenth century everybody laughed at Rabelais’ novel, but nobody despised it. Now, in the eighteenth century, the gay, century-old laughter becomes something despicable” (117). However, Nugent’s reading of the Creole world as disgusting, firmly associated the Caribbean planter culture with those very elements of festive folk culture which were eradicated from notions of modern British identity.

The problematics raised in Nugent’s rejection of the Creole excesses of consumption were also extended to a criticism of sexual depravity which she observed in Jamaica:

white men of all descriptions, married or single, live in a state of licentiousness with their female slaves; and until a great reformation takes place on their part, neither religion, decency nor morality, can be established among the Negroes. Their example must be the worst possible to these poor creatures. (1:87)

The moral laxity of white Creole culture and the complexity of an inter-racial society were a great source of anxiety for Lady Maria. As the governor’s wife she was expected to entertain “the black, brown and yellow ladies of the house” in her dressing room as was customary (1:234). This Nugent suggested was a moral compromise and semi-acknowledgement of the mistresses and the illegitimate offspring of the Creoles. Their lack of self-control was chiefly blamed on the climate, and Nugent fed into this common belief that the hot weather loosened morals:

It is extraordinary to witness the immediate effect that the climate and habit of living in this country have upon the minds and manners of the Europeans, particularly of the lower orders. In the upper ranks they become indolent and inactive, regardless of everything except eating and drinking and indulging themselves, and are almost entirely under the dominion of their mulatto favourites. (1:209)

Nugent’s sentiments were echoed by other diarists of the period: J. B. Moreton, Edward Long and Bryan Edwards. Indeed Moreton explicitly blamed the climate for, quite literally, melting the
moral of the British, “how imperceptibly, like wax softened by heat, they melt into their [the Creoles] manners and customs” (1:78). However Nugent was also sensitive to the carnivalesque challenge that miscegenation raised, and there was even an element of ironic reversal in her depiction of an attractive black woman whom she refers to as a “black sultana” who was pregnant for the fourth time to an ugly Scottish overseer. She described him as “about fifty, clumsy, ill-made and dirty,” and adds that he had a “dingy, sallow-brown complexion, and only two yellow discoloured tusks by way of teeth” (2:66). Nugent also blamed sexual laxity on a general lack of Protestant religious education, and she lamented the lack of religion which was a strong part of her own national identity: “It is indeed melancholy to see the general disregard of both religion and morality, throughout the island” (1:234). Nugent was outraged at the lack of respect the church was accorded and described how the planters, when in church, talked continuously and only attended infrequently, and as a matter of display. This was in total contrast with her own, very British confidence in the principles of the Protestant faith. The Creoles were heathenish, irreligious and indifferent to the British fusion of national and religious identity. Again this underlines the primitive nature of Caribbean society for Lady Maria Nugent and highlights how the Caribbean constituted a site of chaos, a pre-reformed medieval turmoil, in which the order of British sobriety was disrupted and flouted.

Through depictions such as that found in Lady Maria Nugent’s journal, the Caribbean was inscribed as the space of transgression and carnival for Britain, operating at the margins of the imperial culture, both geographically as well as psychologically. It acted as a contained and authorised space in the British psyche, which provided a parody of the rules and restrictions of Britishness, and also as a site in which the repressed aspects of Britishness, such as violence and hedonism could be exercised vicariously. This ultimately served to prop-up the fantasy of British national identity. In their book *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White also note the way in which positive social definitions are made through the exclusion of the transgressive. “The Bourgeois subject continuously defined and redefined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as ‘low’ -as dirty, repulsive, noisy contaminating. The low was internalised under the sign of negation and disgust” (191). Stallybrass and White’s point can be directly applied to the concept of British identity, which could divorce itself from contradictions by associating destabilising impulses
with another culture outside its physical boundaries, and directly on to the Caribbean. Carnival in the Caribbean was not a periodic expression of excess and hedonism, not the space of second life to which Bakhtin refers in his discussions of European culture, but a general condition of life. What the medieval European society experienced as a festive and potentially destabilising release from the strictures of feudal existence, was the distorted reality of the Caribbean society, with its continuously overloaded tables and everyday violence, and in consequence it became far more sinister and destructive.

What we are presented with in the accounts of Lady Maria Nugent, Matthew Lewis, Edward Long and Bryan Edwards are recordings of a medieval society in which the carnival transgressions had overcome the boundaries, and became a reality, accepted as everyday Caribbean life, rather than confined to specific times and occasions. The Carnival-kings on their estates, the great planters like Rose-Fuller and the Beckfords, held court in the most carnivalesque manner. Their houses were often ill-constructed and the households were in disorder, but their reputation for feasting and drinking was exemplary. According to Bryan Edwards:

There are some peculiarities in the habits of the white inhabitants, which cannot fail to catch the eye of the European newly arrived; one of which is the contrast between the general plenty and magnificence of their tables (at least in Jamaica) and the meanness of their houses and apartments; it being no uncommon thing to find, at the country habitation of the planter, a splendid side-board loaded with plate, and the choicest wines, a table covered with the finest damask, and a dinner of perhaps sixteen or twenty covers; and all this in a hovel not superior to an English barn. (2:9-10)

Even whilst trying to defend this position, Bryan Edwards demonstrates the planter’s social dependence on excessive consumption. It is interesting that Edwards’ description of the genial and generous Creole host with his overloaded table and dilapidated barn of a house mirrored the popular European image of the medieval carnival court with its emphasis on consumption and immediate gratification of appetite.
Indeed, these images of Caribbean transgression were also familiar in metropolitan fiction, particularly in plays that were performed on the contemporary London stage. The Creole objects of Nugent’s disgust were adapted into characters of derision and comedy. One of the most popular Caribbean characters that would have been familiar to an eighteenth century readership was that of the sugar planter who, having newly arrived in England, creates comic mayhem through his lack of social restraint and inability to ‘read’ the codes of British culture. Samuel Foote’s play, *The Patron* (1765), a comic satire on the way in which money and fashion are corrupting the arts in his contemporary society, offers an account of the reasons why British culture is suffering. The ‘Dedication to Lord Granville Gower’ is explicit: “The following little comedy…is calculated to expose the frivolity and ignorance of the pretenders to learning with the insolence and vanity of their superficial and illiberal protectors” (1). He introduces a caricature of a typical West Indian planter, Sir Peter Pepperpot, who is loud, vulgar and disgusting, with no redeeming features, and who is interestingly described in the play as an “absolute Rabelais”(3). It is notable how the stereotype of the Creole as alien is perpetuated in this, and many other texts of the period. Richard Cumberland’s play *The West Indian* (1771) provides another good example of the characterisation of the Caribbean planter, as does Tobias Smollet’s more critical depiction of planters in his novel, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771).

The transgressive image of the Creole was also extended to debate the image of gender in fiction. The Caribbean was also seen as a site wherein the natural order of the sexes was disrupted and the boundaries of femininity and female identity were not only challenged, but inverted. J.B. Moreton confirmed this image of the Creole woman as a duplicitous fiend, suggesting that women of the Caribbean were never what they seem to be:

Young ladies who have been confined to the narrow limits of Jamaica from their infancy are soft, innocent, ambitious, flirting play-things; and in more particular manner, those who are retired in the country; when they dress they decorate themselves elegantly; abroad they appear as neat as if they came out of band boxes, lovely and engaging:- at home diametrically the reverse. If you surprise them, as I have often done, you will be convinced of this assertion, that Ovid, with
all his metamorphoses, could not match such transformations. In stead of well shaped, mild angelic-looking creatures you beheld abroad, you will find, perhaps, a clumsy greasy tom-boy, or a paper-faced skeleton, romping or stretching and lolling from sofa to sofa in a dirty confused hall or piazza, with a parcel of black wenches, learning or singing obscene or filthy songs, and dancing to the tunes. (108-9)

Moreton’s account highlighted what he felt to be the—often disguised—carnival nature of the Creole women who lived a double-life. In public appearing as demure and delicate stereotypes of femininity whilst in reality, they are drunken, lascivious fiends. This defeminising of the Creole woman strongly echoed the carnival precedent of cross-dressing, where the outward appearance of a woman belied the man beneath. Sarah Scott’s novel Sir George Ellison (1766) is a good example of this questioning of the gender roles, because in this novel Sir George and his wife exchange gender positions. He is sentimental, emotional and is often moved to tears, whereas she is hard, cruel and seems to lack any real tenderness. Mrs. Ellison, a Creole plantation owner of considerable wealth is described as agreeable and, “although the bloom of youth was past, she was still handsome” (14). However, as Scott is at great pains to emphasise, Mrs. Ellison was not only hard hearted with regard to the sufferings of her slaves, but is also scheming and manipulative. Mr. Ellison’s marriage is a disappointment to him, and like many sentimental heroines he finds himself not in a partnership of mutual sensitivities and respect, but caught in a relationship that resembles a commercial arrangement, in which his wife feels herself to be the usurped manager. Before marrying Ellison, she had run her own estates and managed her own finances and resents his interference in her property, and in the text is demonstrably more masculine than her husband. As Scott remarks on their family, “in theirs woman was certainly not the weaker vessel, since she was above those soft and timorous whims which so much affected him” (25). This carnivalesque reversal of the sexes is made clear when Sir George attempts to repeal the punishment of slaves on their estate:

Had you dear been present when they threw themselves at my feet, embraced my knees and lifting their streaming eyes to heaven, prayed with inexpressible
fervency to their supposed gods to shower down their choicest blessings on me, you would have wept with me. (21-22)

This stereotypical feminine outburst of emotion however is contrasted with the response of his very dry-eyed wife, who simply concludes that the slaves were just relieved at having escaped a deserved punishment that her “weak and simple” husband could not tolerate.

Sir George is increasingly horrified by his wife’s unfeminine and unfeeling responses, but concludes that having been born in the barbarous Caribbean, she cannot know any better. He claims that, “Education has perverted her understanding, or in some degree suppressed the best sensations of the heart” (56). As a Creole woman her environment is shown to have destroyed her gentleness and compassion. She is not only de-feminised, she is carnivalised into the figure of an unnatural woman who disrupts the natural order of gender and society. There are many such examples of these masculinised, Creole women in eighteenth century British literature. Isaac Bickerstaff’s play entitled Love in the City (1767) extends the commonly held perception of this characteristic through his experiments with femininity and barbarism. He creates a young, pretty and beguiling Creole character who, whilst looking like a typically beautiful young lady, has a propensity for demonic cruelty with regard to her slaves. Priscilla is impervious to the suffering she inflicts. She openly states that she sees nothing wrong with having her slave “horse-whipped till there is not one bit of flesh left on your bones” (9). Priscilla defends her position by saying, “she is but a Neger. If she was at home at our plantation, she would find the difference; we make no account of them there at all: if I had a fancy for one of their skins I should not think much of taking it!”(10). Therefore the symbol of naïve feminine virtue, so important in eighteenth century literature of sensibility, is effectively presented as being deformed by her Creole heritage. The young Creole woman is a whip-wielding tyrant, dramatically juxtaposed with her feminine British counterparts.

Through various forms of literature produced in the eighteenth century, it can be seen that the Caribbean became a reference point in British culture for the carnival and transgressive, and this archive would be drawn on repeatedly to examine the hidden side of the British psyche; those carnal impulses that were taboo for the British to display. Jane Eyre (1847) for example, showed how wild or passionate urges
loaded with implied sexuality could be conveniently located in the character of the Creole, Bertha Mason. Charlotte Bronte could therefore introduce the theme of sex and violence into her text, but at a convenient distance from her heroine, through the use of the ‘code of the Caribbean.’ It is because Bertha was a Caribbean Creole that her profile as a wild raving beast was implicitly understood by the reader—without the need for too much explanation on Bronte’s part. This image was unquestionably accepted as part of the cultural code of the Caribbean: a code of Otherness which symbolised the carnival forces that British culture had suppressed and, at the same time, equated with depravity, hedonism and violence.

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TURNING A BLIND EYE: HOMOSEXUALITY IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

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In Caribbean Literature, the homosexuality of Afro-Caribbean males is seldom mentioned. Moreover, it is often dismissed by authors with pejorative references, such as “the batty man,” “he like man,” “boongy bandit,” and “auntie man.” The “auntie man” is what Richard Burton in *Afro-Creole* describes as “the ‘anti-man,’ the negation of everything it is to be a man” (164). However, Jamaica Kincaid’s biographical text *My Brother* attempts to break from this tradition and examine the complexity of Afro-Caribbean male homosexuality and the homophobic society in which it evolves, an environment that frequently pressures gay men to keep their same-sex relationships covert. Similarly, in *A Small Gathering of Bones*, Patricia Powell focuses upon how the AIDS virus affects the gay community and why homosexual men feel pressured to marry women in order to establish a “safe” cover for the homophobic Caribbean society.

In *My Brother*, Jamaica Kincaid recounts the life of her brother, Devon Drew, who died of AIDS on January 16, 1996, at the age of thirty-three. In particular, she explores how Devon hid his homosexuality and led a double life; he masked his same-sex relationships by having frequent sexual encounters with women. Kincaid often portrays Devon as reckless and irresponsible, as a person who engages in unprotected sexual behavior with numerous women. Even though he is HIV-positive, he asks one of his doctor’s nurses out for a date and flirts with European women at the beach. In one instance, he sleeps with a woman from Guiana and does not tell her that he has the HIV virus. Devon states that “he c[an] not live without sex” and is “unmoved” when his social worker “ask[s] him if he would like to have that done to him, [be with] someone infected with the HIV virus and knowing it hav[e] sex with him without telling him” (66).

Kincaid observes that “if by some miracle Devon could be cured of his disease he would not change his ways” (195) and that he has “the face of someone who had lived in extremes, sometimes a saint, sometimes a sinner” (83). At various instances in the text,
however, he does show some responsible sexual behavior. For example, Devon promises his doctor that he will be more careful (68) and wants to have a family and “settle down” (57). Unfortunately, this change of behavior is short-lived and Kincaid thinks that her brother lives to have his desires fulfilled; he has no purpose and only knows how to die: “Devon,” she says, “lived in death” (88). For Kincaid, Devon’s identity is “a compulsion to express himself through his penis” (70). She expresses anger towards Devon’s failure to heed her warnings of becoming infected with the HIV virus and recalls his belief that “he would never get such a stupid thing [the HIV virus.] [He says,] (‘Me no get dat chupidness, man’)” (8). His irresponsibility and failure to positively change his life pushes Kincaid to admit that “she did not love him” and “missed seeing him suffer” (58, 57).

It is only towards the end of the novel after Devon’s death when Kincaid seems more compassionate towards Devon. She realizes that Devon’s promiscuity masked his love for men and his fear of being viewed as “unmanly.” Kincaid discovers this information at a book tour for her text *The Autobiography of My Mother* in Chicago when she sees an Antiguan woman who looks familiar. Kincaid recalls the incident:

I said, “Did you know my brother?” And she said yes. And then she said that she had been a lesbian woman living in Antigua and how deeply sad it made her to see the scorn and derision heaped on the homosexual man; homosexual men had no place to go in Antigua, she said, no place to simply meet and be with each other and not be afraid; and she had opened up her home and made it known that every Sunday men who loved other men could come to her house in the afternoon and enjoy each other’s company. My brother, she said, was a frequent visitor to her house. […] On Sundays men who were homosexuals came to her house, a safe place to be with each other, and my brother who had just died was often at her house, not as a spectator of homosexual life but as a participant in homosexual life. (161)

At first, Kincaid is confused that a stranger knows more about her brother than she does. She then feels pain that her brother’s life ended tragically because he was never able to reveal his complete self. In the
following excerpt, Kincaid examines the complexity of her feelings for her brother:

A great sadness overcame me, and the source of the sadness was the deep feeling I had always had about him: that he had died without ever understanding or knowing, or being able to let the world in which he lived know, who he was; that who he really was—not a single sense of identity but all the complexities of who he was—he could not express fully. (162)

Kincaid surmises that it is very likely that if Devon had made his homosexual relationships public, he would have risked social alienation and isolation in Antigua. She notes Devon’s “fear of being laughed at, his fear of meeting with the scorn of the people he knew best were overwhelming and he could not live with all of it openly” (162). At this moment, the full brunt of her brother’s other life becomes conscious to her—the flirting with the nurses in the doctor’s offices “must have been especially painful” Kincaid recalls because “in it his secret of not really wanting to seduce them, really wanting to seduce someone who was not at all like them, a man” (164). She recognizes what she calls the “doubleness of life” and how this must have caused Devon anxiety, a pain she was not cognizant of until after his death.

As Kincaid consciously examines the signs of Devon’s homosexuality, such as his previous trip with an older man to Trinidad, she makes some significant connections—especially by seeing that Devon’s homosexuality and her writing could be understood in the same way, thus constructing a link:

His homosexuality is one thing, and my becoming a writer is another altogether, but this truth is not lost to me: I could not have become a writer while living among the people I knew best, I could not have become myself while living among the people I knew best—[...] his life unfolded and there was everything to see and there was nothing to see; in his life there had been no flowering. (162-163)

Kincaid acknowledges she could not have developed into a successful author in her homeland of Antigua. Likewise, Devon could not become his real self within such a homophobic society. Kincaid laments that her
brother never left this community, and that only she was given this opportunity.

Kincaid also realizes the social stigma attached to homosexuality in Antigua. Generally, the Afro-Caribbean community is perceived as being extremely homophobic and rejecting of gays and lesbians. Several scholars have examined homophobia in the Afro-Caribbean society and have explained society’s intolerance of gays and lesbians based on several factors. According to Thomas Glave, one is the significant presence of Western Christian religion (viii). In this context, selected examples of biblical scripture are interpreted to reinforce homophobic attitudes. In addition, many negative stereotypes and sexual myths exist about Afro-Caribbean men. This rejection increases the pressure on gays and lesbians to keep their same-sex relationships hidden and to adopt a behavior which is in accordance with the norm. Hence, Afro-Caribbean men may want to project their “normalcy” by seemingly accepting the dominant culture’s heterosexuality.

In her book *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation* Sandra Pouchet Paquet questions Kincaid’s intent of waiting until the end of the text to discuss her brother’s homosexuality. She asks, “It is homophobic? Or is it the reverse, a refusal to link Devon’s self-destructiveness to his homosexuality?” (253). While *My Brother* does not completely focus upon Devon’s homosexuality—Kincaid examines a multitude of issues, such as her conflict with her mother and her disgust with Antigua—the text does, however, examine Devon’s life in its entirety. It is quite possible that since Kincaid only discovered his homosexuality late after his death, she put this information in correspondence to her brother’s chronology—beginning with Devon’s life in Antigua, his diagnosis of being HIV-positive, then having AIDS, his eventual death, and lastly the revelation of his hidden life. Kincaid’s real accomplishment though, resides in successfully drawing attention to the problematic nature of openly adopting a homosexual identity in view of the existing prejudice and antagonism towards gays, as well as examining the realistic social and psychological stressors which are components of living in a homophobic society. In Caribbean literature, this important issue is often not analyzed and commonly neglected.

*A Small Gathering of Bones* by Patricia Powell continues the exploration of homosexuality in the Caribbean. Powell notes in a 1996
interview with Faith Smith in Callaloo that the inspiration for the novel came from “a Jamaican friend who lived in New York and [...] contracted AIDS and died” (327) and that she wrote this text “to transform that grief” (327). The text examines the life of Dale Singleton, a gay man living in Jamaica in 1978. As Dale discovers that his long-term partner Nevin Morgan is unfaithful, he also learns that his close friend Ian Kaysen is dying and has a mysterious disease which is unknown to doctors. Although unnamed in the text, Ian’s disease is the AIDS virus and is starting to transform the socio-cultural dynamics of Jamaica.

Because of his problematic relationship with Nevin, Dale starts an affair with the married Alexander Pilot, who has a family-man image to preserve. Ian voices his condemnation for gay men who hide behind the façade of marriage: “‘Too scared to come out, them hide behind wife’s frock tail. Breed up the place with plenty children, people think them is real man. While my tail out on the line, them still keep work. What a life. Nice and easy. And you add to it’” (29). His concern also reveals the problematic silence gay men endure about their sexuality and the societal rewards homosexual men receive when they stay in the closet. Keeping homosexuality a secret avoids the derision of being considered “‘funny that way’” (41) and is culturally reinforced. For while Alexander loves men, he admits to Dale that he would “‘not really’” be opposed to his son’s being a “‘batty man,’” but would rather “‘have him [as a gay man] get married. Have a family’” (40).

Powell examines society’s disapproval of same-sex relationships. For instance, Nevin and Dale are a couple of five years and live next to Nevin’s parents. However, Nevin’s father, Mr. Morgan, will not acknowledge Dale as Nevin’s partner and he “‘kiss[es] his teeth and wheel[s] off in his chair’” whenever Dale greets him (13). Ian’s mother also disowns and denounces him because of his homosexuality. In fact, she rejects him after he reveals his homosexual identity to her: “‘When your child choose a course God didn’t cut out for him, you dish him dirt. [...] You wash your hands clean. You banish him from your life’” (37). While Mrs. Kaysen denies Ian’s existence, he is unable to accept her disapproval and tries to achieve her acceptance. For instance, Ian knocks repeatedly at her gates even though she does not answer; he sends her extravagant gifts, but they are returned unopened; and he becomes baptized. All of these efforts fail to change Mrs. Kaysen’s position: “‘I never did like you from the beginning ... Even then you
were no damn good. Should’ve followed me heart and put a blasted end to you, then’” (22). At the end of the text, she literally destroys her son by pushing him so fiercely that he succumbs to death.

As the novel progresses, there is also the threat of homosexual men being under constant observation and danger. Ian is frequently victimized by other men because of his homosexuality and is aware of the risk of getting assaulted physically: “You have to take chances. Can’t just spend your life coop up inside the blasted house” (81). Dale also faces physical and verbal violence: “the steel-toed tips of police shoes elbow him in the sides [...] [and] his friends pile ridicule upon ridicule on his curved shoulders” (10). They both accept the peril of living in a homophobic society, yet do not fully acknowledge the injustice of the abuse. Members of the community also cross Ian and Dale’s privacy to morally assess their sexuality. For instance, Dale intuits that his aunt, though fond of him, attempts to “read his diary when [he is not] there and search through his clothes” (25). In addition, Miss Dimple, Ian’s caretaker, seems to “listen [to Ian and Dale] somewhere close disapprovingly, even though [Dale] could still hear her downstairs panker-panker-panker in the kitchen” (92). This continuous scrutiny leaves Dale in a state of recurring panic and he fears that his homosexuality will be known to his church congregation: “Him had to leave the church. It was impossible to continue on like this. His days heaped in hypocrisy. In lies” (112).

In her review of A Small Gathering of Bones, writer and literary critic Opal Palmer Adisa accuses Powell of depicting the majority of the homosexual characters in this text in a stereotypical manner. For instance, she refers to the apparent lack of the characters’ frustration and anger with a society that disapproves of their sexual orientation and encourages a closeted lifestyle. She also points to the stereotyping of gay men as having multiple sexual partners or casual sex. Hence, she finds that these characters stereotypically propagate AIDS and fear in the homophobic society. Even with these criticisms, Patricia Powell should be recognized for exploring the complex issue of homosexuality and the hiding of same-sex relationships in Caribbean society. Outside of Kincaid’s My Brother, few Caribbean authors approach these subjects.

Jamaica Kincaid’s My Brother and Patricia Powell’s A Small Gathering of Bones examine the lives of homosexual men in Afro-Caribbean society. Both texts also explore the pressure gay men feel to
integrate into homophobic society by leading a heterosexual existence and keeping their relationships hidden by marrying women or going to “safe” residences, where they can love each other openly and without fear of ridicule. These texts never lose sight of society’s denial and stigmatization of homosexual men—especially in the Afro-Caribbean community, which often does not allow for the acknowledgment of their existence. In a way, the texts of Kincaid and Powell have paved the way for a deeper analysis of homosexuality and its various issues in Caribbean literature.

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"SHAVE 'EM DRY": LUCILLE BOGAN'S QUEER BLUES

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I love the blues...they're so seditious...I don't care what they're talking about—the subtext is always about sex.

Sonya Sanchez, Regis University poetry reading, April 21, 2005

This epigraph by Sonya Sanchez draws on a long tradition of thinking of the blues, and particularly women’s blues, as veiling a raucously sexual and subversive content. But the sex exulted in blues written by both men and women is almost exclusively heterosexual and mainstream. Conversely, blueswoman Lucille Bogan, (also singing under the pseudonym Bessie Jackson) resisted the normative, and as a result, her story has been lost to the Harlem Renaissance tradition. In her blues, Lucille Bogan unflinchingly explodes a well-guarded attachment to (hetero) normative sexual practices. Indeed, in the world of Bogan’s blues, nothing is held sacred, and little is coded. Whether Bogan is refashioning the whore’s apology to a boast about “craving” her wares or envisioning a queer world where pronouns are not sutured to sexual identity, her blues speak the non-regulated erotic in no uncertain terms. Recovering and accessing Bogan's work, then, is critical to a more nuanced study of the Harlem Renaissance. The impulse to recover this neglected body of work is not based solely on the fact that Bogan’s work can seem transgressive, but also because it expands our understanding of the regulatory impulses surrounding the articulation of sex during this compelling period in American literature. Using the well-worn term “transgressive” mandates an explanation—for this study, I will employ both senses of the word. That is, I will consider “transgression” as an action, to pass over or move beyond socially-regulated boundaries as well as the sense of “transgression” as a violation or an act of disobedience.

Before moving to an exploration of Bogan’s songs, it is important to also clarify the term “queer,” as Bogan’s work, I argue, embodies the term. Over the last two decades, the word queer has gone through a linguistic reclamation. While queer was employed as a barb in the early twentieth century to describe someone as not “normal,” or not heterosexual, it has been strategically reappropriated, first by the activist community (including ACT UP and Queer Nation) and later by
academics. The goal of both constituencies was to remove the sting or negative connotations of *queer* by tactically re-embracing what was once a slur or epithet. In the process, they infused *queer* with new meaning.

*Queer* is now used as a noun, a verb, and an adjective, and as such has acquired different meanings. Used adjectively, *queer* is primarily an umbrella term for gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transsexual; to describe those who inhabit spaces outside of society’s idea of the sexual normative. In the nominative, *queer* also resides in identity politics; however, contemporary queer theorists have made a break from essentialist politics of identity and sexuality. *Queer* has come to mean more than simply a shorthand term for the gay community, and it is its use as a verb and within the phrase *queer theory* that I find most provocative. In an archival sense, the verb *to queer* is first to articulate what is historically considered “normal” with sexuality or gender, and then to return to the text having repositioned the normative, thus also having a context for what was cast as “abnormal.” Yet, Lucille Bogan’s songs do not require this from the critic. Makers of black culture, like Bogan, were articulating queer and operating in the queer long before queer theorists entered the scene, thus my job is not to map a queer reading onto Bogan’s work but rather to examine the ways her songs frame and enunciate queer desire.

Clearly, Lucille Bogan is not the only blues woman of the Harlem Renaissance to sing about same-sex desire. Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith both toy with lesbian themes in their music. But neither Rainey nor Smith actually challenges the social order where we find heterosexuality planted firmly in the center. Smith’s and Rainey’s allusions to queer sex are meant to titillate, not agitate. In fact, this is what distinguishes Rainey and Smith as non-transgressive, and visibly in opposition to Bogan. Perhaps daring for the time, “Prove it on Me Blues” (1928) is often cited as emblematic of the Harlem Renaissance’s riotous sexual freedom. When calling forth an unruly and hedonistic image from the period, Rainey’s song is referenced again and again. “Prove it on me” has become something of a theme song for the queering of Harlem, yet the song simultaneously embraces and dodges lesbianism. Rainey and her contemporaries modishly don a sexually radical image, but do not swerve far outside the normative. Unlike blues outlaw Lucille Bogan, they neither rattle the heteronormative paradigm at the center of critical studies of the blues.
as text, nor challenge the demand for coded sexuality to avoid feeding the image of black women as hyper-sexual and erotic. Eric Garber notes that in the Harlem Renaissance lesbian desire was mostly used as distinguishing prop:

Though rarely identified as homosexual, same sex relationships were fluid in Harlem. Men and women were expected to marry. But in their circle, performers such as Bessie Smith … Ma Rainey … Alberta Hunter, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Josephine Baker and Ethel Waters all cultivated a lesbian or bisexual image. For female jazz and blues singers, being attracted to other women was chic (53).

In their “chic” claim to fugitive sexuality, these popular singers dared the listener to “prove it on [them]”—but indeed the listener cannot. The lyrics only bandy with queerness. These artists most often place heterosexual desire at the center of their blues with countless songs evoking the trials of hetero love. “Ma” Rainey laments that her useless “man leaves at midnight: don’t come back ‘til noon” and then later exults in the good sex that follows their clash, while Bessie Smith mourns that her “new man had left [her]” (220, 239) and quickly amends this dirge by touting his sexual accolades. Fringe sexuality was, for these songwriters, actual fringe: a costume, a decorative trimming not meant to be taken too seriously.

Perhaps this accounts for the surprising absence of critical commentary on Lucille Bogan, whose extensive repertoire of blues songs surpasses even Rainey’s. Composing substantially more songs than any of her female peers, Bogan has nonetheless been excluded from discussions of the blues, and particularly, from acknowledgment as a notable figure among the classic blues women. Musicologists and feminist critics alike have focused on the substantial contributions made by Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, and Ida Cox, and yet Lucille Bogan’s input exceeded that of her female contemporaries. Rainey, the uncrowned “queen” of the blues often collaborated with other musicians, and had only a handful of songs credited to her individually. Bessie Smith, touted as the “empress” of the blues, was best known not for her songwriting but for her interpretation of songs written by mostly male composers. On the other hand, Bogan exclusively wrote and sang her own material, with at least thirty-seven songs to her credit.
At the same time, Bogan’s lyrics are sex positive (and not only for those who inhabit the blessed heteronormative sphere), unapologetic and explicit in ways that pre-suppose Audre Lorde’s important essay “The Uses of the Erotic.” In this pivotal essay, Lorde illuminates the importance, physically, spiritually, and politically, for women to embrace, not shun, articulations of their bodies and sexual desires. Envisioning a fearlessly feminist world, Lorde imagines “women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic’s electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange” (59). It is likely that Lorde had never encountered Bogan’s work when she argues that women must write, express, and most importantly, act upon their sexual desires to gain access, voice and pleasure in a deeply patriarchal system designed to silence and control women. Bogan early understood that the expression of the erotic is a radical and vital act. Fifty years after Bogan left the stage, Lorde argues:

We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalizing sexual arousal. I think of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force that moves us toward living in a fundamental way … the erotic is a force that lies in a deeply spiritual and female plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling (60).

Although Lorde remains entrenched in 1980s lesbian-feminist identity politics, claiming the erotic as a strictly “female plane,” she does make a crucial point—the erotic can be mined for power. I would add that the female erotic space is necessarily revolutionary, and as such, it is no accident that Bogan’s exploration into this socially and culturally outlawed realm has veritably expelled her from blues scholarship. In Bogan’s blues, she does more than simply edge toward forbidden subjects; indeed, she explodes the well-guarded division between polite and crass, private and public, holy and blasphemous.

As Bogan explores prostitution, prohibition, sexually-transmitted disease, lesbianism, asymmetrical power relations, (what we now might read as) transgender desire and the politics of sex, it is somewhat understandable that she is not considered part of the female blues triumvirate (Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith & Billie Holiday). For instance, where Rainey and Smith only hint at subversive themes such as lesbianism and female rebellion, Bogan’s lyrics occupy a position
between deep eroticism (where sex is implied) and pornography (where sex is explicit). In fact, Bogan’s songs urge us to traverse, if not inhabit, the terrain upon which the debate between these terms is hotly contested. As one encounters her gutsy, edgy lyrics, it is very clear that her music is ribald, even by today’s standards. It is this combination of Bogan’s unflinching depiction of the sex act coupled with her refusal to gloss over the less attractive aspects that makes her work salient. Indeed, Bogan does not simply flirt with the forbidden, she holds a magnifying glass to sex.

There is no record of the early reception of Bogan’s music, although the fact that she recorded at least six times in Atlanta, New York City and Chicago over an eight-year period suggests that she had a sustained fan base. In terms of her contemporaries, one can only imagine how W.E.B. Du Bois or Alain Locke might have responded to Bogan’s songs. As David Levering Lewis puts it, “the deans of the Renaissance were entirely content to leave the discovery and celebration of Bessie, Clara, and Trixie, and other blues-singing Smiths to white music critic Carl Van Vechten’s effusions in Vanity Fair” (The Portable Harlem Renaissance, xiv). In “Negro ‘Blues’ Singers” Van Vechten gushes in adoration of Bessie Smith to his primarily white audience:

The band struck up a slower and still more mournful strain. The hangings parted and a great brown woman emerged … garbed … in a rose satin dress, spangled with sequins, which swept away from her trim ankles. Her face was beautiful, with the rich, ripe beauty of southern darkness, a deep bronze brown, like her bare arms … She began her strange rites in a voice full of shoutin’ and moanin’ and prayin’ and sufferin’, a wild, rough Ethiopian voice, harsh and volcanic, relaxed between roughed lips and the whitest of teeth, the singer swaying slightly to the rhythm (104).

One can instantly see, even in this brief excerpt, why black intellectuals might have scoffed at Van Vechten’s depiction of the blues and its artists. While Du Bois and other black thinkers attempted to revise the image of African Americans from a metonym of the jungle to the intelligent and moral equals of their white counterparts, authors like Van Vechten thoroughly exoticized black culture and black bodies. In
Van Vechten’s effusions of the blues singer, her song resounds like a prayer meeting, as the singer is “full of shoutin’ and moanin’ and prayin’ and sufferin’” (104). Whereas one might conclude that the black elite would be pleased that black artists received positive critical attention, this kind of focus was most likely doubly insulting, especially when it came on the heels of a thoroughly patronizing Van Vechten essay published the month prior, also in *Vanity Fair*. In his article, “Moanin’ Wid a Sword in Ma Han,” Van Vechten laments that black artists are toying with the classical tradition when they should stick to what they know; spirituals and the blues. Although Van Vechten might have had good intentions when he cooed about “Negroes” being best suited for primitive dancing and crooning folk tunes, the black literati did not appreciate his endorsement, which exoticized and eroticized black artists at a heavy price.

Indeed, the black critics disapproved not only of that which might be deemed too primal but also of anything that hinted at indecency. If Du Bois felt the urge to bathe after reading Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, how might he have endured Bogan’s unexpurgated version of “Shave Em Dry,” with her unapologetic boast of sexual prowess and brags regarding the ample size of her nipples as well as the nature of her penis? Still, the black literati’s reaction to the blues left this authentically erotic expression to the pens of mostly white reviewers.

Although there is no extant film footage of Bogan’s performances, we still have access to over eighty individual recordings. *Document Records*, an independent recording company specializing in early blues, jazz and country music, released Lucille Bogan’s complete collection in three volumes in 1994. There has recently been a renewed popular interest in Bogan’s music, prompting Sony to offer a Lucille Bogan collection in March, 2004, yet this attention has not yet translated to scholarship. As with most intrigue in vernacular art forms as well as the resurrection of formerly exiled or forgotten artists like Lucille Bogan, the original impulse usually comes from the street, not the academy. It is important to keep in mind that the blues is, above all, a vocal expression. In Bogan’s recorded songs, one is privy to the chuckles, asides, strategic pauses, shifts in tone and running commentary with her pianist. Blues musicians and singers draw on a diverse range of musical qualities, inflections and timbres fashioned after the human voice. Bogan employs blue notes, the most unique of
these qualities, singing certain notes slightly flattened. What results is a distinguishing sense of dissonance that is often read as gloomy or heartbreaking. An exploration into Bogan’s songs complicates this reading, and her musical presentation is as complex as her lyrics. Thus, I will include a “reading” of particularly compelling shifts in tone and departures from form. In her recordings, Bogan’s voice was often mistaken for that of a male. Bogan’s ability to bend or flatten musical notes to achieve a unique—and gender-bending—quality is solidified when one explores her lyrics.

The biographical information on Lucille Bogan is sketchy at best and what little information we have comes from a brief article by Bob Eagle, written in 1974. According to Eagle, Lucille Bogan was born Lucille Anderson in Armory, Mississippi. Lucille moved to Birmingham, Alabama in childhood. By the age of 25, she had met and married Nazareth Maxwell Lee Bogan, a locomotive fireman who traveled a great deal. The couple had a son, Nazareth, Jr. and Lucille helped to raise a step-daughter, Ira Betty.

In addition to compiling relevant facts about Bogan’s life, Eagle also managed to find Lucille Bogan’s son, Nazareth Bogan, who granted him an interview. Although Eagle laments that Lucille Bogan’s son “took no interest in his mother’s activities” (25) the interview did allow Eagle to patch together a record of her life. According to her son, Bogan first recorded for Okeh records in 1923. The first recordings took place in New York City, and were followed by a rare recording session in Atlanta that same year. Despite the fact that she was friendly with singer Bessie Smith (as claimed by her son), it appears that Bogan did not join the vaudeville circuit, but rather returned to her husband and children. Four years later, in 1927, Bogan recorded with Paramount Records, and then again the following year for Brunswick Records. According to Eagle, “the Brunswick period produced Lucille’s most influential recordings” (25). Many of Bogan’s songs from these sessions have been covered by subsequent blues and jazz artists, including B.B. King, Buddy Guy, and Sonny Boy Williamson.

Despite this popularity, one need only encounter Bogan’s lyrics to songs like “Till the Cows Come Home,” which conjures a raucous buffet-flat sex party, “B.B.Q. Bess,” where the singer likens the economics of selling food to selling sex, or “Women Won’t Need No
to speculate why the listening public, then and now, may find her music disconcertingly explicit.

The best known of Bogan’s lost lyrics is “B.D. Women’s Blues,” a song that further agitated heterosexuality by praising the “B.D.” woman. It is unclear whether the term “bull dagger” or “bull dike” (also spelled bull-dyke) was widely understood during this period as a queer reference for lesbian. Although the Oxford English Dictionary cites the word “bull diker” as first employed by author John Rechy in City of Night in 1963, etymologists cannot agree upon the origin of the phrase and are, in fact, widely divergent in their speculations of its nascence. Actually, the term was used as early as 1906 by sexologist J. Richardson Parke in Human Sexuality: A Medico-Literary Treatise on the History and Pathology of the Sex Instinct. Parke discusses the term “bulldykers,” maintaining that “in American homosexual argot, female inverts, or lesbian lovers are known euphemistically as ‘bulldykers,’ whatever that may mean: at least that is their sobriquet in the ‘red light’ district of Philadelphia” (309). The term “red light district” typically suggests a place where prostitutes do business, but here it is also a district where all illicit queer sexualities can be found. Parke introduces the term almost as an aside to show that he has access to the lesbian “underworld.”

“Women Won’t Need No Men,” Bogan’s sole sense of men subordinates a heterosexual narrative by casting the male/female relationship in purely economic terms. This is not a song where Bogan re-imagines the dominant paradigm or conjures some kind of separatist utopia. Although the title promises a revision, it is not by way of erasing men completely from the picture, but rather Bogan urges women to “just get you four or five good men,” and the loss of one will not be so anguishing. The title may have been more fittingly “Women Won’t Need Only One Man;” yet, if one looks closely, we see that Bogan’s relationship to men is predominantly financial.

Judy Grahn notes that Lucille Bogan’s “B.D. Women’s Blues” makes one of the earliest references to bulldykes, and while Parke used the term much earlier to describe female “inversion,” Bogan’s reference over twenty years later is likely the first in the classic blues era. In literature, however, Claude McKay initially explains the difference between “lesbian” and “bull-dyker” in his novel Home to Harlem, published in 1928. In a conversation between protagonist Jake and his best friend Ray, Ray explains the subject of the Alphonse Daudet book his friend is reading: “It’s about a sporting woman who was beautiful like a rose and had a soul like a wandering cat. Her lovers called her Sappho... Sappho was a real person. A wonderful woman, a great Greek poet... Her story gave two lovely words to modern language... Sapphic and Lesbian –beautiful words” (128-9). Jake responds by clarifying that Ray is referring to “lesbian,” is “what we call bulldyker in Harlem,” noting that “them’s all ugly womens” (129). McKay’s clarification of the term “lesbian” assumes that all lesbians are “ugly,” and likely those that stand out and do not abide by traditionally feminine gender presentation.
One thing is clear, this was a term used by the queer population to describe a certain type of woman. Unlike the term “invert” or “homosexual” the term was not secured to the queer body by psychiatrists or lawmakers. Rather, it emerged from the exiled community, perhaps as a shorthand term for a butch dyke, or as an encoded term meant to signify without offering a definition to the outside community. Evidently, the term was in use by 1906, if Parke used to supplement his authority as an expert on inverts and their colloquialisms.

Although it is problematic to assume broad usage of the term or to conflate this apparently deeply cloaked reference to lesbianism as a brazen embrace of alternative sexuality, one can acknowledge that it was likely understood in Bogan’s circles. Indeed, the word “bulldyke” is assumed by the context of the song but never articulated, as Bogan always refers to the butch lesbian with the letters “B.D.” One infers that the reference would appeal to a limited, specific and knowing audience who was familiar with the expression.

**B.D. WOMEN’S BLUES** (1935)

Comin’ a time, B.D. women ain’t gonna need no men
/ Comin’ a time, B.D. women ain’t gonna do need no men
/ Oh they way treat us is a lowdown and dirty sin
B.D. women, you sure can’t understand / B.D. women, you sure can’t understand
They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man
B.D. women, they all done learnt their plan / B.D. women, they all done learnt their plan
They can lay their jive just like a natural man
B.D. women, B.D. women, you know they sure is rough / B.D. women, B.D. women, you know they sure is rough / They all drink up plenty whiskey and they sure will strut their stuff
B.D. women, you know they work and make their dough / B.D. women, you know they work and make their dough / And when they get ready to spend it, they know they have to go

Before moving to the text, I must clarify that when I refer to gender flexibility or more specifically, to the bull-dykes’ appropriation of the
masculine in “B.D. Women’s Blues,” my understanding of masculinity as a construct has been informed by the important work of Judith Halberstam. In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam explains that there are many versions of masculinity, but only male masculinity is privileged as “the real thing” (1). In order to fasten the term masculinity to a male body, “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity” (1). Society is absolutely dependent upon other renderings of masculinity then, to solidify the reification of male masculinity. So when Bogan challenges the standard definition of masculinity by attributing it to the B.D. women, she unsettles a well-guarded idea that has been wedded to social structures that embody the normative at the same time as reinforcing that standard by comparing these masculine women to a “natural man.”

The title “B.D. Women’s Blues” requires that we pause, not only to consider the lesbian reference, but also the ambiguity of the wording, raising the question: is the speaker a B.D. woman, singing about the blues of being a bulldagger, or is the song a lament about these women, from one who is not? Bogan’s use of pronouns is indeed slippery, but the remainder of my reading will assume that “B.D. Women’s Blues” is mostly a praise-song to the bull-dykes. The use of third person to refer to B.D. women is unambiguous at least in a few of the lines. This reading is confirmed by Bogan’s playful and lighthearted performance of the song. One can practically hear the smile on Bogan’s face, signifying that although she may complain that the bulldykes have over-indulged in their gender performance, she still finds them compelling, even admirable.

The first stanza of this song can be read in two disparate ways. As written in the transcript of the song, and following her later usage of the third person to refer to B.D. women, one would believe that the speaker speaks longingly to a time when B.D. women will no longer need men, suggesting that at this point in time, lesbians were reliant upon men in some ways. One might conjecture that, like in Bogan’s other pieces such as her blues on prostitution (“B.B.Q. Bess” and “Tricks Ain’t Workin’”) this need is economic, yet at the close of the song, Bogan complicates this reading by admiring the bull-daggers’ economic strength.

Yet when listening to this song, one hears a lengthy pause between “B.D. women” and “ain’t gonna need no men,” an unwritten comma that indicates an assumed pronoun—which one can surmise
by the complex relationship of admiration and annoyance that the singer has with B.D. women might well be “I” or “we.” In this reading, the singer addresses B.D. women in this line, reassuring them that she will not need men in the future. Then the first line is repeated almost verbatim, except that Bogan has added the word “do” to the second line. Upon listening to this addition, there appears to be no musical necessity for it, as the accompanying instruments do not swerve from the original line. Moreover, there is no rhythmic shift that requires an extra word. Rather than inserting “do” simply for artistic embellishment, this seemingly minor addition shifts the timeframe from some unknown point in the future to the present moment. Indeed, the phrase “B.D. women <pause> ain’t gonna do need no men,” denotes action, as if the singer will not have to “do” anything for men. This inclusion also insinuates that women have already reached this point in time, undermining the first part of the line, “[c]omin’ a time.”

In the third line, Bogan’s use of “they” and “us” is also ambiguous, leaving one to wonder whether the way men treat treat “us”—the group of people to whom the speaker feels she belongs—is “a lowdown and dirty sin,” or the way these masculine women behave toward the singer is shameful. In the latter, perhaps it could be read literally, that the singer acknowledges the questionability of her sexual actions with these women in light of the church: it is indeed a “dirty sin” to let them “treat” her.

In the first two lines of the second stanza, the singer claims that one “can’t understand” the bull-dagger, and yet this repeated claim is followed by a knowing description that “they got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man.” It is as if the speaker is feigning shock and confusion at the B.D.’s gender presentation, thinly veiling her admiration with a weak protest. Following quickly on the heels of the singer’s objection to the bull-dagger, the singer extols the butch dyke, likening her head to that of an “angel.” That Bogan specifically claims the angel to be the missing link that helps define the gender of this man/woman could also be an allusion to an angel’s androgyny. As I will illustrate later, this would not be the only place where Bogan queers her references to Christianity. In “B.D. Women’s Blues,” men (representing one half of the sacred hetero sphere) are the transgressors, treating women like “a lowdown and dirty sin” and the bull-dykes (who would typically be considered sexual outcasts) are likened to seraphs—or that bull-dykes are both devil and angel in one
package. Another interesting reversal in this stanza is Bogan’s use of the word “natural.” Admiring the bull-dykes for their ability to “walk...just like a natural man,” Bogan intimates that there are both “natural” and “unnatural” men, and it appears that the bull-dykes fall into the latter category. Linking a good performance of the masculine, the bull-dagger’s ability to “walk just like a natural man,” with the term “natural,” which typically evokes the “normal” or “innate” man, Bogan normalizes queer gender performance and reinforces that heterosexuality is also a performance.

An interesting critical shift appears in the third stanza when Bogan writes “they can lay their jive just like a natural man.” Up until this point, the speaker esteems the bull-dagger, and yet the phrase “lay[ing] their jive” may signal that the butch dyke has learned too well the performance of men. The term “jive” can be understood in a number of ways. One can read it as a substitute for jazz, but contextually, with no other references to music, this usage is unlikely. More feasible is the definition of “jive” as talk that is “misleading ... deceitful ... [or] worthless,” (The New Oxford American Dictionary, 913) in which case Bogan moves from expressing admiration for the butch dyke to conveying displeasure. What is interesting about this reading of “jive” is that one sees Bogan exploring power differentials and the butch/femme performance in queer sex long before queer theorists such as Joan Nestle, Sue-Ellen Case, and Judith Butler. Indeed, for Bogan, the power differential is what matters, not what is inside of the pants.

A few years after composing and recording “B.D. Women’s Blues,” Bogan twice revises Ma Rainey’s song “Shave ’Em Dry.” (1928). Bogan’s version, we shall see, clearly means to embrace the forbidden and unabashedly critique Ma Rainey’s and William Jackson’s earlier version. Below is the full text of Rainey’s version, from 1928:

**SHAVE ‘EM DRY** (by Ma Rainey and William Jackson, 1928)

There’s just one thing I don’t understand / Why a good lookin’ woman likes a workin’ man
Hey, hey, hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry / Goin’
away to where you off my mind
You keep me hungry and broke, daddy, all the time /
Hey, hey, hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry  
Don’t see how you hungry women can sleep / They  
shimmy all day without a bite to eat  
Hey, hey, hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry / Goin’  
downtown to spread the news  
State Street women wearing brogan shoes / Hey, hey,  
hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry  

If is wasn’t for their powder and their store-bought  
hair / State street gals couldn’t go nowhere  
Hey, hey, hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry / There’s  
just one thing I can’t understand  
Some women drivin’ State Street like a man / Hey,  
hey, hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry  
Went to the show the other night / Everybody on  
State Street was tryin’ to fight  

Hey, hey, hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry / Ain’t  
crazy ’bout my yellow, ain’t wild about my brown /  
You can’t tell the difference when the sun goes down /  
Hey, hey, hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry / When  
you see two women running hand to hand / Bet your  
life one’s got the other’s man / Hey, hey, hey daddy,  
let me shave ’em dry / Come here daddy, lay in my  
arms  

When your wife comes, tell her I don’t mean no harm /  
Hey, hey, hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry  

Before exploring Lucille Bogan’s risqué version of “Shave ’Em Dry,” it  
must be noted that Ma Rainey’s original version surpasses her earlier  
(and better-known) song, “Prove it on Me Blues” in a number of  
important ways. Although the singer remains safely ensconced as  
merely the voyeur of sexual transgression occurring in “Shave ’Em  
Dry,” Rainey does point to radical sexual practices. Indeed, Rainey  
counters the normative by including exotic dancers, where the women  
“shimmy all day,” transsexuals as prostitutes, where the trannies rely  
upon “powder and...store-bought hair” to sell their “merchandise,”  
and butch performance, as the bull-daggers “wear brogan [sensible  
and “masculine”] shoes” and “driv[e] State Street just like a man.”  
Furthermore, as Angela Davis rightly notes, in “Shave ’Em Dry,”  
Rainey treats sex outside of marriage as a casual affair when she writes
“[w]hen your wife comes, tell her I don’t mean no harm.” (241-2). Yet when the song is placed next to Bogan’s rendition, one quickly sees that Rainey remains tentative in her exploration of unconventional gender expressions and queer sexual practices. The contrast is so stark that one even could argue that Bogan was satirizing Rainey’s and Williams’ shy homoerotic version:

**SHAVE ’EM DRY** (unexpurgated version by Lucille Bogan, 1932)

I got nipples on my titties, big as the end of my thumb / I got somethin’ between my legs’ll make a dead man come / Oh daddy, baby won’t you shave ’em dry? (Aside: Now, draw it out!)

Want you to grind me baby, grind me until I cry / (Roland: Uh, huh.) / Say I fucked all night, and all the night before baby / And I feel just like I wanna, fuck some more, Oh great God daddy (Roland: Say you gonna get it. You need it.) / Grind me honey and shave me dry / And when you hear me holler baby, want you to shave it dry / I got nipples on my titties, big as the end of my thumb / Daddy you say that’s the kind of ’em you want, and you can make ’em come,

Oh, daddy shave me dry / (Roland: She ain’t gonna work for it.) / And I’ll give you somethin’ baby, swear it’ll make you cry / I’m gon’ turn back my mattress, and let you oil my springs,

I want you to grind me daddy, ’til the bell do ring / Oh daddy, want you to shave ’em dry

Oh great God daddy, if you can’t shave ’em baby won’t you try? / Now if fuckin’ was the thing, that would take me to heaven / I’d be fuckin’ in the studio, till the clock strike eleven / Oh daddy, daddy shave ’em dry / I would fuck you baby, honey I’d make you cry / Now your nuts hang down like a damn bell sapper / And your dick stands up like a steeple / Your goddam ass-hole stands open like a church door / And the crabs walks in like people / Aside: Ow, shit! / (Roland: Aah, sure enough, shave ’em dry?) / Aside:
In the first line, Bogan calls up and seems to revel in the image of the black woman as Hottentot Venus. At a time when the wealthy members of the black women’s club movement were “defending [black women’s] names against pervasive charges of immorality and sexual promiscuity,” (Davis 36) and other female blues singers dipped their toes in the sexual waters, Bogan wallows. Her lyrics make waves, when she boasts of “nipples...big as the end of my thumb.” One needs to consider whether Bogan is performing her erotic hypersexuality, pandering to a bigoted white audience that expects and wants the black female body to be excessive and accessible, or, like her contemporaries Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, fully aware of and capitalizing on the cultural exchange. Just as Bogan unsettles the binary between natural/unnatural in “B.D. Women’s Blues,” her sexual bluntness disarms the listener in “Shave ’Em Dry.” Co-opting the language that pathologizes the queer, black body, Bogan might either undermine or underscore that prejudice, but one need only listen to her song to hear the delight she takes in articulating the forbidden.

Bogan shifts from playfully rebellious in “B.D. Women’s Blues” to downright pomographic, with her interpretation of “Shave ’Em Dry.” From the first boast, the listener is inundated with graphic details that would surely make the faint-hearted tremble. In fact, one need not even get to the lyrics but only as far as the title to recognize that Bogan is going to “shave [her audience] dry.” It is important to consider what the phrase “shave ’em dry” implied and if the nuances of this phrase varied from Rainey’s to Bogan’s version of the song. I think that we can agree that “Shave ’Em Dry,” in both renditions suggests a two-person act that is painful and personal. If taken literally, shaving without lubricant is at best, raw and abrasive. Clearly, both singers mean to evoke a sexual subtext. Rainey repeats the refrain
“Hey, hey, hey daddy, let me shave ’em dry” after each stanza. The singer is always the person wielding the razor, and some unknown third party is the object. However, in Bogan’s song the razor switches hands, and the singer seems almost carried to excess in her enthusiasm. The refrain changes form each stanza, and what shifts is the object of the action. She demands to be shaven, then also orders her “daddy” to “shave ’em dry, [italics mine]” and at one point where she can scarcely be discussing anything besides her own mons veneris, she sings “When you hear me holler, baby … shave it dry.”

Hollering can conjure plantation songs, the black church, as well as cries of pain or pleasure. Nonetheless, “Shave ’Em Dry” is pervaded with images of pain in this song—such as with the repetition of the word “cry.” Yet over the course of the song, the one brought to tears shifts from the singer to her male lover. First, the singer wants her partner to “grind her” until she cries, but this is followed with a promise that she is going to “give [her partner] somethin’…swear it’ll make [him] cry.” This song lends itself to a reading of sadomasochism, but it is important to note that the term SM as well as the practices and culture of the SM community had not yet been articulated as such. Nevertheless, an SM interpretation is worthy of consideration. One should understand that this sadomasochistic image does not mandate that the top/bottom or dominant/submissive players are entrenched in unchanging sexual roles. Indeed, in Bogan’s version, the performers trade roles during the course of the song. If the singer begins as merely a receptacle for the male lover, by the close of the song she is wearing a “brass cock” and “fucking” or penetrating him. In “Shave ’Em Dry,” the SM practices allow for variable identifications, changing positions, and shifting sexual hierarchies.

In another startling twist from the expected, Bogan revises the childhood verse and finger game “Here is the church / and here is the steeple; / Open the door and here are the people.” What should evoke innocence and youth becomes a snapshot in the life of a jaded whore. “Now your nuts hang down like a damn bell sapper, / And your dick stands up like a steeple / Your goddam ass-hole stands open like a church door / And the crabs walks in like people.” It is difficult to conceive of an imagination so vivid and intense as to claim this image without having experienced it first-hand. The parasites as parishioners simile also forces the listener and critic to consider how this startling image becomes a transgression of sex in religion. In calling forth
ecclesiastical imagery in the song, rather than sanctifying the queer sexual act, Bogan’s description taints both sex and the church. Wherein “B.D. Women’s Blues” Bogan uses religious imagery to make the butch body sacrosanct, in “Shave ’Em Dry” the queer body is debauched and no subject is off limits. Bogan’s bravado, which she laughs in the face of this wretched imagery, brings to mind Langston Hughes’ thoughts on blues, that they are “laughing to keep from crying.”

Yet, this is where simply analyzing the written text comes up short. One must hear the singer’s voice, laced with humor and mischievousness. Although for most of the song, Bogan croons in her typical blues style without a hint of mockery, when she moves into the revision of the children’s finger game rhyme, she can barely continue and is obviously fighting the erupting laughter. Undoubtedly, Bogan understands that she is trammeling sacred terrain. In the liner notes of Bogan’s collection put out by Sony, Dick Spottswood claims that this version of “Shave ’Em Dry” almost “seems like something out of minstrelsy, dutifully playing on exaggerated racial and sexual stereotypes to please and shock her white audience” (9). Although I agree that the lyrics are incendiary, Spottswood does not give Bogan enough credit by casting the song as merely pandering to her white audience. Bogan’s entire repertoire, including “Shave ’Em Dry,” is meant to not only shock her peers like Ma Rainey, but also transgress the limits of white culture. Angela Davis notes that the classic women’s blues “launch … a brazen challenge to women’s subordination,” (36) and I would add that Bogan is determined to stretch societal limits to the breaking point by taking on normative sexual roles more broadly.

Bogan’s version of “Shave ’Em Dry” also transcends the other blueswomen’s view of the prostitute. The singer embraces the title “whore,” and claims “I got fat [thrived] from fuckin’.” Furthermore, where “Ma” Rainey observes the (what we might now refer to as transgendered) prostitute with her “powder and [her] store-bought hair,” from a safe distance, Bogan’s speaker straps one on and embodies the figure. Moreover, while the singer surely enjoys her work, the purpose is definitely financial gain. The empowerment that the singer feels in the sexual act, and in using brazenly sexual language, is nowhere clearer than when she claims her johns “come round to kiss my ass.” Prostitution does not belittle her—it denigrates her johns.
Beyond shocking her blues friends and transgressing social propriety in this song, Bogan, perhaps inadvertently, creates a blues set deeply against the normative. In the steeple stanza, the singer’s male lover is displaying his anus to her. She later sings of “fucking” him, that is, taking the active role in sex. And finally, at the end of the song she boasts of her “cock … of brass.” One could read this reference as the singer taking on the gay male “top” persona. Whether her “cock” is imagined or an actual dildo, her possessing the phallus and describing its use for male sodomy that completely excludes her biological sex, is as queer as it gets.

Lest one thinks of Bogan’s “Shave ’Em Dry” as merely an anomaly in the classic blues era, she presents another song that also passes into taboo with “Till The Cows Come Home.” Instead of attempting to keep track of the slippery pronouns, or whether the “bitch” is female, male, transgender or hermaphrodite, or the multiple sexual acts, the critic would benefit by considering as a whole the overall mayhem and sexual bedlam that this song evokes. In Eric Garber’s “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” his and Ruby Smith’s depiction of the wild buffet flat rent parties, so renowned during the Harlem Renaissance, is deeply reminiscent of the space Bogan articulates in “Till The Cows Come Home”:

Some were raucous establishments where illegal activities such as drinking, gambling, and prostitution were available. Others offered a variety of sexual pleasures cafeteria-style. A Detroit buffet flat of the latter sort, which Ruby Smith remembered visiting with her aunt, Bessie Smith, catered to all variety of sexual tastes. It was “an open house, everything goes on in that house.” Smith continues explaining that “[T]hey had a faggot there that was so great that people used to come there just to watch him make love to another man. He was that great. He’d give a tongue bath and everything. By the time he got to the front of that guy he was shaking like a leaf. People used to pay good just to go in there and see him do his act…. That same house had a woman that used to . . . take a cigarette, light it, and puff it with her pussy. A real educated pussy. (Duberman 318)
The sexual party atmosphere and multiple partners in “Till The Cows Come Home” is best read as a metonym for the buffet flat parties. Lucille Bogan is not the only female blues figure to draw on the image of din and wildness that pervade Harlem rent parties. Bessie Smith, in one of only a handful of her original compositions also conjures the atmosphere of the buffet flat. Regarding Smith’s song, Davis notes:

The buffet flat was an institutionalized house party in the urban black community of that era, combining celebratory music with sexual activities of all sorts. It was also a major component of the black gay subculture, particularly during the era of the Harlem Renaissance. (133)

In “Soft Pedal Blues,” (1925) Smith calls to mind the all-night parties that were hugely popular, not only for white patrons hoping to taste the “wild side” of city life, but also for the younger black artists of the Harlem Renaissance. “I’m drunk and full of fun—YAHOO!” Smith repeats throughout, making her evocation of the buffet flats to be that of drunken and entertaining spaces, but she steers clear of direct references to sex. Conversely, in “Till The Cows Come Home,” Bogan not only grounds the atmosphere of the party in sex, but more importantly, it is riotous and rebellious queer sex.

**TILL THE COWS COME HOME** (1932)

I got a man I love, got a man I like / Everytime I fuck him I give him the doggone clap

Oh baby, Give him the doggone clap / But that’s the kind of pussy that they really like I told them, I’ve got a good cock and it’s got four damn good names / Rough Top, Rough Cock, Tough Cock, Cock Without a Bone / You can fuck my cock, suck my cock or leave my cock alone / Oh, baby, I’ve been at this all night long / You can fuck my cock or suck my cock, baby, till the cows come home / You know, both my men, they are tight like that / They got a great big dick, just like a baseball bat / Oh, fuck ’em, do it to me all night long / I want you to do it to me, baby, till the cows come home / They know a bitch from Baltimore / I got hairs on my cock that’ll sweep the floor
I got spunk from them hairs that would shut the door /
And I look over your *
I'm a bitch from Baltimore /
Oh, talking bout a bitch from Baltimore / And I got
hairs on my cock that'll sweep anybody's floor / I got
a big fat belly, I got a big broad ass / and I can fuck
any man with real good class / Talkin' bout fuckin',
talkin' bout grinding baby all night long / And I can do
it to you honey, until the cows come home.

If you suck my pussy, baby, I'll suck your dick / I do it
to you honey till I make you shit.

Oh, baby, honey, do it all night long / Do it to me
papa, break me in until tomorrow comes.

[text taken directly from recording]

One could argue "till the cows come home” about whether to call this
pornography or a queer articulation of the erotic, but clearly Bogan
intends again to repossess the phallus. Indeed, Bogan swerves so far
from the traditional Harlem Renaissance fare, again she attempts to
dethrone the blues. While many of the classic blues singers use double
entendre, broach uncomfortable themes tentatively and edge toward
the risqué, in “Till the Cows Come Home,” and “Shave ’Em Dry,”
Bogan plays the exhibitionist, and clearly delights in using shocking,
even offensive language and imagery.

The wording of Bogan’s song is indeed provocative, as the
singer crows of having four monikers for her one “good cock,” and
shapes the entire song around her sexual endurance: she can do it “till
the cows come home.” But equally interesting is Bogan’s vocal
performance of the song. Unlike “Shave ’Em Dry,” in “Till the Cows
Come Home” Bogan remains serious throughout, and if the listeners
do not follow closely, they might imagine the song to be a typical,
benign even, old-style blues. Bogan’s voice is decidedly deeper here
than in the other twenty songs in the Sony collection. It is as if Bogan is
attempting to fuse form and content, as the sexual play including
gender-swapping in the text is enriched and materialized with her deep
alto performance.

“Shave ’Em Dry” and “Till the Cows Come Home” are meant
to both disturb and delight. And while I question Angela Davis’ claim

3 The asterisk represents a word that was incomprehensible from the recording.
that “the blues realm…knows no taboos,” (133) since there is
decidedly much forbidden territory through which most 1920s and
1930s blues artists dared not tread, Lucille Bogan, on the other hand,
is clearly willing to trample upon social prohibitions, even the most
sacred. She is not writing lesbian music; she is transgressing every
possible boundary of sex and sexuality. Still, what makes Bogan’s
music valuable and worthy of reclamation is more than its un-
apologetic articulation of (what we now call) queer desire. Rather it is
the way this music complicates our ideas about the nature of the blues,
the tone of the Harlem Renaissance, and the politics of reclamation.
Clearly, there is a sense of overall sexual adventure that pervades the
literature, music, and art of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly
embraced by the younger generation of artists. Yet the Harlem
Renaissance as an era and as a subject of study is also pervaded by
sexual shame as is demonstrated by the multitude of taboo subjects still
cordonned off and left alone. There are but a handful of examples of
artists and scholars who unflinchingly locate, explore and voice queer
desire. Lucille Bogan’s music should be recognized as it occupies a
compelling and problematic space that obliges us to examine our own
attitudes about desire. If the blues domain truly is, as Davis promises, a
space that “refuses to pass judgment,” (133) then it is with this spirit
that we should study Bogan’s work.

The most productive years for blues women coincided with the
Harlem Renaissance, yet these working class artists and the black elite
had an uneasy relationship. As Davis notes, “because women like
Bessie Smith … embodied sexualities associated with working-class
black life—which, fatally, was seen by some Renaissance strategists as
antithetical to the aims of their cultural movement—their music was
designated as ‘low’ culture” (xiii). An examination of over eighty issues
of Opportunity Magazine, the popular phalanx of the Urban League,
and the NAACP’s Crisis, published between 1925 and 1930, reveals a
glaring absence of articles, poems, short stories, dramas or
announcements regarding the blues. If Smith was too “low” to be
recognized as an artist, imagine the black elite reaction to Bogan.
Indeed, most of the well-heeled older generation of artists and literati of
the Renaissance did not consider any blues to be an art form.

Although the blues likely resounded throughout the buildings
that housed the production facilities of these two well-respected
publications, written reference shows the down home working class
music scene was considered at best, lively entertainment, and at worst, absolute trash. W.E.B. Du Bois’ conception of the “talented tenth” definitely did not include the blues women in its ranks. Du Bois removes any doubt about who might be selected for his privileged coterie, in his essay “The Talented Tenth,” when he writes that “from the very first it has been the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass” (174). Even though blues women were deeply talented and intelligent, by and large they were rarely formally educated beyond high school. As Du Bois enumerates a genealogy of “distinguished Negroes” from poet Phyllis Wheatley to esteemed Dr. Lemuel Haynes, his “aristocracy of talent” clearly elevates what he calls the “college-bred Negro.” Certainly the early blues women like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey singing to the masses at revivals and tent shows did not, in Du Boisian ideology, embody the kind of talent that would “elevate the mass[es].” And far beyond Rainey’s work, the subject matter and delivery of Bogan’s material would have been untouchable.

Another powerhouse of the Harlem Renaissance, philosopher and pedagogue Alain Locke, may have conceived of the well-educated and talented “New Negro” as one who could strategically mine black folk traditions for insights, but it is improbable that he seriously considered the blues as a worthy art form. Oxford-educated Locke was wedded to a European aesthetic, and his conception of “cultural pluralism” reached to African, not African American sources for creative inspiration.

Yet, the younger generation of Harlem Renaissance writers diverged from their predecessors to some extent in their appreciation of the blues. Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Countee Cullen each wrote blues poems and saw the significance of the blues tradition in African American culture and letters. Hughes published no fewer than fifteen blues poems before World War II, and never shied away from articulating the merit of the blues as a vital mode of creative expression. In fact, the poem that catapulted him into national recognition, “The Weary Blues,” fuses the rhythm and tempo of the blues melody to the lyrical line. In his powerful poem “Ma Rainey,” Sterling Brown honors one of the most influential blues women. Gwendolyn Brooks was one of the first successful black female poets to acknowledge the influence of the blues, in her poem “Queen of the Blues,” but it was well after the era when women
attained status as blues royalty. Even Countee Cullen acknowledged his deference to the blues, albeit subsequent to its heyday, in “Colored Blues Singer,” published in 1947.

Moving from the backdrop of the Harlem Renaissance to a consideration of later treatments of blues as both a musical and a literary genre opens a very broad discussion. Countless poets, theorists, singers, and musicologists have attempted to articulate a definition of the blues, both in terms of form and content. Ralph Ellison probably comes closest to translating the musical tradition when he notes the following:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching conscience, to finger its jagged grain, and then transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically ... they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self. (90)

For Ellison, then, the blues impulse conveys a fearless, survivalist reaction to the harsh facts of (black) life. The blues is a remedy for the daily grief, despair, prejudice, loneliness, poverty and racism experienced by Southern blacks as well as those newly-migrated to the North in the 1920s. Yet Ellison, like Hughes, focuses upon the “painful details” that the blues hopes to numb, and also avoids a discussion of the vital role of the erotic in the blues.

Ellison and Hughes are not the only writers to evade the subject of sex. Even notable classic blueswoman Alberta Hunter, who did not shy away from sexuality in her songs, evades any mention of sex when she attempts to define the blues:

The blues? Why, the blues are a part of me. They’re like a chant. The blues are like the spirituals, almost sacred. When we sing the blues, we’re singing out our hearts, we’re singing out our feelings. Maybe we’re hurt and just can’t answer back, then we sing or
maybe even hum the blues. When I sing, ‘I walk the floor, wring my hands and cry – Yes, I walk the floor, wring my hands and cry’... what I’m doing is letting my soul out.

From the film, *Wild Women Don’t Get the Blues*

Like Hughes and Ellison, Hunter highlights the ways the blues makes one feel better and, interestingly, likens them to “spirituals, almost sacred.” Although Hunter penned risqué songs such as “You Can’t Tell the Difference after Dark,” a tune that embraces miscegenation and inter-racial desire, sex is curiously missing in her description of the blues sphere.

Current blues scholars also dance around the subject of sex. Musicologist Bill Dahl defines the blues as such:

> It remains a living, breathing entity ... its future assured as long as folks search for relief from their suffering or require a rollicking soundtrack for their Saturday night soirees. The blues is as honest a musical form as it is uplifting. The blues is life—with all its ups and downs intact. (Dahl)

Concurring with Dahl’s and the earlier definitions, musicologist Larry Neal describes the blues in similar terms:

> At the pulsating core of their emotional center, the blues are the spiritual and ritual energy of the church thrust into eyes of life’s raw realities. Even though they appear primarily to concern themselves with the secular experience, the relationships between males and females, between boss and worker, between nature and Man, they are, in fact, extensions of the deepest, most pragmatic spiritual and moral realities. (152)

There is a profound reticence in discussing the sexual elements of the blues – a reluctance that pervaded not only the Harlem Renaissance, but continues to silence musicologists and literary critics today. This reluctance, I believe, revolves around, on one hand, the moral taboo regarding the inclusion of explicit sex and/or pornography in high culture, and on the other, the larger impulse to mute those who reside outside of dominant culture. That which cannot be accreted, appro-
priated or subsumed, such as the revolutionary music by Lucille Bogan, must be buried.

The voice of black female desire and sexuality is still barely audible, and if one tacks on a queer expression of that desire, it is downright impossible to hear. An exploration of Lucille Bogan’s songs contributes to what needs to be a mass scholarly effort, making this, and other black queer silences voluble. Evelyn Hammonds writes that black female sexuality has been “absent yet-ever-present [and indeed] pathologized,” (131) that cultural and literary critics must stop contributing to the suppression of the black female erotic. Hazel Carby concurs that the blues offers excellent fodder for theorizing the reclamation of black women’s bodies. Lucille Bogan’s repertoire offers us the ideal space in which to do so. Transgressive voices like Bogan’s hold the capacity to extend and complicate our ideas about the blues as an art form while reshaping our understanding of the place of queer female desire in the larger Harlem Renaissance movement.

**WORKS CITED**


