

SEX, OR THE UNBEARABLE

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P R E F A C E

Sex, or the Unbearable: the title of this book does not offer its readers a choice between these two terms, as in “your money, or your life.” Nor does it mean to imply that we think of sex as reducible to “the unbearable.” To be honest, there’s not that much sex in the book either, and the “unbearable” to which it points is all crossed over with the enjoyable too. But then again, enjoyment itself, as we discuss it here, can be unbearable. What we offer instead is an analysis of relations that both overwhelm and anchor us—an affective paradox that often shapes the experience of sex. We approach sex here as a site, therefore, at which relationality is invested with hopes, expectations, and anxieties that are often *experienced* as unbearable. Sex, though subject to the pressures of legal sanction, social judgment, unconscious drives, and contradictory desires, holds out the prospect of discovering new ways of being and of being in the world. But it also raises the possibility of confronting our limit in ourselves or in another, of being inundated psychically or emotionally. *Sex, or the Unbearable* examines our attempts to remain rooted in the social by both holding fast to and moving beyond our accustomed ways of experiencing ourselves and our connectedness to others. It explores the forms of negotiation we resort to in dealing with intimate estrangement, and it tries to enact, in its own formal structure, the constant, and at times disconcerting, adjustments those forms of negotiation demand.

The following chapters approach the scene of relationality by focusing on the “negativity” that can make it so disturbing. Negativity for us refers to the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or

fixity of identity. It denotes, that is, the relentless force that unsettles the fantasy of sovereignty. But its effects, in our view, are not just negative, since negativity unleashes the energy that allows for the possibility of change. So too “nonsovereignty,” a term to which we’ll return, invokes the psychoanalytic notion of the subject’s constitutive division that keeps us, as subjects, from fully knowing or being in control of ourselves and that prompts our misrecognition of our own motives and desires. At the same time, nonsovereignty invokes a political idiom and tradition, broadly indicating questions of self-control, autonomy, and the constraints upon them. To encounter ourselves as nonsovereign, we suggest, is to encounter relationality itself, in the psychic, social, and political senses of the term. For that reason, this book attends to those moments when negativity disturbs the presumption of sovereignty by way of “an encounter,” specifically, an encounter with the estrangement and intimacy of being in relation. Sex is exemplary in the way it powerfully induces such encounters, but such encounters exceed those experiences we recognize as sex.

These dialogues explore such encounters while simultaneously recording and performing one. It could be no other way. Relationality always includes a scenic component, a fantasmatic staging. It puts into play reaction, accommodation, transference, exchange, and the articulation of narratives. Just what an encounter entails, however, remains for us unresolved. As it must. For an encounter refers to an episode, an event, its fantasmatic scene, and the myriad misrecognitions that inform the encounter and define its limit. Our various ways of theorizing such encounters with relation shape our different views of the political and affective consequences of social embeddedness. We are constantly asking, What do our distinctive responses to each other and our cases tell us about the structural conditions that produce the encounter with nonsovereignty in the first place?

Though the negativity inseparable from the sexual encounter comes to the fore most insistently in the final chapter of this book, it makes itself felt repeatedly in the dialogues that follow. For encounter in all its ambiguity shapes the experience of sex, giving rise to various forms of response, including, as the first two chapters suggest, optimism and reparativity. We wonder throughout these dialogues whether it is possible to endure the experience of rela-

tion in the absence of optimism for bearing or surmounting what overwhelms us in ourselves and in each other. Is optimism, in fact, invariably at work in negativity? Or, conversely, is optimism a disavowal of what's unbearable in negativity? Do we even mean the same thing by optimism? This book attempts to hold such questions steadily in view. Even where we disagree with each other in the ways that we address them, though, we proceed together through the breaks and divisions that enable conversation, politics, and the creation of new social forms.

Sex, or the Unbearable is thus an experiment in the forms of theoretical production. It proceeds from the belief that dialogue may permit a powerful approach to negativity, since dialogue has some of the risk and excitement we confront in the intimate encounter. Not for nothing does the *OED* list “communication” and “conversation” as the primary meanings of *intercourse*. In its dialogic structure, then, this book takes shape as collaboration, argument, and exploration at once. It belongs to an experimental genre in which theory, politics, and close textual analysis encounter the pedagogical necessity of responding to the provocations of otherness. Dialogue commits us to grappling with negativity, nonsovereignty, and social relation not only as abstract concepts but also as the substance and condition of our responses—and our responsibilities—to each other.

Reimagining forms of relation entails imagining new genres of experience. These chapters try to extend the generic contours of theoretical writing by making exchange, dialogic give-and-take, a genuine form of encounter. By that we mean that throughout this book we try to attend not only to what we can readily agree upon but also to what remains opaque or unpersuasive about the other's ideas, what threatens to block or stymie us. Resistance, misconstruction, frustration, anxiety, becoming defensive, feeling misunderstood: we see these as central to our engagement with each other and to our ways of confronting the challenge of negativity and encounter. Far from construing such responses as failures in the coherence or economy of our dialogues, we consider them indispensable to our efforts to think relationality. An academic culture in the United States still dominated by the privilege of the monograph only rarely affords occasions for critics to converse with each other

in print. That may reflect conversation's low place in the hierarchy of literary genres. Structurally determined by interruption, shifts in perspective, metonymic displacements, and the giving up of control, conversation complicates the prestige of autonomy and the fiction of authorial sovereignty by introducing the unpredictability of moving in relation to another. One never can know in advance to what one's interlocutor will respond or what turns the conversation may take through the associations of a single word. We are aware that what we're saying here sounds a lot like what we say about sex—and that, of course, is the point. As the book proceeds, the structural resonances among sex, politics, and theory become ever more insistently the focus of our analysis.

This discussion starts, as all discussions do, in the middle of many idioms and vernaculars and at the point where many genealogies converge. Entering a conversation always means entering it with an idiolect that has to adjust to someone else's, difficult as that may be. As a consequence, our own conversation includes and exceeds us at once; references taken for granted by one person are foreign to another; historical contexts or philosophical grounds are never fully shared (nor could they be, given the infinite expansion of knowledge that would require); alignments of context or reference take shape simultaneously as gaps, missed encounters, and blockages. So the process of clarification on which we embark must operate immanently from within the conversation rather than by appealing to an objectivized understanding of a set of issues that the conversation unproblematically presupposes. Each of us offers a set of terms that start to look different when the other uses them, and each of us develops ways of testing out, querying, and accounting for the other's conceptualizations. This process might make any reader, including the writers themselves, desire some dictionary or reference point to stabilize the conversation or long for an accompanying seminar to fill in the gaps and provide us with background knowledge to make the going smoother. But conversation, like relationality, proceeds in the absence of such a reference point or undisputed ground, often, in fact, producing the fiction of that ground only retroactively.

The question of assumed knowledge can also manifest itself as a question of address. Any given reader may feel that the conver-

sation is taking place elsewhere, failing to address her or him, or that it shifts its address unpredictably from inclusion to exclusion. Being in relation invariably involves the animation of distance and closeness; in that sense even direct address can be felt as indirect and acknowledgment can seem like misrecognition. Both of us had that experience in the course of these conversations, and it would be surprising if our readers did not have it too. But the process of negotiating those shifts, of finding one's bearings, is at the center of the ongoing project of relationality we explore in this text.

To sustain the critical dialogue we put fidelity to our ideas and their consequences above the performance of our friendship, on the one hand, or the scoring of points, on the other. (Whether or not we succeed, of course, is not for us to say.) Though friendship serves as the ground from which these dialogues arise, it doesn't prompt us to deny our differences or obscure our intellectual or political commitments. At the same time, those commitments themselves are what these dialogues put to the test. In the course of these conversations we both experienced clarification, surprise, and, most important, transformation; there were moments, that is, when the contours of our own understandings noticeably shifted and something of the other's language or intellectual imperatives affected our own. The differences in our political and theoretical investments did not, of course, disappear, but something else, new ways of inhabiting those investments, appeared as well.

For all the insistence of such differences, though, we acknowledge at the outset that we came to these dialogues with similar intellectual backgrounds and theoretical allegiances. Some might see that as a limitation, a failure of the dialogue to allow for an encounter with the disturbances of multiple kinds of difference. But even in the narrowcast of an encounter with the similar we recognize no putative sameness of self, no sovereignty, no coherence, and no identity that doesn't reveal its own radical differences. To be sure, many other encounters than this one both could and should take place—and encounters with other sorts of difference than those that develop here. But one of the points this book hopes to make is that any encounter (with the world, with another, or even with oneself) discloses a nest of differences that carry what Barbara Johnson so memorably called “the surprise of otherness” (1987, 16).

One of our goals, as we've already mentioned, is to think together about the social, political, and theoretical consequences of "negativity." Negativity points to many kinds of relation in what follows, from the unbearable, often unknowable, psychic conflicts that constitute the subject to the social forms of negation that also, but differently, produce subjectivity. Generally negativity signifies a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience. In its disturbance of such totalizations, negativity enacts the dissent without which politics disappears. Negativity, in this sense, is inseparable from the struggles of subordinated persons to resist the social conditions of their devaluation. However, by challenging the coherence of the categories through which the subordinated produce their claims for legitimation, negativity can also become an obstacle to their organized resistance to things as they are. This double valence of negativity accounts for its centrality to a set of debates that have occupied queer theory for some time—and that occupy our debate with each other here.

One of the motives for our orientation toward questions of negativity and relation is to dislodge one position in those debates, what has been called "the antisocial thesis," from a set of understandable anxieties that it has provoked among some queer thinkers.¹ The historic practice of LGBTQ studies has been toward reclaiming and repairing lost histories and ongoing practices of delegitimation. Negativity as a source for social theory tends to reject the impulses to repair social relations that appear to us irreparable, and in that light, our work might seem quietistic, apolitical, nihilist, defeatist, or even irresponsible. By engaging closely with sociality and with our own deep-rooted tendencies to think about its zones of optimism and longing, we are seeking to make a persuasive case for the necessity of recognizing the importance of addressing structural antagonisms in any analytic of the social. In doing so, we seek to affirm negativity's central role in any antinormative politics. We hope this conversation might permit a reframing of the antisocial

1. While evidence of that debate abounds, the most concentrated venue of its performance can be found in the *PMLA* roundtable "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory."

thesis that has already generated such lively debate and so much important theoretical work by its critics and adherents alike.

Part of the problem we have to confront in trying to move that debate forward, however, is that the very name “antisocial” disregards our persistent embeddedness in and attentiveness to sociality. It is not a matter for either of us of standing outside the social or sociality or against the possibility of creating more capacious social worlds. Rather we recognize that negativity emerges as resistance to the fixity of social forms that seem to define the possibilities for and the limits of relationality. We want to explore the valences of social intensities and fantasies, of the contradictory pressures implicit in established forms of relation, in order to read them not in any simple antithesis to the social but rather as intrinsic to it.

We recognize too that “antisocial” has sometimes functioned as a synonym or coded shorthand for “antisentimental” or “antireparative.” Where the issues of sentimentality and repair are concerned, our positions are not identical and we do not agree in all cases on the meanings of those terms. These dialogues address them directly, though, and try to work through the ways we understand the investments they bespeak. Nor do we exempt ourselves from investments, including unrecognized investments, in what those terms may name. Our approach, however, depends on acknowledging the specific contexts of their uses in order to recognize both what they enable and what they might foreclose. This book thus aspires to reformulate discussion of the antisocial thesis by conceding from the outset that the questions of sociality so vigorously argued in its wake are genuinely hard and politically imperative, which is why they call forth such intensity of thought on all sides of the debate.

It is in the context of that debate that we came to put this book together. Having mounted different but related arguments against the normative domination of sex, sexuality, and political collectivity by the ideological lure of the future, we were separately called on by Heather Love to give papers at a conference, *Rethinking Sex* (2009), that she was organizing in honor of Gayle Rubin. Initially invited to give papers at a session tentatively called “Tomorrow,” we decided instead to have a public conversation that would build on Rubin’s writings in order to move beyond the accounts of futurity we each had separately produced and engage instead the implication of sex

in the normative logic of optimism. We began with the notion of optimism because it hooks us to fantasies of the good life, however the good life may be defined. Often such optimism enacts the hope of successful integration into dominant orders—social, psychic, and political—by anticipating ways of resolving the various contradictions amid which we live. Sex, as a locus for optimism, is a site at which the promise of overcoming division and antagonism is frequently played out. But the consequences of such efforts to resolve our social and psychic contradictions can include the establishment of sexual norms and the circumscription of sex for socially legitimated ends. It can equally, however, give rise to fantasies of sexual liberation and a paradise of polymorphous sexualities. We have different concerns about the effects and efficacy of these fantasies, which led us to wonder what it would mean to think about or even desire the experience of sex without optimism. What if we accepted the challenge of negativity and began the process of conceptualizing sex in the absence of such optimism? What sorts of displacements would it introduce into our ways of thinking sex?

That first conversation challenged clichés about the antisocial thesis by making criticism a social and collaborative form even while broaching sociality and sex outside their connection to repair. Our presentation at the Rethinking Sex conference, the basis for chapter 1, undertook to show that negativity, far from being reductively antisocial, is invariably an aspect of the social: that sociality's inherent contradictions give rise to structures of self-relation fundamentally out of synch with themselves. We began with a common interest in negativity's resistance to forms of sovereignty and so in its status as an impediment to normativity's will to social closure and coherence. Our discussion touched on the tragic, dramatic, and comic frames that negativity can inhabit and surprisingly (to us) found its focal objects in the vistas of "the queer adorable." The energy informing that dialogue emerged from our efforts to be in relation at once to each other, our objects, and our ideas, while unfolding the negativity of relation as indispensable to political vitality.

In the aftermath of that conversation, finding ourselves still working through the questions that it raised, we began to ask if it would be useful to try to expand it into a book. So when we were invited the following year to take part in a panel at the annual con-

vention of the Modern Language Association that was being organized in memory of our friend and colleague, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, we decided once more to use the opportunity to pursue these ideas together. Sedgwick's work, over the arc of her career, inspired us to return to the ideological imbrications of sex and the forms of optimism, but to do so by engaging negativity in the context of her analyses of repair.

Given the inevitable, and often unbearable, disturbances onto which sex can open, how is it possible, we asked ourselves (and each other and Sedgwick as well), to address that negativity as inseparable from what is most compelling in sex? In pursuing this thought we had to deal with the difficulty of articulating the join of psychic and social scenes and dynamics. Any analytic encounter with sex should push psychoanalytic accounts of the subject and of the subject's psychic experience to acknowledge and address their constitution within an invariably political field. Sedgwick's interest in Silvan Tomkins and Melanie Klein—especially as her theoretical and activist concerns intersected with her own therapeutic ambitions in *A Dialogue on Love*—encouraged us to tackle a question that followed directly from our previous dialogue: Can we hope to transform our relation to the structural disturbance of the subject's coherence without just producing ever new fantasies of simplifying or repairing it? Our efforts to respond to the challenge posed by such ruptures of continuity gave shape to the talk that later became our second chapter, "What Survives." Sedgwick's death, which viscerally brought home the insistence of rupture in relation, impelled us to explore what follows—affectively, narratively, and politically—from the persistence of negativity in every practice of repair.

Among the responses that greeted our presentation of "What Survives" were several that wondered how to survive the irreparable negativity it evoked. The possibility of a life not governed by the logic of repair seemed, according to some in the audience, unbearable to imagine. How, in the absence of wanting to repair, could one possibly go on? What would such going on look like if we turned our theory into practice? Would living with negativity entail the death of the optimism that animates desire and energizes politics? We felt a responsibility to address these questions as clearly as possible and to flesh out the imbrication of negativity, politics, and the phe-

nomenality of life in order to show how negativity is not the opposite of politics, not a practice of withdrawal from contesting the terms or structures of existence, but rather a challenge to engage with politics in unexpected places and in unpredicted ways.

We also felt the need to think about theory as a type of social practice and to consider the aesthetic in terms of the narratives with which we turn life to account. In the first chapter we focused on separate aesthetic (and, in each case, visually iconic) objects through which to organize our speculations on what sex without optimism might mean. In the second we used Sedgwick's texts to approach what's beyond the optimistic model of attachment forms meant to solve the problem of living. What survives once the model of reparative relation is forced to share space with all sorts of negativity or when it starts to open onto a negativity of its own? For the final chapter we thought it important to link the question of living with negativity to the processes of *narrating* it, gathering up the diverse kinds of realism, causality, fantasy, and organization in movement that narrative forces to the fore. It struck us as crucial, in that regard, to engage a common text, one that would somehow speak to the question of living with negativity while opening onto the interrelations among sex, narrative, and the prospect for changing how we inhabit and relate to the world.

After considering a wide array of objects that might galvanize our thought, we read Lydia Davis's *Collected Stories* together and knew we had found our author. Though drawn to a dozen of Davis's texts, each perfect for this chapter's project, we decided to direct our energies to a close reading of only one. A single text seemed fitting here because this chapter, following our speculations on repair in "What Survives," concerns finding ways of living with an object, or with the loss or breakdown of an object, that roots one in the world.

"Break It Down," the story we finally chose, engages living with others and living on in their absence. Enigmatic and haunting, filled with the pathos of a narrator not fully controlling what he reveals, "Break It Down" provides a scaffold for this chapter's meditations on negativity. It does so, moreover, while enacting a continuous interrogation of what "sex" means. Because it plays so crucial a role in "Living with Negativity" and because we want it to enter our conversation here in its own right, we have reprinted "Break It Down"

as an appendix to our dialogue with the generous approval of Lydia Davis and the permission of her publishers. In this way we hope the story makes audible another voice in this book and provides the opportunity for another encounter with Davis's work—an encounter different, we hope, from reading the story in a different context and one that adds a different context to the dialogues gathered here.

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We have suggested that this book uses dialogue to refine theoretical questions and to bring different aesthetic and critical archives to bear upon them. Those questions about the overwhelming intensities that shape ordinary subjectivity, even in noncrisis times, are harder than any one dialogue can bear, and we are not seeking to do justice to them, in the sense of repairing the world in which they operate as registers of subjectivity and power—if, that is, repair and justice could ever be construed as synonymous. We aim instead, through our own conversation, to initiate many others, including one among theorists of politics, affect, psychoanalysis, and aesthetics, that would try to account for the disturbances and anchors within relationality (to ourselves, across ourselves, to the world at large) and for the effects those disturbances and anchors have on our thinking about sociality. We believe that such conversations can expand our sense of sociality and the possibility of political movement. Paradoxically, though, our strategy of enlargement relies on narrowing our focus here. In other work we each might have moved outward to different exempla and archives. Here the form of the dialogue impels us to ever greater specificity as we respond to a recurrent anxiety about whether our iterations of words, objects, and scenes are understood in the way we intended. Along with the disturbance it occasions, though, the dialogue form affords us the chance to experience the “same thing” as different and to encounter the metamorphic potential that the sameness of things contains. Ultimately for us, it isn't a choice between disturbance and transformational possibility. We are interested in the inseparability of the two, in what can never be predicted or controlled in any engagement with the world, with otherness, and thus with ourselves as well.

1. SEX WITHOUT OPTIMISM

LAUREN BERLANT: Because many of us—I'm not presuming universality here—want so much from sex, from the study of sex, and from activism that foregrounds countering erotophobia, and because so many of us want relief from rage and pessimism about sex too, a phrase like “sex without optimism” might raise hackles. It might sound like a program that advocates coolness, being above the fray, a dare to not care, an affective or emotional imperative, or disrespect for optimism. I can assure you that we are not advocating for any of this.

LEE EDELMAN: Like the book for which it stands as the gateway, this chapter finds its origin more in questions than in answers—questions that Lauren and I have been trying to think about together. In large part those questions center on the very concept of togetherness. They impel us to interrogate the practices, effects, and ideologies of relation both in terms of the others with whom we find ourselves variously together (socially, erotically, politically, spatially, categorically, economically, ecologically) and in terms of the self that may (or may not) claim a unity or togetherness of its own. We approach the issue of relationality through the rubric of “sex without optimism” because sex, for us, whatever else it may signify or be made to figure, denotes an encounter with otherness that attains the stability of knowable relation only by way of an optimism that erases its negativity.

Jacques Lacan's well-known assertion that “there is no sexual relation” resists the imperative to resolve the structural antagonism of the Symbolic (given a contingent expression in heteronormativ-

ity's sexual binarism) through the fantasy, and so the optimism, of a successfully realized relation (Lacan 1991/2007, 116). Lacan, that is, attends to what is negative and unknowable in sex insofar as sexual difference eludes every effort to comprehend it. Such a reference to Lacan, more pertinent perhaps to my approach than to Lauren's, might help nonetheless to crystallize what seems inseparable from sex for both of us: the encounter with what exceeds and undoes the subject's fantasmatic sovereignty. Against the specific optimism such a fantasy bespeaks, sex affords a privileged site for encountering negativity—a negativity that registers at once the insistence of enjoyment, of the drive, and of various disturbances that inhere in relation itself.

LB: Negativity, the “without” in our title, magnetizes many different things, and one of our aims throughout this volume is to elaborate on the richness and incoherence of the concept (if you add up all of the things each of us means). But briefly, by negativity I am pointing at once to the self-cleaving work of the drives, being socially oppressed, and being nonsovereign, affectively undone by being in relation. It's worth saying, therefore, that nonsovereignty and negativity are not precise synonyms (like most synonyms or proposals of likeness, they also imply a world of differences): the latter derives from a philosophical and psychoanalytic engagement, while the former derives from traditions in political theory that traverse social and affective relationality. The main political question is how we understand and mobilize the relations among these concepts, phenomena, and structures.

But it's hard to stay focused on the *variety* when the affective impact of attention to the subject's negativity so often reads as nihilistic or just anti-x when we mean something more overdetermined and dynamic. For example, I don't think that “sex . . . attains the stability of knowable relation only by way of an optimism that erases its negativity”: what it means to know, what it means to want what's not knowable in advance or controllable, what it means to sense something without knowing it, does not add up to amnesia, foreclosure, disavowal, or erasure—but neither does erasure itself, as Lee's writing in this chapter will soon attest. Can understanding more about the many ways that sexuality manifests itself as non-

sovereignty, radical incoherence, and a scene both for optimism and subordination transform what sexuality stands for and does?

So we came up with the phrase “sex without optimism” and then had to figure out what we meant.

LE: One way to tell our story is by starting with the problem of story as such and considering how telling it is that we tell our stories here so differently. However attenuated, qualified, ironized, interrupted, or deconstructed it may be, a story implies a direction; it signals, as story, a movement that leads toward some payoff or profit, some comprehension or closure, however open-ended. This leading toward necessarily entails a correlative “leading from,” the “leading from” or “out of” at the root of “education.” Even in those moments when we imagine ourselves immersed in its permanent middle, the story, so conceived at least, moves through time toward its putative end, where it seems to define the field within which it produces its sense of sense. Absent that framework of expectation, it isn’t a story at all, just metonymic associations attached to a given nucleus.

But even such an elaboration would return us to the conventions of story: the refusal of story will always enact the story of its refusal. This orientation toward a future, toward something always yet to come, conceived as bestowing a value on life by way of the future anterior, by way of the life one *will have lived*, conceived, moreover, as justifying this refusal to live it *while one could*: this is what I call optimism, a condition so wide in its reach that it shapes our experience into narratives touched with the gloss we might think of as finish, in more than one sense of that term. To the extent that such optimism aspires to the finish of this universal gloss, we might view it as truly Panglossian and acknowledge the extent to which it compels a regulatory discipline that, with apologies to Michel Foucault, we could designate as Panoptimism.

Our conversation begins as an attempt to think about how to be pro-sex without succumbing to Panoptimism, or even to the sort of sexual optimism implicit in sexual liberation—and to do so by thinking about alternatives to narrative knowledge and knowledge as narrative: to do so, that is, by once again, as Gayle Rubin recommended, rethinking sex and posing it over and against education as a “leading out” of ignorance, inability, and bewilderment and into

the condition of mastery, understanding, and realized sovereignty. As sex, in this context, compels the provisionality of relation, so the dialogue toward which we are moving neither affirms our shared identity nor reifies our differences. It puts those differences into play instead, bringing them into focus at one moment and revising the optic the next so that openings onto areas of agreement also make visible new zones of dissent. That play bespeaks the enjoyment we take, the goad or provocation we find, in one another's work, and it aims to allow for the sorts of surprises, interruptions, and recalibrations that come, or don't, with thinking in the absence of predetermined outcomes.

Nothing was certain as we began this project; nothing was fixed in advance. We still don't even know for sure that we mean the same things by "sex." For me, it has something to do with experiencing corporeally, and in the orbit of the libidinal, the shock of discontinuity and the encounter with nonknowledge. But versions of such an encounter will inform the movement of these dialogues too, which may induce, libidinally or not, some shocks of discontinuity as well. Together, in the cross-cut meditations, observations, and questions that determine their shape, these dialogues will reverse education's leading out and return to the place of sex in thought, or rather, in thought's multiplication: in its doubling, that is, by the two of us and by the doubling back implicit in the process of rethinking. As one might expect from a critical mode that dabbles in doubling back, we abandon all hope at the outset of moving toward any definable end. But we're also mindful that such a claim may itself be a form of Panoptimism.

LB: We came to the question of sex without optimism focusing on the ways that sex undoes the subject, but we use idioms that aren't identical, as I suggested: Lee emphasizing the structuring force of jouissance and me emphasizing the activity of affect phenomenologically and in historical context—and that matters, as we will see. But we both engage critically the ways that heteronormativity attempts to snuff out libidinal unruliness by projecting evidence of it onto what Rubin calls "sexual outlaws" and other populations deemed excessively appetitive, casting them as exemplary moral and political threats that must be framed, shamed, monitored,

and vanquished if the conventional good life, with its “productive” appetites, is going to endure (Rubin 2011, 131). The question we debate remains what else to do with the knowledge of the overwhelming force of sex and drive.

Thus we have both rejected projects of queer optimism that try to repair the subject’s negativity into a grounding experiential positivity. Where Lee is concerned, this set of aversions and commitments has been called “the antisocial turn” in queer theory and has turned into a controversy about what embracing negativity must mean, can mean, should mean for people’s imaginaries of power and about how to live. Indeed the critique of optimism as foreclosure he recounts has seemed (mistakenly) to some like a critique of imagining life as worth attaching to at all.

But in my advocacy for thinking about the subject as that which is structurally nonsovereign in a way that’s intensified by sex, intimacy building, and structural inequality, I have not been accused of being antisocial, just socially awkward, a whole different problem, resulting in a theoretical idiom more slapstick than stentorian, more concerned with the force and impact of what Lee calls “just metonymic associations.” This means that, while he focuses on “story” as *always* enacting negativity’s drama of expectation and refusal, I am more concerned with that muddled middle where survival and threats to it engender social forms that transform the habitation of negativity’s multiplicity, without necessarily achieving “story” in his terms (Berlant 2007). For, you know, I am a utopian, and Lee is not. I do not see optimism primarily as a glossing over, as “fantasy” in the negative sense of resistance to the Real. I am interested in optimism as a mode of attachment to life. I am committed to the political project of imagining how to detach from lives that don’t work and from worlds that negate the subjects that produce them; and I aim, along with many antinormative activists, to expand the field of affective potentialities, latent and explicit fantasies, and infrastructures for how to live beyond survival, toward flourishing not later but in the ongoing now. Lee has said to me, as we’ve built this conversation, that he finds this orientation too close to the kind of be-goodness that we are also contesting (Berlant 2011).

I would also not describe the negativity of sex and sexuality as Lee just did, as “the shock of discontinuity and the encounter

with nonknowledge.” That is because I think that subjects are not usually shocked to discover their incoherence or the incoherence of the world; they often find it comic, feel a little ashamed of it, or are interested in it, excited by it, and exhausted by it too, by the constant pressure to adjust that is at the heart of being nonsovereign, subjected to the inconstancy and contingency that they discover in and around themselves. At the same time, people protect their sexual incoherence, and it’s worth noticing how they defend the ways that they are unreliable to their self-idealization and their internal noise, including their tangled conceptions of who should have sexual freedom and what kind. Shock, comparatively, is rare.

Finally, in my view, the affective experience of sexual or any nonknowledge is not usually a blockage or limit but is actually the experience of the multiplication of knowledges that have an awkward relation to each other, crowd each other out, and create intensities that require management. This is one place where the desire to cement sex to optimism arises, as any conventionality in the penumbra of sex provides relief from the ordinary muddles that arise in the intimate zones of encounter with other persons and the world. But even the enjoyment of an optimistic reprieve from being overwhelmed within sexualization is not the same thing as the desire for it to be repaired, to go away as a problem, or to achieve a flat consistency. Relief, play, interruption, glitchiness: these can provide a space of interest within which other rhythms and therefore forms of encounter with and within sexuality can be forged.

In short, our commonalities are in our fundamental belief that normativity is an attempt to drown out the subject’s constitution by and attachment to varieties of being undone and our strong interest in a pedagogy that does not purchase space for negativity by advocating for a simplifying optimism. I tend to expand from the multiplicities and disjunctures of the affective register within which subjectification is experienced (whether or not recognized as an experience), while Lee focuses even more abstractly on the frameworks of meaning making that require such domination. I tend to dedramatize the experience of being a sexual subject in the ordinary, while Lee sees the subject’s reeling experience of his subjective negativity as a drama that becomes dramatized. So we thought that perhaps we should look at different registers of aesthetic mediation

that might get both at what we don't share and what we do—a view of the subject's undoing and the wrongheadedness of any reparative politics that turns being undone into a symptom of an illness or a measure of injustice.

.....

Initially we thought the phrase “sex without optimism” was very funny. At the same time it pointed toward a difficult project of displacing sex and sexuality from their seesaw status as either causes of or repairs for the precarity of life. But did we really want sex without optimism? Why didn't we just want sex without stupid or destructive optimism? Our divergence in even understanding these questions was most starkly manifested aesthetically. I wanted each of us to curate a montage of sex without optimism. We made a list of films that we thought would provide some examples.

LE: And then things started to get complicated. The more examples we proposed of what we could think of as sex without optimism, whether or not we qualified that optimism as stupid or destructive or cruel, the more it became clear that we didn't necessarily mean the same things by “sex” and that we were finding it hard to locate representations of sex that weren't optimistic. Something, perhaps the aesthetic framing of our various representations, or perhaps the persistence of narrative in the project of reading as such, recurrently seemed to neutralize resistance to Panoptimism's imperative.

Given her investment in thinking about options for sustaining lives that confront the obstacles of an unpropitious present, Lauren's examples tended toward instances in which surviving the dominations of power shaped a narrative about enduring or negotiating the experience of delegitimated being. Given my own suspicion of rhetorics that privilege viability or survival, a suspicion that marks less a difference from Lauren than a difference in inflection, I tended toward instances that depicted a *structure* I associated with sex without optimism (Edelman 2011). For both of us, whatever our definitions of “sex,” this meant turning to the distinctive undoing within it—an undoing that we don't see identically but one that we recognize as undoing our own as well as the other's understanding of it. That undoing is not, I must hasten to add, simply or

“ultimately” productive. It doesn’t move us toward final synthesis or overcome our differences. And it doesn’t give us comfort, as if it were an absolute good in itself. It prompts us instead to interrogate the relation of sex to our notions of the good and to consider the “re” in rethinking as repetition and undoing at once and so as bound to the problematic of the drive as we encounter it in sex. I take Lauren’s point to heart, after all, when she says that subjects are not generally shocked by the experience of their own incoherence and that what matters most may not, in fact, be blockages or encounters with nonknowledge but the multiplication and overlap of *incompatible* knowledges. But the persistence of that incompatibility, the constant obtrusion of what our will to relational management ignores, denies, or misrecognizes, makes undoing as such the condition of living in a world that is not our own.

If relation exists as a pathway between entities in a multidimensional network wherein those entities themselves are the products of particular sets of relations, then moving across those dimensions and through its infinite relational web will entail an undoing we may not want to experience or acknowledge as such. Shock, as Benjamin taught us, can itself be part of the everyday as well as an exceptional experience of radically traumatizing discontinuity. Even in its everyday form, though, the shock we encounter retains the *potential* to undo our faith in our own ongoingness, our sense of our consistency as subjects (however inconsistently conceived), and to obtrude with an incoherence we cannot master by finding it comic or resolve through the judgment of shame. The corollary to that encounter is anxiety, whose intensities we never fully manage since they signal our too-near approach to what we’re driven to enjoy. That’s why sex gets invested with such a weighty burden of optimism *as well as* with an often overwhelming burden of anxiety: the closer we come to enjoyment, the greater our need to defend against it—to defend our putative sovereignty against the negativity that empties it out.

Though I agree, then, that incoherence may often feel all too familiar and, in consequence, not shocking at all, my claim is that this very familiarity may testify to the will to domesticate the encounter with what can *never* be made familiar, what escapes our recognized feelings, eluding recognition precisely by virtue of those

recognized feelings themselves. What I find so compelling about Lauren's attentiveness to the taxonomies of unaccommodated being is the care with which she traces the conditions impelling subjects to normalizing narratives of emotional adequation even while she attends so shrewdly to the strategies by which alternative possibilities for world-building might also begin to emerge. My own imperative remains, however, to question the ground of those possibilities, to question our desire for those possibilities, to the extent that they still remain rooted in the willful management of affective intensities and susceptible, therefore, to the misrecognitions that reify the subject's self, even if the self that the subject reifies is construed as incoherent. The familiarity of incoherence can become a way of denying it. The I that "knows" its incoherence, or has grown accustomed to it, has usually succeeded, if painfully, in the labor of normalizing a self, even when it conceives that self as inadequate to the norm. So for me, the structuring incoherences that queer the self as the center of consciousness, and so of a pseudo-sovereignty, remain unavailable to the subject except in rare moments of traumatic encounter, moments when the potential for shock gets activated by the nearness of the unbearable, which is to say, of our own enjoyment: the enjoyment "we" never own.

Lauren would see the word "traumatic" as an instance of my making grandiose what she invites us to dedramatize, while I would worry that dedramatization is the emptying out, the attempt to neutralize the force of that encounter itself. Not always—and not in Lauren's work—but maybe in our normative relations to ourselves as continuous or viable subjects. Our world-building can't protect us against the worlds that others build, which may or may not have room for us or find us consistent with their survival. Nor can we be sure that the worlds *we* build don't work against our own flourishing. That doesn't mean we could simply choose to forgo the world-building project, any more than we could simply choose to forgo the optimism of attachment, only that it finds its supplement in thinking the encounter with what resists it, producing thereby the problem of relation these dialogues will confront. The negativity of encounter inhabits relation for Lauren and me alike.

But it does so across differences in intellectual tradition and critical vocabulary that Lauren and I must negotiate as we try to

move in relation to each other while wrestling with relation as a concept. Lauren's focus on affect leads her to resist my account of sex as the confrontation with a limit; she sees it as "the multiplication of knowledges that have an awkward relation to each other, crowd each other out, and create overwhelmed intensities that require management." What I find of interest, however, beyond the necessity of affect management produced by the multiplication of knowledges are the moments that signal the failure or even the inadequacy of knowledge as such, moments when the frameworks of knowing are not simply incoherently at odds with each other but incapable of accommodating the encounter with something unnamable in the terms they offer and irreducible to relation.

This nonrelation that's internal to relation and that threatens to overwhelm our attempts to manage it by *reasserting* relation is central to my approach to the encounter and to my reading of its structure. The insuperable otherness of this nonrelation finds expression in the negativity that marks the subject's encounter with nonsovereignty, but it escapes the sort of recognition by which the subject could assume that nonsovereignty as something of its own rather than as something that disappropriates it of ownership of itself. Nonsovereignty, as we both agree, is not one thing but many; the nonsovereignty the subject can recognize (and so try to manage, at least affectively) differs from the nonsovereignty manifest, for example, by the drive, by the unconscious, or by the Real that dissolves the consistency of reality as known.

In this regard I would want to define one difference between Lauren's perspective and mine by focusing on her distinction between my engagement with "negativity's drama of expectation and refusal" and her concern with "that muddled middle where survival and threats to it engender social forms that transform the habitation of negativity's multiplicity." Lauren's work directs our attention to the scenic potential of what can seem an immutable relation to oneself, one's objects, or one's world. Her subtle readings of "social forms" and their susceptibility to change, however, differ from my own investment in reading the repetitions of the nonrelation that structures and necessitates those changes. Inherent in the proliferation of social forms lies what structures the social *as* form: the void of the nonrelation that in-forms, which is to say, forms from

within, the imperative to formalize relation even while deforming it as well. I tend to focus on the consequences of this antagonism inherent in social forms, while Lauren tends to theorize the social as the site for more scenic sorts of relation, exploring the various ways of inhabiting an environment or of being in the world. But I don't construe this difference in optic or emphasis as absolute. We both attend to the pressure of structures, and we both are committed to thinking about change, even if those notions of structure and change must open to include, in the course of our discussion, the different ways we construe them.

Lauren calls herself a utopian, which she links to the double project of "imagining how to detach from lives that don't work" and expanding what she calls the "field of fantasies" for "flourishing . . . in the ongoing now." I am not a utopian, though I too cast my vote for flourishing. But then I don't see "flourishing" as radically distinct from the experience of "lives that don't work"; negativity, in my view, speaks to the fact that life, in some sense, *doesn't* "work," is structurally inimical to happiness, stability, or regulated functioning, and that only the repetitive working through of what still doesn't work in the end—or works only until the radically non-relational erupts from within it once more—constitutes the condition in which something like flourishing could ever happen. For "flourishing," as I would use the term, refers neither to "happiness" nor to simple detachment from what doesn't work in life but rather to the effort to push beyond limits (internal and external both) imposed by the fantasy of the sovereign self (the self detached from negativity) or the optimism invested in happiness (as an end to the labor of trying to achieve it).

In any case, we both see sex as a site for experiencing this intensified encounter with what disorganizes accustomed ways of being. And as Lauren and I both want to suggest, that encounter, viewed as traumatic or not, remains bound to the nonfutural insistence in sex of something nonproductive, nonteleological, and divorced from meaning making. In this sense sex without optimism invokes the negativity of sex as a defining and even enabling condition. Gayle Rubin reminds us in "Thinking Sex" that "Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force," to which we might add: if only sex lived up to such press more often

(Rubin 2011, 148)! If only, that is, the Panoptimism that rules us, even (or especially) in our denial of its hold, did not so often lend value to sex through the world-preserving meanings imposed upon it to repudiate its negativity. One need not romanticize sex to maintain that it offers, in its most intensely felt and therefore least routinized forms, something in excess of pleasure or happiness or the self-evidence of value. It takes us instead to a limit, and it is that limit, or the breaking beyond it, toward which sex without optimism points.

LB: I never suggested that flourishing involves a “simple” self-evidence in happiness that demands a detachment from “the bad life”: flourishing involves traversing material conditions and then the affective sense of thriving, which is something different from and often incoherently bound to scenes and modes of living. This is why the materially “good life” might not be accompanied by a sense that life is good, why “good sex” might not be something one would want to repeat: without allowing for ambivalence, there is no flourishing. It therefore entails a complex navigation of life and noise, and the will to achieve it calls for practices and tendencies beyond mere accommodation to the world’s and our own negativity. Likewise it isn’t quite right to call psychoanalytic processes “structure” in contrast to the rule of misrule that marks ongoing modes of social domination: both domains of repetition structure, in that they are scenes in which subjects and scenes assume forms that have predictable, not determined, impacts. Structure is a process, not an imprint, of the reproduction of life.

De-antinomizing structure and the everyday, for example, one no longer has to see sex only as expressing a relation of power, or someone’s singular pleasures, or the shattering activity of the drives. We wouldn’t have needed Rubin to help us calm down and think about sex, and to think about affirming what’s threatening about it either, if we did not need to figure out how sex reproduces normativity while predictably disorganizing assurance about why we want what we want and what our variety of attachments mean; at the same time, not quite knowing ourselves, we demand all sorts of things on behalf of the appetites, such as the right to anonymity, aggression, acknowledgment, pleasure, relief, protection, and, often,

repair. Fantasy, formally speaking, is not what glosses over this craziness but that which makes it possible to move within it—sometimes in the blindingly glossy sense of optimism Lee proposes but more formally in the sense its setting provides that ambivalent, incoherent, proximate forces can be moved, moved through, and with. These processes of exposure to power, norm, and desire are structuring in their very variety and variation. As I wrote recently in an essay about the work of Leo Bersani and David Halperin, “When in a romance someone has sex and then says to the lover, ‘You make me feel safe,’ we understand that she means that there’s been an emotional compensation to neutralize how unsafe and close to the abject sex makes her feel. ‘You make me feel safe’ means that I can relax and have fun where I am also not safe, where I am too close to the ridiculous, the disgusting, the merely weird, or—simply too close to having a desire. But some situations are riskier than others, as the meanings of unsafe sex change according to who’s having the sex” (Berlant 2009, 266). That’s where the politics comes in.

So when I say that I want to dedramatize our conceptual and embodied encounters with sex, I don’t mean that I want to live in the pastoral sex world of *Shortbus* (Mitchell 2006), cruising like a happy puppy sniffing around a sea of interesting crotches. To some degree Lee is right that my stance is a way of making peace with misrecognition. Making peace with it, it seems to me—being a realist of sorts as well—gives us a shot at displacing sex from its normative function as the mechanism of emotional cohesion that sustains aggressive heteronormativity. But also, since misrecognition is inevitable, since the fantasmatic projection onto objects of desire that crack you open and give you back to yourself in a way about which you might feel many ways will always happen in any circuit of reciprocity with the world, why fight it? The question is where we move the dramatics of projection, what we can make available for changing their imaginary shape and consequence. I take cues from Lacan and Cavell to see sex as part of a comedy of misrecognition at the same time as it also can be a tragic drama of inflation and deflation. But “comedy” is a technical term here; it does not point to what’s funny or what feels good. Comedy stages explosive and implosive problems of adjustment that are fundamentally affective and political—and survivable, if not affectively too bearable, even beyond the limit.

It might be worth mentioning this concept's origin in a high moment in feminist radicalism. I learned "dedramatize" first from reading Monique Wittig. In *The Straight Mind*, Wittig advocated dedramatizing gender (1992, 30). Her thought was that the demand to be intelligible as a gendered subject reproduced the prisonhouse of binary relationality that constantly reconstitutes heterosexuality as the norm on which all social intelligibility and standards of virtue are said to hang. I think, although I have never thought it before writing it here, that what motivates me to insist on a project of dedramatizing the very intense aim of remaining in attachment is not to deny the drama but to address it tenderly, nudging it to a new place the way a border collie would, not reproducing the intensity of the grand foundation for the world it has become, because only under those conditions of seeing dramas in their ordinariness will the virtue squad not be able to use dramas of threatened sexual security to reproduce the normative good life. To dedramatize the sexual encounter, to think of "benign variation" as sometimes really benign and not a disavowal of story's inevitable negativity, is to dedramatize disavowal and call it what it is, our partial understanding of what we're doing when we take up a position in proximity to the drives that bring us, once again, to becoming undone by wanting something, for example, by wanting sex.

This leads me to our archive. After all of this Lee and I looked at what we could possibly use to exemplify our views. He wants to think about the subject's radical negativity. I had thought I would want to show sex at the extremes, since no doubt the first definition of "sex without optimism" in the imaginary *OED* of the appetites would be bad sex, sex without pleasure, sex that was manifestly or tacitly coerced, forced, or compulsive, sex that disappoints or that turned out to be beside the point. But in my current scholarly work I am focusing on the nonmelodramatic affects that have come to saturate some sexually queer narratives, so that an optimistic structure might not sound like optimism at all—from the vocal flatness of memory films like *The Watermelon Woman*, *Chuck and Buck*, *Mysterious Skin*, and *My Life on Ice*, which tell a trauma story in the tonalities of indie coolness, to sexuality as a form of artifice or method acting in *Mulholland Drive* and *Boys Don't Cry*, to the affectively variable tender experimentality of adolescence films like *In Between Days*,

Thirteen, and *Me and You and Everyone We Know*. I decided on an exemplary scene from the last film to demonstrate encounters with the sexual that point to the sexual limit (of self-knowledge and of world-building potential) in ways that are enigmatic. Lee chose a photograph by Larry Johnson (figure 1.1). It was then kind of shocking for us to realize that, after all this talk of negativity, we had both tapped for our examples the archive of the adorable.

LE: Doesn't this exemplify in miniature how the "shock" of negativity operates? It displaces what we thought we knew or could reliably predict and reveals the presence of something else at work in the decisions, desires, and acts we think of as our own. We may smile at this striking convergence in such an unexpected archive, but the amusement doesn't fully displace the Wordsworthian "shock of mild surprise" at something that seems to have "enter[ed] unawares into [our] mind[s]" (Wordsworth 2004, 238). That the jolt here should come in response to our common recourse to "the adorable" at the moment we seek out objects to illustrate the concept of sex without optimism enacts the sort of irony—the rhetorical figure of nonsovereignty—that the negativity we're focused on always carries in its train.

Perhaps, though, the very disturbance that the negativity of sex can induce makes it logical that sex without optimism would seek the shelter of adorability, invoking the familiarity, the recognizability of its aesthetic. Among the things to which sex refers is the prospect of an encounter with something much closer to the sublime than to the beautiful—which doesn't, as most of us know to our sorrow, mean that sex is always sublime, nor that it can't be conceptualized as beautiful, but rather that it trenches on an economy of danger where shifts of scale can at any moment reorganize value or empty it out, articulate new meanings or dislocate the subject of meaning altogether. Sex, then, may be inseparable from the question of the aesthetic, but primarily because the aesthetic (that is, the *ideology* of the aesthetic as opposed to the specificity of the work performed by aesthetic objects) can shield us against what threatens to undo and displace us in sexual encounters. That, of course, is why Lacan could describe the beautiful as the final barrier before the field of radical desire and as an outpost, along with goodness,



FIG 1.1. Larry Johnson, *Untitled (Ass)*, 2007, color photograph, framed: 57.6 x 62.6 x 1.5 inches (146.4 x 159.1 x 3.8 cm). Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Reprinted by permission of the artist.

against the disorganizations of *jouissance* (Lacan 1986/1992). The adorable, which almost seems to have wrested this privilege from the beautiful, can domesticate the riskiness that inhabits sexual encounter (consider, for example, the scenes of sexual intimacy in *Girls*) and so, as Lauren has put it, can work to “neutralize how unsafe and close to the abject” sex can be. In that sense the archive of the adorable might be a treasure trove of negated encounters with the forms of negativity.

If the adorable is a dominant aesthetic mode of democratic modernity, invoking the reassuring privilege of a blandly harmonious normativity whose essence lies in its distance from the exceptionality of beauty or ugliness, then it also denotes what’s expendable because so easily replaced, what refuses the burden of depth or the experience of emotional vicissitude. In this way adorability has affinities with cuteness, “a taste concept,” as Sianne Ngai observes, “firmly rooted in visual commodity culture” and given expression in objects with “simple contours and little or no ornamentation,” objects that always retain an element of the “unformed” and the “de-formed” about them (815–16). Cuteness, she argues, solicits the violence its pliability lets it withstand, and it invites the performative expression of what she describes as “ugly feelings.” Writing about Larry Johnson’s work, Laurence Rickels makes a similar point: “The violence that goes down in cute culture already doubles and contains itself as violence control. . . .,” he remarks: “Cute is the password of mass-cultural contact, connection, communication” (1996, 28).

The adorable, in a related way, anesthetizes feeling—or rather creates a paradoxical entity: an anesthetic feeling, a feeling that aims to protect against overintensity of feeling and an attachment that can survive detachment from the particularity of its objects. Thus Rickels can write of cuteness that it “lets us pass as instantly available for easy libidization, assimilation, replacement” (1996, 27). Like the adorable, it condenses an optimism about our capacity to master the object, providing the smiley-faced representation of Panopticism’s investment in relations (or rather in a *representation* of relations) that smooth negativity’s rough edges by means of a violence, to return to the words of Rickels, “that doubles and contains itself as violence control.” For at bottom the imperative

of optimism is the normativity of happiness, with its promise of a consistent pleasure in and access to one's objects. Such consistency (even when associated with variety or change) imposes a deadening rigidity, a calcification, a sort of carapace, that functions like the anticipatory act of bracing before a collision and aims to provide protection against the insistence of the world in its alterity, exigency, and unpredictability.

Alain Badiou has good reason to remind us that "every definition of Man based on happiness is nihilist" (Badiou 1998, 37), but we can never be reminded often enough that the political program of happiness as a regulatory norm is less a recipe for liberation than an inducement to entomb oneself in the stillness of an image. It is to seek, as I wrote at the outset, the "stability of a knowable relation," where the fantasy of *knowing* the relation seeks to stabilize or mortify precisely what makes it living and relational in the first place: its opening onto differences we neither comprehend nor control. As a normative project, then, happiness has to abject as radically inimical whatever resists incorporation into its totalizing logic. Violence becomes the medium for its "violence control" as Panoptimism, like a Möbius strip, turns back to the negativity from which it tries to turn away. But to demur from *this version* of optimism is not to deny the inevitability of our, or anyone else's, optimistic attachments. No *Future* made clear that no one, including those who assume the figural status of the social order's death drive, can choose to stand outside that order or the Symbolic logic that shapes it (Edelman 2004). And only the prospect of making the intrinsic negativity of the social apparent, thus opening onto a possible political engagement with the Real, could motivate anyone to take on the function of what I called the *sinthomosexual*. The negativity that interests me has no ground outside the optimism it opposes. The desire at work in these dialogues, invariably a political desire, is to think the enabling conditions of an anti-anesthetic space that would not reproduce the pacifications of aesthetic ideology or the sublimations that recuperate the sublime's distinctive undoings. Instead it would permit the encounter with negativity to initiate transformations whose end is only the endless opening onto the necessity of new ones.

This, then, is not a superior optimism dialectically raised up by negation but rather an effort, embedded in the contradictions of

willing against oneself, to make possible what one's self impedes and Panoptimism renders unthinkable: an openness to what resists the survival of our mortified, adorabilized selves in their conformity to the dominant ethics of happiness and immobilized social forms. In the misrecognitions that sex entails and their recurrent neutralization by optimism's stabilizing impulse, I aim to locate the queerness that works as that optimism's self-resistance: the queerness that is less an identity than an ongoing effort of divestiture, a practice of undoing. Such queerness, I claim, can make no claim—no claim to the good or the proper, and so to no ground from which identitarian claims for redress of wrongs might be launched. In its paradoxical self-definition as what blocks definition's closure, it resists the regime of the smiley face whose rictus carries the promise of consistency, stability, and normalization. Panoptimism precludes the very life it purportedly enables while denying the negativity of its own death-driven investment in "life"—where "life" names the fantasy of escape from loss, contradiction, confusion, or defeat in pursuit of an armored happiness that aggresses the enemies of its hope.

What hope for those who hope to remain consigned to that enemy camp? What happens when hope turns *against* itself in order to affirm the rupture that defines its enabling negativity, its structuring noncoincidence with the universe as it "is"? Things that *may* happen include disaffection, depression, immobility, resignation, or the suicidal fantasmatics of ontological repair. But among the others is a political resistance to the norms by which political possibility is defined—and defined precisely to exclude negativity and, with it, the radical undoing that animates hope as a rupture from itself and thus sets it apart from the happiness that Panoptimism promises.

LB: I don't see queerness mainly as "an effort of divestiture" but also as an attentiveness and will to make openings from within the overwhelming and perhaps impossible drive to make objects worthy of attachment, and therefore I'm less threatened by the potential foreclosures of hope. But I agree largely with what Lee has written; and it makes me realize that part of my resistance to apocalyptic crescendos is that they can well blot out the delicacies that got us there. To amplify the substantive agreement: as James Baldwin

pronounced long before Badiou, some fantasies of collective happiness are inhuman, but a critical social theory would have to engage how people manage their aversion to life and liveness in relation to their desire for them. Such structural ambivalence points to the very complexity of talking about sex when it would be so much easier to be reflecting on feelings. Politically the reparative drive about which I worry most is the genocidal one, the one to which Leo Bersani refers as the inflation of the state ego that forces the world into mirroring its grandiose fantasy; the one that Judith Butler identifies in the imperial world's incapacity to grieve; the one that Sara Ahmed and Barbara Ehrenreich describe in their antisupremacist critiques of happiness projects; and the one that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney refuse in their call to reinvent what we mean by both abolition and reconstruction (offering a quite different praxis from a project of *repair*).

Most fantasies of repairing what's broken aren't, though, genocidal; most of them are ways of staying bound to the possibility of staying bound to a world whose terms of reciprocity—whether in intimate personal or political idioms—are not entirely in anyone's control and which yet can be changed by a radical collective refusal of normative causality, of the normative relation of event to effect. Sex without optimism doesn't have to mean sex with or without "bad sex." It could mean facing that we never had the option of maintaining our composure around that which never provided us the clarity and assurance that seemed to be its promise. It could mean seeing that sex becomes more of a threat when it has to hold up a world that spans both chronological and fantasmatic futures. Sexual politics, even as critical theory, generates better scenarios for inhabiting its great and disturbing discomposure.

The scene I am about to discuss, from *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (July 2005), is famous, if the 1,216,852 viewings of the scene on YouTube are any indication, in addition to the reenactments of the scene that have proliferated. The scene involves transactions between two brothers (Peter and Robby Swersey) and a curator of a contemporary art museum (Nancy Herrington), who is the film's villain. The brothers—Peter is fourteen, Robby six—are exploratory and interested in sexually experimenting on the Internet. Their parents have just divorced, and the mother is never far from the

younger boy's mind, even when they're playing with sex talk online; in contrast, the older boy, manifesting sexual cynicism and genuine curiosity, is also exploring heterosex with his peers. Meanwhile the curator, Herrington, is established by way of her bad taste and aversive mien: she calls shallow things profound; she is liberally politically correct and humorless; she wears black as a badge of seriousness; she wears too much makeup and has a bad hair-dye job to distract inadequately from her pockmarks and her aging; and, most damningly, she is aggressively cold and verbally withholding to people who open their desire to her, face to face, coworkers and aspiring artists (like July herself, playing "Christine Jesperson").

In this scene the brothers have been sex-chatting online with the curator. Neither the filmgoers nor the children know that the curator is the sexual interlocutor whose fantasies the boys are soliciting. They do not even know that the writer is a "she" because, as Peter points out, "she's probably a man . . . a fat guy with a little wiener," or something else, as "everyone just makes stuff up on these things," these chat rooms. The curator-interlocutor does not know either that the "man" is two biracial boys and underage. They do not know that she's white and cranky. How this or any nonknowledge matters matters not in the beginning of the relations that unfold in the film, where people fling themselves into things to become non-sovereign in a different way, as they must, at the beginning (if it is a beginning, that is, of a story), without a mutually agreed-on idiom of optimistic misrecognition like identity or love.

One might say, additionally, that the neglect especially of racial metacommentary reveals this film as a white liberal's fantasy; then again, a melodrama of racial commentary would do so equally. And it is a fantasy about what fantasy might do not just to disavow but to transform the conditions of encounters with negativity. For it turns out that many of them converge in the scenes of the film. Divorce as its framing event forces an assessment of what it means to give up the fantasy of knowing and saying it all in the attempt to stay in relation. Even in self-relation: the husband (Richard Swersey) sets his arm on fire in the opening scene as a "ritual" to confirm that there was a loving family there before there wasn't. He does this having doused his arm with lighter fluid before burning, to *simulate* the risk of being with and without that is both love and its loss, and



FIG 1.2. Robby and Peter Swersey online in *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005).

to delay the wound of lost love that he is now experiencing, by literalizing his wife's loss of him in his sacrificial act toward his own flesh. Even people who have self-disclosed and known each other intimately can discover their mutually enigmatic status and aversive tendencies in any instant and have to get in synch with being out of synch all over again, as they had to do too, though differently, when they were falling in love. Here the fluid burns away because it cannot not, and the rehearsal of having and loss takes on a scarring visceral force. The wife (Pam Swersey) has asked him not to have a drama; he can't help expressing his drama as both life and death. Is charring his skin also an appropriation of his wife's blackness, an expression of the impossibility of intersubjectivity, and/or an attempt to move beyond the ordinary to where the event of love still might proceed? Breakup forces facing the nonrelation that accompanies conventional optimism about attachment and points to the necessity of fantasy within the ordinary to provide a ground for the extension of relation whether or not an adorable nonsovereign mutuality is achieved episodically or, as we will see, on the affective virtual plane of "forever."

But before there is a relation durable enough to become event there are the gestures of feeling out that are never fully absent from an intimacy's long middle. Robby gets curious. He wants to know if the woman likes bologna; Peter asks her if she's got big bosoms.



FIG 1.3. Making sex up as they go along in *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005).

They know some things about sex but not much: Peter pronounces “bosom” like “bozzum” (see figures 1.2 and 1.3).

The scene’s drama intensifies when Robby insists that it’s his turn to control the chat.

PETER: What should we write? “I have a big wiener?”

ROBBY: I want to poop back and forth.

PETER: What? What does that mean?

UNTITLED: I’m wearing pants and a blouse.

NIGHTWARRIOR: How’s your bosom?

UNTITLED: I have a deliciously full “bosom.”

NIGHTWARRIOR: I want to poop back and forth.

UNTITLED: What does that mean exactly?

NIGHTWARRIOR: I’ll poop in your butt hole and then you will poop it back into my butt and we will keep doing it back and forth with the same poop. Forever.

For a minute, “Untitled” has not understood her paramour. It excites her not to have understood, and then it excites her to have the answer explained “exactly.” It excites her also that “NightWarrior” is imagining a forever that, realistically, physically, would be impossible, with or without the direct-action pooping, and so the whole thing is ridiculous. Yet the word “forever” that is there, a holophrasm without predicate or hesitation, a one-word sentence



FIG 1.4. The title of an art exhibition in *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005).

standing for a plane of time, saturates the affective field that seeks, consequently, to find form in the encounter. This exchange makes the curator “hot,” and they agree to meet.

To figure the sexual fantasy of pooping back and forth, forever, that Robby imagines, he types in an emoticon-like ideogram. Later Herrington folds it into the title of an art exhibition—and makes an icon of the age of a queered relation that adds to “divestiture” a proliferation of scenes of care that might give fantasy and living some better options (see figure 1.4). Warm, digital, touch: to many political theorists, the dynamic flow of the fantasy—)) < > ((—is a structurally impossible achievement (Berardi 2009; Hardt and Negri 2012; Dean 2010). In *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, though, people of all statuses aspire seriously, intensely to become cartoon, to become billboard, to become comically iconic, to become lighter, to circulate, and to disperse the heavy comportment of their loneliness and structural exhaustion into a rhythm and a game. The film’s plot moves through two dissolutions of two straight couples, through divorce and death, and many attempts by people not in couples to become connected to other humans or other lives across distances that might be fantasized but never permanently bridged. All of this takes place in the historical context of so much change, waste, and waning, across adolescence to old age, aesthetic to immaterial labor, AIDS and ordinary geriatric deaths, and families reconfigur-

ing on the edge. Amid all that, the adolescents and unhooked-up adults “hot” to try out sexual things amid the shrinkage of what counts as mobility seem crazy and brave, not conventional; mobility is no longer upward but barely outward, involving moving around and making gestures. Love plots and sex plots convert “back and forth” from tragic to comic and back again, from bitter to lovingly mournful and freaked out about loss, from heteronormative to experimental, and from awkward to interested.

In this expansive context old fantasies shrink too, and that’s a good, because when the conventions shrink, things shift and slide, and people have to develop new orientations and modes of attention and extension alongside their old formulas. The episodic sweep of the film’s stretched ending bears this out. People go to an exhibit and take in tableaux of the too-closeness of love and loss; new intimates on a date look at a picture of a bird hung in a tree and hug there, eyes closed, one behind the other. A little boy stands outside at sunrise, listening to the sound of a coin tapping on a streetlight. To not rush into story while inhabiting action is to experiment with relation. So the condition of the film’s adults and children merge, as now everyone is trying to figure out what tone to take toward the *jouissance* that drives them from themselves. The new comportment iconized in pooping back and forth is all awkwardness, mistakes, and a desire to sense nearness more than nextness. It involves a continuous starting over, not out of optimism for projected out futures but for being in the world whose pressures are continuous and demand all of the resources they can scrape up and offer.

During the course of the film even the curator undergoes an emotional rehabilitation: she moves from “hot” to WARM; that’s one way to think about it. Warmth is an atmosphere that allows life and death to be in the same place as what’s potentially unbearable in love every minute, the having and losing that’s both ultimate and ordinary. Her curation is not a performance of denial or a celebration of the fantasy of simple flourishing but a gallery space for moving around the scene of relationality’s hard pleasures and hard knocks. As far as we know, admission is free. Of course, in a film so much about work (the work of the shoe salesman, the artist, the curator), freedom from a precarious economy is a fantasy too: the film tracks the costs of many kinds of nonsovereignty, of the non-



FIG 1.5. Back and forth, face to face, in *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005).

relation that is relation. Another character, a lonely young white girl, makes a hope chest, a privately curated hoard of fantasy that eventually she shares with her neighbors, the brothers. This suggests that all intensified relation involves curation, etymologically the organization of care, if not cure.

In tune with the legacies of white sentimental privilege—Herrington is a pasty-white white liberal—the curator’s “humanization” likewise occurs on taking in the fact that her lover turns out to be the mixed-race, round-faced boy. During their meeting they don’t say anything. There is proximity, glancing, the hesitant touching of hair, and a chaste kiss (see figure 1.5). We never get a clue what the event means to the boy, with his deadpan face and absorptive—not passive—mode of relation. For Herrington, the conversion of the pooping icon into a device signifying a general intimacy among survivors living the atmosphere of ordinary crisis in the present happens only after she reroutes, through the encounter with the boy, her ambivalent sexual optimism from romance and the couple form to scenes of aesthetic transformation in which many spectators come to open themselves to being touched and undone.

She had blamed AIDS for the affective turn, during which time, she says, people *represented* feelings instead of risking the disturbance and comfort of contact for which sex stands in as emblem. But what she curates, in the end, derives art from diverse racial,

sexual, geopolitical, and generational locations in order to return disturbance to tenderness. I don't mean that she aestheticizes difference simply in the negative sense in which the artwork muffles insuperable antagonism, although the icon)) < > ((does that too. The becoming-event of the encounter takes place when spectators witness and appreciate the waning of their genres of attachment—of mourning and of romance—without knowing what comes next.

Having something or someone is still unbearable, yet borne by mediation, as by genre—by the)) < > ((—people can be together only if they're also apart in some way. Racism, homophobia, misogyny, erotophobia, class antagonism, and then the random encounters on the street that become, through repetition, meaningful, intimate, touching, freaky: art here slows down and opens up time to the beat and membrane in which all of that upheaval, misery, intimacy, and clarity in the ordinary is lived. No matter how technically politically correct *WARM* is, gone is the cosmopolitan fantasy of merging and knowing and dissolving hierarchy into a confident equality. Stillness, stuckness, and aggressive willfulness persist in proximity to all kinds of death that are only sometimes too soon, sometimes unjust, but always sad, and “forever.” A phase and phrase are being passed through—without signaling the repair of relation. But is the film the same as the exhibit that the curator stages? To the surprise of neither of us, *Me and You* wants it both ways: it provides no happy ending but a bittersweet one, an optimistic aubade for bearing the end of sexual and emotional normativity as such within the chaotic middle that Susan Sontag (1991) called “the way we live now” and that Herrington adapts from Robby Swersey's)) < > ((.

LE: Robby's fantasy of this back-and-forth movement, his fixation on an image of intimacy as “poop” being passed between butt holes forever (he demands that his brother transcribe that image *exactly* in the words he used), may seem at once a powerful emblem of nonfutural sexual optimism, of a rhythmic movement of opening and closing, reception and propulsion without end (at once interminable and nonteleological), but it also can be viewed, in the idiomatic translation it also seems to solicit, as just more of the same old shit. Even in this openness to the rhythms of exchange (to the rhythms of openness and closure) there's already visible a

closing down, an encrustation of self that correlates with the insistence that the “poop” passed back and forth must stay the “same” forever. This recalls Lauren’s earlier insight that fantasies of repair are generally “ways of staying bound to the possibility of staying bound to a world.”

Such staying bound, however, if it’s to be more than merely bondage, if it’s not to become the frozen form on which one’s world depends, must be bound to the very unbinding that can seem its polar opposite—unbinding both as the release of cathexes from the objects to which they’re bound and as the release of the subject from fixations that bind it to an image of itself. It entails, that is, divesting oneself of the self’s immobilized form as well as of the fantasies that freeze-frame the self in relation to desire. Staying bound to the possibility of being in and with the world, where the world refers to the multiplicity always breaking from normative forms, must counter the dispensation that mortgages life to a mortified image even while enacting a repetition compulsion, a death-driven movement, a back and forth that betrays the insistence of something we can never resolve, get beyond, or make peace with.

This death drive attests to the excess that makes any totalization impossible, to the break opened up by the multiple of multiples constitutive of being for Badiou (1998, 25). As a force not governed by the logic of meaning, it insists on, and thereby “stays bound” to, dissent from the reality to which, in our subjective constitution, we remain committed as well. It enacts what we might want to characterize, but in a Lacanian sense, as Realism: an encounter with what the regime of naming, what our faith in reality, leaves out. The persistence of reality may be a necessary fiction, even for those who resist a given social or political reality, but the intrusions of the Real make the fictionality of its status almost palpable, reminding us therefore that reality is imaginary in form. Attending to the moments of rupture is not a judgment *against* the imaginary or an argument *for* the Real (as if the latter argument could somehow take place outside the imaginary itself); rather it’s an effort to account for the disturbance of imaginary reality by a Real with which we can never have a relation, only the recurrence of encounter. That “we” survive, that the world endures, that reality, despite such obtrusions, goes on: this is the normative structure of belief to which

the subject is committed despite the negativity to which it “stays bound.” The lure of the imaginary sustains the world, but the world thus sustained by the imaginary is also transpierced by the Real. And the two don’t play well together. That’s why negativity produces, especially when encountered in the drive, a sense of non-coherence, of self-resistance, of out-of-jointedness that clings as well to whatever a social formation objects as queer.

Like Lauren’s example of sex without optimism, mine too engages the negativity of relation as making transformation possible. But where her text invokes a universe of people aspiring to “become cartoon,” mine involves a cartoon-like image that is “unbecoming” itself. Larry Johnson’s *Untitled (Ass)*, a color photograph from 2007, offers a canny depiction of the touching, enforcing, and breaching of limits. Structured by the deeply ambiguous relation between the (photographed) sketch of the blissed-out donkey and the (photographed) “reality” of the human hand (with a pencil as its prosthesis), the image mobilizes differences in representational status and degree of agency (not to mention identification by species, color, and apparent dimensionality) in order to approach the encounter with what (to paraphrase the old Blackglama ad) unbecomes us most. In doing so, it positions the donkey (with its “humanly” expressive face) and the hand of the man with the pencil (presumably the artist who created it) in the intimacy of an illegible act taking place at the ass’s asshole—or, at least, that’s where it *would* take place if the ass had an asshole here. For the asshole is what the eraser at once erases and points out. Expunging from visibility what it directs the eye to take in, the eraser here enacts the intertwining of encounter and relation, negativity and attachment, which is why it can be seen as variously penetrating, concealing, or erasing the asshole, and with it, the donkey’s ass, and, by extension, the donkey itself as ass.

To the extent that the eraser negates what is by effacing what mustn’t be seen, it aims to produce an emptiness, a hole or a gap in the drawing at the place of the hole that it disallows, inscribing thereby the very thing it seems to remove or undo. If the image keeps something unnamed or untitled, unspoken or actively censored, it designates *Ass* as one of the names by which the untitled goes. By titling and untitling the image at once (Johnson’s title of choice is

Untitled), the title of the photograph mimes the picture's simultaneity of erasure and inscription, refusing to specify—leaving *Untitled*—what then, in the wink of a parenthesis, it nonetheless seems to name: (*Ass*). But that naming cannot erase the erasure of a title or name in the first place. Something is passing back and forth across the frame of paired parentheses, something in perpetual movement that seems to open and close the (*Ass*), to offer itself up and then withdraw, thus pressing us to put interpretative pressure on the eraser pressing on the ass's ass in the photograph itself.

Whatever the eraser in the picture is doing, it invites us to think about sex without optimism, without investment in the stability or coherence of the self in relation to its objects. *Untitled (Ass)* is part of a series Johnson made in 2007 that includes two others in which “adorable” cartoon characters are intimate with the pencils that might have drawn them. In *Untitled (Giraffe)* the eponymous two-dimensional creature leans forward between seemingly three-dimensional hands holding pencils that enter its ass and its mouth despite the drawing's flatness. The visible ends of the pencils are blunt—they can neither draw nor erase—but they produce nonetheless the intense concentration the animal seems to express. So too in *Untitled (Kangaroo)* the gaping mouth and the wide, round eyes of the animal thrusting an “actual” pencil into its empty pouch (no human hands present here) suggest the pencil's multiple ways of producing animation. Though this time the pencil's visible end is sharpened to a point, we have no idea if the unseen end is rubber-topped or blunt. But *Untitled (Ass)* makes the eraser itself the point of intimate contact. If the marsupial, despite its female gender, seems, vulgarly, to be “rubbing one out,” the ass, though equally enjoying itself, is being rubbed out instead. Among these images, *Untitled (Ass)* is the only one where the loss of sovereignty, the encounter with something beyond the world whose familiar dimensions we assume, is explicitly elaborated in terms of the coincidence of enjoyment and undoing.

But what enjoyment? Whose enjoyment? How should we read the relation between the expression on the ass's face (or on the giraffe's or the kangaroo's) and the pressure of the pencil that produces it—though not, at least in the photograph, by *drawing* that expression? We're encouraged to view these erotic encounters across

ontological barriers as sparking a flood of libidinal energy within the drawings themselves, as if, in the case of *Untitled (Ass)*, the eraser at the animal's anus brought it to life in rubbing it out, animating it despite its stillness through the shock or spark of contact. Like Robby Swersey's fantasy of endless exchanges in unchanging form, this image too co-implicates animation and immobility.

Of course, the aesthetic dream of imbuing inert material with autonomous life is as old as Ovid's Pygmalion, whose statue warmed to flesh when he touched its cold, still lips with his (which informs, no doubt, Nancy Herrington's becoming "human" after kissing Robby). Just what fantasy of relation, though, does this aesthetic ideal condense? Does the image awaken to "sovereignty," to its difference from the creator who imagined it, or does it offer the artist no more than an echo, his "own love back in copy speech," in the words of Robert Frost (1995, 307)? If the donkey in Johnson's photograph comes to life through sexual encounter, finding animation (from the Latin *animus*, "mind as the originator of intentions" [OED]) at the hand of the artist who shaped it, then we can hardly take its "sovereignty" as "originator" for granted. The eros that vivifies the other may prove to be other than its own. In that case the donkey's expression of enjoyment may merely express the artist's, reflecting within the image itself what the photograph frames as outside it. Does this rendering of a sexual encounter then, represent one subject's presence or two? It depends not only on whether or not we view the ass as animate but also on whether that animation makes it other than the artist or the same. As Paul de Man notes in a different context, Pygmalion may want to escape his own consciousness by encountering in his statue another subject, but he also may want to impose on the statue's otherness his own subjectivity (1979, 177–87).

Untitled (Ass), while extending the reach of this Ovidian tradition, makes things a bit more complex, for what animates the ass in the image also threatens to erase it. Pygmalion and his living statue, unreadably distributed between one and two, allegorize, like Johnson's photograph, the sexual nonrelation, the comic incommensurability of desire that Shaw's rendition of Ovid brings out. But Johnson's image, no less comic (in terms of genre, at least), makes palpable comedy's link to the negativity of sexual encounter. To

make palpable, to allow us to touch, to permit us to put our finger on it: the photograph gives us the touching of a hole, the palpation of the anal opening that opens the ass to a space of enjoyment no subject as subject, as sovereign, can bear. The pencil's erasure of the hole in the ass may signal the erasure of the ass as a whole, but the ass's unbecoming of what it was, its metamorphosis by way of the pencil, makes the erasure of the ass in response to the erasure of its "unbecoming" asshole coincide with the *dilation* of the asshole across the whole image of the ass. This is the corollary, both tragic and comic, to our optimism about sex, to our hope and expectation that it can sustain the promise of meaningful relation by denying its invariable intimacy with what takes us from ourselves. The violence (psychic, physical, emotional) of sexual normativity, its targeting of what it sees as "unbecoming" with regard to sex, performs this optimism by trying to separate sex from negativity, from what's unbearable in enjoyment. But the comedy, however dark, implicit in normativity's violence lies, as Johnson's image shows, in the re-duplication of negativity by the violence meant to erase it. The result—and Johnson's *Untitled (Ass)* conveys this to brilliant effect—is that perverse enjoyment (the penetration or stimulation of the ass) and the reaction against it (the effort to erase the asshole as the site of enjoyment) can look *exactly the same*. And that's why normativity so often insists on the adorable: to underscore the familiar forms of emotional attachment and domesticate the violence by which attachment to the familiar is enforced.

If it's striking that our examples of sex without optimism, selected independently, bear similar traces of the adorable, it's equally striking that what's adorable in each should aestheticize the asshole. Both Robby's vision of "butt hole[s]" open to the endless exchange of "poop" and Johnson's picture of the effacing of the asshole as implicated in the asshole's insistence engage a back-and-forth movement reminiscent of the Freudian *fort/da*. Fittingly, therefore, in both of our images the asshole retains its libidinal associations with the assertion and undoing of control, the control to which, in one reading of the game, the play of *fort/da* aspires. On the basis of its association with such a discipline of self-governance, Guy Hocquenghem argued the centrality of the anus

to capitalism's intersecting logics of privacy, property, and subjectivity and offered his account of what he called the "privatisation" of the anus, the practice that erases it from view (Hocquenghem 1972/1993, 96). If this privatization makes the anus the prototype of capitalistic production, generating surplus value by mastering labor and controlling exchange, it simultaneously increases the charge of what it requires to be concealed, necessitating a mediated expression of the libido that the anus thereby magnetizes.

Perhaps that explains why the ass so often figures in the adorable. The Coppertone girl might stand for a host of other, similar instances where the "cuteness" of the ass, allegedly free of sexual associations, stands in for the paradigmatic relation of the ass itself to cuteness. (Smooth and round, it can appear, to recall Ngai's account of cuteness, "unformed.") Insofar as signifiers of cuteness (the cartoonish lineaments of the donkey and the chat-room references to "poop") inflect the assholes in our images, they displace the anxiety about anal control and the correlative threat of non-sovereignty onto a past we can view as behind us now that we've put aside childish things. The aesthetic of the adorable thus enables the sublimation of the asshole by giving it visibility in the form of what has yet to achieve its form—a form that reaffirms the temporal movement toward the subject's self-formation. (No wonder the adorable ass is so often depicted in diaper ads.) Robby's computer-graphic image of his fantasy is adorable because its iconic formulation sublimates a more graphic anal desire; similarly Johnson's image of the donkey with the eraser at its ass is adorable in ways that Robert Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait with Whip* (1978) could never be. The teleology implicit in the adorable, the dialectical determination of its unformed quality by the temporality of disciplinary formation (and hence of regulation, privatization, and the regime of normativity) returns us, then, to the optimism that negativity could be erased.

Thus our images of sex without optimism don't leave optimism behind any more than they ever escape the disturbance of negativity. Instead they depict an interminable oscillation as each comes into focus and then retreats from view. In this back-and-forth movement they describe a constant engagement with negativity, with what

opens us to an otherness that undoes our image of the self. If that negativity entails destruction, such destruction enables change. Not, however, by redeeming negativity but precisely by *enacting* it, by imposing it as the condition of being open to (ex)changes that promise us nothing more than being bound to them, forever.

AFTERWORDS

We close this book with two afterwords. Given our interest in shifting the available genres of theoretical encounter, we wanted these afterwords to break from both the collective voice of the preface and the dialogic responsiveness of the chapters themselves. So we decided to write our afterwords separately, unaware of what the other would say or what form that saying would take. We hoped to discover what we each had learned from our collaborative work on this project and to look back at our exchanges while answering the loaded question, How was it for you?

Unsurprisingly, no reader could wonder for a moment which afterword was written by whom. For better or worse, our voices, in all their differences, come through loud and clear. But what does surprise us, given the argument foregrounded throughout this text, is how close we come to each other in certain crucial formulations, especially where we both converge on the pedagogy of surprise. Insofar as critical practice takes shape as an intimate encounter—with one's own ideas, with an object's otherness, with the voices of countless scholars—we do not intend these afterwords as the last word in any way. Nor do we think our conversation, or the effect of our having had it, is over. As the man accounting for his sexual adventure in "Break It Down" insists, "It isn't over when it ends, it goes on after it's all over" (129). That's what an intimate encounter means and what we mean by the encounter that animates us in *Sex, or the Unbearable*.

It Isn't Over

It seems fitting that our final chapter ends on the word “surprise.” With its etymological link to being seized, overtaken, or taken over, *surprise* defines the encounter with what disrupts our expectations by breaking through the defensive barriers associated with routine. To that extent surprise inheres in experiences of nonsovereignty that take us (as, for example, in sex) beyond our familiar limits—if only, as so often with sex, in largely familiar ways. Even those subjects who live with the expectation of nonsovereignty (children and prisoners, among others) can find a vestige of sovereignty in that very expectation, thus normalizing those limits into the logic of a world. It takes a lot of attention and a willingness to be seized by something one cannot know in advance to retain the capacity for surprise before what offers itself as what is; it takes a continuous resistance to one’s englobement by “the world.”

The paradigmatic form of such resistance is the drive. In contrast to the investment in fantasy that vivifies desire, affirming a world where objects have the power to complete us, the drive dismisses both objects and the aim of achieving completion. Enacting a negativity with no other end but its own insistence, the drive expresses the nonsovereignty brought home in what we’ve called “the encounter.” Though the effects it generates constantly change, the negativity of the drive does not. Nor can it, properly speaking, be taken as an object of desire. No wonder negativity gets such bad press. It shrinks from positivization in any program of political action and undermines whatever we take as an a priori good. Like the drive, that is, it affirms no good beyond its own persistence: the good (but is it a good at all?—negativity can never affirm it) of encounter, interruption, disturbance, unmaking, disappropriation, subtraction, surprise.

But surprise is often unpleasant. The jolt it induces, the shock of what we didn’t or couldn’t anticipate, reminds us that whatever the feelings a given instance of it inspires, surprise corresponds to a breach of security and so to a possible threat. Another name for that threat, as this book has argued, might be *life*, where life entails vulnerability to the unpredictable encounter that can often seem, with regard to the selves that we recognize, unbearable. Who wants de-

stabilization when what's destabilized is us, our place in the world, our deepest values, the political goals we advance? Shouldn't negativity shake the ground our political rivals stand on without its seismic ripples causing us to topple too? But the encounter buffets the world as it is and us in a single blow. How could it ever do otherwise when we are the products of that world? We claim that we want to break it down, but our wanting, our desire as subjects (insofar as we view that desire as *ours*), no more survives the encounter intact than does the subject itself. Negativity-lite is no option.

That explains why these dialogues, in the process of thinking the conditions for change, keep coming back to the unbearable in the encounter with negativity. Negativity is unchanging as structure because negativity structures change. Far from being incompatible, structure and change are inextricable. In any given instance, though, we need to ask some questions to understand their relation more fully: What sort of change are we talking about? What level of structure do we aim to describe? What scale of attention do we deploy to distinguish between change and repetition? It might, for example, seem surprising to some that this book, in which we explicitly advocate openness to surprise, should "keep coming back to the . . . unbearable" as if to iterations of the same. That the embedding of surprise in repetition is able repeatedly to surprise us speaks to the incessant pressure of what we continue not to know. But our coming back to the unbearable is never just a return to the same. What's unbearable in negativity is its vertiginous nonidentity, the disunity we fail to comprehend however much we think we know our own and the world's incoherence. Our encounters with negativity, like the repetitions of the drive, may change our objects, ourselves, and our relation to what surrounds us. They may alter our experience of being in the world in ways both large and small. But they do so without, for all of that, affecting the persistence of the unbearable or the force of its structural consequences, including the urge to negate whatever contingently (and therefore variably) may figure its negativity.

All of which serves to remind us of what we far prefer to forget: the unbearable names what cannot be borne by the subjects we think we are. We build our worlds in the face of it so as to keep ourselves *from* facing it, as if we implicitly understood that the un-

bearable as such can have no face and works to deprive us of ours. Though meant to forestall the unbearable, such world-building no more escapes it than do our attempts at political change. But the fact of that structural imperative discredits neither world-building nor political struggle; to the contrary, it interprets such struggle itself as integral to negativity's structure. It suggests, moreover, that politics derives from a negativity indifferent to the future, a negativity that insists, in the present tense, on the urgency of politics as the ceaseless drive of resistance and dissent. One might even add: for their own sake, which is also to say, for ours.

Exploring how negativity casts off its every reification, including attempts to oppose it simplistically to optimism, sociality, or repair, these conversations have tried to be true to negativity's creative destruction, enacting the otherness of relation as seen in the moment of encounter. Perhaps, then, the most surprising thing about *Sex, or the Unbearable* is its suggestion that the word we understand least in its title may be "or."

—LEE EDELMAN

After It's Over

At one difficult time during the writing of this book, after a heated phone call about where our work was headed, I returned to the text to respond to what I felt was some misreading of the grounding of my arguments. In that writing, as often, I was feeling my way, both focused on moving the discussion forward (about what it means to seek to transform what's nonsovereign in desire and unbearable in relation) and also irritated about how I'd been characterized. Yet I also did not want to become stubborn and stentorian, pulling our work off-track by making it about me rather than the problem at hand, which I hoped wasn't me! But in collaboration, as in love, or even ordinary conversation, one can never be sure.

I began writing with a digression from our shared focus on the impossibility of repairing, mastering, or even being adequate to the intimate encounter and turned instead to the James Mason film *Bigger than Life* (Ray 1956). *Bigger than Life* is about an English teacher after World War II who is rescued from a heart problem by a new miracle drug, steroids. But, as both Lee and I would predict, the

repair also injures, transforming the story of cause and effect to a spectacle of cause and side effects. Steroids make Mason a hyper-masculine sadist, inflated with sexual and intellectual grandiosity and seething with contempt at the pathetic self-esteem obsessions of the bourgeois parents whose children he teaches. At the same time he oscillates in his affect, weeping and overwhelmed by the appearance through him of an aggression he cannot fully own as his. Then, paradoxically and spontaneously, he seethes at his own wife and child for their weakness, their own refusal to be Bigger than Life like him, and their resistance to the rules he has set up to enable a superior askesis, or discipline of life.

In one scene, Mason, with his enormous head, is helping his small, soft son to do his math homework. Helping turns to intimidation and bullying. As the scene intensifies and becomes scary, the son gets worse at the math that he already cannot do. They are trying to parse a story problem. As an exercise in the assessment and force of relation, the story problem often finds its way into the narration of love. (Lover X does this, and lover Y does that: Why, then, is the outcome Z?) Here, to find a common denominator, the child adds six and five when the task warrants multiplying. He gets the conjunctures of relation wrong. The father's critical voice deepens and the son's defensive voice gets higher. As the voices intensify, the commanding voice penetrates the room and siphons the child's

FIG A.1. Love, teaching, intimacy . . . or the unbearable. *Bigger Than Life* (1956).



confidence. Then the father behind the desk crosses over to the son at the table, as though his physical proximity will produce a greater clarity of thought. This shift converts the wall into a screen, as the silhouette of the dominating father towers over his cowering son (figure A.1).

This dumb show in *nuce*, this shadow puppet show, is haunting and terrifying. It is as though the film turns at once toward affective inflation and a demonstration of the magic of cinema in order to distract the audience from the pure brutality it also continues to demonstrate. Even when it is crowded out by other gestures of enabling and gifting, even when turning toward and turning away from our objects is executed with good intentions, this tableau of a bullying pedagogy is desperately ordinary at the heart of love.

I was surprised to be writing about *Bigger Than Life* as though Lee had cast me as the woman or the child in that film, appearing in these pages variously as the weak theorist, the reparative sociologist, the politically correct subject seeking out the virtuous archive and reparative gesture, the reader who missed a crucial point. True enough! But was I so sure that I did not want to dominate Lee back through some kind of lateral-minded sweetness or a Nietzschean weak-strong countertheorizing style? My question opened onto the vista of contradictory desires that intimate encounters will animate: to dominate; not to dominate; to avoid being dominated; to submit to his claim so as to get on with things, or to give in to a partial agreement; to listen hard to find what's movable in the situation; to give as good as I get; to be equal; to try both to get it rightish conceptually and between us. Then I started laughing at what a perfect scene this crazy condensation in *Bigger Than Life* was for demonstrating the cluster of impossible and unbearable interests we bring to relationality—in this book, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, I mean.

So, sheepishly, in our next phone call, I told Lee of this outtake I had written and what I had learned from writing it, and it turned out that, lo, he too had memorized *Bigger than Life*, or been dented by it, and the same scenes and the same problems, without exactly identifying all over it (and there we are, not identical). We started laughing and riffing all over the place, drawing from the kinds of things we know (more psychoanalytic, in his case; more materialist and affective in mine; aesthetically focused for both of us) to make

some sense of the impact of this film. This kind of open ferocity and friendliness was exemplary of the collaborative spirit that made this book possible for us and enabled us to be educated by the process of writing it, even when our encounters radically diverged or just shifted awkwardly in the ballpark of a mutual clarification. But of course I would claim this, since the position I hold in what you've just read is that making a world for what doesn't work changes the consequences of those failures in a way that produces new potentials for relation within the structural space of the nonsovereign.

I might rest my case by being my final case. Throughout the book, though, there is no finishing off of the structural problems with an optimistic inversion, comic displacement, capstone phrase, or decisive vignette. There is no formula—no form—that can anchor the *or* that marks the problem our title poses. Sex, collaboration, and relationality as such require us to learn to walk in the wet sand of the questions that shift on the occasion of an impact by another, even when that impact involves something as small as another's phrasing. Why should our critical work be different from any other object whose force affects what it seems possible to think, to do, and to undo?

I do not read things; I read with things. When I read with theorists, with art, with a colleague or a friend, to *read with* is to cultivate a quality of attention to the disturbance of their alien epistemology, an experience of nonsovereignty that shakes my confidence in a way from which I have learned to derive pleasure, induce attachment, and maintain curiosity about the enigmas and insecurities that I can also barely stand or comprehend. This is what it means to say that excitement is disturbing, not devastating; ambivalent, not shattering in the extreme. Structural consistency is a fantasy; the noise of relation's impact, inducing incompleteness where it emerges, is the overwhelming condition that enables the change that, within collaborative action, can shift lived worlds.

—LAUREN BERLANT