Passionate Destruction, Passionate Creation:
Art and Anarchy in the Work of Dennis Cooper

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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PHD IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE CULTURE AND THOUGHT

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SUMMARY

The subject of this thesis is the life and work of the American writer Dennis Cooper. It is the first book-length appraisal of his career, which regards his poetry, prose, and innovative employment of new media from the perspective of his avowed anarchism. Situating his work within the context of American and French literary history and traditions of anarchist thought, I identify and pursue a dialectic that recurs in his work between, on the one hand, a commitment to subjective experience and individuality and, on the other, a desire for community and communion with others.

Comprising five chapters, the work is roughly chronological in organization. I begin with an examination of Cooper's early poetry collection *Idols*, in order to establish the basic features of an outlook that is hospitable to anarchist thought. I next consider Cooper's attempts at microcommunity-building in Los Angeles and show that his efforts brought together a vibrant community of young poets off the Venice Beach boardwalk in the late 1970s. Staying on the West Coast, the third chapter compares Cooper's work with that of San Francisco New Narrativists Robert Glück and Bruce Boone, in order to examine radical and reformist approaches to writing homosexuality in the wake of Gay Liberation. The penultimate chapter is devoted to Cooper's most famous work, the five-novel series called the George Miles cycle: I uncover the intricate systems he uses to structure the cycle and ask what his experiments might mean for anarchist writing. Finally, I turn to Cooper's largest project to date, his blog, and argue that he uses its simple apparatus to produce ideal conditions for the ephemeral appearance of an anarchist cyber-network.

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Introduction

A punk, a queer, a monster, an anarchist

> *"The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!"*
>
> (Mikhail Bakunin)[1]

This thesis centres on a career retrospective of the controversial and critically acclaimed writer Dennis Cooper, situating his work within American and French literary traditions and regarding his oeuvre from the standpoint of his avowed anarchism. I examine the way he perceives the relationship between the individual and society and trace the development of his engagement with anarchist ideas, from his early poetry to his better-known prose, right through to his most recent use of new media. Given that Cooper's interrogations of and improvisations upon anarchist thinking are themselves idiosyncratic, I approach my subject in a flexible and non-programmatic way: he does not apply his anarchism systematically (although his work is vitally concerned with systems) so it does not seem productive to apply anarchist thought to his work in a systematic way. I do not analyse each and every one of Cooper's many books: instead my thesis illuminates those moments when Cooper's writing seems particularly consonant with anarchist thought but I stop necessarily short of presenting a unified vision of his anarchist aesthetics.

Of course it depends on who you ask but most people who have read Dennis Cooper's work are unlikely to know him first and foremost as an anarchist writer, despite his insistence that "my own politics, which I identify as anarchist, are fundamental to how I make work" (Cooper and Higgs, 2011). Many readers may think of him more as a "punk poet" and, as labels go, it isn't the worst one: I show in my opening chapters that by the late 1970s the sound and style of New York punk rock had escaped the confines of Downtown Manhattan and had made their way to Cooper on the West Coast; influenced by his friend Patti Smith, he started self-publishing punk-inflected poetry in Los Angeles as early as 1978. The "punk poet" tag originated with Warhol's assistant and muse, Gerard Malanga, who said in a promotional blurb that

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[1] From "The Reaction in Germany: From the Notebooks of a Frenchman" (see Bakunin, 1842)

"[Dennis Cooper] may very well be the first punk poet" (qtd. in Cooper 1978a). Critic Rudy Kikel would lend credence to Malanga's claim, finding the "punk frisson" of Cooper's poetry between "attacks on his 'audience'… an acceptance of vulgar or circumscribed desire (the influence of rock 'n roll, the press, television, and American cinema are felt in his poetry), and an unembarrassed association of sex and violence" (1978). Although privately Cooper expressed ambivalence about the association of his poetry with punk – writing in his diary in October 1978 that "I'm referred to as a 'punk poet' again, don't know whether that's a good or bad thing in the long run" – the term stuck and continued to define the aesthetic of Cooper's poetry for years to come (1978b 10 Oct 1978).

Cooper is also called a "queercore" writer: despite his influence on the Los Angeles poetry scene in the 1970s and 1980s, Cooper's writing only started to gain widespread recognition in the late-80s and early 90s, just as queer theory began to gain traction in discussions of gender and sexuality. As I show in chapter 3, like queer theorists Judith Butler and Diana Fuss, Cooper is antipathetic to normative ideas of sexual identity – straight and gay – and his work has sought to expose and critique attempts to have the diversity of sexual experience coagulate into even a strategic essentialism. A brief article he wrote in 1992 entitled "Queercore" enthusiastically endorses what he calls "a new brand of queer defiance… where 'queer' defines not a specific sexuality, but the freedom to personalize anything you see or hear then shoot it back into the stupid world more distorted and amazing than it was before" (1996, p. 295). Novels like *Closer* (1989) and *Frisk* (1991) have consequently been considered especially amenable to queer readings by the likes of Earl Jackson Jr., who states that "the sexual practices thematised in Cooper's work are not part of an identity politics" (2006, p. 151), and Leora Lev, who has said that "Cooper's work has problematized the category of 'gay fiction'… by collapsing reductive labels that unfortunately end by policing literary representations of sexuality, desire, and 'otherness'" (2006a, p. 22).

More often than not, however, Cooper is known as a "transgressive" writer – one of the literary rebels that came to the attention of the public and the academy in the mid-late 1990s. According to its advocates and critics, the primary concern of such writing, which included the work of other Grove Press authors such as Kathy Acker and Gary Indiana, as well as Bret Easton Ellis and Mary Gaitskill, was to propel writing towards (and beyond) the limits of acceptable moral and ethical behaviour. Their respective treatments of sexuality, violence, and drug use comprised a violent and shameless assault on social convention. Engaging with topics such as paedophilia, scatology, and snuff pornography, Cooper's George Miles cycle (the five-book series that is the focus of chapter 4) was considered by some as a masterpiece of transgressive writing. In an article coining the phrase in 1993, Michael Silverblatt aligned the emerging genre with the

subversive corporeality of Sade's transgressions: "Exploring the sexual frontiers implicit in Mapplethorpe's photographs or Karen Finley's performances, transgressive writing has violation at its core: violation of norms, of humanistic enterprise, of the body. Really, it's the Marquis de Sade who officiates at the American orgy" (1993). Although transgressive writing was not without its detractors (see Gardner, 1996, p. 56), to aficionados it exposed the artificiality and hypocrisy of socially defined norms, subverted sexual and gender stereotypes, and prized open spaces for the articulation of non-normative modes of sexual experience (see Neeper, 2008).

Transgressive writing like Cooper's has recently attracted renewed critical interest: scholars such as Kathryn Hume and Robin Mookerjee have re-emphasised the capacity for such work to make visible society's norms and challenge readers' ethical assumptions. Thus Hume finds that in the George Miles cycle's depiction of sexualized violence, "Cooper offers no answers, but we are put in a position of having to think about our own stand on such issues" (2012, p. 137). Not pulling any proverbial punches, Mookerjee meanwhile asserts that "transgressive fiction is the most significant literary movement of our time" and sees Cooper, Acker, Ellis, and others as part of a longstanding tradition of literary satire that includes the work of Jonathan Swift and François Rabelais (2013, p. 14). Echoing Hume's assertion that "Cooper certainly takes us outside norms and laws and raises questions about the rights of the individual as opposed to the community", Mookerjee contends that transgressive fiction is antinomian in orientation (Hume, 2012, p. 137). Fundamentally critical of the received wisdom, norms, and moral imperatives propagated by society, according to Mookerjee, transgressive fiction "sets out to reject beliefs considered assumptive for any member of the culture, subculture, or group of which one is a presumed member. This rejection of membership is an assertion of the novelist's perception of reality, or at least a subjectivism that allows for the plausibility of a given (proscribed) viewpoint" (2013, p. 102).

This friction between the individual and the social group that, according to Hume and Mookerjee, Cooper's transgressive fiction often throws into starkly violent relief is a fundamental idea in this thesis: it will be my contention that Cooper is undeniably concerned with the often fractious relationship between the subject and the wider social systems within which it circulates. However, like the idea that Cooper is a punk poet or a queercore writer, his classification as a transgressive writer is only one part of the story: Cooper's engagement with punk aesthetics, his interest in queer articulations of sexual identity, and his mobilization of transgressive strategies are actually symptoms of a more profound identification with anarchism. Thus, while relatively dismissive of all labels, he is openly anarchist, readily acknowledging that,

Anarchism is extremely defined in how I live my daily life. I believe in the old

anarchist dictum that as soon as you gain power, you must disperse it. Anarchism is a utopian notion, but as a system by which to think about the world and myself, I think it flawless. (Cooper and Stosuy, 2001)

Cooper's writing has persistently sought to fashion forms of literary expression most appropriate to his experience of the world as an anarchist artist. Taken together, I suggest that his oeuvre constitutes one of the most outstanding examples of a sustained artistic engagement with the subject of anarchism in American letters.

Yet he is far from the only example – for almost two centuries, anarchism has played a significant but under-recognised role in the literature of the United States: in "Anarchy and Authority in American Literature", Irving Howe makes the case for "a strong if subterranean current of anarchism" that runs right through the literature of the 1800s (1990, p. 107). Dismissing the impact of a rather more violent and politically active European anarchism, Howe argues that in Twain, Hawthorne, Melville, and others, the effect of American individualist anarchism is palpable and their work shows that "the American imagination, at its deepest level, keeps calling into question the idea of society itself" (1990, p. 116). This anarchistic effect is not limited to a critique of society and "fixed points of morality", however, and Howe suggests that an anarchist undercurrent is most readily visible in these writers' yearning for the stateless fraternity of non-coercive social formations (1990, p. 113). Thus in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, he writes that Huck and Jim together make up a precariously balanced anarchist community: their "community of equals", like the raft they navigate downstream "is established by persons and involves the delicate adjustment, moment by moment, to the desires each perceives in the other" (1990, p. 112). Melville's *Moby Dick* offers a similar example and Howe finds "the blood-brotherhood of Ishmael and Queequeg before they submit to Ahab's compulsive authoritarianism, one of the most beautiful enactments of plebeian fraternity in our literature" (1990, p. 115). It matters little that these fictional communities are utopian and evidently not built to last; they attest to the tenacity of an anarchistic interest in co-fraternity and community beyond conformity:

> The anarchist belief in the fraternal is a belief in the power of love as a mode of discipline, indeed, in an equable relationship which may even replace both love and discipline by something more lovely: the composure of affection. (1990, p. 108)

One of the objectives of this thesis is to explore Dennis Cooper's work as a contemporary eruption of the kind of subterranean current that Howe so beautifully outlines here. The anarchism that surfaces in Cooper's work is of a piece with Howe's characteristically American

kind – critical of society but longing all the same for free association with others. To establish the basic features of an outlook that is later hospitable to these anarchist ideas, I begin with an examination of Cooper's early poetry and consider his collection *Idols* (1979) in relation to two of his earliest influences: Arthur Rimbaud and the Marquis de Sade. Out of the combined impact of Rimbaud and Sade comes Cooper's lonely poetics of adolescence, which considers subjective solitude to be the keystone of human experience. In this chapter we see that Cooper regards the interaction between self and other as a subjectively mediated one: all experience is filtered through consciousness and this unfortunately forecloses the possibility of a truly intersubjective encounter between individuals.

Cooper's worldview is thus determined by the primacy of the individual in isolation, yet I argue that what makes his work so interesting – and, indeed, anguished – is its suspension between a resigned acceptance of individual isolation and a frustrated yearning for it to not be true. In the second chapter I follow through on these reflections and explore Cooper's attempts to stage encounters beyond the text, showing that his attempts at microcommunity-building in Los Angeles brought together a vibrant community of young poets off the Venice Beach boardwalk in the late 1970s. This chapter sees Cooper's thought evolve and his work adopt more recognisably anarchistic traits: once an idealised condition to which he aspired, now the intersubjective is less important than individual independence. I argue that the punk rock of Patti Smith and the coterie poetics of Frank O'Hara anticipate Cooper's newly attenuated attitude: O'Hara's poetry in particular may be read alongside Cooper's more sensational work as an example of writing that is suspicious of intersubjectivity and unfettered communion with others.

Staying on the West Coast, my third chapter looks at a specific example of Cooper's resistance to the idea of the communal and reassesses his relation to the San Francisco New Narrative movement. Cooper's work has often been conjoined with that of Robert Glück and Bruce Boone, whose New Narrative writings sought to create a shared sense of gay community in experimental prose. However, my comparison of their respective works shows that similar styles and a shared interest in homosexual themes belie fundamental ideological differences between them. Part literary analysis, part cultural history of sex-radical anarchism in the 1980s, in this chapter I consider the insurrectionary gay critiques of collectivism that influenced Cooper's emergent anarchism and examine divergent modes of writing homosexuality in the wake of Gay Liberation, plotting the differences between Cooper's radicalism and New Narrative's more reformist approach.

In radical circles since at least the 1960s, the idea of "the system" is a kind of ubiquitous bogeyman. Although a definitive explanation of the term is hard to come by (as is a definition of comparable terms like "the man") it seems to connote the abstract machinery of government

and the bourgeois establishment, which themselves imply notions like constraint, conservatism, and conformity – the antithesis of countercultural ideals. For anarchism in particular, the system represents everything the anarchist stands against: coercive, artificial forms, usually of state power, that seek to govern and control human behaviour. My penultimate chapter considers the role of the system in Cooper's George Miles cycle and I confront the apparent paradox that arises when one conducts a detailed analysis of Cooper's most famous work. In spite of anarchism's antipathy to systems and system-think in general, Cooper uses many imbricated systems and arbitrary forms like concentric circles, six-pointed stars, and infinity symbols to plan and structure his cycle. In this chapter I offer two possible ways that Cooper's interest in systems may be reconciled with his avowed anarchism and explore what his experiments with systems may mean for the production of anarchist writing in general.

My final chapter turns to Cooper's largest project to date: his blog. In this chapter I argue that the blog is the culmination of Cooper's efforts, in which his anarchist ideas are most readily apparent. Testament to his abiding interest in the creation of small, supportive, intentional communities of artists and writers founded upon the idea of individual autonomy, I demonstrate that his blog extends and refines his earlier attempts at microcommunity-building in Los Angeles thirty years earlier. Cooper uses the simple apparatus of the blog in ingenious ways to produce ideal conditions for the ephemeral appearance of an anarchist cyber-network, generated out of desire and reciprocity – a community built on what Irving Howe might call the "composure of affection".

An annex to the main thesis, the coda that closes the work considers Cooper's most recent prose novel, *The Marbled Swarm: A Novel* (2011), and attempts to bring to light the secrecy-effects and strategies of encoding that structure Cooper's most difficult and confusing work yet. I show that in this text we witness a reversal of his blog's apparent endorsement of autobiographical transparency and demonstrate that obscurity and concealment are instead its principal traits. Bringing this study up to date, I locate Cooper's recent writing within a territory occupied since at least the beginning of the twentieth century by dissident, subterranean desire and sedition. Drawing the themes of his work into conversation with early twentieth-century anarchism and mid-century queer subcultures, I argue for his continued engagement with anarchist traditions and his experimentation with anarchist and queer ideas. Finally, I make provisional steps towards the exploration of a new direction in Cooper's anarchist aesthetics – a direction grounded in sociability that refuses to speak its name.

Anarchy (*an* – "without", *arkhos* – "ruler, chief") is a mobile concept which, at least in the popular imagination, connotes a riotous, even adolescent anti-ideology and, since its inception, anarchist philosophy has itself been a contested terrain of conceptual renegotiations.

Writing about anarchism thus presents certain definitional problems: which anarchism? Whose anarchism? To raise the question Emma Goldman would famously attempt to answer: anarchism – what does it really stand for? Goldman writes, "the methods of Anarchism… do not comprise an iron-clad programme to be carried out under all circumstances" and coaxing the inherent, productive mutability of anarchist thinking into a set of statutes seems rather absurd (1969a, 63).[2] It may be helpful, nonetheless, to situate the anarchism that informs the theoretical framework of this thesis according to certain key debates.

In its various forms, anarchism is based on a belief in individual sovereignty – each individual has the capacity to act independently, according to his or her will. Thus Max Stirner – for many one of the earliest anarchist thinkers – begins his 1845 polemic *The Ego and its Own* with the declaration that "I am unique" and his work posits that each individual is born into the world as a discrete self in possession of what he calls "ownness", or an essential freedom of will (1995, pp. 7, 141). "From the moment when he catches sight of the light of the world" Stirner writes, "a man seeks to find out *himself* and get hold of *himself* out of its confusion, in which he, with everything else, is tossed about in motley mixture" (1995, p. 13, original emphasis).[3] Yet for Stirner and the anarchists that have come after him, the fundamental sovereignty of man is occluded, fettered, and curbed by the State: through its intrusions and support of the status quo, it inhibits free expression and the realisation of individual uniqueness. For anarchism, man is born free but the State puts him in chains and much anarchist ink – not to mention blood – has been spilled challenging it. In *Statism and Anarchy* (1873), for instance, Mikhail Bakunin

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[2] In the work that follows, I do not repudiate the idea that anarchism is a delinquent, juvenile idea – as I indicate in my opening chapter with reference to the Paris Commune and Hakim Bey's influential idea of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, anarchism may in fact be *allied* with an adolescent, insurrectionary temporality.

[3] For Marx this axiomatic belief in individual agency is far too abstract and ahistorical – Stirner's idea of a fundamental individual sovereignty (shared by otherwise different anarchist thinkers such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin) is too metaphysical and not grounded in an observation of the ways that individual will is affected by specific material conditions at particular historical moments. Conversely, for Marx the individual will is one that is estranged and compromised by its coming into being in an alienating capitalist system; such a will can only come to be emancipated in communion with others as species-being: in other words, it will only be an agential subject when the proletariat revolutionizes the material conditions of society. The difference between Marx and the anarchists on this point is most apparent in their respective views on freedom: thus Jeffrey H. Barker finds that,

> Marx's concept of freedom is far more complex since the development of individual freedom for Marx is intimately connected to the transformations of the existing material conditions of life within capitalist society. For the anarchists, on the other hand, freedom or liberty is an absolute or near absolute, preexisting aspect of human nature, no matter how unfree the particular society in which humans live. (1986, p. 202)

The first chapter explores Stirner's egoist philosophy in more detail with reference to Emerson's transcendental individualism.

virulently denounces the State and chastises those like his estranged socialist brethren under Marx who would seek to turn the State-form towards revolutionary ends: "if there is a State, then necessarily there is domination and consequently slavery. A State without slavery, open or camouflaged, is inconceivable – that is why we are enemies of the State" (2005, p. 178).

This enmity emerges in the work of a number of anarchists as not just a resistance to extant forms of government but as a more thoroughgoing critique of society *tout court*. Successive generations of anarchists have argued that the State and its nefarious effects are bound up with a general attitude, which, out of weakness and complacency, supports the tyranny of the majority and refuses to recognise the inalienable fact of individual freedom.[4] Thus, following in the footsteps of Ralph Waldo Emerson's perception of society as an "impracticable mass" antipathetic to individual enlightenment (1964, p. 176), in "Minorities versus Majorities" Emma Goldman condemns the supremacy of "quantitative" thinking in her time (1969b, p. 69). "Authority, coercion, and dependence rest on the mass, but never freedom or the free unfoldment of the individual, never the birth of the free society" she writes; "Every effort for progress, for enlightenment, for science, for religious, political, and economic liberty, emanates from the minority, and not from the mass" (1969b, pp. 78, 74). In such anarchist critiques society means conformity and ignorance, hierarchy and centralisation; according to Paul Goodman, you would have to be mad to affirm it:

> …by and large I am not impressed that those who are better socialized to our present society are wise and brave or, indeed, altogether sane. On balance I do not think it would be an advantage to identify with them more than I do. It is better to follow my own genitals, heart, and head, family and friends. (1964, p. 118)

Yet the rejection of society does not imply the repudiation of all social arrangements and, unlike transcendental individualists like Henry David Thoreau or extreme figures such as Stirner, most anarchists do not wish to cut themselves off from all human interaction.[5] Pierre-

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[4] The refusal of the majority to embrace individual sovereignty is comparable to Sartrean "bad faith" where the individual denies their fundamental freedom to act and the attendant existential anguish of their decision-making by appealing to facticity or worldly limitations (see Sartre, 2003, pp. 67-8). Although an extended discussion of existential and anarchist ideas of the subject is beyond the scope of the present study, I acknowledge the impact of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist reading of the Marquis de Sade on Cooper's emergent anarchism in chapter 1.

[5] The subject of Thoreau's status as an anarchist has long been the subject of debate. Thus while Goldman is content to claim him as "the greatest American Anarchist" (1969a, p. 56) and some critics see in works like *Walden* (1854) and "Civil Disobedience" (1849) an anarchism that "followed from the doctrine of the

Joseph Proudhon, for instance, fully recognises the interdependence of the individual and the social – in *The Philosophy of Poverty* he writes that, "as individualism is the primordial fact of humanity, so association is its complementary term" (1847). Yet anarchists seem particularly sensitive to the fact that such interdependence demands thoughtful, continual negotiation if the individual is to maintain his or her sovereignty. Social arrangements are a problem, therefore, but a productive one. Goodman, the most prominent anarchist intellectual in post-War America and the focus of an extended discussion in chapter 2, hints at a possible solution in the quote above: an association of friends and family that fosters sexual, emotional, and intellectual liberty. This attraction to small-scale communities that enshrine the independence of their participants is a persistent trait in American anarchism in particular and Goodman's outlook is indebted to pioneering nineteenth-century anarchists like Benjamin R. Tucker who, in place of the alienating mass of majority society offered voluntary, minority associations.

> We offer cooperation. We offer non-compulsive organisation. We offer associative combination. We offer every possible method of voluntary social union by which men and women may act together for the furtherance of well-being. In short we offer voluntary scientific socialism in the place of the present compulsory unscientific organisation which characterises the State and all of its ramifications… (qtd. in Martin, 1957, p. 212)

Other facets will emerge in the course of our investigations, including anarchist responses to sexuality and time, but these three tenets – the belief in individual sovereignty; the suspicion of society; the commitment to alternative social arrangements – characterise the anarchism that undergirds this thesis.

The statement by Mikhail Bakunin that lends this section its epigraph and prompts the title of this work attests to the bilateral movement intrinsic to his vision of anarchism. According to Bakunin, a negation of structures of authority that would seek to control, command, and corrupt the free individual must go hand-in-hand with a more generative impulse, oriented toward constructing alternatives to the structures it denies. In this thesis I argue that Cooper's writing is anarchistic and ambidextrous, resisting on the one hand what he sees as the predations of

individual's duty to his conscience alone" (Eulau, 1962, p. 126), still others wish to rescue him from charges of such radicalism and attest that his work elucidates a fine vision of "democracy as a political order that corresponds to the experience of individuality" (Rosenblum, 1998, p. 72).

collective conformity and threats to the free individual, but committed on the other hand to building non-coercive, non-hierarchical social forms out of shared desire and mutual affection.

Chapter 1

Adolescence and Isolation

Idols

> *"Come back, come back, dear friend, only friend,*
> *come back. I promise to be good."*
>
> (Arthur Rimbaud)[1]

By the time he appeared on the literary scene of the 1970s with the poetry collection *Idols* (1979), Cooper had already self-published two limited-run poetry chapbooks: *The Terror of Earrings* in 1973 and *Tiger Beat* in 1978. Although stylistically erratic and rather more loosely composed than the lapidary lines of his later poetry and prose, the pieces in these early volumes nonetheless attest to Cooper's early interest in themes that would come to characterise his work, frequently invoking Californian youth culture, pornography, and the numbing glamour of American TV shows. The world of Walt Disney which repeatedly surfaces throughout Cooper's oeuvre (memorably as the obsessive interest of *Closer*'s George Miles) also makes its inaugural appearance here. In *The Terror of Earrings*' "The Plague and Boredom are Getting Married", for instance, Pinocchio drives through California with the poem's narrator, Neil Young, and a "mescaline baby" (1973, p.30), in an hallucinatory travelogue that recalls the narcotic prose of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959) and Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Los Vegas* (1971). The iconography of pop and rock music is also a recurring interest and both collections include a number of poems with cameos by stars like Neil Young, Jim Morrison, and Leonard Cohen; *Tiger Beat*'s "Boy Talk" takes place in the aftermath of a Blondie gig, where singer Debbie Harry has left the poem's speaker with "chills on [his] skin" (1978c, n.p.).

    Tiger Beat in particular seems to have been well received, drawing praise from poets like Allen Ginsberg, who exclaimed that "*Tiger Beat* is imaginative, sexy, funny, TV pop high school masculine muscles and hair plus some high irony cadenzas out of the extravagances of 'N.Y. School' mind", while the poet Joe Brainard, rather more laconically stated, "I like it a lot" (qtd. in Cooper, 1978a). Applauding the "bravery" of Cooper's poems, in his review of *Tiger Beat* Rudy

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[1] Letter to Paul Verlaine, 4th July 1873 (see Rimbaud, 2003a, p. 63).

Kikel states that "Cooper's work is closer to that of some older, legendary, or 'oppressed' poets – Rimbaud, Genet, Wieners… than it is to that of the post-Stonewall poets" (1978). In this opening chapter we will put some pressure on the connection Kikel identifies here between Cooper and Arthur Rimbaud, considering Cooper's first major poetry collection *Idols* in relation to Rimbaud's proto-adolescent poetics. Bad boy of French Symbolism, idol of a generation of rock n' roll poets, and most influential of Kikel's triumvirate, Rimbaud's life and work forms the bedrock of Cooper's writing, orienting his work from the outset toward an appreciation of adolescent experience and imbuing his work with a singular blend of youthful rebelliousness and disjunctive poetics.

In populating his poetry with alienated teenagers and calibrating the form of his poetry to suit them, Cooper uses the figure of the adolescent to insist upon the ineluctability of subjective isolation. This is a pivotal idea in the work of the Marquis de Sade, another of Cooper's earliest and most enduring influences. The solitude of the individual is arguably the *sine qua non* of Sade's thought, which, according to Maurice Blanchot and Simone de Beauvoir, underwrites the famously egoistic philosophy of works like *The 120 Days of Sodom*. This chapter situates Cooper's early work at the intersection of these two writers: the individual isolation that is essential to the work of Sade and Rimbaud is a fundamental condition of Cooper's writing – one that he tirelessly, yet unsuccessfully tries to escape.

Rimbaud and adolescent poetics

Published by Felice Picano's progressive gay Seahorse Press in 1979, *Idols* is a collection of Cooper's poetry written between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five and was his first widely distributed book. Although it includes almost a decade's work, there is nonetheless a remarkable consistency to Cooper's choice of subjects and the reader is struck from the outset by the continual circulation within the space of the collection of numerous sexually adventurous adolescent boys. *Idols* is populated by male teenagers gleefully masturbating in high-school locker-rooms, lounging on street corners turning tricks, or caressing each other's pale bodies in hotel-rooms in Amsterdam. Yet Cooper's preoccupation with teenagers doesn't stand apart from the way he tells their stories – it often inflects the very composition of the poems. More than a mere subject to be disinterestedly described or hemmed in by a poetic form, in a number of these poems adolescence seems to determine a part of their style: "High School Basketball", for instance, sketches fast-paced flashes of scenes from an afternoon playing pick-up games of basketball at the high-school gym.

> When boys wanted to toss the ball around they'd use ninth period when nothing was going on. I'd see a herd of them heading down the gym stairs. I'd join them if no one had brought any Hendrix records or dope. I'd be in the middle of that crowd, trampling the steps like water in front of a busted dam. We'd hit the cool of the locker rooms. We couldn't stop moving around, too ready. Jockstrap never washed. Short blue trunks. Blue tee-shirt or not. Dirty white socks to our knees. Tennis shoes (white or black) with our names. (1989, p. 26)

Cooper's rush of short, punchy sentences spill out like water from "a busted dam". Quickly swamping the speaker's initially rather removed "I" and carrying him away in a plural "we", the poem simulates the energy and excitement of its youthful subjects as they sprint up and down the court, watched by "a few girls in the bleachers talking boys with their faces close together" (1989, p. 26). Shifting and erratic, flitting from one image to the next, the poem is "too ready" to "stop moving around", and seems to derive this incessant motility from its "herd" of aroused teens.

The poems in *Idols* are also preoccupied with how adolescence affects one's perception of time. Written during and just after Cooper's teenage years, in these poems adolescence is presented either as a state being lived through or one that has recently been left behind, whose loss is felt acutely. Many of the poems take the latter approach: the opening "Boys I've Wanted" series, for instance, insists upon a temporal dislocation or separation between the speaker and the teenage figures that drift into his retrospective purview. In "Greg Tomeoni", the speaker remembers a scene of fumbling adolescent sex from a distant present: "I was in eighth grade/when he was in seventh", he remembers, noting that "we didn't cum (too young I think)" (1989, p. 11). Likewise, the poem "Steve Nelson", sketches the beauty of the eponymous Steve from afar, observing that "In those days/his thinness graced/every ball game/with its fumbling/and his face/without a care" (1989, p. 17). The hot-tempered beauty of "Mark Clark", meanwhile, is recalled with a sigh: "He was so alive then" (1989, p. 16). A pervasive past tense distances the poetic voice from the events and individuals described, such that they occasionally assume the character of objects, separate from the speaker in the present: thus, the subject of "Bill McCall" is drawn in its integrity and offered to the reader like an old photograph, yellowing at the edges.

> Friends, see how pale
> his skin was. It
> glowed. And his lips
> with a trace of teeth, and

> ears like boats for tongues. (1989, p. 18)[2]

In these poems and others like them from the collection, the poet tries to encapsulate the events and beloveds of his youth from the position of the present. Detachment dogs these representations, however, such that their artificiality, their constructedness, their *re-routing* through the screen of an older poet's mind constantly comes to the fore. Cooper seems to insist here that the lived experience of an adolescent – even the poet's own adolescence – cannot be translated into the experience and language of a mature adult without doing a certain violence to it. This may account for the series' flat, descriptive tone and almost complete lack of affect: Cooper is perhaps reticent to speak for the adolescent other or speculate about their emotional states in words that are not their own. In "Boys I've Wanted", adolescence takes place *in another time*: not just an earlier time but a lived temporality that appears to be qualitatively different from the poet's own and exists almost beyond his attempts to represent it.

This conjunction of poetics and adolescence appeared a little unusual to Robert Peters, one of *Idols*' first reviewers, who wrote: "until recently, I knew of no poets who capture the rich fantasy life of the adolescent in poetry worthy of the name. Leonard Cohen's self-pitying, beaver-shot, teenybopper poems don't quite make it. But Dennis Cooper's new poems, *Idols*, do" (1980, p. 22). Peters shouldn't have been so surprised however – the concept of adolescence as described and popularised by G. Stanley Hall's two-volume study, *Adolescence* (1904), has in fact marked poetic production since the early years of the twentieth century. Hall famously defined adolescence as a time of rapidly accelerated growth and development in which the individual is forced to give up the protected seclusion of childhood and assume his or her place within the social collective. Adolescence, he famously posited, is "suggestive of some ancient period of storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained" (1925, p. xiii).

> There is much passivity, often active resistance and evasion, and perhaps spasms of obstinacy, to it all. But the senses are keen and alert, reactions immediate and vigorous, and the memory is quick, sure, and lasting, and ideas of space, time, and physical causation, and of many a moral and social licit and non-licit, are rapidly unfolding. (1925, p. xii)

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[2] Within such a context, in lines like "I remember our position/side by side…" and "I remember him saying he loved me/and that I thanked him…" (1989, p. 11), Cooper's "I remember" produces an antithetical effect to that used by Joe Brainard in his serial poem of the same name. Unlike Brainard, whose poetic voice in *I Remember* (1970-1975) is wholly composed of memories, excavated by the work of a repeated "I remember", Cooper's version insists, conversely, that we recall the distinction between the speaker and these remembered scenes. While Cooper and Brainard's respective uses of "I remember" here diverge, however, there are some fascinating correspondences between their projects, in particular their employment of seriality as a means to reconceive the writing subject. I explore this in greater detail in chapter 5, "Networking the Cybersocial".

Hall's influential study identified a nexus of concepts that would come to define the way people thought and talked about teenage life in the years that followed. Delinquency, the adolescent's pursuit of excitement, his or her susceptibility to the media's influence and propensity for "relational aggression" like rumour and gossip: the widespread circulation of such ideas not only changed the themes thought proper for poetic treatment, it also changed how poems were written and poets like William Carlos Williams and John Ashbery, in particular, attempted to bear witness to the experience of adolescence through a modulation of poetic form and diction.[3]

Long before he heard about Williams or Ashbery, however, Cooper had already encountered Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (1886). Commenting upon his earliest influences, Cooper says: "when I was fifteen, I read an interview with Bob Dylan and he mentioned Rimbaud. So I bought one of Rimbaud's books and I was staggered. Everything changed. His poetry, his biography, the fact that he wrote such incredible things and was so ambitious when he was my age were hugely inspiring" (Cooper and Silverberg, 2011, p. 175). While still a teenager, therefore,

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[3] Williams' work is one of the earliest examples of a modern adolescent poetics, incorporating contemporary youth culture into his writing in the hope of catalysing a rejuvenation of art and poetry. Adolescence is not just a recurring subject for works like *Spring and All* (1923), *The Great American Novel* (1923), and *The Descent of Winter* (1928) – their composition also appears to stem from an adolescent's pursuit of new sensations; charging ahead, lines left half-written, orthodoxy dismissed with the impertinence of youth. Critics like Marion Strobel were not convinced by Williams' irreverent, unpredictable poetics, however, and took issue with the timorous, juvenile machismo of poems like "The rose is obsolete", writing that: "[Williams] is like an adolescent boy who while loving something of soft-petalled beauty, scoffs at it, so that he will be considered a He-Man" (1980, p. 76). Nonetheless, Cooper seems to gesture towards Williams' importance to the development of a poetics of adolescence by giving him a cameo in the high-school homework assignment of John F. Kennedy Jr., featured in *Idols*' "Some Adventures of John F. Kennedy Jr." series:

> ...he slogs through poets,
> hates them all until William Carlos Williams.
> "You mean this is poetry?" He leaps
> on his notebook. "I can write this stuff
> by the ton". And so he does, a twenty pager. (1989, p. 71)

The continuity between poetics and the state of adolescence in Ashbery's work, meanwhile, is most legible in the temporality of such poems as "Soonest Mended" (1968), where he declares: "None of us ever graduates from college,/For time is an emulsion, and probably thinking not to grow up/is the brightest kind of maturity for us, right now at any rate" (1997, p. 232). Of this poem Stephen Burt writes:

> The place in the life course that the poem describes — neither innocent nor adult, slippery and unfixed — resembles the place in the American language that Ashbery's slippery syntax seeks. And the self or speaker whom Ashbery imagines — so different, as his critics note, both from the autobiographical self of confessional poetry and from the impersonal authority of some modernists — is immature, promising, uncertain, and even indefinitely undergraduate: a trope or an instance of modern adolescence. (2007, p. 2)

Cooper had found in Rimbaud a paradigmatic combination of youth and poetic form. Stephen Burt affirms this combination in his survey of the intersections of youth and poetry and he states that Rimbaud is "the closest nineteenth-century predecessor for the modern English-language poetry of adolescence" (2007, p. 12).

> Composed in the 1870s, Rimbaud's poetry seemed to him and to its later readers rebellious, uncontrollable, immature, unstable, hostile to received authority, radiant with sexual energy, sensitive to urban social change (i.e. the Paris Commune), and in search of an extraordinary new language. Not coincidentally, Rimbaud was himself in his teens. (2007, p. 13)

The most pertinent aspect of Rimbaud's work is its pervasive energy and an affirmation of incompletion that repeatedly curtails development: thus, according to Burt, Rimbaud's poetry "does demonstrate a phenomenon frequent in twentieth-century poetry of adolescence: …absolute resistance to Bildung, to any and all attempts to mould, from a youthful life, an adult life course or a career" (Burt, 2007, p. 14). Works collected in the *Illuminations*, for instance, attest to Rimbaud's antipathy to normative notions of maturity and psychological development – Leo Bersani contends that these poems repudiate conventional models of the mature subject and "the poetic imagination tends to become a slide projector which ejects each slide almost at the very instant it is lighted up" (1984, p. 244). The poem "Childhood", for example, is composed of numerous stubborn impediments to progress or narrative continuity, comprising successive "slides" of half-beheld consciousness tethered to a precarious positional "there is":

> In the woods there is a bird; his song stops you and makes you blush.
> There is a clock that never strikes.
> There is a hollow with a nest of white beasts.
> There is a cathedral that goes down and a lake that goes up.
> There is a little carriage abandoned in the copse or that goes running down the road beribboned.
> There is a troupe of little actors in costume, glimpsed on the road through the border of the woods.
> And then, when you are hungry and thirsty, there is someone who drives you away. (1957, p. 11)

For Dennis Cooper adolescence involves Rimbaud and Rimbaud's poetics is defined in large part by his adolescence. We can see this intersection at work in a number of pieces from *Idols*, where Cooper combines an emphatically adolescent milieu with a form that attests to Rimbaud's influence. In these poems, temporality is once again brought into play.

Jim, my best friend,
gives me five dollars
when I am sixteen
to lie face down on his bed
while he feels my ass,
long hair passing for a girl's.

Jim, caught by his mom
on the night I sleep over
with my used underwear
pressed up to his nose
while I perch nearby
pretending to sleep.

I, pulling up his
wet swimmer's silks
over my white ass
in front of the mirror
and Jim, from behind,
slips his palms inside

Jim, my oldest friend,
watching me dress out
in gym class, grabbing me,
snapping my butt with
wet towel, leaves marks
on me, red as his mouth. (1989, p. 23)

"Early Riser" shows that on those occasions when Cooper tries to describe adolescent experience, time is an essential vantage point from which to explore and represent it from the inside. The poem offers a sense of logical continuity (e.g. when the speaker refers to "his wet swimmer's silks", the reader can correctly assume that these are Jim's), but unfolds as a series of vignettes, illuminated momentarily and arranged without transition between one scene and the next. Its form recalls Bersani's description of a Rimbaldian "slide-projector" and, as in the earlier poet's work, only the incident that is underway *right now* is significant here: Jim "gives me five dollars/when I *am* sixteen". If the poem is logically continuous, therefore, it is certainly not temporally so – each end-stopped line does not so much interrupt the action as strictly proscribe its limits within the space of each isolated stanza.

Unlike other poems from the collection which go to great lengths to remove their teen subjects to a distant, unassailable past, "Early Riser" is marked by the insistence of the present: we watch as Jim hands over the money; gets caught sniffing the speaker's underwear; gropes him in front of a mirror; etc. The poem's language illustrates a sequence of moments placed in a perpetual present and Cooper's employment of present participles in the final stanza in particular ("watching"; "grabbing"; "snapping") locates the events recounted in an elongated

instant: the intimate lives of these two adolescents appear before the reader in a continual now. This effect resonates intimately with one found in Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (we recall the insistent "There is" of the poem "Childhood"), as Cooper's delicate warping of the poem's temporality around the sex-lives of his teenage protagonists effectively refuses narrative progress. Concentrating the poem's sexually charged activity in an enduring instant, "Early Riser" is emblematic of Cooper's on-going explorations of the time of adolescence – an exploration which, I would argue, is made possible by his initial encounter with Rimbaud.

Insurrectionary adolescence

For Cooper, the most exciting and enduring features associated with the young French poet – an iconoclastic energy; his radical resistance to authority; his ground-breaking aesthetic innovation – indicate the possibilities of adolescence in general. Cooper's work affirms a radical potential he perceives in adolescence, against a society that on the one hand adores childhood and on the other lionises maturity; a society that effectively normalises social acculturation and dismisses adolescence as a temporary aberration or an unfortunate excrescence to be overcome. As he passionately states in interview with Ira Silverberg, "the fact that teenagers were routinely disrespected, objectified, exploited, and disempowered was a huge issue to me [at fifteen] and one that has remained very important to me as I've become an adult". He continues:

> Now I can inhabit the thoughts and emotions and motivations of adults who see teenagers as problems, as reminders of their own youth, as sex-objects or triggers of sentimentality, as a dismissible, transitional, short-lived species that occupies some sort of dark age between childhood and adulthood, both of which are seen as more legitimate stages of life. But my concentration is on resisting that supposed wisdom. I don't see it as wisdom but as a standard rationale employed by people who hate and fear the fact that they're getting older against their will. That rationale makes adulthood into a more important period of life than adolescence and the teen years, and that just makes no sense at all to me. Adulthood merely lasts longer. (2011, p. 183)

Implicit in this analysis is a radically aberrant attitude towards time, which emerges in tandem with the idea of adolescence and with Rimbaud by proxy: instead of a stage in a normative process of psychological and social development, adolescence is a *state* that Cooper's work investigates and enshrines.

A similar idea runs through Kristen Ross' *The Emergence of Social Space* (1988), a powerful study which reads Rimbaud together with the Paris Commune, a "semianarchistic" uprising that began on the 18th of March 1871 and ended seventy-two days later in a bloody

massacre of twenty-five thousand Parisians by the federal army (1988, p. 3). Razing the traditional hierarchy of Paris' political institutions and inaugurating a "horizontal" (1988, p. 5) system of government via a network of self-governing *arrondissements*, the Commune was endorsed at the time by Mikhail Bakunin, who acclaimed its "spontaneous and continued action" that brought about "a bold, clearly formulated negation of the State" (Bakunin, 1971, p. 268/263). Bakunin was nonetheless wary of heaping too much praise on such a short-lived uprising and modern historians have followed suit, according the event relatively short shrift. Yet according to Ross, the Commune represents an important insurrectionary moment and its dismissal on the basis of its ephemerality is symptomatic of a normative, linear notion of time that privileges longevity – a notion that is challenged by the Commune itself. Temporality in the Commune, Ross argues, was untimely or "saturated".

> The publicity of political life, the immediate publication of all the Commune's decisions, and proclamations, largely in the form of *affiches*, resulted in a "spontaneous" temporality whereby citizens were no longer informed of their history after the fact but were actually occupying the moment of its realisation… we can describe the sensation as being a simultaneous perception of events passing by quickly, too quickly, and of each hour and minute being entirely lived or made use of: saturated time. (1988, p. 42)

The Commune is therefore a rupture with the idea of historical progress, imbued with a latent potentiality that turns the concept of time on its head. Reminiscent of theories of the event found in the continental tradition of European philosophy (espoused by such thinkers as Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze),[4] Ross' refiguring of the Commune in fact most closely resembles the anarchist writer Hakim Bey's notion of a Temporary Autonomous Zone or TAZ. Bey's influential improvisation upon poststructuralist thought affirms the capacity

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[4] Ross' formulation in fact comes directly from Blanchot, who states that a *récit* (such as Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*) is "not the narration of an event, but that event itself, the approach to that event, the pace where that event is made to happen – an event that is yet to come" (1999, p. 447). This notion of the "untimely" event *à venir* also characterises Derrida's concept, adapted from Blanchot and elucidated in such works as *Spectres of Marx* (1993): "what has been uttered 'since Marx' can only promise or remind one to maintain together, in a speech that defers, deferring not what it affirms but deferring just so as to affirm, to affirm justly, so as to have the power (a power without power) to affirm the coming of the event, its future-to-come itself" (2006, p. 20). For Derrida, Deleuze is "the thinker of the event" (1998) and the latter's Bergsonian formulation is in fact closer to Bey's TAZ and the time of *suradolescence*, than Derrida's more messianic view. In *The Logic of Sense* (1969), he writes of the antagonism between the time of Aion and that of Chronos; between a temporal plenitude where the past and future exist in a relationship of non-contradiction and a normative (or mundane) conception of time that would limit the potentiality of the latter. For Deleuze, the event is an opening onto the time of Aion and the virtual and he writes that, "each event is adequate to the entire Aion; each event communicates with all others and they all form one and the same Event, an event of the Aion where they have an eternal truth" (2004, p. 74).

of small-scale uprisings to create "a bit of land ruled only by freedom", beyond State control (1990). "A certain kind of 'free enclave'" comes into being, he declares, not through the messianic revolution and its attendant annihilation of all inequalities but rather through localised insurrections like the Commune, which frequently go unrecognised by the dominant code. (1990) Necessarily spatial, he argues that such enclaves also have an inherent relationship to time, often existing only as temporal scramblings of the hegemonic code, but also constituting epiphanic discontinuities within the normative (and in this case Hegelian) notion of time and historical progress.

> the uprising is a moment that springs up and out of Time, violates the "law" of History. If the State IS History, as it claims to be, then the insurrection is the forbidden moment, an unforgivable denial of the dialectic. (1990)

Bey's evasive and lyrical definition of the TAZ[5] parallels Ross' rather more deliberate examination of the Commune, adolescence, and Arthur Rimbaud. "The Communards are 'out of sync' with the timetable of the inexorable march of history", she states; "Like adolescents they are moving at once too fast in their unplanned seizure of power and too slowly" (25). As the poet of the Commune and the poet of adolescence, Rimbaud's work also bears witness to an "evental" time: his *A Season in Hell*, for instance, is a *récit*, or the account of an "exceptional event", which inhabits a temporality wholly different from the bourgeois novel's "everyday, mundane time" (48). While the nineteenth-century novel imposes a teleological development upon the movement of its narrative and the motivations of its characters, Rimbaud's *récit* is an anti-genre that dispenses with development and resists the formula of the Bildungsroman. Poet laureate of the TAZ, according to Ross Rimbaud "proposes the impossible: a narrative that consists of pure transformational energy, pure transition or *suradolescence"* (49). This is Dennis Cooper's Rimbaud: iconoclastic *suradolescent* idol whose life and work allow one to view askew the social adherence to "mundane" time. This idiosyncratic take on temporality, so reminiscent of Bey's anarchist ideas,[6] is therefore an indispensible element of Cooper's take on adolescence and Arthur Rimbaud.

However, the adolescent effect in *Idols* is not limited to time – adolescence also lends the work its solitary, egocentric air. Cooper's conception of adolescence seems roughly contiguous with Jean Piaget's influential model of intellectual development, which finds the

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[5] "I am not trying to construct political dogma", Bey writes; "In fact I have deliberately refrained from defining the TAZ – I circle around the subject, firing off exploratory beams" (1990).

[6] Although in his diary of May 1984 Cooper names Bey as an attendee at the New York launch of his novella, *Safe*, there is no evidence to suggest that they knew each other well.

teenager enclosed within a recursive, self-contained psychological loop. According to Piaget, as the individual grows through childhood into adolescence, he begins to recognise others' capacity for thought, yet cannot see that the objects that preoccupy them differ from those that preoccupy him – consequently he thinks his thoughts are theirs. Having filled everyone else's heads with his own thoughts about himself, in public the adolescent believes he stands before people who judge him as harshly or as approvingly as he judges himself. In his own mind, therefore, he constructs an insular, solipsistic – and profoundly lonely – vision of the world composed solely of his own impressions.

> The young adolescent, because of the physiological metamorphosis he is undergoing, is primarily concerned with himself. Accordingly, since he fails to differentiate between what others are thinking about and his own mental preoccupations, he assumes that other people are as obsessed with his behaviour and appearance as he is himself. It is this belief in that others are preoccupied with his appearance and behaviour that constitutes the egocentrism of the adolescent. (Elkind, 1967, p. 1030)

Yet where Piaget argues that such egocentrism is overcome with age, Cooper's work seems to suggest that growing up doesn't solve the problem. In *Idols* the teenager's experience is taken as a particularly potent example of conditions that persist into adulthood: for Cooper, subjective solitude, non-relationality, and ego-centrism are constitutive of contemporary subjectivity. We shall see that Cooper draws a radical conclusion from the rather banal idea that personal impressions colour the way we see the world. If subjectivity always inflects one's experience of reality such that one interacts not with the world per se but with a subjectively mediated, re-presented impression of the world, no human being can ever experience a truly intersubjective encounter with another and is, therefore, ever alone with their representations. It is Cooper's early encounter with the Marquis de Sade that curses him with this ego-centric worldview, which he is destined to continually confront and contest with little hope of success. In the sections that follow, I argue that if Cooper draws the form of his poetics of adolescence from Rimbaud, Sade ensures that into that poetics will be encoded loneliness and an on-going struggle with the apparent inescapability of individual isolation.

Sadean egoism

If *Terror of Earrings* was the first book Cooper published, it was not the first book he produced: in a number of interviews he refers to an epic – but now lost – prose work completed in his teens and modelled on the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*. Detailing its fate to Slava Mogotin

of *Honcho Magazine*, he says:

> DC: I tried to imitate *120 Days of Sodom*, and wrote this 800-pages-long extreme novel. It was about this party in the high school where my friends and I got all these different cute guys to come to the party, and then we kept them there and tortured and killed them. It was a really long thing, totally horrible and ridiculous.
>
> SM: Basically you tried to be as kinky as possible.
>
> DC: Yeah, evil and cool. Then one day I realized that my mom was going through my stuff and reading my diary. It was a long story. She made me go to a psychiatrist. I was really afraid that she was going to find it. It was hidden in my bedroom. So I burned it. And years and years later I was putting my book together and I found one page that got somehow out of that. (Cooper and Mogutin, 2000)

Although only a solitary page remains of his teenage tribute to *120 Days of Sodom* (included in *Idols* as the prose poem "Mike Robarts (page from a porno novel I wrote at sixteen)", the effect of Sade's book persists in Cooper's writing and he frequently claims that Sade is one of a handful of writers who had the greatest impact on his development as a writer. Considering the sadistic scenes for which Sade is known, and the exaggerated fantasies of murder and rape that made Cooper's novels somewhat infamous in the 1990s, it may be tempting to conclude that Sade's influence on Cooper extends only as far as offering him a model for the depiction of sexualised violence. Matias Viegener goes a little further by suggesting that, as a philosopher and pornographer of power Sade's presence haunts Cooper's novel *Frisk*. "As in de Sade", he writes, "Dennis Cooper's work is a series of speculations on what are essentially philosophical issues, but they are recast in contemporary terms in and on the body" (2008, p. 133).

Yet seems to me that the impact of Sade's thought on Cooper's work is simultaneously more profound and more diffuse than Viegener's otherwise excellent analysis will allow and Sade's influence is not limited to *Frisk*'s imagined scenes of murder and mutilation or Cooper's recurring interest in the body. Rather, the effect of his early exposure to Sade and especially his reception of Sade's work through the interpretive lens of Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Blanchot reverberates throughout his writing. Speaking with *The Paris Review* Cooper talks about reading Sade as a teenager and, significantly, notes that "the Grove Press editions of Sade's books that I read had super-heady essays on and in defence of Sade's work by Beauvoir and Blanchot, so I knew what he was doing was serious literature" (2011, p. 176). The essays he refers to here, Blanchot's "Sade" (1949) and Beauvoir's "Must we burn Sade?" (1952), offer two of the earliest and most enduring elucidations of Sade's philosophical system as one of supreme egoism. Turning to Beauvoir's and Blanchot's texts, we can see that this egoism represents a fundamental

problematic for the entirety of Cooper's work; one that initially appears to lapse into anguished solipsism only to later form the basis of his interest in anarchist thought.

In the introduction to *120 Days of Sodom*, Sade has his libertine hero the Duc de Blangis enunciate one of the more succinct appraisals of his egoist worldview. The Duc asserts that conventional morality and ethics, which dictate that one should strive to be virtuous and just, are without an impartial or universal foundation. Notions of the just and unjust, for instance, "have never been anything if not relative... The stronger has always considered exceedingly just what the weaker regarded as flagrantly unjust, and that it takes no more than the mere reversal of their positions for each to be able to change his way of thinking too" (1987, p. 199). Having dispensed with such a vacuous and illegitimate ideology, he contends that the only recourse is to behave just as he likes:

> I do my choosing without hesitation, and as I am always sure to find pleasure in the choice I make, never does regret arise to dull its charm. Firm in my principles because those I formed are sound and were formed very early, I always act in accordance with them; they have made me understand the emptiness and nullity of virtue; I hate virtue, and never will I be seen resorting to it. (1987, p. 198)

Beholden to neither gods nor masters, the Duc does what he wants and, "as he was a man of the greatest possible wit", Sade's narrator exclaims, "his arguments had a decisive ring" (1987, p. 198).

Passages like this form the foundation of Blanchot's essay, written as a response to the publication of Pierre Klossowski's *Sade, My Neighbour* in 1947 and included, as Cooper points out, in Grove Press' 1965 edition of *Justine and Philosophy in the Bedroom*. Here Blanchot constructs a clear picture of Sade's philosophy as one predicated upon systematic negation, which sets the sovereign individual at its apex. According to Blanchot, Sadean thought advances one principle above all others:

> This philosophy is one of self-interest, of absolute egoism: each of us must do exactly as he pleases, each of us is bound by one law alone, that of his own pleasure. This morality is based upon the primary fact of absolute solitude. Sade has stated it, and repeated it, in every conceivable form: Nature wills that we are born alone, there is no real contact or relationship possible between one person and another... These principles are clear. (40)

This is Blanchot's strong claim: that Sade's egoism proceeds via an axiomatic belief in the fundamental solitude of the subject. Other individuals, if they appear at all in the world of Sadean Man, exist for him only as shapes of his consciousness, always already negated in the

abstract. Thus the Duc reminds participants in his forthcoming orgies that "it is not as human beings we behold you, but exclusively as animals one feeds in return for their services, and which one withers with blows when they refuse to be put to use": undifferentiated, dehumanised, he indifferently tells them that they are "already dead" (1987, p. 252). Sovereign, supreme, untouched, and unmoved by other individuals, "what is especially striking", Blanchot contends,

> is the fact that the world in which the Unique One lives and moves and has his being is a desert; the creatures he encounters there are less than things, less than shades. And when he torments and destroys them he is not wresting away their lives but verifying their nothingness. (1965, p. 55)[7]

Although her essay is more obviously marked by Hegelian theories of the subject and contemporary existentialism, Beauvoir's analysis proceeds in much the same fashion as Blanchot's earlier work and, like Blanchot, she aims to elucidate the fundamental egoism of Sade's writing. Sade, in her account, repudiates the notion of a universally applicable system of morality or ethics on the basis of "a heterogeneity of values, not only from class to class, but from individual to individual" (1987, p. 50). His system finds its clearest expression in lines such as those of the Duc de Blangis quoted above and thus, according to Sade and the Duc, "there is no reality other than that of the self-enclosed subject hostile to any other subject which disputes its sovereignty" (1987, p. 50). For Beauvoir as for Blanchot, Sade's egoism arises out of a self-imposed solitude that refuses to countenance a relationship with another individual.

> [For Sade] nothing has truth for me other than what my experience envelops, and the intimate presence of the other radically escapes this experience; therefore it does not concern me and cannot dictate any duty to me. "We mock the torment of others: and what would this torment have in common with us?" And again, "There is no comparison between what others experience and what we feel; the strongest pain for others must surely be nothing to us, and the least tremor of pleasure we experience touches us". (1987, p. 58)

One of the significant contributions of Beauvoir's essay is to connect the egoism of Sade's

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[7] Peter Cryle's virtuosic essay on *120 Days of Sodom* affirms Blanchot's argument, framing Sade's excessive and relentless counting (of passions, days, victims, etc.) as an emphatic and violent negation of individuality and difference. He argues that "counting can be said to pursue sameness because it enacts the triumph of abstraction. In dealing successively with the objects it meets, counting never fails to retrieve and affirm a determined order. For things, for people, for crimes to be counted, they must be taken as equivalent" (1994, p. 123). In the next chapter, we shall see that Cooper turns this "triumph of abstraction" on its head, associating its obliteration of difference with coercive forms of community rather than the supreme individualism of Sadean Man.

writings with the conditions of his life and she comments, for instance, upon the correspondence between the Sadean egoist's lack of empathy and the "curse" that was Sade's autism, "which prevented him from ever forgetting himself or being genuinely aware of the reality of the other person" (1987, p. 22).[8]

Each of these pivotal essays seeks to triangulate Sade's system via intersecting concepts of non-relationality, solitude, and egoism. No two subjective worldviews are compatible therefore, in Sade's reckoning, the individual is sundered from the world and from others, condemned to live in an emotional and spiritual solitude that echoes Sade's isolation in French prisons and asylums for over thirty years. It is this aspect of Sade's work that has the most profound effect on Cooper's writing. If later works like *The Tenderness of the Wolves* and *Frisk*, known for their transgressive combinations of scatology, sex, and death, evince a more legibly Sadean style, *Idols* explores the ideas that lie beneath, in particular the notion of subjective isolation and the human condition of non-relationality. Cooper's anguished reaction to these ideas in his early poetry is, as I show in the following section, antithetical to Sade's triumphant approach.

Subjective isolation

In the "Boys I've Wanted" series we looked at above, non-relation and distance defines the relationships between the figures that appear in the poems themselves as much as it marks the temporal relationship between the poems' speaker and his past. In pieces like "Scott Van Der Karr", for instance, the speaker's desire for communion with another is continually negated by the physical boundary of bodies and the unfathomable otherness of his beloved. Opening with an acknowledgement of the separation between them, the poem quickly shifts to a linguistic suturing-together of the writing "I" and the desired "you" in a shared, communal "we":

> It was the Christmas dance
> wasn't it? My rock band
> played. You joined the dance floor.
> We had knocked over the big tree.
> We had opened the mock packages. (1989, p. 12)

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[8] In a characteristically subtle reading of Beauvoir's essay on Sade, Judith Butler similarly concludes that, for Sade, the individual is "as if constitutionally alone" (2003, p. 183). His denial of intersubjective relationships, Butler notes, is antithetical to Beauvoir's own thought: Beauvoir's ethical maneuver, however, is to enact her own ethic of intersubjective action by approaching Sade as an Other and allowing for the possibility of a relationship with his work.

Here, first and second person pronouns meet and join momentarily before almost immediately defying poetic contrivance and withdrawing to their previous positions: "My band was the Stones. I, Jagger./Your eyes were closed. You knew your way" (1989, p.12). Cooper's choreography of pronouns is accentuated when the speaker joins Scott on the dance floor and initiates some passing corporeal intimacy between them.

> Later I danced beside you, drunken,
> stumbled into you again and again.
> And I could smell your sweat and your breath.
> Everyone could. Did you notice? (1989, p. 12)

Although the speaker may repeatedly stumble into Scott, they are both bounded by individual bodies that seem, for Cooper, to emphasise the separation of each and circumscribe their interaction. The impotent and unanswerable question that concludes this poem – "Did you notice?" – also insists upon the psychological separation between the self and the other: the other's mind will forever escape intellection by the speaker and this, we are led to infer, will forever obstruct their combination in a wished-for intersubjective "we".

The "Boys I've Wanted" series' sense of ubiquitous separation appears in other poems in the collection where Cooper continues to situate his characters at a distance from one another. "First Sex", for instance, emphasizes the dissociation between the speaker of the poem and a desired other and details the disappointing divergence between his imagined lover and the one he finds before him.

> This isn't it.
> I thought it would be
> like having a boned pillow.
>
> I saw myself turning
> over and over in lust
> like sheets in a dryer.
>
> My style was reckless,
> wool dry. Other than mine
> there were little or no arms.
>
> I could whisper anything
> into an implied ear
> and praise would rise
> like a colourless, scentless gas.
> Then I would breathe to sleep.
>
> But my lover moves.

> And my lips grow numb as rubber
> before I capture half the ass
> that rose like Atlantis
> from my dreams.
>
> I try to get his shoulder blade between my teeth.
> He complains, pillow in his mouth.
> Doesn't mean it.
> Means it.
>
> He rolls onto his back,
> face raw and wet as fat,
> like it has been shaken from nightmares.
> I don't know how to please this face. (1989, p. 20)

The question that concludes "Scott Van Der Karr" is echoed in this last line, in the evident illegibility of the lover's desire and the speaker's acknowledgement of an empathetic impasse between them. However, "First Sex" also confronts an important corollary of *Idols*' recurring emphasis on the non-relational: with the obstruction of understanding between the self and the other and in the absence of a coveted intersubjective experience, the speaker is isolated and alone with his fantasies. Imagined erotic scenarios generated with the aid of "a mound of porno" are here contrasted with real referents and the latter are found wanting: "This isn't it" (1989, p. 21). Hanging on the ambivalent "match" – a pun that suggests both a search for equivalence and a means to incinerate that search – the poem's conclusion suggests that the speaker considers forsaking the immediate, actual encounter with his lover for solipsism and the solace of his fantasies.

> Tomorrow when he has made breakfast
> and gone, I will sweep
> the mound of porno from my closet,
> put a match to its lies. (1989, p. 21)

This reading finds support in the masturbatory scenes that mark a number of *Idols*' poems. "If I were Peter Frampton" sees the speaker projected into the body of the English rock star and once inside desperately wishes to "finger fuck [himself]/in front of a one way mirror/with all the lonely guys/on Selma behind, fed at last"; although he would take pleasure in trying to have sex with Mick Jagger and hiring punk bands to open for his shows, the speaker tells us that "the best/part is the masturbation, looking/down at my own famous body" (1989, p. 30). This onanistic fantasy is therefore directed by a kind of radical self-containment, in which the speaker dreams about being Frampton only to lock this fantasy up in an erotically self-referential loop; like "First Sex", what turns the speaker on, it seems, is not the other but fucking

his own fantasy of the other. A similar self-enclosed circularity seems to govern "Good Advice", in which the speaker is "lit from below" and "ankle deep in [his] jeans":

> …It is hot enough
> that I sweat, and my hands
> slide all over me. I look good
> in this light. Someone seeing
> me would desire me. I wouldn't
> mind this hand being a mouth,
> Shaun or David Cassidy down on
> his knees going over me and
> looking so good in the low light.
> It could be me down there
> and my mouth. I wouldn't mind. (1989, p. 19)

The interchangeability of the speaker's fantasy of the Cassidys with a fantasy of himself contributes to the collection's pervasive mood of isolation and here, as in "If I Were Peter Frampton", a fantasy initially projects the speaker out of himself only to quickly circle back into an affirmation of individual solitude.

Such poems epitomise the broader argument *Idols* attempts to make regarding the relationship between the individual and the world. So far we have seen that in this collection the non-relational looms large and appears, for the poet, to constitute a fundamental feature of his interactions with others: as the thoughts and feelings of another remain largely indecipherable, no intermingling of discrete selves may occur. Concomitant with this attempt to plot the distance between individuals is Cooper's focus on intellectual and emotional isolation – without the capacity for an intersubjective encounter, the individual is forever alone, hemmed in by a solitary subjectivity. Non-relationality and solitude: these two aspects make up the recto-verso of Cooper's conceptual framework and highlight his indebtedness to the Marquis de Sade. For Sade, the individual is born alone, they live and die alone, and the separation of one person from another is never in question. Indeed, as we have seen above, it makes possible his egoist philosophy – absolving his libertarian protagonists of any ethical responsibility. Cooper unhappily adopts Sade's axiom, while challenging its conclusions. Moreover, Blanchot's comment that in the world of Sadean Man other beings are "less than things, less than shades" (1965, p. 55) also resonates with the depiction of others found in *Idols*. Cooper suggests throughout this work that subjectivity being inescapable, one does not communicate with the world directly but rather through a subjective membrane. Experience is forever mediated through subjective representation, therefore others can be considered mere images of consciousness; "less than things"; "shades" of the mind. The unhappy upshot of this for Cooper is that relationships consist

not of an immediate contact between the self and the other but rather of a frottage between the self and the self's perception of the other. The masturbatory scenes found in these poems seem to advance the argument that every form of encounter, even one comprising sexual intimacy, is ultimately an onanistic procedure: if the self only interacts with its own representation of others, it seems to follow for Cooper that making love to another is just like jerking off. Yet this existential privation saddens and infuriates Cooper ("I've held love", he insists in the poem "My Type" – but alas it has been "at arms length" (1989, p. 29) and although he can see no alternative, his work refuses to affirm and acclaim it. While Cooper's thought seems contiguous with Sade and other egoist philosophers in their comparable belief in subjective solitude, his response to these conditions differs greatly from theirs.

Egoism and Idols

Sade's affirmation of subjective solitude in *120 Days of Sodom* is implicit in the libertines' vehement refusal to relate to their victims or even countenance the notion that their victims might possess interiority: as Beauvoir points out, "remorse and disgust are unknown to them; at most they have occasional feelings of satiety. They kill with indifference" (1987, p. 37). In the Duc de Blangis' speech to his assembled victims on the eve of their ordeal he goes to great lengths to insist upon the utter meaninglessness of their feelings, addressing them not as fellow human beings but as "feeble, enfettered creatures destined solely for our pleasures" (1987, p. 250) and the suffering of the libertines' victims is mostly met with indifference: "Hébé and Colombe were found to have lapsed, their punishment was pronounced at once and fixed for the following Saturday at orgy hour. They wept. No one was moved" (1987, p. 263); "Durcet, not taxing himself to comfort her, advised his daughter that if she did not cease her blubbering that instant, her state notwithstanding, he was going to boot her ass out of the auditorium" (1987, p. 348). The only system of morality and ethics appropriate to such an unsympathetic view of human relations is one of supreme egoism – the only way to live is as an egoist.

Max Stirner, named by some as one of the earliest anarchist philosophers, treads a similar path in *The Ego and its Own* (1845), a divisive psycho-sociological study that posits individual sovereignty as a fact and argues that antagonism between competing world-views is unavoidable: egoism is therefore the only true philosophy. For Stirner the child is born into a world of conflict and as a consequence learns care of the self, courage, and self-assertion: "because each thing cares for itself and at the same time comes into constant collision with other things, the combat of self-assertion is unavoidable" (1995, p. 13). Yet with time and acculturation

the sovereign individual becomes mired in metaphysical speculation about universal ideals like God, Man, and Humanity – fictions or "spooks" that Stirner says occlude the self's fundamental courage and self-sufficiency (1995, p. 36). There is hope for the Stirnerite, however: with the mature discovery of his essence as an embodied spirit, man develops the "egoistic interest" necessary to overcome fixed ideas like society (1995, p. 16); the singularity of his body, its needs, and its physicality, enable mature man to turn away from the common in order to pursue his own self-interest.

Stirner's egoism finds its contemporaneous American parallel in transcendental individualism, where we find a similar denunciation of society and an exhortation of the individual will. In a manner that recalls the Duc de Blangis' decision, in the absence of a universal ethics, to "do [his] choosing without hesitation", in essays like "The Individual" (1837) and "Self-Reliance" (1841) Ralph Waldo Emerson famously takes the "honesty" of individual will as a criterion for ethical or moral judgement. "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature", Emerson writes; "Good and bad are but names readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it" (1987, p. 30). In other words, if an action confirms the strength and fortitude of one's will, it is right; if it constrains one's will or undermines it, it is wrong. Anticipating Stirner's formulation, Emerson finds that as the individual becomes more invested in the "impracticable mass" of society, gaining comprehension and civilisation, his true nature as a solitary, rational animal is forgotten (1964, p. 176): "For everything that is given [in society, by society], something is taken; society acquires indeed new arts and loses just as fast its old instincts" (1964, p. 174). Sundering himself from social concerns and obligations, however, man realizes that society is beholden to the individual, not the other way round.

> As the mind unfolds, it does not show itself as an adjunct to society but it becomes the central point from which all other individuals must be regarded. Others exist to illustrate to the individual the riches of his nature, to embody his thoughts, to fulfil the predictions of his spirit, to publish in the colours of the pleasant light the secrets which pre-existed in the closet of the mind. (1964, p. 170)

For Sade, Stirner, and Emerson therefore, the individual ego is paramount. This is not to elide the differences between their respective philosophies: for one thing Emerson's individual renounces society in order to better commune with the Divine, yet no such spiritual orientation exists in the work of Sade or Stirner, whose jaundiced appraisals of Christianity preclude any even unorthodox take on religion. All three do, nonetheless, proclaim the virtues of being alone and denounce relationships with others as meaningless distractions: thus in *120 Days of Sodom*

Sadean Man delights in his libertarianism and continually affirms his commitment to do as he likes with scant regard for others. Yet Cooper struggles with the repercussions of this ego-centric worldview. The solitude of the individual and the lack of communion with others are inescapable ideas in *Idols* yet such conditions aren't sought out as they are in the work of Emerson, or celebrated as they are by Sade's Duc de Blangis. Instead, these poems attest to a profound anguish at individual isolation and the pieces assembled in this collection encompass repeated, fruitless struggles to overcome this dismal state. *Idols* is not just another of Cooper's adolescent imitations of Sade: poems in this work limn a desperate life of quiet isolation, as their speakers valiantly attempt to form connections with other individuals but find these attempts repeatedly frustrated. Although they acknowledge the ubiquity of subjectivity and the insurmountable barrier to intersubjective contact that is representation, from first to last these poems are tortured by this state and constantly rage against it. *Idols*' opening poem, "Craig Tedesco", for instance, carefully depicts the object of the speaker's unrequited affection by patiently conducting the beloved's features through the text.

> This smile knew
> girls, kissed
> mother and burgers.
> This smile was
> turned against me;
> "Hey asshole",
> it grinned. This hair
> was red, and face
> tanned by freckles.
> No beard dimmed this chin.
> These eyes had
> never seen breasts
> or cunt, though
> this smile said
> they had. This smile
> spit in textbooks,
> farted behind
> old backs, dared me
> to start something. (1989, p. 10)

The repeated "this" that prefaces each description announces the speaker's intention to overcome the distance that stands between him and the perceived other and declares his attempt to induce an intimate encounter in language: possessing and proffering, "this" tries to draw the loved-one near. The concluding section of the poem reveals this closeness to be impossible, however: the oneiric setting manifestly empties "this" and "these" of content and reveals them as poetic conceits. Like the "mock packages" featured in a later poem, they possess

nothing except a poet's dreams of intimacy (1989, p. 12).

> In my dreams
> these eyes clenched
> beneath me.
> This smile was bound,
> or not a smile,
> or it was softened
> and smeared by mine.
> This hair was tousled
> and these shoulders
> white. Hands and taste
> knew them. This head
> was thrown back.
> This boy loosened, was God.
> Neck filled the frame. (1989, p. 10)

"Jeff, After a Long Time", *Idols* final poem, also articulates the speaker's desire to gather a loved-one close in language. Oscillating between motifs of distance and proximity, in this piece the speaker sees an old lover from across a crowded bar and remarks, "our eyes… still touch across the distance, didn't forget" (1989, p. 86). He yearns to unify their respective minds and bodies and join the present with the past, but finds there are "Just our feelings/to hold us together/now when our minds/are off in directions/our bodies tag behind". In writing, however, the speaker finds a brief, if illusory connection, allowing him to reconstruct this scene and imagine an emotional closeness between them. "And just a poem" he writes,

> to show when I grow
> tender, you remain
> that friend that
> I am reaching for. (1989, p. 86)

Forever incomplete and unfulfilled, this unrelenting "reaching for" (a friend, a once-cherished lover, the poet's own adolescence) determines the dominant trajectory of these poems. As Cooper says in an interview with Steve Lafreniere before the republication of *Idols* in 1989, "my things are about this kind of weird detachment and longing for attachment and all that stuff" and these poems are tortured by the fundamental solitude of the subject but continually strive to surmount this condition (Cooper and Lafreniere, 1988, p. 2). Raging against isolation, they reach for an embrace of the other. In the next chapter we will find Cooper extend his reach beyond the text and attempt to satisfy his longing for attachment by building a literary community in Los Angeles in the late 1970s. Applying his energies towards developing a small, vibrant society of like-minded misfits, bringing together friends and fellow travellers at a run-

down literary arts centre just off the Venice boardwalk, Cooper's attention turns outwards, away from the anguished isolation of *Idols*, towards the prospect of social and collective endeavour.

Chapter 2

A Poetics of Dissociability

Little Caesar and Beyond Baroque

> *"The problem that confronts us today, and which the nearest future is to solve, is how to be one's self and yet in oneness with others; to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain one's own characteristic qualities."*
>
> (Emma Goldman)[1]

If Rimbaud and Sade are important and enduring influences on Cooper's outlook, which catalysed the development of his lonely poetics of adolescence, his encounter with punk and the poetry of the New York School allowed for the exploration of an alternate trajectory. In this chapter we will see Cooper consider progressive forms of friendship and community beyond the text. This turn towards ideations of community came about in large part through the production of a literary magazine and poetry press called *Little Caesar*, which operated out of Cooper's Los Angeles apartment from 1976 until 1982. In the pages of *Little Caesar* magazine and chapbook catalogue, he attempted to draw together an avant-garde community made up of friends and fellow travellers. Later, as director of programming at Beyond Baroque, a literary arts centre in Los Angeles, Cooper tried to give this imagined cultural community a physical reality by bringing together young writers he liked, publicly promoting their work, and creating a space for them to develop their art in the midst of a hostile Los Angeles scene. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, L.A. poetry underwent a major – if short-lived – revival, thanks to Cooper and the success of both *Little Caesar* and his tenure at Beyond Baroque. In this chapter I argue that such moves developed out of a conversation with contemporary punk and previous generations of the poetic avant-garde.

Little Caesar *and the "little"*

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[1] Goldman, 1969c, p. 213.

In the previous chapter we saw that Cooper's fascination with Rimbaud's youth and writing precipitated the development of his early poetics. But Cooper wasn't just interested in Rimbaud's poetry, he was in love with the entire Rimbaldian mythos: his youth, his experimentation with drugs, his intense, violent relationship with Paul Verlaine, and his forsaking poetry for obscurity in Abyssinia. In the introduction to a special Rimbaud-themed issue of his poetry magazine *Little Caesar*, Cooper wrote:

> When I was fifteen I wanted to be Rimbaud and I still do, though now I'm too old for the part. Who needed Jagger, Lou Reed, Hendrix, bla bla. He had everything and was farther away than the stars. No chance to disappoint me. I wanted to look like him and made a pathetic attempt — short hair in a long hair era — a fool. I tried to follow him on drugs… He was an ultimate punk. He wrote poems and nobody cared… He'd hate everything my friends and I do now. But I make my pale tribute to him here. He was the greatest poet I know about and the most exciting person. (1978d, p. 2)

Cooper wasn't alone in his idolisation of Rimbaud and during the 1970s the French poet was an indispensible cultural reference point a hundred years after writing his last poem. We recall that Cooper first read about Rimbaud in an interview with Bob Dylan in the 1960s and, in his *Chronicles* (2004), Dylan affirms the French poet's influence when he states that "I came across one of his letters called '*Je est un autre*', which translates into 'I is someone else'. When I read those words the bells went off. It made perfect sense. I wished someone would have mentioned that to me earlier" (2004, p. 288). Jim Morrison was likewise influenced by the French poet's life and work and, according to Wallace Fowlie's comparative study of Rimbaud and Morrison, "[Rimbaud] was a rebel whom Jim Morrison admired, whom Morrison read and studied and on whom to some extent he modelled himself" (1996, p. 3). As Carrie Noland points out, in the work of such musicians, Rimbaud persisted as a model of countercultural resistance. "In the music world", she states, "the seventies was the decade of Rimbaud":

> For a while, you could flip on the radio or attend a rock concert and hear the name of Arthur Rimbaud intoned earnestly by any one of a diverse group of young musicians. Lyricists such as Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, and Patti Smith evoked Rimbaud as an important predecessor, thereby establishing their project within the paradoxical "tradition" of antiestablishment art. (1995, p. 581)

Of the three artists Noland names, it is arguably Smith, one of the progenitors of punk rock, who is most widely known for name-checking Rimbaud, famously yowling "Go Rimbaud! Go Rimbaud! Go Rimbaud!" over the rolling trebly guitar riffs of her 1975 track "Land: Horses". Indeed, a shared interest in Rimbaud would be the initial impetus for Cooper's correspondence

with her, which began in 1974. "I read that she was a fellow Rimbaud worshipper and I'd just made a few silkscreened Rimbaud t-shirts, so I sent her one with a gushing letter. She wrote back warmly", he remembers – stating elsewhere that but for an administrative oversight, he would have been the first person to have brought Smith to play the West Coast (2010a).[2] During the 1970s, idolisation of Arthur Rimbaud was a shibboleth of the rock avant-garde and sharing his Rimbaud obsession with Smith effectively allowed Cooper to gain access to New York's punk scene.

By 1976 Cooper was connected to punk through his correspondence with its unofficial doyenne, but in the summer he travelled to England where he would experience the emergent British punk scene first hand. In London on July 4th Cooper caught The Ramones supporting The Flamin' Groovies at London's Roundhouse, a gig that is widely recognised as a pivotal moment in the development of the United Kingdom's punk scene: in attendance that night were The Stranglers' J.J. Burnel, Siouxsie and the Banshees' guitarist Marco Pirroni, The Damned's Captain Sensible, and if they are to be believed, almost every other young punk in the British Isles (Robb, 2006, pp. 198–202).[3] Cooper also found himself knee-deep in a rising tide of U.K. punk zines including Mark Perry's influential *Sniffin' Glue*, which, like John Holmstrom's New York-based *Punk*, transposed the look of Richard Hell's safety-pinned shirts into a print collage of scrawled reviews, interviews, and concert photos. This combination of an electric, emergent punk community and an off-beat, improvised aesthetic had a huge impact on Cooper and he remembers that "when I got back to L.A. it seemed like the right time to give it a shot myself— have a small group of friends and people that I liked do a magazine without a centre. Also try to pull some of the New York stuff in, the music and all" (Cooper and Lafreniere, 2007). The result of this was *Little Caesar* magazine, which Cooper set up with his friend Jim Glaeser and produced for six years from 1976 until 1982.[4]

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[2] "I was going to Pasadena City College at the time, and PS [Patti Smith] had put out the 'Hey Joe / Piss Factory' single, and it was getting huge buzz. So I asked her if she'd consider playing at my college. (She hadn't played in L.A. yet.) She said, Sure, and, being really cool, she said she'd come out and play for $300. Amazing, right? So I went to the dudes who organized the events at the college and told them, 'Patti Smith is willing to play here for $300. Can you believe it?' And they said, basically, 'Never heard of her. No, thanks'. Stranger than truth but true". (2006a)

[3] Cooper remembers the trip years later:

> I just wanted to explore the early punk scene in London in 1976 and spent a summer there checking it out. It was interesting, of course, but it was still pretty fetal [sic] at that point, so I mostly just saw a lot of gigs and bought a lot of records and zines. I was lucky enough to be at the legendary Ramones show at the Roundhouse, which is now considered the event that basically started the British punk scene in earnest. (Cooper and Gidney, 2009)

[4] The editors amicably parted ways after *Little Caesar #2* leaving Cooper with sole responsibility for editing,

Where New York punks like Smith put the poetry of writers like Rimbaud to music, cutting up and splicing together literary and pop references à la Burroughs and chanting them over amateurishly-strummed guitars, with *Little Caesar* Cooper and Glaeser aimed to introduce the iconoclasm of a punk attitude into the usually staid confines of a poetry journal. The editors were convinced that punk could fundamentally alter the form and status of literature in the 1970s and, as a punk poetry zine, *Little Caesar* attempted to make such a change manifest. In his introduction to the first issue, Cooper writes:

> I have this dream where writers are mobbed everywhere they go, like rock stars and actors. A predilection? You never know. People like Patti Smith are subtly forcing their audiences to become literate, introducing them to Rimbaud, Breton, Burroughs, and others. Poetry sales are higher than they've been in fifteen years. In Paris ten year old boys clutching well worn copies of Apollonaire's ALCOOLS put their hands over their mouths in amazement before paintings by Renoir and Monet. Bruce Lee movies close in three days. This could happen here. (1976, p. 1)

Casually situating the outlook of the editors and their contributors within a cluster of major themes and influences (e.g. rock n' roll, film, youth culture, surrealism, Rimbaud), Cooper's mission statement draws these together under a standard borne by Patti Smith. Here punk appears to offer an opportunity to negotiate between high and low art, yielding an "amazing" poetic vision that would astound the world. In a reversal of the usual route of cultural influence, the United States' exportation of popular entertainment like Bruce Lee movies also gives way to an injection into the American mainstream of predominantly French influences.[5] For the Francophile Cooper this kind of cultural cosmopolitanism was essential: more than a mere matter of taste, it was the prerequisite of literacy itself and *Little Caesar* was effectively going to teach America how to read.

While his dream that writers might one day enjoy moments of Beatles-esque mania is to date largely unrealized, *Little Caesar* would bear out Cooper's aspiration to combine high and low art with a punk ethos and aesthetic to great effect. Interest in the magazine was such that two years after its inception Cooper launched Little Caesar Press, which would go on to publish twenty-four books by established and up-and-coming poets, all of whom had at some point contributed to the magazine. In his history of post-War Los Angeles poetry, poet Bill Mohr maintains that:

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collating, typesetting, and distributing the following ten issues.

[5] Cooper would later repudiate his youthful denigration of Bruce Lee in this opening salvo, confessing: "that was long ago… Now I dig Bruce Lee like any sane person does" (2007a).

[*Little Caesar*] quickly gained a vociferous readership because of [Cooper's] eclectic editorial blend of articles on punk and popular music, film criticism, and a huge swath of casually deft poetry. He also caught the attention of older poets because of his unabashed but thoughtful enthusiasm for how lively the scene was in the late 1970s and for his willingness to be specific about his favourite local poets. (2011, pp. 114–115).

Such distinguished locals included the likes of Steven Hall, Ron Koertge, Jim Krusoe, Jack Skelley, David Trinidad, Bob Flanagan, Benjamin Weissman, and Amy Gerstler, Cooper's sometime classmate at Pitzer College and close friend since 1975. It was with Gerstler that he set out to explore the L.A. literary scene – unimpressed by what they found, he attempted to set up one more suited to them in the pages of his magazine, in the catalogue of Little Caesar Press, and later at his poetry reading series at L.A.'s Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Centre.[6] In addition to pieces by these Los Angeles poets, Cooper also published work by New York artists and writers, particularly those associated with the second generation New York School and Andy Warhol's Factory scene. In its dozen issues, *Little Caesar* included writing by Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Tom Clark, Lewis MacAdams, and Joe Brainard, as well as Lou Reed, Nico, Gerard Malanga, and René Ricard.

Of course *Little Caesar* aimed at being more than just a poetry periodical and what made its volumes stand out was the sheer variety of material Cooper chose to include. The Rimbaud issue mentioned above, for instance, featured new translations of Rimbaud's work alongside Rimbaud-inspired pieces by people like Tim Dlugos, René Ricard, and Gerard Malanga, and photographs of modern Rimbaud "live-a-likes" including James Dean and Johnny Rotten. Cooper's friend and later New Narrativist, Steve Abbott contributed a comic-strip that re-imagined scenes from Rimbaud's life: in one representative panel a yawning Rimbaud exclaims, "Paul, you reek of Absinthe and nasty bourgeois values", to which Verlaine replies: "Bitch!" Although they arrived too late for inclusion in this issue, a later *Little Caesar* would also feature sixteen photographs from David Wojnarowicz's now-famous "Rimbaud in New York" series. Wojnarowicz's photos depict his friend and lover Brian Butterick idling in various locations in Downtown Manhattan wearing a Rimbaud mask Photostatted from the cover of the

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[6] Published in the year *Little Caesar* folded, Gerstler and Weissman's magazine, *Snap: A Periodical of Poetry and the Arts* (1982) served as a short-lived continuation of the *Little Caesar* literary community and its contents page echoed the latter's roster of regular contributors: *Snap*'s first (and only) volume included work by Gerstler, Weissman, Cooper, Skelley, Flanagan, Trinidad, Eileen Myles, Tim Dlugos, Elaine Equi and others. Punk was as important to *Snap* as it was to *Little Caesar* and in his retrospective appraisal David E. James groups them together as "poetry magazines whose context is clearly that of orthodox means of production of poetry, but [show] clear punk influence" (1984, p. 134).

Illuminations. [7] In each shot, Rimbaud's starkly pale features and bored, arrogant gaze simultaneously negate and endorse the situations into whose orbit his image been dragged: Rimbaud/Butterick is pictured riding a subway car plastered with illegible graffiti, shooting heroin, cruising the abandoned piers in the Hudson River, masturbating naked and recumbent.

In its ceaseless promotion of an alternative tradition of poetry and attempt to have a community of contributors gather around a shared artistic vision, *Little Caesar* clearly participates in a tradition of little magazines associated with the literary avant-garde in the twentieth century. Littles like Robert McAlmon and William Carlos Williams' *Contact* (1920/32), the New York School poets' *Locus Solus* (1961-62), and Diane Di Prima and Leroy Jones' *The Floating Bear* (1961-69) all anticipate to varying degrees, *Little Caesar*'s use of the small circulation poetry periodical to forge a group identity in opposition to conservative poetic trends. Magazines edited by Cooper's beloved second-generation of New York School poets were particularly influential: Ted Berrigan's mimeographed *C: A Journal of Poetry* (which ran from 1963 to 1966), and Lewis Warsh and Anne Waldman's letterpress-printed *Angel Hair* (1966-78) similarly sought to evoke a shared aesthetic sensibility and situate a poetic community within it. *C*, for instance, produced a sense of second-generation community through the appearance of the same poets and poetic styles throughout its run and poems by Padgett, Berrigan, and Dick Gallup appeared in most of its thirteen issues. For its part, *Angel Hair* also featured a rotating roster of New York School poets of the first and second generation, including editors Warsh and Waldman, Berrigan, Gallup, Padgett, Kenward Elmsie, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, and others.

The pages of *C* and *Angel Hair* advance a radically inclusive vision of poetic community, permeable and open to all kinds of influences and styles. Berrigan's editorial stance at *C* offers a particularly salient example of this in his apparent attempt to dismantle divisions between poetic cliques and stage a rapprochement between estranged avant-gardes. "*C* will print anything the editor likes", Berrigan writes in his editorial statement, and a glance at the names of poets featured in its issues attests to a broad and varied aesthetic taste (qtd in Padgett, 1993, p. 69). Ranging beyond Ashbery, O'Hara, and the usual suspects (although these are represented), *C* also featured contributors far from the peripheries of a classic New York School aesthetic. Such a varied roster of writers leads Harry Thorne to remark that in his work at *C*, Berrigan "eschewed the codification of a poetics in favour of contrast and idiosyncrasy":

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[7] According to his biographer Cynthia Carr, Wojnarowicz was introduced to *Little Caesar* by Tim Dlugos, who had picked him up while cruising the Downtown piers (2012, p. 149). Wojnarowicz most likely submitted his photos in response to the call Cooper put out in earlier issues for submissions to *Little Caesar*'s "Rimbaud Live-A-Like contest", in which potential contestants were asked to mail him "a photo and reason why you're the seventies' version of [Rimbaud]" (1977, p. 1).

> Berrigan did not present any kind of theoretical framework or manifesto in his magazine that would separate New York School poets (who were themselves hardly a homogenous group) from non-New York School poets. The resulting mix of poets and poetic styles and approaches in *C* means that it is almost impossible to discuss the magazine in terms of a unified poetic grouping. (2006, pp. 74–5)

Thorne also notes Berrigan's attempt as editor of *C* to bridge a longstanding dissociation between the New York School and the Factory scene through the inclusion of cover-art by Andy Warhol.[8] In Thorne's account, such a move circumvents O'Hara's antipathy for Warhol's art by including the work of both within the magazine: commissioning work by Warhol demonstrated a desire "to question group allegiances and open the magazine to wider avant-garde influences. While Berrigan would certainly not have wanted to alienate O'Hara… it does show that despite his fervent admiration of O'Hara's work, Berrigan did not want his magazine to reproduce the artistic tastes of his literary hero" (2006, p. 81).

With *C*, Berrigan evidently sought to forge an inclusive and especially diverse community made up of different – and not always sympathetic – poetic and artistic traditions. Daniel Kane suggests that this may be read as Berrigan's "microcommunity building that both echoed and complicated the utopian aspects of 1960s counterculture" (2003, p. 107). Similarly utopian aspects had prevailed in Los Angeles' little-known countercultural poetry scene in the 1950s, which grew up around Venice West and determined the trajectory of poetry in L.A. for the two following decades. Dennis Cooper found such a situation intolerable, however, and worked to radically transform the L.A. scene and how poetry was seen there: not only did his efforts *not* echo 1960s counterculture, they were directed against it and the idea of community it fostered. Although Cooper's sceptical regard for collective endeavour distinguishes him both from earlier L.A. poets and the poets of the second generation New York School, this nonetheless dovetails in certain respects with the attitude of his friend Patti Smith and the work of Frank O'Hara. The following sections show that Smith and her hostility towards the second generation of New York School poets begets Cooper's antagonistic relationship to the older poets of L.A.'s literary scene. Furthermore, I argue that their shared antipathy for earlier artists who revered collaboration and the idea of communion has an antecedent in O'Hara: radically re-reading his occasional poetry alongside the anarchist thought of his contemporary, Paul Goodman, I demonstrate that O'Hara, like Smith and Cooper after him, has a markedly ambivalent relationship to the notion of

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[8] For a detailed account of the production of this cover, which featured a portrait of Gerard Malanga and Edwin Denby (both of whose work appeared in *Little Caesar*), its importance for Warhol, and its social currency as "verbal gossip", see Reva Wolf's *Andy Warhol, Poetry, and Gossip in the 1960s* (1997, p. 25).

intersubjectivity. Goodman's radical ideas trickle down through O'Hara's work and into Cooper's, pooling as a subterranean reservoir of anarchist thought, which is protective of individual independence but nonetheless looks for the friendship and community others.

The Little Caesar of L.A. poetry

During the late 1950s, Los Angeles' Venice West became known as a Beat hangout, serving as the setting for Lawrence Lipton's classic, *The Holy Barbarians* (1959), which celebrated a sun-drenched, drug-infused, Southern-Californian society at the margins of mainstream America. This countercultural community was briefly home to a small group of poets, including Stuart Perkoff and Bruce Boyd, both of whom were featured in Donald Allen's ground-breaking anthology *The New American Poetry* in 1960. Exemplars of a Beat ethos and aesthetic, such poets advocated the use of illegal drugs like pot and peyote as part of their creative process and their poems echo the work of Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso in an apparent pursuit of authenticity and transcendence.[9] "Venice Recalled", one of Boyd's poems included in Allen's collection, regards the community from the vantage point of one who had departed for San Francisco and wistfully recalls the Venice West poets' shared commitment to the notion of poetry as a collective quest for spiritual communion.

> they are fearful in their heads
> of being on the outside looking in
> - to the centre of language:
>
> but we who would live openly are its natural peripheries
> & take the unborn where the dead leave it
> to grow, at our hand
>
> "always prefer the common", thus the noble
> Heraclitus, in "this world, which is the same for all

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[9] In *The New American Poetry*, Allen identifies five main poetic groupings post-1945: the Black Mountain College poetry of Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Charles Olson; the San Francisco Renaissance led by Duncan and Jack Spicer; the New York School; Beat poetry including Ginsberg, Corso, Jack Kerouac, and Bruce Boyd; and a final group with "no geographical definition", encompassing poets such as Philip Whalen, John Weiners, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and Stuart Perkoff (1960, p. xiii). These categories have been contested by a number of critics and the poets themselves: Mohr, for instance, contends that Allen's separation of Perkoff and Boyd into discrete categories negates the contribution of L.A. poets to what he calls the "West Coast Renaissance" and "only served to dilute the presence of [the L.A.] community within the framework of underground poetry" (2011, p. 80). Be that as it may, given Boyd's obvious indebtedness to a Beat aesthetic, his inclusion with Ginsberg, Kerouac, et al seems to me to be a good one, and the error may have been not grouping Perkoff with them.

our language is although inductive
the topology of what we live:
thus not its substitute but its enlargement.

there, with us
a new poem was always something
the making, something
that asked to be shared at once: seldom a "result"
to praise or blame, & never this only, we mostly looked
behind it for the ways that came together,
between whom, intended, a clearing was being made (1960, pp. 159–60)

Lipton's best-selling book features transcribed conversations between prominent Beats like Ginsberg and members of the Venice West scene, and Boyd's insistence here on the oral tradition of poetry, "that asked to be shared at once", the process of poetic composition as a channelling of creative energies that seemed to exist "behind it", and the appreciation of process or "the making" at the expense of the finished product or "result", epitomizes certain qualities of a Beat poetics.[10] Boyd's peers also identified his work with the pursuit of authenticity: according to an audience member who saw him read in San Francisco, "everybody present recognized that [he] had struck it rich and had written an absolutely authentic poem" (Ellingham and Killian, 1998, p. 150). Due to its inhabitants' increased dependence on hard drugs and the incarceration of Perkoff – arguably the lynchpin of the scene, who was responsible for founding the Venice West Espresso Café and its weekly poetry reading series – Venice West quickly disintegrated in the 1960s leaving Los Angeles once again without a notable literary hub.

In 1968 the reading series and writing workshops at Venice's Beyond Baroque helped to resuscitate Los Angeles' moribund scene. Poets in the city flocked to George Drury Smith's storefront property on West Washington Boulevard to read and discuss their work, in the hope of finding a community of like-minded literati. According to Mohr, a cluster of Los Angeles poets yearning for mutual support and encouragement quickly formed around the Beyond Baroque building and its NewComp Graphics Centre, which allowed neighbourhood poets to typeset and paste-up their work cheaply on the premises.

From 1975 to 1985, [with the acquisition of the NewComp Graphics Centre] Beyond Baroque provided the poets in the region with the opportunity to have

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[10] An eventful poetry reading by Ginsberg and Corso in Venice West, at which Ginsberg repelled a drunken heckler by taking all his clothes off, in front of an audience that included Anais Nin, is remembered in Stuart Perkoff's "The Barbarian from the North (for Allen Ginsberg)": "what are we to say, then, of a man/who takes off his clothes in someone else's living room?/are we to applaud?/what is his nakedness to us?/what do we care about his poems?" (see Lipton, 1959, pp. 193–9).

a poem critiqued on Wednesday night, test the revision out loud at an open reading before the featured poet on Friday, type and paste it up for publication during the following week, and subsequently bring it back from the printer to be shelved at the library and sold at the bookstore… Beyond Baroque presented very little in the way of impediments to an artist's decision about how mature she or he was as an artist, and its institutional projection into the development of the community continually favoured potential rather than enactment. (90)

Such a description evokes the sense of a poetic community at Beyond Baroque: like the one at St Mark's Church on the Lower East Side[11] and in *C* and *Angel Hair*, the Beyond Baroque community was inclusive and supportive of its members if perhaps not terribly critical of the poetry that was presented at its workshops. Mohr's description also connects Beyond Baroque to the Beat ideology of Venice West as articulated by Boyd's poem above, in particular the latter's insistence that a poem is symptomatic of a creative process, not an object in itself to be "praise[d] or blame[d]" by other poets. Indeed poets from Venice West like John Thomas, who were not yet strung out on drugs or locked up for criminal activity, often turned up at Beyond Baroque readings and were welcomed into the fold.[12] The early groupings that gathered at West Washington Boulevard, like the Venice Beats, thus seemed to simply "prefer the common" – sharing space and poetry with one another in a city which was dominated by the film industry and had no time for this least lucrative of arts.

Following the acquisition of a new lease, Beyond Baroque moved into the disused Venice City Hall in 1979 and Dennis Cooper shortly took over as director of the reading series. Cooper had come to Beyond Baroque in the mid-1970s with Amy Gerstler, looking for poetry they connected with and a group of peers who would support and challenge them. He is unambiguous about their disappointment with what they found: "While still at Pitzer, [Amy and I] started investigating the L.A. literary scene together, seeing which local poets we liked (not many) and didn't care for" (2008). In Cooper's estimation, the community that orbited the reading series

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[11] St Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, located on East 10th Street between Stuyvesant Street and Second Avenue, has been the literary hub of Downtown New York since the 1950s and home to the Poetry Project since 1966. Launched the help of a two-year, $200,000 federal grant in support of a "Creative Arts for Alienated Youth" project, the Poetry Project offered the largely white, educated, hippie congregation of St Mark's and the Lower East Side a diverse programme of poetry readings and writing workshops, as well as the opportunity to print their own poetry magazines using a mimeograph machine in the church's office. St Mark's quickly became a hive of poetic activity and, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, it supported a growing literary community whose most notable members (such as Ted Berrigan and Anne Waldman) were profoundly influenced by the poets of the New York School (see Champion, n.d.; Kane, 2003, pp. 123-53)

[12] Cooper notes that "there was all this reverence towards [John Thomas] from a certain contingent of the L.A. poets, and when he would show up at BB [Beyond Baroque] or read there, it seemed like it was supposed to be a big, rare deal, even though he was always around and did readings as often as anyone else, and his poetry seemed basically to be on a par with the other LA/Venice poets" (2010b).

before he inherited it was too minor and "provincial" (qtd. in Kikel, 1983, p. 57). However, having made connections with poets from across the continent through *Little Caesar* and finding himself in charge of the reading series at the centre's new location, Cooper was in a strong position to revolutionize the poetry scene at Beyond Baroque and he set out to establish an alternative community of poets whose influences and ambitions matched his own. "When I was doing my *Little Caesar* magazine and was given the job of programming events at L.A.'s Beyond Baroque Literary/Arts Foundation", he recalls, "Amy and I set out to create our own literary scene, seeking out other talented young local writers and artists and trying to get them to hang out with us" (2008). Cooper and Gerstler's work culminated in the development of a distinct grouping of Los Angeles poets that Brian Kim Stefans in his history of Los Angeles poetry calls the poets of the punk era.[13]

One of Cooper's first acts as reading-series organizer was to put an end to open readings, and Mohr is incorrect when he suggests that any poet who came to Beyond Baroque might have access to an open reading from 1975 right through to 1985: Cooper remembers that upon assuming the role, "I wanted there to be a lot of energy and I wanted people to be really serious about their writing. So I was picky... And to all the people who had always automatically gotten readings there I said no, you're not good enough, you can't read here" (Cooper and Lafreniere, 2007). With Jack Skelley, director of the music and performance series, Cooper also sought to shake up the usual format of poetry programming by booking punk bands like X and organizing themed events like a birthday party for Rimbaud, where a Rimbaud impersonator was hired by Cooper to "piss on people and spit on them" (Cooper and Lafreniere, 2007). These kinds of events also helped to solidify associations between Beyond Baroque and the burgeoning Los Angeles art and performance scene based around LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) and LAICA (Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art), which included young artists like Jim Isermann, Mike Kelley, and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto. Kelley recalls that,

> Through Benjamin Weissman and Tim Martin, who went to CalArts with me, I got to know writers associated with Beyond Baroque like [Dennis Cooper] and Bob Flanagan and Jack Skelley and Amy Gerstler. I also got to know some L.A. artists of the previous generation: Chris Burden and Ed Ruscha and Alexis Smith and James Hayward were all extremely supportive early on... A lot of writers associated with Beyond Baroque were exploring mass culture in a manner I found new and inspiring. I think the intermixture of writers, musicians, and artists and video makers in L.A. then was remarkable. (Cooper and Kelley, 2010,

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[13] Kim Stefans' introduction to "The Lost Poets of Los Angeles" mini-anthology describes the group as "largely centred around Dennis Cooper's 'zine *Little Caesar* and the literary institute Beyond Baroque (where the band X formed)" (2011, p. 134) .

Cooper also abolished the policy of free admission to Beyond Baroque readings, enabling the centre to apply for grant funding by offering evidence of income from their events. The implementation of this admission fee and the connections he formed through *Little Caesar* allowed him to invite a much wider range of poets to the reading series than ever before. Journalist Craig Lee contemporaneously notes that before Cooper's appointment as reading-series organizer, "the series mostly featured local Venice poets [while] Cooper immediately pressed for national recognition, often inviting poets from outside Southern California" (1980, n.p.). Guests included Steve Benson, Elaine Equi, Ted Greenwald, Allen Ginsberg, Carla Harryman, Christopher Isherwood, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Jerome Sala, Ron Silliman, and many others from across the United States.

Dennis Cooper's young punks

Cooper also cultivated a community at Beyond Baroque that would be receptive to the readings he organized. Mohr cites an anecdote by a previous director of programming, Jim Krusoe, in which a reading by Kenward Elmsie under Krusoe's tenure was attended by only six people; "three of them left after intermission" (qtd. 2011, p. 93). Given that Cooper and Gerstler both "revered the so-called New York School particularly", under his reign as reading-series organizer such an affront to a second-generation New York School poet would have been unthinkable (Cooper, 2008). As Kim Stefans points out, the so-called punk poets of Los Angeles all shared an affection for writers like O'Hara and Brainard, and "self-consciously tried to adapt modes of New York school writing to Los Angeles" (2011, p. 134): this interest in the New York School not only characterised Cooper and Gerstler's work and friendship, it also formed the basis of their association with poets like David Trinidad. In an interview with D.A. Powell, Trinidad remembers his first meeting with Cooper and his account offers a vivid impression of the scene at the time.

> That November [1979], at a memorial reading for Rachel [Sherwood], Dennis Cooper sought me out. He'd seen some of my poems in *Beyond Baroque* magazine and wanted to include me in an anthology of poets in their twenties, *Coming Attractions*, that he was editing. I think Amy Gerstler and Jack Skelley were with him that night. Later we all became friends. Their work had a big impact on me. Dennis created a lively scene at Beyond Baroque, which lasted until he moved to New York, in '83 or '84. He brought a lot of interesting poets from around the country to read at Beyond Baroque. I met Tim Dlugos that way, and Elaine Equi and Jerome Sala. Those were very exciting days. Everyone had their own magazine and/or press, or ran a workshop or reading series. We'd all

show each other our new poems. There was a real sense of camaraderie, of mutual support.

Dennis introduced me to the work of the New York School poets. I'd already read (and loved) O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, but Schuyler's *The Morning of the Poem* was a revelation. Joe Brainard, Alice Notley, and Ted Berrigan also had a profound effect on me. In college I'd been influenced by such poets as Sexton and Plath, Ted Hughes, May Swenson, Elizabeth Bishop. The New York poets gave me permission to make new kinds of poems, to write about mundane or ordinary things, to speak with a more familiar tone. There was still a lot of sadness in my poems, but I guess I was learning not to take myself quite so seriously. It was great, when I eventually came to New York, to meet and become friends with so many poets I admired. (2003)

Although she rarely spent extended periods of time in Los Angeles, as Trinidad mentions above, the Chicago-based poet Elaine Equi also became an intimate of the Beyond Baroque group: Cooper regularly showcased her work in *Little Caesar* magazine and her second collection of poems, *Shrewcrazy*, was published by Little Caesar Press in 1980. Her recollections of Beyond Baroque, like Trinidad's comments, similarly attest to the camaraderie of Cooper's group and the Los Angeles punk poets' improvisation upon a New York School aesthetic.

Eventually in the early '80s [Jerome Sala and I] got invited to read at Beyond Baroque when Dennis Cooper ran the series. It was one of my all time favourite readings. We felt so at home there and met a lot of cool poets who are still among my best friends—people like David Trinidad, Amy Gerstler, Jack Skelley… I loved the sensibility of most of those writers. Their work was so witty and edgy. What fascinated me most was how pop it sounded. If it had been a big deal for Frank O'Hara to write about James Dean, these L.A. poets seemed to have grown up, like myself, watching hours and hours of TV. Jack Skelley had a magazine called *Barney*, after the Flintstones character, and he'd written this great ode to Marie Osmond. David Trinidad wrote about Barbie dolls and girl groups. They aggressively and unabashedly upped the ante on bringing poetry and pop culture together. (Equi and Tangen-Mills, 2011)

Bob Flanagan, the performance poet, member of the Los Angeles punk rock trio "Planet of Toys", and soon-to-be "supermasochist", also fondly recalled the Beyond Baroque scene Cooper had brought into being, claiming that it "turned my life around. I came from knowing nothing about poetry at all – from writing awful rhyming stuff – to poetry as a life style. It was an incredible learning experience" (qtd. in Moffet, 1994).[14] Benjamin Weissman, meanwhile,

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[14] Flanagan was a regular on the scene for a number of years, meeting his partner Sheree Levin (Rose) at a Beyond Baroque event and collaborating with David Trinidad on *The Taste of Honey* (1990). He would later leave poetry – if not all writing – behind, becoming known primarily for his outrageous masochistic performances, some of which are explored in the 1993 RE/Search volume *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist.* His life-long struggle with cystic fibrosis and his final days before succumbing to its symptoms are recorded

remembers that when he stumbled upon the reading series in the early 1980s, "[Dennis] was very cool and supportive. I also fell in love with my wife at Beyond Baroque—Amy Gerstler, the foxy librarian. Beyond Baroque rocks" (Weissman and Deznermio, n.d.).

Cooper collected the work of a number of these poets in *Coming Attractions: An Anthology of American Poets in their Twenties*, edited by him and published by Little Caesar Press in 1980, which featured L.A. poets like Flanagan, Skelley, and Trinidad and others associated with Beyond Baroque and *Little Caesar* including Equi, Jerome Sala, and Eileen Myles, and poets from Washington D.C.'s Mass Transit scene, like Bernard Welt and Diane Ward. In his introduction to the volume, Cooper reveals that his decision to group these poets together arose out of a desire to highlight those who, he says, "are doing writing which is both promising in relation to their future as artists and indicative of new feelings among younger writers toward poetry and the world" (1980, n.p.). Later, when Cooper revealingly admits that "being in one's twenties sets up certain limits and forms certain bonds", he hints at what he thinks this "new feeling" might be (1980, n.p.). The poets Cooper included in the anthology effectively address the problems of their age – which are, not coincidentally, the same problems faced by Cooper and his friends at Beyond Baroque: how to locate the boundaries of the self and how one might connect with others in ways that are consistent with those limits. Setting themselves apart from the previous generation of poets whose ethos of radical inclusivity they plainly disagreed with and influenced by their contemporaries in punk-rock, the outlook of this younger generation was rather more anarchistic in character, being more protective of their individuality than their immediate predecessors.

The poems assembled in *Coming Attractions* bear this out: from Trinidad's triumphal celebration of his inebriated "outcast tongue" to the discontinuous logic of Skelley's splatter-horror poems that fail to dislodge the lyric subject loitering "in the hills, on the beach, other lonely places", these poets insist upon the distinction of the self and the separation between the self and others (1980, pp. 143, 127). Yet they also consider the conditions under which connections might be possible and Bob Flanagan's contributions exemplify these ideas. "Houses" in particular focuses on the dissociation that exemplifies the poet's perception of the world and locates his speaker, still and unchanging, at the centre of a whirling dervish of flux and mutability.

> As each unit is a constant, so is Bob,
> his flashlight here, now there;
> spider, mouse, pipe, table, cup,
> An arc of white light sweeps across the sky.

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in Kirby Dick's beautiful and harrowing *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1997).

> The crocuses work their way toward the surface
> until the pale tip of a finger
> points to some star,
> not a star, but a planet,
> then, finally, a space,
> the space between two fence posts.
> The neighbours are busy moving.
> Who moves at this time of night?
> Not even a street light of a moon,
> just a bulb
> shining through a window. (1980, p. 66)

Here everything the speaker's eye alights upon appears as a distinct entity or "unit" – even the poet himself as "Bob" – and his reference to the flashlight that picks out these things and distinguishes one object from another gestures towards the influence of Rimbaud's similarly dissociative perspective.[15] These units are the theme of the poem but so too is the space between them and this stanza imitates its "pale tip of a finger", which at first points to "a planet" and then to the vacuum that gives the planet its definition. This space is not some abstract mass overhead that fails to penetrate the speaker's life – he sees it all around him, even in "the space between two fence posts". Elsewhere in the poem Flanagan says that "there are long gaps between what we see and what we hear" and this distance between things – especially the distance that marks the speaker's relationship to the world – is a recurring idea (1980, p. 67).

However, if objects are isolated from each other and the speaker's relationship to the world is one of distance and dissociation, "Houses" hardly laments this fact: the solitary, domestic "bulb/shining through a window" lights a lonely scene but it is also starkly beautiful in its integrity. "As each unit is a constant, so is Bob", the opening line runs, and the poem repeatedly endorses the isolation and unitary wholeness of the self in particular.

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[15] In "Vowels", for instance, Rimbaud's famous attempt to produce a synesthetic experience in poetry arises out of a rapid and relentless succession of images, the vowels themselves "burgeoning births" whose only common characteristic is the colour they are conjoined with:

> Black A, White E, Red I, Green U, Blue O: vowels.
> Someday I'll explain your burgeoning births:
> A, a corset; black and hairy, buzzing with flies
> Bumbling like bees around a merciless stench,
>
> And shadowy gulfs; E, white vapours and tents, proud
> Glacial peaks, white kings, shivering Queen Anne's lace;
> I, purples, bloody spittle, lips' lovely laughter
> In anger or drunken contrition (2003b, p. 104)

> There are long gaps between what we see and what we hear.
> We hear the glass breaking but the windows are still intact.
> No one is getting married. Everything back the way it was.
> The ground lies flat again, undisturbed.
> The world goes in and out, building and dismantling.
> Some days a certain lamp seems much brighter than usual
> and other days much dimmer.
> There's an urge to change,
> to knock out a wall or plant a flower bed.
> As if we've come to the end of everything we know
> and somehow these new things will attach themselves to us,
> changing the way we look or how we talk. (1980, p. 67)

The nucleus of this stanza is the constant self that stands adjacent to a world of continuous flux. Whether on a grand scale ("the world goes in and out, building and dismantling") or more trivially in his back garden, the poet observes that change is always underway. Later in the poem he writes of the change that has overtaken the places from his past: "yes, the very ground where his house was,/where he can now drive that freeway past his old school/and watch his market, and his drug store, and his trees/blur past him in a muddy wash" (1980, p. 67). He even admits that the on-going flux of the world may "[change] the way we look or how we talk". Yet these changes are cast as merely cosmetic: they fail to fundamentally alter the subject to which they "attach themselves". Change happens, it seems, but does not trouble a constant, distant self who regards it with disinterest.

Can bonds with others be formed in such an atomised universe? Well "no one is getting married" but connections do occur:

> George and Mary throw rocks at the windows of an abandoned house. He says, "Let's make a wish". He wants to go someplace exotic like Africa or Tahiti. She has a different wish, and hers comes true. (1980, p. 66)

The relationship between George and Mary the poet hints at is sympathetic but somewhat antagonistic: although they join together in a shared and quintessentially delinquent endeavour, they are nonetheless different entities with distinct aspirations. To put this into context, if George and Mary are lovers, their relationship to one another is the antithesis of the one John Donne writes about in a poem like "The Good Morrow", where he champions the idea that love should dissolve the distinctions between individuals, writing that: "If our two loves be one, or, thou and I/Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die" (2005, p. 293). In Flanagan's poem, conversely, lovers' freedom from one another and the separation between them is paramount.

Provisional alliances are therefore possible in Flanagan's world, but only between subjects that retain their independence: this is redolent of an anarchistic attitude towards social

formations and the above stanza may be read as epigrammatic of the punk poetry scene at Beyond Baroque, where Flanagan joined with other delinquent poets at a run-down literary arts centre just off Venice Beach to lob poems like rocks at the previous generation's decrepit forms. Cooper, Gerstler, Flanagan, Trinidad, Weissman, and Skelley: this group of friends made up the core of the new generation of Los Angeles poets – "punk poet mutants" that journalists like Laurel Delp found were "breathing life into the local poetry scene" (1982, p. 10).

Unsurprisingly, the changes Cooper and his friends made were not always appreciated by the crowd that had previously frequented Beyond Baroque and his tenure aroused no small amount of animosity. A reflective Bill Mohr contends that "other poets in Los Angeles who were not part of what appeared to be a new inner circle at Beyond Baroque began to grumble at their reduced stature at Beyond Baroque. After years of building a scene into prominence, they felt that they were being relegated to supporting roles and walk-on parts" (2011, p. 118). Regarding the fallout from his abolition of the open readings policy, Cooper also maintains that "everyone was furious at me, literally punching me and throwing things in my face. Because that's all they had. They would go there every week and read their poems at the open reading and that was their thing" (Cooper and Lafreniere, 2007). Elsewhere he comments on the pervasive hostility directed towards "those of us who were in some way in charge", like himself, Skelley, and their friend, Jocelyn Fisher (then president of Beyond Baroque) (2006b). Craig Lee, who wrote a profile of Cooper for the *L.A. Weekly* under the headline, "The Little Caesar of the L.A. Poetry Scene", reported that "the fraternity of younger poets, whom Cooper describes as 'his group' are often denigrated by other poets ([Venice Beach poet] Lynn Bronstein calls them a 'poetry mafia')" (1980, n.p.).

In the early 1980s, Beyond Baroque was effectively the setting for an ideological struggle that was underway throughout the United States at the time, as the flower power of the 1960s gave way to a far less idealistic 1970s. Los Angeles' earlier poetry scene, inclusive and radically porous, preferring what Bruce Boyd calls "the common" and concert with others, was in constant conflict with Cooper's young, somewhat exclusive set. This incessant antagonism between the old crowd and the new even contributed to a split in the Wednesday-night workshop and led to the establishment of a splinter-group that moved out of Beyond Baroque and into the Social and Public Arts Centre a couple of minutes walk away. It also ultimately resulted in Cooper's resignation as the reading-series co-ordinator in 1983, after more than three years in charge.[16]

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[16] On his blog, in a note to Tosh Berman, sometime director of Beyond Baroque in the post-punk years, he describes the night that he decided to quit.

Speaking of Beyond Baroque and hatred, I may have told you this, but the final straw in

The shift witnessed here away from a community that valued collective endeavour over the individual efforts of any one poet provides a useful vantage point from which to differentiate between the social formations of the second-generation New York School and those endorsed by Cooper, sometimes referred to as a member of the post-New York School generation.[17]

Daniel Kane contends that the second-generation poets "resuscitate" the practices of appropriation and collaboration used by previous avant-garde movements like surrealism, such that in certain works the voices of individual contributors become so braided together that the reader cannot be sure who has written any single line or word (2003, p. 113). From Berrigan and Waldman's landmark collaboration "Memorial Day" (1971) and Berrigan and Robert Creeley's "Think of Anything" (1971-72) to book-length collaborations such as Berrigan, Padgett, and Brainard's *Bean Spasms* (1967), these kinds of collaborative experiments participate in what Kane elsewhere calls the second generation's "poetics of sociability", which acts as the glue for the community even as it exposes to critique the culturally enshrined notion of a lone poetic voice by transcribing the clamour of a poetic community.

> Second-generation work manifested more clearly than previous groupings had done before that the place of the solitary and muse-inspired author could productively give way to a poetics of sociability that, at least temporarily and by virtue of the collective, help create a truly alternative site of resistance against the literary and political establishment of the era. (2006, pp. 95–6)

By contrast, although they socialised together, the circle of younger poets at Beyond Baroque had little interest in developing a *poetics* of sociability. As we noted above, they accept the isolation and solitude that defines the world around them and their work looks favourably upon independence and individuality. Consequently they seem to have been much more wary of sacrificing their individual voices to the flux and anonymity of collaboration, and collaborations between Cooper, Gerstler, and the other poets of the Los Angeles set are quite

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my tenure there as readings coordinator was I scheduled Kate Braverman to read even though she and I were not exactly mutual admirers. That night when she stepped to the podium, after I'd given her the peace offering of a very respectful, praise-filled introduction, she launched into this long, vicious attack on me right in front of my face to the roars and applause of her assembled fans, and for reasons that seem reasonable now but really hurt me at the time, none of my assembled friends or supporters defended me. You know how thankless the running things at Beyond Baroque job feels when you're doing it, and that was the night I decided, that's it. I'm done. (2006c)

[17] In "Tim: A Review", a tribute to Tim Dlugos, Eileen Myles writes that in his introduction to Dlugos' selected poems, *Powerless*, Cooper "called Tim Dlugos 'Post-New York School', which is also true of course but probably easy to say if you're not including yourself. If Dennis agrees to be in it, too, then I totally accept the term" (2003, p. 228).

rare. Indeed David Trinidad appears to be the only member of the group with any real interest in the practice, collaborating with Bob Flanagan on their book-length *A Taste of Honey* (1990), with Tim Dlugos on "Columbus Day" (1982), and with Cooper on the lone, unpublished poem "S.O.S.", written in January 1985.

It would seem that even though poets like Berrigan and Waldman expanded the range of material available to subsequent generations of poets inspired by New York School poetry, offering models of poetic engagement with subjects like sex, drugs, and rock n' roll, Cooper and his friends did not enthusiastically embrace the older poets' model of a poetic community. There is a clear generational difference here: the L.A. punk poets' reticence to engage in the process of collaboration (which is significant given their intimacy with Berrigan, Brainard et al) and their antipathy for Beyond Baroque's older poetry scene is symptomatic of a disagreement between succeeding generations about the place of the individual within social or communal formations.

This disagreement has a precedent and in fact characterised Patti Smith's relationship with New York's Poetry Project in earlier years. Arriving in the East Village in the late 1960s and eager to make a name for herself as a poet, Smith sought from the outset to establish her independence from the poetry community that had taken up residence at St Mark's Church, which included Berrigan, Waldman, and other members of the second-generation New York School set. Daniel Kane's study of Smith's association with the Downtown poetry scene finds her identifying, not with the progressive forms of community fostered at the Poetry Project, but with poets like Rimbaud in an attempt to "aggressively […] reinstate uniqueness to the figure of the poet" (2012, p. 108). "Read consistently as agitating if not outright repudiating affiliation with a collective", Rimbaud was Smith's example of antagonistic individualism and buying into his "outlaw aura" facilitated her dissociation from the community and poetics of the Poetry Project: "Rimbaud and related figures are practically epic demigods for Smith, whose heroic individualism she contrasts, in an implicitly disparaging way, with the cheerful flocks assembled at St Mark's" (2012, pp. 108–9). Kane takes a rather dim view of Smith's distinguishing herself from the group at St Mark's Church and he sees her actions as those of a twenty-four-year old's "youthful arrogance" (2012, p. 110).

Kane's association of Smith's individualism with youth and Rimbaud is correct: we saw in the previous chapter that Rimbaud, whom Carrie Noland names "a model of antisocial innocence", necessarily signifies the state of adolescence and its attendant egoism for those who were influenced by him (1995, pp. 583–4). Yet where Kane perceives only a "reactionary" bent to Smith's shunning the practices of a "neo-Dada collaborative scene", I see a quasi-anarchistic attempt by her to reclaim a piece of individual autonomy in the face of a social grouping for which the idea of individual uniqueness was not only anathema but positively regressive (2012,

p. 114). Kane's second-generation New York School poets produced a "poetics of sociability"; under the influence of Rimbaud and Patti Smith, Los Angeles in the late 1970s saw the rise of a poetics of *dissociability* that reinstated the idea of individuality and allowed for a separation of the individual poet from the efforts of the collective. As Smith's attitude was transposed to the West Coast via Dennis Cooper who, as we know, worshipped Rimbaud and was connected with Smith and the punk scene, it produced the effects we commented upon above: estrangement from the (older) collective at Beyond Baroque and the generation of an alternative punk poetry scene that regarded the singular more sympathetically.

In the first chapter we observed that, confronted with the fundamental isolation of the human subject, Cooper's poetry "reaches for" communion with another; yet while at Beyond Baroque he repudiated a model of poetry and community based on a "social life", "the common", and communion with others. In *Little Caesar* Cooper attempted to draw together a community of poets sympathetic to his style and outlook, but he never goes so far as to include collaborations in its contents. Cooper is therefore stretched between a desire for togetherness and a commitment to independence. This is a typically anarchistic condition and one that reaches an uneasy equilibrium in, for instance, the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who writes that an individualistic orientation and a wish for community are "the two faces of our nature, ever adverse, ever in course of reconciliation, but never entirely reconciled". Just as Bakunin's anarchism tries to balance a passion for destruction and an equal but opposite passion for creation, Proudhon's anarchism is similarly marked by the oscillation between dissidence and harmony: "in a word, as individualism is the primordial fact of humanity, so association is its complementary term; but both are in incessant manifestation" (1847).

Although the apparent paradox we find in Cooper's work is thus hardly new or exclusive to this writer at this particular time, I would suggest that a productive correlation might be made between his on-going negotiation between the individual and the community and a similar dialectic that surfaces in the work of Frank O'Hara, whose poetry he adored. The first generation of New York School poets are widely considered to be emphatically apolitical: David Lehman, for instance, writes that unlike the Beats, "the poets of the New York School pursued an aesthetic agenda that was deliberately apolitical, even antipolitical" (1999, p. 9). Yet a patient analysis of O'Hara's work and the intellectual culture in which he moved reveals that the provenance of his so-called coterie poetics is much more radical than previously believed. In Cooper's poetry and community-building, I will argue, this radicalism and its critique of the common, resurfaces with a punk rock hue and constitutes an engagement by proxy with the ideas of the anarchist intellectual, Paul Goodman.

Origins and afterlives of O'Hara's coterie poetics

The sense of community that the New York School poets' little, *Locus Solus*, produced within its few issues in the early 1960s reflected in its contents pages the kind of community that Frank O'Hara had attempted to cultivate in his poetry for more than a decade. Now commonly called his coterie poetics or poetics of coterie, critics have lately focused on O'Hara's commitment to relationality in poetry and the ways that his work attempts to transcribe the intimate bonds between members of his group of artist and writer friends. In *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (2006), for instance, Lytle Shaw finds that O'Hara's poetry and art criticism evince a desire to replicate and interrogate in writing the social fabric of the New York School, their friends, and associates: "The idea of O'Hara as a coterie poet emerges both from his intimate links to a circle of famous artists and writers and from the intimate referential practices of his work, in particular his conspicuous use of proper names, especially those of his friends" (2006, p. 2).

Dropping the names of John (Ashbery), Jimmy (Schuyler), Kenneth (Koch), LeRoi (Jones – Amiri Baraka), and other friends like Joe (LeSueur), Jane (Freilicher), and Grace (Hartigan), O'Hara's texts gather up a small community of individuals brought together in friendship and poetry. Critics including Shaw have attributed the emergence of this coterie poetics to the influence of Paul Goodman's "Advance-guard Writing in America: 1900-1950", published in *The Kenyon Review* in 1951. Destined to become an influential text for a number of emergent poetry communities in the United States at the time, O'Hara read Goodman's essay as a Master's student at the University of Michigan in the summer of 1951 and wrote excitedly to Freilicher: "I read Paul Goodman's current manifesto in *Kenyon Review* and if you haven't devoured its delicious message, rush to your nearest newsstand! It is really lucid about what's bothering us both besides sex, and it is so heartening to know that someone understands these things" (qtd. in Gooch, 1993, p. 187).[18]

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[18] Shaw remarks upon the significance of Goodman's essay to members of the San Francisco Renaissance and the Black Mountain poets:

> O'Hara's interest in the writings of Paul Goodman, for instance, was shared by several of the most important American poets of the 1950s, from Jack Spicer, who read Goodman both into textual strategies like dedications and occasional poems and into the more daily workings of his intimate community in San Francisco, to Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, who theorized Goodman into their own correspondence. (2006, p. 81)

In fact, Goodman had met Spicer during his brief stay at Berkeley in 1949-50 and had taught with the Black Mountain poets in the summer of 1950 (Ellingham and Killian, 1998, p. 390; Stoehr, 2003, p. 86). The Black Mountain faculty refused to grant Goodman a more permanent position at the college, however: an abrasive and often irksome character, "by the end of the summer the bohemians, Quakers, and refugees on the faculty had decided they did not want [Goodman's] kind of troublemaker at Black Mountain,

Goodman's article is at once a rather bewildering history of the European avant-garde in the first half of the twentieth-century and a lucid exploration of the role of the "advance-guard" of American letters as the twenty-first century approaches. For Goodman, the United States was still in a state of "shell shock" following World War II and, as a result of increased technologisation and the resurgence of consumer culture in the post-War years, American society was defined by conformity and abstraction, where the individual was separated from the power to act and Americans were alienated from one another (1962a, p. 205). A radical revision of these social formations was possible, however, and the avant-garde artist in particular could help to break down the anonymity and emptiness of modern society by establishing "intimate communities" through art. In a passage often quoted by O'Hara scholars, Goodman writes:

> the essential aim of our advance-guard must be the physical re-establishment of community. This is to solve the crisis of alienation in the simple way. If the persons are estranged from one another, from themselves, and from their artist, he takes the initiative precisely by putting his arms around them and drawing them together. In literary terms this means: to write for them about them personally, and so break the roles and format they are huddled in. It makes no difference what the genre is, whether praise or satire or description, or whether the style is subtle or obscure, for anyone will pay concentrated attention to a work in which he in his own name is a character. Yet such personal writing can occur only in a small community of acquaintances, where everybody knows everybody and understands what is at stake; in our estranged society it is just this intimate community that is lacking. Of course it is lacking! Then give up the ambitious notion of a public artist. (1962a, p. 211)

O'Hara effectively took up Goodman's challenge: writing for and about a small community of friends, using their proper names, having his work embrace them as a group, and courting the danger of its circulation amongst the members of a small coterie rather than the public at large. As Andrew Epstein observes:

> O'Hara's enthusiastic response to Goodman's essay offers a tantalizing clue about the origins of O'Hara's distinctive poetic stance: in particular, his penchant for writing poems to and about his friends, his preference for occasional poetry, and his notorious, controversial practice of nonchalantly citing his friends' proper names in his poems, leaving some to wonder how the reader is supposed to have any idea who "Jane" or "John" are. (2006, p. 30)

But what of the origins of Goodman's idea of an "intimate community", which O'Hara so enthusiastically endorsed? A poet and literary critic, Goodman was also the most outspoken

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however many Noh plays he might write to celebrate their local haunts" (Stoehr, 2003, p. 86).

and controversial anarchist intellectual in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, notorious for his virulent criticisms of American society and openly bisexual lifestyle. In a culture of widespread conformity, Goodman's work took aim at the status quo and what he called Americans' "powerful psychological resistance" to thinking the contemporary situation otherwise: such resistance cast alternatives to the absurdity and alienation of modern life as impractical and "utopian" (1962b, p. 5).

> There is no doubt that the term "utopian thinking" is importantly used to conceal the statement: *The structure and folkways of our society are absurd, but they can no longer be changed. Any hint of changing them disturbs our resignation and rouses anxiety. Cruelly, for things are well enough as they are.* (1962b, p. 6, original emphasis)

"Mankind seems to be galloping toward the condition of a social beehive or termitary", Goodman warned, "in which individual uniqueness, creaturely contact, neighbourly charity, the satisfactions of local community, and the high culture of real cities, are all increasingly irrelevant" (1962c, p. 86). His proposed alternatives to the absurd structures and folkways of society – including his idea of an avant-garde "intimate community" – thus sought to accommodate and attend to these virtues.

According to Goodman, the education system, for instance, spent too much funding on the infrastructure of teaching and not enough on teachers: "why not try, as a pilot project, doing without the school building altogether for a few hundred kids for most of the day… using the city itself as the material for the curriculum and the background for the teaching" (1962b, p. 13). In urban areas like New York, he declared elsewhere, city planners bowed to the cult of the automobile by bulldozing enormous highways through old neighbourhoods, obliterating communities, and accentuating the alienation of modern life with a road to the suburbs.[19] His proposition? Ban the private automobile from metropolitan areas: "By banning private cars and reducing traffic, we can, in most areas, close off nearly nine out of ten cross-town streets and every second north-south avenue. These closed roads plus the space now used for off-street parking would give us a handsome fund of land for neighbourhood relocation" (Goodman and Goodman, 1962, pp. 145–6). In these kinds of "utopian" proposals, Goodman consistently fought

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[19] Such concerns would be reiterated in Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of American Cities*, published in 1961. While Goodman's 1947 manifesto, *Communitas* (co-written with architect Percival Goodman), was largely ignored in the heyday of post-War auto-fever, Jacobs' critique of urban planning would be instrumental in catalysing resistance to Robert Moses' polarizing plans for New York City, culminating in a successful opposition to his proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway in 1962 by residents of Downtown New York (Barnett, 2012, pp. 250–1; see Short, 2006, pp. 36–45).

against the contemporary attitude "that things are well enough, there is nothing to be grievous or angry about, and anyway our situation is inevitable", offering suggestions that stemmed from an anarchistic belief in the inviolability of individual uniqueness and the practicality of small-scale community-building (1962d, p. xvi). In "Poem read at Joan Mitchell's", written by Frank O'Hara the day before Jane Freilicher's marriage to Joe Hazan in February 1957, we can read echoes of Goodman's ideas in O'Hara's negotiation between a desire for individuality and a dedication to togetherness.

One of O'Hara's occasional poems, "Poem read at Joan Mitchell's" spins a complicated web of friendships from references to New York School intimates like Ashbery, Koch, Freilicher, and LeSueur. The epithalamion opens by addressing to the bride to be: "At last you are tired of being single/the effort to be new does not upset you nor the effort to be other/you are not tired of life altogether", and later continues:

> This poem goes on too long because our friendship has been long, long
>   for this life and these times, long as art is long and un-
>   interruptable,
> and I would make it as long as I hope our friendship lasts if I could
>   make poems that long
>
> I hope there will be more
> more drives to Bear Mountain and searches for hamburgers, more evenings
>   avoiding the latest Japanese movie and watching Helen Vinson
>   and Warner Baxter in *Vogues of 1938* instead, more discussions
>   in lobbies of the respective greatnesses of Diana Adams and
>   Allegra Kent,
> more sunburns and more half-mile swims in which Joe beats me as Jane
>   watches, lotion-covered and sleepy, more arguments over
>   Faulkner's inferiority to Tolstoy while sand gets into my
>   bathing trunks
> let's advance and change everything, but leave these little oases in
>   case the heart gets thirsty en route
> and I should probably propose myself as a godfather if you have any
>   children, since I will probably earn more money some day
>   accidentally, and could teach him or her how to swim
> and now there is a Glazunov symphony on the radio and I think of our
>   friends who are not here, of John and the nuptial quality
>   of his verses (he is always marrying the whole world) and
>   Janice and Kenneth, smiling and laughing, respectively (they
>   are probably laughing at the Leaning Tower right now)
> but we are all here and have their proxy (1991, pp. 113–4)

From the outset O'Hara's poem makes good on his commitment to Goodman's idea of an intimate "advance-guard" community, referencing in its title a named friend (the painter Joan Mitchell) and intimating the presence of a group of avant-garde friends at the poem's initial

reading. Yet this communal intimacy is quickly abraded by the poem's opening lines, in which the speaker offers an equivocal statement on Freilicher's impending union and sees in it the demise of her uniqueness and individuality: "At last you are tired of being single/the effort to be new does not upset you nor the effort to be other/you are not tired of life together". The state of "being single" (i.e. unattached or independent; one instead of two) is here equated with novelty and variety, two cardinal virtues in O'Hara's poetry. The speaker also attributes a kind of heroism to the maintenance of one's independence by recognizing the "effort" it takes – an effort that the bride-to-be has "tired" of, capitulating instead to a life of ease and togetherness. The first stanza, therefore, seems to undercut the title's apparent encouragement of friendly attachment by championing the individual who separates herself from the drift towards unity with another.

In the following stanza, however, the speaker seems to revise his earlier dismissal of the "life together".

> city noises are louder because you are together
> being together you are louder than calling separately across a tele-
>   phone one to the other
> and there is no noise like the rare silence when you both sleep
> even country noises—a dog bays at the moon, but when it loves the
>   moon it bows, and the hitherto frowning moon fawns and slips (1991,
> p. 113)

The speaker now appears to recognize his error: previously portrayed as the result of a failure of fortitude or of giving in to exhaustion, the state of "being together" is here affirmed as vigorous and necessary. It is also treated more tenderly and these lines are replete with the speaker's own yearning for such a connection, which might undo the lonely separation of "being single" epitomized by "tele-/phone" calls that never seem to connect "one to the other". Andrew Epstein writes that "[O'Hara's] poems are filled with a strange, agitated mixture of optimism and sadness, a thirst for togetherness and a yearning for solitude" (2006, p. 109) and these first ten lines establish a motif that will recur throughout the rest of the poem, where we find the poet balancing the individual and the communal, oscillating between fervent support of togetherness and wariness about the loss of self it might precipitate.

Of the commentaries that address the connection between O'Hara's writing and Goodman's thought, most attend almost exclusively to the significance of *The Kenyon Review* piece alone and usually dismiss as irrelevant the fact that Goodman and O'Hara moved within

intersecting social circles in New York throughout the 1950s and 1960s.[20] Such a constricted focus leads the reader to assume that O'Hara's familiarity with Goodman and his work extends only as far as this essay, when O'Hara actually possessed at least three of Goodman's books and was reasonably well acquainted with him personally: Joe LeSueur, O'Hara's friend and roommate for more than a decade, to whom he dedicated his *Lunch Poems*, was even introduced to O'Hara by Goodman in 1951 at a New Year's Eve party thrown by John Ashbery.[21] More curiously, Shaw, Epstein, Diggory, and Gooch[22] also fail to recognise Goodman's status as a prominent anarchist intellectual and that his work as a whole is anarchistic in origin, consistently drawing on anarchist sources and aligning itself with a tradition of anarchist thought: Carissa Honeywell's succinct appraisal finds that "Goodman utilized the anarchist tradition to formulate his distinctive critique of contemporary America according to the principles of decentralization, participatory democracy, autonomy, and community" (2011, p. 3).

It seems, therefore, that there exists in the critical commentary on Frank O'Hara's poetics of coterie, a desire to separate O'Hara from Goodman and muffle the anarchistic tones of Goodman's ideas and consequently O'Hara's poetics. Granted this may be the result of mere oversight or of modern critics' underestimating the extent of Goodman's influence – an influence that, as Susan Sontag pointed out, was grossly underestimated even at the time of his death: despite "the extent to which Paul Goodman's ideas were repeated", she wrote; "As the assessments come in now that he is dead, he is treated as a marginal figure" (1981, pp. 7–8). In

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[20] Epstein and Shaw make no mention of Goodman's other works or the fact that O'Hara purchased Goodman's *The Dead of Spring*, *The Facts of Life*, and *Stop Light* in 1951 (see Gooch, 1993, p. 186). Terrence Diggory briefly refers to Goodman's *Communitas* but restricts his analysis of the New York School community to "Advance-guard Writing in America: 1900-1950". Brad Gooch totally dismisses the significance of their relationship, declaring that, "O'Hara's contact with Goodman once he moved to the city was less a revelation than an example of the disappointment that sometimes follows upon meeting a cultural hero in person" (1993, p. 187).

[21] LeSueur had met Goodman in Los Angeles in 1949, and they were occasionally lovers for some years afterward. In his memoir, *Digressions on some poems by Frank O'Hara*, LeSueur writes:

> I met Frank on New Year's Eve 1951, at a party given by John Ashbery. Paul Goodman said, "There's a poet named Frank O'Hara I think you'll like", and led me across the room to him. And that, of course, was my real introduction to Frank, the one that took. It led somewhere and for that reason became etched in my memory. At the time, Paul – the first intellectual, the first poet, and the first bohemian or non-conformist I ever got to know – was still in my life, still of some importance to me, and the hold he had over me, sporadic in the three years we'd known each other, came to an end once and for all when, by introducing me to Frank, he unwittingly turned me over to him. (LeSueur, 2004, pp. 5–6)

[22] Only David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde* names Goodman as an anarchist but does not associate his advance-guard essay with O'Hara's poetics (1999, p. 287).

any case, given O'Hara's avowed admiration for Goodman, their long – and sometimes fraught – acquaintance, and their circulation within the same milieu, it seems reasonable to conclude that when he adopted Goodman's model of an intimate avant-garde community, O'Hara (if not, perhaps, his later critics) was well aware of the radical underpinnings of Goodman's thought.

It is not my intention here to portray O'Hara as an anarchist poet like Goodman or suggest they were close friends – LeSueur, for instance, points out that in spite of O'Hara's admiration for Goodman's work, "at best theirs was a tenuous friendship, one that never got off the ground" (2004, p. 117). I simply wish to suggest that, due to the influence of Goodman's thought, O'Hara's coterie poetics resonates more closely with anarchist ideas than previous criticism will allow and that these ideas are more overtly actualised when Dennis Cooper comes on the scene. Enthused by Goodman's work, O'Hara's poetry orients itself toward microcommunity-building while retaining traces of an anarchist's belief in individual autonomy; given that a struggle between individual isolation and intersubjective communion already marks the poems in *Idols*, Cooper's writing and his efforts at Beyond Baroque and with *Little Caesar* are receptive to O'Hara's and Goodman's ideas.

Cooper's introduction to Goodman through O'Hara's poetry and indeed his association with Patti Smith introduces a modulation into his thought. With Cooper's exposure to anarchism at one remove and his acquaintance with Smith comes a renewed appreciation for individuality and a wariness about certain aspects of the common and of communal endeavour. His second major collection, *The Tenderness of the Wolves* (1982), begins to reflect this newly attenuated position and the title itself indicates that the work may be viewed as a meditation on the qualities of communal life: that the wolves' tenderness is offered only to their own suggests the conformity often demanded of the collective. Without doubt more sensational than O'Hara's "Poem read at Joan Mitchell's" and utterly distinct from the earlier work in tone and technique, Cooper's long poem from this collection, "A Herd", nonetheless presents a critique of communion and the common that is comparable with O'Hara's and evokes the devastating – even murderous – erasure of individuality that intersubjectivity may portend.

The one and the herd

Composed in 1980 while Cooper was working at Beyond Baroque, *The Tenderness of the Wolves* poems explore similar themes to the ones we examined in *Idols* and notions of non-relationality and subjective isolation are ubiquitous within the collection's teenage milieu. However, such ideas are expressed in much wilder, more sexually explicit, and more violent ways than the

previous collection, which appears relatively tame by comparison. In *The Tenderness of the Wolves* the Sadean solitude that marked Cooper's earlier work meets identifiably Sadean practices for the first time and these poems deal with extreme, mostly anally-fixated sexual encounters, along with rape and murder. The poem "Dinner", for instance, circles back to the distance that defines relationships between the protagonists of *Idols*' poems but does so via an explicit treatment of the practice of anal fisting (introducing one's hand into a sexual partner's anus and rectum). Here a nameless moustachioed older man leads teenage Tom from a gay bar to the parking lot outside; they strip and fuck in the back of a car and the man beings to finger Tom's ass, noting that "the handsome young face was far away… The boy was as distant from these moves as God from his priests down on earth" (1982a, pp. 37–8). This sense of separation endures throughout and, even as the tempo of their lovemaking quickens towards a climax, "both the men's breaths blew in ever altering rhythms, manned by the shapes of words which, because of the distance between them, neither could quite comprehend" (1982a, p. 38). Despite this chasm of distance and incomprehension the man persists and, in a pornographic parallel of *Idols*' rather chaste last lines, the poem draws to a conclusion with his reaching for (into) another.

> Now the man churned three fingers deeper into the well-stretched-out hole, withdrew them a little and pushed four back in. He squeezed the thumb up. Then he dialled and dialled until his hand was enclosed. The anus handcuffed the wrist. The boy was breathing so deeply the man thought that he might be dangerous or in danger.
>
> Suddenly, Tom shot off on his fingers. His body shuddered. His head clunked forward on the glass. (1982a, p. 38)

From "Dinner" onwards, the collection builds in intensity, arriving at a tipping point with the eponymous "The Tenderness of the Wolves" series, where the influence of Cooper's contemporaneous scrapbooks on sex and serial killing is evident. Recently collected in *Gone: Scrapbook 1980-82*, its content is torn from the pages of magazines and newspapers like *Inside Detective*, *The National Enquirer*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, which recount in detail the rape and murder of boys and young men by male serial killers around Los Angeles in the 1970s and 1980s. "I made it to try to understand my relationship to the material I was interesting [sic] in writing about at that time, which was largely the sex/violence/emotion axis that I had been preoccupied secretly and imaginatively with since I was a kid", Cooper explains; "At the time I was making the scrapbook, that particular axis was being acted out and illustrated all around me via the concurrent spate of serial killers who were committing their acts and coming to light in that period" (Cooper and Bladh, 2014).

These poems explore the same axis. "Grip", for instance, begins: "While raping a boy/slide your hands/around his neck/closing your grip/until he is dead" (1982a, p. 44). The following poem, "Darkens" is more legibly indebted to the scrapbook's contents, written from the perspective of an unnamed murderer who drugs, rapes, and kills his young male victim: "First he's impeccable, tense, too ideal. Then he is/weeping, annoys me. Then limp, cool, unprevailable,/dull. Then sprawled saint-like on the floor; gazing/upward. I dump that in the river and he is gone" (1982a, p. 45). The final poem in the series is even clearer about where its subject matter comes from – "Late Friends" is dedicated to Robert Piest, the final victim of serial murderer John Wayne Gacy, and references the Des Plaines river where Piest's body was found: "you are raped, strangled, and dropped/in the Des Plaines river. The man who does it feels/spiritual and light" (1982a, p. 47).

The subjects of these poems are more transgressive than the ones that precede them but their themes are contiguous. *The Tenderness of the Wolves* shows that Cooper is still thinking about subjective isolation and the possibility of communion with another. Like all of his characters, the figures that surface in this collection suffer from a "weird detachment" or are victims of another's "longing for attachment" (Cooper and Lafreniere, 1988, p. 2). These poems nonetheless appear to test the limits of Cooper's previous conclusions. If you strive for an impossible intersubjective encounter because you cannot countenance the alternative affirmation of egoism, where does this pursuit end? If intersubjectivity equals a disintegration of discrete subjects and an obliteration of difference between the self and the other, is the sum of such ideas death? Can reaching for another turn into a murderous stranglehold? The poem that closes the collection dramatizes such ideas and seems to criticise *Idols*' quest for togetherness, casting it in a rather negative light.

"A Herd" is a twelve page, twenty-four-part prose poem that depicts the lives of some loser high-school kids and their grisly deaths at the hands of a homosexual serial-killer named Ray Sexton. The poem drifts with apparent aimlessness between sections, floating through scenes set in the locker rooms and bleachers of a Californian high school, the lamp-lit bedrooms of laconic teenagers, and the dark basement of the murderer's home where adolescent boys meet their doom. Its narrative repeatedly returns to Sexton, however, who is described without much psychological depth and seems somehow bored and exhausted. Sexton seizes, sedates, restrains, and tortures his victims with a kind of indifference, before wearily doing them in with a sigh. As for his motivations, the poem does not reveal much but, significantly, we are told that it alleviates Sexton's feeling "cold and empty": killing is a compulsion and "in every cool body something could warm without reason. His hands would veer from his work and anchor him at the flesh" (1982a, p. 73). This warmth and connection is only momentary and once rigor mortis

set in, we are told, "he felt nothing" (1982a, p. 73).

Sexton's cold and empty loneliness is therefore dissipated by occasional intense contact with another – a murderous intersubjective encounter in which he convinces himself he has wholly incorporated his victim's subjectivity and all of what they are (or were) is his: in Sexton's daydreams, one of his victims signs an autograph "I'm yours" (1982a, p. 73). Yet when his boys necessarily expire as a result of their ordeal, his encounter with them dwindles into insignificance. Emptiness and his attendant desire for plenitude again set in: "the ideal had grown sour and he was left holding the bag and looking around for something to fill it. There had been nothing. Then, gradually, the longing came back" (1982a, p. 73). Sexton essentially represents the point at which the search for intersubjectivity becomes pathological and his killing spree is underwritten by a compulsive desire for communion with others – specifically teenage boys. For Sexton being single is not just tiring, as it is for O'Hara's Freilicher, it is unbearable and repeatedly sends him out on the hunt for a boy – any boy – with whom he can experience the state of "being together".

One upshot of this pathological pursuit of intersubjectivity is that it erases the specificity of the other in the abstract: apart from the imperative that they conform to his type, the particularities of each individual victim matter little to Sexton and this fact is repeatedly emphasised in the text by the equivalence the poem draws between his adolescent victims and "a herd" of hapless animals. We are told, for instance, that Ray tears his victims' photographs out of the morning newspaper and pins them in a row on a bulletin board: "Five heads hung high by a hunter"; we also read that he "put bodies down in the crawl space, like beasts into a cage" (1982b, p. 73). A more sustained comparison likens his most recent casualty to a pet dog.

> He thought about the backs of boy's necks where the haircut stopped and a soft trace of it trailed just a bit down the skin. He'd place his hand there with fingers resting behind the ears, caressing there as a man does his dog, to relax it. A dog's mouth would drop open and tongue plop over its edge. A boy's lips would moisten, swing around as though guided by radar, leak their tongue and its peace. (1982b, p. 57)

As this last sentence indicates in its swift transition from the singular, if indefinite article of "a boy" to the plural possessive pronoun in "their tongue", the correlation established between victims and animals has its roots in a negation of individuality and a drift towards the generic and undifferentiated which persists throughout the poem. The murderer's prey are repeatedly drawn under the sign of the common: describing the high school's denizens and its "shadowy herd of victims", the poet insists upon collective terms like "rabble", "slew", and "load" (1982b, pp. 60, 51, 51, 68). Teenagers are also "crowded" into locker-rooms and Ray, we are told, chooses

from "ranks" of boys (1982b, pp. 51, 68).

This repeated emphasis on the common is joined by the lack of detail given to this rather anonymous crowd of vulnerable young beasts. In the locker rooms (whose "four parallel rows of green lockers" are as uniform as the adolescents using them), boys pull on "grey teeshirts emblazoned with crude block letters: Smith, Wojnarowicz, Peters, etc." – the employment of "etc." quickly effacing any specificity that preceded it (1982b, p. 51). Even when the poem closes in on Jay Levin, Sexton's latest victim, his face is described as "nondescript, pimply white, ruled by blue, bloodshot eyes" (1982b, p. 52). We also read that a need for resemblance amongst his teenage boys and vagueness of their features are characteristics of Sexton's murderous desire: "The magazine's stars were Ray's angels, freed from the limits of I.Q.s and coordination, whose distant looks had a cloudy, quaalude effect. Teen stars' perfection haunted him and a vague resemblance to one or another could more often than not, be gleaned from the face of a boy he had killed" (1982b, p. 56).

Deploying these techniques simultaneously throughout the poem, Cooper suggests that Sexton's suspension of any ethical or moral code arises out of the intersection of the animal and the common: Sexton may torture, rape, and murder his victims with indifference because they are denied uniqueness; their "being single", in O'Hara's words, is negated and they find themselves drawn together as a genus, quickly dispatched without conscience. This correlation of the animal and the common – and the anethical aperture it opens up in "A Herd" – recalls Derrida's argument in "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)". Here he argues that the precarious but reified distinction between the human and the animal is consistent with Western thought's binary logic and participates in a range of other oppositions (life/death; speaking/muteness) which similarly seek to privilege the first term by negating the second. This distinction is predicated upon both a suppression of heterogeneity – the assumption by the human of a homogeneous set called "the animal" and the erasure of difference between species and members of that species – and an occlusion of the interdependence of each term: without death, what is life? Without animal life, what is human life?

> Beyond the edge of the *so-called* human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than "The Animal" or "Animal Life" there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living, or more precisely (since to say "the living" is already to say too much or not enough), a multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead, relations of organization among realms that are more and more difficult to dissociate by means of the figures of the organic and the inorganic, of life and/or death. These relations are at once intertwined and abyssal, and they can never be totally objectified. They do not leave room for any simple exteriority of one term with respect to another. (Derrida 2008, p. 31)

For Derrida, the abstract negation of difference and heterogeneity denoted by man's use of the common noun "animal", legislates for the annihilation, abuse, and exploitation of the particular animal by man. Furthermore, according to this logic, once a region of humanity is portrayed as bestial, the execrable treatment of animals by humans is legitimately applied by humans to humans themselves: witness, for instance, the correlation of Blacks and Irish with apes in popular nineteenth-century caricatures, which were used to spread and support xenophobia and racism in the United States.[23] Cooper seems to be responding to these kinds of ideas in "A Herd", aiming them at the idea of the collective. It is the common and the realm of animality into which Sexton's victims drift that, in a way, condemns them to death: individuality and difference negated in advance, his axe hacks them up into an anonymous mass of flesh, "until no owner could claim it" (1982b, p. 59).

Spurred on perhaps by Patti Smith's brazen refusal of the Downtown community and by his on-going arguments with the older Beyond Baroque crowd at the time of the poem's composition, in "A Herd" Cooper radicalises O'Hara's critique of togetherness, offering a grisly, bilateral critique of the ruination of individuality and difference that the common and a concomitant pursuit of intersubjectivity may threaten. The poem stakes out a more nuanced position than the one found in *Idols*, where communion with others was desperately sought even if subjectivity was acknowledged to be proscribed and ineluctable. Here subjectivity is less a state from which the poet wishes to escape and more the ground from which individuality grows – a source of uniqueness that should be prized and protected from the predations of the common. In "A Herd" the individual subject assumes a certain sovereignty and ideas like communion, commonality, and the collective are treated with no small amount of reserve. This conceptual framework re-emerges in Cooper's next work, the novella *Safe* (1984). This long prose piece is the focus of the following chapter, in which we will see Cooper continue to explore ideations of community and hone his anarchist critique of the common with specific reference to the gay community and gay collectivism in the 1980s. Contrasting his work with those of the New Narrativists, a group of gay San Francisco writers with whom he is sometimes associated, I explore two stylistically sympathetic but ideologically incompatible modes of post-Stonewall gay writing and reveal the radical queer context of Cooper's emergent anarchism.

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[23] A similar idea is implied in the Duc de Blangis' speech in Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, cited above, when he warns them that "it is not as human beings we behold you, but exclusively as animals one feeds in return for their services, and which one withers with blows when they refuse to be put to use" (1987, p. 252).

Chapter 3

Anarchism, Activism, Critique

Safe and San Francisco's New Narrative

> *"This is a time when independence seems important."*
>
> (Dennis Cooper)[1]

Since Cooper began writing prose in the early 1980s his work has frequently been associated with New Narrative, a form of writing that surfaced in the Bay Area of San Francisco at the end of the 1970s. He and a loose grouping of New Narrative writers, which included Robert Glück, Steve Abbott, and Bruce Boone, incorporated overt expressions of same-sex desire in their work, displayed a comparable interest in the abject and used similar techniques of narrative composition. This correlation was initially invoked by New Narrativists themselves then maintained by a growing body of secondary material on New Narrative and by critical studies of Cooper's novels. In what follows I critically assess how appropriate this association really is by considering Cooper's first prose novella *Safe* (1984) and some key New Narrative texts. Ultimately we will find that a thematic and stylistic convergence belies a fundamental ideological difference between Cooper and New Narrative writers. While New Narrativists celebrate gay life and seek to have an imagined community of gay readers converge and cohere around their writing, Cooper's work is opposed to these manoeuvres, sceptically regarding the compulsion to found a community on shared sexual experience. Tracing the distinction between their respective projects not only offers a unique opportunity to extend our examination of the intersection of radical politics and sexual dissidence that marks Cooper's work but also allows us to consider reformist and radical approaches to writing homosexuality in the wake of Gay Liberation.

Safe *and New Narrative*

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[1] Cooper, 2004a, p. 136.

In 1983 Cooper had finally had enough of Los Angeles' "small-minded, lax, windbag of a poetry scene" and, following his resignation as organiser of Beyond Baroque's reading series, he relocated to New York where he was to live for the next two and a half years (qtd. in Kikel, 1983, p. 57). This move from Los Angeles to Manhattan coincided with a shift in his writing from poetry to prose: after the appearance of *The Tenderness of the Wolves* in 1982 (which itself included the large prose piece of "A Herd"), Cooper would not publish a new collection of poems for twenty-six years. His first major prose work was the novella *Safe*, released by the Sea Horse imprint of Felice Picano's Gay Presses of New York in 1984.

A tripartite narrative, *Safe* concerns the character of Mark Lewis, sometime boyfriend of Cooper and twenty-something object of desire for three principal protagonists, including a writer called "Dennis". Its opening section, "Missing Men" assembles various disconnected incidents from Mark's relationship with his writer boyfriend Rob, and details Rob's repeated attempts to write a novel which "blankets" feeling with "stylisation" (2004a, pp. 103–4). The following section "My Mark", vaguely sketches Mark's sexual encounters with older men and presents a number of fragmentary, introspective accounts of the narrator's relationship with Mark and his efforts to capture him objectively in prose, "safe, in a sense, from the blatant front lighting of my true emotion, though it creeps in" (2004a, p. 131). Finally, "Bad Thoughts", set in the aftermath of Mark's death, follows Mark's quietly grieving ex-boyfriend Doug as he superimposes Mark's face onto a succession of new lovers, finding ultimately that he "can't quite tune the real Mark in" (2004a, p. 154). Phrased in elaborate, sometimes ostentatious language (Mark's new haircut, for instance, is "sculptural" atop the "pedestal" of his face (2004a, p. 100), the novella often reads more like a series of prose experiments than a fully developed work. It was nonetheless well received by critics who had liked his poetry: writing in the *L.A. Weekly*, art critic and sometime *Little Caesar* contributor Peter Schjeldahl acclaimed its publication as "a literary event of a kind not seen since the '60s" (1984, n.p.), while Steve Abbott in the San Francisco Sentinel saw the work as an example of "serious" writing: "socially disturbing but spiritually transformative" (1986, n.p.).

Abbott's article, which claimed that in the early 1980s "a whole New Narrative movement was taking shape and Dennis Cooper, among others, was in the forefront" (1986, n.p.), was also one of the first to associate Cooper's prose work with New Narrative. Led by the novels, short story collections, and critical works of Robert Glück and Bruce Boone, and promoted by Abbott's literary magazine *Soup*, New Narrative came to designate an innovative approach to narrative composition, which combined features of traditional storytelling and a commitment to the legacy of Gay Liberation with post-Marxist social and political critique. For Glück, this formed a response to two important questions: "How to be a theory-based writer? –

one question. How to represent my experience as a gay man? – another question just as pressing"
(2001). Comprising an apparently autobiographical account that periodically subjects itself to a
sociological critique, New Narrative pieces tended to be fragmentary and interruptive,
alternately attracting and repelling the reader's search for a story.

> For the writer, the trick is to embrace the narrative while at the same time
> exercising a critically reflexive distance. This balance is always at risk of being
> dismissed as postmodern irony but what New Narrative ultimately seeks is a
> textual performance that can recognise itself as a cultural construct and
> simultaneously affirm the political value of a life-changing story. (Harris, 2009,
> p. 806)

This oscillation between narrative and its deconstruction would come to be called a text-
metatext approach, in other words: "a story keeps a running commentary on itself from the
present. The commentary, taking the form of a meditation or a second story, supplies a
succession of frames" (Glück, 2001). One of the movement's founding texts, Bruce Boone's *My
Walk with Bob* (1979), exemplifies the style, offering autobiographical accounts framed by a
sustained critique of the ideological bedrock of narrative and language itself.

In the title story, Boone and "Bob" (Glück) take a diversion through San Francisco's
Mission Dolores on the way "to do some shopping" (2006, p. 21): "Together we admired the
bright blue and gold of the beam decorations. We breathed in the cold of the stone floors and
the musty quiet of the adobe walls" (2006, p. 22). Throughout their tour of the church and the
following car-ride, objects and locations prompt Proustian digressions and the narrative often
segues into meditations packed with biographical detail. Such moments anchor the story in the
narrator's experience as a gay man living in San Francisco at the end of the 1970s – the failure of
Bruce's recent relationship is recalled and analysed, for example, as is his jealously for his ex-
boyfriend's new lover. Sex also features prominently. Recalling "a brief and mindless onslaught
of promiscuity", Bruce lists some of his myriad sexual encounters:

> There was – for example – meeting people in bars, talking for long hours and
> then leaving for their place or mine. There was in addition the glancing in
> stranger's eyes on streets and then the hurried assignations in hotel rooms. And
> then of course there was just plain sex without the formalities – sex categorical
> you might say. There was sex at the bathhouses and sex at the public parks.
> There was sex on deserted beaches. There was sex in the azalea bushes along
> the dividers of expressways. Sex in groups, sex with a chosen other, sex by
> oneself. Sex in thought, word and deed – to use the formula I remember the
> nuns using. But perhaps you begin to see my point. As for sex there was a lot of
> it and of many different varieties. (2006, p. 31)

The progress of Bruce's story is comparable to a work like Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, comprising as it does a relatively sequential narrative nestled within a number of reflections on the narrator's personal experience. Yet the seeming-transparency of this rather conservatively plotted tale is undermined by its alignment with a series of other stories whose societal function is then investigated and exposed. Thus the narrator comments at length upon the formal composition of Catholic Marian apparition stories (e.g. Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Fatima, etc.) and proceeds to critique their role in the religious and ideological indoctrination of the young (2006, pp. 26–31). Such analyses plainly signal that storytelling has historically been used to inculcate and incorporate the narrator's own story within such a history. Momentarily removed from the narrative current and its series of events, readers are here encouraged to ask themselves: what is the function of *this* story? What am I being taught here? In another sequence that exemplifies New Narrative's text-metatext approach, philosophical issues, which recall those raised by contemporary structural linguistics, throw into relief a remembered incident from the narrator's friendship with Bob.

> Where I run aground is in the intrusions in my speech of the words of others, words that aren't mine and never can be. For words, as they say, are inextricably connected with each other in the chain of language. And what about a word like void? – one that's never been mine, by the way. When I say the word void I imagine Bob picking out cucumbers at the produce counter of the Noe Valley market, anxiously smiling of course, weighing prices against textures against looks in the shipment of the day. (2006, pp. 34–5)

The reader here finds Bruce thinking through an apparent antagonism between, on the one hand, the impersonal "chain of language" and its history and circulation amongst anonymous others and, on the other, language's lived dimension and the way it is appropriated and personalised, ultimately coming to reinforce intimate associations between friends.

Cooper's *Safe* shares a number of stylistic attributes with Boone's model of New Narrative writing. Like *My Walk with Bob*, it is unambiguously located within a West Coast city (this time Los Angeles) and its action unfolds against a backdrop stippled with certain readily identifiable tropes drawn from the lives of urban gay men. By referencing a popular gay periodical and its classified ads dedicated to anonymous gay sex, for instance, *Safe*'s opening lines loudly (and perhaps proudly) attest to the work's familiarity with a modern gay lifestyle: "Mark had just opened a beer when he noticed an ad in the *Advocate*. It asked for someone like him to write a 'beautiful, blond, twenty-eight-year-old lawyer with very specific ideas of lovemaking'" (2004a, p. 99). We are also informed that Mark and his boyfriend Rob attend screenings of gay porn films at a theatre downtown and that Mark cruises a number of gay

hangouts in the Los Angeles area, such as Revolver "the only bearable bar in West Hollywood", "the hustler strip along Santa Monica Boulevard", and the One Way, "a spooky, black-leather bar in Lower Silverlake" (2004a, pp. 118–119). *Safe* seems to declare itself a gay text, reproducing the contours of a certain type of gay identity in the 1970s. At one point Mark even recalls a scene of schoolyard homophobia that could be drawn from any one of a number of contemporaneous coming-out stories.[2]

> He thinks of the day his best friend turned on him and yelled, "Boy kisser!" Kids were squealing, running to classrooms around him. He crumpled onto the cold cement walkway, sure its hard slap was the last feeling he'd have in his stupid, miniscule lifetime. (2004a, p. 108)

Like Boone's *My Walk with Bob*, then, Cooper situates his narrative within recognisably gay contexts (such as the gay porn theatre), with reference to certain gay-specific details (e.g. the *Advocate*), and in relation to particular locations like Los Angeles' Silverlake.

This accretion of contextual detail is often framed in *Safe*, as it is in Boone's work, by a markedly autobiographical tone. Most of the middle section "My Mark", for instance, is narrated from the first-person perspective of "Dennis", a writer who describes the development of his relationship with Mark: "I signed my name in his copy of my book. I scribbled his number on half of a sheet of loose paper. I wrote his name in my tiny black booklet where poems start out lines of words dreamed up when coming on people like him. We shook hands" (2004a, p. 128). An early, limited-edition print run of this section, published by Sherwood Press in 1982, even included a black and white photo of Cooper and Lewis together, a version of which appears within the narrative itself:

> I have a photograph of Mark and me against a white wall that could be anywhere in the world. We look incredibly happy, having been drunk on our asses seconds before. We have our arms around each other's shoulders. I'm more ecstatic than Mark, and he's more determined to look great on paper. It was a luminous moment. My line to friends upon showing it is "We'd have made some great babies together". Their eyes roll upward. (2004a, p. 137)

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[2] These include works like Aaron Fricke's memoir, *Reflections of a Rock Lobster* (1981), and the semi-autobiographical *A Boys Own Story* (1982) by Cooper's friend Edmund White, both of which established the major traits of the genre: a closeted adolescence filled with sadness, insult, and sexual frustration is followed by a happy, well-adjusted adulthood in the company of gay peers. The gay coming-out memoir was big business and a plethora of similar titles were published in subsequent years, leading Esther Saxey to remark that, "in the early 1970s, a teenage boy is swimming – in a pool, a lake, in the sea. He is a misfit at school, tormented by unrequited passion. He climbs out of the water and goes home alone. By the end of the 20th century, there are many of these boys. So many that at times it seems extraordinary they don't meet: in the locker-room, on the shore, at the beach" (2008, p. 35).

These autobiographical sequences often drift into penetrating reflections upon the process of narrative composition and the function of Cooper's writing, the style of which resembles the text-metatext method of Glück and Boone. An anecdote which unfolds in transparent prose is often quickly undermined by an impressionistic sketch of the writer's motivations: having described how Mark would "motorbike over, listen to records with me, go get Mexican food, smoke a joint, stand around with his hands in his pockets", Dennis admits – "these thoughts are more about me than my friend because when I was with him, his looks left me speechless" (2004a, p. 131).

Given the similarity between such moments and Glück and Boone's style, perhaps it is not surprising that they, like Abbott, would view *Safe* as a New Narrative text and Cooper as a New Narrative writer. Writing to Cooper in the summer of 1984, Glück heaped unqualified praise on his new novella exclaiming "the prose takes my breath away": "I respond to *Safe* in a very intimate way" he writes and, obliquely associating Cooper's work with that of the New Narrative, adds "I would like to dare to think we are making a new phase in writing happen" (1984). Boone is more explicit in his alignment of *Safe* with New Narrative concerns and in his correspondence with Cooper appears eager to view the latter's style through the prism of New Narrative technique:

> It's as if, added to the earlier lyricism [of Cooper's poetry], there's now the calm mastery of narrative – which spells adultness, maturity. The complexity of, technically, something like text-metatext concerns, as I've gotten to calling them, I first started thinking of only lately in your work... of a "take"-on-a-"take"-on-a-"take" of something (French! *en abyme*, they say). (1984)

In spite of Abbott, Glück, and Boone's remarks and their evident desire to call Cooper one of their own, I contend that this correlation between Cooper's work and New Narrative, although easily made, is not so easily substantiated. Of course they were all good friends, corresponded frequently, and supported each other's writing: Cooper's book *He Cried* was even published by Boone and Glück's Black Star Press in 1985. Nevertheless, though Cooper may have appropriated certain stylistic elements from his friends in order to aid his transition from poetry to prose, there is no record of his having ever workshopped his writing with them. He certainly never participated in their writing workshops at San Francisco's Small Press Traffic arts centre, the unofficial "school" of New Narrative that produced a second generation of writers including

Dodie Bellamy, Sam D'Allesandro, Camille Roy, and Kevin Killian.[3] In subsequent sections, I outline the fundamental differences between Cooper and the New Narrativists by exploring their respective political and aesthetic strategies. Considering their divergent responses to the notion of collective gay identity and to gay community-building in the 1980s, we will see that New Narrative's reformist politics contrasts with Cooper's radical approach, vividly illustrating the emergent anarchism that powers his work.

A New Narrative for the gay community

As recent critical studies of New Narrative writing stress, a major factor that distinguishes it from the contemporaneous, yet far better-known L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (Language) movement is New Narrative's commitment to gay activism.[4] Although both literary avant-gardes had roots in post-Marxist theory, adopted critical standpoints on language, and positioned themselves in opposition to capitalist ideology, unlike Language, New Narrative placed gay politics at the heart of their project. Surveying the subaltern status of gay men and women at the end of the 1970s and the spectrum of violence and intimidation that continued to target them, New Narrativists considered the project of Gay Liberation to be incomplete: their writing was thus conceived as an continuation of Gay Liberation's activism and consciousness-raising by other means. This distinction between Language and New Narrative would be represented by their divergent responses to the function of narrative. For early Language practitioners, it was considered a conservative, content-oriented, ideologically complicit mode of literary composition, anathema to the practice of politically engaged writing. In his appraisal of Language's consequent nonnarrative or antinarrative procedures, Jerome McGann writes:

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[3] For examples of the work of second-generation New Narrativists see Bellamy's *The Letters of Mina Harker*, D'Allesandro's *The Zombie Pit: Stories* (edited by Abbott), Roy's *Swarm*, and Killian's *Argento Series*. Kaplan Harris' excellent appraisal of the latter in "Avant-Garde Interrupted: A New Narrative After AIDS" conducts the critical groundwork necessary to assess the evolution of New Narrative from one generation to the next – an assessment that is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present study.

[4] Language poetry, most often associated with the work of Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, and others, emerged in the 1970s as a radical riposte to the rather more mainstream Confessional poetry of writers like Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. Regarding the poets published by *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the poetry magazine he edited with Bernstein, which would become a mouthpiece for the movement, Andrews recalls that: "to many of us, the mainstream's more conservative commitments seemed insufferably boring or distracting or irrelevant - compared with the desire to explore the workings of Language & the (social, embodied) production & reproduction of Meaning & Sense" (2015, p. 108). In the manner of contemporary deconstruction and poststructuralist theory, Language poetry sought to critique and complicate language's political and social substrate through disjunctive, anti-lyric, and – in particular – non-narrative experiments, some of which are considered below.

> Narrativity is an especially problematic feature of discourse to these writers, because its structures lay down "stories" which serve to limit and order the field of experience, in particular the field of social and historical experience. Narrativity is, in this view, an inherently conservative feature of discourse, and hence it is undermined at every point. (1987, p. 638)

For McGann, Charles Bernstein's poetry in particular resists narrative's normative criteria of linearity and continuity by critiquing the notion of beginnings and inserting capacious discontinuities into his poetic arrangements. Bernstein's "For Love Has Such a Spirit That if It Is Portrayed It Dies", for example, scrambles narrative codes usually dispensed at the beginning of a piece and withholds the conditions of its legibility:

> Mass of van contemplation to intercede crush of
> plaster. Lots of loom: "smoke out", merely
> complicated by the first time something and don't.
> Long last, occurrence of bell, altitude, attitude of.
> The first, at this moment, aimless, aims. To the
> point of inordinate asphalt-lecture, entail. (1980, p. 48)

According to Bernstein himself, Ron Silliman also "break[s] the hold of rationalized narrative" by fracturing its chronological, causal, and unifying imperative; "detail is cast upon detail, minute particular upon minute particular, adding up to an impossibility of commensurable narrative" as exemplified by nonnarrative works like Silliman's *TJANTING* (1986, p. 308).

> Not this.
> What then?
> I started over & over. Not this.
> Last week I wrote "the muscles in my palm are so sore from halving the rump roast I cld barely grip the pen". What then? This morning my lip is blisterd.
> Of about to within which. Again & again I began. The fray light of day fills the yellow room in a what wch is somber. Not this. Hot grease had spilld on the stove top. (Silliman, 2002, p. 15)

As Kaplan Harris remarks, the use of such synchronic, nonnarrative, and antinarrative strategies was designed "to facilitate a more autonomous, less consumer-oriented reading practice… narrative structure was discarded in favour of a liberating discontinuity at the level of sound and syntax" (2009, p. 808).

For New Narrativists, however, dispensing with narrative wholesale was a privilege the (straight, white, male) subjects of history could afford, but one which presented rather more of a danger for those groups that found themselves the objects of history, their capacity to enunciate subject positions ever curtailed. "If you take away people's emotions, their ability to

tell stories and their capability to deal generally with the outside world", Boone contends in the second issue of Abbott's *Soup*, "you are really not going to have much of an appeal to several significant groups. Blacks, Latins, and other racial minorities for instance. Most feminists and politically oriented gay men for instance" (1981, pp. 7–8). For Boone and Glück, narrative represented the opportunity to articulate experience – specifically the experiential details familiar to gay men – in prose: to make it legible to readers who might share these experiences. Constituting a reading public out of such shared experiences offered author and reader alike the occasion to affirm their participation in a gay community. In Rob Halpern's précis:

> Although New Narrative evolved together with late twentieth-century avant-garde poetries, it pushed against Language writing's privileging of poetic form, stressing instead the value of storytelling – in both verse and prose – as the means by which to deepen the convergence of writing and politics, while aligning that convergence with the work of gay community building. (2011, p. 83)

A preliminary sketch of New Narrative's ideas appears in Boone's 1979 article on Frank O'Hara for the inaugural issue of *Social Text*, which also included pieces by Stanley Aronowicz and Fredrick Jameson, convenor of the Marxist Literary Group that Boone attended at the M.L.A. in the summer of 1977. Entitled "Gay Language as Political Praxis: The Poetry of Frank O'Hara", Boone's essay was one of the first critical appraisals of O'Hara's poetry that attempted to address the matter of the poet's sexuality. Excoriating previous academic critics for eliding the fact that O'Hara's language was that of a gay man, Boone argues that it is essential to read O'Hara's poetry "against the backdrop of the literary oppositional movements of the period, but more importantly, in the context of gay community life. For it was significantly in the post-War years that gay men first began to feel themselves a cohesive group, and with group needs" (1979, p. 63). Drawing a theoretical framework from Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Boone posits that for self-preservation and concealment gay men in mid-century America developed their own coded languages in response to linguistic-political oppression and that such codes may be deciphered in O'Hara's work. Gossip, trivialization, "gay usages or expressions… that will have greater meaning for gays than for straight" (1979, p. 73); "the alienation felt in one's life as a gay person" (1979, p. 74); the poems' "sense of a life lived as continuously imperilled and unfulfilled in its essential social needs" (1979, p. 84): for Boone, "O'Hara seems like other gay men talking, only more articulate – unexpectedly startling or even brilliant, but much like any gay man who talks with others within the community of the period" (1979, p. 80).

In Boone's account, O'Hara's work emerges out of a great communal store of gay language: his poems are full of cyphers and euphemisms and disguised codes unavailable to the

straight majority but recognizable to other gay men with similar experiences. First and foremost an expression of the community that precedes him, Boone's O'Hara differs greatly from the O'Hara we met in the previous chapter, who might have had something to say about his status here as a mere mouthpiece for the collective. But Boone is candid about his critical reading of O'Hara, which he calls "retranslating": "An investigation of the social practice and language of [O'Hara's] poems then, is not meant to be of merely 'historical' interest. Rather it is an attempt to comment on and extend the interested struggles of gay people today" (1979, p. 63). Thus the accuracy of Boone's account is perhaps less important than the narrative he constructs in his article, which allows other gay men to connect with the experiences he decodes in O'Hara's work. He writes that "as Benjamin tells us, storytelling arose as a group activity of 'giving advice' – against some danger threatening the community" (1979, p. 83): with Frank O'Hara as his protagonist, here Boone is telling an imagined community of gay post-Stonewall readers a story of shared oppression, one that may help to resolve the contradictions he believes were threatening it from within.

New Narrativists were not blind to the ideological bias of narrative or to its traditionally conservative form but they chose to offset these issues with the introduction of the formally reflexive text-metatext technique. It was hoped that laying bare the structure of their narratives – and assessing the problems of narrative more generally – would encourage the reader to critically reflect upon the presumed transparency of stories and the subjectivities that were constructed through them: "The storyteller thus emerges as a composite of stories, the many faults and fissures of which draw attention to the constructed dimensions of our social world, as well as to the way the self itself is tangled in artifice" (Halpern, 2011, p. 90).

In both recent studies mentioned above, Dennis Cooper is read alongside New Narrative practice as an associate or accomplice: Halpern suggests that Glück and Boone "shared affinities" with Cooper (2011, p. 82), while Harris suggests that Cooper's work was a "major influence" on New Narrativists (2009, p. 808). In both cases, their projects are presented as parallel but discrete. However, in one of the first critical essays on New Narrative, "The new queer narrative: intervention and critique" (1995), Gregory Bredbeck presents Cooper and New Narrative as not merely sympathetic but synonymous: though Glück and Boone are credited with coining the term, it is Cooper that is taken as a privileged example of its tendencies.[5] This New Narrative,

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[5] Opening his article, he shares Earl Jackson Jr.'s anecdote about the formation of New Narrative. "Around 1980", he writes, "Bruce Boone and Robert Glück, were talking about how to describe their writings, which at that point were heavily influenced by the Language poets. Boone said 'How about New Narrative? What a stupid name'. A genre was born, perhaps apocryphally" (1995, p. 477). Boone and Glück swiftly fall out of Bredbeck's narrative of new queer narrative, however, ceding primacy to Cooper in his account.

however, bears little resemblance to the one described in Halpern's and Harris' work. For Bredbeck, New Narrative denotes a particular set of texts that, unlike previous forms of gay writing, avoid activism and "seek primarily to expose the perniciousness and pervasiveness of hegemony" (1995, p. 485). As such, it may be associated with queer theory's interrogations of discursively constituted sexual identity.

> What perhaps most unifies the genre, if it can be called that, is that while not all of its practitioners would accept the labels gay or lesbian, all of their writings eschew the boundaries that typify heterosexuality as it is normatively constructed in Western culture; and hence, in recent years, the genre has frequently been called the new *queer* narrative. (1995, p. 478)[6]

Canonical gay texts such as E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, Bredbeck argues, are representative of activist critique, which "exposes the ideological constraints implicit within the production of narrative and offers alternative modes of narrative production" (1995, p. 479). New queer narrative, on the other hand, is what he calls pure critique – radically sceptical of all systematic thinking and representational politics; like queer theory, it is "centred on the radical potentialities of questioning the ability to know and discern systems which is endemic to the first task of activist critique" (1995, p. 479). "Activist critique" he summarises, "seeks to change a system, while pure critique seeks to expose a system in its entirety as a system" (1995, p. 480). As a form of pure critique, Bredbeck suggests that Dennis Cooper's writing "can immediately render this distinction palpable" (1995, p. 485): the play of surfaces in Cooper's writing, in particular, deconstructs or queers binary oppositions between interiority and exteriority and parodies attempts to access objective truth beyond representation. Fruitless attempts to comprehend through observation of corporeal interiority in Cooper's *Frisk*, for example, represent "a grotesque parody of structural narratology, for it enacts a belief that accessible representation is authoritative only to the extent that it provides access to a deeper level of preceding significance" (1995, p. 487). According to Bredbeck, Cooper's work bleakly insists upon the ubiquity of representation and removes the capacity to affirm (homosexual) difference beyond the text.

> Unlike gay narrative, which uses structures of representation to project

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[6] Bredbeck cites no sources that substantiate such a contention and I can find no reference to "new queer narrative" before the appearance of his article in 1995. He possibly conflates New Narrative and New Queer Cinema – a term coined by B. Ruby Rich in 1992, which grouped together the films of young auteurs like Gregg Araki and Todd Haynes. Their work, like Bredbeck's new queer narrative, echoed queer theoretical paradigms in their resistance to normative taxonomies of sexuality. See B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema".

potentialities for alternative narrativities, *Frisk*'s narrative exposes the potentiality for difference as complicit with the very structure of hegemonic representation; both the social act of writing and the antisocial action of murder are exposed as representational nodes that knot the subject into acculturated power. (1995, p. 487)

"Systematicity is exposed" therefore, but Cooper refuses "to intervene within this system of production by projecting an alternative coherence" (1995, p. 487).

It should be clear that by basing his analysis on Cooper's work rather on than Glück's and Boone's, Bredbeck draws some rather unorthodox conclusions about New Narrative's politics and aesthetics. In his portrayal, New Narrative is opposed to the gay movement's "programme of both social change and aesthetic theory that has taught writers how to make subjectively inscriptive differences visible and knowable, and thereby able to exert social change" (1995, p. 479). Yet we have seen that from the outset Glück and Boone sought to inscribe gay experience and were committed to the legacy of gay activism and community-building. Their work, moreover, better resembles activist critique than pure critique: like E.M. Forster in Bredbeck's account, New Narrativists exposed the process of narrative composition and its ideological bias, all the while offering new narrative modes to their gay readers. I would contend, nonetheless, that the difference he plots between activist and pure critique is sound. So too is his appraisal of Cooper's work and his alignment of the latter with queer politics: in following sections, we will observe that Cooper's anarchism is open to queer interpretations of sexual identity and is vitally concerned with the problem of representation.

It seems to me that Bredbeck has effectively framed his argument correctly, but his examples are the wrong ones. Substituting the terms of his debate, therefore, I would suggest that a distinction between New Narrative and Cooper's work may be reframed as a difference between activist critique and pure critique: i.e. between an approach that amasses and gives expression to gay experience in order to constitute a shared sense of community and one that operates against communal forms and the conformity that often inheres in them. This is, in effect, an opposition between reformist and radical politics made manifest in styles of narrative composition. In "A Herd", we saw Cooper launch a critique of the common and communality in general, illustrating the dissolution of individual identity intersubjectivity may portend. When juxtaposed with Boone's and Glück's writing this critique assumes a certain specificity, becoming more clearly that of a queer radical, opposed to any reformist agenda and the notion of a legible gay identity. We can better understand Cooper's antipathy to these more reformist writings and his work's particular admixture of politics and sexuality by taking into account the climate of sex radicalism and anarchist thought that marked the context in which he wrote.

Anarcho-homo radicalism in the 1980s

In June 1983, some months before Cooper was due to submit the manuscript of *Safe* to Picano at Seahorse Press, he received a short, handwritten letter from his friend, Bernard Welt. A poet and critic, Welt was a younger member of the Mass Transit group of poets based in Washington D.C. from 1972 to 1974, which also included Doug Lang, Tim Dlugos, Terrence Winch, Michael Lally, and Karen Allen (later star of George Lucas' 1981 blockbuster *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*). Welt and Mass Transit first came to Cooper's attention through the endeavours of Dlugos, who saw that Cooper and the D.C. poets shared an interest in New York School poetry: in her retrospective appraisal of the scene, Patricia Griffith finds the work "accessible, fresh, and funny without sacrificing seriousness. They were closest to the New York poets, Frank O'Hara, who was already dead, Kenneth Koch, and John Ashbery but with a freshness all their own" (1988, p. 3). Echoing similar descriptions of Cooper's later Beyond Baroque reading series and its integration of Los Angeles' writing and art scenes, Welt also comments that Mass Transit's weekly poetry readings based at the Community Bookstore on P Street,

> communicated to you this tremendous enthusiasm of a very serious kind, I mean there were some very well read people there. It wasn't just a lot of hippie nonsense. I think a lot of them might have had a better background in visual arts and what's being said about aesthetics than you might find among most writers, so I got exposed to that through Mass Transit. (Welt and Elliott, 1988, p. 10)

The subject of the letter to Cooper was Welt's participation in Washington D.C.'s Gay Pride Day and the six-page tract he and a couple of friends had produced for the occasion, which he had enclosed: "we're supposed to sit at a little table and pass these out and argue with people", Welt writes, before adding with notable apprehension: "I cannot remember how I got into this" (1983a). Given the pamphlet's subject matter and the site of its impending distribution, it is not difficult to understand Welt's concern. Published by the Gay Anarchist Circle (GAC), this Xeroxed A5 leaflet comprising text, stock illustration, and playfully doctored cartoon strips, contained a number of incendiary pieces dedicated to promoting an anarchist take on American society. In his lead article Welt writes, "We subscribe to the ridiculous notion that people know how to run their own lives; that they value freedom and diversity over authority and homogeneity; that they are willing to work to make a better world. We are crackpots. We are anarchists. And we're coming to get you" (1983b, p. 1).

While briefly citing the influence of writers like Emma Goldman and Henry David

Thoreau, Welt's position in this opening salvo is explicitly indebted to Paul Goodman, whom he names "the outstanding gay anarchist thinker of recent times" (1983b, p. 1). Goodman's 1966 tract, "Reflections on the anarchist principle", which foresees the anarchistic coming-together of disparate political positions around a shared critique of authority, offers Welt a usefully capacious concept of anarchism to present to his gay readers. He writes:

> Anarchists do not accept a particular class analysis of society; they have been communist and radically individualist, religious and atheistic, revolutionary and evolutionary. Yet, as Goodman says, "despite these differences, anarchists seldom fail to recognize one another, and they do not consider the differences to be incompatibilities". This is because it is basic to anarchism that no body of authority should be imagined to speak for all of us, and no abstract set of principles allowed to stand in place of complex human realities. (1983b, p. 1)

Anticipating a hostile reaction to his piece – he was distributing anti-statist material in the seat of U.S. government after all – Welt goes on to try to assuage his reader's concerns by debunking some myths propagated by mainstream politicians and the media. Welt may have been most concerned, however, about the reaction of Gay Pride Day attendees to the pamphlet's contentious integration of anarchist thought and sexual dissidence.

Radically resistant to the United States' authoritarian regime and all extant forms of progressive politics, as a result the GAC was vehemently opposed to contemporary gay politics' reformist agenda. According to Welt and his collaborators, gay politics was simply not radical enough: they demanded not merely piecemeal reform but an overhaul of the entire system of state domination that divided heterosexual from homosexual, men from women, and white from black. For Welt, such binary logic set social groups against one another and obscured the fact that "All people, of whatever class, race, gender, or religious or political persuasion, are oppressed in authoritarian society; all are bullied or bribed into placing the welfare of the state before their own" (1983b, p. 2). Gay politics' pursuit of a homosexual programme within the terms of an authoritarian system, therefore, simply reified existing divisions between gays and straights.

> We differ from gay politics on very basic issues of both theory and practice: we think that laws against homosexual behaviour or against the employment of gay people as teachers, for example, show not that bad laws can be made, but that laws are bad; and that laws made to "protect" us are equally bad. It is not our business to plead with the state to grant us "rights". It may appear reasonable to use the state to counteract its own authority over our lives – but that is an impossibility. Every gay rights measure enacted only serves to make us wards of the state, subject to law-makers' whims and ill-informed decisions, and furthers the isolation of gay people. (1983b, p. 2/6)

Rejecting this dualist, hierarchical arrangement of society, therefore, Welt and the GAC condemned all forms of activism that appeared to participate in "the system": "stay outside it and work against it", Welt concludes; "If we do that, we have a chance of forming our own personal ethical goals, instead of accepting the ones imposed on us by authority" (1983b, p. 6).

In a following article "Sex, Naughtiness, and Social Control", the pseudonymous Kyd Wake extends Welt's anarchist critique of collective politics into the realm of sexual identity-formation. Part commentary on Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, part analysis of gay identity politics, the writer aims to uncover the consequences of a collective affirmation of gay or homosexual identity. Outlining Foucault's genealogy of the homosexual subject and his delineation of the socially vested interest of such taxonomies, Wake contends: "The categorization of sexual types in the nineteenth century (from which our 'gay' identity is derived) was not neutral. It was, in fact, a division of persons into the normal and not-normal – the effect, if not the purpose, of which was the persecution of the non-normal" (1983, p. 5). However, according to the writer the use of Foucaultian reverse discourse as a basis for contemporary gay politics – in which the category of homosexuality is affirmed and reproduced by those who find themselves its subjects – is not an adequate solution to such a predicament. The reification of such isolationist manoeuvres appears to him an insufficiently radical response, which cannot trouble the system and is ultimately complicit with the underlying logic of the homophobic status quo.

> Now in the late twentieth century we say, in a perhaps belated rejoinder, yes, your identification of us is correct, although we reject the judgements of value you have attached to it. We are "gay" which is no better and no worse than any other category of sexual sensibility. We even go so far as to say (as on the occasion for which I write these remarks) that we are gay and proud of it... Why are we willing to accept this tainted merchandise? Why are we willing to accept – and accept enthusiastically – this categorization when to do so is to participate actively in our own oppression, not as gay people but as people? (1983, p. 5)

Reiterating the anarchist sentiment of the lead article, the writer similarly concludes that gay politics' ideology of social differentiation amounts to ghettoization, reinforcing state control and disempowering the individual: "it is our position as anarchists that people do not need to be controlled and our assumption that people do not want to be controlled" (1983, p. 6).

The GAC's articles would almost certainly have provoked debate on Washington's Gay Pride Day in 1983. Suggesting that those who supported reformism were complicit in their own subordination and indicting gay politics for its collectivism on a day dedicated to gay solidarity

was a bold move; also, as denoted by Welt's evident anxiety, it was surely not a popular one. Nevertheless, the GAC's combination of anarchist and sexually dissident concerns, while perhaps anomalous in a context marked by gay collectivism, in fact participates in a longstanding tradition of sex radical anarchism in the United States and could draw upon a number of historical precedents. American anarchist and free love advocate Ezra Heywood, for example, was a prominent nineteenth-century exponent of sexual liberation whose righteous defences of sexual nonconformity in his periodical *The Word* (1872-1890, 1892-1893) and in publications such as *Cupid's Yokes* (1877) frequently found him charged with obscenity.[7] Other prominent American anarchists such as Emma Goldman, Benjamin R. Tucker, and Alexander Berkman also addressed same-sex concerns in their lectures and writings. Historian of sex-radicalism, Terrence Kissack, even goes so far as to argue that the discussion of homosexuality in the United States was initiated only through the work of the emergent anarchist movement: without Europe's prominent same-sex intellectuals, reformers, and sex radical advocacy groups, he notes that in the U.S. in the 1800s same-sex intimacy was a topic broached only by anarchists. "The first sustained U.S.-based consideration of the social, ethical, and cultural place of homosexuality took place within the English-language anarchist movement", he contends; "From the mid-1890s through the 1920s, key English-speaking figures of the anarchist movement debated the subject of same-sex passion and its place in the social order" (2008, p. 4).

Such debates converged upon the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895, a sensational case that famously found the writer sentenced to two years hard labour for committing acts of "gross indecency" with members of the same sex. American anarchists were among the first to defend Wilde and to recognise that his conviction showed that the State's regimes of control were sexual regimes of control and, as such, constituted what Alan Sinfield in *The Wilde Century* (1994) would term a "faultline" story (1994, p. 5). Writing in her autobiography *Living My Life*, Emma Goldman recalls her "indignation" at Wilde's conviction; the trial and the verdict, she asserts, were a "great injustice" and she "had pleaded [Wilde's] case against the miserable hypocrites who had sent him to his doom", (1931, chap. 22). Meanwhile, in the pages of his periodical *Liberty*, an evidently appalled Benjamin R. Tucker decried the court's presumption of heterosexual conformity and condemned its demonization of "a man who has done nothing in the least degree invasive of anyone";

> a man whose entire life, so far as known or charged, has been one of strict

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[7] Heywood's publication of Walt Whitman's censored, sexually provocative poems, "A Woman Waits For Me" and "To A Common Prostitute" in the August 1882 issue of *The Word* also contributed to the case for obscenity brought against him by the U.S. Postal Inspector in October 1882 (Blatt, 1986, p. 36).

conformity with the idea of equal liberty; a man whose sole offense is that he has done something which most of the rest of us (at least such is the presumption) prefer not to do – is condemned to spend two years in cruel imprisonment at hard labour. (1895, pp. 4–5)

These early anarchist considerations of sexuality and sexual liberation appear largely consistent with those found in the GAC's pamphlet: in particular, both locate the struggle for sexual freedom within the context of radical resistance to the machinations of an authoritarian state. However, the GAC's discussions, as we have seen, are framed within the context of very contemporary concerns, namely a genealogy of the sexual self and an analysis of society's foundational (binary) logic. The genealogy it sets out, as we have seen, is taken from Foucault's popular work in *The History of Sexuality*; its critique of social binaries, however, closely resembles Derridean deconstruction. Thus, for instance, when Welt writes that an authoritarian system relies upon the designation and isolation of a homosexual subject, in order "to make gay people more completely and unquestionably <u>the other</u>" (1983b, p. 2), he outlines a proto-deconstructionist position. Such a formulation resonates with Derrida's analyses of alterity and difference that had begun to circulate in the United States by the 1980s.

Building upon Hegelian dialectics, psychoanalysis, and Saussurean linguistics, Derrida argued that individual identity is constituted only through a negation of what it is not: the self, in other words, is established only through the identification and denial of a specific and generalised other. This ceaseless process of othering permeates the entirety of the social sphere, instantiating binaries at every turn and elevating one term over another (masculine/feminine, strength/weakness, rational/irrational, heterosexual/homosexual). One root of such dualistic thought, according to Derrida, is Western metaphysics:

> All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent. (1977, p. 93)

Derridean deconstruction sets about exposing and analysing the dichotomies and failed negations of this "metaphysical exigency" wherever they occur. Due to Derrida and Foucault's increased visibility on university campuses across the U.S. and their implication in the so-called "Culture Wars", by the 1980s deconstruction and genealogical critique had gained traction in the American academy. However, the GAC's combination of Foucault's and Derrida's thought within

the context of political and sexual radicalism in 1983 seems to me to have been a rather novel contribution, the conceptual framework of which may have heralded the arrival of queer theory some years later.

Like the GAC, queer theory was critical of gay identity politics and utilised a similar combination of Foucault and Derrida to frame their critique. In terms acutely similar to those used by Welt, for example, in 1990 prominent queer theorist Judith Butler would write that "identity categories tend to be the instrument of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (1993, p. 308). In a logical contortion typical of her writing, Butler also relies on Foucault's work in order to recast her refusal to assume a normative sexual identity: "To propose that the invocation of identity is always a risk does not imply that resistance to it is always or only symptomatic of a self-inflicted homophobia. Indeed, a Foucaultian perspective might argue that the affirmation of 'homosexuality' is itself an extension of a homophobic discourse" (1993, p. 308). Later, in what is considered another of queer theory's founding texts, Diana Fuss casts the "metaphysics of identity" in a deconstructionist manner when she asserts:

> Many of the current efforts in lesbian and gay theory... have begun the difficult but urgent textual work necessary to call into question the stability and ineradicability of the hetero/homo hierarchy, suggesting that new (and old) sexual possibilities are no longer thinkable in terms of a simple inside/outside dialectic. (1991, p. 1)

In this piece Fuss' tone frequently drifts towards the anarchistic when she speaks of theorists' obligation to "invade", "interfere with", and "critically impair" the formation of social hierarchies (1991, p. 6). Recalling Kyd Wake's scepticism about Foucaultian "reverse" discourse, she also states that "homosexuality, read as a transgression against heterosexuality, succeeds not in undermining the authoritative position of heterosexuality, so much as reconfirming heterosexuality's centrality precisely as that which must be resisted" (1991, p. 6). Although neither Bernard Welt nor Kyd Wake posit a discursively constituted self (a notion that is invoked by Butler and Fuss in the texts above and one which would become the norm in the years that followed), the work of the GAC plainly presages that of the later, more institutionally recognised queer theory.

Homocore

If queer theory extended the conceptual framework of the GAC's manifesto without any clear

connection to its anarchist underpinnings, Homocore music and zines, which flourished in the 1980s and 1990s explicitly affirmed a version of its anarchist ideology while radicalising its aesthetics.[8] Arising out of the United States' and Canada's punk subcultures in the mid-1980s and including groups as varied as Nip Drivers, The Fifth Column, The Dicks, and Gay Cowboys in Bondage, Homocore added hardcore punk riffs and rhythms to lyrics infused with queer characters and same-sex desire. Meanwhile, zines like *J.D.s* (1985-1991) and *Homocore* (1988-1991), assembled by punks who opposed the mainstreaming of gay culture, similarly turned punk's ironizing gaze and anti-establishment ethos toward creative re-imaginings of homosexual identity. The irreverent, overtly D.I.Y. aesthetic of such zines and the explicitly anarchistic co-ordinates of their texts bisected the line between classic punk zines like *Sniffin' Glue* and the sex-radical agenda of the GAC's own "zine". Cooper was passionate about Homocore from the outset and clearly saw it as the rejuvenation of a fading punk attitude; its proliferation of zines in particular seemed to indicate the resurfacing of the type of attitude that had led to his setting up *Little Caesar* ten years earlier.

Produced by queer anarchists Bruce LaBruce and G.B. Jones, *J.D.s* (Juvenile Delinquents) was especially critical of traditional gay politics and its issues were replete with subversive expressions of sexual desire. In a characteristically polemical piece entitled "Don't Be Gay: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Fuck Punk Up the Ass", which appeared in *Maximum RocknRoll* in 1989 and was later reproduced in *Homocore*, LaBruce and Jones as "The New Lavender Panthers" write:

> The gay "movement" as it exists now is a big farce, and we have nothing else to say about it, so we won't say anything at all, except that, ironically, it fails most miserably where it should be the most progressive – in its sexual politics. Specifically, there is a segregation of the sexes where unity should exist, a veiled misogyny which privileges fag culture over dyke, and a fear of the expression of femininity which has lead to the gruesome phenomenon of the "straight-acting" gay male. (1991, pp. 27–28)

Claiming to be "dedicated to the task of putting the 'gay' back in 'punk' and the 'punk' back in 'gay'" (1991, p. 30) they also revile and lampoon conservative ideations of homosexuality in a

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[8] Long neglected or ignored despite LaBruce's renown as the director of such scandalous sex-radical queer films as *No Skin off My Ass* (1991) and *Gerontophilia* (2013), Homocore has recently attracted renewed interest from writers like Pitchfork Media's Eric Torres, who writes of the "sense of freedom zines like *J.D.s* evoked", in their "queer-centric moral code that railed against the very '80s, consumerist, heterosexual machismo that superseded punk's open-minded policy of embracing nonconformists in the '70s" (2015).

typically punk assumption of the abject: "The New Lavender Panthers (male contingent) would like it to be known that not only do they consider themselves butt-rangers, but also bum-chums, turd-burglars, knob-gobblers, cocksuckers, and gaylords, while the girls are well-known diesel-dykes, baby butches and lezbo killer whores. In other words, fuck sexual conformity" (1991, p. 29). In *J.D.s*, such articles were accompanied by lists of favourite Homocore music tracks, pornographic photographs and illustrations, erotic stories, interviews, and letters collaged into a typographically erratic, "homemade" layout.

Emulating these sentiments and aesthetics, Tom Jennings' *Homocore* likewise identified as anarcho-homo or homopunk – its pages were even stamped with Jennings' anarcho-homo "logo" which depicted a Circle-A (an anarchist icon) superimposed upon an inverted pink triangle.[9] In the editorial to the second issue, "What the Fuck is *HOMOCORE*?" Jennings displays a resistance to normative designations of sexuality reminiscent of the New Lavender Panthers: "You don't have to be a homo to read or have stuff published in *HOMOCORE*. One thing everyone in here has in common is that we're all *social mutants*; we've outgrown or never were part of any of the socially acceptable categories" (1988, p. 1). Like *J.D.s*, *Homocore*'s Xeroxed A5 pages were also filled with altered photographs and illustrations, letters, interviews, erotic stories, manifestos, and the occasional poem, cut up and pasted together in sumptuous, erratic arrangements.

If the GAC's pamphlet introduced Cooper to the intersection of sexual dissidence and a tradition of American anarchism, zines like *J.D.s* and *Homocore* brought about the radicalisation of Cooper's politics and his irrevocable turn towards anarchist thought. Cooper recalls,

> I rediscovered anarchism through my love of punk rock. It was referenced [by] a lot of punk artists and by people writing about punk so I read a number of books about it. It just made absolute sense to me, especially as articulated by Emma Goldman. The impracticality of revising society into an ideal anarchist state was obvious, so it appealed to me more as a philosophy, although if there's ever a viable revolution I'll definitely join the front lines, and anarchist action groups have my heart. (Cooper and Glück, 2006, p. 253)[10]

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[9] Jennings is better known as the controversial co-creator of FidoNet, a riotously popular networking hack for Bulletin Board Systems or BBSes (proto-listservs widely used in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s). For a contemporaneous consideration of FidoNet and its anarchist foundations, see Randy Bush, "FidoNet: Technology, Tools, and History".

[10] Along with 2011's *Paris Review* interview, this is one of the most revealing interviews with Cooper in which he talks candidly about his influences, politics, the structure of his novels, and his tempestuous relationship with his mother. For the purposes of this study, however, the piece is more significant for what remains unsaid between Cooper and Glück. Despite detailing at length his work's connection to anarchism, neither he nor Glück try to even tentatively associate this avowed anarchism with any kind of identity politics; as if a tacit agreement on the disagreement of their attitudes has been reached, gay identity is in

The anarchist renunciation of what Jennings mocks as "socially acceptable categories" seems to have particularly impressed Cooper and informed his subsequent critiques of 1980s gay politics. In his article on Homocore zines penned in 1990, Cooper considers the political and historical juncture that saw the production of *Safe* and zines like *J.D.s* and laments that "the gay community at large, giddied and a little spooked by its growing political power, seemed to meet calls for anarchy with a collective finger to the lips. To punks' horror, many gays in the early '80s had gotten as lazy as the heterosexual mainstream who sought to oppress them" (2010c, p. 1). Bearing out Bernard Welt's criticism that the gay movement was simply not radical enough, according to Cooper, reformist gay politics' adherence to the idea of a collective gay identity and community seemed to have merely substituted one (straight) term for another (gay) one, leaving social hierarchies in place: "'Problem children' (punks, activists, women in general) were marginalized via an unspoken but entrenched class structure that effectively alienated all but the most 'privileged'" (2010c, p. 1). Homocore's subversive take on sexuality and politics, however, offered a vibrant alternative to traditional, middle-class gay politics and its inevitable descent into political and sexual conservatism.

> Mutually supportive for the most part, but individualistic in outlook and design, these zines share a hatred for political correctness, yuppification, and all things bourgeois, especially within gay culture. In fact, for many of these young editors, the enemy is less heterosexuals than, in the words of Johnny Noxzema of *Bimbox* [another popular zine], "cryptofascist clones and dykes… telling us what to think." (2010c, p. 2)

By the time Homocore came around, Cooper's outlook was already sympathetic to its version of anarchism having already been exposed to Frank O'Hara's critique of collectivism and the GAC's anti-statist rhetoric. Yet Homocore catalysed this latent anarchist tendency, exposing Cooper to a radical and singularly creative critique of mainstream (gay) ideology that he enthusiastically embraced. Later asked to identify a political event pertaining to homosexual affairs that he considered most significant, he acclaimed the influence of Homocore and the queer zine movement it fostered, framing their contribution in anarchistic terms.

> I have to split my vote between 1) the formation of ACT-UP [AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power], and 2) the emergence of the Queer zine movement. My hope is that we stop buying so mindlessly into the notion of collective identity. Our attraction to members of our own sex gives us something in common but it

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fact not discussed at all throughout this lengthy interview.

doesn't make us inherently responsible to each other. We're not a family. We're not a religious sect. (Cooper, n.d.)

In the previous section, we ventured that Cooper could be distinguished from the New Narrativists by re-purposing Gregory Bredbeck's distinction between activist and pure critique. New Narrative as activist critique, we suggested, is a reformist method, exposing the ideological investments of traditional narration while simultaneously producing a narrative of gay experience that would, to paraphrase Bruce Boone, make legible gay people's emotions and their ability to tell their own stories. Cooper's pure critique, on the other hand, is more radical in its approach: virulently critical of the "perniciousness and pervasiveness of hegemony", it repudiates the injunction to affirm collective gay experience through narration (Bredbeck, 1995, p. 485). Having considered Cooper's agreement with the anarchist ideas espoused by the GAC and by publications like *J.D.s* and *Homocore*, we may now posit that pure critique is in fact a practical application of anarchist thought in the field of writing. Pure critique is symptomatic of anarchism's resistance to the system and systematicity in general and, when applied to homosexual affairs it may be mobilised against the reformist imperative to utilise established terms (narrative, community, identity, etc.) to further a collective gay programme. Returning to *Safe* once more, we can see how this strategy is signalled in Cooper's work and how anarchist thought operates in his prose.

Safe *from the common*

From the beginning of *Safe*, Cooper's sometime paramour Mark appears to elude representation and the author's depiction of him is often wilfully vague. We are told, for instance, that Mark's appearance is unremarkable and that his clothes usually consist of "dyed black jeans, black coat, and a black T-shirt, his typical nonregalia" (2004a, p. 105). He also believes that his worst facial features are "oversized ears, a too turned-up nose", but without an agreed-upon measure of size or "up-turning" this reveals little specific detail: how much is "oversized"? How turned-up is "too turned-up" (2004a, p. 100)? Cooper's descriptions circle Mark's face, at pains to marshal his features into a distinguishable portrait:

> his face a cleanshaven mask, haircut sculptural atop that pedestal, mascara wresting his dark brown eyes to the appropriate distance, his uniformly grey clothing grounding them, smudging any overtly sexual tone or effect. In theory this look should make him about as alluring as one of the mannequins in these display windows… (2004a, p. 100)

This correlation of Mark with the nondescript figure of a mannequin is sustained later when Rob imagines pulling a mask of the pornstar Jeff Hunter "over Mark's unsuspecting head" (2004a, p. 106). The overall impression of Mark is that of "shiftiness" (2004a, p. 100) – a vagueness and imprecision that even photographs cannot counteract: his boyfriend Rob has a framed photo sitting on his desk, "in it Mark's camping, lips puckered, eyes crossed", his beauty is a "smear"(2004a, p. 103). An extended sequence in the second section of *Safe* also compounds the difficulty of identifying Mark's specific attributes by repeatedly describing his body as that of a skeleton whose only defining features are generic ones.

> The man grapples forward and locates a skull in Mark's haircut. He picks out the rims and caves for his eyeballs and ears. The lantern jaw fastens below them, studded with teeth. He comes to the long shapely bones of Mark's shoulders, toying with them until two blades resembling manta rays swim to the surface… Mark hears the man come. Okay, that's over. He raises up and glances over his shoulder. The skeleton turns to stare at its lover. (2004a, p. 125)

This ubiquitous sense of Mark's vagueness or lack of specificity is not alleviated by his proximity to gay cultural signifiers. We read in the first section L.A.'s gay culture circumscribes the environment through which Mark moves – the reader attempts to locate him through the intersection of his character with certain scenes and locations: Mark reads the *Advocate*, cruises the Santa Monica strip, drops into a gay porn theatre, and so on. We are led to believe that these are physical and emotional scenarios that exemplify the life of an urban gay man. In a New Narrative work this might be an opportunity to posit the shared experience of gay life; in Cooper's text, however, invoking these signifiers hardly constitutes an endorsement of gay collectivism and connotes instead cliché and anonymity.

Such is the ubiquity of the generic gay context in which he is submerged that *Safe*'s protagonist often struggles to dissociate his individual features from these archetypal ones: distinguishing Mark is a manifestly challenging, even impossible task, and such tropes add little definition in spite of their spatial specificity. What differentiates Mark from another gay man who might read the *Advocate* or have someone give him a rim-job or dolefully recall a scene of childhood homophobia?[11] The facets of a typical gay lifestyle that are repeatedly attributed to

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[11] Although the appearance of the *Advocate* may seem rather innocuous to the modern reader, amongst political progressives in the 1970s and early 1980s the *Advocate* was considered the conservative gay newspaper par excellence. In 1976, the well-known Californian periodical *Gay Sunshine: A Journal of Gay Liberation* published a series of articles in response to the *Advocate*'s attacks on gay liberation, entitled "The *Advocate*: a remarkable publication whose readers buy, buy, buy". Lionel Biron's article held that the new owner of the *Advocate*, David Goodstein, had shifted "the basic editorial position from dead centre to somewhere between conservative and reactionary… During the past year the *Advocate* has been

his character therefore only exacerbate Mark's "shiftiness", rendering his portrait still more elusive. Consistent with the pure critique of his avowed anarchism that cynically regards any attempt to homogenise gay experience, Cooper uses these tropes as vectors of uniformity rather than difference, allowing him to further negate Mark's specificity.

Such an approach is fundamentally opposed to the one found in archetypal New Narrative texts like Boone's *My Walk with Bob*, which, as we have seen, uses the co-ordinates of contemporary gay life as important loci through which to trace its narrative of communal gay experience. Robert Glück's New Narrative work *Jack the Modernist* (1985), a pornographic gay picaresque published in the same year as *Safe*, similarly narrativises moments and locations drawn from the life of San Francisco's downtown gay scene into a collage of community. Seeking the "community" of "ecstatic sexuality" the work's autobiographical narrator, "Bob", journeys through San Francisco's labyrinthine gay bathhouses, cruising sites of shared sexual experience in which individual subjectivity is suppressed (1995, p. 9). In the following passage, for example, individual bodies become dis-integrated, unfolding into an undulating communal landscape of intersecting body-parts.

> : a waist arching calls attention to the nipples and sends the smooth ass backward giving access – someone slowly kneels
> *Two mouths, four nipples, four hands, two cocks, two*
> : the shifting of buttocks
> *scrotums, two assholes, two hundred and sixteen possi*
> : one excited man excites others to a circle of masturbation – hands and cocks group and regroup like a sudden wind shifting in a garden, or like a story: when a cock comes it withdraws from the plot
> *bilities and then another man joins you – an orgy in the*
> : someone is fucking a face he can't see, slow rhythmical ass that opens up and then clenches, its dreamtime logic has a unity that can't be dismissed or broken into parts. (1995, p. 56, original emphasis)

As Diane Chisholm observes, "an advocate for the future of community that, he believes, can be salvaged through collective storytelling, Bob visits the baths for moral, as well as sexual, reassurance" (2005, p. 90). Although Glück's text-metatext method persistently critiques modernist attempts to unify reality in art, Chisholm argues that it simultaneously "foresees redemption in storytelling that knits community together in the face of ruin once the façade of

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transformed into a show place of white, middle class gay America. Features on travel, fashion and entertainment suggest an affluent, carefree lifestyle in which Gay means little more than *fun* and chic" (1976). To an early 1980s gay audience, therefore, the inclusion of the *Advocate* in *Safe*'s opening lines may have indicated Mark's political conservatism (or, more likely, apathy); combined with the other factors that contribute to his general "shiftiness", it also subtly critiques the bland vacuousness of a certain type of white, middle-class gay identity.

gay romance is ripped off" (2005, p. 53).

Unlike Boone and Glück, therefore, who utilise aspects of gay life affirmatively (if cautiously) in order to uncover and enshrine common gay experiences, Cooper employs the signifiers of a communal gay lifestyle and identity critically, denouncing their dispersal of the sovereign self. However, this is not the only stylistic factor that distinguishes Cooper from New Narrative: his brand of text-metatext also differs greatly from theirs. In "My Mark", the narrator – and self-identified author of the piece – frequently interrupts the story and reveals its construction. Attempting to describe a post-coital scene between Mark and an anonymous trick, the narrator writes:

> I see myself in the man's position, though more on a level with Mark in the sense that I'm brighter and less prone to unbridled worship. I'd ask Mark to stop if he yelled at me. I don't have the money to pay for him. But here I am blocking the view of this simple scene, like a director who accidentally walks in front of his own projector, then stands there, oblivious to the snoring around him. (2004a, p. 130)

This kind of endoscopic metatextual commentary diverges from those of New Narrative that, conversely, discuss the philosophical repercussions of their stories or locate them within contemporary political or ideological debates. *Jack the Modernist*'s narrator Bob, for instance, situates features of his personal life within a constellation of catastrophic global events:

> Nuclear catastrophe, destitution, famine, additives, melanomas, losing face, U.S. involvement in El Salvador and Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, South Korea, Chile, Lebanon and Argentina, war in the middle East, genocide of Guatemalan Indians and extermination of the native peoples of Brazil, Philippines, Australia, answering the telephone, resurgence of the Nazis, the KKK, auctioning of the U.S. wilderness, toxic waste, snipers, wrinkles, cult murderers, my car, Jack's safety, queer bashers, South Africa, being unloved, considered second rate, considered stupid… (1995, p. 33)

By comparison, then, Cooper's commentaries can appear to relate his narrative to a rather intimate and personal sphere: rather than attack the intrusions of homophobic ideology, for example, *Safe* appears as merely one artist's attempt to represent his lover's beauty. Reflecting on the novella years later, Cooper remembers that,

> I wanted the work to be about the cruel, self-defeating nature of aestheticism itself and how art could only short-circuit in relationship to experiences that were too deep or frightening or complex to be represented by language. I felt, and still feel, that when language tries to encompass those kinds of experiences, it becomes overly infected with the consciousness of the artist who tries to

represent them and, as a result, it flatters the artist and lies to the audience. (Cooper and Glück, 2006, p. 258)

In the first chapter we saw that Cooper's poetry describes a quiet life of anguished isolation: although Cooper takes Sade's belief in subjective solitude and non-relationality as his own, he desperately tries to resist it, "reaching for" some kind of intersubjective communion. His efforts are in vain, however, and *Idols* underscores the sad fact that, for Cooper, to encounter another is merely to sense more of oneself, as all experience is refracted through consciousness. The statement above frames *Safe* as the obverse of such a scenario. Not only does consciousness inflect the artist's experience of another, all attempts at objectivity by the artist are "infected" by consciousness. The narrator of "My Mark" considers the principal motivation of the work to be his attempt to accurately convey Mark's beauty to his reader: "That kind of beauty is insular, fills all my words anyway. What I construct must divide him from them in slight ways, such as placing the warmth of his skin against clinical language like the flesh of a man who lies down on a sharp bed of nails and is saved from real pain by the evenness of the impression" (2004a, p. 133). "I'm trying to get to the truth", he says, yet this clinical, objective account is bound to fail as the writer's true emotion "creeps in" (2004a, pp. 137, 131): Mark's beauty is a subjective "concoction" stirred up by the writer's feelings – feelings that undermine any attempt at objectivity (2004a, p. 130).

Of a piece with Cooper's earlier poetry in which subjectivity reigns and a subjectively mediated experience of the world is ubiquitous, *Safe* effectively reverses New Narrative's elevation of individual experience to the level of the communal, insisting instead upon the ineluctably subjective nature of all representation. Furthermore, from an anarchist perspective New Narrative's attempts to found a gay community based on a representation of subjective experience is inherently suspect. Without objectivity, which might impartially make experience legible and allow individuals to weigh its merits without authorial coercion, it seems unethical – even irresponsible – to attempt to base collective action on the narrative representation of an individual consciousness.[12]

We have seen that Cooper's affinity with anarchist thought bears itself out in what Gregory Bredbeck calls pure critique – a kind of persistent negativity or destructive passion that resists and undermines the system in all its forms. In *Safe*, this critique is primarily expressed through a resistance to the symptoms of gay collectivism, warding off normative gay identity and

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[12] In Cooper's subsequent novels the pursuit of objectivity in prose emerges as a pressing concern for the anarchist writer: in the following chapter we will examine Cooper's attempts to minimise the coercive effect of writing and, through the use of algorithms and writing procedures, see him try to express strong feeling without making the reader into an accomplice.

experience. This is the radicalisation of a tendency we traced in Cooper's early work, which sceptically regarded the notion of the common and its concomitant erasure of individual difference. Yet we have also seen Cooper push back against ideas of subjective isolation and yearn for intersubjective encounters; we have even seen him try to create opportunities for such encounters, nurturing the development of a radical literary community in Los Angeles. Cooper's life and his work continually negotiate between the one and the many – a ceaseless dialectical movement between the competing demands of the individual and the community drives his work. In the next chapter, we turn to Cooper's most celebrated and controversial work, the series of five novels known as the George Miles cycle, where this dialectic surfaces in its most intricate and byzantine form.

Chapter 4

The Subject and the System

The George Miles Cycle

> *"The thing that matters is not what they show
> me but what they hide from me and, above all,*
> what they do not suspect is in them*."*
>
> (Robert Bresson)[1]

The subject of this chapter is Dennis Cooper's George Miles cycle, the series of five novels for which he is best known: *Closer* (1989), *Frisk* (1991), *Try* (1994), *Guide* (1997), and *Period* (2000). I examine the circumstances that led to its creation, outline the role each work plays in the cycle, and assess its critical reception. More importantly, in this chapter I aim to bring to light the underlying form of the cycle and unearth the embedded structures and systems that Cooper uses to construct this elaborate literary monument to a dead friend. I show that concentric circles, six-pointed stars, and infinity symbols dictate the progress of Cooper's cycle, the place of each novel within whole – even the behaviour of his protagonists. Pushing this a little further, I consider the employment of such arbitrarily-chosen forms from the perspective of Cooper's avowed anarchism.

Anarchist thought has historically been antipathetic to the kind of control exemplified by Cooper's structures; anarchism is, by its very dictionary definition, a "belief in the abolition of all government and the organisation of society on a voluntary, cooperative basis *without recourse to force or compulsion*" ("anarchism, n.," n.d., my emphasis). Anarchists have always sought to free themselves from coercion and the inorganic forms and institutions that compel humanity to act contrary to their better nature: in his *A.B.C. of Anarchism* (1929), Alexander Berkman writes that "the more enlightened man will become, the less he will employ compulsion and coercion… Anarchism is the ideal of such a condition; of a society without force and compulsion" (1977, p. 8). Why, then, does Cooper seem to submit to such artificial structures? Shouldn't an anarchist literature be more *spontaneous*? Is this a critique or a contradiction? Ultimately we will find that it is both, simultaneously. The systems that undergird the George

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[1] Epigraph to Dennis Cooper's *Try*; original emphasis.

Miles cycle pose a demonstrable threat to the well-being of Cooper's protagonists and have a coercive effect upon his writing but, paradoxically, they also come to serve his ends and cultivate the latent anarchism of his writing.

If this chapter has an attendant structure it is the grid: we begin by surveying Cooper's circulation within the gridded metropolis of Manhattan and his participation in Downtown's interlocking art and writing scenes in the 1980s. We observe his flight from New York at the height of the AIDS crisis, going off the social grid to the relative isolation of Amsterdam. Finally, into the matrix of critical debate on Cooper's work, we introduce something new: a critical appraisal of the function of grid-like forms in the George Miles cycle and their relevance to anarchist literature. For Rosalind Krauss, writing a few short years before Cooper's arrival in New York, the grid was the preeminent form in twentieth century art: "the grid extends in all directions, to infinity" (1979, p. 60). "In the cultist space of modern art", she wrote, "the grid serves not only as emblem but also as myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away" (1979, p. 54). This chapter seeks to uncover the contradictions of Cooper's grids and assesses his attempts to turn their ubiquity to the service of the individual will.

Downtown dreams

Cooper's apartment on Manhattan's East Twelfth Street placed him at the heart of Downtown, an area south of Fourteenth Street that had served as New York's countercultural, artistic, and literary hub since the early 1920s. By the 1970s, Downtown artists, writers, musicians, and activists lived together with poor immigrant families in cheap, closely packed tenement buildings, largely ignored or neglected by New York's forces of law and order. In her debut novel *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), Kathy Acker, a regular Downtown resident whose first works were written and published there, paints a vivid portrait of Downtown consonant with other recollections of the scene.

> A racially mixed group of people live in these slums. Welfare and lower-middle class Puerto Ricans, mainly families, a few white students, a few white artists who haven't made it and are still struggling, and those semi-artists who, due to their professions, will never make it: poets and musicians, black and white musicians who're into all kinds of music, mainly jazz and punk rock. In the nicer parts of the slums: Ukrainian and Polish families. Down by the river that borders on the eastern edge of these slums: Chinese and middle-middle class Puerto Rican families. Avenues of junkies, pimps, and hookers form the northern border;

> the southern border drifts off into even poorer sections, sections too burnt out to be anything by war zones; and the western border is the Avenue of Bums. (1984, p. 56)

Downtown was an exciting and politically fertile environment for the creative imagination that had captured Cooper's young dreams as a site of infinite and varied artistic possibility, down whose streets had walked Frank O'Hara and the New York School poets, Andy Warhol, and punks like Patti Smith: "Growing up in L.A. and being heavily influenced by poets and musicians and performance artists associated with Downtown New York, the scene there seemed like a dream situation for me" (Cooper and Myles, 2006, p. 463). 232 East Twelfth Street, where Cooper lived from 1983 until 1985, stood within easy reach of the landmarks of this artistic dreamscape: St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, site of the famous Poetry Project, was a couple of blocks south; performance art space PS 122 was three blocks east; the unofficial nerve centre of punk/No Wave, CBGB's was a ten minute walk to the Bowery.

Cooper's first few months in New York appear to have exceeded his expectations: Downtown offered the vibrant and challenging social scene he craved and worked hard to create in Los Angeles. In an *Advocate* feature in Autumn 1983, Cooper claimed to feel very much at home in New York, amongst "so many writers whom I admire, who are my friends, and whom I feel very close to aesthetically" (Kikel, 1983, p. 57). Years later, in conversation with the poet Eileen Myles, another fixture of the Downtown scene whose collection *Sappho's Boat* (1982) was published by Little Caesar press, he attests to his excitement at coming to New York and finally finding a community of artists and writers that was "multigenerational and just thrilling":

> I'd go to a party with Tim [Dlugos], Donald [Britton] and Brad [Gooch], and there would be slightly older writers like Joe Brainard, and Kenward Elmsie and Ron Padgett, and then the established greats like Ashbery and Schuyler and Edwin Denby and nonpoets like Donald Bartheleme and Alex Katz and Roy Lichtenstein and just an incredibly multigenerational group of artists, gay and straight. (Cooper and Myles, 2006, p. 466)

Diary entries from the time of his arrival in New York also reveal Cooper's continued interaction with older and younger members of the Downtown scene and describe, for instance, intimate dinners with Downtown curator Raymond Foye, lunches with Tim Dlugos, and late-night phone conversations with Kenward Elmsie. The guest list for *Safe*'s launch party, dutifully noted by Cooper in his diary on May 6th 1984, similarly attests to his growing visibility and participation in Lower Manhattan's cultural scene, listing such notable attendees as poet/punk rocker Richard Hell and pop artist Keith Haring. The party also drew a sizeable number of established writers like Edmund White (who wrote the introduction to *The Tenderness of the Wolves*), poet and critic

Marjorie Welish, doyen of Language poetry Charles Bernstein, and Anne Waldman, the artistic director of the Poetry Project from 1968-1978. A younger generation of writers and artists was also well represented, including Carl Apfelschnitt the abstract artist, art critic and novelist Lynne Tillman, and Peter Lamborn Wilson whose anarchist poetry and philosophy was later published under the pseudonym Hakim Bey (1978b).

Cooper also became engaged with Downtown's performance scene, collaborating with musician Chris Cochrane and choreographer Ishmael Houston-Jones on *THEM*, an improvisational dance piece first performed at PS 122 in 1986. Cooper's text accompanied Cochrane's droning, feedback-heavy score and Houston-Jones' contact improv in an aggressive, sexually charged work that, for audience members like the *Village Voice*'s Burt Supree, obliquely addressed the AIDS crisis: "*THEM* isn't a piece about AIDS but AIDS constricts its view and casts a considerable pall" (1986, n.p.). In an article for the *Advocate*, Cooper described Houston-Jones as "a powerfully built black man whose work concerns his race and sexual preference in a general way [and] concentrates on the issue of repression" – his 1984 solo piece *f/i/s/s/i/o/n/i/n/g*, in particular, "suggested how difficult it is to be an individual in our uncertain world, implying that all men and women are potential victims, whatever their subculture" (1985, p. 28). Unsurprisingly, given this shared interest in individuality and subcultural identity, Houston-Jones and Cooper continued to work together, producing pieces like *Knife/Tape/Rope*, produced in 1989, and *The Undead*, which premiered at L.A.'s International Olympic Arts festival in 1990.

Despite his inclusion and increasing involvement in Downtown culture, the move to Manhattan was ultimately something of an anti-climax for Cooper, leading him to remember that "I did feel disappointed that the real Downtown New York wasn't exactly what I'd foreseen and dreamed" (Cooper and Myles, 2006, p. 478). Alienated by a poetry scene that had become predominantly straight and had turned from his beloved New York school poetry to that of the Naropa Institute, Cooper rarely visited the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. On the rare occasion that he did, he found the space itself – gutted by fire in 1978 and rebuilt in a stark, minimalist style – as conservative and forbidding as the scene that surrounded it.

> By the time I went to a reading at St. Mark's, the church was this big empty sterile white space… It wasn't intimate or pleasurable to be in there at least for a poetry reading. I just felt, like: wow, this isn't what I thought it was going to be like at all… I definitely got the feeling that I had missed the great period of the Poetry Project. (Cooper and Myles, 2006, p. 475/476)

Somewhat unexpectedly, given that the promise of a society of like-minded artists and writers had precipitated his move from L.A., Cooper also became aware of his growing dissatisfaction

with the intense sociability demanded of the Downtown scene. Although plainly enamoured with this new, exciting artistic community, the constant expectation of involvement in it appears to have been ill-suited to his temperament, which he considers more West-Coast in character: "the heavily social aspect of life in New York wore me out", he remembers; "I grew up in L.A., which is an asocial city unless you make a big effort to be social and I think that suits me" (Cooper and Myles, 2006, p. 473). However, of the factors that caused Cooper's uneasiness with living Downtown, which ultimately contributed to his decision to leave New York for Amsterdam in 1985, by far most significant was the tightening grip of an AIDS epidemic that, even at the time of his arrival in 1983, "was casting its darkness over the group of gay writers [he] was close with".

> My group of artist friends was decimated by AIDS. I mean, Tim Dlugos tested positive and then Donald Britton and the filmmaker Howard Brookner and the performance artist John Bernd, and it was just bam, bam, bam . . . one after another in really quick succession. We were almost all gay, and we got hit particularly hard. (Cooper and Myles, 2006, p. 469)

Having been inseparable from Dlugos and Britton during his first few months in New York, their HIV-positive diagnosis suddenly indicated AIDS' worrying proximity: "AIDS was starting to happen, people were getting sick and it was just so terrible that I just wanted to get away" (Cooper and Epstein, 2001). Offered the opportunity to move to the Netherlands with his new Dutch boyfriend, Cooper assented without reservation and fled for Amsterdam in 1985.

The George Miles Cycle

Cooper evidently enjoyed some of his time in New York and he forged intimate relationships with a number of artists and writers that would endure long after his departure. Nonetheless, it does not seem to have been a particularly productive time in his writing career and, collaborations with Houston-Jones notwithstanding, his creative output during these years was negligible. The social demands of the scene and frequent drug binges seem to have eventually taken their toll on his work. He was also broke and, to make enough money to get by, his time and energy were spent drafting paid book reviews or features for newspapers and magazines. In Amsterdam on the other hand, far from the rush of Downtown society and its attendant pressures, Cooper's focus would soon return to writing. It became, in fact, his only means of moral and financial support during his two and a half years there: within days of his arrival, his relationship with his boyfriend fell apart and he found himself living in almost complete isolation, with no friends and no money to return to the United States. Writing to Lynne Tillman, he lamented: "I have no

money to move, no job prospects, etcetera. Kind of grim. It just seems increasingly foolish to be here. I do get a lot of work done, but that doesn't disguise my loneliness and the general lack of stimulation" (1987a). In loneliness and privation, however, Cooper devised his most ambitious project to date: the work that would come to be known as the George Miles cycle.

Comprising a series of five novels, *Closer*, *Frisk*, *Try*, *Guide*, and *Period*, the cycle is undoubtedly Cooper's most well-known work. Envisaged as a sustained artistic tribute to Cooper's childhood friend and sometime lover, George Miles, the brevity of these works and their articulation in a halting, adolescent vernacular belie the project's complex structure and an unrelenting conceptual rigor that determines its execution. While the five titles that make up the cycle form one integrated, meticulously planned and unified work, each novel is nonetheless formally and thematically discrete and merits its own brief introduction. *Closer*, the first of the five, is a thematically bold yet narratively conventional text, comprising eight interlinked accounts of adolescent boys who attend the same suburban high-school, recounted alternately in third and first person with occasional segues into diary entries. Each character's story inhabits the same terrain of adolescent gay sex, punk, pop music, and high-school art classes that served as the setting for Cooper's *Idols*. Each narrative turns around the immaculate body of a cute, insecure sophomore named George Miles: *Closer*'s characters are irresistibly drawn to him and obsessed by him. This circling of fictional protagonists around a shared object of affection obviously owes much to the composition of *Safe* and, as in that work, their desire to control and/or understand is frustrated and George remains pallid and withdrawn, an inscrutable pseudo-character at the limit of their comprehension and that of the reader.

A bleaker and more claustrophobic work, *Frisk* takes the form of a memoir, its protagonist "Dennis" describing at length his interest in understanding his sexual partners inside and out. His ruminations are occasionally interrupted by scattered pieces of fiction that are similarly obsessed with the male body and compelled to represent its processes and functions. In this text, the fictional territory established by *Closer*'s narrative is greatly expanded: scenes take place in Amsterdam, New York, and Los Angeles, in homes and hotels, with a greatly enlarged cast of characters. The time covered by the narrative is also extended, now spanning two decades from 1969 to 1989. In spite of its capacious fictional territory and temporality, *Frisk*'s range of thematic concerns is greatly restricted, focusing almost exclusively upon themes of sex, death, and corporeal investigation, which, as I show in the final section of this chapter, it worries over with an attentiveness bordering on the psychotic.

Try, the third work in the series and centre of the cycle, is the longest, most conservatively plotted, and most sentimental of the five novels, which returns the cycle to an exclusively Californian setting. Centred once more on inarticulate and excitable adolescent boys

and the men who love them, it follows the emotional and sexual lives of traumatised teenager Ziggy, his heroin-addicted writer friend Calhoun, and Ziggy's sexually abusive family, including his gay fathers Brice and Roger and a paedophilic Uncle Ken. Just as its protagonist Ziggy occasionally appears like a regular teenage boy (in passages where, for example, he is pasting together the latest issue of his zine or neurotically obsessing about his looks) *Try*, with its linear plot and abundant dialogue, sometimes looks like a conventional novel. Nonetheless, both Ziggy and the work itself are infused with a recurring trauma that lurks beneath the surface, infuses their language, and often erupts violently and unexpectedly.

By far the most introspective novel in the cycle, *Guide* is a patchwork of protagonists, themes, and scenes assembled from the previous works, written in a style that repeatedly reflects upon its own construction. Comprising fragments of autobiography, ruminations on 1990s rave subcultures, sustained acid trip sequences, and sex scenes staged on kiddie porn film sets, *Guide* might be best described as *Frisk*'s more thoughtful twin. Like *Frisk*, it contains autobiographical narration and features "Dennis" as one of its dramatis personae; yet unlike the earlier work, whose concern is primarily libidinal, *Guide*'s focus is psychological. A running commentary, which courses under and through the lives of its characters, recalls Cooper's earlier experiment with a text-metatext approach in *Safe*, surfacing frequently to suggest tentative definitions of emotional states.

Period is a bewildering, skeletal work, so slight that its effect almost dissipates in the description. The novel opens upon a remote, rural landscape dotted with dark woods and haunted cabins, through which shuffle horny teenagers Leon and Nate, a mute boy called Dagger, and a grief-stricken artist named Bob. Chapter by chapter a second, mirror narrative slowly intrudes upon the first, featuring an artist named Bob, a disabled boy called George, and randy adolescents Etan and Noel. Both of these stories are veined by a perpendicular story that presents a warped version of Cooper himself and the motivations behind George Miles cycle: here we find a cult writer named Walter Crane, who pens a popular book also called *Period* in tribute to George, his now-deceased friend and sometime lover. *Period* also features Cooper's first experiments with online phenomena, using instant messaging (IM) to amplify the work's confusion and intrigue. Written after Cooper had learned that Miles, from whom he had been estranged for a number of years, had committed suicide, *Period* reflects the wordless grief that affected Cooper for months afterward and a sense of agonised futility that the George Miles cycle should exist when his friend did not.

Such is the cycle's range of themes, including gay pornography, 1990s zine culture, paedophilia, heavy metal, drugs, murder, sex, and death, that it attracted a lot of press on its appearance. Equally evocative of Freudian abject-analysis and Bataillean expositions of

transgression, the conceptual and philosophical frameworks these novels flirt with also ensured that the cycle would be the focus of academic discussion long after *Closer*'s publication. A blueprint for much of the criticism that would follow, Elizabeth Young's "Death in Disneyland: The Work of Dennis Cooper", published in 1992, situates Cooper's work within the context of psychoanalytically-inflected studies of sexuality and a tradition of francophone theory. "*Closer* is a very singular book", she contends:

> It functions on at least three distinct levels all closely intertwined: as a fantasy or fable, as a critique of pornographic writing, and also as the simulation, or coming into being in textual form, of a number of unrealized, ineffable psychic states. *Closer* tells of a group of teenage boys, still in high school, whose lives come to converge around the body of the sublimely beautiful George Miles (2006, p. 46)

Borrowing from Jean-Francois Lyotard, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Lacan, Young proceeds to extricate and explain *Closer*'s triumvirate of interpretive levels, sketching a broadly poststructuralist context within which one might view the work's characters and themes. Relying heavily upon Lacan, for instance, she contends that an extended sequence in which George visits his dying mother in hospital represents an "Oedipal crisis" and corresponds to a developmental stage in Lacanian psychoanalysis. With the death of his mother, she contends, "George now enters human culture and society, that is the Symbolic Order which is dominated by the Law of the Father": "in a textbook case of Oedipal crisis, George has at last grown up and entered the signifying circles, the marriage of Heaven and Hell that comprises language and desire" (2006, p. 53).

Psychoanalysis also underpins Earl Jackson Jr.'s assessment of *Closer* from 1993, although he borrows from writers like Jean Laplanche and Julia Kristeva rather than Freud and Lacan. As the title of his essay "Death Drives Across Pornotopia" makes clear, Jackson argues that in *Closer* one witnesses a knotting together of artistic representation and the Freudian death drive. Quoting Laplanche's seminal *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (1976), he claims that "Cooper delineates the death drive as a force whose symbolization [for Laplanche] 'allows for an intuition of the unconscious, even though it is already at the level of discursive thought: a theoretical exigency, the refracted derivative of desire'" (2006, p. 158). Jackson's critique is also influenced by Julia Kristeva's analysis of abjection in her *Powers of Horror* (1982): examining George's probing, scatological sex with the older Philippe, and his almost-homicide at the hands of the shadowy Tom, Jackson claims that

> Philippe and Tom sought the secret of George through literal invasions and

excavations of George's body. George (like the other boys) confused his inner self with his "innards", in a detour of abjection, which according to Kristeva is an attempt to individuate the self by demarcating the divisions of inside and outside. (2006, p. 167)

A testament to the influence of contemporary critical theory, Jackson, like Young, also draws many of his insights from French philosophy, regarding Cooper's writing through the work of Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Guy Debord.

Structures and systems

Young's and Jackson's interpretations of the cycle's founding texts via a combination of psychoanalysis and predominantly poststructuralist literary theory, is affirmed and extended in many subsequent appraisals of the George Miles novels.[2] Yet somewhat apart from this pattern of criticism lies the work of Marvin Taylor, director of New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections and custodian of Cooper's personal archive. Although similarly influenced by

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[2] Thus, the art critic Hal Foster sees Cooper's texts as part of general trend in contemporary writing and visual art to ruminate upon the traumatic withdrawal of the Lacanian Real and situates his analysis within the context of Lacan's discussion of the gaze (1996, p. 119). Meanwhile, as we have seen, in his essay on what he calls the "new queer narrative", Gregory Bredbeck rather hastily conjoins the New Narrative and *Frisk*; like previous critics of Cooper's work, he also perceives in the latter a familiarity with poststructuralist critics such as Derrida, Bataille, and Paul Virilio and with poststructuralist-inspired queer theory in general (1995, p. 478).

Most ambitiously, Michelle Aaron's "(Fill-in-the) Blank Fiction: Dennis Cooper's Cinematics and the Complicitous Reader", considers the entire movement of the George Miles cycle from the perspective of Roland Barthes' influential distinction between "writerly" and "readerly" texts. Writerly, experimental works such as Cooper's induce the modulation of a reader's subject position, drawing him or her into a productive, symbiotic relationship with the text; readerly or conservative texts, however, do not. Regarding a range of "blank" strategies employed by Cooper throughout the cycle, which dilate textual orifices and introduce ruptures of meaning in the text (e.g. ellipses, dashes, mid-sentence question marks, stuttering adolescent hesitations, etc.), she contends that these lure the reader into engaging with the work and participating in its creation:

> Cooper's texts are blank in that they can be characterised by the mapping of an empty space for the assumption and occupation by the reader. These structured blanks are not about the reader's participatory scouting for what is missing but about playfully integrating the reader into the text. This is the primary form and purpose of Cooper's blankness: to instate the complicitous reader. (2004, p. 126)

Building on Aaron's essay, my 2008 essay *Plus d'un Georges*: Dennis Cooper and the Work of Mourning George Miles", approached the cycle from the perspective of Derrida's theories of mourning and friendship. I argued that within the cycle circulates something comparable to a deconstructive or Derridean ethics of otherness: "The construction of [Cooper's] entire oeuvre around innumerable structural and typographical pockets situates mourning at the centre of the George Miles cycle", I wrote; "His fidelity to the time of mourning, the to come [*avenir*], marks his project as a deeply ethical turn towards the other" (2008, p. 172).

poststructuralist literary theory (drawing insights from Barthes and Kristeva), Taylor's critical texts on Cooper nonetheless display an attentiveness to the conceptual form of the George Miles cycle that is absent from almost all of these other works. To my knowledge, his is the only critical perspective that attempts to combine theoretical insights into Cooper's work with a detailed examination of the cycle's meticulous planning and construction, the structure of which he has called "geometric" (2012). In "'A Dorian Gray Type of Thing': Male-Male Desire and the Crisis of Representation in Dennis Cooper's *Closer*", for instance, his exploration of Cooper's unsuccessful attempt to "represent the unrepresentable, those things that lie outside of the systems of signification" derives in large part from a detailed exposition of that work's range of formal systems (2006, p. 197). Surveying the different bipartite schemata that make up the text and are embodied by the characters of John, David, George, Cliff, Alex, Philippe, and Steve, he contends:

> Each chapter employs a different symbolic system reflecting the titular character's attempts to explain the world around him. Each world is structured around a dyadic relationship: John: art/life; David: imagination/reality; George: words/his body; Cliff: pornography/experience; Alex: film/life; Philippe: beauty/death; and finally Steve: words/love. In each system there is an attempt to make sense out of experience, especially the experience of male-male desire, and to give meaning to life. That each system fails and leads to fragmentation is symptomatic of the text. (2006, p. 178)

In his presentation at the opening of "Closer: The Dennis Cooper Papers", a recent exhibition of material from Cooper's archive pertaining to the George Miles cycle, Taylor also produces a fascinating overview of the numerous structures and systems that function within the George Miles cycle "at both the macro and the micro levels" (2012). "For several years I had been analysing the geometric structures that underlie each of the novels and the entire structure of the cycle itself" he stated and, taking the text of *Guide* in particular as one justification of this line of inquiry, he suggested that the structure of that text is star-shaped (2012). This form is replicated in the text by the recurrence of a star-shaped sigil, a magical sign imbued with a preternatural power by its creator whose purpose must necessarily be withheld.

> Cooper played his hand on purpose by titling one of the chapters "Star-shaped" and by having the starlike body on the cover… The structure is a six-pointed star with a character associated specifically with each point. Each of the male/male relationships in the novel also constitutes a part of the structure. Dennis/Luke, Mason/Drew, Chris/the dwarf represent differing modes of attraction. Dennis and Luke are platonic lovers. Luke is also the maker of sigils. At one point he paces out a six-pointed star in the living room of the house he and Dennis share. (2012)

His analysis also covered the form of *Frisk*, which corresponds to an infinity symbol, and *Period*, which consists of four concentric circles "set around a central moment when everything in the novel goes retrograde" (2012).
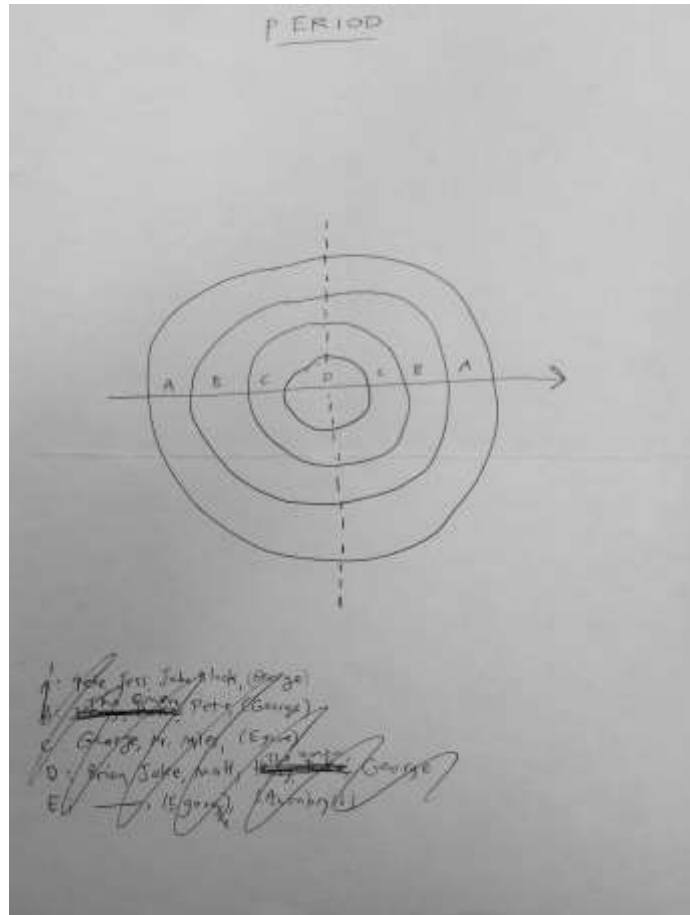
Diagram of *Period* by Dennis Cooper.

While Taylor's work differs greatly from other criticism, Cooper's own comments seem to endorse his exploration of the various recurring, quasi-geometric forms of the George Miles cycle and affirm his interest in the cycle's interlocking systems and structures. Numerous interviews and commentaries on the cycle have found Cooper keen to foreground its structure and to explain its detailed architecture. Introducing the cycle on dennis-cooper.net, for example, he describes how he devised the elaborate forms that the George Miles texts rigorously adhere to:

> Over [the] years, I'd developed a game plan or overall structure for the cycle. It would take the form of a novel being gradually dismembered to nothing. The first novel would construct the themes, archetypes, subjects, style, and atmosphere of the cycle… Each succeeding novel's form would reflect the damage caused by the violence, drug use, and emotional turmoil of the previous

novel… Parallel to this dismemberment in stages structure, would be a mirrored structure where the first novel would seem to gradually move through a mirror and eventually, over the course of the cycle, become a backwards reflection of itself. (n.d.)

Speaking with Robert Glück about the function of humour in his work, Cooper also refers to comedy as one "system" amongst many others that function simultaneously to produce the fabric of his texts. "I think of my prose as being made up of a bunch of different systems that are distinct but simultaneous and interdependent", he states; "I divide the various things going on in the prose into individual systems and attend to each one so that it functions correctly on its own and also services and is serviced by its fellow systems" (Cooper and Glück, 2006, pp. 248–9). Elsewhere he is even more explicit about the systems that structure the project and the patterns and diagrams used to plan each novel.

I made two dozen or so graphs and equations and formulas. The most general one shows an overall formal structure, and each of the five novels has the same structure as the cycle itself. *Closer* and *Period*, which are the first and last books, have a strong correspondence to each other, as do *Frisk* and *Guide*, the second and fourth novels. The middle novel, *Try*, is built in such a way as to unify the group by whatever means necessary, but it doesn't have a strict formal relationship to the others, and it functions as a kind of oasis. Each of the five novels shares or replicates the cycle's physique, with the chapters or sections within the novels strictly corresponding. Structurally, each of the novels and the cycle itself are identical. That's the skeleton.

Working in tandem with that system and competing with it is a second and more metaphoric outline. I thought of *Closer* as the cycle's body, and I tried to fill it with everything that body would need to survive as it ventured through the cycle. There was also a subdivision within that system such that each of the body's three main faculties – the libido or lust, the heart or emotion, and the mind – would be given its own novel to control. Lust was the overlord in *Frisk*, emotion in *Try*, and the mind in *Guide*. The rule was that I couldn't use anything as material in the rest of the cycle's novels that wasn't either used and referenced or hinted at in *Closer*…

Those systems, and a lot of other, more intricate schematics, were already in place before I wrote the cycle, and my goal was to work within those rules and to enliven, disguise, or reveal the blueprint using the novels' content. (Cooper and Silverberg, 2011, pp. 193–194)

This lengthy description is accompanied by a diagram that visually charts the complex architecture of the cycle and illustrates the interaction between these two systems or structures: the metaphoric or "dismemberment in stages" structure is outlined above while the "mirrored" structure represented below.
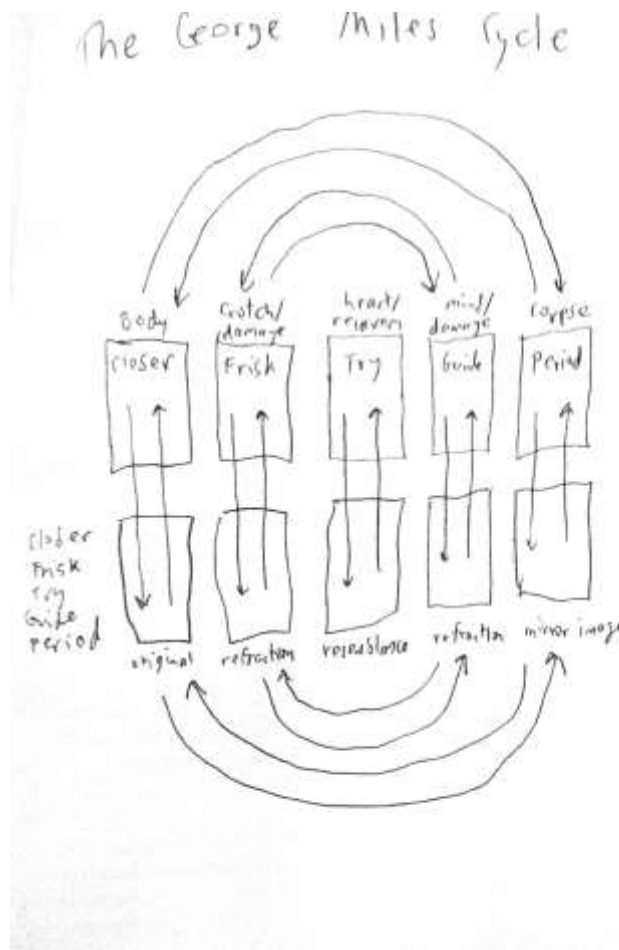
Cooper's plan of the George Miles cycle from *The Paris Review*.

In spite of their emphasis on the structure of the cycle and their careful elucidation of its interlocking systems and forms, neither Cooper nor Taylor suggest *why* such a structure is employed. Where does this adherence to elaborate structures and strictly defined patterns and rules come from? In Cooper's and Taylor's foregroundings of structure, they also fail to address an apparent contradiction between Cooper's anarchism and the rigorous systematicity and control employed by him at the level of chapter, novel, and cycle. Put it this way: if we take a basic definition of anarchism to be a resistance to coercive methods of control then how can an anarchist like Cooper conduct his texts through such strict, plainly coercive structures? How could he apply them so obsessively, pouring his protagonists' slacker-talk into these rigid forms?

One resolution to this apparent conflict might be to consider Cooper's works as microcosmic representations or reflections of the world from an anarchist perspective. By setting his wayward characters against rigorous structures, Cooper could be said to dramatize the predicament of modern society: quite simply, the cycle depicts an on-going struggle between the subject and the system. This is implied throughout the series but is made particularly obvious

when characters themselves sense that their actions are observed, constrained, or somehow manipulated by forces beyond their control. In the opening lines of *Closer*'s second section, "David: Inside Out", the titular character confesses, "I have the feeling that someone is watching me".

> I use the term loosely because I have few feelings, and even they're too simple, like primary colours. Fear is the basic one lately, no thanks to my nemesis (it could be male, female, imaginary, ghost – I'm not big on subtleties) poring over my every move, whether I watch TV, eat breakfast, ride a bike, sleep, shower, go to school… (1994, p. 21)

Its title a thinly-veiled reference to the 1980 Diana Ross pop single "Upside Down", whose lyrics famously run, "Upside down/boy, you turn me/inside out/and, round and round", David's section turns Ross' lines macabre, insisting upon the presence of a shadowy but intrusive force hell-bent on controlling him: "It's hard to describe the sensation. Maybe rape or demonic possession come close" (1994, p. 21). Later, in a sequence that could be taken from Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), this invisible menace seems to seep into David's daydreams, embodied by an older man who turns David's body grotesquely inside-out: "Before I can step back he's slashed at my face. Blood splatters onto his shirt. He carves, and uses his fingers to pull back the loose skin, until my whole skull is exposed to the air, and flesh hangs in waves around my neck like a Shakespearean collar" (1994, p. 26).

Period's teen protagonists also suffer the intrusion upon their world of a malevolent and manipulating force. Nate and Leon make the mistake of invoking it in a rudimentary Satanic ritual, using a dead cat and a cassette tape of a goth band.

- Fuck, that's him. Look at that. It's like a smudge. On the cat.
- Oh, shit.
- What?
- I think he's screwing me. Ow.
- Relax, let him. It's his thing, man. Uh… Welcome Master of Darkness. We want to ask you for something. We want you to give Leon that deaf boy. What's his name?
- Dagger. Ow, ow.
- We want Dagger to be Leon's sex slave, so he can do what he wants. Can you do that for us?
- Ow, ow. (2000, p. 8)

Their wish is later granted when Dagger is suddenly possessed: "he writes down that he's scared, then, boom, he starts looking real weird, and you can see Satan's taking him over, then, sure enough, he writes down that he'd really, really like to suck dick, with about ten exclamation marks" (2000, p. 10). The lack of autonomy in his sexual partner is not a turn-on, however, and

Leon laments that while they fuck, "I start thinking, Why am I doing this? Not like, This is dumb. More like, This boy deserves better. Or I deserve better, or both of us do" (2000, p. 11). Haunting the rest of the work, the unseen power they unleash makes its presence felt not just in the actions of the characters but also, it would seem, in the novel's weird refractions of time, space, and characterisation.

In these examples, Cooper draws the reader's attention to the struggle between his adolescent characters, imbued with a semblance of independence or autonomy, and each novel's system, to which they are obliged to relinquish their control. We see elsewhere in the cycle that these systems are implicitly considered in parallel with abstract social systems and that the demands that Cooper's fictional structures make upon his characters are evocative of social demands. To take one example, *Try*'s Ziggy considers what might be called the heteronormative injunction in terms like those used by David and Leon above to describe the invisible menace that stalks them.

> with Nicole, make that with every girl so far, sex ends up being so... planned in advance, not by him obviously, but by history or whatever. So no matter how wild sex gets, he's still following this preset, like, outline, point by point, and when an experience is over, such as now with Nicole, it sort of gradually dilutes into a zillion other people's identical experiences, until Ziggy feels... used in a way? Or maybe it's just his rebelliousness problem. Still, gay sex seems to have this great scariness quotient, whereby no two situations are ever alike, as far as he can tell. (2004b, p. 45)

Ziggy's reflections on the difference between straight sex (prescribed, normative, "planned in advance") and gay sex (aberrant, singular, "scary") recall Gayle Rubin's discussion of heteronormativity in her influential 1984 essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality". According to Rubin, unproductive (that is, un-reproductive) sex acts including gay sex, masturbation, sadomasochism, and so on, were historically considered threats to the social order whose hierarchy was founded upon a reproductive ideology. Consequently, in Western societies such acts were excluded from the interior of what Rubin calls the "charmed circle" of sexuality and the boundary that separated normative sex (inside) from non-normative sex (outside) was constantly, anxiously policed. Rubin accompanies this Foucaultian analysis with a diagram plotting the "charmed circle" that divides normal (or, in Ziggy's words, "preset") sex from abnormal ("scary") sex, which, coming full circle, is itself reminiscent of the diagram for *Period*. Cooper is evidently not the only one thinking about the social order in geometric terms.
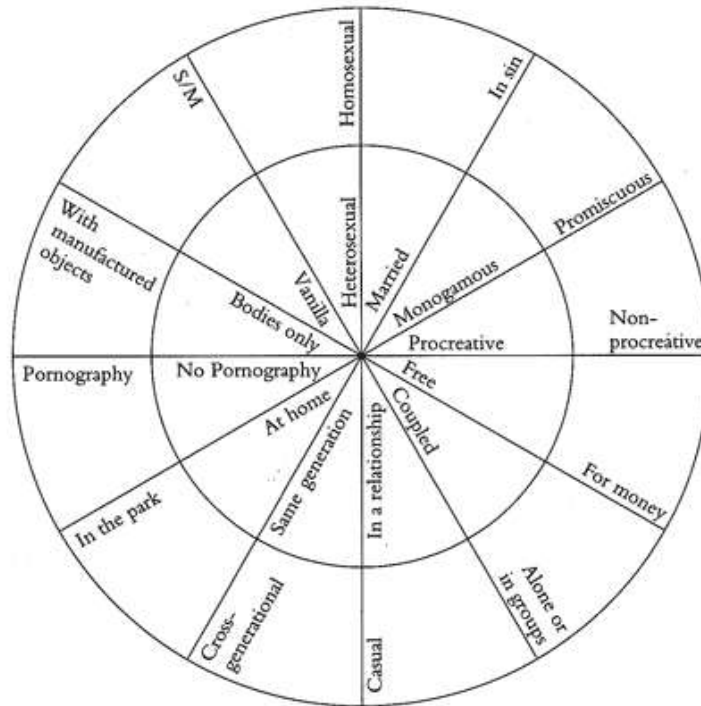
Gayle Rubin's "Charmed Circle" of Sexuality

An important facet of Rubin's study is her attempt to expose and critique the axioms that underpin the "charmed circle" of sexuality – assumptions that "are so pervasive in Western culture that they are rarely questioned" (1999, p. 149). Sexual essentialism, for instance, "the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions" is an "embedded" belief system that seems so normal and is apparently so obvious it is, to all intents and purposes, invisible: it is as if "sexuality has no history and no significant social determinants" (1999, p. 149). As we have seen, the systems and forms that structure Cooper's cycle are as subtle as these normative systems of thought. Although Cooper carefully details and diagrams the form of the cycle and each novel in his paratextual comments, his characters seem to feel its presence less explicitly. They sense only that their behaviour is being observed or manipulated by invisible powers, which occasionally manifest as demons or Freddy Krueger-ish figures in dark rituals or dreams.

By representing the struggle between the individual and the invisible systems they circulate within, Cooper's cycle may be viewed alongside Rubin's work: she traces the development of normative systems of thought and questions the unquestioned; he, in a less determinate way, also makes systems of control palpable by portraying their effects on his characters. Of course, his purpose is more diffuse than hers and not primarily sexual: to him, constraints placed on sexual liberty are symptomatic of deeper, more pervasive regimes of

control. As an anarchist, he does not merely wish to demonstrate that heteronormative thinking is problematic; he wants to show that society, which secretes heteronormative thinking, which is predisposed to generating group-think, which interferes with how all individuals conduct their lives, is *itself* the problem. In this way, the George Miles cycle acts as a kind of diorama where we see free individuals competing with the influence of various invisible systems that stand for wider social constraints: reflected and elucidated in what Cooper elsewhere calls the cycle's "dual qualities of excessive form and improvisational looseness", this is "the central contradiction in the work" (n.d.).

Although this constitutes a broader and more elegant anarchist critique than we have yet seen in Cooper's oeuvre, I would suggest that his interest in devising premade forms for his fiction extends further than this capacity to represent the effects of social control. If we zoom out a little, we see that their employment also attests to a more profound engagement with anarchist thought at the level of the work's composition.

Procedural anarchism

In the previous chapter, we discussed Cooper's provocative assessment of the limitations of literary expression: attempts to represent experience in language and consequently in writing are for him necessarily subjective, fallacious, and coercive. Regarding the conception of *Safe*, we recall his assertion that,

> I wanted the work to be about the cruel, self-defeating nature of aestheticism itself and how art could only short-circuit in relationship to experiences that were too deep or frightening or complex to be represented by language. I felt and still feel, that when language tries to encompass kinds of experience, it becomes overly infected with the consciousness of the artist who tries to represent them and, as a result, it flatters the artist and lies to the audience. (Cooper and Glück, 2006, p. 258)

John, one of *Closer*'s disillusioned teens repeats this statement almost verbatim. When asked by a teacher to speak to his classmates about his art (vaguely described in the text as quasi-realistic portraits that look like police sketches), John writes: "What you seem to like in my drawings is how they reveal the dark underside, or whatever it's called, of people you wouldn't think were particularly screwed up. But you should know the real goal of my work is a Dorian Gray type of thing. I make you look awful, and I start to look really good…" (1994, p. 5). In other words, art is a kind of trick that appears to reveal weighty truths that are in fact artistically contrived, brewed in the consciousness of the artist himself. This idea is echoed throughout Cooper's work, which

constantly struggles with the ineluctably subjective nature of experience.

Yet such a position raises some quite serious difficulties for the anarchist writer. If the communication of experience in literature lies to its readers, how is it reconciled with a political and social philosophy that, in its multifarious forms, renounces such subtle coercion? Furthermore, can an artistic representation ever be anarchistic that wheedles and cajoles its audience into affirming the subjective vision of an artist over their own, when anarchism takes as its fundamental tenet the autonomy of the individual (and, in this case, reading) subject? To my knowledge, most anarchist writers have not posed these questions or sought to problematize literature's coercive effect in any great detail. In the preface to her collected essays, for instance, Emma Goldman praises the power of the written word and champions written over verbal communication. "My great faith in the wonder worker, the spoken word, is no more", she states; "The speaker, though ever so eloquent, cannot escape the restlessness of the crowd, with the inevitable result that he will fail to strike root" (1969d, p. 41; p. 42). Conversely, "the relation between the writer and the reader is more intimate" – the experience of reading creates a one-to-one bond between writer and reader, the better to persuade the latter of the former's position and allow thoughts to "strike root" in the reader's mind (1969d, p. 42). Goldman does not address the inherent problems and contradictions such comments raise from the standpoint of anarchism's resistance to authority, which corrupts the mind and controls the behaviour of the otherwise autonomous individual. However, Cooper's remarks above demonstrate far more sensitivity than Goldman to the problem writing poses for the committed anarchist: he is keenly aware that the writer-reader relationship is dogged by hierarchical associations and, given anarchism's suspicion of authority's corrupting influence, the "infection" of authorial consciousness may even render an anarchist literature hypocritical.

Following the logic of this formulation, however, we could conversely argue that if a writer's subjective interference were minimized and the coercive effect of their expression somehow curbed, then literature might be better aligned with anarchism. If authorial intention could be subtracted, the coercive effect curbed, and writing curve toward the form of a chronicle then perhaps literature could become more appropriately anarchistic. It is within this context that it is possible to reflect upon Cooper's use of apparently arbitrary forms like concentric circles, six-pointed stars, and other elaborate structures and systems: they constitute his attempt to subtract a part of his subjectivity from the project by handing over a large degree of its composition to a formal procedure. In spite of the apparent singularity of such a stance, there are in fact precedents to be found in experimental twentieth century poetry, a field with which Cooper was well acquainted. John Cage's and Jackson Mac Low's procedural poetry in particular combines compositional constraint and anarchist thought in ways that foreshadow Cooper's

work.

Cage's Dada- and Duchamp-inspired derivative poetics and his application of "chance operations" to works such as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* or Emma Goldman's autobiography, are demonstrably anarchistic in orientation (qtd. in Hayles, 1994, p. 226). Scanning source texts and selecting words or phrases beginning with the letters of the title or of a name, Cage produces "mesotics" or writings-through the middle, freeing canonical works from their old syntactical arrangements and dissolving the voice of the artist into the operation of nonintentionality. "The political correlative to Cage's aesthetic practices is anarchy", N. Katherine Hayles claims; "He believes that anarchy, like linguistic strategies that overwhelm intentionality without annihilating it, can dissolve the coercive bonds of social regulation while still fostering individual responsibility" (1994, p. 238). Andy Weaver's critique of Cage's politics agrees with Hayles, pointing out that these poetic procedures,

> worked against the commonly-held notion of the individual genius, the writing subject who brings forth great texts through his or her own solitary, unique brilliance. Instead, [he] created texts that show the importance of anarchic communities, texts that show the importance of non-hierarchical giving to and taking from others in a radically free exchange of ideas. (2010)

The procedural poems contained in Jackson Mac Low's *Stanzas For Iris Lezak* (1971), meanwhile, are made up of a number of "diastic reading-through nonintentional text-selection procedures" (or simply, diastics) – one example of Mac Low's many attempts "to develop artistic forms that advance and encourage freedom" (Mac Low and Zurbrugg, 2010, p. 400). A sometime student of Cage at the New School for Social Research, Mac Low improvised upon his teacher's method by selecting words from a source text and arranging them on the page using a series of constraints determined in advance:

> "Diastic" is a word coined by Jackson from the Greek words "dia" (through) and "stichos" (a line of writing, a verse) and is contrasted to "acrostic" from "akros" (an extreme, such as the letter at the beginning or end of a verse line)… In employing such procedures, the writer reads through the source text, taking into the poem each successive unit which has the letters of the source words in corresponding places. The first linguistic unit in the poem begins with the first letter of the first word of the title or other seed, the second unit has the second letter of the first word of the seed in its second place, and so forth, possibly through multiple passes through the source string. (Mac Low, 2010, p. 407)

These kinds of diastic procedures compose poetry according to a set algorithm and engage a kind of machine-writing – indeed, like Cage, Mac Low's work from the 1980s used computer

programs to automatically select his texts. As Brian McHale points out, this represents Mac Low's endeavour to create a non-egoic poetry by withdrawing subjectivity from the work: "at the extreme of self-effacement occur practices like Mac Low's, in which all local decisions are left to the operation of the machine" (2000, p. 20).

What is remarkable in the work of both of these innovative anarchist poets, then, is a commitment to diminishing subjective interference through a transfer of compositional responsibility to an arbitrarily-selected procedure or algorithm. This process is contiguous with Cooper's project, which finds its procedural constraints in the geometric structures and compositional systems that undergird the George Miles cycle, through which subjective inflection appears similarly limited. Nonetheless, in spite of these similarities it seems to me that Cooper's procedural prose differs from Cage's and Mac Low's work. Although elaborate structures similarly function as constraints in his writing (determining, for example, the placement and activity of characters, chapters, and novels in the series) Cooper does not appear to believe, as Cage and Mac Low do, in the salvation of these constraints, even going so far as to state rather emphatically that "all structures created to impose order of any kind are inherently corrupt" (Cooper and Glück, 2006, pp. 253–4) – in other words, their forms are never perfect and their effect will always be somewhat unpredictable. Cooper thus seems to be attentive to the conspicuous tension that haunts an anarchist art that would defer responsibility to an artificial form and attempt to subdue the autonomous subjective voice. He exploits this tension to produce his work's distinctive combination of stasis and motility, blankness and vehemence but, as a careful reading of *Frisk* shows, for better or worse he ultimately returns to the sovereignty of the subject.

Frisk*: the subject and the system*

Marvin Taylor writes that *Frisk*'s corresponding form is an infinity symbol, examples of which stand at the beginning and end of the book as titles for the opening and closing chapters. These chapters mirror one another, each comprising five paragraphs of similar length that describe five photos of an adolescent boy, naked, recumbent as if dead, a rope tied around his neck. Small details differ between the two chapters, however, indicating their relationship to one another is more refraction than reflection: in one, the subject's eyes "could be parts of a doll" – in another they are "alert, antsy" (1991, pp. 3, 127–8); in the first, "his ass sports a squarish blotch, resembling ones that hide hard-core sexual acts, but more sloppily drawn" – in the last, "his asscrack is covered with something that vaguely resembles a wound when you squint" (1991,

pp. 4, 128). Initially, "the mouth of a shallow cave, like the sort ocean waves carve in cliffs", later "the 'wound' is actually a glop of paint, ink, makeup, tape, cotton, tissue, and papier-mâché sculpted to suggest the inside of a human body" (1991, pp. 4, 128). Although uncannily similar in their staging, these are evidently not the same photographs and, more importantly, they are not described in the same way. The figurative passages that open the work – oblique, imaginative, thick with detail that segues into simile – are in the end demystified and resigned to a plain, unadorned account of the scene. It is as if the opening lines travel through the cleansing fire of the work and endure its ordeals only to emerge again slighter, older, more distant, disenchanted.

While Taylor describes the form that underlies *Frisk* as an infinity symbol, it might be more accurate to describe the structure as that of a Möbius strip – despite the illusion of alterity, *Frisk*'s narrative traverses just one surface and, though loopy, the path Cooper has his protagonist tread does not deviate. Hemmed in both by the strip's form and the other systems that dictate the work's thematic concerns (i.e. the libidinal imperative), Dennis is made to depart from these photographs and at length returns, the Escherian epic anti-hero, to find them a little unfamiliar and himself much changed. In structuring *Frisk* according to this form, the range of authorial decisions available to Cooper is greatly reduced, as his choices must produce the textual arrangement demanded of the strip. Like Cage's procedural poetics, the Möbius strip engages a procedure that introduces subjective constraint by limiting Cooper's actions. However, unlike Cage, Cooper is not resolved to excising the subject from his work and, putting the lie to its procedural limitations, *Frisk* turns out to be a work that is in fact unequivocally subjective.

In the novel Cooper traces a linear developmental narrative, told in the first person by the narrator, Dennis, a writer who includes sections of his novel-in-progress in his ostensible memoir. At least in its opening stages, the work assiduously differentiates between its autobiographical and fictional components by insisting upon the truth and coherency of Dennis' autobiography. The section "Tense, 1969-1986", for instance, presents the reader with a clearly demarcated chronology of Dennis' life ("When I was thirteen..." "When I was seventeen..." "When I was eighteen..." etc.), which plots a credible and pretty conservatively-plotted story of Dennis' psychological development (1991, pp. 24, 27, 31). As a traumatic consequence of seeing some pornographic photos at the age of thirteen, the reader is told that Dennis' psycho-sexual growth was fundamentally altered, prompting a lifelong quest for the satisfaction of a (sometimes violent) desire to explore his sexual partners. He later attests,

> Maybe... if I hadn't seen this... snuff. Photographs. Back when I was a kid. I thought the boy in them was actually dead for years, and by the time I found out they were posed photographs, it was too late. I already wanted to live in a world where some boy I didn't personally know could be killed and his corpse

made available to the public, or to me anyway. I felt so... enlightened? (1991, p. 70)

In these passages Dennis confides in the reader and, recounted in an honest, informal register, his testimony appears all the more truthful for its minor lapses and failures. Thus Dennis tells us that when he was twenty-eight he paid a hustler named Finn to spend the night with him but confesses that he cannot recall how much he paid or how Finn's voice may have sounded: "He named his price (I forget)... I'm trying to remember his voice. I just can't" (1991, pp. 86–7). Dennis may be an unreliable narrator but in the imperfection of his account he nonetheless comes across as sympathetic and sincere.

Elsewhere the text distinguishes these autobiographical sequences from its fictional ones by clearly introducing them as such: Dennis states that he spent several months working on "an artsy murder-mystery novel, some salvageable fragments of which are interspersed through the following section" (1991, p. 40). The next section then maintains this distinction by dividing the "artsy murder-mystery" taking place on the ground from the journal entries Dennis writes in a plane en route to New York. Having firmly differentiated Dennis' disarmingly honest self-presentation from his fictional interludes, the next chapter then unveils a harrowing and nightmarish tale of rape, murder, and mutilation in Amsterdam in the form of a letter written by Dennis to his childhood friend Julian. Assisted by a couple of amoral German henchmen, Dennis has finally realised his desire for death and destruction by indiscriminately fucking, killing, and dismembering helpless adolescent boys. In their death, we are told, he has found "this major transcendence or answer" (1991, p. 107). "I feel strong, powerful, clear all the time. Nothing bothers me anymore. I'm telling you Julian, this is some kind of ultimate truth" (1991, p. 107).

Yet as the text concludes, truth is revealed as a ruse. Julian and his brother Kevin visit Dennis in Amsterdam and find no bodies – the room on the third floor of the windmill that was supposedly filled with rotting corpses doesn't even exist: "'I knew it', Kevin said, gazing up. 'Rooms like that exist only in books'" (1991, p. 122). With this revelation the entire edifice of autobiographical truth constructed and meticulously sustained throughout the preceding pages all at once fractures and crumbles and the entirety of the work is shown to be "infected by the consciousness of the artist". In this way *Frisk* returns us to familiar territory where we find subjective solitude triumphant and Cooper's work again caught in a recursive feedback loop that admits no other. "Nothing is real in the book", Cooper asserts and here, once more, there is only subjective representation: no outside the narrator's subjectivity, or inside it; no truth or fantasy (Cooper and Boddy, 1994). It all forms the one fictional fabric or what we might call, following Paul Hegarty, a textual epidermis, replete with alluring hollows, folds and apparent depths but

all constituting the same surface: "Cooper's fictions seem to offer surface only, however convoluted and twisted that surface, but it is vital to recognise that depth is always in play, even though there is no depth that does not come to be shown as only surface" (2008, p. 181).

Frisk's bathetic conclusion extends Cooper's theme of subjective isolation, yet in doing so it effectively contradicts the meticulously planned procedure designed to limit subjective expression. The Möbius strip even comes to reinforce the solitude of the subject: the text's premise, that subjectivity is proscribed and ineluctable, is amplified by its unfolding across a single, enclosed surface. Not only does the system fail, therefore, it comes to serve the subjectivity it aimed to master. There is a familiar sense of tragedy to this state of subjective isolation, especially when we find that in the case of Frisk it is we, the reader, that the narrator is now "reaching for": we whom he confides in; we whom he wishes to experience an intersubjective encounter with. We may nonetheless draw a kind of political optimism from the text. If the writer of Frisk, like his characters above, is limited by certain procedures and finds his actions determined by premade structures that separate him from what he can do, the failure of these procedures demonstrates the indefatigable resources of the subject and its capacity to overcome constraints imposed upon it. "I'm a super optimist and idealist", Cooper says; "If you're an anarchist, you have to believe that people are essentially good and the corruptions and distortions all come from power structures and things that overly organize people" (Cooper and Escoria, 2014): in the George Miles cycle, systems and sclerotic structures vie with the free individual, corrupting and distorting the behaviour of author and protagonist alike. In the end, however, systems are turned inside-out, corrupted, repurposed, made to short-circuit; in the end, the individual will out.

Chapter 5

Networking the Cyber-Social

The Sluts and Dennis Cooper's blog

> *"A lot of things that are seen to be real on that blog, that I present as real, are not real. That's part of the game."*
>
> (Dennis Cooper)[1]

Think of it as a kind of magic trick – that one where the magician disappears. You see him walk into a dark cabinet painted with moons and stars and so on and his assistant closes the door on the right, then the one on the left. Sometimes at this point the assistant introduces swords into the box or throws a silk sheet over it or spins it around so you can see that the magician hasn't escaped out the back. Once these operations are all over, the assistant leads you and the rest of the audience in a count and finally, with a flourish, throws open the cabinet doors. "Shazam!" Inside the box a spotlight picks out the magician standing in his tuxedo, wearing an enigmatic smile but – and you're not the only one who is thinking it – he is definitely gone.

Dennis Cooper likes magic tricks. Botched magic tricks, deconstructed magic tricks, magic tricks that retain a sense of the strange or uncanny even when they fail. Regarding magic's relationship to the writing of *Period* he says, "I studied illusion and magic tricks and then I just did the same thing I did with narrative, I tried to completely reinvent the magic trick into this weird fractured complex thing" (Cooper and Kennedy, 2008, p. 205). In this chapter we will see that in his longest, largest, and most intricate work to date, his blog, Cooper pulls a disappearing act while remaining in plain sight. In what follows I will show how this illusion works, outline the effect produced by it, and argue that this allows Cooper to create a decentralized, horizontal, online anarchist community made up of his fans and friends. We begin, however, with an examination of *The Sluts*, Cooper's 2004 novel which contains in microcosm the ideas and structures he later uses in his blog: as a static, fictional simulation of the sprawling, mutable blog, *The Sluts* is an ideal place to initiate our discussion of Cooper's engagement with anarchist networks.

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[1] Cooper and Kennedy, 2008, p. 199.

The Sluts: *void and multitude*

Equally reminiscent of the lowly genre fiction of pulp detective novels and the obscure avant-garde work of the Nouveau Romancier, Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Sluts* is one of Cooper's most critically and commercially successful novels. Acclaimed upon publication, it was awarded two major prizes, the Lambda literary award for works which explore LGBT issues and the Prix Sade for writers who go "beyond all forms of censure and who [defy] the moral or political order against all forms of intellectual terrorism" (Prix Sade, n.d.). It is also one of the most formally experimental of his novels: dispensing with the largely unidirectional, televisual technologies found in *My Loose Thread* (2002) and *God Jr.* (2005) such as TV or videogames, *The Sluts* instead adopts the appearance of web-based communication technologies. Shifting from the media of transmission to the media of engagement, in its formal arrangement the work sets out to imitate online review websites, message boards, email, and instant messages (IM).

Despite its unconventional design, the novel's plot is relatively sequential, taking place between June 2001 and May 2002, opening with reviews of a teenage hustler named Brad, on a website for regular patrons of gay male escorts. User bigman60 offers an exhaustive physical description of Brad using the appropriate fields (age, height, weight, prices, dick size, etc.), then describes a night during which "unbelievable" sex ended with Brad having a severe psychological episode that was "very spooky" (2005a, p. 4). This is followed by a similarly comprehensive review that challenges certain details of Brad's physical appearance in the previous report (here, for example, he is two inches shorter) but depicts a sex scene and conclusion analogous to the one before: user llbean claims, "I did have to order him to leave, and he was very out of it and acting pretty strange. But let me tell you, he's worth it" (2005a, p. 6).

In another review, self-proclaimed "carer" JoseR72 posts a description of Brad (eye colour blue, not hazel or green as in the previous reviews) and outlines his failed attempt to rehabilitate him. Fifteen more lengthy reviews are posted by a variety of other users, which contest previous submissions and revise aspects of Brad's physique or behaviour. The object of these reviews cycles through various weights (115lbs to 165lbs) and hair colours (blond, dyed blond, dishwater blond, brown), and alternates between being circumcised and uncircumcised, loquacious and laconic: "despite what has been said about him", user bizeeb7 contends, "he was quite talkative, too talkative if anything" (2005a, p. 10). With each new report, Brad acquires more and more minutely dissimilar attributes; his portrait warps and becomes incrementally more sprawling and mysterious, eliciting phenomenal interest and, we are told, drawing huge

traffic to the website. Who is Brad? Is he a burnt out porn star called Stevie Sexed? Was he murdered in August 2001? As user thetimmonster observes, "We're all caught up in this Brad thing because we're obsessed with him and want to fuck him" (2005a, p. 110). "I'm addicted to this saga", admits user sammyd, "because it's like a great mystery novel with a lot of sex scenes in it… It's like cutting-edge escapism" (2005a, p. 112).

In subsequent sections of the novel – "Ad", "Board", and "Email/Fax" – the Brad mystery is amplified and distorted, with users and commenters finding themselves entangled in it, drawn inexorably to the thread in order to engage with other Brad fans and have their fantasies affirmed and augmented by one another. Like Faulknerian voices circling the corpse of Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying*, members of the "escort-loving community" depicted in *The Sluts* mechanically orbit the text's Brad-shaped lacuna (2005a, p. 110). Yet as they interact their online personae become subject to the same modifications and revisions as the expansive, but gradually receding nucleus of their discussions.

User egarrison, for instance, who claims to be Brad's pregnant girlfriend, movingly begs the users of the message board for donations, only to have her appeals undermined by user builtlikeatruck44, who alleges that she is a "well known Portland skeezebag who takes in street hustlers, addicts them to heroin, and pimps them to support her and their drug habits" (2005a, p. 119). Meanwhile thegayjournalist, who professes to be a writer for the *Advocate*, makes apparently sincere requests for information regarding the murder of Stevie Sexed. When pressed, however, he confesses that he is not a journalist, but the user Zack Young and has in fact been impersonating Brad's sometime boyfriend, Brian, and "a number of the other key players" (2005a, p. 163). The suspense and confusion which envelopes participants in the Brad thread at times surpasses that which surrounds Brad himself: was user jimmytaylor murdered by Brian? Is builtlikeatruck44 a guardian angel or a violent paedophile? Is Zack Young behind it all?

Although the work concludes in a bathetic fashion typical of Cooper's works, revealing the loneliness and desperation which underlies the collective fantasy in which user and reader alike have been implicated, this depiction of Brad and the community which surrounds him remains as the most prominent accomplishment of Cooper's novel. With the character or fictional space of Brad, Cooper convincingly limns the periphery of a void – he creates a textual lacuna by focusing on the individual voices which seem gravitationally drawn to it. Timothy Baker states that,

> As a protagonist and sometime narrator, Brad is revealed to be completely unknowable: he is a blank identity that can be filled both by himself and by others, whether those be direct imitators such as Thad [a Brad clone] or by the board commenters who vicariously live through him. (2008, p. 57)

This structure recalls a work like *Closer*, which tries to pinpoint George Miles by peering through the eyes of his admirers and, given that *The Sluts* was originally conceived as the fourth book in the cycle, one might be tempted to see the same strategy replicated here (Cooper and Kasavin, 2004). Yet in *Closer* and in the George Miles cycle as a whole, Cooper's thought is turned inward: as we saw in the case of *Frisk*, he writes with an obsessive, navel-gazing attentiveness to the centre. With *The Sluts*, conversely, Cooper seems determined to identify the impulses that attract his protagonists to Brad and the forces that bind them loosely together as an "escort loving community" (2005a, p. 110). His focus therefore shifts from the flickering presence in the middle to the voices that encircle it; from the single to the plural. The structure of the work may very well be similar to works in the cycle, but here the author seems more interested in the periphery than the hub.

Turning aside from the solipsism that marked the George Miles cycle, in *The Sluts* Cooper also turns back the clock to his Beyond Baroque days and his initial efforts at community-building in Los Angeles. Back then he was in the middle of a radical, avant-garde society of like-minded poets including Amy Gerstler, Jack Skelly, and Bob Flanagan. Although their veneration of the individual voice and contempt for its dissolution in "the common" could be read as anarchistic, the very centrality of Cooper to the community indicated the persistence of a social hierarchy inimical to anarchist thought. As reading series co-ordinator, Cooper brought the punk poets together and helped to cultivate a vibrant literary scene in Los Angeles; yet once he departed for New York in 1983, the community stopped growing, calcified, and eventually broke apart. If, as poet Lynn Bronstein defensively remarked at the time, the young poets of Beyond Baroque were a poetry mafia, then Cooper was their unwilling Don. Looking back on his time in L.A., he confesses to a discomfort with this status:

> I was in a rut, *really* in a rut. I was seeing only poets, particularly a group of poets who sort of looked up to me, as a person who could give advice as well as be a friend. I was, like, a big fish in a small pond out there. I was pretty famous, but it was so *easy*. I didn't deserve the attention I was getting. It was ridiculous. (qtd. Kikel, 1983, p. 57)

For a writer who, by his own admission "like[s] situations where I can't possibly be the centre of attention, or where I can believe that such a thing is possible" being so famous and indispensible to the Beyond Baroque crowd was intolerable and ultimately led him to abscond to the anonymity of Downtown New York (Cooper and Byloos, 2000, p. 9).

Yet this experience of fame and its capacity to bring a group of people together in their

shared desire for intimacy with a relative celebrity seems to have stayed with Cooper and emerges as a prominent theme in *The Sluts*. Woven from the stuff of his previous novels, sexual desire and morbid fantasy are of course ubiquitous in the text and, as Leora Lev points out, here "collusion, complicity, love, hate, victimization, caretaking, and salvation all appear hopelessly intertwined" (2008, p. 99). In addition to these very familiar features, fandom, celebrity, and idolization – ideas largely passed over by Cooper since *Idols* – are equally insistent leitmotifs. The final reviews of the escort named Brad, for instance, illustrate the lengths some obsessed "Brad fans" will go to in order to orchestrate a rendezvous with their favourite celebrity: in his review, Sandman808 exclaims, "watching his cute face go through its range of emotions was very hot and knowing he was the legendary Brad made it even more special" (2005a, p. 189). When Cooper talks about the website male4malescorts.com, an inspiration for the novel, he admits to a fascination with the circulation of "superstars and fans and stalkers and the whole thing" that structures that website (Cooper and Kasavin, 2004).

Returning to the idea of community in the wake of widespread digitisation, *The Sluts* finds Cooper at work sketching a fictional blueprint for an online community, drawn together by intrigue and held together by the promise of sex or fame or an elusive brush with celebrity. Somewhat like the one at Beyond Baroque, this community bonds through a shared attraction to a celebrated centre (there Cooper; here Brad); nonetheless, the society in *The Sluts* is markedly more horizontal and, the centre having absented itself, the text made up solely of lateral conversations between participants.[2] Here Cooper is exploring the ways that one might effect the development of a network – a social formation in which relationships between members are non-hierarchical. Can the Internet admit kinds of community that are more open, flexible, and robust than those currently in existence? What is the most effective way to build such a community? Can it be sustained? If *The Sluts* introduces Cooper's response to these questions, his blog – a "major project" for more than a decade – is the main event (Cooper and Kennedy, 2008, p. 201). Investigating the forms and concepts necessary to bring about the emergence of an anarchistic community online, in the following sections I show that the blog capitalizes upon some of the ideas discussed above, namely the capacity of desire and celebrity to join various individuals together in a supple, non-coercive social structure. We begin by

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[2] In conversation with Danny Kennedy, Cooper remarks:

> [*The Sluts*] has no centre at all. All the other books have an emotional centre to them and this one has no emotional centre to it at all, it's purely abstract. Brad is not an emotionally riveting character, he's just an example and he's just a whatever, he doesn't even exist. (Cooper and Kennedy, 2008, p. 196)

exploring phenomenon of the network, its place within anarchist thought, and its importance to Cooper's re-imagined community. Later we will see that as an archetypal network and a sprawling, "live" version of *The Sluts*' cyber-fictional simulation, Cooper's blog allows him to experiment in miniature with the makings of an anarchist community.

What is a network?

A rudimentary definition of a network might start with what it is not: namely, a hierarchical, centralized, and hermetic system comprising homogeneous elements, rigidly arranged. The bureaucracy of the state in its traditional form might epitomize such a system, in its compartmentalization and hierarchisation of parts, cascading down from the upper echelons of central government (e.g. ministries of the state, the criminal justice system, civil servants, etc.). Formations such as these tend towards stability and stasis, conveying information relatively slowly and changing only gradually and with much effort. Kafka is perhaps their scribe, drawn to the maddeningly illogical excrescences produced by their inflexible logic and impressionistically sketching the glacial pace with which information percolates through their striated layers. In the vocabulary of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, these centralized, homogeneous systems are called "arborescent" and are the anachronistic vestiges of feudal or sovereign societies.

> Arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centres of significance and subjectification, central automata like organized memories. In the corresponding models an element only receives information from a higher unit and only receives a subjective affection along pre-established paths. (1987, p. 16)

According to Deleuze and Guattari, such arborescent structures not only shape the ruling class but also over-code the psycho-sexual landscape of the modern subject. As a result, opposition to the status quo usually advances "along pre-established paths" too: in their congregation around the issue of homosexual orientation, for example, gay advocacy groups replicate and inadvertently validate the systems to which they are opposed.

In place of the arborescent Deleuze and Guattari offer the rhizomatic: "finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbour to any other, the stems or channels do not pre-exist and all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their *state* at a given moment such that the local operations are coordinated and the final, global result synchronized without a central agency" (1987, p. 17, original emphasis). The rhizome or network, then, may be distinguished primarily by its horizontal and spontaneous distribution of

heterogeneous parts, which provisionally connect with one another through currents of information, energy or, particularly for Deleuze and Guattari, desire. In place of centralizing, hermetic forces, and slow, incremental adaptation, the network is instead made up of an ever-expanding number of nodes and change is rapid, extensive, and continual. Networks, therefore, are constitutively heterogeneous, mutating multiplicities. As Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker explain:

> Networks are multiplicities, not because they are constructed of numerous parts but because they are organized around the principle of perpetual inclusion. It is a question of a formal arrangement, not a finite count. This not only means that networks can and must grow (adding nodes or edges) but, more important, means that networks are reconfigurable in new ways and at all scales. Perhaps this is what it means to be a network, to be capable of radically heterogeneous transformation and reconfiguration. (2007, pp. 60–1)

The necessity for continual transformation and reconfiguration in networks should be emphasized here, for while the potency of a top-down, arborescent structure comes from the perpetuation of its rigidity (regardless of its actual constituents), that of the network lies in a perpetual dynamism: "networks are only networks when they are live: when they are enacted, embodied or rendered operational" (Galloway and Thacker, 2007, p. 62).

As a non-hierarchical, decentralised assemblage of independent nodes, the network is an anarchistic structure par excellence and it surfaces repeatedly in modern anarchist literature. The work of British activist Colin Ward in particular sees the network as a vital alternative to the stratification of contemporary society and his argument for the radical potential of networks is framed in terms that are starkly reminiscent of Deleuzoguattarian formulations such as those above. Thus his support for "the strengthening of *other* loyalties, of *alternative* foci of power, of *different* modes of human behaviour" is redolent of Deleuze and Guattari's calls for the rhizomatisation of thought and the socius (1982, p. 22, original emphasis). Like Deleuze and Guattari, Ward similarly stresses the "spontaneous order" of the network and he writes that, "given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of the situation – this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of externally imposed authority could provide" (1982, p. 28).[3] Anarchism opposes forms of thought and organisations that are hierarchical, arborescent,

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[3] Experimentation is also a central tenet of Deleuze's ethics, which arises out of his reading of Spinoza and underwrites much of his contribution to collaborations with Guattari. For Deleuze, following Spinoza, a body consists of a specific relation of motion and rest, speed and slowness between particles that constitute that body. A number of significant and mutually dependent aspects arise as a result of a body meeting or encountering another body:

pyramidal: "we have to build networks instead of pyramids", Ward insists;

> All authoritarian institutions are organised as pyramids… they are pyramidal structures with a small group of decision-makers at the top and a broad base of people whose decisions are made for them at the bottom. Anarchism does not demand the changing of the labels on the layers, it doesn't want different people on top, it wants us to clamber out from underneath. It advocates an extended network of individuals and groups, making their own decisions, controlling their own destiny. (1982, p. 22)

If gay rights groups could be associated with a conventionally centralized arrangement around a shared concept of gay identity then we might consider Homocore activism of the 1980s and 1990s as an example of an anarchistic network formation. Circulating via an abundance of zines that were dear to Cooper, these acephalous groups thrived without an organizing principle or a core belief. "Xeroxed and/or cheaply offset-printed publications… constituting a network of sub-desktop alternatives to established, large circulation periodicals", they were oriented instead towards the peripheral and perverse (Cooper, 2010c, p. 2). The Homocore movement, which had such a formative influence on Cooper's anarchism, and other grassroots movements of the 1990s such as Riot Grrrl, which combined radical feminism with punk-rock, generated their networks during these years through the dissemination of D.I.Y. print culture including zines and newsletters. But the network's elemental tendency towards expansion was greatly impeded by

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> When a body encounters another body or an idea another idea, it happens that the two relations sometimes combine to form a more powerful whole, and sometimes one decomposes the other, destroying the cohesion of its parts. (1988, p. 19)

Bodies in agreement combine their respective relations in order to form a greater relation, of increased capacity to be affected, which thus has a higher degree of power, e.g. the agreeable encounter of the human body with food where the nutrient-relation of food combines with a human's digestive-relation. Two bodies that disagree however, react badly with one another: their relations conflict and one or both bodies finds its constituent relation or one of its subordinate relations decomposed. As a body attempts to ward off the opposing body and extract itself from the decompositional relation, its capacity for affectivity is rigidified and its degree of power is decreased accordingly:

> This is what is meant by my power decreases. It is not that I have less power, it is that a part of my power is subtracted, in the sense that it is necessarily allocated to averting the action of the thing. Everything happens as if a whole part of my power is no longer at my disposal… A part of my power is fixed. (1981, pp. 20-21)

On the basis of this, Deleuze claims that in an encounter an ethics (or more precisely, what he calls an ethology) manifests itself through the direct designation of the values of good and bad: in every encounter a body immediately determines which encounters are good and which are bad. A spontaneous ethics therefore arises only through experimenting with different encounters and plotting good and bad relations: experimentation is the key to unlocking an ethics that is not determined in advance.

the pace of distribution: acquiring the latest issue of a zine involved more than moving a cursor on a computer screen, it meant posting cash or a check to the address of its publisher, and then waiting for it to be delivered – depending on its popularity this could take weeks. In *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, for example, Riot Grrrl historian Sara Marcus attests to a massive backlog of unanswered mail requests at the headquarters of Riot Grrrl D.C. (2010, p. 8). While the U.S. postal system cannot be held wholly accountable for the demise of these movements, the slow calcifying of their communication channels may have contributed to their inevitable disintegration: as Galloway and Thacker remind us "networks are only networks when they are live" (2007, p. 62).

With the arrival of affordable Internet dial-up in the late 1990s, however, communication technologies began to develop the speeds necessary to sustain a network's requisite rate of growth and change. As a "network of networks", or a "hypernetwork", the Internet has always been especially adept at facilitating the development of horizontal networks and from its inception it was envisaged as a tool with which to build distributed systems (Terranova, 2004, p. 41). Ironically enough it was the hierarchized war machine of the United States military that came up with the idea: as its creation myth now famously holds, the Internet was the result of the military's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's attempts to set up a decentralized system of computers that could survive in the event of an enemy attack. Should an air strike incapacitate a Middle-Eastern hub, for example, interaction between other hubs in the network would be unaffected and commands communicated via that hub would be would be sheltered within the structure.

In the 1970s, as the mode of information transfer changed from a Network Control Program (NCP) transport layer to the more flexible and robust Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP), hermetic computerized systems under the control of a single entity (such as the US military) gave way to a more open network architecture, liberating communication between participants of different systems (see Hauben, 2003).

> The Internet, in fact, is not just a global computer network, but a network of networks, the actualization of a set of design principles entailing the interoperability of heterogeneous information systems… The Internet was conceived from its inception as a heterogeneous network, able to accommodate in principle, if not in actuality, not only diverse communication systems but also drifting and differentiating communication nodes. (Terranova, 2004, p. 54)

From the outset, therefore, the Internet had certain elements of a rhizomatic network encoded into its infrastructure, in particular horizontal communication, decentralization, and the capacity for spontaneous accretion.

While the number and scale of networks undoubtedly increased with the advent of open architecture and continued to grow at an unprecedented rate, particularly during the 1990s' dot.com boom, limited technological knowhow also restricted the advance of networks. Becoming an active participant or node of a cyber-network required more than an email account – it required an understanding of computer programming. Consequently, while the first Weblogs that arose in the late 1990s catalysed the proliferation of small, discrete networks, as Rebecca Blood confirms, some knowledge of basic coding language like HTML (hypertext mark-up language) was needed in order to participate: "When I started mine in 1999 no tools had yet been designed specifically for creating Weblogs. Some programmers created or adapted their own software. The rest of us hand-coded our sites" (2004, p. 53).

In the 2000s, "everything changed" (Blood, 2004, p. 55): the arrival of next-generation Web technologies unlocked the opportunity for apparently-unlimited interaction and connectivity between even the uneducated and uninitiated would-be nodes of the Internet's emergent networks. Offering free-to-user software that was easy to operate and needed no real training, the primary function of these kinds of technologies, grouped under the name "Web 2.0", was to enable user-generated content and communication (O'Reilly, 2005). Media theorist Lev Manovich credits Web 2.0 with a fundamental shift in orientation of the Internet from professional to amateur and from a broadcast to an engagement paradigm, exemplified by the popularity of social media hubs such as Wikipedia, Facebook, and YouTube.

> Two commonly held ideas about Web 2.0 are most relevant... First, in the 2000s, we are supposedly seeing a gradual shift from the majority of internet users accessing content produced by a much smaller number of professional producers to users increasingly accessing content produced by other nonprofessional users. Second, if in the 1990s the web was mostly a publishing medium, in the 2000s it has increasingly become a communication medium. (2009, pp. 319–320)

Most importantly for the purposes of this study, the implementation of Web 2.0 technology also changed how Weblogs were used and who used them: by providing a pre-coded interface, companies like Blogger or Wordpress arguably democratized blogging and liberated participation in the blog network. Neither the time for hand-coding nor an education in the finer points of CSS or JavaScript was a prerequisite: everyone could now have their own blog and manage their own node. As Geert Lovink points out, "whereas the dot.com suits dreamt of mobbed customers flooding their e-commerce portals, blogs were the actual catalysts that

realized democratization worldwide, of the Internet" (2008, p. 4).[4] It is within this context that I propose we should consider the conception and development of Dennis Cooper's blog.

Dennis Cooper's a blog

In May 2005, extending his research into communication technologies conducted for *The Sluts* and responding to a survey on his website, Cooper began blogging at *Dennis Cooper's* (denniscooper.blogspot.com). Although his debut post, entitled "I think I'm ill-suited to blogging", makes plain his initial unease with the project, stating "I'm shy, not particularly talkative, and I don't really like talking about myself", Cooper seems to have acclimatized rather rapidly – posting brief entries onto the site daily and engaging with a growing number of fans and friends who stumbled across his site or found their way there thanks to word of mouth (2005b). Blogs like his were wildly popular at the time: massive public adoption of free blogging software and web hosting services provided by Blogger, Wordpress, Livejournal, and others, resulted in a massive increase in the number of online blogs from 3 million in May 2004 to more than 10 million by the time Cooper wrote his first post (Sifry, 2006).[5] He and this legion of other bloggers could easily create content (comprising text, picture file, or video) and quickly upload it to the Internet without prior knowledge of even basic computer coding such as HTML. Permalinks gave each individual post a URL (uniform resource locator – a stable identity and location on the web) that could be emailed to friends and linked to on other blogs, while a comments facility beneath each post allowed bloggers to interact with other members of the so-called blogosphere.[6]

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[4] Their impact was particularly evident in the field of journalism where they spearheaded the evolution of what William Dutton calls the "Fifth Estate":

> 'Networked individuals' can move across, undermine and go beyond the boundaries of existing institutions… The ability the Internet affords individuals to network within and beyond various institutional arenas in ways that can enhance and reinforce the 'communicative power' of 'networked individuals' is key. The interplay of change within and between such individual and institutional 'networks of networks' lies at the heart of what I am arguing is a distinctive and significant new Fifth Estate. (2007)

No longer in thrall to a transmission model, bloggers actualised the potential of the Internet to form distributed networks that checked and challenged the authority of narratives shaped by mainstream TV and newspapers.

[5] The following year's growth was even greater, jumping to an enormous 35 million (Sifry, 2006)

[6] An immense, often amorphous work that renders any exhaustive appraisal extremely problematic, Dennis Cooper's blog has persisted in one form or another since 2005: hacked and hijacked by forces unknown on November 17 2006, the blog was renamed *DC's* and relocated to denniscooper-theweaklings.blogspot.com. In the study that follows I draw upon a representative selection of posts taken

Many of the blog posts published at *Dennis Cooper's* comprise in-depth, eye-catching explorations of modern and contemporary writers, artists, filmmakers, and musicians. They typically include a short introductory text written by Cooper followed by curated examples of the subject's work including text, jpegs, music files, YouTube clips, and so on. Cooper also provides an extensive list of links from around the web that explore the topic in greater depth (articles, interviews, more YouTube clips, etc.). The expansive range and variety of material considered ensures both established and relatively unknown subjects receive equal exposure: a post considering the work of British writer Ivy Compton Burnett, for example, is sandwiched rather incongruously between posts devoted to American rock band, Butthole Surfers, and the German visual artist Susanne Hay. As one of Cooper's "heroes", Robert Pollard of the indie rock outfit Guided by Voices is a recurring presence but Cooper also considers little-known or recently discovered subjects such as French writer Tony Duvert, visual artist Ryan Trecartin, and Australian photographer Bill Henson (2006d).

Along with these posts dedicated to particular subjects and artists, the blog also provides insight into the conception and production of Cooper's own works. This usually takes the form of in-depth responses to questions posed in the blog's comments section about individual books and book-passages, leading to comprehensive explorations of the structures of certain works. In early 2006, for example, Cooper compiled a series of posts that painstakingly detailed the architecture of the George Miles Cycle. Before unveiling a sequence of equations and graphs used to structure the five novels, his opening post makes clear the significance of this organisation.

> When I was developing the cycle, I realized that what I wanted to do wouldn't work if I wrote in a straightforward narrative style. I realized I would have to figure out and design a particular kind of container suitable for the content and subjects I wanted to explore – a container that would organize, display, house comfortably, and allow a productive interraction [sic] between subjects that would otherwise either deflect or destroy one another. One thing I did was devise a large number of charts and graphs in order to predetermine the cycle's form, which I wanted to be rather simple in appearance and yet very complex when examined, sort of like the things I wanted to write about. (2006e)

In addition to publicly dissecting his previous novels, Cooper also provides excerpts from smaller pieces and progress reports on new work. While writing *The Marbled Swarm: A Novel* (2011),

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largely from the blog's inception to its one-year anniversary in order to illustrate that from inauspicious beginnings, through constant development and reconceptualization, Cooper's blog becomes a sprawling, horizontal work of participatory art.

for instance, over two years he gradually revealed key facts about its influences, spoke at length about its structure and themes, and posted photos of the people who inspired its characters.

This repeated foregrounding of process performs a number of functions simultaneously. In the first instance, it appeals to readers of his books that wish to know more about how he wrote them. Like "making of" extras that appear on feature film DVDs or documentary series like VH1's "Behind the Music", these posts try to please his fans and play to their curiosity. Consequently, it forms part of what we will call Cooper's autobiographical scrapbooking, which, as I explain below, fanatically collects and collates innumerable details about the work and life of the author Dennis Cooper and ends up making an idol out of him. Yet his itemisation of the practice of writing (the sources and inspiration of his work; his minor, daily writing successes and setbacks; etc.) also simultaneously withdraws an aura of artistic genius from his work. Laying bare the process of novelistic composition can be seen as an anarchistic attempt by Cooper to abdicate the artist's traditional position of privileged insight and undermine the hierarchy that might elevate him above his fans. Cooper intimates in these blog posts that there is nothing divine or mystical about what he does – he is the antithesis of a poet-prophet and certainly not Shelley's "legislator of the world" (2004). Although these two functions – promotion and demotion – may initially appear at odds with one another, as we shall see, Cooper radicalises self-promotion such that it comes to engineer a paradoxical self-screening, allowing him to further level the hierarchy between writer and reader.

One might find these kinds of posts on another writer's personal website, yet it is readily apparent that Cooper's blog is a little different from the majority of blogs currently in circulation. The distinction here is not merely one of longevity (unofficial statistics estimate that 60-80% of new blogs are abandoned after a month, while Cooper has blogged continuously since 2005 (Calson Analytics, 2007): while similarly focused on the life and work of its author, *Dennis Cooper's* seems to reach for something broader, more plural than most blogs' subjective critiques of mainstream media or reflections on the blogger's personal interests (fashion, food, film, etc.). Underneath or adjacent to Cooper's front page pulses something multiple and cooperative: a cursory scroll through the site finds the names and voices of numerous others swarming at the margins of Coopers own; a click through to the blog's comments section unearths a hive of bloggers, chatting, arguing, boasting, devising collaborative projects, sharing links; relays issuing back and forth, out of the comments section, and beyond the blog itself.

Guided by the thoughts and activities of its writer, most blogs are determined by private introspection (that nonetheless unfolds in public), displaying attentiveness to the self that verges on the egotistical. Yet this egocentric facet of blogging culture is in fact antithetical to its technological basis. One of the fundamental qualities of a blog is its ability to establish and

maintain instant, easy, and continuous interaction between the blogger and his or her peers: blogs are designed to promote participation and sociability. The comments section that follows each blog post, in particular, offers the opportunity for bloggers to support one another, disagree, or discuss issues raised in the post above. Yochai Benkler sees these comments as a principal feature of blogs, symptomatic of a changeover from a read-only Web to a writeable Web.

> The result [of blogging software's commenting facility] is therefore not only that many more people write finished statements and disseminate them widely, but also that the end product is a weighted conversation, rather than a finished good. It is a conversation because of the common practice of allowing and posting comments, as well as comments to these comments. (2006, p. 217)

Commenting can therefore make the relationship between reader and writer/publisher more horizontal – turning a monologue into a dialogue and the act of publishing into an interactive conversation between writer and reader. Nonetheless, a perusal of the comments sections of many blogs reveals that while this facility certainly exists, its use is not as widespread as Benkler would have us believe. Innumerable blog posts are in fact followed by no comments at all and, if any comments have been left, they are usually either spam messages to which the blogger does not respond, or genuine comments, to which the blogger also does not respond. Literary blogs run by writers such as Lisa Jarnot (*Lisablog*: http://www.angelfire.com/poetry/lisajarnot/blog/) and Bett Williams (*bett's blog*: http://nothingbutthewheel.blogspot.com/), or New Narrativists like Bruce Boone (*a stele for jamie*: http://bruceboone.wordpress.com/) and Dodie Bellamy (*belladodie*: http://dodie-bellamy.blogspot.com/) seldom attract a single comment. On the rare occasion that a comment is posted on these blogs, a reply from the author is not forthcoming.

Such examples suggest that although blogging is an inherently networked form, the threat of the arborescent or pyramidal is never far away: all too easily an engagement model lapses back into a broadcast model and openness gives way to solipsism. A blog's capacity to become what it is is therefore wholly dependent upon its author's commitment to the generation of networks and the blog's capacity to draw sufficient numbers of other users to the site to ensure the network's continual growth. The following sections investigate how Dennis Cooper's blog addresses these essential criteria: I first examine in detail the ways that Cooper (industriously, continually) encourages the realisation of a network of artists, writers, and musicians that spreads out from his blog to form connections with other parts of the Internet and life offline. I then argue that by using his status as a cult celebrity, Cooper attracts new visitors to his blog in an attempt to sustain the network's vital accumulation of nodes; he

cunningly wields his fame, however, such that it simultaneously promotes his idolisation and levels the hierarchy between him and his fans, opening up a Dennis Cooper-shaped lacuna in the middle of the (hyper)text.

Commenting and community

In contrast to the blogs of Cooper's contemporaries and innumerable other examples, at *Dennis Cooper's* feedback is treated as a vital component of the blog's structure and form. Readers are warmly encouraged to react to the day's post, offer their own takes on Cooper's work, or talk about themselves in the comments section and his responses to these comments form a subsection of the next day's post. Cooper's commitment to replying to each commenter, every day – even when the number of comments ballooned from about twenty per post in 2005 to over a hundred per post in 2007 – indicates the indispensability of this interaction to his conception of the blog. "I go through them one by one and answer them", Cooper states; "It really does take about three to five hours every morning to do" (Cooper and Simpson, 2011). This ongoing conversation between Cooper and his readers (known as "distinguished locals" or DLs) perforates the stratification of front page and comments section, setting up a relay that attempts to render their interactions less hierarchical.

But what of the comments section itself? Composed of what artist and Irish DL Jonathan Mayhew calls "a mixed bunch of writers, artists and other ne'er-do-wells of the interwebs", the comments section of *Dennis Cooper's* finds DLs chatting with one another about their work and offering one another advice or support (2015); they also debate aesthetic interests, offer recommendations for further reading, and sometimes argue passionately with each other. Tokyo-based DL, the writer Paul Curran recalls that "my first comments were directed at Dennis and were related to my own writing and getting-to-know-you kind of things, or joining questions he asked to everyone, but then I started interacting with other DLs as we commented on each other's comments". The comments section, he claims, "became an extraordinarily vibrant and occasionally volatile virtual conversation or interactive text" (2015).

In the introduction to *Userlands: New Fiction Writers from the Blogging Underground*, his edited anthology of work by DLs published in 2007, Cooper acknowledges the importance of the conversations that circulate in the comments section when he writes:

> The comments section had become something of a virtual workshop full of supportive yet sharp discussions about writing by the people posting there. While I still used the blog as a creative outlet and playground for my own ideas,

> it seemed to me that my creations were less the point than the lure that brought newcomers into the growing artistic community that had formed backstage of the blog's main page. (2007b, p. 12)

These sentiments are echoed by other DLs, who attest to the importance of the community built in the comments section and its effects away from *Dennis Cooper's*: DL Mark Gluth states, "I love how the community that formed on his blog, in the comments section, has spilled over into social media (most of us are active in some way on Facebook) and the real world". Indicating an inherent understanding of the networked form of this particular community, he adds: "I think it presents this idyllic model for what the Internet can be, at its best" (2015).

As Gluth correctly observes, the community generated by the comments section of Cooper's blog has had a tendency to "spill over" into other areas of the Internet and into the "real world", affecting the personal lives and careers of those who socialise in the comments section. A case in point, Gluth's last two books were published by small presses run by friends he met on Cooper's blog: his novel, *No Other*, was put out in 2014 by DL Ken Baumann's Sator Press and, most recently, his collection of short stories, *The Goners*, was released in February 2015 by DL Michael Salerno's Kiddiepunk Press. "My career would exist in some radically different form were it not for Dennis's blog", Gluth asserts (2015). Salerno, an Australian photographer whose Kiddiepunk Press website hosts Cooper's newest project, a "HTML novel" called *Zac's Haunted House*, has also published poetry collections by DL Thomas Moore, adding his scarred photographic images of bare-chested young men to Moore's disturbing poems about sadomasochism and neglect. Although DLs tend to be mostly male-identified, Salerno also met the female illustrator and performance artist Benedetta De Alessi in the comments section of Cooper's blog and the two were married in 2011. The comments section at *Dennis Cooper's* has been the site of innumerable other meetings and collaborations, encounters, intrigues, and even altercations since its launch in 2005, its development nurtured and sustained by Cooper's feedback and the enthusiasm of the commenters themselves.

In addition to forming the "backstage" part of *Dennis Cooper's*, this relatively small but enthusiastic artistic community also frequently dictates the content of the blog's front page and the trajectory of the blog itself. If a DL asks Cooper a question in the comments section, for instance, that question might be relayed to the group on the front-page the next day and then form the subject of a subsequent post (e.g. "The Ideal Music Festival" June 28 2005). Recurring "Self-portrait" days allow DLs to engage in their own autobiographical scrapbooking by posting pictures of themselves as children (July 15 2006) or at Halloween (October 20 2006) – for Paul Curran, days like this "helped to gel the blog" (2015). DLs are also encouraged to research their own posts on any topic, compile text, jpegs, and video links and then submit them to Cooper for

publication on the blog. Guest posts are frequently as detailed and encyclopaedic as Cooper's own, on subjects as varied as free jazz (curated by DL Jeff Jackson, October 9 2006), British comedian Chris Morris (curated by DL Joe Mills, November 10 2006), and American crooner Lorenz Hart (curated by DL David Ehrenstein, November 17 2006).

Exposed to the multifarious interests and activities of the community that inhabits the blog's comments section and made up in part of conversations between Cooper and DLs, *Dennis Cooper's* is as much about engagement as transmission: collaboration and community are essential parts of this immense, online project. Cooper states as much in an interview with Danny Kennedy.

> Kennedy: Could you say something on that kind of conflict between the work [on the blog] and the people who are contributing to it and how those things relate?
> Cooper: They're not in conflict. They're completely the same thing. They determine… they're collaborating with me in some way. Everything is shaped to bother them or surprise them or fool them or make them happy. It's all about that. (Cooper and Kennedy, 2008, p. 202)

Although Cooper evidently uses blogging's potential for the realisation of networked forms, as a participatory artwork *Dennis Cooper's* also recalls earlier offline modes of artistic production and is particularly reminiscent of a tradition of conceptual, neo-dada art that swept through Downtown New York in the 1960s and 1970s.

The work of artists influenced by John Cage such as Bernadette Mayer, Yoko Ono, Jackson Mac Low, Vito Acconci, and the Fluxus group offer preceding models for Cooper's blog in their attempt to create public art that foregrounds the principle of artistic cooperation. Mac Low, sometime founder-member of the international neo-dada art troupe Fluxus, whose work we encountered previously, attempted to de-hierarchize the structures of artistic production and reception which he believed occupied the field of mid-twentieth-century poetry. In chapter 4 we looked at Mac Low's procedural poetics and saw that his experimentation with diastics tried to replace subjectivity with an arbitrarily selected algorithm. Yet this kind of machine writing not only modifies the relation of the poet to the text – it also redistributes the relationship between poet and reader. Brian McHale's assessment of machine poetry such as Mac Low's finds that "the output of poetry machines… tends to be elliptical, discontinuous, 'gappy'. In such texts, the reader's share in production necessarily expands: the reader (who else?) is the one who supplements the ellipses, connects the disconnected part, fills in the gaps, and so on" (2000, p. 19). Consequently, Mac Low's poetry demands much of its reader, calling upon them to participate, not merely in the appreciation of a work but also in its completion. Mac Low's later

works extend this tendency and incorporate it into their performance: his "simultaneities" include vocal, instrument, and found text parts variously sung, played or spoken by a number of performers and are specifically designed as participatory pieces that enfold the performers voices and egos simultaneously. These works presage certain facets of Cooper's online anarchist network and represent Mac Low's attempt to summon into being, if only for the length of a performance, an elusive anarchist community.

> A longtime pacifist and anarchist, Mac Low has said his simultaneities are a microcosm of an ideal, free anarchist society. "The community made up of the performers", Mac Low said at a Bard College conference in 1999, "is a model of a society that has certain characteristics that I would like to see abound in the wider society: the individual performers exercise initiative and choice at all points during the piece, but are also...constructing an aural situation that is not merely a mixture of results of egoic impulses, but an aural construction that has a being of its own." (Poets.org, n.d.)

A contemporary of Mac Low, Vito Acconci similarly sought to open his art to input from the public: describing this facet of his art in terms that recall Cooper's designation of "distinguished locals", Acconci claims that "I accepted the fact that my work needed participants, inhabitants, *users*" (Acconci and Sherwin, 2008, my emphasis). His infamous 1972 piece "Seedbed", for instance (re-performed by artist Maria Abramović at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2005), found him at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York, hidden under a large wooden ramp, masturbating to the sound of gallery visitors' footsteps overhead for hours at a time. Broadcast via loudspeaker to those above him, his imagined erotic scenarios ("You're pushing your cunt down on my mouth"; "You're ramming your cock down into my ass") attempted to fabricate a kind of feedback loop of desire between the public and the unknown and unseen artist. "Acconci's larger goal was to involve the public in the work's production by establishing an 'intimate' connection with visitors", Teresa Smalec claims; "He followed the footsteps of those who traversed the space, encouraging patrons to view their audible movements as part of an amorous exchange: 'I am doing this with you now . . . I'm touching your hair . . . I'm running my hand down your back . . . I'm touching your ass'" (2006).[7] In this sense,

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[7] This determination to withdraw artistic privilege in favour of co-operative production continues to inspire his art: describing his recent art/architecture salon "Acconci Studio", for instance, he states:

> The way the Studio doesn't work is: I have an idea and everybody carries it out. The way the Studio does work is: sometimes – not always – I start a project with a general method: that's what I do best, general ideas, overall structures, I'm not so good at details – then we talk a lot, discuss and argue… and all the ideas change so that nobody knows anymore which is whose, and nobody cares… (Acconci and Sherwin, 2008)

Acconci's piece offers a more intimate antecedent to Cooper's project than Mac Low's "simultaneities": although both artists attempt to create collaborative, experimental, and ephemeral artworks, with "Seedbed" Acconci indicates the importance of infusing such work with desire. While perhaps not as explicitly erotic, the interactions that take place within *Dennis Cooper's* are also underwritten by desire – the desire of fans for their idols.

Dennis Cooper's becoming-idol

As noted above, *Dennis Cooper's* began as a type of informal personal website and supplement to his official site, which itself provides extensive information on the content and design of his books, specifics on previous collaborative projects, as well as biographical notes and news on upcoming releases.

> The guys who run my official website (www.denniscooper.net) asked vistors [sic] what they'd most want to be added to the site, and they chose a blog by me. (Note to voters: I wish you'd picked a message board. You're the mysterious ones, not me.) (2005b).

Despite this initial reluctance, his blog quickly filled with the kind of information Dennis Cooper fans would love. We read, for instance, that some of Cooper's favourite films are Robert Bresson's "The Devil, Probably", Orson Welles "Magnificent Ambersons", and Andy Warhol's "Chelsea Girls" (2005d), and he dislikes ex-Smashing Pumpkins frontman Billy Corgan (2005e). His favourite *Simpsons* character is Barney (2005f). Elsewhere we find gossipy details about Dennis Cooper's repeated attempts to secure a U.S. visa for his Russian boyfriend, the failure of these attempts, and his ultimate relocation from L.A. to Paris where, to his relief, his boyfriend acquires a visa from the French government (May – August 2005). Other posts consist of numerous polaroid pictures taken during the 1970s and 1980s, where Dennis Cooper appears alongside celebrities of the New York and Los Angeles literary scenes: John Ashbery, Donald Britton, Kenward Elmsie, Robert Glück, and Brad Gooch all make regular appearances (e.g. 2006f).

By revealing this kind of material about his life and offering readers the opportunity to chat with him, Cooper drew many fans to the site, a number of whom are still part of the blog's community of commenters. DL Thomas Moore, for instance, recalls being "very excited" when he found the blog: "I was a huge fan of Dennis Cooper's books. I can't remember when I first

read the blog but I think I was looking for interviews with Cooper online, and reading bits and pieces about him and I saw the blog linked or listed somewhere" (2015). Similarly, DL George Wines claims that, "what drew me to the blog was an interest in Dennis' work. When I saw what was going on at the blog and that he actually responded to commenters there, I commented. I've been commenting almost daily ever since" (2015). For DL Mark Gluth it was a short step from his own Dennis Cooper fan site to *Dennis Cooper's* and conversing with a group of fans that were also drawn there in the hope of gleaning new facts about their cult hero.

These DLs were not alone in their interest and excitement, and traffic to *Dennis Cooper's* was immense – at one point racking up more than 80,000 hits per day (see Cooper and Kennedy, 2008, p. 202). Suddenly, in two years, a relatively little-known cult writer found himself with a huge audience that tuned in daily to hear his opinions on the latest Lars Von Trier film, check out his favourite bands, read his work in progress, or send him a message. Given the massive increase in his renown as a result, it could be argued that the main reason for the blog's existence is to market Cooper and his work for financial gain.[8] Yet if his blog's popularity has resulted in his increased visibility, even a cursory scan of Cooper's earlier work is sufficient to contest the claim that selling books is the principal motivation of the blog. The phenomenon of fandom is simply too intriguing and important to him to employ his celebrity in a grasping and utilitarian way – Cooper frequently identifies as a fan (of Rimbaud, for instance) and writes about fans, hero-worship, and idolisation in thoughtful and compassionate ways.

His liner notes for the reissue of Sonic Youth's album *Sister* in 1994, for instance, is wholly preoccupied with the relationship between fans and their heroes. "Phoner", a fictional telephone interview between teenage Cubby and Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore, is written from the perspective of a teenage fan trying to make sense of the desire that underpins his relationship to Moore and to Sonic Youth's music. "What do you think of… fans like me?" Cubby asks Moore; "…you're glad we worship you? Cos we *do*" (2010d, p. 102, original emphasis). Later Cubby's "worshipping question" becomes more explicitly about the erotics of fandom, when he confesses,

> Shit… Don't, like, hate me, but… your music gives me a boner, ha ha ha. Always. It's weird. Especially the, uh, *Sister* album and… *especially* when *you're* singing. And *especially especially* on… You know in "Schizophrenia" when you sing that line about, uh, "Her brother says she's just a bitch with a golden chain?" Well, when you sing that, I'm thinking, "Yeah I *am* a bitch, Thurston", you know? (2010d, p. 103, original emphasis)

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[8] It is not clear if the blog's popularity translated into sales figures – however, it undoubtedly contributed to HarperCollins' offering Cooper a three-book deal with their Harper Perennial imprint in 2008.

The character of Cubby is tenderly drawn, allowing Sonic Youth fans like Cooper himself to identify with the teenager's hesitation, excitement, awkwardness, and hyperbolic appreciation of Moore: "He has *such a beautiful fucking surferish way of talking*. Wow! There *is* a God" (2010d, p. 104, original emphasis). This encounter between Cubby and Moore shows Cooper taking fandom seriously and evinces his sensitivity to the vulnerability of the fan, offering an empathetic examination of his powerlessness before his idol.

Moreover, the sheer volume of largely inconsequential, sometimes sensational biographical detail that is pasted daily onto the front page is too insistent and prolific to be driven by a mere opportunistic exploitation of his fanbase. There is more to Cooper's self-revelation than a desire to make money from these disclosures and he appears to amplify or modulate aspects of the blog to produce slightly unsettling results. This is consistent with his stated intention to use the blog as an opportunity for formal improvisation: early posts, for instance, describe it as "a place to experiment" (2005c), specifically "having to do with structure and form" (2005b). "I'm trying to do something really different with the blog", he tells Danny Kennedy:

> But the blog is interesting because the blog really can be almost anything. It's a very limited form. Because I feel like in a way it's like going back to the beginning again, because I can do anything inside these rules and these strict things about what size the pictures can be and where they can be placed and what links you can do and what you can't do and all that stuff… It's me using the blog and not having any kind of respect for what a blog is. (2008, pp. 198–9)

As we saw in the case of *Frisk*, Cooper's writing often takes certain forms that would seem to bind his creative expression and bends them to his will: thus the Möbius strip that would seem to put limits on subjective expression ultimately comes to amplify its effect. Here, similarly, Cooper plays with blogging's "totally degraded form", turning its traditional use as a site of autobiographical revelation into something altogether weirder and more compelling (Cooper and Kennedy, 2008, p. 201).

One of the unusual effects of Cooper's blogging experiment is that the patient, meticulous collection and display of Dennis Cooper-related paraphernalia seems to transcribe Cooper's biographical minutiae with the compulsive care of a Dennis Cooper fan – his blog begins to resemble a fan's scrapbook of a literary idol. Dennis Cooper's "Rules of Writing" are pasted into the entry of 27th June ("Characters are not real people. They are designs with human names. The design itself can be revised into any other design as long as it retains its name and keeps you fascinated while you're writing"). July fills with photos of Dennis Cooper's L.A. pad, French friends, and his Russian boyfriend. August 11th brings another Dennis Cooper writing exercise

where readers can learn to write like Dennis. September: more visa troubles. The intimate association between these blog postings and a fan's scrapbook looks intentional on Cooper's part when we consider his repeated use of scrapbooks in the early stages of his work's development, a technique he first encountered while working with William S. Burroughs' archive in the 1970s.

> I was able to really study the scrapbooks that Burroughs had made while writing his early novels, and I was very inspired and influenced by the way Burroughs had combined texts, both original and found, with magazine images and photographs in a collage-like way, and I thought that trying to work out my ideas and sense of style and structure through that kind of multi-media approach without the pressure of having to start writing novels might help me, and it really did. (Cooper and Bladh, 2014)

In the 1970s and 1980s, Cooper used scrapbooks to assist his exploration of contemporary celebrity culture and idolisation – efforts that ultimately contributed to the writing of *Idols* and other works from that period. His extensive JFK Jr. scrapbook (1973-79), for instance, forms the basis of "Some Adventures of John Kennedy Jr.", a series of thirteen poems from *Idols*. Comprising 112 pages of clippings (e.g. photos, news items, gossip columns) taken from celebrity magazines and newspapers such as *The National Enquirer* and *Movie Life*, Cooper's JFK Jr. scrapbook details the particulars of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Jr.'s adolescence from the death of his father to his entrance to Brown University. JFK Jr. stares out from every page of this obsessively-compiled folder: in grainy black and white, "John John" stands solemnly by his father's grave; in a full two-page spread, he plays in the snow with his mother; bold tabloid text over another picture exclaims "Kennedy son sent away: How drugs almost cost John Jr. his life"; three pages depict John on the beach, older now and naked from the waist up.

Scrapbooks like this one are meditations on the phenomenon of celebrity in American post-War culture. Reminiscent of Andy Warhol's serial paintings of Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy, they explore an American obsession with the rich and famous, which is symptomatic of a "spectaclist" American society of Debordian proportions that "announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles": "everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (Debord, 1970, n.p., §11; 1). Specifically, Cooper's scrapbooks investigate the dislocation of subjectivity induced by the media's repeated representation of celebrity – how a persistent bombardment of images of the same person may result in a withdrawal of their subject such that representation comes to supersede reality. Cooper stresses this feature in a recent interview about his scrapbooks: "I was very interested in 'the teen idol' at the time," he recalls; "I was very interested by the way those boys were emptied out of meaning by the media

and by their image-makers" (Cooper and Bladh, 2014). We will detail the intersections between Cooper's blog and a Warhol-inspired seriality in the following section but perhaps it is sufficient to note here that his scrapbooks trace the becoming-idol of teenage celebrities like John F. Kennedy Jr. and offer a glimpse of the process undertaken by Cooper's subsequent self-scrapbooking.

The blog format, which encourages and even expects persistent self-presentation, constantly offers its writer the opportunity (or responsibility) to promote themselves and their work and quickly construct autobiographies that structure their discussions. Cooper's blog, as we have seen, executes its form of self-presentation as a kind of scrapbook, akin those that might be compiled by a Sonic Youth fan or a teen heart-throb's young admirer or those assembled by Cooper himself in previous decades. However, taking scrapbooks as one of the conceptual supports of Cooper's much later blog-as-scrapbook introduces an estranging effect into this archetypally autobiographical text. Here we witness the becoming-idol of Dennis Cooper and, although his name hovers over every post, *Dennis Cooper's* fails to capture its subject.[9]

Hotel Cooper

The point of Cooper's self-scrapbooking is to maintain an alluring, almost holographic presence in the middle of the blog that stokes the interest of Dennis Cooper fans, draws them to the site, and keeps them there as a loosely-bound community while simultaneously removing himself from the centre. In effect, Cooper is trying to create a network that avoids the errors of the Beyond Baroque scene – fabricating a community that has a magnetic, affective charge but that is also acephalic. Cooper usually undertakes this process slowly and subtly; its effect is necessarily cumulative so it is normally only perceptible on a macro level. Nonetheless, there are particular instances where Cooper tips his hand and his project appears in microcosm. On 13th of August 2005, he publishes the following post.

> Saturday
> -- Wake up feeling burnt out. (Our hotel room window faces an apartment building where very late last night some young gay guy and his mother had a screaming, hysterical, hours-long, sleep destroying fight. (Sample dialogue: Mom: "Louie! Louie! Louie! I'm your fucking mother! I don't want you to do that!" Louie: "Fuck you, mother! This is my life! This is my fucking life! Get out of my fucking life! I'm nothing, mother! Nothing! Nothing!")

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[9] Thus the blog's apostrophe seems to indicate a proprietorial designation (e.g. "Dennis Cooper's place") yet as an abbreviated form of "Dennis Cooper is", it also gestures toward a project of self-presentation that is fulfilled daily yet remains forever incomplete.

-- Drink lots of coffee, smoke a few cigarettes. (Remember to try to find a store, any store in Paris that sells Camel Wide Lights as I'm scarily down to three packs.)

-- Walk to Columbus Café to buy a caramel-apple muffin. (Observation: when French guys are beautiful, they're knee-buckling beautiful; when they're ugly, they're interesting ugly like character actors.)
-- Fiddle with the order, contents of my poetry collection. Work on this one longish, fucked up prose poem I've been trying and failing to salvage for about a year now.
-- Read the International Herald Tribune. (The Dodgers lost again?! No impeachment proceedings against Bush yet?! Courtney Love isn't really clean and sober?! 'Stealth' is a box office flop?!)
-- Sex. (n.o.y.b., m.f.) (2005g)

This apparently throwaway piece is important because reveals the continual oscillation between self-assertion and self-abnegation that characterises the operation underway in Cooper's blog. The most explicit indication of this is the piece's conspicuous absence of a subject: the post recounts events, makes plans, registers observations, notes reminders – almost all without the presence of an "I". Ostensibly itemising a day in the life of Dennis Cooper, the subtraction of a subject immediately puts the notion of an agent behind these activities into question.

The post is evocative of a New York School style and is especially suggestive of O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems: Cooper's trip to the Columbus Café for a caramel-apple muffin in particular seems to retrace the steps of O'Hara's observant *flâneur* and his fondness for confectionary. Including *The International Herald Tribune* – an international English-language newspaper that employed John Ashbery as its art critic while he lived in Paris during the 1950s and 1960s – reinforces this New York School association, as do Cooper's O'Hara-esque exclamations about what he reads ("The Dodgers lost again?!"). The list-like quality of the writing, meanwhile, recalls Kenneth Koch's work and the poems of latter-generation New York School writers like Anne Waldman, Joe Brainard, and Tim Dlugos. Down to the teasing, flirtatious "Sex (n.o.y.b., m.f.)" ("none of your business, my friends"), the piece is a dense collage of New York School styles and references. Yet it reads like an iteration that is pushed almost to the point of pastiche – a deluge of allusions that threatens to overcome the specific, personal quality of the blog post. The piece is recognisably New York School, but is there a subject in the style?

The key to understanding this piece lies in its opening section, which finds Cooper awake in a hotel, exhausted after a sleepless night. The setting is crucial here as the hotel room itself signifies the theme of selfhood and its abolition. Hotel rooms offer a few square-footage of personal space in the vast, often foreign urban sprawl. Individual cells to which visitors may retreat to recompose themselves after a day in the crowded city, they can also be blank spaces hospitable the expression of desires that might otherwise be impeded by one's moral or ethical

attachments: Wayne Koestenbaum remarks that "hotel uncanniness wakes us from lostness in the 'They' – peer pressure, social norms, the noise of crowd-think" (2007, p. 38). Yet "the hallmarks of hotel experience", Koestenbaum continues, "are not-being-there, emptiness, automation, mechanical transmission" and if hotel rooms grant their occupants a certain liberty from "lostness", the iterability of the space also induces anonymity (2007, p. 48). Tourists, travelling business-types, drifters, runaways, etc. – for this procession of unknown characters home is briefly a bed with starchy sheets, a Formica table, single-serving coffee, a glass wrapped in plastic. To inhabit a hotel room is to partially identify oneself with its identikit accommodations, to become lost in that endless, faceless procession of guests, and to concede one's anonymity within it.

For the subject, therefore, hotel rooms are paradoxical zones where one's identity is continually menaced by the vacancy of being-identical. Cooper is predisposed to ideas of symmetry so it is not surprising that Louie's hysterical declarations in the apartment opposite reflect this aspect of hotel rooms. "Fuck you, mother! This is my life! This is my fucking life! Get out of my fucking life! I'm nothing, mother! Nothing! Nothing!" Poised between a vehement affirmation of selfhood ("This is my life!") and an almost simultaneous withdrawal of that self, leaving "Nothing! Nothing!", Louie's dialogue mirrors the status of Cooper in his hotel room, which is itself representative of Cooper's on-going attempts on his blog to scrapbook himself into obscurity.

This amplification of autobiography to the paradoxical point of opaqueness extends into the twenty-first century a mode of poetic composition undertaken by Cooper's friend Joe Brainard in the 1970s. Brainard's famous poem *I Remember* (1970-75), for instance, bears a striking resemblance to *Dennis Cooper's'* almost compulsive self-presentation and manipulation – through extension – of authorial identity. In Brainard's work, a lengthy series of aphoristic (and apparently honest) reminiscences are announced by a ubiquitous "I remember".

> I remember the first time I got a letter that said "After Five Days Return To" on the envelope, and I thought that after I had kept the letter for five days I was supposed to return it to the sender.
> I remember the kick I used to get going through my parents' drawers looking for rubbers. (Peacock.)
> I remember when polio was the worst thing in the world.
> I remember pink dress shirts. And bola ties.
> I remember when a kid told me that those sour clover-like leaves we used to eat (with little yellow flowers) tasted so sour because dogs peed on them. I remember that didn't stop me from eating them.
> I remember the first drawing I remember doing. It was of a bride with a very long train.
> I remember my first cigarette. It was a Kent. Up on a hill. In Tulsa, Oklahoma.

> With Ron Padgett.
> I remember my first erections. I thought I had some terrible disease or something. (2012, p. 5)

The above sequence continues in the original 1970 edition for 32 pages and in subsequent editions for up to 138 pages and has recently become the focus of critical interest for the manner in which it engages with contemporary Pop art to produce a serial self. While lines such as these evoke the lyric subject, therefore, their collection of biographical detail, arranged in a series and stamped with a recurring brand speaks more to Pop art works like Andy Warhol's famous Campbell Soup Cans (1982) than post-War Confessional poetry. For critic Andy Fitch, such an incessant "serial realist" display of a seemingly transparent self, produces a queer effect: "Brainard's project at first appears to provide a fixed focal-point of projective identification, but finally presents an amorphous, polytemporal subject beyond the range of even the most empathic reader" (2012, p. 161/179). *I Remember*'s poetic voice is ultimately discrete but indistinct, everywhere but elusive.

> Anticipating poststructuralist calls to deauthor poetic production, Brainard elects not to explode or erase the "I", but (all the more devastatingly, as Warhol and Lichtenstein prove through their departures from previous abstract painting) to repeat it – confounding rather than parodying, the lyric subject's authentic coordinates at a particular time and place. (2012, pp. 178–179)

Brainard's serial repetition of the self, which curves toward anonymity while retaining an affective charge, may thus find modern expression in the cyber-scrapbook of Dennis Cooper's blog.

In assuming such a method of composition, Cooper affirms his continued participation in a tradition of Pop-inflected poetry that in addition to Brainard includes the work of James Schuyler, Lewis Warsh, and Cooper's friends Eileen Myles and David Trinidad. According to Fitch, such work constructs "a pixelated, post-Romantic lyric 'I', an 'eye' that enables post-War poetics to assimilate the affect-heavy, perspectively fluid simulacra of pop-cultural narrative" (2012, p. 48). Myles' work is especially consonant with Cooper's in this regard and her "An American Poem" in particular improvises upon a confessional register, expanding its lyric subject exponentially in order to accommodate the poem's imagined audience. The poem commences, "I was born in Boston in/1949" and right away this reads like a Confessional poem: Myles was born in Boston in 1949. The poet then divulges details about her privileged childhood as part of "a wealthy and powerful/American family", from whose "collective fate" she tries to escape.

> I hopped
> on an Amtrak to New
> York in the early
> '70s and I guess
> you could say
> my hidden years
> began. I thought
> Well I'll be a poet.
> What could be more
> foolish and obscure.
> I became a lesbian. (1991, p. 14)

These details are also public record: Myles came to New York from Boston in 1974 and was immediately swept up in the New York School scene, taking workshops at the Poetry Project and hanging out with poets like Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley. For a while, she even worked as an assistant to James Schuyler: in her 2010 "poet's novel" *Inferno*, she recalls that her job amounted to "getting $235 a week to sit in the Chelsea with Jimmy and bitch about Chris and my gay life; bring him the paper and make the French toast (getting him totally fat)" (2010, p. 114). Myles is also an out lesbian – she describes her coming out at her first reading at the Poetry Project to Kimberly Lamm: "I was part of the St. Marks scene and I got my first Wednesday night reading there, in the fall of '77, I was in love with a girl for the first time and willing to say so and willing to write about it, and it just seemed like some wonderful new operation started to occur in my poems at that time too" (2002).

Yet the apparently autobiographical voice Myles sets up soon reveals that the "famous/Boston family" she has supposedly run away from is in fact the Kennedys. "Yes/I am a Kennedy" she publicly declares; "And I await/your orders" (1991, p. 15). Coming out of a specific, factually-anchored, quasi-autobiographical "I" into the rather more indefinite "a Kennedy", this confession also precipitates a shift in the poem from a confessional tone towards an oratorical one, as the poet assumes her status as the people's candidate and rails against rates of homelessness, AIDS, the lack of basic medical care, and rising rents. She has been sheltered from these problems, she says, because she is a Kennedy but, she asks, "Shouldn't we all be Kennedys?" The poem's closing lines then insist with expansive, Whitmanesque inclusivity upon the Kennedy name as a point of collective identification that runs contrary to "the message of Western/Civilisation": "I am alone".

> Am I alone tonight?
> I don't think so. Am I
> the only one with bleeding gums
> tonight. Am I the only
> homosexual in this room

tonight. Am I the only
one whose friends have
died, are dying now.
And my art can't
be supported until it is
gigantic, bigger than
everyone else's, confirming
the audience's feeling that they are
alone. That they alone
are good, deserved
to buy the tickets
to see this Art.
Are working,
are healthy, should
survive, and are
normal. Are you
normal tonight? Everyone
here, are we all normal.
It is not normal for
me to be a Kennedy.
But I am no longer
ashamed, no longer
alone. I am not
alone tonight because
we are all Kennedys.
And I am your President. (1991, pp. 16–17)

In a manner that recalls Cooper's retreat behind the scrapbooked idol of Dennis Cooper, in Myles' poem a queer slumming heiress that passes for Eileen Myles sheds her poet's rags as she is cast as a member of the Kennedy clan. For Myles being a Kennedy means being a somebody – cloaking oneself in the mantle of privilege and celebrity – yet as Maggie Nelson succinctly observes, her poem "cannily performs being 'somebody' and 'nobody' at the same time" (2007, p. 182). Here Myles shows that being a somebody is like being a nobody: the self-assertion of the lyric subject ("I am") is consistently undermined by its association with an iconic name ("a Kennedy").[10] Fame is crucial to Myles' improvisation: in this poem the famous image can conceal the self, an operation which, I have argued, distinguishes the self-scrapbooking and self-idolisation Cooper undertakes with his blog. Furthermore, for Cooper and Myles this image may be used as a focal point from which to challenge the loneliness and isolation of modern American society – something "we" may all gather around.

"An American Poem" attests to Myles' commitment to retooling the lyric subject in order

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[10] "I am a Kennedy" in this sense echoes Rimbaud's famous "I is an other" (*je est un autre*) and both lines evoke a precarious balance between subjective assertion and its suppression in otherness (see Rimbaud, 2003a, p. 31).

to implicate the reader in a communal experience comparable to the one Cooper tries to bring about on his blog. However, while Myles' poem expands the self and then the all-American family such that it can include all of the poem's implied (American) audience, developing an online network out of a veritable multitude of independent voices is a more involved affair. It requires more than mere inclusion by fiat and in order for this network to come into being, as we read in the sections above, Cooper has to both attract fans to his site *and* keep them there: by engaging with them every day, provoking and facilitating interactions between them, and regularly handing over the front-page of the blog to them, Cooper turns his blog into a participatory artwork that is co-authored by a network of collaborators.

Solitude and the swarm

From centralized to distributed intelligence, from NCP to TCP/IP, from broadcast to engagement: the history of the Internet is that of the progressive subtraction of centralized, hermetic, and homogeneous structures. As a network of networks or a "hypernetwork", which can facilitate the erosion of hierarchical power structures and cultivate spontaneous order, it is an exemplary anarchistic arrangement. The orientation of the Internet is in sync with the particular brand of anarchist thought we have detailed in Cooper's work so far – especially his criticism of hierarchical social forms, which attempt to transform the multiplicity of identity and desire into a monotonous unit. Thus when Cooper regards the "banding together" of a gay community after the Stonewall riots, for instance, while appreciative of its political intent to assert individuals' "inalienable rights", he is plainly hostile to its effect on the literary imagination.

> Before Stonewall, homosexuality was a kind of flotsam that occasionally washed up on fiction's cutting edges, along with such topics as drug use and criminal activity… But with liberation, the subject was effectively normalized. So began the age of the traditionally plotted, realistic, worldly gay novel in which likeable gay characters dealt likeably with traditional everyday traumas like mortgage payments, job stress, prostate cancer and relationships gone sour. (2010e, pp. 67–8)[11]

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[11] Cooper's denigration of Gay Literature here specifically targets conservative writing aimed at a lucrative gay market that exfoliates dissidence. As he states elsewhere: "Gay Fiction has become something of a money maker for major publishing houses and therefore desirable to them within limits. Naturally, I guess a lot of lesbian and gay male writers are gearing their work accordingly"; as a result, "writers with original voices, old and young, both those who've already blurred homosexuality and language interestingly for decades and those writers now following in their footsteps are being treated as fringe talents, curiosities, even as politically incorrect troublemakers within gay literature itself, which is spooky" (1990).

Conversely, we recall that he writes appreciatively of the nebulous 90s queer networks and the furious energy of their avant-garde zines: "Mutually supportive for the most part, but individualistic in outlook and design, these zines share a hatred for political correctness, yuppification, and all things bourgeois, especially within gay culture" (2010c, p. 2).

For Cooper, traditional forms of community eliminate difference and individuality, thereby inhibiting artistic creativity. Networks, on the other hand, allow for the formation of alternative communities that are conducive to both individual expression and mutual support. His description of the *Userlands* anthology, for instance, insists upon the "kind of unofficial mode of disseminating work that has become possible through the phenomenon of blogging, and how this networking and community building among writers has allowed for work of a more individualistic and original nature than that generally passing through the university system into the publishing world" (2006g). Elsewhere, he describes this community as a specifically anarchist one, claiming "it interests me as an anarchist thing" and, highlighting the political valence of its structure (i.e. the network form), he says: "It's more interesting to me in terms of politics 'cause I'm really trying to consciously break down the power structure there all the time. But at the same time I can't completely break it down because the front page is mine" (Cooper and Kennedy, 2008, p. 201/203). Furthermore, while he works tirelessly to sustain the community by posting and responding to the blog's participants six days a week, he nonetheless acknowledges the precariousness of its construction: Cooper seems very much aware that the elemental mutability of networks, coupled with the Internet's mercurial composition imbues the community with an inbuilt obsolescence: "It has to stay up on the internet – that's what I like about it… Even so, it slowly dies because the links die, different things die" (Cooper and Kennedy, 2008, p. 201). Indeed, most of the posts referenced in this chapter have experienced some degree of blog-rot: disappearing photos, dead links, severed connections between posts in the archive. In effect, returning to Hakim Bey's formulation detailed in the first chapter, we may characterise *Dennis Cooper's* as a Temporary Autonomous Zone – a "forbidden moment" of "insurrection blossoming spontaneously into anarchist culture" whose significance should not be measured by its longevity: as Bey writes, "the TAZ must vanish, it will vanish, leaving behind it an empty husk, only to spring up again somewhere else" (1990). We may conclude, therefore, that a project like *Dennis Cooper's* allows its author to employ the simple apparatus of the blog, its visibility, accessibility, and its potential for autobiographical manipulation, in order to produce ideal conditions for the ephemeral appearance of an anarchist cyber-network.

In this study we have charted the back-and-forth in Cooper's life and work between the individual and the community. We have seen him "reach for" another in *Idols*, only to push back against gay collectivism in *Safe*; we watched as he embraced literary society at Beyond Baroque,

then fled for the solipsism of the George Miles cycle. We have observed him suspended between an affirmation of subjective isolation and a contradictory yearning for society – between an anguished appraisal of solitude and a condemnation of community. In his blog, however, for the first time we witness a cessation of earlier hostilities between one and the many. Here, Cooper's work may be emphatically subjective at the same time as it is porous and hospitable to encounters with others. *Dennis Cooper's* networked form is the culmination of Cooper's efforts: an anarchistic equilibrium that allows him to participate in a vibrant, trans-national artistic community very much on his own terms.

Coda

Encoded

The Marbled Swarm: A Novel

> *"…left the Christian Brothers, and*
>
> (Section illegible – Editor)
>
> *Ninth Circle. Now it's my favourite."*
>
> (Tim Dlugos)[1]

This final section is an open-ended investigation of Cooper's latest writing, which offers possibilities for future lines of inquiry. I argue that while Cooper continues to be concerned with anarchism, desire, and ideations of community, in his recent work he adopts an alternative strategy to the one explored in the last chapter. For an author who employs autobiography to such great effect in his blog, lately Cooper appears more suspicious than one might expect about ideas of transparency, openness, and lucidity in general. Turning away from the frank revelations of the blog and losing itself in riddles and codes, secrecy and concealment are the major structural features of Cooper's latest prose work, *The Marbled Swarm: A Novel* (2011). Meanwhile, his new "HTML novel", *Zac's Haunted House* (2015), composed of cascading lists of animated images Cooper found online, is written in an obscure, private idiom that only Cooper can articulate – and few can comprehend without great difficulty.[2] In this concluding section, we will see that Cooper's *The Marbled Swarm* is a radical challenge to the primacy of the visible that courses through modern society and a riposte to the over-sharing so characteristic of life online and the obverse of the project we outlined in the previous chapter. Hewn from secrets and cloaked in codes, it is also a novel that revels in obscurity and fosters the impression of shadowy underworld communities. This coda explores Cooper's interest in obscurity from the position of

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[1] Contributor note in: Cooper, 1980, p. 50.

[2] Although one reviewer was inclined to see *Zac's Haunted House* as "something of an about-face from [Cooper's] last novel" the works are contiguous in their obsession with puzzles and codes (Bradley, 2015): "The more closely one searches and decodes its carefully detailed sequences and construction", runs the novel's description on *Dennis-cooper.net*, the more one reveals "a deep and fraught fiction puzzle" ("News: *Zac's Haunted House* available now", 2015).

his queer radicalism and establishes provisional, trans-historical associations between his work and the subcultures of queers and anarchists that inhabit the marginal, occluded spaces of twentieth-century history.

Decoding The Marbled Swarm

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault famously charts the evolution of the disciplinary regime, outlining the principal features of a transition from a sovereign society, in which discipline was enforced through confinement and seclusion, to a contemporary disciplinary society, remarkable for the primacy of visibility and observation; "from a schema of exceptional discipline to one of a generalized surveillance" (1995, p. 207). A disciplinary society, according to Foucault, is one which derives from the permanent visibility of the social subject and their observation, real or imagined; which requires that its persons be legible at all times to the panoptic gaze of the disciplinary apparatus. Under these conditions, the constant exposure of the subject to the possibility of surveillance results in an internalisation and concomitant proliferation of the machinery of discipline.

> He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (1995, pp. 202–3)

Constant visibility effectively induces the subject to forever unveil themselves and become the means of their own domination: "on the whole, therefore, one can speak of the formation of a disciplinary society in this movement that stretches from the enclosed disciplines, a sort of social 'quarantine' to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of 'panopticism'" (1995, p. 216).

From a Foucaultian perspective, then, ours is a context determined by the absolute primacy of the visible: thus, individuals willingly unfold the most private pleats of consciousness before the databank of social media. Governments similarly demand absolute transparency of the self in order to evince one's innocence until proven otherwise. Even dissent, in order to be considered as such, must present itself in terms which are immediately legible to the status quo: recent responses to quasi-anarchist collectives such as Occupy Wall Street, for example, speak of the need for "positive objectives" – "to be for something specific and not just against something" (Bill Clinton qtd. in Weinger, 2011). Within this panoptic landscape, a subject's commitment to secrecy and concealment – effective negations of the *sine qua non* of such a

social context – is imbued with a radical significance.

Foucault's provocative analysis of the disciplinary society and his emphasis on the principle of visibility offers an especially useful prism through which we may begin to theorise Cooper's *The Marbled Swarm*, his most difficult and complex book to date. The strategies of concealment that structure the work indicate Cooper's interest in obscurity – in its very form the novel explores alternatives to the ceaseless exposure and consequent subjugation that marks the modern disciplinary society and its regulation of resistance. *The Marbled Swarm* is the opaque antithesis of Cooper's blog, whose apparently unfettered autobiographical openness allowed him to conjure up an online community: although sociability is also suggested here, it is one of shadows and cyphers that resonates productively with the dissident society of anarchist seditionists at the end of the nineteenth century and twentieth-century queer dissenters in their turn.

The Marbled Swarm is a perplexing text that offers its reader the testimony of an arrogant, rich, twenty-something Frenchman who haltingly recounts in baroque prose, a circuitous journey through a labyrinthine chateau in the French countryside to his flat in the Marais area of Paris. Along the way, the unnamed narrator persuades us that he is part of a small group of affluent Parisian cannibals, with whose help he murders his brother, a depressive teenager and Manga fanatic, by fucking him violently then repeatedly rolling a heavy barrel over him. Hidden passageways behind false walls of French chateaus and mansions abound, and voyeurism is a recurring theme. I would argue, however, that these incidents represent only the most superficial layer of Cooper's text and to mistake them for the most significant aspect is to look at things rather back to front. The main focus of the text, and the aspect that concerns us here, is the eponymous marbled swarm: the narrator's manner of speaking, which he inherits from his stepfather. This comprises a number of interlocking systems of speech derived, at least in the father's authoritative version, from a variety of different European languages and registers,

> spoken at a taxing pace in trains of sticky sentences that round up thoughts as broadly as a vacuum. Ideally its tedium is counteracted by linguistic decorations with which the speaker can design the spiel to his requirements. The result, according to this mode's inventor is that one's speech becomes an entity as open-ended as the air it fills and yet as dangerous to travel as a cluttered, unlit room in which someone has hidden, say, a billion euros. (2011, p. 49)

This kind of obscurity adheres to the narrator's descriptions of the marbled swarm which, we are led to infer, may have magical effects: it is hinted, for example, that the father's vast accumulated wealth has been one consequence of its deployment (2011, p. 49).

Yet the son's version and the one that we are reading is a flawed imitation, involving

different systems, badly integrated, which fail to produce the same manipulative effect. It is, the narrator laments, a bad cover version of an original classic: "my marbled swarm is more of an atonal, fussy bleat – somewhat marbled yet far too frozen tight and thinned by my loquaciousness to do the swarming it implies" (2011, p. 49). Nonetheless, this version is sufficiently marbled to produce the disconcerting effect of the novel itself, which, though initially part murder-mystery, part Sadean nightmare, increasingly comes to draw one's focus away from the pursuit of such sensationalist currents toward the crosshatched surface of the text itself. The reader's interpretive energies subtly evolve into investigative ones, their attention conducted toward deciphering the multitude of narrative threads (or, what Cooper calls "tunnels" (Cooper and Chaplinsky, 2011) which litter the plane of the text and whose intermingling, we realize, constitutes the plane itself. The supremacy of ostensible plot (that of a cannibal's murderous travelogue) is demoted, woven into and around the others to produce an undulating textual fabric. Cooper suggests this in an interview with *The Paris Review*:

> I thought about each element of the novel, whether it was a narrative thread or character or reference point or an on-going motif or tone or rhythm. The idea was that they would always be there, but they would be emphasized or de-emphasized at different points, mixed into the foreground, middle ground, or background, being moved around constantly so the reader's attention would be directed all over the place. My idea was that it would give the writing a three-dimensional quality, as the reader is carried along by the musical surface of the novel, but he or she would also be chasing different story lines and recurring ideas as they waver and scamper about and hide inside the prose. (Cooper and Silverberg, 2011, p. 197)

A brief look at one of the more densely plotted sequences of *The Marbled Swarm* may provide us with an idea of how this strategy works. The fifth part of the novel opens with the revelation that, unbeknownst to all including his lawyer, the narrator's recently-deceased stepfather was in possession of a chateau in northern France. Attempting to find out more about the property and ascertain its value, the lawyer tells the narrator that he has found scant reference to it despite his extensive searches. However, he was informed by the mayor of a nearby village that in the chateau's gardens there exists a mysterious and peculiar-looking playhouse designed to resemble something from a comic book. The account quickly segues into a description of the narrator's final meal with his father, who reveals his discovery, years earlier, of a network of hidden rooms and passages in their previous home which, he was told, were installed by a contemporary of Sade. He then confides that his attraction to magic, rather than voyeurism motivated the construction of secret rooms and passageways in their new home, an old shoe-factory in central Paris.

The rest of the section continues in this way: shifting from one narrative track to another, splicing sequences together, taking up themes discarded in previous sections; fraying narratives replaced by others, storylines intersecting at unexpected moments and escaping in surprising directions. However, embedded within these prominent narrative threads (the spooky chateau, magic, the culinary arts, and so on), are the vague features of still more plotlines. Passages in this section open onto fairy-tales (we are told that "the playhouse would huff and puff"), Disney motifs (a child is said to be "goofy"), comic books (the narrator refers to himself as "a kind of Robin who wasn't wedded to uncley Batman but rather hypnotized into an unwitting shadow of the Dark Knight") and acting or performance ("[the narrator's] father's head… starred the long face he had generally fastened to the world" (2011, pp. 129, 131, 132, 133). Such a sequence may not impress the reader who wishes to be informed of the ultimate fate of a particular character; one, however, who has learned to decode *The Marbled Swarm*'s simultaneously functioning plots, themes, and rhythms; who can chase down its tones or chase its tones down the fictional tunnels Cooper constructs, will experience it rather differently.

This use of encryption that by turns signals and buries narrative strands in the throng of the marbled swarm is an essential feature of *The Marbled Swarm* (and its marbled swarm) and one that is explicitly and repeatedly noted by the novel's narrator. Reflecting upon the narrative's construction, for example, the he confides that:

> Everything you've read thus far was more mischievous than you imagined… you're advised that what you see around you – walls, if you're hallucinating, or certain facts, if you're my readers – are potentially encrypted – with passageways if you're chateau guests, or subtexts if you're with me… (2011, p. 60)

In interview, Cooper is also unambiguous about the use of various codes in order to create the text's mystifying effect: "It is a puzzle and it can be solved" he seductively explains; "There's [sic] many, many, many clues – everything there is kind of a clue. You can believe the narrator when he says, I have an emotional problem and I've been lying to you –if you want. But it is solvable" (Cooper and Chaplinsky, 2011). In the following sections I will argue that a consideration of *The Marbled Swarm*'s secretive strategies allows us to make out not only the myriad concealed and visible passages that underlie its apparent tale of Gallic cannibalism; it also allows us to perceive that underneath the work itself lies yet another grid of interlacing passages which lead out of Cooper's text and away from the twenty-first century. The most significant of these pertain to the oblique systems of communication utilized by sexually dissident subcultures in the twentieth century and, deeper still, the deception and duplicity employed in anarchist propaganda since

at least the end of the nineteenth century.

Encoding queer desire 1930 – 1970

Throughout the preceding chapters, we found Cooper's writing to be rather sceptical of the idea of a monolithic gay identity and the notion of a gay community in particular: his work persistently eschews the reification of homosexual desire and the adoption of normative taxonomies of sexual identity. Rather than present his readers with affirmative representations of gay relationality, for instance, he instead confronts and trespasses the bounds of normative registers of sexuality (gay and straight) offering accounts of marginal, illicit, and socially reprehensible forms of sexual desire. His refusal to go with the gay flow has not done him any favours: *Closer* was rejected by numerous major publishing houses because Cooper's impressionistic portrait of queer male adolescence failed to conform to conventional gay stereotypes (Cooper, 1987b). Even more unsettlingly – and not un-ironically given his previous publishing difficulties – following the publication of *Frisk* in 1991, Cooper received a death threat from a gay direct action group for what was perceived as that novel's *perpetuation* of murderous homosexual stereotypes.

Cooper's sceptical detachment from the normative nomenclature of sexual identity is sustained by the narrator of *The Marbled Swarm* as he nonchalantly defers responsibility for the designation of his sexual orientation to the reader in statements such as, "were I gay and not the creep to whom you'll turn the other cheek soon enough" (2011, p. 5); "were I even half as gay as you imagine" (2011, p. 7); "were I gay or, if you insist, entirely gay I would have... well you tell me. I'm not gay enough to know" (2011, p. 46). Nonetheless, despite this continued suspicion of identity politics, and his reputation as "an outlaw, even in outlaw worlds", I contend that Cooper does affirm, if subtly and provisionally, his participation in a tradition of sexually dissident expression (John Waters, qtd. in Lev, 2006b, p. 132). The techniques of encryption and encoding deployed in *The Marbled Swarm* evoke strategies of covert communication and oblique expression utilized by queer subcultures since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. The two forms I consider here are Sapphic modernist *romans à clef*, occasionally employed by writers like H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Djuna Barnes, and the secret language of Polari, which circulated most widely within British queer communities in the forties and fifties.[3]

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[3] The following study might have been bookended by a consideration of the use of green carnations, a nod to Oscar Wilde which identified its wearer as homosexual (Bartlett, 1988, p. 52), and flagging or handkerchief codes, which circulated particularly within the gay BDSM subculture in the 1980s and denoted its bearer's preferred sexual practice (see Gambetta, 2011, pp. 166–168).

While the origin of the *roman à clef* (a novel in which biographical detail is often barely concealed beneath anodyne prose) dates from seventeenth century France, its function as a satirical or parodic mode of address, which speaks uncomfortable truths to power from behind a fictional screen, has assured its continued usage to the present day (*Primary Colours* (1996), Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2005), and Robert Harris' *The Ghost* (2007), for instance, are all popular works which utilize *roman à clef* techniques). For early twentieth-century women novelists who wished to publish narratives featuring same-sex desire, the *roman à clef* also offered a unique opportunity to have their work buoyed up by the current of mainstream publishing. American (and some English) writers of so-called Sapphic *romans à clef* used the form in order to express personal lusts and private trysts in ways that succeeded in circumventing the panoptic gaze of anti-obscenity legislation.[4] As Sashi Nair's study asserts,

> In the period between the world wars, a number of female modernist authors mobilized a particular version of the *roman à clef* genre in order to represent a desire that was seemingly unspeakable, strategically deploying references to personal experience as a means to simultaneously reveal and encrypt same-sex emotional and physical attachments. (2012, p. 4)

One such practitioner of the Sapphic *roman à clef* between the wars was Djuna Barnes, whose work, as Thomas Heise points out, is consistently marked by a preoccupation with secrecy and writing's potential to conceal what is most cherished. Her early journalism, he contends, demonstrates that "for Barnes, authentic queer life was contingent upon being submerged, unknowable and away from the prying eyes of New York… Ultimately the [queer] underworld – hidden below the basements of a depraved neighbourhood – remained concealed within her prose as a means of staving off the erosion of local detail in the community she seeks to shield" (2011, p. 100). Her novel *Nightwood* (1936) extends this project, conducting an interest in secrecy and concealment though the form of the *roman à clef*.

An oneiric travelogue through the streets of pre-Haussmann Paris, *Nightwood* is stippled with a panoply of eccentric characters, most notably Doctor Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor, melancholic Nora Flood, and her promiscuous, alcoholic lover, Robin Vote. In

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[4] In addition to subversively sequestering their non-normative desires in a dominant conservative mode, some of these writers also used the *roman à clef* to critique clinical discourses such as Havelock Ellis' sexological studies and Freudian psychoanalysis, whose theories of sexual pathology aimed at making explicit and visible the features and origins of same-sex desire. Barnes' first *roman à clef The Ladies Almanac* (1928), for example, in its extensive enumeration of the "tells" or symptoms of same-sex desire accentuates the expository impulse of sexology to humorous effect "mak[ing] a mockery of sexological attempts to attribute desire to a congenital disorder or medical condition" (Nair, 2012, p. 81).

his preface to the text, T.S. Eliot attempts to divert its readers' attention away from a lurid fascination with the weirdoes that populate *Nightwood*'s passages toward an appreciation of its lyricism and the universality of its accomplishment: to mistake its representation of "the human misery and bondage which is universal" for a "horrid sideshow of freaks", he contends, is "to miss the point" (2007, p. xxi). However, beneath these interpretive layers or functions (one anticipated and scorned by Eliot, and one he construes and endorses), there exists yet another. Couched within the form of the *roman à clef*, the point of which is rather missed by Eliot (whether deliberately or accidentally is unclear), *Nightwood* also describes, in detail but at a safe remove, the sorrow and suffering attendant to Barnes' failed homosexual relationship with her lover Thelma Wood. When Nora dejectedly reflects upon her fraught relationship with Robin, therefore, Barnes' prose broadcasts on at least two different frequencies, concealing within a fictional register an autobiographical account discernible only to herself, Wood, and the members of their circle.

> Looking at every couple as they passed, into every carriage and car, up to the lighted windows of the houses, trying to discover not Robin any longer, but traces of Robin, influences in her life (and those which were yet to be betrayed), Nora watched every moving figure for some gesture that might turn up in the movements made by Robin. (Barnes, 2007, p. 55)

Nightwood's "layered, simultaneous address to public, counterpublic and coterie audiences" which scrambles the salient features of Barnes' relationship with Wood and renders them decipherable only to a small clique of queer subcultural writers, I would argue, telegraphs the later use of Polari by gay subcultures after World War II (Nair, 2012, p. 4).

Immortalized in British singer Morrissey's 1990 single "Piccadilly Palare",[5] parlyaree, parlare or Polari, despite its heterogeneous origins in the murky depths of Britain's urban spaces, is now largely synonymous with the gay subcultures of post-WWII London and Manchester: "put simply, [it was] a secret language mainly used by gay men and lesbians in London and other UK cities with an established gay subculture, in the first 70 or so years of the twentieth century" (Baker, 2002, p. 1). Akin to other types of mid-century slang in its use of metonymy ("handbag", for example, usually denotes money) and anagrams ("ecaf", often shortened to "eek", is a face), Polari may be considered as less a discrete language than a composite lingo comprising a singular

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[5] "The Piccadilly Palare/was just silly slang/between me and the boys in my gang/'so bona to vada, oh you/your lovely eek and/your lovely riah' […] exchanging Palare/you wouldn't understand/good sons like you/never do" (Morrissey and Armstrong, 1990). Morrissey, whom a High Court judge once pronounced "devious, truculent and unreliable" is himself no stranger to sexual double-speak ("Morrissey misery over court verdict," 1998).

blend of linguistic ingredients and registers. In terms reminiscent of those we have seen used by the narrator of *The Marbled Swarm* to describe his father's speech, Matt Houlbrook finds Polari,

> Derived from a mixture of lingua franca, Italian, Romany, and backslang originally associated with eighteenth-century theatrical troupes, by the twentieth-century Polari was part of that amorphous "underworld" slang current amongst dockside labourers, seamen, prostitutes and tramps. By the 1920s it had clearly entered common usage within queer urban life. (2005, p. 152)

The most significant feature of Polari, and one of the primary reasons for its emergence within certain urban gay communities in Britain, was its facilitation of secrecy. Faced with the threat of arrest and prosecution until the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967, "anti-languages" and asignifying systems such as Polari enabled the gay subcultures of cities like London to continue to circulate within, around, and beneath the prevailing language of society at large (Baker, 2002, p. 15). Identifying gay men with other ostracized, often criminalized groups at the time, Leslie Cox and Richard Fay affirm the importance of this aspect of Polari's genesis and deployment, arguing that "just as some marginalised groups developed secret codes, such as criminals' cant or tinkers' shelta, so gay men developed Polari. These codes developed from the need to express common identity, for self-protection, and for secrecy" (1994, p. 107). Houlebrook similarly asserts that, if "Polari was a linguistic practice through which men enacted their difference, it was simultaneously a tactic of concealment, evasion and invisibility… Whatever their degree of fluency, these 'special words' allowed men to hide their character and conversation from all but those in the know" (2005, p. 152). In the following passage, evocative of the vocabulary and cadence of the Polari which was used in London, for example, discernible English terms and phrasing give way to code-encrusted arabesques designed to foil the intrusion of a mainstream audience and evade its penetrating glare, while remaining ajar for the initiated inhabitants of the queer underworld.

> As feely homies [young men], when we launched ourselves on the gay scene, Polari was all the rage. We would zhoosh [fix] our riahs [hair], powder our eeks [faces], climb into our bona [nice] new drag [clothes], don our batts [shoes] and troll off [cruise] to some bona bijou [nice, small] bar. In the bar, we would stand around parlyaring [chatting] with our sisters [gay acquaintances], varda [look at] the bona cartes [nice genitals] on the butch homie [masculine male] ajax [nearby] who, if we fluttered our ogleriahs [eyelashes], might just troll over [wander over] to offer a light. (Burton, 1977, p. 23)

The distribution of Polari textures in the conversations of some gay men at this time, the

surfacing of encoded terms (riah, ajax, bona drag, etc.) within their speech, evokes the alternately visible and invisible circulation of gay subcultures within the heteronormative terrain of British urban spaces in the 1940s and 1950s.

In its emphatic use of encryption and its fixation upon concealment, *The Marbled Swarm* evokes the clandestine practices laid down by preceding forms of queer subcultural communication. Like the Polari-peppered speech of queer Londoners, the narrator's prose, as we have seen, is littered with *key* words and phrases which signal the surfacing of a particular narrative strand which the reader may or may not recognise: the opening, "One day…" or the invocation of a "trail of breadcrumbs" indicates the proximity of a fairy-tale thread, while the appearance of a carousel or a roller coaster will denote the arching of the story towards Disney/Disneyland (2011, pp. 84, 91, 124). The unexpected loops and folds of the narrator's language, furthermore, bend temporal lines and envelop *something* that remains undisclosed (at least until the final sections of the novel). Lines typically corkscrew through repeated future unreal conditional formulations without ever divulging their ultimate destination.

> If vampire movies hadn't been the franchise of that year, and were wastrel fashion models and feeble-looking bands not so incredibly in vogue, and if a wary-eyed pallor were not, as a consequence, the diamond in the rough of facial options, my sad state might have turned the single-minded nerds and fops moseying around me into Good Samaritans. (2011, p. 79)

Elsewhere, proleptical remarks that might designate a relatively clear locus are quickly clouded by formulations like the one above. In the following passage, will the boy die at the hands of the narrator? Yes or no?

> Sure enough, and let me add that this assessment stood beyond his death, there was literally nothing worth archiving in the boy's head. It's true that until a year or two prior to that afternoon, I might have set myself the less ambitious goal of having some variety of sex with him, then, severely disappointed, as I've always been about sex, and worrying about the act's illegality, murdered him after a day or two or week of careful planning. (2011, p. 9)

In these examples Cooper's work furtively affirms an affiliation with oppressed constituents of sexually dissident communities that peopled the secret spaces of twentieth century history, conversation, and writing. Yet beneath this affirmation there persists another, still more firmly embedded tradition to which Cooper's use of encryption in *The Marbled Swarm* may be seen to allude: a seditious strand of anarchist doublespeak that emerged in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

Anarchist artifice from 1901

The United States in the mid-late 1800s experienced a golden age of anarchist propaganda which saw the publication of numerous avowedly anarchist tracts, pamphlets and newspapers, the majority of which largely denounced anarchist terrorism and concerned themselves more with "propaganda of the word" than "propaganda of the deed". These included reformer Josiah Warren's *The Peaceful Revolutionist* (1833-1848), Ezra Heywood's anarchist and free love periodical *The Word* (1872-1893), Lysander Spooner's series of pamphlets targeting the United States legislature, *No Treason* (1867-1870) and Benjamin Tucker's individualist anarchist newspaper *Liberty* (1881-1908). In sometimes-incendiary terms, these publications outlined positions overtly critical of the state and its bureaucratic apparatuses, excoriating its domination of an impoverished underclass, immunity from prosecution, instantiation of coercive forms of social organization, and intrusions into the moral lives of individuals. This profusion of nineteenth-century anarchist propaganda even survived the sensationalist, anti-anarchist attitude that prevailed in some quarters following the Haymarket bombing of 1886, which saw the murder of police officers by anarchist radicals and the subsequent execution of anarchist sympathizers in Chicago. Despite the consternation provoked by Chicago law enforcement in its aftermath,[6] Haymarket induced neither widespread fear of anarchist activity, nor consequent license to repress anarchism in all its forms. Richard Jensen finds, in fact that,

> During the 1890s the United States near immunity to anarchist violence seemed natural to most Americans, who believed… that, given the freedom and liberty provided by American laws and institutions, anarchists, whether of native or foreign origin, had no reason to attack public officials… because anarchists were 'at least allowed the right of conducting a peaceful propaganda' in the United States, they hoped for the President's 'protection and preservation', rather than his murder. (2001, p. 17)

With the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz, however, public opinion turned viciously upon anarchist groups, their supporters, and their presses. Prominent anarchists across the US were rounded up, abused, and interned as suspected collaborators (Jensen, 2001, p. 18); anarchist settlements in the textile factory town of Paterson, NJ were raided and burned and mobs attacked the offices of numerous anarchist

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[6] Investigation of the bombing fell to Captain Michael J. Schaack who, with the assistance of the infamous Pinkerton Detective Agency, kept Chicago and its populace "writhed in fear" and brought any kind of anarchist activity in the city to its knees (Donner, 1990, p. 8).

mouthpieces (Goldstein, 1978, p. 67). This initial convulsion was sustained by the legislature with the implementation of a plethora of state and federal laws between 1902 and 1903, aimed at exposing and punishing anarchist dissent, or what was adjudged to be criminal anarchy which envisaged the overthrow of the state. Crucially, these laws also targeted the publication and dissemination of ideas considered to be supportive of criminal anarchy: the 1902 amendment to New York State's penal code, for instance, defines an advocate of anarchy as any person who "prints, publishes, edits, issues or knowingly circulates, sells, distributes or publicly displays any book, paper, document, or written or printed matter in any form, containing or advocating, advising or teaching the doctrine that organized government should be overthrown by violence, force or any unlawful means" ("NY Anarchy Law 1902," 1902, p. 958). President Theodore Roosevelt's public criticism of anarchist activities in 1908, in the hyperbole of its denunciation and its advocacy of repression by any means necessary, expressed a sentiment which had, by that stage, become typical of many Americans' feelings toward anarchism.

> When compared with the suppression of anarchy, every other question sinks into insignificance. The anarchist is the enemy of humanity, the enemy of all mankind, and this is a deeper degree of criminality than any other. No immigrant is allowed to come to our shores if he is an anarchist; and no paper published here or abroad should be permitted circulation in this country if it propagates anarchistic opinions. (1908, p. 13)

Such action and the agitation of Roosevelt, according to R.J. Goldstein "left behind a lasting and dangerous legacy in the passage of federal and state laws that for the first time since the Alien and Sedition laws [in 1798] penalized persons solely on the basis of opinions, affiliations and advocacy, rather than on the commission of what would normally be considered a crime" (1978, p. 67). Indeed, the prevailing anti-anarchist inclination at this time contributed to the formation of the State Department's Bureau of Investigation, precursor of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the first American intelligence network that could track and curb the seditious activities of anarchist groups in the U.S. (Jensen, 2001, p. 32).

As a result of such widespread control and surveillance and in order to evade it, anarchist groups and especially anarchist literature in the United States largely went to ground. For the latter this meant excising the word itself from anarchist propaganda, obliquely offering anarchist strategies for the modification of the status quo and burying the terminology of its political ideas deep beneath a veneer of euphemistic language. The anarchist historian James J. Martin asserts that this concealment of anarchist sedition was so extensive that an accurate survey of American anarchism at this time is actually impeded by "the constant use of less highly-charged words [in] anarchist propaganda" – during this period, he writes, "anarchist literature and sentiments [are]

disguised as something else" (1957, p. 1). From 1901 to 1906 even Emma Goldman, a well-known and outspoken anarchist, took to expressing her anarchist convictions only under the pseudonym, "E.G. Smith" (Ferguson, 2011, p. 62 n93).

This shift from the explicit to the implicit, while permitting anarchism to persist undetected and unprosecuted rendered its reality contiguous with the perception of anarchism in the public imagination as an ever-present but invisible threat. This perception was exacerbated by fictional depictions of anarchy that appeared at this time, notably *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1908), Joseph Conrad and G.K. Chesterton's respective forays into the dim-lit and sinister worlds of espionage and anarchist terrorism at the turn of the century. Conrad's tale pursues his corpulent protagonist and agent provocateur Adolf Verloc (codename Δ) down London's dank streets and shadowy back-alleys as he attends secret meetings with deranged anarchists and instigates a Greenwich bomb plot which will allow the authorities to arrest and prosecute such traitors to the Crown. Chesterton's more metaphysical or surreal work, meanwhile, amplifies to an almost comical degree certain elements of Conrad's text, bestowing codenames upon each central character (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc.) and implicating all of them in a conspiracy devised by anarchist seditionists, who are ultimately unveiled as police officers.

While these novels are antipathetic to the political ideology of anarchism and although their British locale differs from the American context we have been discussing, the clandestine worlds they describe of passwords and codenames muttered in dingy alleyways which travel beneath the unsuspecting façade of contemporary society are not entirely inaccurate representations of an American anarchist underground in the early twentieth century.[7] Neither, to be sure, are they unfaithful depictions of the kind of fictional techniques which Dennis Cooper utilizes in his *The Marbled Swarm*, written more than a century afterward. The passwords and passageways that distinguish the question of anarchism for Conrad and Chesterton become central features of fictional composition for Cooper: what they merely represent thematically as characterisation and plot, he etches into the fundaments of the formal constitution of his text. The puzzling structure of *The Marbled Swarm* – the encryption of its structure that harkens toward the deceptive ploys deployed by American anarchists in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries – offers another instance of Cooper's engagement with the history of American anarchism.

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[7] Linnie Blake's discussion of Emma Goldman's activity in 1901 sees the latter "retreating to the burrow, the lair, she went underground, becoming Miss E.G. Smith and setting to work on the tenements of the Lower East Side" (1997, p. 186)

In the opening to this work, I said that it was my intention to shed some light on the anarchist undertones of Dennis Cooper's work – to demonstrate that a subterranean current of anarchist thought surfaces in his writing, as it has in the work of other American writers since the 1800s. In these pages we have read that Cooper engages with the major tenets of an anarchism akin to that of Bakunin, Proudhon, Goldman, and others revealing himself to be both critical of certain social formations and simultaneously committed to constructing alternative social arrangements more in keeping with anarchist thought. Within this context, *The Marbled Swarm* presents a rather different and somewhat paradoxical proposition. I have shown above that the work's principal theme is obscurity: articulated by the narrator's byzantine way of speaking, the novel's construction around narrative "tunnels" suggests that the text itself is only a marbled surface that conceals something obscure and perhaps precious underneath (say, a billion euros). This obscurity makes palpable the connection between Cooper's writing and previous subcultural traditions and allows us to consider the work as an expression of Cooper's sympathy for – or affiliation with – anarchists and metropolitan queers who used similar techniques throughout the twentieth century. In other words, in this novel a subterranean anarchist current is in fact implied by the riddles and codes that allowed it to go underground in the first place: anarchism (and a related queer dissent) is here illuminated by its very obscurity.

Yet the upshot of this obscurity is the arousal of intrigue. It is our desire as readers to explore and understand this obscurity, to bring to light what the shadows hold, that propels the narrative and that, in fact, underwrites the preceding investigation. As readers we find ourselves embroiled in half-understood conspiracies whose effect recalls that felt by *Frisk*'s young narrator when he encounters a close-up photo of a destroyed teenage ass, which is "too out-of-focus to actually explore with one's eyes, but too mysterious not to want to try" (1991, p. 4). The intrigue the novel provokes thus implicates its readers in the trans-historical associations explored above: encountering accomplices, deciphering half-hidden truths, forming tentative relations – in effect, *becoming anarchistic*. *The Marbled Swarm* not only indicates a cautious alliance with persecuted anarchists and queers, it also involves us in the same process. Turning our interpretive faculties into investigative ones, he creates interested connections between his contemporary reader and these oppressed subcultures and encourages us to savour the mysterious pleasures of a life lived out of sight of the panoptic gaze.

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