University of Sussex

A University of Sussex PhD thesis

Available online via Sussex Research Online:

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

TOM BAMFORD-BLAKE, PHD ENGLISH

BASE TRANSGRESSIONS:
LEGACIES OF GEORGES BATAILLE
IN QUEER AND FEMINIST EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

FEBRUARY 2019

Declaration

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.

Tom Bamford-Blake

Summary

Georges Bataille has been both influential and highly contentious in the years since his death. His theories have been generative for some left-leaning thinkers yet seen as intellectual dead ends by others. He influenced feminist writers while often being read as misogynistic. My thesis follows trajectories of this influence, primarily in modern and queer and feminist Anglophone experimental writing. I focus on Bataille's concepts of the *base* as that which transgresses the limits of thought and language, and of *communication* as a radical move towards community that can only occur through such base transgression. Taken together, these concepts provide ways of thinking through a series of queer and feminist critiques of existing intellectual and political structures. At the same time, Bataille's concept of the base hovers between a disruptive anti-essentialism and a reductive essentialism in a way that presents problems for such critiques.

My thesis follows several interconnecting threads. I analyse the possibilities and limitations of Bataille's theory of transgression for understanding different feminist approaches to sex and sexual violence, using the radically differing examples of Andrea Dworkin and Kathy Acker (chapters one and two). Moreover, I consider what roles the base and communication might play with regard to Dworkin and Acker. My readings here are dependent on the work of Laure, both one of Bataille's major influences and one of his fiercest critics. I show how Laure's influence on Acker in particular provides a necessary counterpoint to Acker's interest in Bataille (chapter two).

I then consider the roles played by transgression and communication in the work of Rob Halpern (chapter three). Halpern's *Common Place* considers possibilities for queer community under capitalist and imperialist heremonies. Exploring Genet and New Narrative as influences on Halpern, I explore the important questions raised by Halpern's work while arguing that it remains limited by its adherence to certain kinds of transgressive subjectivity. I then extend this critique to take in the political dynamics of the live poetry reading, comparing how they operate in readings by Halpern and by Kenneth Goldsmith. Finally, in my conclusion I place this thinking of the base in relation to different approaches to revolution and recuperation in Marxist and Fanonian thought.

Contents

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not exist were it not for John David Rhodes, who introduced me to Bataille while supervising me under Sussex University's Junior Research Associate scheme in 2008. I thank him here. I also thank my supervisors, Sam Solomon and Sara Crangle for their incalculable kindness, generosity and support. In particular I thank Sam for grounding my thought in materialist feminisms and reminding me to frontload; and Sara for her rigorous thinking-through of Bataille's ideas, their possibilities and their limitations.

In alphabetical and therefore arbitrary order I thank the following friends and colleagues for expanding and kindly critiquing my ideas: Rebecca Harding, Byron Heffer (and everyone involved with the Violence, Cruelty, Avant-Garde conference), Paul Ingram, Katherine Kruger, Nell Perry, Nat Raha, Helen Tyson, Harriet S. Weil and Zia X. I thank everyone involved with Benefits (particularly Steve Willey), Separate Cat Facilities (particularly Jack Lowe) and House of Brag (particularly Taha) for indicating the possibilities of community. I thank Emma Newport and everyone else I have taught and taught with, in particular my students on the Critical Approaches course, for teaching me how to communicate. I thank the Bamfords, Parrys and Blakes for support and provision of the space to think.

Versions of chapters one and four were presented at, respectively, the Obscure Modernism conference at Birkbeck and the Contemporary Poetry: Thinking and Feeling conference at Plymouth University (both 2016). My thanks go to the organisers. A version of chapter three was published by *The Literateur* in 2016; thanks go to Eleanor Careless for her support and editorial input.

I save my greatest gratitude for Ren, without whom none of this would have been possible. Their love, kindness, support, thoughts and creative rage have been everything. I am forever in their debt and grace.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my mother, Janet Parry, an artist and a feminist. This project began and ends in the spaces opened by grief and love.

Introduction

Bataille's contested legacies

Much has been written about 'transgressive' developments in the literary and popular culture of the past few decades. In Layne Neeper's words, transgression 'violates conventional moral boundaries and social proprieties which are culturally sanctioned' (2008). Artistic examples of this model of transgression could range from Bret Easton Ellis to John Waters to the 'in-yer-face theatre' of Sarah Kane and Martin McDonagh, not to mention Jake and Dinos Chapman in visual art and the New French Extremity in cinema. The fact that these examples are so generically, stylistically and philosophically different in approach already tells us something about how unhelpful 'transgressive' can be as an identifying tag. Academic books such as Robin Mookerjee's *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition* (2013) are emblematic of this problem: Mookerjee's book lists artists as unalike as Kathy Acker and Philip Roth as part of a supposed 'transgressive tradition.' To add to the confusion, transgression is seen by some as an exhausted force and by others as one that continues to dominate. There is a perversity to this that is perhaps appropriate. The publication of two similarly titled texts in close succession – Ashley Tauchert's *Against Transgression* in 2008 and Martin Crowley's 'Postface a la Transgression' in 2009 – seems to indicate an impasse with regard to critical theory's view of transgression, whether we are seen to be 'against' or 'post' transgression. We are faced with two assertions that seem both to contradict and to complement each other. Crowley claims that transgression has failed, that 'its appalling, inassimilable intransitivity has turned out to be no more than banally ineffectual before the digestive force of accumulation' (2009: 100). Tauchert, meanwhile, seems to believe (with, it must be said, little cited evidence) that transgression has become the dominant force of criticism within the academy to the point where it can no longer be questioned (Tauchert 2008: 73, 107).

The truth contained within both these statements is, perhaps, as follows. If the transgressive has become a dominant form, it has done so *insofar as it has ceased to be radical*. Tauchert does not sufficiently justify her assertion that transgression has become the dominant mode of thought in the academy. However, there is a more persuasive argument that forms of art, entertainment and culture that might once have been considered transgressive – 'extreme' depictions of sex and violence, for example – have for some time now been entirely acceptable in mainstream Anglophone popular culture. We need look no further than the enormous popularity of *Game of Thrones*, a show whose graphic depictions of sex, violence and sexual violence surely give the lie to any claim that such things are still artistically prohibited in any meaningful sense.

We might say that herein lies the paradox of transgression: if these images were once transgressive, by becoming so ubiquitously accepted they have ceased to be. However, let us look at this more closely. To stay with the example of *Game of Thrones*, it is not the case that the show's imagery has ceased to be prohibited; rather, it has become ubiquitous *as something prohibited*. The types of violence seen in *Game of Thrones* are still 'unacceptable' according to the laws and social mores of liberal democracies: if one saw them taking place on the street the police would still be called. Further, the appeal of seeing them on television is not that we like the idea of them happening but rather the frisson of seeing something that would not be permitted in real life. Of course, none of this is news, or indeed new: it has been the appeal of the horror genre for decades (and Gothic literature before that, and so on), and much has been written on the question of why we respond the way we do to violent entertainment and imagery. Examples include Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (1992), Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Adriana Cavarero's *Horrorism* (2007), and the list goes on. We might ask, then, whether there is anything left to say about transgression in 2019. The first wager of my thesis is that there is, *if* we can find new paths within the legacy of transgression's theorisation. The question emerging from this wager is whether such new paths can provide us with ways of thinking that are adequate to present problems.

As both Tauchert and Crowley acknowledge, one of the central figures within the legacy of the thinking of transgression is Georges Bataille. There has been no shortage of writing about Bataille in recent years, yet he remains a difficult figure to pin down, and the second wager of my thesis is that he has more to tell us. What, then, does Bataille say about transgression? For Bataille, transgression is a major force in culture, society and individual psychology. He sees a recurrent and unavoidable drive in human beings towards doing that which is forbidden. Bataille sees this drive in our being drawn to forbidden forms of sexuality, to spectacles of death, and to illicit activities and experiences such as gambling and intoxication. For Bataille, it is not only that we are drawn to activities *despite* their being forbidden: we are drawn to them *because* they are forbidden. The rule forbidding something and the transgressive drive towards this thing are inextricably bound up with each other in a 'combination of abhorrence and desire' (1989b: 95). '[T]he feeling of horror,' he argues, does not correspond… to what is bad for [people], to what jeopardizes their interests. On the contrary, if they horrify us, objects that otherwise would have no meaning take on the highest present value in our eyes' (1989b: 104). This is a truth that we 'turn away from' (1989b: 14) but the remains the case on the level of society and of the individual. People break the laws of the state and of religion to participate in forbidden actions. Moreover, they also break the 'rules' that they impose on themselves in the name of self-interest and self-preservation. It is not simply that one *wants* to risk oneself and is

forbidden to by the law; rather, paradoxically, one is drawn to risk oneself *because one does not want to*. 'Insofar as they are able,' Bataille says, 'men risk the greatest losses and go to meet the most serious threats' (1989b: 104). The sense of a calculating rational individual with coherent wants and needs is in this sense disrupted by transgression, which ultimately manifests for us as 'the desire to lose ourselves' (1989b: 109).

However, this disruption also tends to be kept under control by the very fact that transgression and rule are inextricable from each other. While we are drawn to transgress the rule, the transgression frequently ends with the reassertion of the rule. For Bataille a classic example of this is the festival, wherein the rules of society are temporarily suspended and levels of intoxication and sexual license that would normally be forbidden are permitted, before order is reasserted. The festival, Bataille cautions, still 'consecrates and completes an order of things based on rules; it goes against that order only temporarily' (1989b: 90). Another crucial example for Bataille is *sacrifice*. A sacrifice, he argues, is an instance of permitted transgressive violence: in the killing of a sacrificial animal the disruptive transgressive urge of the community is expressed in a ritualised and thus contained manner (1989b: 106). 'The transgression,' then, 'does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it' (2006: 63). This containment of transgression, according to Bataille, has to do with why we read violent literature, exemplified in his interpretation of the appeal of the detective novel. 'The fictional nature of the novel,' he says,

> 'helps us bear what, if it were real, might exceed our strength and depress us… In a sense, sacrifice was a novel, a fictional tale illustrated in a bloody manner. A sacrifice is no less fictional than a novel… it is not a crime but rather an enactment of one; it is a game… [O]nly the fictitious approach of death, through literature or sacrifice, points to the joy that would fully gratify us… at least in theory, since if we were dead we would no longer be in a condition to be gratified' (1989b: 106-109).

The choice is fiction or death. So much, we might say, for the political potential of transgression. Yet this apparent closure is not total. For Bataille erotic and sacred transgression also opens onto the realm of the *heterogeneous*. According to Bataille heterogeneity 'concerns elements that are impossible to assimilate' to the conventions of the 'homogeneous' dominant order of thinking and social organisation (1985: 140): phenomena that cannot be contained within the limits of conventional meaning. Transgression, meanwhile, refers to the crossing of these limits (1985: 140). The concept of heterogeneity, then, may allow us to go further than the concept of transgression has done so far. This because the breakdown of the conventional

notion of the subject that occurs in transgression is taken to its limit in heterogeneity. Where the transgression model focuses on *temporary* moves towards that which is prohibited (sex, festivals and so on), moves that are then recaptured by prohibition, heterogeneity focuses on that which is always *other* to the homogeneous order. In one of the most radical and challenging implications of Bataille, homogeneity ultimately encompasses all thought that is geared towards grasping, interpreting, theorising and schematising experience. At the points where transgression becomes heterogeneous it can no longer simply be understood as a transgression of the rule but rather as a move beyond any kind of understanding that would even enable a rule to be formulated.

If we view sacrifice, for example, through the lens of heterogeneity then it is no longer simply a case of expelling violence beyond the social (though it may also be this) but is rather an act that defies all of the reasoning upon which our understanding of the social and everything else rests. Sacrifice undoubtedly has some *meaning* within homogeneous thought. It has been assigned a particular role in the social order, namely preserving the social order by expelling violence outside it (1994: 41)[1]. Yet at the same time sacrifice has an aspect that defies any possible meaning or function that could be given to it: it is always in some way a *senseless* killing and a meaningless, *unnecessary* loss. In this regard it cannot be recuperated to homogeneous thought or to the dominant social order and remains other to it (1992: 84).

Further, as Benjamin Noys has persuasively argued in his work on Bataille, this 'otherness' also defies any notion of a clear or clean boundary between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous. Drawing on the poststructuralist reception of Bataille, Noys argues that if heterogeneity can never be fully comprehended in conventional thought then this must also mean that it cannot be accorded a role within any organised system of 'inside' and 'outside' (2000: 11). When thinking of transgression and the heterogeneous we might have imagined homogeneity as a bordered territory around which lies the vast uncharted expanse of the heterogeneous. Transgression would then cross this border to enter heterogeneity, only for the border to reabsorb it as the transgression is contained: I picture the way an amoeba absorbs another cell as it feeds. This image remains applicable when we are talking about transgression's role in the social order. Yet once we start to talk about heterogeneity it is no longer adequate.

Heterogeneity, then, does not lie 'outside the border' of a homogeneous system of meaning. Rather, it disrupts and blurs any notion of border or boundary. Noys uses the language of 'contamination' to describe this (2000: 50). Heterogeneous non-meaning does not lie 'outside'

---

[1] This is the thesis of René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, which drew on Bataille among other sources.

meaning but rather contaminates it with non-meaning and thus unravels it. This non-meaning, as I explore further below, is also paradoxically aligned with religion: 'The divine world is contagious,' says Bataille, 'and its contagion is dangerous' (1992: 53). This vision of the heterogeneous as constantly shifting and uncontainable also corresponds to Bataille's notion of the 'formless' (*l'informe*) famously taken up by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (1997: 40), although for Noys even to posit heterogeneity as 'formless' is too fixed (2000: 33).

We are faced, then, with a conflict between the movement of heterogeneity and the movement of transgression, where transgression tends towards containment and heterogeneity contains at least the possibility of escaping containment. There is a further twist, though: insofar as it is transgression, heterogeneity can be recuperated in the sense of being *other*. If heterogeneity is too contagious too stay safely outside meaning, by the same token it is not immune to being contained by meaning: as Rodolphe Gasché puts it, '[t]here are no *pure* heterogeneous elements (2012: 12, my emphasis). This recuperation, then, can happen in at least two ways. Firstly, despite its radically disruptive potential a heterogeneous situation or experience may still play itself out and return to the dominant social order as per the transgression model. Secondly, and perhaps more worryingly, heterogeneity risks not only returning to the homogeneous social order but morphing into a more oppressive version of it in the form of fascism. In his crucial essay 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' Bataille outlines how heterogeneity in the field of politics does not only pertain to the radical left. Far-right movements and military coups may also be heterogeneous to and transgressive of the homogeneous social order insofar as they disrupt the usual running of things through acts of violent upheaval, yet they do so in the name of a brutal reinscription of power and tradition rather than a liberation from it. Seen in the context of Bataille's broader thought this far-right heterogeneity would ultimately be an instance of heterogeneity being recuperated to homogeneity; yet it does so through a move into the 'extremity' of heterogeneity (1985: xvii). Further, it is the very *power* of this heterogeneity that makes fascism so dangerous. If fascist heterogeneity is only opposed by homogeneity then resistance resembles mere 'trivialities' (Bataille 1986: 151). The ways in which heterogeneity can ultimately reinstate homogeneity, then, are manifold. This problem of reactionary recuperation will come up again and again as we engage with Bataille.

Can we escape this recuperation, then? My thesis responds to this (perhaps unanswerable) question by focusing on developments in queer and feminist theory, writing and politics and asks to what extent Bataille remains a generative resource for these tendencies. In particular I consider Bataille's concepts of heterogeneity and transgression and their influence on Anglo-American experimental writing from 1926 to the present day. Working with the English translations of Bataille's work, I explore how this work has manifested its influence in various

strands of modern and contemporary English-language writing. I explore the various relationships, both antagonistic and productive, between Bataille and later feminist and queer writers and theorists. Perhaps the most important vector of this relationship for my research is the New Narrative, a strongly Bataille-influenced tendency in queer writing in the US in the 1970s and 1980s. Writers often grouped under this tendency include Kathy Acker, Bruce Boone and Robert Glück, all of whom I address in my thesis, as well as Dennis Cooper and Chris Kraus. Glück excerpted Bataille in his novel *Jack the Modernist* and Boone translated Bataille's *On Nietzsche* in 1992. Rob Halpern's critical writing on the New Narrative and its implications for his own poetic work are also crucial in the latter part of my thesis. This focus is timely insofar as there has been a recent renewal of interest in New Narrative among more mainstream audiences and media. In recent years Kraus's *I Love Dick*, with its evocation of the 'Bataille Boys' of mid-1990s academia (2015: 17) has been republished and has spawned a TV series, while Kraus's 2017 biography of Acker sparked a new wave of interest in the latter writer.

What emerges from my research into these trajectories is a persistent problem that might be summed up as follows: writing and thought that focuses too greatly on transgression, in particular on the more reductive versions of transgression, risks losing all radical potential and being safely contained as *only* that which is prohibited. It is in Bataille's concepts of heterogeneity, communication and the base that we may find forms of thought, writing and praxis that are accessible via transgression but seemingly with the potential to escape containment contained. Once again, I critique the limitations of transgression with reference to heterogeneity; but equally, once again, I use the persistence of transgression to critique the idea of heterogeneity.

Integral to these critiques is the concept of the *base*. Broadly the base corresponds in Bataille's thought to that which is considered low, vulgar or expendable. This corresponds to heterogeneity specifically in the aspect that is disruptive to organised, coherent thought. The base is that which is not recuperable. What interests me about the base as compared to some of Bataille's other concepts is that it often appears in his writing as a violent eruption against authority, where this authority can variously be the authority of the state, of the ruling class, or of rule itself. It also relates specifically to that which defies or cannot be communicated by language. What is also significant is this analogy between rebellion, often for Bataille a rebellion of the proletariat or lumpenproletariat (2006: 135), and the refusal of language. It is here that we see a strange meeting point between Bataille's theory of non-verbal communication and a kind of opposition to 'high' thought and complex language that at its furthest extreme is potentially philistine and anti-intellectual. This understanding of the base is by no means a

consistent theme in Bataille's work. Contempt for the niceties of language is just as often resisted in Bataille as it is embraced; Bataille is as devoted to intellectual pursuits as he is at times anti-intellectual. Nonetheless, the connection is noteworthy.

Let us take a step back. In order to understand the base in all its contradictory implications we need more of a grounding in Bataille's thought as a whole. This 'whole' is, by nature of Bataille's approach, necessarily incomplete. Bataille's thought is so expansive that it is necessary to place artificial limits on which aspects of it I discuss in order even to discuss it. Suffice to say that each citation I give for one of his ideas could be replaced by citations from multiple other sources within his oeuvre. His writing is marked by a tendency to repeat and modulate ideas over and over again. The ideas he expressed at the different stages of his life are related to each other in complex ways, sometimes mutually supportive and sometimes contradictory. Further, as we have seen the thought of the heterogeneous tells us what we *cannot* think. Nonetheless, Bataille's thought has a large degree of coherence. Bataille's thought is systematic *up to a point*: it describes until it reaches the limit of what can be described. In another sense, though, this 'until' is too temporally sequential: the 'limit' is perpetually there, infecting thought with the knowledge of its own inadequacy.

It is because of this inadequacy, as well as simply for reasons of space, that I cannot describe all of Bataille's concepts here. Having outlined the base, transgression and heterogeneity, I now outline the following: eroticism, the sacred, expenditure, sovereignty, nonknowledge and finally communication. Concepts I largely leave out include intimacy, the formless and ipseity. Others, such as evil and the *acèphale*, I touch on in later chapters. Why, then, have I chosen the concepts I have chosen here? Bataille's understanding of the erotic played a major role in his influence on the New Narrative, and for him the erotic cannot be thought without the sacred. Sovereignty, nonknowledge and communication are crucial for his thinking of both writing and politics. An understanding of expenditure, meanwhile, is necessary for a fuller understanding of sovereignty. I begin, though, by returning to the question of transgression.

Why, then, are we supposedly drawn to transgression? In 1957's *Eroticism* (also known in different English editions as *Erotism* or *Death and Sensuality*) Bataille focuses on transgression in the context of sex, and the question of why we transgress is answered in this context. Sex is the transgressive act *par excellence* given that in almost all human societies it has been both practiced in some form and subject to some kind of prohibition: 'man,' Bataille says, 'is defined by having his sexual behaviour subject to rules and precise restrictions' (2006: 50). Such prohibitions range from the incest taboo, to laws (emanating both from the state and from 'moral' or religious authorities) proscribing prostitution and other forms of sex work (Bataille

2006: 129). For Bataille what these prohibitions indicate is that sex is *always* in some sense forbidden. While most people do it[2], it is unlike other activities that most people do (working, eating, sleeping) in that it is always in some way experienced as 'wrong,' a source of anxiety, confusion and dissolution that comes from us simultaneously wanting to do it and feeling that we should not or cannot. 'Man,' says Bataille, 'goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him' (2006: 7).

If sex is always transgressive and yet at the same time a ubiquitous human impulse, then this tells us something about both sex and transgression. Bataille's explanation for why sex is both necessary and forbidden comes from his association of sex and the aforementioned dissolution of the subject. At its extreme, this dissolution as it occurs in sex constitutes a breakdown of the boundaries between discrete human bodies that leaves us as an undifferentiated mass. When two (or more) people have sex they experience a blurring such that they are no longer two distinct bodies or two distinct subjects but rather a continuous being. Bataille traces this urge towards continuity to the primordial development of life. According to him this development was a movement of *splitting*: microbial life initially developed through the splitting of cells, and life ever since then has been characterised by greater and greater separation of organisms from each other (2006: 96). Elsewhere in his writing Bataille describes a version of this development occurring in human prehistory. According to him humans initially did not experience themselves as separate from the great organic mass of the natural world, and only became separated with the developments of culture, agriculture and civilisation (1992*: 41)[3]. In both of these contexts the movement is the same: we have become split off from each other and from the greater mass of life on earth, and our urge in sex (as well as other transgressive activities) is to become once again joined to each other within the 'intimacy' of this mass, ultimately losing our individuality (2006: 98). Insofar as it is 'not compatible with the positing of the separate individual,' this 'intimacy' is also 'violence' and 'destruction' (1992: 51).

Of course, this total experience of continuity could not happen without the breakdown of civilisation as we know it. This, then, is why sex is a transgression: while it is necessary for the perpetuation of society, it also presents a threat to it. As I have said, this understanding of sex-as-transgression also helps us to understand what is meant by transgression in general: that which is transgressive, for Bataille, is that which is inextricable from the human subject as we know it and yet threatens the foundations of this subject. The end point of this threat to the integrity of the body and of the subject is death. In the terms set out in *Eroticism* death is

---

[2] Bataille tended to assert that *all* people do it, and did not give much attention to the question of asexuality.
[3] The parallels are clear here with Freud's understanding of sex and the death drive. While Bataille wrote surprisingly little about Freud (the Freud-Bataille connection would come later with Jacques Lacan), he was certainly aware of him and indeed underwent psychoanalysis himself in the 1920s (Noys 2002: 12).

another form of continuity: as we die and decompose we go from thinking subjects to being just so much organic material, part of the undifferentiated mass of life (2006: 13). This sense that sex is transgression and ultimately death is what Bataille denotes by *eroticism*. 'Eroticism,' Bataille says, 'is assenting to life up to the point of death' (2006: 11). The erotic is the aspect of sex that, rather than being functional in terms of reproduction, is dangerous to the subject and to society and thus forbidden; yet its proscription does not make it any less the case (2006: 51). Another aspect of this model is that, as Shannon Winnubst (2007: 83) has noted, eroticism is not only sexual. Though sex is Bataille's primary focus in *Eroticism*, as well as many of his other works, as I have said eroticism applies just as much to death and the sacred. Thus the concept of eroticism not only gives sex a different meaning but also gives other activities and experiences meanings that had previously only been associated with sex[4].

Bataille was not necessarily a supporter of the kind of developments that we would now think of in terms of the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s. Unlike, say, Herbert Marcuse, he did not believe that unfettered *eros* could be a liberating force in society (Tauchert 2008: 112; Wilson 2017: 13). Instead, he sees the erotic as a *fact* of society, not to be valorised but simply to be acknowledged. Further, the transgressive nature of the erotic is also the source less of joy than of anguish: the suffering emerging from our desire for a continuity that is impossible (2006: 19). 'We' want continuity but if we achieved it we would cease to be 'us'. Thus for Bataille erotic intimacy and continuity is death both physically and intellectually. Where for Marcuse *eros* is life, for Bataille it is ultimately death – yet still we want it. Bataille is indebted here to Nietzsche's notion of the Dionysiac state. For the early Nietzsche, the Dionysiac as it manifests in Greek tragedy is a chaotic and non-rational state of communion between people and the material world: a 'basic understanding of the unity of all things, individuation seen as the primal source of evil' (Nietzsche 2003: 52). This communion entails both joy and an acceptance of death and destruction[5].

In order to broaden this notion of transgression into other areas of Bataille's thought, it is necessary to understand the concept of the *sacred*. Here, too, Bataille stays with Nietzsche's ideas, particularly the death of God. Much as with Nietzsche, Bataille's notions of erotic transgression and prohibition are inextricable from his obsession with religion, particularly Christianity. Despite having been raised in a secular household he flirted with Catholicism early in life, even spending time in a seminary, and the Christian model of sin and forgiveness left an indelible mark on his thought. The Lord's Prayer asks God to 'Forgive us our

---

[4] There are a number of parallels here with Audre Lorde's understanding of the erotic (2007: 53 *passim*).
[5] Nietzsche's interest in the Dionysiac as opposed to the Apollonian opens the door to his anti-Socratic view of classical philosophy (2003: 70-71).

transgressions.' God is the ultimate arbiter of moral law and a transgression is thus a challenge to God. Yet in the Catholic model we can transgress, be forgiven and return to the fold: transgression is permitted to take place as long as God's rule can then be reasserted.

As the transgression model makes clear, though, within the Bataillean model the transgression of God's law would in fact be required by, inextricable from, this very law. God's law requires and necessitates its own breaking. In this quasi-Miltonic rebellion against God we see the role played for Bataille by blasphemy. Bataille swiftly turned against religion after his Catholic phase. However, as Stuart Kendall notes, Bataille's course 'is as foreign to atheism as it is to instutionalized forms of religion' (Bataille 2011: xxiii). Insofar as he *is* an atheist, his atheism is of the Nietzschean type that remains obsessed with the idea of God even, or especially, in God's absence. Rather than any kind of rationalist dismissal of religion as superstition, Bataille engages in a blasphemous *inversion* of religion (1994: 18). This inversion is best expressed by the *Summa Atheologica*, the title given by Bataille to his wartime trilogy (*Inner Experience*, *Guilty* and *On Nietzsche*) and a parody of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.

Bataille's relationship with religion, then, goes beyond the notion of transgressing against God. In a complex way, God is not only the (absent) arbiter of moral law but also occupies a space coextensive with that of the erotic (2006: 22). While in the Abrahamic religions the sacred tends to exclude the erotic, for Bataille this exclusion is a development of the Abrahamic religions (in particular Protestantism) and is not inherent in religion itself (1992: 88; 1989a: 116). The realm of the *sacred* corresponds for Bataille to that which is excluded from the quotidian operations of society (1992: 49), which includes both the erotic and the divine. It is only in Abrahamic religions and the societies derived from them that the sacred is posited as 'higher' than the worldly social order, something that society can look towards with a view to redemption, whereas the erotic is placed 'below' society, unacceptable and requiring exclusion (1992: 70).

It is in this sense that transgression 'against' God is in fact ultimately a realisation of Bataille's sacred, one that collapses the distinction that had been introduced between the sacred and profane (Surya 2002: 102-3). The blasphemous scenarios that occur repeatedly in Bataille's work – the rape and murder of a priest in *Story of the Eye*, the sex worker who calls herself God in *Madame Edwarda* – are in this sense realisations of the sacred. God, ultimately, is the negation and exhaustion of God (Foucault 1998: 27). Bataille retains an obsessive desire to spit on God's corpse, so to speak: to repeatedly transgress the *idea* of God in order to access the realm of God's absence where the sacred and profane are identical. 'God is dead!... And we have killed him!' cries Nietzsche's madman in *The Gay Science* (2009a: 120). 'God is dead,'

says Bataille, perhaps going even further, 'so dead that I could make his death understandable only by killing myself' (2011: 75)[6]. The death of God is not a matter of God's being explained away by human rationality, but rather comes at a lacerating cost to human life.

For Nietzsche and Bataille, the death of God leaves us exposed to this laceration. How, then, do we respond; how, Nietzsche asks polemically, 'can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?' (2009a: 120). For Nietzsche, of course, there is no real consolation. The absence of God must also throw the concept of truth into question so that truth becomes 'the weakest form of knowledge' (2009b: 110). Instead, we must confront cultivate *amor fati*, love of fate; we must confront the Dionysiac 'beautiful chaos of existence' without expecting from it any 'providential reason and goodness' (2009a: 157). To hope for providence is servile, is 'slave morality' (2009b: 20); to accept life in all its unjust chaos is to be masterful, a condition that Nietzsche, in his famously troubling account of history, ascribes to a warlike, conquering aristocratic class (2009a: 22 *passim*). Bataille was profoundly influenced by this view of Nietzsche's in his own account of the history of class conflict and economics.

Bataille's thought on economy does not form a central focus of my thesis, but it is necessary to give an account of it given how central it is to the broader tendency of Bataille's thought. This theory is outlined primarily in his last and most comprehensive theoretical work, *The Accursed Share* (*Le Part Maudit*). As with his theory of the erotic, it rests on some questionable scientific, historical and anthropological analyses. In Bataille's theory of economy, then, heterogeneity corresponds to *excess* and *expenditure* while homogeneity corresponds to accumulation and conservation. Homogeneous society is concerned with accumulating and conserving the resources required for human life to continue, but there is also a tendency in society for resources to be expended without return (1989a: 20-21). Bataille describes a rhythm of accumulation and expenditure occurring in the aforementioned sacrifices and festivals of classical and feudal societies (1989a: 46).

For Bataille, then, one of the major problems with modern society is that we have lost contact with expenditure. In the functional, goal-oriented organisation of bourgeois capitalist society there is no longer a place for sacrifice or festival in the manner that these things once existed (1989a: 136-137). The impulse towards transgressive excess is manifested in smaller, 'safer' ways: in particular Bataille talks about our interest in violent literature as an instance of this (1989b: 104-107). At the same time, the impulse towards excess can never be fully avoided: it pops up again and again, like an air bubble in wallpaper. The major fear expressed by Bataille

---

[6] In another draft of this text, he put the image more viscerally: 'God is so dead that one could only make his death understood with the blow of an axe' (2011: 224).

in *The Accursed Share* is that if society does not find a place for excess the impulse towards expenditure will become ruinous to a point of no return. The most apocalyptic possibility here is nuclear conflict, which Bataille (writing in the midst of the Cold War) sees as an analogue of feudal military expenditure taken to world-destroying proportions (1989a: 186-187).

Bataille contrasts the *restricted economy* of homogeneous society with *general economy* (1989a: 27). For Bataille, just as the principle of eroticism can be connected to primordial microbial development, so the principle of excess ultimately operates on the level of physics with the sun's endless giving-out of energy. This is general economy: the sun gives out energy that is absorbed into the food chain of life on earth. Because the sun never stops giving out energy there is always an excess of energy available, and so the persistence of excess in human society occurs (1989a: 28). Homogeneous societies, particularly bourgeois capitalist society, are restricted in that they try to endlessly accumulate, but because there is always an excess in nature there is always also an excess in society (1989a: 29).

As I have said, this schema is based on an eccentric and questionable understanding of biology and physics. Even leaving this aside, the theory of general economy raises a number of issues with regard to what I have said about heterogeneity and recuperation. As Noys points out, the attempt to establish excess as a first principle of nature contrasts with the more radical implications of his thought on heterogeneity. By positing the need for excess as the *reason* for sacrifice, religion and other transgression-centred endeavours, Bataille denies what he has already said about heterogeneity: that it defies all reason and all function (Noys 2000: 131). Further, the association of excess with ruinous nuclear conflict seems to stand in opposition to what Bataille has elsewhere posited as the desirable potential of heterogeneity.

These problems aside, the idea of expenditure tells us something about what sovereignty means for Bataille. To be *sovereign* is to be excessive: to be able to expend without care, and to be unconcerned with accumulation (1989b: 198). The sovereign condition is, to use Nietzsche's words, to have 'unconcern and scorn for safety, body, life, comfort' (2009: 23). The one who has mastery, sovereignty, is the one who is willing to lose everything, whereas the one who is afraid to lose everything is placed in the servile position of working to accumulate.

Bataille is also responding here to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, particularly as interpreted by Kojève (1980: 15). I cannot give a full account of Hegel here, but it is worth staying with Hegel – or more to the point, Hegel as interpreted by Kojève – in order to understand what Bataille took from him. Kojève's account of the master-slave conflict was given in his lectures, and glossed by Raymond Queneau. In the conflict as described by Kojève and Queneau,

> [The] Slave is the defeated adversary, who has not gone all the way in
> risking his life, who has not adopted the principle of the Masters: to conquer
> or to die. He has accepted life granted him by another… He has preferred
> slavery to death, and that is why, by remaining alive, he lives as a Slave.
> (1980: 16)

Here the sovereign would correspond to the 'master' (or sometimes 'lord' for Hegel) who achieves dominance by being willing to accept the possibility of death, whereas through his fear of death the slave remains in a servile position. Just as in the move from feudal to bourgeois society we have according to Bataille lost touch with excess, so we have also lost touch with sovereignty. Though the bourgeoisie are the dominant class they are not sovereign in the sense that the nobles were because they are no longer willing to enact expenditure for its own sake. Sovereignty, then, does not only mean power or dominance: it *exceeds* these concepts. Here we see how, as with heterogeneity, sovereignty goes much further than can be contained with a temporal cycle of social hierarchy. Bataille's thought of sovereignty can be partly understood through his deep resistance to the fascist appropriation of Nietzsche (1985: 182). Sovereignty takes Nietzsche's notion of the *übermensch* and moves it away from the aristocratic, elitist character that it undoubtedly possesses towards its more radical implications. If the sovereign individual has a total power that emerges from a rejection of directed, functional activity and a total openness to risk, then this paradoxically also means a total willingness to abandon power. To remain in power means to take practical steps to *remain* in power, whereas the sovereign individual has no interest in taking such steps. Thus sovereignty corresponds to the openness to dissolution and death expressed in the erotic and the heterogeneous. Michael Taussig calls this openness 'the mastery of nonmastery' (2006: viii).

Thus sovereignty is related to Nietzschean mastery less in its aristocratic sense than in the more radical sense. From the latter perspective, Nietzsche's hostility to fixed notions of meaning and value manifests as a move away from the notion of a unified self and the relations of social power based thereon (Bataille 1992: 22)[7]. This is also where Bataille's move away from Kojève's Hegel becomes clear. Whereas for Kojève's Hegel the conflict between master and slave is part of a directed process, for Bataille the sovereign master's acceptance of the risk of death is ultimately not done *for* anything. As both Foucault (1998: 32) and Derrida (1998: 103) have pointed out, Bataille's response to Hegel has major implications for the relationship between transgression and dialectical thinking in general. In Derrida's words, 'Lordship has a

---

[7] This is not to say that Bataille removes *all* vestiges of aristocracy from his notion of sovereignty. As I show in chapter one, the problem of elitism persists in Bataille's thought.

meaning. The putting at stake of life is a moment in the constitution of meaning' (1998: 104); 'sovereignty,' on the other hand, 'is totally other. Bataille pulls it out of dialectics… despite the characteristics that make it resemble lordship, sovereignty is no longer a figure in the continuous chain of phenomenology' (1998: 107)[8].

For Bataille, the ascendancy of bourgeois over feudal society entails the victory of servility over sovereignty. This ascendancy has specifically to do with *work*. Insofar as it has come to revolve around work, bourgeois society has become servile rather than sovereign, homogeneous rather than heterogeneous, and has made its transgressions highly delimited within systems of containment. The work, the labour, that is inherent in the development of society according to the Hegelian dialectic has manifested in a society that has forgotten the need for excess. It has also manifested in a philosophical tradition obsessed with the establishment of meaning – *the work of making meaning* – and blinded itself to the heterogeneity that cannot be contained within any system of thought, that in one sense lies 'outside' the field of meaning but in a truer sense contaminates all projects of meaning and thought. '[P]hilosophy,' for Bataille, 'is work' (2006: 258); to *know* at all is 'to work; it is always a servile operation… Knowledge is never sovereign' (1989b: 202). Bataille sometimes refers to this heterogeneity that defies meaning as *nonknowledge* (2001b: 204)[9].

As Derrida's commentary indicates, Bataille's move away from work also puts him at odds with many interpretations of Marx's interpretation of the dialectic. While Bataille was somewhat Marxian in his thinking during his activist period in the 1930s, this ideological leaning did not necessarily persist in his post-war and wartime work. As I explore in chapter one, Bataille was highly influenced by Marx's account of the class struggle, but took it in a different direction by aligning the force of the revolutionary proletariat with heterogeneity. This approach aligns with Marx insofar as it wants the proletariat to move from servility to sovereignty, but differs from Marx insofar as Bataillean sovereignty is opposed to work. Work, of course, has a place in

---

[8] Derrida is not one of the major foci of this thesis, but his status as a vector and critic of Bataille's thought cannot be underestimated.

[9] This challenge to the Hegelian dialectic and to conventional understandings of knowledge is also redolent of Adorno's thought (Kennedy 2018: 129). Working from a different intellectual perspective, Adorno and Horkheimer share many of Bataille's concerns: the systematising of knowledge and what gets left out, the turn from Enlightenment rationality towards fascism, and the power of myth. Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer see de Sade and Nietzsche's works as constituting 'the intransigent critique of practical reason (2010: 94); later, Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* goes further and aims for an "anti-system" (1973: xx) concerning what is 'heterogeneous' to the Hegelian dialectic (1973: 4). The terms and approach are to this extent strikingly similar to Bataille's. The difference is perhaps that Adorno and Horkheimer remain attached to a rigorous dialectical thinking-through of reason against itself, whereas Bataille conceptualises his approach as a thinking of reason to its limit, after which limit thought is abandoned. Bataille looks outwards *beyond* reason whereas Adorno and Horkheimer turn back and look critically within it. This is only a tentative suggestion, which cannot do justice to the Adornian corpus. Though my thesis does not work with Adorno, it is necessary to recognise Adornian thought as a trajectory both parallel to and quite different from Bataillean thought.

Bataillean thought, for as we have seen there can be no thought that is not work; but if we are aligned towards sovereignty then this thought-work must necessarily be inadequate.

This resistance to work – to usefulness and functionality – creates a number of problems for Bataille's political thinking as it develops from the 1930s onwards. One of these problems pertains to the relationship between work and revolution. Much of Bataille's writing of the 1930s calls for proletarian revolution while remaining vague about what this might actually involve beyond a heterogeneous exuberance. Another problem has to do with an arguably more conservative turn in Bataille's thought after the Second World War. In later books such as *The Accursed Share* it seems Bataille turns toward a more descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to society and politics. Where his 1930s writings are calling for revolution, albeit in ambiguous terms, his later work talks of heterogeneity and sovereignty not as things to move towards but rather as facts of social life. In one sense, this move away from an imperative mode is truer to the spirit of the heterogeneous, which in its aversion to functionality ultimately refuses any kind of imperative. At the same time, however, in moving away from calls to revolution Bataille also gives voice to a more managerial, even technocratic attitude: in his aforementioned discussion of nuclear war, for example, he is asking how society can *manage* its expenditures so as not to destroy itself (1985a: 186). This is very different from Bataille's earlier writings that all but call for society's destruction and rebirth. We can interpret this move in a number of different ways. It may be that Bataille was chastened by the knowledge of nuclear warfare and Nazi death camps into a move away from a desire for social destruction. It may also be that recognising the ultimately non-imperative nature of heterogeneity Bataille could no longer see it as a vector of revolution. Still, though, this move presents something of a missed opportunity for a left-wing politics engaging with the legacy of Bataille. If Bataille has moved away from the possibility of social transformation because he has aligned it with a heterogeneity that on a social level can be nothing other than destruction then he has surely thrown the baby out with the bathwater, for there are many other ways of thinking about revolution.

We might conclude from the above that the thought of heterogeneity is ultimately conservative because in its refusal of functionality it makes any real change impossible and instead remains as the removed 'other' of a social order that otherwise persists unperturbed. If we are looking for aspects of Bataille's thought that remain generative in the twenty-first century it is necessary to turn back to heterogeneity on a more philosophical level. What, then, is the place or non-place of heterogeneity within Bataille's thought and by extension within his model of society? Bataille is not simply an irrationalist or nihilist who believes that nothing means anything; rather he wants to pursue knowledge *to its limit* in order to engage authentically with

heterogeneous non-knowledge. Here again, though, we come up against a contradiction: we need to have a system of knowledge in order to have a sense of what that system of knowledge cannot cover. Bataille is highly aware of this contradiction, particularly as it applies to his own work: he frequently acknowledges that he is trying to understand aspects of the world in order to point to what ultimately cannot be understood. It may be that Bataille's mode of thought simply allows this contradiction to exist, whereas in the Hegelian dialectic it would have to be resolved.

In this regard what is radical about Bataille's thought is precisely that it insists upon *irreconcilable contradictions* that cannot be 'worked on,' cannot be in this sense recuperated to knowledge and usefulness. This existence of what cannot be reconciled is also denoted by Bataille as *the impossible* (*l'impossible*) (1991: 9). A similar extreme is reached when at the end of *The Accursed Share* Bataille throws his hands up and announces that 'sovereignty is NOTHING' (1989b: 430, Bataille's emphasis); although, of course, for Bataille 'nothing' is not the end of the discussion. At the same time, it may be that this refusal to be useful or comprehensible may simply allow heterogeneity to be contained as a moment of irrationality, a lacuna that may disturb but does not ultimately disrupt the course of conventional thought: a safely contained other to thought, a mere outlier. In this sense it is still recuperated within a cycle of transgression and prohibition, excess and accumulation. This, then, is a major question: does heterogeneous sovereign non-knowledge remain within this logic, or can it break out of it?

Inner experience: community, communication and writing

The attempt to achieve sovereignty, without this necessarily meaning power over others, must also be understood within Bataille's thinking of community and communication. Bataille addresses this issue in particular in his wartime works such as *Inner Experience* (*L'experience interieure*). While it may seem paradoxical for the key to community to be found in *inner* experience, for Bataille this is the whole point. The 'inner' in inner experience pertains to that which is secret and intimate (Bataille 1988: 3). This secrecy and intimacy in turn pertains to the erotic desires that in bourgeois society are relegated to the realm of individualised private experience because they are prohibited and regulated. Again, this is seen as a shift from earlier societies to modern ones: where in many social orders the festival, the sacrifice and even the orgy were permitted public events, in Bataille's time such transgressive, heterogeneous experience is no longer permitted in public. One can have sex with another person 'in the privacy of the bedroom,' as the well-worn phrase goes, but acts of public sex are taboo. One

can no longer enact public sacrifices (although public executions still took place in France until 1939) but one can read a murder mystery in one's own time.

What interests Bataille, then, is how these private experiences open out onto the kinds of sacred and erotic experiences that were once public and that at their furthest extreme blur the boundaries between individuals. In this sense, private experiences can point towards the breakdown of the boundary between public and private and thus towards a more radical notion of *community*. For Bataille this is *communication*: a meeting between people not as discrete individuals but in a sharing of their disruptive, heterogeneous impulses that breaks down the boundaries between them and points towards an erotic and sacred continuity: 'the "sacred" is communication between beings,' says Bataille (1985: 251). Further, communication requires risk and rupture: it 'cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked*, placed at the limit of death and nothingness' (1994: 19, emphasis Bataille's). To return to sovereignty, then, Bataillean communication entails the refusal of sovereignty to simply be mastery. It provides the potential for a model whereby the self achieves sovereignty precisely by losing itself in communication with others, a communication that breaks down the boundaries of the self. In this sense sovereignty is the preserve of the community, not the individual; further, not a community *of individuals* but a community into which the individual melts (1988: 27).

Communication takes place through sex and through sacrifice but also through writing and reading. In fact, one of Bataille's own primary experiences of community was through reading his friends' work and being read by them. This is particularly true of Laure (whose romantic and sexual relationship with Bataille was inextricable from their intellectual and literary connections) and, later, of Maurice Blanchot (Sweedler 2009: 14). This move towards a 'community of readers' was in part necessitated by the collapse of Bataille's pre-war projects, *Acèphale* having been another attempt at a radical community manifested through radical acts of sacrifice, but one that proved unsustainable (Blanchot 1988: 13). This failure of Bataille's most radical attempt at putting community into practice perhaps gives some sense of why Bataille became attached to community through reading, particularly after he had been at points quite sceptical of the written word. Whereas in some of his writing of the 1930s he had described heterogeneous experience as something that defies language, even perhaps erupting through it to effect something more authentic, in *Inner Experience* and other later works he is more open to the possibilities of writing. The community that reading and writing opens out to includes not only Laure and Blanchot but also, posthumously, Nietzsche: in *On Nietzsche* Bataille says that his 'life with Nietzsche as a companion is a community.' The book *On Nietzsche* itself 'is this community' (1992: 9).

Bataille is sceptical of writing, yet a book can be a community. This connection between reading and the heterogeneous via communication, then, brings out one of the major paradoxes in Bataille's attitude to language. Bataille was suspicious of writing, and yet wrote constantly, even obsessively. Noys suggests that Bataille 'is a reader who wants to have done with reading and so he reads to the very limit of reading' (2000: 129). So, we might add, Bataille wants to 'write to the end of writing': to write to the point where the possibility of written communication would be exhausted and the possibility of a communication other than words might be indicated. This approach to writing also maps onto Bataille's evocation of knowledge and nonknowledge: we communicate knowledge through language insofar as we can speak and know at all, but we come up against a limit to language and knowledge that opens onto heterogeneity. Staying with Noys, we should also remember that heterogeneous communication does not lie 'outside' or 'beyond' normal language, since heterogeneity itself refuses the notion of limit. Instead, just as the heterogeneous *infects* the homogeneous, so communication might be imagined to exist in and through regular language, operating as an infection within it that disrupts its activities.

Still, though, questions remain. If Bataille's writing carries something radically communicative, how precisely does this communication take place given that it defies language, defies writing? Further, and perhaps more troublingly, can we ultimately distinguish between, on the one hand, the blurring of individual selves that might be desired from a communist or anarchist utopia, and, on the other hand, that found in fascist and totalitarian states? Of course the difference is that Bataille's sovereign communication ultimately must refuse the fascist situation wherein the undifferentiated mass exists in subservience to the singularity of the leader; this is because such sovereignty cannot belong to one person's power over others but only to something shared. Nonetheless, as Bataille himself acknowledged in the 1930s, when put in the context of political praxis the risk emerges of a liberating sovereignty sliding into a fascist recuperation of sovereignty.

Bataille's influence has cast a long shadow in the worlds of literature and theory, albeit sometimes without Bataille himself being directly acknowledged (ffrench 2007: 1-2). Beyond his aforementioned troubled engagement with Surrealism, Bataille collaborated with and influenced a number of his contemporaries who continued to be influential after Bataille's death, among them Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Klossowski and Denis Hollier. As I explore in chapter one, the break with Breton proved decisive for Bataille's thought[10].

---

[10] It also formed parallels with the work of perhaps the other most significant dissident from Surrealism, Antonin Artaud. Bataille did not know Artaud well but was interested in him (Surya 2002: 74). The aspects of festival and

There has also been a kind of parallel evolution of work on transgression that has addressed similar territory to Bataille without acknowledging him directly. Perhaps the key example of this is Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's work on transgression and festival, which does not cite Bataille directly but rather draws on Julia Kristeva, for whom Bataille was a crucial influence (Stallybrass and White 1986: 175; Kristeva 2002: 8). Also crucial for Stallybrass and White is Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the carnival. More recently Robin Mookerjee (2013) has developed on this approach to suggest 'transgressive fiction' as a form that resists all morality and ideology, a position that I criticise in chapter two. In general, I use work in this Bakhtinian and Kristevan tendency as a counterpoint to Bataille's work, one that that sheds further light on his view of transgression by offering a different angle on it.

However influential Bataille remains, though, the question persists regarding to what extent his thought provides an adequate model for understanding contemporary political developments. Bataille is significant if we still believe in the more *radical* possibilities for a transgression opening onto heterogeneity. However, as I demonstrated previously, this would have to mean a transgression that was not immediately contained. It seems safe to say that most of the transgressive material we encounter in popular culture does remain safely contained: we finish watching *Game of Thrones* and go to bed glad that we don't live in a world where such things happen and yet also glad that we got to see what it would be like if they did. Yet, of course, this is not the whole story: the acts of sexual violence, for example, occurring in *Game of Thrones* do occur in real life, but they are unevenly distributed. We mostly do not see them happening in the streets of Western cities, but they do happen behind closed doors. In certain circumstances, and depending who you are, the law and the police might protect you from them, but in other circumstances the law will let them happen or the police will perpetrate them with impunity. You are more exposed to the possibility of being a victim of these acts if you are a woman, black, queer, trans, disabled or poor. You are more likely to perpetrate them and get away with it if you are a white cis man. My point here is that acts of sexual violence (to stay with this example, which will be a major one throughout my thesis) are transgressive insofar as they are prohibited by the law and contained within transgressive artworks. Yet they are *not* transgressive insofar as they are norms allowed and perpetrated by the state and by people who are disproportionately powerful within the state, power being striated according to class, gender, race, sexuality and so forth. Sexual violence is, we might say, unevenly transgressive. In this sense, transgression as a model is both adequate and inadequate: it is adequate *in some contexts*,

---

sacrifice in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, as well as Artaud's writing on the plague as a situation in which social prohibitions break down, show clear parallels with Bataille (Artaud 1958: 27).

but remains inadequate for understanding fully the operations of late capitalist states in the present situation.

What, then, is the present situation? Speaking in the broadest of terms, we are faced with a renewed mainstream awareness of queer, anti-racist and feminist politics, along with a growing (albeit uneven) acknowledgement that these struggles have to be considered in the context of the capitalist exploitation of labour. At the same time, we see the growth of renewed fascist and nationalist movements in the forms of the alt-right, Generation Identity, the Trump administration and Leave.EU. The Internet has proven to be a vector for the most reactionary and the most radical ideologies, bringing back to the forefront political conflicts that never really went away. Questions about the spectacle and the consumption of images continue to be asked within the framework of social media. In the aftermath of feminism's 'sex wars' splits persist regarding the inclusion, and more to the point the agency, of transwomen, sex workers and women of colour within feminist movements. Moreover, left-wing movements continue to struggle with questions over essentialism, intersectionality, centralised organisation, and that most contentious of terms, 'identity politics.' The problems, then, are not new, but rather new developments of long-standing problems within new cultural, economic and technological contexts. Of course, this overview does not remotely do justice to the granular complexity of the ways in which these problems are playing out. Still, this broad account is useful in showing what might be the current context in which transgression occurs.

I should pause here to establish what I mean when I talk about the 'order' that transgression transgresses. As I have begun to outline, this 'order' consists of a number of different things: capitalism, bourgeois morality, male dominance, heteronormativity, white supremacy and so on. It seems fair to say that all of the listed systems occupy a dominant position in the current world, just as they did during Bataille's life. At the same time, there are of course many ways in which the status and formation of these systems has shifted over time and continues to operate differently in different contexts. Further, these systems do not all operate in the same ways as each other. Therefore when I use phrases such as 'the dominant order' – and this phrase is used by Bataille himself (2006: 54) – I use it as something of a shorthand, while acknowledging that the 'dominant order' is itself multifarious, self-contradictory and contains different conflicting dynamics within it. Further, insofar as Bataille possesses a set of values, these values are in many ways aligned with the dominant order. Despite his fervent opposition to fascism and anti-Semitism, Bataille was also very much mired in homophobia (Bataille ed. 2004: 34), racism (Dworkin 1980: 176-177) and, as I discuss extensively in chapter one, misogyny.

Building on the above observations, I want to propose the idea of the *reactionary transgression*. This term would apply to transgressions that reinforce the dominant order either by becoming contained *as transgressions* or simply by never having been truly transgressive in the first place. There is also a slippage between the two options I have just given: sexual violence, for example, is both easily containable by prohibition in certain sectors of society *and* not prohibited at all in others. In this sense the presentation of sexual violence as prohibited helps to cover up the fact that it is frequently not prohibited. In uneven transgression, then, an act can be contained as transgression in one context and simply permitted in another context. In this sense prohibition and permission are two sides of the same coin; yet in acknowledging this we must not forget that prohibition and permission are distributed along the lines of power. Rape is often presented in the media as a crime committed by the archetypal 'stranger in a dark alley,' often figured as black, whereas date rape, rape committed by long-term partners and rape by 'respectable' white men is often not viewed as rape at all. The prohibition of rape in one context facilitates the permission of rape in other contexts. Figuring rape in one context as transgressive enables it to be treated in other contexts as permissible.

Bataillean transgression, then, is important for what it can tell us about reactionary transgression but also as an instance of reactionary transgression. Some aspects of Bataille's transgression – the shocking exuberance of his imagery, the fragmentation and difficulty of his texts – remain genuinely transgressive in relation to the dominant order in certain ways. However, the misogynistic bent of some of his language is not heterogeneous to the dominant order but covalent with it. Further, the transgressive scenarios of sexual violence in some of his pornographic fictions still, in their transgression, risk falling into the category of contained transgressions. Rather than being opened to a genuinely transformative heterogeneity by reading them, instead we read them, are shocked, and are then returned to the real world in which, we choose to believe, *such things do not happen*. Of course this is far from the only reading of Bataille's pornographic work – the radical reading I have evoked retains some valence – but it is, I believe, one of the readings in play, and not to be dismissed.

Further, as I have said, all transgressions are susceptible to recuperation. In this sense all transgressions are reactionary transgressions because they all either reinscribe or are contained by the dominant order. Nonetheless, I still want to retain the notion of a transgression opening onto a heterogeneity that cannot be recuperated. Hence, I will maintain a distinction between reactionary transgression and transgression *per se*, while bearing in mind that, as ever with Bataille, these different categories always slide in and out of each other. All transgressions, then, are potentially reactionary transgressions, but with the possibility of opening out onto an irrecuperable heterogeneity, a possibility that I want to keep in the frame. Further, not

everything fits into the transgression model: the point is not that everything is a transgression and therefore recuperated but rather that everything is recuperated *insofar as it is understood as transgression.*

Bataille, then, is a generative resource because his work constitutes both a means of talking about reactionary transgression and an instance of it. This becomes clearly relevant in the current political context. The way in which the far right can make use of heterogeneity, outlined in the crucial essay 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism,' is eerily relevant in the age of Trump and Brexit. We can thus turn back to the idea of 'uneven transgression' and use this as a means of critiquing the alt-right and Men's Rights Activists. As I have said, transgression is uneven: that which is contained as transgression in one context is the norm in another context. What we must also reckon with, though, is the *performance* of transgression: the fact that one can present as transgressive something that is in fact a norm. A crucial example of this is the way the alt-right invokes the idea of free speech. They claim that their racist and misogynistic views are transgressions of a rule of political correctness and thus radical. Yet this rule does not really exist in the way they claim it does. What emerges here is that the concepts of uneven and reactionary transgression constitute both critiques of the idea of transgression and diagnostics for our contemporary situation. The unevenness of transgression shows the limitations of the transgression model for understanding our world, but the *fact that a sense of the transgressive can still be invoked* by the alt-right tells us something about its continued relevance for our thought.

In order for the above to make sense we must resist universalising Bataille's categories. As I have said, it is not that transgression is universal but rather that the apprehension of social phenomena *as transgressive* is and has been a widespread phenomenon. It is not, then, the case that Bataillean transgression is an ever-present force that has found new expression in the socio-political dynamics of today. Rather, today's dynamics are connected with the *influence* of an idea of transgression related to Bataille and thus present ways of looking both at transgression's relevance or its lack thereof. In order not to universalise Bataille it is useful to bring into view the work of Michel Foucault.

Foucault addresses Bataille in his 1963 essay 'A Preface to Transgression'. He takes from Bataille the sense that when addressing phenomena such as sexuality we encounter a limit to what we can think and express. Bataille's innovation, in Foucault's view, is that he does not talk about what might lie *beyond* this limit so much as the experience of *the limit itself*. Transgression, in Foucault's words, 'has its entire space in the line it crosses… The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess' (27).

To understand why this is significant we must return to Bataille's relationship with Hegel. Hegel looks at the limit of knowledge as something knowledge can dialectically move beyond, whereas in Foucault's view Bataille stays at this limit. For Bataille, in this sense, the transgressive move towards the limit does not *lead to* anything. In Foucault's words, transgression, particularly sexual transgression, 'exhaust[s] its nature when it crosses the limit, knowing no other life beyond this point in time' (Foucault 1998: 27-28). Hegel's dialectical process is transgressive in the sense that it pushes the limit of knowledge, but by insisting on the teleology of the move beyond, it misses something about the limit itself. By staying with the limit, Bataille presents us with something different from Hegelian negation: a transgression that, because it does not lead us 'beyond,' is not negational but rather affirmational. This transgression is not 'a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world)… Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being' (28), thus presenting a 'philosophy of non-positive affirmation' (29) and 'the possibility of a non-dialectical language' (32). In the essay Foucault deploys the image of a flash of lightning illuminating the night of nonknowledge (1998: 28). Transgression, limit-experience, can momentarily show us what we do not know, but it cannot permanently illuminate the darkness; it cannot fill the darkness with the light of knowledge. Foucault, then, prefigures Derrida's claim that 'Bataille is even less Hegelian than he thinks' (1998: 128). Bataille himself retains an ambivalent sense that one might access what lies beyond language and conventional knowledge. This 'Hegelian Bataille,' however, is not the Bataille Foucault is interested in. By emphasising the limit to knowledge, Foucault can enlist Bataille for his own intellectual approach, one that proclaims the impossibility of a Hegelian absolute knowledge.

In this sense Foucault deploys Bataille against Hegel. Yet in doing so he also transforms Bataille. For both Bataille and Foucault transgression throws us against the limit that keeps us from absolute knowledge. But for Bataille, as we have seen, this limit is *itself* quite absolute, quite universal. It always appears when we enter the realms of the erotic and the heterogeneous. Foucault's approach, seen in the context of his overall project, is different. While 'Preface to Transgression' may arguably still allow a sense of an absolute limit, this definitively changes in Foucault's later works such as *The History of Sexuality.* Here, knowledge is limited not in an absolute sense but rather because it is always contingent on its circumstances, in particular its production by systems of power and discipline. Whereas in the 'Preface' Foucault says that '[s]exuality… traces that line of foam showing how far speech may advance upon the sands of silence.' (1998: 24), here he argues *against* the 'often-stated theme, that sex is outside of discourse' (2010: 1431). When it comes to sexuality, absolute knowledge is not limited by the unavoidable appearance of heterogeneous excess. Rather, sexual knowledge is produced in a

contingent manner by circumstances, in such a way that the idea of 'absolute knowledge' is no longer to be taken seriously but is rather a product of a particular set of historical circumstances (primarily the scientific disciplines emerging in the wake of the Enlightenment). Sex 'became a "police" matter… a thing one administered' (1424-1425); it was not outside discourse but rather 'a dispersion of centers from which discourses emanated' (1431). This, then, is where the question of historicising Bataille emerges. In keeping with his attitude to knowledge, Foucault does not think sexuality is an irrepressible force that social taboos try to suppress. Rather, sexuality, like other aspects of human psychology and behaviour, is produced by the very laws that regulate it, as well as by the scientific disciplines that study it: for example, 'the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized' (1436).

Foucault's ideas, then, have different implications to Bataille's. For if homosexuality did not exist prior to its classification then it follows that the urge to transgress the law prohibiting homosexuality did not exist prior to the existence of this law. Bataille, in contrast, mostly speaks only of a generalised sexuality that is *always* desired and *always* forbidden; it is in this sense ahistorical. The role of transgression in society has changed over time for Bataille, as I have described, yet the key elements of prohibition and transgression remain essentially the same. Bataille is ahistorical here in part because of his unquestioned heteronormativity. His focus is on an idea of sexuality as transgressive *per se* which is necessarily reductive insofar as it leaves these elements out. There is an odd mismatch between the 'hetero' (meaning 'other' or 'different') of heterogeneity and the 'hetero' of heterosexuality. Heterogeneity denotes a potentially infinite difference and variation that cannot be described by any consistent system, yet in his thinking of sexuality Bataille mostly remains within a heterosexual model in which the only 'difference' is between man and woman. The inadequacy of this binary model leads Bataille into many of his problems with sex and gender. He stays with a number of false universalisms and essentialisms even as he tries to go beyond the limitations of rational thought. His may be the 'straight mind' that Monique Wittig says 'cannot conceive of a culture, a society where heterosexuality would not order [the] very production of concepts and all the processes which escape consciousness'. In this sense his 'hetero' is the conservative concept of the 'different/other' on which Wittig argues 'straight society,' with its unequal division between man and woman, is based (1992b: 28).

Drawing on Foucault, then, we can begin to situate Bataille's theory of transgression within the specific relations of gender and sexuality that produced it. A number of questions immediately emerge. Is Bataille's anguish around sex partly just a product of the prohibitions of his time? Do these prohibitions tell us something we need to know now or are we beyond them at this

point? Even if these prohibitions are no longer ones we recognise, do they still tell us something about the prohibitions we labour under? A major part of my project, then, is to situate Bataille's ideas within queer and feminist contexts that he himself does not acknowledge. In particular I explore the feminist critique of Bataille in detail in chapter one. There are also other aspects of Bataille to consider, however. Beyond historicising transgression, we might also wish to see if the heterogeneous has something in it that, through this historicising critique, we can retain as relevant. Bataille's transgression model has not only been viewed as a symptom of heterosexism: it has also been profoundly generative for some feminist and queer readings.

The resurgence of interest in New Narrative writing is not a coincidence insofar as books like *I Love Dick* focus on the liberating and oppressive dimensions of sex, the apparent impossibility of disentangling the two, and the relevance of Bataille for thinking through these problems. As Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett point out,

> certain concepts of… Bataille seem close to the heart of that queer
> resistance which seeks, among other things, to decenter the link between
> (hetero)sex and social progress and to rethink the relationship between
> sexuality, sexual citizenship and politics. (2011: 89)

In making this claim Downing and Gillett are drawing on a number of antecedents, including Foucault, whose debt to Bataille I have already described. A chain runs between Bataille, Foucault, Derrida and the queer theory of Judith Butler, whose critique of fixed concepts of gender is informed by 'Bataille's now famous laughter which, Derrida tells us… designates the excess that escapes the conceptual mastery of Hegel's dialectic' (Butler 2006: 140).

Moreover, via his friend Jacques Lacan Bataille influences what has been called the 'antisocial' or 'antirelational' turn in queer theory associated with Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani[12] (Downing and Gillett 2011: 90). Strictly speaking Edelman is more the Lacanian and Bersani tends to work directly with Freud, but Bersani nonetheless cites Bataille, whom he calls 'one of the first writers to reject the great modernist project of a domination of life through art' (1990: 113). Bersani's 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', an incredibly influential text for queer theory, uses Bataille as one of its bases for an account of queer sex, and sex in general, as a form of 'self-shattering' that is both desired and abhorred: 'Bataille reformulates this self-shattering into the sexual as a kind of… self-debasement, as a masochism… in which, so to speak, the self is

---

[12] Although Leo Bersani does not necessarily call himself a queer theorist, he has nonetheless frequently been grouped under this tendency in queer theory, and certainly his influence within it would be hard to deny.

exuberantly discarded' (1987: 217-218). Bersani, of course, places this discarding of the self in the context of the AIDS crisis, arguing that the homophobic horror of HIV is indicative of a deeper social fear of sex itself. There is a sense here that the sexual practices of oppressed queer communities provide an instance of what Bataille was talking about: that sex is both the communication that founds community and the death that destroys it, and that this is a truth that the dominant social order cannot acknowledge. Bataille's emphasis on the elusive, 'impossible' relationship between individual and community – a relation that cannot fully come into play without the dissolution of the individual as we know it – thus remains highly significant[13]. It should also be said that when we read Bataille in relation to sex-positivity we must remember that Bataille, like Bersani, is a writer who explores sex obsessively without ever being 'positive' about it. Contemporary queer feminisms are frequently preoccupied with both the possibility of a sex-positive ethos and the need to address problems of sexual violence and rape culture. Bataille's 'sex-negative' approach provides one among many ways of thinking through the possible tensions between these approaches.

Other theorists who have recently engaged with Bataille in the context of queer theory include Kathryn Bond Stockton (2006: 47), who has used Bataille to talk about abjection and exclusion in the context of blackness and queerness; Lane R. Mandlis, who uses Bataille to conceptualise the 'exclusion of transsexuals from the public sphere' (2011: 219) and Tim Dean (2011) whose work on barebacking and its relationship to Bataillean transgression also links to Bersani's work on the same subject (Bersani and Phillips 2008: 31-56). As we will see in chapter three, what brings many of these theorists together is a continued working-through of some problems associated with *community* – problems to which the antirelational approach is one response, and which find an especially acute expression in Bataille.

There may, then, be some justification for bringing in Bataille as an intervention into queer theory. We must do this, though, while bearing Foucault in mind and insisting upon putting Bataille in context. Where, then, might such a reading leave us in terms of our current situation? One question is what kinds of discourse and affect around the erotic are called for in the situation we are in, a situation where a queer feminism finds itself under attack by a resurgent patriarchal order in the context of capital's instability. Transgression, then, is relevant to queer theory insofar as transgression can be queer and also insofar as reactionary transgression can pose a threat to queer life. As I have shown, this is the case both *despite* and *because of* Bataille's often sexist straight male viewpoint. Bataille is both a source of ideas that have been generative for feminists such as Kathy Acker *and* an example of just the kind of

---

[13] Patrick ffrench has argued that relationality is ultimately central to Bataille's thought (2007: 4).

white male intellectual that feminisms have often set themselves against. This deep
contradiction is the source of much of my thinking in this thesis.

Bataille is also significant for queer and feminist theory because he tells us that what is
heterogeneous is also susceptible to recuperation. In this view, queer sexuality could just be
another transgression: one indulges in a prohibited sexual activity before returning to the
mainstream order of things. As Louise Turcotte has pointed out in a discussion of Monique
Wittig, it has sometimes been the case that those who belong to an 'alternative' sexuality have
'defined themselves as a minority and never questioned, despite their transgression, the
dominant choice' (1992: xi)[14]. However, the types of queer and feminist activity I have
described are of course characterised by a *refusal* to be recuperated. Indeed, as Downing and
Gillett suggest, resistance to recuperation by the dominant is a defining characteristic of
queerness. When considering a 'queering of Bataille,' then, we must ask whether, on the one
hand, queerness can draw on the radical potential of Bataille's heterogeneity, and on the other
hand whether the recuperation of transgression can tell us anything about risks of recuperation
faced by queer thought. There *is* a risk that anything positing itself as *other* in relation to the
dominant order of things paradoxically becomes placed *as other* and contained as such. The
possibility of this risk is what the transgression model teaches us. The question remaining, then,
would be what kind of otherness could resist containment within the transgression-prohibition
model? As I have said, Bataille's concept of heterogeneity, insofar as it resists being only
transgression, might fit the bill here. However, there remains a problem in terms of how we
encounter the heterogeneous, particularly in art. In practice, instances of heterogeneity,
however much they may try to escape containment, often end up resembling instances of
transgression. We read a queer book and are then returned to everyday life in a social order that
continues to operate in a homogeneous manner. In this sense heterogeneity remains within the
logic of transgression and the radical potential of heterogeneity is lost.

The risk of recuperation becomes perhaps more pronounced in the case of feminism. For
example, the anti-pornography feminism of Andrea Dworkin (whom I address in chapter one)
has been notoriously susceptible to recuperation to a morally reactionary agenda. This tendency
is currently repeating itself, with trans-exclusionary radical feminists associating themselves
with Christian fundamentalist churches. Bringing feminism to bear on Bataille, therefore,
means a number of things: seeing what resources Bataille can offer for feminism, critiquing
Bataille from a feminist standpoint, and also using Bataille's theory of transgression to consider

---

[14] Turcotte makes this point in the context of a more questionable set of claims about gay men's relationship to
feminism. Without supporting these claims, it is possible to take on board her more general point about
minoritarianism.

how forms of feminism have been recuperated (Connolly 2014: 110). Moreover, the case of Dworkin is a different form of recuperation to that of heterogeneity-as-transgression: Dworkin's anti-pornography feminism was recuperated by the right not because it could be placed as *other* but because its aims were so close to those of the Christian right and could thus be instrumentalised. We are thus faced with at least two different forms of recuperation: recuperation by being placed as a 'safe' *other*, and recuperation by being reintegrated into the project of the dominant order.

In chapter one I consider these problems by reading Bataille's own work, in particular *Story of The Eye* and his interwar writings on class struggle. I read these alongside Andrea Dworkin's criticism of *Story of the Eye* and Susan Suleiman's response to Dworkin's critique. My purpose in doing so is to consider Bataille's misogyny and how it relates to the 'base' tendency in his writing. Dworkin responds to *Story of the Eye* by reducing it to only one of its dimensions, that of sexual violence against women. This response is inadequate to the text insofar as it is profoundly reductive. However, I argue, with Suleiman, that it is also valuable insofar as it draws attention to a misogynistic aspect of the text that is often ignored. However, with Suleiman, I want to hang on to a particular aspect of Dworkin. I argue that the very reductiveness of Dworkin's reading is itself worthy of attention insofar as it engages oddly with the 'base' aspect of Bataille's own thought. For this analysis I draw on Suleiman's distinction between 'textual' and 'representational' readings of *Story of the Eye*, where the 'textual' is aligned with the post-structuralist response to Bataille given by Roland Barthes and the 'representational' is aligned with Dworkin. My major point here is that the reductiveness of the representational approach, its attempt to strip away the layers of the text that are perceived to be illusory, inadvertently mirrors some of Bataille's accounts of the concepts of the base, communication and experience in his writings of the 1930s and beyond.

My point in attempting this synthesis is to show a way that, through Dworkin, Bataille's ideas can be used to critique Bataille. To this extent the chapter is intended as a contribution to the existing body of feminist thought that responds to and critiques Bataille. The hope is to find elements of Bataille's thought that, read against his misogynistic aspects, may remain generative for feminist discourse. This aspect is explored further in chapter two where I focus on the Bataille-influenced work of Kathy Acker, in particular the novel *My Mother: Demonology* (1994). This book takes inspiration from, among other things, Bataille's relationship with Laure (Colette Peignot). Looking at Acker's engagement with Laure's own writing and theory, I will further draw out the idea of the base as both an extension of and a challenge to some of Bataille's other ideas, again specifically in a feminist context wherein Bataille figures as both inspiration and antagonist.

The concept of the base moves somewhat into the background while the focus on the subject remains for chapter three, which focuses on the work of the poet and theorist Rob Halpern. I look at Halpern's work as a response to Bataille and to New Narrative. In particular I focus on how Halpern uses Bataillean ideas of community and transgression in the context of queer, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist politics in his interconnected poetic and theoretical work. While drawing out the fascinating implications of Halpern's work, I argue that his use of Bataillean ideas at points falls back into a transgressive approach that risks reifying a particular kind of white male subject position. I then move outward to explore Jean-Luc Nancy's Bataille-influenced notions of community as an alternative approach. Thus this chapter focuses on a critical approach to Bataille's understanding of community and what potential this may or may not have for a queer and anti-racist contemporary politics.

Halpern's work also raises questions of subjectivity and community in relation to performance and community, and I extend my consideration of Halpern into chapter four with a focus on these issues. I compare audience experiences of Halpern's readings with audience reactions to the controversial work of Kenneth Goldsmith. In my conclusion I build on what I have said about community, subjectivity and transgression in chapters three and four and bringing back in the concept of the base from chapters one and two, considering how these pieces fit together and what questions and challenges remain. I argue that we are left with the question of whether current developments in left-wing, queer, feminist and decolonial theory and activism can use Bataille as a resource or whether they are in fact characterised by an opposition to transgression and the heterogeneous before considering whether the heterogeneity and the base have the capacity to bridge these different tendencies. As part of this discussion I consider the heterodox Marxian thinking of Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Rancière as interventions into the idea of the base. I also look at Stefano Harney, Fred Moten and David Marriott's respective engagements with the legacy of Frantz Fanon. I point to the ways in which these specifically anti-racist, decolonial responses to dialectical thought are not only Fanonian but also Bataillean, and consider the resulting political implications for Bataille's legacy in radical theory and praxis.

Having attempted to provide a sketch of Bataille's thought and its implications, I must nonetheless concede that Bataille cannot be reduced to a single theoretical programme; rather we can only work through aspects of his thought. In this thesis Bataille can be something of an evanescent, phantom figure. My focus is on how certain problems that are crystallised in his work reappear, sometimes transformed and sometimes not, in the work of others whom he influenced. In examining the legacy of transgression, heterogeneity and the base, then, I aim to understand how these ideas might represent not just gestures beyond the limits of the existing

society but a move towards the actual transformation of this society, and to what extent they present real matrices for this move from gesture to transformation. I also ask tentatively what such a transformation might look like, whether it would be desirable from the point of view of contemporary radical political demands, and indeed whether the latter judgement can meaningfully be made from the point of view of a currently existing political subject. This project is, then, appropriately Bataillean in its impossibility. Let us begin.

Chapter one

The base and the hidden: Bataille, feminism and the limits of representation

In this chapter I consider a number of related and overlapping concepts in Bataille's thought, centring my analysis on the concept of the base. As I began to describe in my introduction, the base is a somewhat elusive concept in Bataille's writing. It can be linked to his ideas around transgression, heterogeneity, inner experience, sex and death, as well as to ideas that are not as prominent within his work but that, I will argue, raise crucial questions for our understanding of Bataille and his legacy. These latter ideas are both interconnected and contradictory: they concern binaries of secrecy and clarity, of directness and obfuscation and of writing and experience.

I explore these binaries by juxtaposing Bataille's writings on the base in the 1920s and 1930s with his embrace of secret ritual activity and 'inner experience' in the context of the *Acéphale* group. From the point of view of this concept of the base I then consider the operation of transgression in Bataille's novel *Story of the Eye*, the different ways in which this operation has been understood by different readers of the text, and the implications of these readings for feminist politics. For this I take as my starting point the arguments of Susan Suleiman, who takes *Story of the Eye* as an example of how transgressive work has been approached by critics in divergent ways that she refers to as the 'textual' and 'representational' readings (1990: 77-78). Suleiman compares two opposing readings – Roland Barthes' poststructuralist reading and Andrea Dworkin's radical feminist reading – in order to demonstrate how, in her view, the representational reading (aligned with Dworkin) can provide a necessary focus on aspects of the text that the textual reading (aligned with Barthes) tends to ignore (1990: 78-79). Within this framework the representational reading reveals complex and contradictory connections between Bataille's theoretical work and feminist attempts to challenge male-dominant viewpoints including those of Bataille himself. I then go on to show the ambiguous relationship between the representational reading and the themes of the base and secrecy.

The base, secrecy and political engagement

I begin by looking at Bataille's writings on literature and class struggle in the 1920s and 1930s. These writings raise the issue of Bataille's relationship to politics and the role played by the base for this relation. In the essay 'The "Old Mole" and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*' (written 1929-30) Bataille extols the revolutionary potential of 'human agitation' and 'baseness,' setting these concepts against 'bourgeois mental forms'. He then argues that 'in

human terms no baseness values… the rage of refined literati, lovers of an accursed poetry' (1985: 43). In the essay 'The Use-Value of D.A.F. de Sade,' from around the same time, meanwhile, he says that 'the fact of needlessly resorting to literary or poetic verbiage, the inability to express oneself in a simple and categorical way… betray[s] a pretentious hypocrisy' (1985: 92). In these contexts the idea of the 'base' refers to a number of overlapping things. Allan Stoekl presents Bataille's 'base materialism' as concerning a 'critique of the elevated – the ideal, the *sur*real,' that posits 'a matter that cannot be reduced to systems of scientific or political mastery' (1985: xv). In Bataille's words, '[b]ase matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations' (1985: 51). As I indicated in my introduction, in Bataille's broader work the base is aligned with heterogeneity and transgression. Suleiman aptly sums up how transgression is described by Bataille as a phenomenon that 'exceed[s] the bounds of rational, everyday behaviour' yet 'is indissociable from the consciousness of the constraint or prohibition it violates' (1990: 75). These concepts can in a number of ways be considered as 'base' according to Bataille's definition: in their disruptiveness, in their hostility towards bourgeois sensibilities, and in their refusal of assimilation and systematisation.

There is, further, a desire in Bataille's essays cited here to portray the 'base' element that he elsewhere aligns with heterogeneity as being opposed to the practice of literary writing, more specifically the writing of Surrealist intellectuals, which is seen as restricted and inauthentic in comparison (Surya 2002: 120). In addition, the base element is here aligned with the 'human' and with 'simple and categorical' expression. This figure of 'the human' is also, it seems, a proletarian figure. Bataille follows his comment on the 'lovers of an accursed poetry' with the dictum 'what cannot move the heart of a ditchdigger already has the existence of shadows' (1985: 43). It is not a coincidence that Bataille has chosen the figure of the ditch-digger rather than any other worker. With its associations with the soil and perhaps with the digging of graves – we might be reminded of the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* – the figure of the ditch-digger can be linked to many of Bataille's preoccupations extending beyond issues of class. These preoccupations concern the alignment of death with a base matter that disrupts all attempts at dignity and systematisation.

Perhaps, then, Bataille's attempt to set this kind of earthy simplicity and directness against complex literature and theory has more to do with the ditch-digger's baseness than with his proletarian status (for Bataille, as we will see, this figure is almost certainly male). Nonetheless, Bataille has chosen this apparently proletarian figure, and the political implications of this choice are relevant to his wider work. In a later essay, 'Popular Front in the Street,' published in 1936, Bataille attempts to extend this apparent hostility towards intellectuals and literature in

favour of 'the human' into the field of political praxis, and in doing so realises more fully his assertion of a proletarian figure[16]. Significantly, this text was initially given as a speech the previous year to the political group Contre-Attaque (Counter-Attack) of which Bataille was the co-founder. This group was formed in the context of the formation in 1934 in France of the Popular Front, which as Stoekl explains was 'an antifascist alliance of the Communist and non-Communist left' (Bataille 1985: 262). Stoekl also argues that

> Bataille's speech indicates the frustration of many intellectuals of the left
> both with the Communists' reluctance to maintain an alliance with other
> parties of the left and with the Communist tendency to support implicitly the
> French army[.] (Bataille 1985: 262)

More to the point, for our present purposes, Bataille attacks the party leadership of the Popular Front for failing to engage properly with the revolutionary energies of the movement's rank-and-file and thus letting the movement down. 'In a certain sense,' he says,

> the Popular Front meant nothing more than the revolutionaries'
> abandonment of the anticapitalist offensive… at precisely the time when a
> great number of people, independently of their political tendencies, agreed
> upon the disastrous character of the capitalist system... [which] in the midst
> of the present crisis would represent the most scandalous possible weakness.
> (1985: 164)

In this regard Bataille's criticism is in line with the critique levelled by much of the radical left against the Popular Front, namely that in trying to yoke together communism and social democracy the Popular Front had failed to address the real roots of fascism in capitalist oppression. However, Bataille's critique also has characteristics that are more specific to his project. He repeats in this speech his claim of a disdain for an over-emphasis on language. 'The will to be done with impotence implies,' he says, 'scorn for… phrasemongering; the taste for verbal agitation has never passed for a mark of power'. The 'phrasemongers' in this view are 'certain professional revolutionary activists' who, according to Bataille, have taken it upon themselves to lead the working class but in doing so are in fact suppressing its energies. Bataille accuses 'militant revolutionaries' of 'a complete lack of confidence in the spontaneous reactions of the masses' (162).

---

[16] The question of praxis is taken up in a different form in Bataille's novel *Blue of Noon*, written in 1935 although not published until 1957, as well as his later *L'Abbé C.*

However, Bataille himself may be guilty of assuming the same kind of leadership role for himself, perhaps without realising it. 'We address ourselves,' he says of his speech,

> to the direct and violent drives which, in the minds of those who hear us, can contribute to the surge of power that will liberate men [sic] from the absurd swindlers who lead them. (161-162)

This passage raises a number of problems with Bataille's position. Again we encounter a valorisation of directness, force and violence (Suleiman 1994: 70). But, we might ask, who are the people who *hear*? This does still imply that the proletariat are in some way out there waiting to hear Bataille's agitational message and be inspired by it; it still puts them in a somewhat passive position. There is also, it appears, an association for the Bataille of these texts between class struggle and a kind of anti-intellectualism. Clearly this association is one to which many communist revolutionaries would be vehemently opposed.

Moreover, the problem with Bataille's attachment to revolution goes beyond a lack of clarity as to what *kind* of social revolution he wants; his theory may lack concrete engagement with social revolution *per se*. It is possible that Bataille may be using the idea of the working class to serve his own wider theories rather than genuinely attempting to put his theories in the service of working-class struggle. This is especially true because this move away from class struggle seems to correspond in Bataille to a move towards a more private form of praxis. 'The Sacred Conspiracy' was published in 1936, the same year as 'Popular Front'; however, Bataille offers a viewpoint contradicting that of his 'Popular Front' speech the previous year. 'It is useless', Bataille says in 'The Sacred Conspiracy,'

> to respond to those who are able to believe in the existence of this world and who take their authority from it; if they speak, it is possible to look at them without hearing them… It is necessary to refuse boredom and live only for fascination.
>   On this path, it is vain to become restless and seek to attract those who have idle whims, such as passing the time, laughing, or becoming individually bizarre. It is necessary to go forward without looking back and without taking into account those who do not have the strength to forget immediate reality. (1985: 179)

What, then, is the group in this passage that separates itself from those who are too banal or not strong enough for the activity they choose? This is where we encounter the group called '*Acéphale*' ('Headless'). *Acéphale* gave its name to a published review, but as Stoekl described,

> [T]he *Acéphale* group itself was considered to be a "secret society," its rituals closed to the public. Clearly Bataille had fundamentally changed his conception of the nature of the political activity to be carried out. (Bataille 1985: xix)

These rituals included meeting in the woods at the site where a tree had been struck by lightning. Most notoriously the group had planned to actually sacrifice one of the members – possibly Bataille himself – but this was not carried out because nobody would volunteer to do the killing (Bataille 1985: xx). It is worth quoting Stoekl at greater length here as he provides a useful summation of *Acéphale*'s activity:

> The secret society is a group of adepts, operating in the margins of (and acting against) official society… The *Acéphale* group was also outside the mainstream of political life: subversive yet not intended to lead an organized mass movement… [and] offered nothing in the way of the standard economic and material promises – that was left to the mainstream groups. (xix)

There is an emphasis here, then, not on the tumultuous revolutionary mass in the street but rather on the members of *Acéphale separating themselves out* from the mass of society. Whereas in the 'Popular Front' piece Bataille was hoping to be 'heard' by the masses, here he is hoping to block his ears from hearing *them*. Along with this separation from the mass comes a kind of rejection of 'the world.' The earlier Bataille was attacking abstraction and praising the 'earth,' which seems to refer to the real world, to 'immediate reality' and to the soil of the ditchdigger. 'The earth is base, *the world is world*' he says in the "Old Mole" essay (1985: 43). Here, however, he seems to reject the world in an almost Gnostic way: he wants to reject those who 'believe in the existence of this world'. Bataille's body of writing about Gnostic mysticism itself dates back at least to 1930 (1985: 259), but here it has taken on a new role in becoming associated with an actual social praxis, that of *Acéphale*.

Bataille seems in some ways to be absenting his group from the field of revolutionary action, in stark contrast to the earlier pieces. We might be justified in asking whether Bataille's invocation of a position of leadership in 'Popular Front' then translates into the formation of a

political elite in the form of *Acéphale*. In some ways this would not be a fair assessment. The group is *not* an elite in the sense that it is not trying to exercise power over the masses. The very secrecy and obscurity of the group can be seen as a deliberate resistance to the possibility of taking power. If the group's rituals remain not only private but quite possibly incomprehensible to the majority of people, then there is less risk of them taking power in a tyrannical or fascist manner (Bataille 1985: xviii-xix). As Suleiman points out, such a retreat, if it is a retreat, could be seen as reactionary but could equally 'protect one from active collaboration with the enemy' (1994: 78). Indeed Benjamin Noys argues that the ''position' of *Acéphale*' is in fact 'the loss of any political position' (2000: 46). In Noys' view, then, inner experience functions to avoid a fascist political engagement while also opening out the possibility of a more profound political engagement, one not reducible to any form of leadership or susceptible to being harnessed in the service of an oppressive regime (2000: 49). We can also link this idea to the meaning of the group's name, 'Headless' (1985: xix-xx). This name pertains on the one hand to heterogeneity, with its emphasis on the body and against the rationality associated with the head, and on the other, Stoekl argues, to leaderlessness – the group may be restricted, but it does not behave like an elite in the sense that it does not seek to lead, nor does it appear to have an internal hierarchy in any conventional sense. Bataille, then, seems to be climbing down from the polemical position of the 'Popular Front' speech.

However, this might seem like a somewhat weak response to the problem of mass revolution. We can see why Bataille might want to climb down from his position of *speaking to* the masses, but this does not necessarily mean he cannot engage with them at all. What then is the reason for this response? It is possible that Bataille, like many intellectuals, has come to see communist revolution as a failure and thus rejected it in favour of other practices. If this is the case then we could see the emphasis on uncontrolled revolutionary violence in 'Popular Front in the Street' as a version of revolution that Bataille initially tries to bring into being but then feels the need to reject. Further, as I have suggested, Bataille's engagement with the mass may have been lacking in concreteness all along. If the figure of the proletarian invoked in the earlier essays is more of a symbol than an actual engagement with the reality of that subject then this might be another reason why it is relatively easy for Bataille to discard this figure and refocus his attention on a closed circle of intellectuals. In this sense the select group that speaks to the mass and the select group that refuses to speak to the mass are two sides of the same coin: both, arguably, would express a wilful separation from the mass. Of course this separation also functions to figure the mass *as a mass*, whether the proletarian mass is valorised for its heterogeneous effervescence, as in the earlier Bataille, or whether the mass comes to represent that which the minority group turns away from. Either way, there is a lack of engagement with the actual subjectivity of the people within this mass: who they might be, what they might want

and how they might be differentiated within the mass. These are things that, for example, an intelligent Marxist analysis of class struggle would have to reckon with.

This is especially the case because the obscurity and restriction of *Acéphale* seems to be exactly what Bataille attacks Surrealist intellectuals for in his other essays. In these essays he attacks the idea of a group that has made itself irrelevant to reality, to the world and to class struggle by engaging in obscurantist, 'refined' literary activity. Does Bataille's earlier claim, then, undermine the radical possibilities for *Acéphale* and potentially reduce it to just another private bourgeois intellectual activity? These are also potential problems regarding any group of intellectuals trying to position itself in relation to class struggle. Whether the intellectual group positions itself as separate from class struggle or in a position of leadership at the vanguard of it, this group separates itself from the everyday experience of class struggle rather than reckoning with its actual implication and imbrication within the complexities of this struggle.

Key here is the notion of 'inner experience' that I outlined in my introduction. Suleiman aligns inner experience with the 'inward turn in Bataille's thought' by which she characterises *Acéphale*. However, as Noys is keen to point out, inner experience also has deeper implications for politics. Noys argues that Suleiman has misunderstood the concept of inner experience when she relates it to the formation of a closed and individualised praxis. Her interpretation, Noys argues, is overly literal: she assumes 'inner experience' must refer to a turning toward the self, away from political engagement with wider society. Noys, in contrast, says that inner experience is for Bataille profoundly social and political as it 'can always be traced to an experience of community' (2000: 48). He points to the passage in *Inner Experience* where Bataille pronounces that 'your life is not limited to that ungraspable inner streaming; it streams to the outside as well' (1988: 94). Noys says that this idea 'destroys the concept of inner experience as internal' (2000: 51). It seems here Bataille still wants to reject some notions of bourgeois private experience.

Noys' critique is not entirely fair to Suleiman, who does in fact consider the social ambiguity and political potential of inner experience. She acknowledges that in embracing a political activity that refuses to choose between action and inaction (and, by extension, between fascism and the Popular Front tendency in anti-fascist resistance) Bataille may have been working towards a 'third term' (1994: 78) that presents possibilities beyond these binaries (and not, it should be said, in the sense of a fascist Third Positionism). Further, Noys does not answer all the criticisms of Bataille that Suleiman raises. Even if inner experience can be said to be politically communicative, the way in which inner experience is realised in the secret and arcane praxis of *Acéphale* still raises questions about the relation of inner experience to elitism. If what

occurs in the inner experience of *Acéphale* is a politicised kind of communication that breaks down the barriers between individual selves (Hollywood 2002: 62), it still seems valid to ask about the social composition of the group of individuals which must form the starting point of this transformation. If these individuals are members of a closed and secret group then there is still a sense that this experience is being withheld from those outside the group.

The problem lies with Bataille's contradictory desire to make a claim for the political valence of something that must remain secret in relation to the public sphere. The risk of this approach comes from the conjunction of class relations and other power relations into which the approach is introduced. The notion of a practice undertaken by a closed group, whether a group that leads the masses or that is separated from it by secrecy, may understandably lead to concerns about elitism and privilege. This privilege takes a number of forms: we could think of the privilege of the intellectual who has access to certain types of literary and cultural material (that, for example, factory workers might not have) and the gender privilege of the white men, such as Pierre Klossowski and Andre Masson, who made up the majority of *Acéphale*'s membership and the circle associated with it (Bataille 1985: xix)[17].

The risk, then, is that the closed group proposed by Bataille will be formed of the very individuals who already bear a degree of power and privilege within society. If secret 'acephalic' activity is proposed as the primary activity of left-wing intellectual and cultural revolution then the privileged character of the practitioners of this activity might lead this revolution to reproduce the status quo. The focus on closed group activity might divert intellectual energy that could otherwise be directed 'outwards' towards a deconstruction of the group's own position of superiority. This focus would then defuse the attempt at direct, unmediated proletarian action proposed by Bataille in 'Popular Front in the Street' (Suleiman 1994: 78).

We might think here of the Surrealist Louis Aragon's dictum, quoted by Walter Benjamin in 'The Author as Producer,' that '[t]he revolutionary intellectual appears first and foremost as the betrayer of his class of origin' (Benjamin 2007: 237). Indeed, as Suleiman (1994: 70) notes, Bataille makes the similar comment that '[t]o whatever extent the unhappy bourgeois has maintained a human vulgarity… *disaffection with his own class* [my emphasis] quickly turns into stubborn hatred' (1985: 32). Given Bataille's *relatively* stable and privileged occupation as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale during the 1930s (Bataille 1985: x) he would not conventionally be said to belong to the class of proletarian workers that he invokes in 'Popular

---

[17] There were exceptions: Laure was involved, as were Isabelle Farner and the Japanese artist Taro Okamoto (Bataille et al 2017: 148-149).

Front in the Street'. To what extent, then, we might ask, does Bataille successfully betray his class?

This does not discredit all the political claims made for inner experience, which remain profoundly important as they consider how we might move from being private, self-interested subjects to members of a community of solidarity. However, we are left wondering how the self-enclosed group could work towards this kind of community if it remains small, secret and unknown to the public at large. We can imagine a scenario where the membership of *Acéphale*, and thus access to the rituals of inner experience, broadened, with people joining the group on a larger scale that nonetheless remained secret and thus resisted being harnessed by any kind of political authority. However, this did not happen to any significant degree. Acèphale did recruit new members, and there was even a socio-political dimension to some of their activities: members were not permitted to shake hands with anti-Semites, for example. There is something very appealing about the elevation of this tiny, everyday act of antifascist resistance into a ritual practice. Nonetheless, it does not amount to anything with a wider social reach; it did not transform society on a wider scale, and probably by its nature could not have done. The risk thus remains that *Acéphale* looks like nothing more than the self-indulgent activity of a small group of intellectuals, an activity that does not engage on any level with the vast majority of people and thus appears simply irrelevant.

Acéphale, then, represents a number of different and contradictory things: an elite that positions itself as above or at least separate from the masses; a deliberate turn away from the field of political action in favour of 'inner experience'; an abdication of positions of leadership and rational understanding; and an activity defined by its secrecy and its inaccessibility to anyone other than a small group of adepts. Nonetheless, in terms of its alignment with heterogeneity and its refusal to be enlisted to broader political projects the activity of *Acéphale* can still be seen as 'base.' How can it be, then, that the base is the property both of the heterogeneous mass of the proletariat and of the secret activity closed to the majority of people? This question emphasises the contradiction I have discussed in Bataille's politics, between secrecy and withdrawal on the one hand and direct collective action on the other. It also *collapses* this contradiction by pointing out that the closed group in whose hands the secret praxis implicitly lies *cannot* simply withdraw from a position of political leadership because it already occupies a position of relative historical political primacy. In this sense the activity of *Acéphale* may, despite its intentions radically to the contrary, uphold certain aspects of bourgeois power and privilege that are anathematic to communist revolution. Bataille's attempt to make the negation of politics a political act would then effectively fall back, despite itself, into preserving the status quo. One articulation of this view of Bataille is made by Halpern, who argues that the

'absolute negativity' of Bataille's position and those influenced by it entails a historically determined 'categorical dismissal of communism' (2016: unpaginated).

This question regarding the extent to which Bataille's radical gestures revert to conservative positions also comes into play with regard to his sexual politics. These politics are most clearly on display in Bataille's works of pornographic literature such as *Story of the Eye* and *Madame Edwarda*, and it is here that I turn in the next section. As I will show, the role played in these texts, especially *Story of the Eye*, by male dominance links back in specific ways to Bataille's engagements with writing and revolutionary politics and throws them into new light[18].

Misogyny, transgression and the unrepresentable

Bataille first published *Story of the Eye* pseudonymously in 1928, around the same time as many of the essays as I have discussed. Briefly, *Story of the Eye* is a pornographic narrative told from the point of view of an unnamed male narrator who enters a violently intense sexual relationship with a woman named Simone (Bataille 2001: 9). The couple's relationship extends to involve orgies with various others, named and unnamed, especially a girl named Marcelle. Described as 'the purest and most affecting of our friends' (12), Marcelle, as I will describe below, frequently assumes a submissive role wherein she is tortured and abused by the narrator and Simone, which culminates in her committing suicide (43). After this event the narrator and Simone go on to engage in ever more extreme sexual acts, culminating in the rape and murder of a priest (64-65). There then follows a second part of the book, presented as an autobiographical account by the author of the events in his own life that led to the writing of the fictional narrative (70).

Story of the Eye is intimately connected with Bataille's theories of transgression and heterogeneity. As a pornographic text featuring graphic scenes of violent sex and sexualised violence, it is an archetypally transgressive text (Suleiman 1990: 72). To put it in broad terms, the inclusion of such scenes in a text is often seen as transgressive because of their crossing of the limit of what would be considered acceptable or desirable in everyday life. This kind of transgression is also often characterised in terms of its potentially shocking or upsetting effect on a reader (Neeper 2008). Material that is transgressive is likely to be shocking, offensive or upsetting to at least some people precisely as a function of being transgressive. However, I would argue that once we look at a text like *Story of the Eye* it becomes clear that the idea of a

---

[18] I have elected not to discuss Bataille's other major novel, *Blue of Noon* (*Bleu de Ciel*, written in 1935 and published in 1957) and *L'Abbé C* (1950), works which raise different (though related) questions that are outside the scope of my discussion here.

normative sense of what is shocking, offensive or traumatic does not really hold up. This is because any sense of normativity is bound up with the interests of the established order, specifically – for my purposes – the order of male heterosexual dominance. In other words, the belief that certain activities and experiences are transgressive is instituted by a dominant order that has an interest in oppressing and excluding these activities and experiences.

How does male dominance manifest in *Story of the Eye*, then? The narrator is explicitly figured as the perpetrator of sexual violence: he describes himself as raping or intending to rape the female characters on more than one occasion (21, 40, 65, 67). This dynamic can be illustrated with reference to the interplay of the characters in one early scene. The narrator describes how 'Marcelle, who had an unusual lack of will power, agreed to join us… with some other friends at our place' (15). Inevitably, this new encounter turns into an orgy; Marcelle asks to leave but the narrator repeats that "We promised we wouldn't touch you," to which Marcelle responds with 'a violent rage' (16). Soon after this, however, she announces that she wants 'to take off her dress'; she then shuts herself in the wardrobe and begins masturbating while also 'pleading to be left in peace'. Finally, she emerges from the wardrobe to witness the 'blood, sperm, urine and vomit' left behind by the increasingly violent orgy; she reacts to these with 'a sickly but violent terror' (17).

The constantly shifting attitude of Marcelle, between unwillingness to take part in the sexual action and enthusiasm for it, can again be interpreted in multiple ways; it cannot necessarily be seen as an endorsement or normalisation of rape on the part of the text. All of the characters display a similar oscillation between revulsion and desire. The overall attitude toward sex in the text is precisely the overlap between horror, anger and arousal displayed by Marcelle; on one level this is as much the case for the narrator as for Marcelle. He describes her distress during the orgy as being 'attached to… the horror continually aroused by the compulsiveness of my actions' (40). He is thus portrayed to be as much at the mercy of his feelings as she is, and indeed his feelings are inextricably linked to hers. Surya goes so far as to say that there is nothing 'sadistic in the ferocity of the trials [Marcelle] has to endure. They are *innocence* itself'. Marcelle, Simone and the narrator all 'obey this fate without restraint, carried along by what is illuminating about such a destiny given to desire' (2002: 101). Of course, this corresponds to the nature of transgression as described by Bataille. The characters' attitude to sex is shown to be an intense and uncontrolled one within which they are no longer bound by conventional codes of ethics yet at the same time feel a sense of anguish at the sense of defying these rules. It might thus be said that rape is only one of a plethora of amoral and forbidden acts committed or desired by the characters; any justification of it which might appear to occur as a result of it being desired by the narrator would be countered by the obviously anguished and

chaotic state within which it arises. Despite the narrator's position of power over Marcelle, both characters are presented as being linked and even merged by the intensity of their sexual anguish and ecstasy (Surya 2002: 101).

However, this is far from being the whole story. The ambiguity between the compulsion to transgress and the recognition of prohibition with regard to sex plays out in ways that seem to reproduce sexist social conventions and assumptions. Marcelle, for example, has a distinct relationship to these aspects of transgression compared to the other characters. As I have shown, Marcelle is frequently figured as the victim of sadistic manipulation on the part of the narrator and Simone. Transgressive sexuality in *Story of the Eye*, then, to some extent occurs specifically through the victimisation of a woman who is presented as an archetypal 'innocent' (Dworkin 1982: 177): the narrator specifically describes her as 'naively pious' (Bataille 2001: 15) and as 'the purest… of our friends' (Bataille 2001: 12).

At the same time, as I have described above Marcelle is also shown at times to embrace and desire these sexual advances. What is specifically disturbing about this shift from resistance to consent is how closely it follows the misogynistic myth of the woman who initially resists sexually aggressive advances but is eventually won over by them[19]. This is a myth that feeds into what Dworkin, as I have mentioned, describes as the widely-held belief 'that sexual violence is desired by the normal female, needed by her, suggested or demanded by her,' a belief which functions to silence, punish and subjugate women in the face of male authority. Marcelle, then, in many ways conforms to entirely conventional models that present female sexuality as submissively available to men. Insofar as *Story of the Eye* operates as a conventional work of pornography it supports Dworkin's argument and challenges the more radical claims made for Bataille's writing of sex. Stuart Kendall, for example, has claimed that Bataille's work is not pornography but erotica, in the sense that 'erotica is the activation of desire' in a more heterogeneous sense, whereas 'pornography is a caricature of desire, a stable structure that goes through the motions' (Bataille 2013: 125). Yet as I have shown, *Story of the Eye,* despite its more heterogeneous moments of utter strangeness, often functions precisely as this kind of mechanised repetition of conventional sexual tropes[20].

---

[19] Bataille similarly blurs the lines between consensual pleasure and rape in his last novel, *My Mother* (*Ma Mère,* 1966), where the narrator describes the 'violent sensuality which my mother had experienced when… my father had raped her' ('où mon père la viola') (2012: 79, 2012b: 79).

[20] We could also challenge Kendall's binary between erotica and pornography on its own terms. Given the amount of highly generic and conservative writing that has been marketed as erotica (*Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example) and the radically queer material that has been produced under the aegis of pornography by studios such as Trouble Films, it is not at all clear that the distinction holds up.

For the sake of balance we must note that Marcelle is not strictly the only victim of sadism in the book. For example, in one strikingly surreal scene Simone commands the narrator to abase himself by eating a raw egg out of a bidet. Simone then promises the narrator that 'she would do the same for me and also for Marcelle' (33). The sadistic and masochistic roles are thus to some degree moveable, and there are times when the dynamic between the characters is more redolent of a consensual BDSM relationship wherein individuals freely take on and discard such roles according to their desire. However, it also seems inappropriate to use this language in application to *Story of the Eye*, a text where, as I have said, desire is not 'free' but compulsive and the idea of a subject who could freely consent is itself under attack. There are no safe words in *Story of the Eye*.

Even bearing the above in mind, we can still note that the narrator is much more frequently the dominant, active agent in the narrative: his acts are mostly not the result of someone telling him what to do, whereas Marcelle's acts mostly are. We might say, then, that one of the reasons that transgression in *Story of the Eye* reinforces male dominance is that it happens from the point of view of the man, with the women operating as the object of transgression rather than its agential subject. As Cathy MacGregor asks, glossing Carolyn Dean, 'how can a woman really transgress if she does not have a subjective position to transgress from?' (2006: 107). In her lack of subjectivity, then, woman becomes the Other of transgression (Lloyd 2013: 575). It follows that, in Ashley Tauchert's words, '[i]f "Transgression" [sic] cannot be thought *by* the other, but only thinks itself in violent domination or incorporation of otherness… it can only really represent the logic of the same masquerading as a radical break with tradition' (2008: 113). In this sense, then, *Story of the Eye* presents us with reactionary transgressions that in fact reinforce the status quo rather than challenging it. In this sense transgression is recuperated.

Story of the Eye, then, is an apt example of what I pointed out in my introduction: that we cannot simply take the 'transgressiveness' of a transgressive text at face value. We must consider for whom the text is transgressive, what rules it transgresses, and why it transgresses them (Neeper 2008). Several implications arise from this analysis of the social determination of what is considered transgressive. If we consider the sexual violence in *Story of the Eye*, it is not sufficient for us to simply say that reading about sexual violence is shocking because this violence transgresses the limit of what we find acceptable. This is because, as I said in my introduction, this limit is in no way universal or predetermined. We might expect a socially conservative reader to find unacceptable not only the book's scenes of rape but *also* its scenes of sexual activity that is scatological or fetishistic but nonetheless, as far as we can tell, consensual. On the other hand, a reader with, let us say, a queer, sex-positive and feminist viewpoint might read the book and find the rape scenes unacceptable but not the scenes

portraying 'merely' unconventional forms of sex. Of course, these are hypothetical examples. We cannot predict exactly how *any* reader might react, and, for example, a reader who is opposed to rape in real life might not necessarily be opposed to fictional portrayals of rape that she sees as contributing to our understanding of the phenomenon[21].

In this light, when we encounter sexual violence in a text such as *Story of the Eye* we must consider what the transgressiveness of this sexual violence is doing in relation to the wider social determination of notions of transgression. As I mentioned in my introduction, we live in a society wherein sexual violence is still widespread and wherein sexual violence against women functions to reaffirm the dominance of men. Within such a society, the sense that the sexual violence within *Story of the Eye* is transgressive expresses a contradiction: however unacceptable we find the sexual violence in the book we nonetheless continue to live in a society which fails to find such violence sufficiently unacceptable to actually stop it from happening. *Story of the Eye* transgresses the rules that society does not really enforce: this is the sense in which its transgressions could be considered reactionary. If in reading this book we experience a shock that is based on a sense of a shared recognition that sexual violence is unacceptable then, I would argue, we are failing to recognise that the society in which we live *does* frequently tolerate sexual violence and thus this sense of a shared recognition is illusory. The shock of transgression may then reinforce this illusion. We need, then, to locate the sexual violence of books such as *Story of the Eye* more concretely within a society that not only tolerates but also in some regards produces and relies on such violence. In this view, then, our understanding of sexual violence should encompass both this violence *and* the social conditions of heteronormative male dominance that produce it, rather than against an abstract sense of what is permissible that perhaps implicitly assumes that the sources of sexual and other violence can be found *outside* social conditions.

If we take this view we can then look at the representations of transgressive violence in *Story of the Eye* in relation to social conditions in a number of ways. On the one hand, we could see these representations as exposing the investment in sexual violence that mainstream society might otherwise want to hide. In this way the book's transgressions would be effective precisely by exposing society's failure to enforce the rules being transgressed. At the same time, we could also see the book's treatment of violence as contributing to the very normalisation of rape that allows its continued occurrence. In this second view, the apparently transgressive nature of the book's violence would be in a sense illusory. We might then say that in drawing our attention onto 'extreme' scenarios of 'transgressive' sexual violence *Story of the*

---

[21] We might see Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* (1975) as an attempt to write a violent erotics from a contrasting lesbian-feminist standpoint, albeit one where issues of power and consent are still interestingly at issue.

Eye merely deflects our attention from the fact that real-life occurrences of such violence are not transgressing any rule that is actually enforced.

This elision associated with transgression can also be seen in the relation between what Suleiman calls the 'textual' and 'representational' readings of *Story of the Eye*. Suleiman describes a longstanding interconnection between sexuality and the avant-garde's valorisation of transgression, which finds one (though by no means the first) manifestation in 'the Surrealists… who placed eroticism at the center of their preoccupations with cultural subversion' and culminates with a perceived 'metaphoric equivalence between the violation of *sexual* taboos and the violation of *discursive* norms,' with Bataille as 'a central reference' (1990: 74)[22]. This 'metaphoric equivalence' within which 'the transgressive content of a work of fiction… must be read primarily as a metaphor for the transgressive use of language effected by modern writing,' effects

> the transfer… of the notion of transgression from the realm of experience –
> *whose equivalent, in fiction, is representation* [my emphasis] – to the realm
> of words… the sexually scandalous scenes of *Histoire de l'oeil* are there to
> "signify" Bataille's linguistically scandalous verbal combinations, not vice
> versa. (1990: 75)

Suleiman is speaking here not only of Surrealism but also of Bataille's influence on those theorists often grouped under the term post-structuralism, in particular Barthes. The slippage in the concept of transgression 'from the realm of experience… to the realm of words' persisted after Suleiman, too: in 1999 Patrick ffrench argued regarding *Story of the Eye* that '[t]he transgressive text is transgressive now not in terms of what it represents but in its mode of representation' (40-41). What complicates such claims is the scepticism Bataille displays elsewhere towards the capacity of language to communicate experience. The slippage into the textual, after all, is very close to what Bataille aggressively accuses the Surrealists of in the "Old Mole" essay. It should be said that here Suleiman is not arguing against post-structuralism or deconstruction *per se* (and in any case these terms have been notoriously misapplied in dealing with French theory). Rather than mounting a critique of a broader 'post-structuralist' tendency in the understanding of language, then, Suleiman mostly limits herself to critiquing specific instances of what she sees as a slippage from the representational to the textual. The effacement of representation that Suleiman critiques is not an inevitable feature of deconstructive readings,

---

[22] As Cathy MacGregor (2006: 95) also notes, this model is close to that described by Alice Jardine (1985: 34) where modernity is constituted, metaphorically, through an invasive exploration of the maternal body.

the most compelling of which have explored precisely the ways that signifier and signified disrupt each other rather than remaining in a stable relationship.

Suleiman illustrates the slippage from the representational to the textual with reference to Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1972 novel *Project for a Revolution in New York* (1990: 40-41). The similarities of this novel to *Story of the Eye* make it a useful example for her argument regarding the latter[23]. Suleiman, then, identifies two important aspects of *Project*: firstly the theme of sexual violence and secondly the 'sliding' and 'discontinuous' textual techniques characteristic of the *nouveau roman* tendency within which Robbe-Grillet is grouped (1990: 54). She then points out the tendency of critics such as Jean Ricardou 'to ignore the thematics altogether and treat the text exclusively as a set of formal variations operating on the level of signifiers.' (1990: 55). Suleiman (1990: 59) then shows how critics such as Ricardou seem to make an active *effort* to ignore the subject matter in favour of the form by fusing an emphasis on the formal elements of the text with an insistence that to focus on the text's subject matter is misguided. She details how sexual violence against women is indeed relentlessly referred to throughout *Project*: each of its scenes, she says, 'centers around a rape or some other form of sexual aggression against one or more female victims' (1990: 64). Suleiman argues convincingly that many if not all of the scenarios described in the book in fact function, at least on one level, to reinforce a sexist formation within which 'the male-female opposition operates as the opposition between aggressor and victim' (1990: 65)[24]. This, as will be seen, is another similarity with *Story of the Eye*.

What are we then to make of this critical insistence on the unimportance of sexual violence? It appears that the textual reading exemplified here by Ricardou functions to deny the importance of the sexual within the text, thus deflecting critical consideration of the way the sexual violence is presented (Suleiman 1990: 53). The further implications of this reading can be explored by turning to *Story of the Eye*. Suleiman (1990: 78) cites Roland Barthes' essay 'The Metaphor of the Eye' (1963) as an example of the textual tendency in criticism of *Story of the Eye*. 'The Metaphor of the Eye' is included in the Penguin edition of Bataille's novel, cementing its position as a seemingly standard response to it. It makes the argument that *Story of the Eye* 'bears no comparison with any ordinary piece of fiction' because it is '[e]ssentially… a metaphorical composition' in which 'a term, the Eye, is *varied* through a certain number of substitute objects' (1963: 120). These objects include eggs, testicles, and the other 'globular'

---

[23] The similarity is probably not coincidental: Bataille was most likely an influence on Robbe-Grillet (Ramsay 1992: 221).

[24] Arne De Boever also discusses Suleiman's analysis of Robbe-Grillet in terms of sadism, Sade and Foucault in his *Narrative Care* (2013: 101).

objects recurring throughout the text (120-121). There is also a 'second chain' of metaphors, connected to the first one, which relates to liquid: tears, milk, sperm and so on (121).

There is however, as Suleiman (1990: 78) notes, something strange about Barthes' insistence that the sexual is not *per se* a major aspect of the text. '*Story of the Eye*,' he says, 'in no way nominates the sexual as the first term in the chain… The imaginary world unfolded here does not have as its "secret" a sexual fantasy' (1963: 122). The sexual, then, is for Barthes an aspect of *Story of the Eye* but of no more importance than any other. Or, as ffrench put it later, *Story of the Eye* 'is not about the body' (1999: 22). The testicle is not meant to be considered any more important than the eye (this is indeed compelling insofar as the book is named for the eye); milk is not a metaphor for sperm but rather both are metaphors for each other. We can see how this 'flat' chain of references within which no term is the final referent links with Suleiman's description of transgression occurring within the realm of text rather than experience: Barthes' reading refuses the possibility that the lived experience of sex might be the 'first term' in the chain.

These claims demand further examination. After all, sex is the continual action of this novel. Every one of its pages features a reference to sex or sexual desire; there is not a reference to, for example, eggs on every page. As Suleiman indicates, this should give us pause when considering Barthes' claim that the former is of no more importance than the latter. Of course, this observation alone does not mean that sex must be the 'secret' or the 'first term' of the text: Suleiman does not herself claim that this is the case. However, several elements of the text do seem to be leading the reader to give sex some kind of importance or primacy. In the opening line of *Story of the Eye* the unnamed narrator says 'as far back as I can recall I was frightened of anything sexual' (9), and then goes on within the same paragraph to describe the beginnings of his sexual desire for and relationship with Simone. The role of sex as a source of both desire and terror is thus foregrounded by dint of its placing at the beginning of the story; the reader is encouraged, it seems, to see sex as the starting-point of *something*, whatever this may be.

Equally, Barthes' claim that *Story of the Eye* is a text wherein 'Everything… is on the surface' and that it is thus 'out of the reach of all interpretation' (1963: 123) seems to be, as Suleiman (1990: 85) notes, contradicted by some of the suggestions made by Bataille in the autobiographical section of the text entitled 'Coincidences.' On the one hand the title 'Coincidences' seems to support Barthes' claim that the relationship between images is not one where one image originates another, but rather one where elements come into an arbitrary association with each other in the manner of a coincidence. However, much of what Bataille actually writes in this section appears to suggest that the associations are specifically *not*

coincidental. For example, Bataille gives his now-famous description of witnessing his blind and partially paralysed father urinating:

> [T]hose huge eyes went almost entirely blank when he pissed, with a
> completely stupefying expression of abandon and aberration… [T]he image
> of those white *eyes* from that time was directly linked, for me, to the image
> of eggs, and that explains the almost regular appearance of urine every time
> *eyes* or *eggs* occur in the story. (72)

Barthes' interpretation of this passage is that 'it is the very equivalence of the ocular and the genital that is original, not one of its terms: the paradigm begins nowhere' (1963: 122). In other words, Bataille's witnessing of his father can be seen as the origin of the linked importance of eyes, eggs and urine, but it *cannot* be said that either eyes or urine are the starting point of this set of associations. Further, Barthes does not even mention the possibility of sex having anything to do with this origin. He thus denies that sex is at the root of the text's preoccupation with urine, and also that the appearance of urine is *primarily* to do with the father's body or Bataille's traumatic memory of this body; rather, urine is only *one* of the images emerging from this scenario and it has no primary importance, let alone an importance emerging from a sexual or bodily association.

However, as Suleiman points out, Bataille does in fact specifically mention a sexual connection to this traumatic memory. A few paragraphs after the urination incident he describes how his father, during a visit from the doctor to treat his syphilis, 'shrieked… "Doctor, let me know when you're done fucking my wife!"' Bataille then says that 'the necessity of finding an equivalent to that sentence… largely explains *Story of the Eye*' (73). Barthes has therefore ignored Bataille's claim that his father's urination is in fact connected (via the syphilis which, we are led to believe, caused the blindness, paralysis and irrational outburst) to an 'explanation' for *Story of the Eye* and that this 'explanation' is in turn related to sex (Suleiman 1990: 85). The clear Freudian resonances of the importance given to the father's obscene relation to sexuality are amply described by Suleiman (1990: 85), as well as Amy Hollywood more recently (2002: 43).

I do not take a primarily Freudian approach here any more than a deconstructive one; my intention is not to 'explain' *Story of the Eye* by reference to Bataille's sexual experiences. Apart from anything else, there is some ambiguity regarding whether 'Coincidences' constitutes an accurate description of Bataille's childhood. Bataille's description of his father, for example, has been challenged by Bataille's brother Martial (Surya 2002: 4-5); although for Freud, of

course, this 'primal scene' need not have literally happened. In any case, even if we did know Bataille's account of his experiences to be factual this would not mean that *Story of the Eye* was reducible to these experiences; Barthes' approach is correct at least in this regard (Hollywood 2002: 41-42). The point, rather, is that Bataille frequently talks about his narrator (in 'The Tale') and then himself (in 'Coincidences') being motivated by sexual desires or compulsions and about sexual scenarios being to some degree crucial or originary for the rest of the text. The reader is thus encouraged to think about the sexual as a central causative element of the text.

To say that sex carries this importance within *Story of the Eye* is not to make essentialist claims about what sex itself is, means or represents. Foucault – another theorist contentiously grouped under post-structuralism – can help us here. For him, we recall, sex is an important object of study but not a force in its own right; rather it is produced and conditioned by its discursive contexts. Considering the question of sex's presence in *Story of the Eye*, then, Foucault might say that sex is not at the centre of the text but rather, to paraphrase my earlier quotation from *The History of Sexuality*, a dispersion of centres from which discourses emanate. This dispersion of centres would be much like Barthes' flat chain of references in that sex would not be the first term but only one among many.

At the same time, though, a Foucauldian view would depart from Barthes in certain ways. Sex for Foucault is not simply one among a series of linguistic signs, but is also a vector of concrete social relationships of power and control. We might say Foucault is interested in sex as a language, whereas Barthes wants to prioritise language *over* sex. Thus Foucault might help us towards a view of *Story of the Eye* as a text *about* sex – sex as violence, as an exchange, as a power relationship, as a conditioner of subjectivities – but not a text that posits sex as an irreducible essence. This view enables us to see the text as presenting sexual violence as one of its aspects but not, as Dworkin believes, the only one.

Thus, the elements that I have here identified as 'sexual' are images or acts that are *conventionally* viewed as such; the question of what it *means* for these acts to be sexual as opposed to anything else is a relevant but separate one. There is also a degree of irony, perhaps, in Bataille's choice of title for the section 'Coincidences'. This would be an irony which cuts both ways: the title serves to undermine Bataille's allusions to an autobiographical 'explanation' for *Story of the Eye*, yet at the same time the presence and the seemingly convincing nature of these 'explanations' makes us doubt that the signifying chain can be reduced to mere coincidence. *Story of the Eye*, then, is ambiguous: it cannot be fully explained by its representations of sex or personal experience, but nor can it be fully described by a textual reading which de-emphasises these elements. What Suleiman (1990: 93) does suggest is that

the textual reading has so far been overly favoured and that it may therefore be strategically useful to engage in a reading that, so to speak, re-emphasises the representational elements. Such a reading, she says, would itself be flawed and incomplete precisely because of its insistence on these elements' importance, but it would provide a necessary counterpoint to the textual reading. It is here, then, that the relevance of the representational reading emerges: by focusing on what is represented, namely sex, the representational reading brings out what is missed by the textual reading. Suleiman puts this well when she asks:

> What is the spot in Bataille's text from which the powerful textual reading averts its gaze? To answer that question, it is necessary to turn to an *other* reading, one that has its own significant blind spot but that nevertheless has the advantage of making us see Bataille – as well as the theory of textuality in which he was so powerfully enrolled – in a new, problematic light. (1990: 77)[25]

The example of a representational reading given by Suleiman, then, is a specifically feminist one that aims not only to point out the sexual content but also to critique it. Suleiman (1990: 82) describes how for Andrea Dworkin *Story of the Eye*, as a pornographic text, necessarily carries the same ideological message that she considers all pornography to carry, namely 'that sexual violence is desired by the normal female… suggested or demanded by her' (Dworkin, 1982: 166). Thus, in this view, *Story of the Eye* conspires with the rest of the tradition of pornographic writing to reinforce misogynistic myths about women that function to legitimise and reinforce male supremacy[26].

This argument is crucial. It is also useful, however, to temporarily leave aside Dworkin's political stance and look at what it is about her reading that, in Suleiman's schema, is specifically representational. Suleiman notes the usefulness of Dworkin's text in making clear the difference between the textual and representational readings: contrary to the textual reading, the representational reading focuses on the situations depicted to the exclusion of all else. Thus Suleiman describes how Dworkin demonstrates the 'representational' nature of her reading using the striking technique of describing all the events of the book's plot; she takes up seven pages of her own book (1982: 167-174) to do so. As Suleiman (1990: 80) notes, aside from a few quotations Dworkin strips away all elements that do not directly serve to describe the events of the plot. This account of *Story of the Eye*, Suleiman says, 'flattens out Bataille's narrative

---

[25] Bataille has his own take on the blind spot: as Derrida (1998: 108) and Noys (2000: 30) note, he uses it to denote the nonknowledge for which philosophy cannot account (1988: 110). Suleiman's analysis, then, turns Bataille's 'blind spot' around to ask what Bataille himself is not accounting for.

[26] Others including Monique Wittig (1992: 26) have made similar claims regarding pornography.

into a piece of pulp pornography' and explicitly dismisses the explorations of the text's metaphors and symbols that might be associated with textual readings such as Barthes' (1990: 79)[27]. Thus in a very different way this reading brings out the same sexual 'content' emphasised in 'Coincidences'.

In light of Dworkin's broader argument, the intention of her 'flattening-out' approach is of course to expose the misogynist ideology believed to be 'hidden' by the other elements of the text: 'Bataille,' she says,

> has obscured more than he has uncovered. He has obscured the meaning of force in sex. He has obscured the fact that there is no male conception of sex without force as the essential dynamic… The language stylizes the violence and denies its fundamental meaning to women[.] (1982: 176)

This interpretation of *Story of the Eye*, taken alongside Dworkin's deliberate reduction of the text to the events of its narrative, indicates a claim on Dworkin's part that is extreme both politically and as literary criticism. Not only is Bataille's text *nothing more* than an instance of misogyny, goes the argument; all of its metaphors, textual techniques and psychological resonances are themselves *nothing more* than window-dressing for this core of misogyny (Suleiman, 1990: 82). This also indicates a difference between Dworkin's reading and the one I have argued is encouraged by 'Coincidences': rather than connecting *Story of the Eye*'s attitude to sex with Bataille's personal history she instead makes this attitude a symptom of the general phenomenon of misogyny, from which Bataille's personal concerns are merely another distraction (1982: 175-176).

Leaving aside for now the full implications of this claim, Dworkin *is* absolutely correct in pointing to the misogyny in *Story of the Eye*. As I have shown, the sexual scenarios featured in *Story of the Eye* unfold in many places, as in Suleiman's description of *Project*, according to the dynamic of male aggression against women. Whether or not it can be said that all the female characters in the book reinforce stereotypes about women, it *can* be said that at least some of the dynamics of the text reproduce specifically misogynistic tropes and that these tropes *are not challenged* within the text. To this extent, then, Dworkin is correct. There is at the very least a

---

[27] Dworkin may also be responding to Angela Carter, whose earlier *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) undertakes a close reading of Sade's *Justine* that is similar in its level of detail but quite different in its style and analysis. Carter is in fact as attentive as Dworkin to the misogyny in Sadeian texts but with the crucial difference that Carter sees some potential for feminist agency in an engagement with these texts, whereas for Dworkin they can only be part of the problem. Bataille himself gives a similarly exhaustive level of sequential detail in his presentation of the historical documents around Gilles de Rais (2004: 69 *passim*).

misogynistic *dimension* to *Story of the Eye* that is indeed deeply troubling and inextricably linked to structures of male supremacy. In this regard, then, Bataille may be upholding an existing relation of power rather than challenging it. Despite the revolutionary politics of his early political writings, when it comes to male supremacy Bataille might be seen to reinforce the status quo. One thing the textualising of transgression does in this sense is to mask the power dynamics that are actually at stake. It is easier to see transgression as unproblematically liberating if transgression stays on the page.

Further, it may be that, as Suleiman suggests, Bataille's revolutionary politics are reliant on an implicit male supremacy for much of their force. Suleiman describes Bataille's politics in the 'Popular Front' era as being focused on 'virility'; in this light we might see his valorisation of proletarian figures as having more to do with their perceived masculine power than with their material status from a class point of view (Suleiman 1994: 70). As I have said, the arguable fetishising of the figure of the ditch-digger could be linked to Bataille's connection of this figure with general themes of death, sex and the base *at the expense of* an engagement with the revolutionary (or otherwise) subjectivity of such figures in the political moment of Bataille's writing. This would reveal a contradiction in the idea of the base, between a base concretely rooted in proletarian lived experiences and a more ahistorical notion of the base that risks eliding the particularities of these experiences by aligning them with a generalised heterogeneity.

The reinforcement of a male-dominant view of sexuality in *Story of the Eye*, then, overlaps with the reinforcement of a potentially elitist approach in the political writings of the 1930s. Given the role of 'virility' in these political writings, these fields of sexual and class politics are inextricably linked. If the Bataille of 'Popular Front in the Street' and *Acéphale* fails to be the kind of traitor to his class that he wants to be, he may do the same in the field of sexual politics. Dworkin makes a similar claim about Sade: that his seemingly radical sexual exploits in fact merely 'upheld the ethic of his class' as an aristocrat in pre-Revolutionary France (1981: 72). Dworkin's view of Bataille, implicitly, is that he is doing the same.

Once we have acknowledged the role of misogyny in *Story of the Eye*, then, Barthes' apparent avoidance of it appears difficult to justify, and the extremity of Dworkin's response might in turn appear necessary at the very least as a counterpoint to this avoidance. The palpably angry, polemical tone of Dworkin's response is clearly intended to shake readers out of precisely this kind of complacency. As has been discussed above, the textual readings of Barthes and Ricardou deprioritise not only sexual violence against women but also the sexual itself as themes of the text. Just as the effacement of elements of the text has occurred on both of these

levels, then, Dworkin's attack on the text also functions in multiple ways: it points both to the role of the sexual *and* to the role of sexual violence against women. It must be acknowledged at this point that for Dworkin these two phenomena cannot be separated. She considers the misogynist ideology that she identifies in *Story of the Eye* to shape heterosexual sex to the extent that the latter is not extricable from sexual violence, at least not within the existing social order (1981: 22-23). Leaving aside the problems that many, such as Gayle Rubin (2011: 269), have identified with this position, we can acknowledge the value of Dworkin's emphasis on the role of *violent sex* within *Story of the Eye*.

In doing this, however, she may paradoxically find herself allied with Bataille in certain ways. As Noys points out, '[t]he very violence of [Dworkin's] reading and the horrified affect that Dworkin feels before Bataille is, in a strange way, a sort of respect for Bataille's writing' (2000: 88). Noys also cites Leo Bersani's writing on Dworkin in the context of sexuality (1987: 215). After all, as I have argued, Bataille himself points to the sexual content of the text in a way that defies the textual emphasis given by Barthes. Dworkin (1982: 176) of course profoundly differs from Bataille in the *meaning* that she gives to sex; she is explicitly dismissive of the philosophical dimensions Bataille attributes to sex, seeing them as obfuscations. The primary value of her critique thus remains its focus on the misogyny in *Story of the Eye* rather than on its sexual elements more generally. Nonetheless, the slight overlap between their otherwise opposing views may point to an important juncture between feminist and Bataillean thinking. The reading of Bataille's work that I have argued for here indicates a preoccupation on his part with the lived experience of sex (which corresponds in Suleiman's reading to the representational) that makes possible a feminist critique of his views of this experience and a feminist reappropriation of some of his ideas. This critique would attack the misogynistic aspects of his view of sex and argue for a feminist approach to the same territory (Kingston 2014: 2).

Of course, a feminist engagement with Bataille has already been undertaken by writers such as Kathy Acker, who describes Bataille's writing in terms of a 'Nonpatriarchal Language' (2006: 89; Tauchert 2008: 22). Dworkin's hostile attitude towards Bataille is by no means the only feminist critique that has been attempted. Nonetheless, I have shown how, despite its major limitations, Dworkin's representational reading acts as a productive intervention into the dialogue between Bataille and feminism. In looking at these critiques, then, we encounter two levels of avoidance or occlusion with regard to *Story of the Eye*: firstly a refusal of the importance of the bodily experience of the sexual within the text, and secondly a reluctance to talk about the importance of sexual *politics*, and specifically the influence of male supremacy, within this experience of the sexual. To acknowledge this does not mean we have to defy

Foucault and say that sex is an inescapable essence, but rather that the deliberate obfuscation of sex is deeply strange in its own way.

Even if our take on sex is more Foucault than Dworkin, then, Dworkin's reading is worth attending to given the sheer ferocity of its insistence on misogyny as an overriding, almost transcendent force. This ferocity is something Foucault cannot give us. It is also oddly Bataillean in its extremity. Building on Noys, we might say that in this way it is more of an apt response to Bataille than Foucault or Derrida can provide. As Bersani says in the context of his own comparison of Foucault and Dworkin, 'Dworkin at least [has] the courage to be explicit about the profound *moral revulsion* with sex that inspires the entire project' (1989: 215). Bataille, in his own ambivalent way, evokes a 'moral revulsion with sex' that a Foucauldian reading cannot really access.

Let us return to the matter of representation. What the alignment of the representational reading with Dworkin's feminist reading suggests is that the representational reading is useful precisely because its focus on the sexual scenarios of the story exposes the way in which these scenarios play out according to misogynistic tropes. If we try to link *Story of the Eye* back to the sexual we are confronted with the misogyny that informs the text's presentation of sex. Thus the textual reading, in this view, functions to occlude the presence of a misogynistic sexual sensibility within the text by occluding the very presence of sex. The way in which the textual reading of transgression deflects the critical view away from instances of misogyny in transgressive texts would then function to shore up male authority. In this regard the representational reading would then become a means of accessing something about transgression and heterogeneity that textuality misses.

Dworkin's representational reading is reminiscent of the 'base' activity that Bataille calls for in his interwar writings in that it resists what she sees as the obfuscations of language in order to strongly, aggressively assert the irresistible reality that language tries to hide, which for her is the reality of misogyny[28]. We have seen in these writings a possible framework in which the base and transgression are aligned with the 'human' and with something clearly expressed and opposed to the pretensions of literature; such a framework would be similar to one in which the representation of lived experience is seen as revealing aspects of transgression that are hidden by the obfuscations of textuality. In this sense Dworkin turns one of Bataille's own approaches against him. In Derrida's words, but in an utterly different way, she 'interpret[s] Bataille

---

[28] When considering Dworkin and base transgression we must also acknowledge the alignment between antipornography feminism and the historic class-based disgust for an unruly proletarian 'base' body, as Nicola Pitchford, thinking with Laura Kipnis and Stallybrass and White, points out (2002: 165). In this regard antipornography feminism would be decidedly against the base.

against Bataille… interpret[s] one stratum of his work from another stratum' (Derrida 1998: 127). She interprets the stratum of Bataille's misogyny with a force and aggression aligned with Bataille's stratum of baseness.

As Suleiman (1990: 84) indicates, it is not the case that textuality is inherently reactionary or representation inherently radical. Rather, different readings of a text will in different circumstances be made to serve different political ends; depending on the circumstances representation might be either the more reactionary or the more radical approach. The terms are highly moveable. Nonetheless, we can say that in the case of Bataille the sexist or patriarchal aspects may be obfuscated by a focus on the textual and may come into sharper focus when we look to the representation of experience. This is not least because to the extent that Bataille's writing represents sex it is skewed towards the way the sexual situation is experienced by a heterosexual man and thus itself obfuscates, for example, the way this situation might be experienced by the women who have sex with him. Thus, a focus on the idea of lived experience makes possible a reading of the contingent and subjective nature of such experience.

Base representation: language against itself

Moving away from the specific issue of misogyny, we might say in a more general sense that the attempt to represent reveals more clearly the impossibility of representation (Kennedy 2018: 115). This may be one way of accounting for the fact that in the passages I have quoted from Bataille's theoretical writing transgression seems to be aligned with notions of simplicity and clarity that are reminiscent of Dworkin's insistence on a simplified reading of *Story of the Eye*: perhaps it is precisely in the attempt at clear communication that we encounter what exceeds the possibility of communication.

We must be careful here, of course. The idea of a text that 'clearly' represents a narrative scenario does not entirely overlap with the idea of the base. If the base is heterogeneous and disruptive then it would presumably also resist the capacity of language to be unproblematically representative. As I mentioned, this is precisely the aspect of Bataille's theory that writers such as Barthes and Derrida have focused on. Nonetheless, the idea of a reality that irresistibly surges through and sweeps away the obfuscations of language can be found in both Dworkin and Bataille. Indeed, Bataille's call to 'express oneself in a simple and categorical way' (1985: 92) seems both to mirror Dworkin and to contradict Bataille's own emphasis elsewhere on chaos and disruption. Here, rather, he seems to be calling for a clear communication of reality, through forms of expression that would still presumably have to take place through language. This call both contradicts the lack of clarity embraced by Bataille elsewhere *and* contradicts

itself on its own terms, since the claim that language is inimical to the base seems to go hand-in-hand with the suggestion that a *clearer* language *could* communicate the base. One way of understanding this might be to say that a language that reaches a full, clear representation of the base ends in being ruptured by it; we might call this a kind of self-negating representation. However, we are still left wondering how this paradoxical situation might occur and how it might relate to Bataille's contradictory claims elsewhere.

This sense of moving beyond writing also appears in Bataille's later work *Madame Edwarda* (1937). At the height of one of the narrator's most intense sexual encounters with the titular character the text interrupts the narrative with a bracketed paragraph. This paragraph is worth quoting in full:

> (If you have to lay yourself bare, then you cannot play with words, trifle
> with slow-marching sentences. Should no one unclothe what I have said, I
> shall have written in vain. Edwarda is no dream's airy invention, the real
> sweat of her body soaked my handkerchief, so real was she that, led on by
> her, I came to want to do the leading in my turn. This book has its secret, I
> may not disclose it. Now more words.) (140)

This paragraph, like Bataille's earlier essays, seems to oppose a certain notion of writing to a certain notion of base reality. This reality is said to necessitate a rejection of the 'play' and 'airy invention' associated with literary writing. The kind of writing which Bataille claims to reject here is characterised by 'slow-marching sentences,' suggesting that what he proposes instead is that the writer should get to the point, at least when the point is 'to lay yourself bare' – '*denuder*' is the word used in the original French (2012a: 48)[29]. There is a clear connection between these claims and the claims made in the earlier essays. He wishes to reject the 'airy invention' (*Edwarda*) of 'literary and poetic verbiage' ('D.A.F. de Sade') in favour of the effort to 'express oneself in a simple and categorical way' ('de Sade') in order to 'lay yourself bare' (*Edwarda*). The use of 'denuder,' of course, also makes a metaphorical linkage between physical nakedness and the exposure of reality or of the self. Given the sexual nature of the nudity in *Madame Edwarda* we can again see Bataille's association of the base, heterogeneity and sex.

The suggestion that in *Edwarda* the narrator is *laying himself bare* is also reminiscent of *Story of the Eye*. As in the 'Coincidences' section at the end of *Story of the Eye* Bataille is keen to

---

[29] Kendall notes elsewhere the slippage of this word between senses of bareness and literal nakedness (Bataille 2011: xxvii).

emphasise the idea that the story is based at least to some degree on real events: Edwarda is 'no… invention' but rather is (or was) 'real'. Bataille's insistence in 'Coincidences' that, contra Barthes, he is discussing his own intimate psychological experiences has a clear resonance in the laying-bare of *Edwarda*. However, there are also differences. In *Edwarda* Bataille does not give the specifics of the real events on which the story might have been based to the extent that he does in 'Coincidences': it is not clear whether all the events of the story are supposed to be seen as having really occurred or whether the piece is, for example, a sexual fantasy based around Bataille's real encounters with sex workers[30].

The passage, then, asserts a 'real' element to the story while simultaneously being vague about what the details of the real event might have been, thus creating a sense that the text is trying to describe reality but *necessarily failing to do so*. This sense is compounded by the contradictory claims made by Bataille about what the text is trying to do. On the one hand he wishes the reader to 'unclothe' – '*reduit a la nudite*,' 'reduce to nudity,' in the original (2012a: 48) – what he has said. On the other hand he insists that he 'may not disclose' the 'secret' of the book. The attempt to discover the truth or reality communicated by the text is essential, yet ultimately this reality cannot be accessed through reading. It is inaccessible, possibly held within the interiority of the writer or perhaps not even to be found there; of course it is impossible for the reader to know either way[31].

This contradiction is also embodied in the style of the passage, which is at points characterised by the evasiveness and lack of clarity Bataille wishes to decry. What, for example, is the aforementioned phrase 'led on by her, I came to want to do the leading in my turn' doing in this paragraph? We could surmise that it describes the power relation between the narrator and Edwarda in a way that may indeed be important in analysing the sexual politics of the text. However, its relation to the rest of the paragraph is not immediately clear, meaning that in the context of this paragraph it comes to resemble precisely the kind of frivolous language-play (there is something playful in the reversal of who is doing the leading) that the paragraph sets itself against. The presence of this sentence in the paragraph seems to indicate the text's failure to make its point clearly, as well as, perhaps, a Beckettian sense that the writing is doomed to 'play' rather than communicate meaning. The paragraph even concludes with the sentence

---

[30] Of course, we know that Bataille did frequent brothels and is described by his biographer Michel Surya as having been 'violently in love' with one sex worker (2002: 155).

[31] Complicating things further, the *absence* also indicated by this non-disclosure is, as Amy Hollywood has persuasively argued, also unavoidably tied to a misogynistic view of Edwarda as the bearer of a Freudian-Lacanian 'lack' (2002: 116-117).

'Now more words,' which is very Beckett-like[32] in its dismissive and grimly humorous suggestion that the continuation of the narrative will consist merely in the production of more language. This language will, it is implied, of course continue to fail to say what the bracketed paragraph has tried to say.

To return to the issues raised by Suleiman's reading of *Story of the Eye*, then, it is possible that Bataille's concept of transgression might be aligned with a notion of lived experience and against writing in a way that complicates his reception by writers such as Barthes. The suggestion here is that the emphasis on the situations represented rather than the textual ways in which they are represented can bring us back to a degree of horror, pleasure or anguish occurring within these situations that is *not reducible to the text* and that the textual reading functions to neutralise or obfuscate. This move from textuality to the representation of situations is of course a contradictory one insofar as these situations are fictional constructs: it is the text that both creates them and gives the reader access to them. Suleiman's suggestion that representation is the 'equivalent, in fiction' of experience (1990: 75) is not intended to mean that representation enables us to bypass the fiction – the text – to access experience directly. However, it is possible that to engage in what might seem to be a more conventional or reactionary form of reading in which the reader focuses on the situations presented to her 'as if they were real' might in a paradoxical way give us an understanding of a reality of transgression and heterogeneity that is in fact *unrepresentable*; that the textual reading however fails to put across this unrepresentability because the text is in fact merely another version of the attempt to represent; and that the more direct attempt at representation embodied by the 'non-textual' reading in fact puts across unrepresentability more clearly to us because it brings more immediately and viscerally to mind those situations which defy representation owing to their excessive or transgressive nature.

Certainly Bataille at times allows for the possibility that literary representation might have the capacity to take us beyond itself towards some kind of base, unrepresentable reality. Drawing on the language of *Acéphale* and *Madame Edwarda*, we might say that this reality is hidden by the text but is also the secret that the text wants to divulge – whether or not it actually can. Bataille seems at times unable or unwilling to decouple writing from his notions of heterogeneity, the base and inner experience. Soon after the passage in *Inner Experience* cited above where he speaks of a communicative experience that 'streams to the outside' Bataille then seems to relate this communication *back* to literary writing: 'we are nothing,' he says,

[32] This comparison is of course anachronistic in the sense that Beckett's *Molloy* would not appear until 1951; Bataille read and reviewed it when it did appear (Bataille 2012c: 103). The similarity is thus a strange one, and worth considering further in the light of the literary connections between Bataille, Beckett and Blanchot.

seemingly addressing a lover, 'beside burning words which could pass from me to you, imprinted on a page' (1988: 94).

There are also points where Bataille expresses both arguments, expressing his sense of the inadequacy of literature while also pointing to ways in which literature might reach towards base reality. In 1938's 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' he returns to the theme of the inadequacy of art and writing, asking 'what is the meaning of these painted and written phantoms[?]' and stating that '[e]verything is *false* in images of fantasy' (1985: 225). These statements form only one part of a wide-ranging and complex essay within which Bataille decries 'life broken into three pieces,' these three pieces being 'art, science [and] politics' (1985: 227). This demand for an integration between art and life points to the possibility of bridging the gap between the Bataille who calls for action and the Bataille who moves towards inner experience. This may also point to the notion of a politicised, communicative inner experience that Noys indicates. We see here the possibility of a reconciliation of writing and the base. However, we are also left to consider what might be the nature of the supposed divide between art and base reality in the first place and what might be the nature of the activity that bridges this gap. This attempted move from text to reality remains necessarily paradoxical. This paradox is summed up well by Noys' claim that Bataille 'is a reader who wants to have done with reading and so he reads to the very limit of reading' (2000: 129). We must ask, then, where this paradox leaves us in terms of politics, particularly the politics of class, gender and sex that I have discussed.

Feminist reversals

Of course, to press Dworkin's approach into the service of this kind of reading of Bataille would directly contradict her dismissal of Bataille's philosophical claims. The major reason for this contradiction is that her reading is not aimed at a general sense of non-representability but rather at the *specific* lack of representation of the viewpoints and agency of women. In this light we might say that Bataille's account of sexual anguish in *Story of the Eye* points to what for Bataille is the non-representable nature of the sexual *in general*, but in doing so also inadvertently points *specifically* to the sexual traumas arising from the subjugation of women in the text. This move from the general to the particular parallels Dworkin's claim that Bataille's belief in a 'nexus between sex and death… cover[s] the grand truth: that force leading to death is what men… truly value in sex.' (1982: 176). As Suleiman (1990: 80) describes, Dworkin sees Bataille's general claim that sex is linked to death as revealing, through its very falsehood, the 'truth' that sex is linked to death *for men*. Susan Sontag's 1967 claim that 'Bataille understood… that what pornography is really about, ultimately, isn't sex but death' (2001: 106) is reframed: yes, pornography is ultimately about death, but only because it enforces the

deathliness that sex must possess under male supremacy. The sex-death connection is not a universal, deep-rooted truth about humanity but rather is particular to and contingent upon the political situation of male supremacy we find ourselves in. It is here that we might be able to reverse the earlier move and press Bataille into the service of feminism. His conceptualising of transgression and heterogeneity in terms of excess gives us a way of thinking about a misogynistic element in *Story of the Eye* that *exceeds* the ability (or inclination) of the textual reading to account for it. Again, this sense of excess beyond the limit enables a reading that theorists such as Foucault cannot support: Foucault, deliberately, stays within the limit.

This view is complicated somewhat by Bataille's writings in *Inner Experience*. As we have seen, this work engages ambiguously with ideas of writing, experience and communication. There is also a passage in *Inner Experience,* one to which Suleiman (1994: 76) draws attention, that brings together the issues of gender, transgression and literary representation that I have discussed. 'Access to the extreme limit,' says Bataille,

> has as a condition that hatred not of poetry, but of poetic femininity (the
> absence of decision; the poet is woman; invention, words rape him). I
> oppose to poetry the experience of the possible. It is less a matter of
> contemplation than of rupture. (1988: 40)

Speaking of Rimbaud, Bataille then adds the following:

> To [Rimbaud's] experience, he gave a poetic outlet; in general, he ignored
> the simplicity which affirms… He chose feminine evasiveness; that which is
> aesthetic; uncertain, involuntary expression. (ibid)

Here Bataille seems to reaffirm that a transgressive experience of the 'limit' requires something matching the account I have given of the base – something on the one hand rupturing and on the other hand simple, forceful and clear. This the base is then opposed to that which is evasive, poetic and aesthetic. Crucially, here this evasive poetry is specifically coded as 'feminine,' making more explicit the sense of an opposition between feminine language and virile, masculine baseness (Hollywood 2002: 115).

The coding of an undesirable poetic evasion as feminine is another example of the kind of unquestioned bias towards misogyny that Dworkin argues is displayed in *Story of the Eye*. However, the passage quoted above also raises an intriguing contrast with regard to Dworkin's reading of Bataille. Bataille's critique of evasive language mirrors Dworkin's claim that *Story*

of the Eye's use of language elides its inherent misogyny. However, if for Bataille evasion is feminine and the reality hidden by yet breaking through this evasion is masculine, then his opposition to Dworkin emerges more starkly. Dworkin (negatively) associates maleness with force, but she also associates the *obscuring* of the role of force in the narrative with maleness. For her, using force against women and hiding, even denying the use of this force are quintessentially male activities. In this view, then, Bataille is guilty of the evasiveness that for Dworkin is masculine but that for Bataille himself is feminine.

Given that Bataille himself is a writer, and has already displayed self-awareness about the perceived inadequacy of writing in *Madame Edwarda*, it is perhaps unsurprising that he would be in part the 'feminine' object of his own critique. It seems stranger, however, that the representational reading enlisted by Dworkin in the name of feminism is the kind of reading that seems to occupy the position in Bataille's schema of a virile, masculine base. Dworkin's mobilisation of a seemingly 'masculine' approach in the name of women's empowerment effectively disrupts Bataille's gender binary. We can also see that Bataille himself does not necessarily see this binary as fixed, given that he as a writer also occupies the 'feminine' side of it. These overlapping oppositions of representation and textuality, the base and evasion, transgression and limit, are therefore not only ambiguous in themselves but also attach to concepts of masculinity and femininity in highly moveable and reversible ways. The reversibility of this gender binary, of course, effectively disrupts the stability of the notion of gender on which male supremacy relies. In this sense exposing the role of male force in *Story of the Eye* would form part of a project of making this unequal structure of gender explicit in order to undo it.

We can also locate this reversibility specifically within the history of feminist receptions of Bataille. The ambiguity revealed by this reversibility can then be seen to apply to the different strategies that feminists have both drawn from and used against Bataille. If Dworkin's use of a 'direct' reading reveals the inadequacy of seeing such a reading as masculine, so also Bataille's association of heterogeneity and transgression with male virility must give us pause when considering Acker's embrace of heterogeneity in the name of anti-patriarchal thought. This ambiguity within Acker's engagement with Bataille, and how it interacts with what might be seen as 'base' readings of Acker's own work, forms the focus of my next chapter.

Chapter two

Kathy Acker and Laure: health and sickness, communication and rupture

In the previous chapter I argued that Bataille's concept of transgression is linked with his concept of the base. What I have called 'the base' covers a range of contradicting but connected ideas in Bataille, primarily direct communication, reality, lived experience, proletarian revolution, masculine virility, and that which is 'low' or of the earth. While often vague and inadequately explained by Bataille, this constellation of concepts is nonetheless useful to examine. If we view Bataille's thought and politics as an interconnected system (albeit a necessarily incomplete one) we can mobilise the concept of the base and its different associations in order to explore and critique Bataille's other concepts, particularly transgression and its political implications. I have also argued that a critique emphasising the base can point out both the limitations of some interpretations of Bataille (such as that of Barthes) and the limitations of Bataille's own thought, particularly in terms of its relationship to women. Base matter's resistance to obfuscation can be turned against Bataille to bring out those points where the sexism in Bataille's work has been effaced or obfuscated by the work itself or by its interpreters. At the same time, focusing on the base in this way brings out the limitations and contradictions *of the base itself*, particularly in terms of its political implications.

I want to consider how the politics of baseness and transgression play out in the work of two writers, each in different ways possessing a complex relationship with Bataille, with feminism and with each other. These writers are Colette Peignot, known as Laure, and Kathy Acker. In this chapter I look at the way Laure takes on the concept of baseness and develops it in ways that contradict Bataille. I then consider to what extent this concept is valuable for a political critique of Bataille's concept of transgression, specifically a feminist one. I also look at how Kathy Acker's work has been read as reinforcing the elements of Bataille's thought that are susceptible to political critique. I then consider how this reading can be countered with reference to Acker's engagement with the base via Laure in her novel *My Mother: Demonology* (1993)[33]. The concept of *communication*, outlined in the previous chapter, is important for drawing all these elements together. The interpretation of communication explored by Bataille in *Inner Experience* emerges from his interaction with Laure (Sweedler 2009: 20). This notion of communication that problematises the concepts of baseness and transgression in a way that has key implications for the kind of post-Bataillean political discourse explored by Acker.

---

[33] Laure also appears in Acker's *Don Quixote* (Pitchford 2002: 176).

Base transgression, base strength: Laure contra Bataille

Laure was an intellectual contemporary and collaborator of Bataille's who was romantically involved with him from 1936 up to her death in 1938[34]. She was involved with both *Acéphale* and *Contre-Attaque*, but her writings were not published until after her death (1995: vii-ix). Bataille and Michel Leiris initially published them soon after her death in a small edition to be circulated among their friends (Sweedler 2009: 28), later in a fuller edition in French in 1971, and in English in 1995 (Sweedler 2009: 194-196). In many ways Laure's ideas seem strongly in line with Bataille's; this is unsurprising given that they probably worked on many of these ideas together, especially regarding the sacred and communication. Laure's statements on class struggle, for example, are strongly in line with Bataille's in 'Popular Front in the Street.' Laure speaks, for example, of

> the gulf created between the revolutionary capacity of the crowd ready to
> risk everything and capable of organising its "excesses" itself and the
> incapacity and spinelessness of leaders and intellectuals who treat all of this
> as the sad "excesses" of the "lumpenproletariat"… (1995: 59, ellipsis
> Laure's)

Laure's hostility to evasiveness, then, seems to align with some of Bataille's thoughts about baseness. Like Bataille, she associates the concepts of excess and proletarian revolution and sets these against an intellectual discourse that is seen as vacillating in the face of its inability to deal with these forces. This seems to fit into the schema wherein base directness is opposed to intellectual evasiveness. As a result Laure's arguments here are susceptible to the same critique as Bataille's: for example, they valorise concepts such as proletarian excess and directness without sufficiently exploring what they might mean either for political action or for the different lived experiences of proletarians.

There are points in Laure's writings where she takes her understanding of the base in a direction that opposes Bataille. For example, we might consider the following lines:

> If I've suffered, it was through ILLNESS.
> A healthy being cannot suffer.
> *Happiness* is accessible to all who have pride in themselves. (1995: 78)

---

[34] Andrew Hussey argues that Bataille's witnessing of 'Laure's death agony'- he was at her deathbed – was formative for his thinking in *Inner Experience* (2006: 82).

What are we to make of these lines with regard to Laure and Bataille's discourses elsewhere on baseness and transgression? In Bataille's work of the 1920s and 1930s, even when he talks about revolutionary proletarian action and force, he is still attached to the anguish and sexual ecstasy of transgression, and to the disruptive activity of base matter. The notion that these things can be aligned is, as I have noted, interestingly contradictory in itself. Bataille does not seek to avoid contradiction; it would be a mistake to assume that contradiction is a weakness in Bataille's argument per se, as he seeks precisely to explore the kind of contradictions that are resistant to intellectual systematisation.

Nonetheless, there is a contradiction between on the one hand Bataille's notion of base transgression and on the other Laure's notions of health and pride in oneself that should give us pause.   In the previous chapter I quoted Bataille as saying that the base 'is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations' (1985: 51). Base matter, then, seems precisely to oppose those notions of human potential and dignity that might encourage humans to have 'pride in themselves.' By extension it might be said that base matter is indifferent to the human 'happiness' that Laure invokes. Base matter, rather, seems to be that element that refuses rational understanding and disrupts the projects by which humans seek to understand and shape the world. In the era of Contre-Attaque and 'Popular Front in the Street' Bataille understands this refusal and disruption as a proletarian force, opposed to the bourgeois project of rationalist understanding and control. It would therefore not be quite right to say that base matter is an element entirely opposed to human agency, something like the divine *nemesis* that in Greek tragedy strikes down humans who grow above themselves. The conflict is more politicised than this: it remains a conflict between classes rather than between humans and a divine cosmic order or an indifferent universe. In this sense Bataille wants base matter to be both inhuman and profoundly human: it insists on the bodily and sexual elements of the human while at the same time refusing the humanist notion of an individual who is master of his fate and controls his relationship to the world (I say 'his' because in the historically male-dominant culture of the West this figure of rational self-mastery is archetypally male). Equally, Bataille's notions of the 'human' try to resist any ahistorical or apolitical notions of an essential humanity, although as we have seen he does at times lapse into the ahistorical despite himself.

If base matter resists human pride, transgression challenges human health. As we have seen, transgression emphasises the porousness of the body's boundaries and the ways in which sexual and other intense physical states can disrupt the notion of a self-contained human body. While in the essays cited Bataille does not talk explicitly in terms of health and disease, in the context

of his wider work we can see the disruptive force of base matter as being aligned with physical states, such as disease, that challenge the idea that humans have control over their own bodies.

What happens, then, when we compare this idea of base matter to the ideas invoked by Laure? Whereas Bataille talks in terms of physical dissolution Laure often valorises health and strength. This is particularly striking because Laure was in fact ill with tuberculosis for much of her adult life; the disease ultimately killed her in 1938. While Laure's thinking should not simply be reduced to the facts of her life, the correspondence and diary entries included in her *Collected Writings* are in many ways illuminating with regard to her thought. Specifically, we see the extent to which Laure is thinking through the restrictions and challenges she faces as a female member of a predominantly male milieu. She faces these challenges on both sides, so to speak: from the conservative Catholic family environment in which she grew up, and from the misogynistic bent of some of the thinking occurring within Bataille's circle. Laure was sexually abused by a priest as a child (Laure 1995: 22), and she also seems to hint at possible emotional or physical abuse at the hands of Bataille (1995: 150).

What we can say for sure is that Laure's contemplation of baseness and strength is profoundly informed by her personal and intellectual relationship with the man whom, as Ashley Tauchert (2009: 39) points out, she calls 'The God Bataille' (1995: 203). In one striking letter, she says to Bataille 'You dare to insult me by talking about weakness when you can't spend two hours alone…' (1995: 151). Laure, then, attacks Bataille by implicitly saying that he is the weaker and she the stronger. As a woman (one, we might add, suffering from chronic illness) she is figured as powerless within society, and she tells us of how this powerlessness is reproduced within her relationship with Bataille; yet she says she is the stronger, and it may even be that she is stronger *because* she starts from this position of apparent weakness. We might say that Bataille, as presented by Laure, is the privileged bourgeois man who wishes to debase himself; she, on the other hand, is already figured by society as debased and wishes to transcend this position. He is healthy and wishes to become sick; she is sick and wishes to become healthy[35]. For Bataille, the authentic challenge to the social order consists in debasement; for Laure, *whose debasement is already required by the social order*, the authentic challenge must consist in her overcoming this debasement. Laure's attainment of strength would be a more powerful challenge to the social order than any strength possessed by Bataille, precisely because society expects her to be weak (Connolly 2010: 32). This is one sense in which Laure is stronger than Bataille: within the context of the revolutionary challenge both of them want to mount, her

---

[35] At least, this is the case in Laure's account: in fact Bataille himself was frequently sick with tuberculosis around this time too.

strength is more authentic than his because more efficacious. As part of this idea of strength Laure also echoes Bataille's dismissal of language from Ch1 but turns it back against him.

The apparent political potential of Bataille and his ideas is also undermined by what Laure sees as his hypocrisy, specifically with regard to women. This is one of the points where Laure's opposition to Bataille's sexism becomes explicit. Her emphasis on strength as opposed to dissolution can be understood in the context of Laure's response to the bad sexual politics of Bataille and men like him. The nature of the relationship between strength and sexual politics becomes clearer when we look at the passage in Laure's notes that contemptuously describes a Communist activist leaving a brothel to go to a political meeting. 'He,' she says,

> is free of all hindrances
>
> then he emerges his face smooth as though purged… he goes to the
>
> Communist meeting – he will be speaking
>
> he who has just bought women, taken part in the monstrous and vile comedy
>
> just like that, quite bluntly with perfect contempt… How can these people
>
> who respect human rights, respect proletarians, see a prostitute as an
>
> instrument of their pleasure? They do not see the woman, the human being,
>
> who comes from who knows where? Oppressed by what or by whom to
>
> have come to this point? (1995: 226)

This passage is not explicitly addressed to Bataille, nor does it name him, but in all likelihood describes him given that she makes similar criticisms of him in their correspondence (1995: 133). In any case we know that Bataille frequented both brothels and Communist meetings, so the description would be apt. Laure, then, argues that Bataille's paying for sex contradicts his supposed solidarity with the workers. The prostitutes are themselves proletarian workers, and Bataille is revealing his bourgeois 'contempt' for them by using them merely as 'instruments'.

Of course, this account presents problems in view of much discourse around sex work. Laure's assumption that the sex worker must have been '[o]ppressed' in order 'to have come to this point' implies that sex work emerges from and entails forms of oppression that are degrading in ways that are distinct from other forms of exploitative work. Much recent thinking and organising around sex work, in contrast, has emphasised the perspectives of sex workers themselves, many of whom have pointed out that sex work is not *inherently* less consensual or more degrading than anything else a worker might do under capitalism, and that the view of sex work as specifically degrading harks back to a long history of discourses that have treated

'prostitution' as a shameful occupation from which women need to be 'saved' (Rubin 2011: 85)[36].

Andrea Dworkin's attack on pornography was, as I mentioned in my introduction, met with accusations that she was reproducing moralistic discourses treating sex and sex work as inherently dirty and dangerous (Rubin 2011: 262-263). As I argued in the previous chapter, Dworkin's critique is valuable insofar as it points out misogynistic currents within pornographic texts such as *Story of the Eye* that other critics have preferred to ignore. However, she is wrong in her assumption that all pornography is therefore misogynistic. This reading of Dworkin is instructive for our reading of Laure. Laure's assumption that the sex worker must be a victim in this scenario leaves much to be desired, but she is surely right in pointing out that by paying for sex the male client affirms a position that clashes with his Communist and otherwise socially radical beliefs. He affirms his social privilege: he is the one who pays for the service and has control over the sex that occurs. Even if he puts himself in a position of abasement before the woman, as Bataille's male protagonist does in the brothel narrative *Madame Edwarda*, the nature of the relationship is that the john ultimately decides what will happen.

This passage, then, speaks of the double standard Laure faced as a woman in this milieu. Moreover, in a fascinating movement of thought, Laure's notes in this passage then proceed to contrast the brothel scenario with her conception of solitary self-possession:

> They stand before a mechanical erotic love instrument… Eroticism as the
>
> depths of despair but absolutely incompatible with active, strong life.
>
> Playing the worst games of man's disintegration.
>
> Withdraw
>
> To live facing one's interior struggle.
>
> Form of suicide
>
> To experience everything = to cancel oneself out (1995: 226)

At times this direction takes a turn that almost echoes the rhetoric of fascism, as where Laure says that '*One* authority must be re-established' and exhorts us to 'Accuse weakness with contempt' (1995: 73). As with the accusation of 'sur-fascisme' levelled against Bataille, we

---

[36] Alain Corbin's research is also illuminating in this regard. He describes how specifically French understandings of sex work were shaped by the regulationist approach that nineteenth-century French law took towards it. According to Corbin the regulationist approach spawned a stereotype of the sex worker as 'venal woman' – corrupt, yet possessing a threatening agency – as opposed to the Anglo-American model of the passive 'fallen woman' (1990: ix-x) that arguably persisted from nineteenth-century abolitionism through to Dworkin. We might see this 'venal woman' in Bataille's Madame Edwarda. Conversely, despite writing in a French context, Laure's description of the sex worker is more reminiscent of the fallen woman, '[o]ppressed' and in need of saving.

must tread carefully here: Laure was at least for a time a communist, was passionately opposed to the anti-Semitism and nationalism of interwar France (1995: 288-289), and travelled to Spain to support the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War (1995: ix). Nonetheless, it is of course relevant here to think about fascism's appropriation of the Nietzschean thought that influenced both Laure and Bataille.

Moreover, we should not overstate the extent to which Laure's thought is opposed to Bataille's. Like Bataille, she contradicts herself, and for every passage that pulls in a different direction to Bataille there is one more in line with his approach. Laure also wrote extensive erotic pieces that described similar scenarios of transgression and dissolution to those in *Story of the Eye* (1995: 64-65). It is also difficult to draw a coherent system of thought from those writings of Laure's that have been published in English. While at points she writes with intellectual clarity, there are writings elsewhere that are clearly only unfinished, loosely organised notes in which she is grasping towards an idea rather than stating it firmly; we must therefore be careful before assuming that ideas in these writings are to be taken at face value. Equally, poems of Laure's such as 'The Crow,' which seem more like worked-through, 'finished' aesthetic entities, at the same time have the fragmentary quality of the 'unfinished' notes (1995: 54-55). These problems are compounded by the fact that none of Laure's material was published before her death, making questions of what is finished or coherent in her work extremely difficult to answer. The nature of the edition of her work available to us in English also presents us with problems, as it does not always list dates for her different texts.

Nonetheless, however provisional some of her writings may be, Laure does seem to take her ideas in a direction that separates her from Bataille, both intellectually and personally. This separation plays out on both theoretical and personal levels within Laure's conflict with Bataille through writing. Laure, then, is sceptical of Bataille's emphasis on transgression of the law, as this passage illustrates:

> It is time to assert that the religion of crime poisons us as much as that of
> virtue.
> We hate innocence adorned with the virtues of crime as much as crime with
> an innocent allure. (1995: 78)

On the theoretical level Laure decries the 'religion of crime'. On the personal level Laure criticises Bataille for his hypocrisy: he is, in her view, pathetically reliant on her while also accusing her of weakness. More specifically, this hypocrisy plays out in a paradox around the problem of transgression. Laure says to Bataille:

> Instead of libertinism which could be a sort of powerful and happy impulse
> *even without Crime* you want bitterness between us. You look like a child
> coming out of the confessional, sure to return. (1995: 179)

This accusation could be interpreted as follows: Bataille blocks the communicative potential of baseness by insisting on its attachment to the 'religion of crime'. The religion of crime, in this context, might be described as the insistence that baseness be manifested as the transgression of a rule rather than anything else. Thus, within the 'religion of crime' sex and proletarian revolt are considered important because they break the rules of the existing social order, not because they have any valence in themselves. The point of Laure's criticism of the 'religion of crime' is, implicitly, that sex and revolution *do* have valence in themselves, and that the focus on transgression is self-defeating because it ends in reinforcing the rule. As I have said, it is difficult to draw out fully coherent arguments from Laure because of the fragmentary nature of her published writing, but it seems possible that she is trying to take the ideas she shares with Bataille beyond the dynamic of law and transgression. For her, perhaps, *communication* is more important than transgression. In the religion of crime, communication is still subsumed within the dynamic of transgression. This is because its primary focus becomes the *transgressiveness* of the breakdown of the boundary between individuals, rather than what this breakdown might be like, what it might do or what its implications might be. This is a subtle but important distinction. Laure may thus offer us a way, not out of transgression, but out of the fetishising of transgression.

However, if we take on Laure's understanding of baseness as communication rather than as transgression we are still faced with contradictions. This is because Laure's ethic of strength and self-reliance comes into conflict with communication's breakdown of boundaries between individuals. It is almost as if Laure feels Bataille has so tainted the notion of communication with transgression that she is compelled to refuse both, and instead focus on the building up of the self; or perhaps of her own self specifically. 'I think one really only acquires that which one has conquered by oneself,' she says elsewhere, adding: '[t]o "call for help" shows serious weakness… I have to manage *alone*' (145). In one sense, Laure's resistance to the breakdown of the self implied by her own concept of communication is an entirely understandable and necessary act of philosophical self-preservation. As a woman living in a milieu that she finds in some ways hostile to her, Laure may very well want to focus on the survival and strengthening of herself as an entity against those forces that want to crush her. However, her insistence on strength may also prevent her from fully exploring the implications of what communication could do.

There are points in Laure's writing where she presents the possibility of overcoming this limitation. She begins one sequence of thoughts with another consideration of solitary self-control, before seemingly finding this idea inadequate:

> True work in serenity
>
> A detached serenity
>
> No, this is not *possible* either.
>
> To experience all that one carries within?
>
> to cancel oneself out
>
> the best and the worst
>
> cancel each other out. (1995: 189-190)

The last four lines share their phrasing with Laure's analysis of the brothel client quoted above: 'To experience everything = to cancel oneself out' (1995: 226). There is a link, then, between the respective passages. Laure responds to Bataille's brothel use with a refusal of self-dissolution and self-cancellation, and this refusal reappears here. However, unlike in some of her other writings, here Laure is not content with 'detached serenity'. The 'everything' in the other passage seems to refer to the outside world that becomes overwhelming when the boundaries of the self break down. Here, however, one can 'cancel oneself out' by exposure to 'all that one carries within': that which overwhelms cannot be escaped in solitude because we carry it with us.

We can glean another reason why solitude is inadequate for Laure by looking elsewhere in her writings. As with Bataille, it is important to recognise that Laure's interests remain, for her, connected to class struggle. Sweedler suggests that when she takes up with Bataille in 1934 Laure 'shifts her concerns from dissident communism to headless pursuits,' in other words the activity of Acéphale (2009: 93). However, as Laure's translator Jeanine Herman points out, Laure visited Revolutionary Spain in 1936, meaning that her highly politicised writings from this visit emerged coterminously with her relationship with Bataille, not to mention her involvement with *Contre-Attaque* and *Acéphale* around the same time (1995: ix). At various points in her writing Laure reiterates her belief in the need for solidarity with the working class (1995: 212).

Is there, then, a third alternative that refuses both solitude and dissolution? Following on from her above dismissal of 'serenity,' Laure suggests '[c]onscientious work, ideas that are well established, sensibly ordered, sorted out, examined and developed. A certain amount of

distraction and play (scenery and costumes)' (1995: 190). This passage presents an earnest consideration of a more practical engagement with the world that avoids both withdrawing and being overwhelmed; at the same time, it sceptically raises the possibility that such planning could be mere 'distraction'. Laure then says that '[e]verything inside of me is contrary. The common experience that we share deserves something besides this conspiracy of silence, this secret complicity that seeps into everything: we mustn't talk about touchy subjects' (1995: 190).

This silence can be read as that of the bourgeois world in which Laure grew up, in which Laure's sexual abuse could not be openly discussed (1995: 26). It could also be read as the silence of Bataille's supposedly radical milieu, where the man attending the Communist meeting does not discuss the brothel he has just left. Later, as an alternative to this kind of reserved bourgeois silence, Laure describes how she favours those who 'exude clearsightedness. Indiscretion is their sweat and their complexion.' (1995: 191). Nonetheless, the problem remains that Laure feels both the need to withdraw from an oppressive and hypocritical and social milieu and the need for community and solidarity with others, particularly the revolutionary working class. Her position, she complains, has been to offer 'verbal solidarity' which nonetheless leaves her 'so far from everyone, from each of them and from myself, this self, riveted to them all the same!' (1995: 210).

Let us, however, stay with the possibility Laure raises of a communication based on practical solidarity and resistant to Bataille's focus on the dissolution of the self. This proposition, despite the inherent problems with it that I have discussed, remains interesting in relation to the critique of Bataille I have been exploring. Like other strategies that I have grouped in the category of the 'base,' Laure's thinking around work, 'serenity' and individual strength function both to challenge the primacy of transgression in the legacy of Bataillean thought and to expose the concrete class and gender politics that are at times effaced by Bataille and his readers. Laure proposes individual strength, health and serenity as alternatives to transgression because she feels that the latter requires a self-dissolution that renders the subject 'weak' and thus hypocritically incapable of the kind of political action the transgressing subject is, in much of Bataille's thought, supposed to be oriented towards. This is true of individual subjects like Bataille, who as men are already comparatively empowered within society, and even truer of a subject like Laure. For her, self-dissolution risks the loss of what little power and capacity for political engagement she has. This emphasis on the difference between Laure and Bataille's positions in society, moreover, functions to expose the lacuna in Bataille's thinking that I discussed in chapter one. This lacuna is his failure to address the way some of his supposedly radical work in fact reinforces existing structures of gender oppression and perhaps, if we see Acéphale as a restricted bourgeois intellectual elite, class oppression too. Just as Dworkin's

highly flawed anti-pornography discourse is useful in exposing occluded aspects of Bataille, so Laure's incomplete and problematic rhetoric of personal strength is valuable insofar as it emphasises the restrictions that she fought against within her milieu. Laure felt the need to be in some sense strong and healthy in order to fight these restrictions, and she found her intellectual partner Bataille's thinking around transgression an inadequate resource for this fight.

Acker and the 'transgressive tradition': base readings and reductive readings

We are left, still, at an impasse with regard to strength and communication: if the self is as fortified as Laure wants hers to be it seems to come into conflict with the need for communication and solidarity with others. Kathy Acker's work with Bataille and Laure cannot necessarily bring us out of this impasse, but it can provide us with additional ways of thinking it. Kathy Acker, then, takes on the legacy of Bataille. What this means, precisely, has been interpreted in different ways. Acker wrote about Bataille in essays and composed *My Mother: Demonology* loosely based on Laure and Bataille's relationship and correspondence. To what extent, then, is Acker's project simply a continuation of Bataille's? Acker's connection to Bataille's legacy is complex. On the one hand, she uses Bataille in a way that is particular to her thinking. Acker's engagement with Bataille is apparent across her work, with its emphasis on sexuality, violence and other 'transgressive' states of physical and mental dissolution. Further, for Acker Bataille points to the possibility of a 'nonpatriarchal language' (2006: 89). On the other hand, the placement of Acker within a lineage of transgressive writing has for some facilitated a reductive, depoliticising reading of her work.

In chapter one, I argued that attempts to efface Bataille's gender politics can result in a hollowing-out of the category of transgression that denies its connection to both politics and the body. Something similar happens in the reception of Acker as part of Bataille's transgressive legacy. Just as Laure's criticism of Bataille can function to challenge and extend his concepts, so too Acker's use of Laure in *Demonology* enables us to challenge the depoliticised view of her own work. This latter view is expressed, albeit in a confusing and ambiguous way, by Robin Mookerjee in his 2013 book *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*. The very ambiguity of his analysis enables us to unpack some of the problems with the depoliticised view.

Noting Michael Silverblatt's coining of the term 'transgressive fiction,' in 1993 (2013: 1), Mookerjee then cites Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* as an example of 'the relentless sexual imagery in transgressive fiction generally,' where transgressive fiction is that which emphasizes the 'immunity of the physical to vague, abstract systems of belief' (2013: 131).

This last phrase brings to mind the binary addressed in the previous chapter between the supposed concreteness of embodied human experience and the supposedly 'vague, abstract' nature of verbal communication. In one sense Mookerjee appears to be talking about an attempt by 'transgressive' writers to make language break through abstraction and re-connect with base reality, an attempt made at different times and in radically different ways by Bataille and Dworkin. What does it mean, though, when Mookerjee refers to 'the physical' and to 'transgressive fiction *generally*' (my emphasis)? The lack of interrogation given to the ways in which these concepts might be politically and socially conditioned arguably points to a tendency here to see the concepts of transgression and the physical in an essentialist, ahistorical way. This is because Mookerjee does not tend to address the particularities of either the physical phenomena described by Acker or the 'systems of belief' she is supposedly challenging.

Mookerjee's 'physical' resembles Bataille's notion of 'base reality' in the sense that it is resistant to verbal expression and intellectual systematisation. Mapping the concept of the base onto Mookerjee reveals both differences and similarities between Mookerjee and Bataille. On the one hand Bataille's approach to the base is at points more politicised than Mookerjee's, in that he aligns the base specifically with the revolutionary proletariat in some of his interwar essays. At the same time, reading Bataille through Mookerjee also serves to emphasise the fact that Bataille's base *is* in some ways ahistorical and depoliticised. Bataille contradicts himself in how he discusses this concept, and at certain points does talk about it as if it is resistant to *all* 'systems of belief', irrespective of political approach. As I have discussed, the way in which Bataille talks about the proletariat itself risks becoming depoliticised, positing revolutionary politics as an expression of the base rather than attempting a genuine synthesis of the two. Further, Dworkin's critique of Bataille can also be seen as a kind of political mobilisation of the base and so might be susceptible to the same kind of comparison with Mookerjee. Both Dworkin and Mookerjee undertake readings of the transgressive that reduce it to a particular element. For Dworkin this element is misogyny, for Mookerjee the body[37].

The key difference here, of course, is that Dworkin's reading of Bataille is highly politicised (at least according to its own terms) whereas Mookerjee's reading of Acker is quite the opposite. Mookerjee places Acker within a tradition of transgressive writing that is characterised by its evocation of the eruption of the timeless, ever-present physical world in revolt against the historically contingent political ideas placed upon it. Mookerjee's reading of Acker might

---

[37] Dworkin's reductive reading had an indirect legal effect on Acker's reception: at one point Acker books were seized at the Canadian border under antipornography legislation based 'in part… on the definition of pornography formulated by Dworkin and… MacKinnon' (Pitchford 2002: 151). Ironically enough, Dworkin's *own* work was seized under the same legislation, presumably because of its quotation of pornography: the reduction to content *ad absurdum* (Pitchford, *ibid.*).

nonetheless tell us something about the relationship between her writing, Bataille and transgression. Despite its claims for political radicalism, Bataille's notion of the base might in certain contexts end up reinforcing dynamics of male and bourgeois supremacy. Perhaps, then, Mookerjee's somewhat conservative understanding of transgression can be seen in this light (although, oddly, Mookerjee does not directly mention Bataille in his book). If, in turn, Acker's work is enlisted for this ahistorical understanding of transgression, this then reveals something about how transgression has been read in Acker. However, it may be that this placement has more to do with the *reception* of Acker by readers and critics than with what actually occurs in Acker's books.

Mookerjee does acknowledge that Acker has a political stance of some kind: he describes *Blood and Guts in High School* as 'a feminist novel' and indeed says that 'For certain critics, *Blood and Guts*, unlike a satiric postmodern novel, has a straightforward conceptual plotline' (2013: 128). Of course, we could also say that a novel does not need a 'straightforward… plotline' in order to have a political stance, and that conversely the absence of such a plotline does not necessarily mean that such a novel must have a postmodern attitude that rejects all political stances. Mookerjee tries to bridge these two ideas – Acker as political and Acker as resistant to politics – as follows:

> *Blood and Guts* neither participates in nor strengthens patriarchal culture
> which politicizes and commodifies the body, although it does critique such
> culture. Acker, though inspired by feminism and some theorists such as
> Deleuze, did not take on any socio-political theory as a central heuristic.
> Therefore, she may also be said to critique feminine sexuality, the family,
> the concept of the oriental, liberal culture, and a host of other ideas with
> cultural or academic currency… she was allergic to all-encompassing
> descriptions of the world. (2013: 130)

This is a strange way of framing Acker's work. To say that Acker is critical of the positions Mookerjee describes is not to say that she does not subscribe to an ideological narrative: the narrative of what we might nowadays call intersectional feminism would seem to include antagonisms towards conventional notions of 'feminine' sexuality, towards orientalism, and so on. At the same time, Mookerjee does quote Acker as making a statement that would seem to support his argument:

> [W]hen you get to the actual physical *act of* sexuality, or of bodily disease,
> there's an undeniable materiality which *isn't* up for grabs. So it's the body

which finally can't be touched by all our scepticism and ambiguous systems
of belief… With the body there's something that's essentially untouchable.
And therefore transgressive. (McCaffery 1996: 21, cited in Mookerjee 2013:
131)

This sentiment seems very much like Bataille's notion of an irreducible and disruptive base
reality associated with the physical. This notion would in turn correspond with Mookerjee's
conception of the physical, making his account of Acker accurate. However, if Acker does
indeed believe in something irreducible and disruptive about the body, then what precisely this
means for her may be different from what it means for Mookerjee. For example, in her recently
published email correspondence with McKenzie Wark, Acker says:

I have a feeling that we don't know what gender is outside our society…
How the fuck could we? (Unless you go back to some kind of essentialism.)
(2015: 105)

Even if the body is irreducible, then, this does not mean it straightforwardly exists outside
ideology. Whereas it seems that Mookerjee wants to see the physical body as resistant to all
ideology, Acker's view (when taken across her different writings) seems to be more that the
body is a disruptive, unpredictable entity that *nonetheless is inseparable from ideological
constructs.* However, once again this textual dissolution has a dual implication. The influence
of Bataille on Acker's fragmentary writing seems to support a more Barthesian interpretation of
Bataille, one that, as I have said, has gained much currency among theorists working in the
wake of deconstruction, but that is also challenged by Bataille's own thought. Barthes, we
recall, insists upon a reading of Bataille's work at the level of the text, whereas the text itself
seems to be insisting upon a further content that the text cannot reach. However, the way Acker
uses techniques of fragmentation and dissolution also resists interpretations that remain at the
level of the text, because Acker insists on certain kinds of experience and knowledge that are
rooted in the body. The body, as I have said, is one of many contradicting concepts that appear
within the category of the base. As I described in chapter one, the 'base' elements of the body
and of direct communication are among those refused by Barthes in his refusal to understand
Story of the Eye in terms of bodily sexual affect or in terms of reference to Bataille's lived
experience. Acker's feminist Bataillean writing about the body, then, might give us a way of
talking about the base that both contradicts Barthes' refusal of the base *and* goes further than
Bataille and Dworkin's reductive readings. This is because Acker talks about the body in a way
that both insists on its reality and refuses to see it as unified entity with essential properties. In
doing so she presents the body as both base and ideological.

In order to explore this idea further, let us turn to Acker's relationship with Laure as presented in *Demonology*. *Demonology* is a book with many threads; its representation of Laure is only one of these, though perhaps the most central. Displaying Acker's usual techniques of intertextual quotation, *Demonology*'s fragmented narrative passes through excerpts from Laure and Bataille's correspondence (sometimes quoted directly and at other times built upon by Acker) while taking in diary entries from travels around Europe (perhaps Acker drawing directly from autobiographical material), references to *Wuthering Heights*, and horrific satires on the reactionary America of George Bush Sr (Colby 2012: 192-193) that today seem chillingly redolent of the Trump administration.

As with any Acker novel this synopsis does not do much justice to the wealth of clashing elements that appear in the book (Colby 2016: 174), but the above describes the aspects most relevant to my argument here. This synopsis gives some indication of the kind of sexual and violent material found in the book, material that to some would be shocking and would warrant an inclusion in the category of the transgressive in which Mookerjee would place her earlier *Blood and Guts in High School*. We can imagine, then, a reading of *Demonology* parallel to Mookerjee's reading of *Blood and Guts* and to Dworkin's reading of *Story of the Eye*, one which sees the text solely in terms of the elements of it that seem most egregious to a particular sensibility. In Mookerjee's case this is a 'mainstream' sensibility that sees itself as normative to a 'mainstream' culture that rejects representations of graphic sex and violence. However, as I have argued, this 'mainstream' does not exist in such a unified way and, even insofar as it does, it does not really reject these kinds of representations as Mookerjee claims. Even within the rubric Mookerjee describes, the sensibility that would be shocked by *Demonology* sees itself as simply 'what people are offended by.' In fact, though, the status of violence as 'offensive' or otherwise shifts depending on who is perpetrating the violence and who is observing. Thus, from Dworkin's point of view the sexual violence in *Story of the Eye* is offensive, whereas the state violence that Rubin argues was enabled by Dworkin's influence on anti-pornography legislation (Rubin 2011: 262-263) presumably is not.

Let us consider, then, the kinds of readings that Mookerjee and Dworkin in very different ways instantiate: readings that reduce the text to what is considered offensive or transgressive according to a given standard of offensiveness or a given law to be transgressed. An account of *Demonology* that merely mentions the kind of violent events that take place within it and gives no further context produces a particular kind of interpretation of the book, perhaps a reductive one that strips it of its feminist politics to place it in an apolitical transgressive tradition. If we

were to attempt a reductive reading, we might observe that *Demonology* is a book containing the following passages:

> Face-to-face with the man, all that she can see is his cock, whether or not
> he's clothed. Knows that he knows that she's drooling at him (or his cock or
> one of his hands stroking his cock through his clothes). So that's why one of
> his hands is moving his cock still through the pants material, now to the left,
> now to his right.
>   The second she dares to touch this cock, through the pants, he whacks her
> so brutally that she hits the pavement.
>   The sailors fuck whores because they're not whores. (38)

However, crucially, these scenes of violence take place alongside sections that seem explicitly feminist insofar as they describe in lacerating terms a misogynist social order (Ioanes 2016: 185). There are numerous examples of this, most notably the aforementioned sections involving George Bush Sr (1994: 173-175). Acker's writing about the body in *Demonology*, then, must be seen in the context of this highly negative portrayal of patriarchy. The female subjects in the book are, on a bodily level, both enthralled and terrorised by patriarchal authority:

> As Father was making love to me, whenever my consciousness was bad and
> wandered into the present, I repeated the sacred laws I had just given myself:
> the laws of silence and the loss of language. For us, there is no language in
> this male world.
> This is called *the poisoning of the blood*. (1994: 168)

Silence is the marker of oppression, yet also appears to be the territory in which the body operates. This is also the silence in which Laure exists. As I have said, the figure of Laure functions in *Demonology* not only as a further connection to Bataille; Laure herself has a particular perspective that counters and at times contradicts that of Bataille. Acker's engagement with this perspective, then, may function to contest the legacy of Bataillean transgression and introduce an alternative viewpoint. This contestation, in turn, may complicate the view that Acker's work is transgressive in a way that is apolitical or that resists all ideologies, including feminist ideologies. We are then faced with an alternative possibility, that of a specifically feminist and base approach that challenges transgression's cultural legacy.

The base in Demonology: strength and self-destruction at the gym

How, then, does Acker take on Laure's approach to the base, the approach seemingly based on strength and self-discipline? Certain passages of *Demonology* clearly emphasise the points already made in Laure's work. For example, at one point in *Demonology* the narrative voice declares 'That which is beautiful is muscular, not diseased' (1994: 114). This claim, suggesting a valorisation of physical strength that echoes fascist imagery, clearly mirrors Laure's more troubling statements such as the following, quoted earlier:

> If I've suffered, it was through ILLNESS.
> A healthy being cannot suffer.
> *Happiness* is accessible to all who have pride in themselves. (1995: 78)

The sentence from *Demonology* may, moreover, be a response to another phrase from Laure, a passage translated in the *Collected Writings* as 'to be strong is to be alone' (1995: 176). It is important to note here that Acker's novel came out two years before Laure's English *Collected Writings*, meaning that Acker is probably doing her own translation from the French. Indeed, Acker had written a text freely adapted from Laure's writing as far back as 1983 (Acker 1997: 106).

We can certainly say, then, that Acker is at points repeating Laure's ideas. However, the fragmentary nature of Acker's writing immediately makes it unclear whether the text is affirming or challenging claims such as 'That which is beautiful is muscular' (of course Laure's own fragmentary writing does the same thing). This phrase appears in the middle of a section, one of many in Acker's oeuvre, in which the narrator struggles with an abusive and yet desired father figure: 'Father seeing every detail of my face as if he owned it' (1994: 114). We are thus left wondering whether it is the protagonist-figure or her father making the identification between beauty and muscle, or whether it is both, or neither. The nature of Acker's writing is to be ambiguous in this regard. If the father is a fascist authority figure claiming that what is beautiful is muscular then we can comfortably reject it, whereas if the narrator is a Laure-figure making this assertion of strength in rejection of patriarchal authority, as Laure did, we are left feeling much more uncomfortable: we are left with our previous problem with Laure, namely that she makes statements against the authority of male supremacy that themselves verge on an authoritarian tone. Acker, of course, is likely aware of these ideological contradictions, and her text is not trying to resolve them but rather to present them to us *as problems*. It is precisely this kind of ambiguity and contradiction that renders the reductive reading of Acker inadequate. Acker's conflictual engagement with Laure's work is a fundamental part of what makes her text

resistant to being read as 'merely' transgressive. The legacy of Laure continues to trouble and problematise the legacy of Bataille.

One intriguing way in which Acker engages with Laure's legacy comes from Acker's interest in bodybuilding. The reference to 'muscle' in the passage quoted above moves a couple of lines later onto a capitalised exhortation 'TOWARDS A LITERATURE OF THE BODY' (1994: 114). What precisely this writing of the muscular body might mean in relation to Laure becomes clearer if we move to a passage from a few pages earlier:

> STORYTELLING METHOD: THE ACT OF BODYBUILDING
> PRESUPPOSES THE ACT OF MOVING TOWARD THE BODY OR
> THAT WHICH IS SO MATERIAL THAT IT BECOMES IMMATERIAL.
> (1994: 110)

In an essay from 1995, two years after the publication of *Demonology*, Acker discuss further her interest and participation in bodybuilding. In this essay she says that she wants 'to break muscle so that it can grow back larger, but I do not want to destroy muscle so that growth is prevented… I want to shock my body into growth; I do not want to hurt it' (2006: 146). Bodybuilding, then, is among other things a way of working on oneself to make oneself grow: a form of self-discipline, we might say. It is clear, then, why Acker might have been thinking about bodybuilding when engaging with Laure. Laure's ethic of personal strength as a mode of psychic defence against an oppressive society takes physical form in Acker's bodybuilding. Acker also mentions how 'Certain bodybuilders have said that bodybuilding is a form of meditation' (2006: 146), which seems to align bodybuilding with Laure's category of 'serenity.'

However, Acker is problematising not only Bataille's legacy but also Laure's. Despite saying that she '[does] not want to destroy muscle,' Acker remains uncertain about the role of destruction in the bodybuilding process. 'Is the equation between destruction and growth,' she asks in the same essay, 'also a formula for art?' Bodybuilding, then, is an analogue of art, and one in which destruction plays an ambiguous part: destruction to the point 'that growth is prevented' is to be avoided, yet destruction in some form seems to be integral to growth. Further, her desire to 'shock my body into growth' has overtones of masochism, a theme that is common elsewhere in Acker's writings. Finally, bodybuilding is not only art, growth and meditation but is also 'about failure because bodybuilding… occurs in the face of the material, of the body's inexorable movement towards its final failure, toward death' (2006: 146).

Death and failure are phenomena that do not sit easily with Laure's ideas of strength and self-preservation. 'Denounce,' Laure says, 'All that is impotence and ruin' (1995: 177). She does not want impotence; she does not want failure. Of course, she rejects these things in the knowledge that she is susceptible to them, and it is this conflict within Laure's work that, among other things, Acker is writing about. She draws out the contradictions that Laure herself only at times acknowledges. Laure's theoretical relation to death is less clear, but she does have one sequence of notes that runs:

> death
> To escape in the negation of oneself: the wish for debasement. (1995: 185)

If death, then, is aligned with negation and self-debasement then it is certainly one of the things Laure wishes to set her thoughts against. Further, Laure's ideas resist Acker's idea of growth through self-destruction: 'a strong character must emerge from dejection on its own,' she says, 'not through destruction, vivisection' (1995: 185). This kind of self-vivisection seems to be precisely what Acker is practicing on herself by pushing her body to the limit in the gym, though Acker is also ambivalent about what level of self-destruction she actually wishes to reach.

The difference, then, between Acker and Laure's versions of base strength is roughly as follows. Acker sees a role for destruction, failure and death within strength, and believes strength involves testing one's boundaries and allowing oneself to be broken and reformed. Laure, in contrast, seems to posit strength as opposed to these things. At points she almost seems to see strength as a kind of inner life-force that could resist death. Laure's notion of strength, in turn, is held in opposition to the Bataillean notion of base transgression that *does* include death among its constellation of concepts, along with 'negation' and 'debasement'. Acker, then, seems to be mobilising a notion of the base that is informed by Laure's personal struggle against male oppression and yet also emphasises the shakiness of the construct of strength on which Laure bases her own resistance. Through her discussion of bodybuilding in *Demonology* and elsewhere Acker evokes a notion of strength that can include the kind of self-dissolution and acknowledgement of death that Laure wishes to resist. Further, this apparent acceptance of destruction is related to Acker's understanding of the body which, as I have said, seems to posit the body both as an irresistible force and as something non-unitary and irreducible to biological essentialism.

With this in mind, we should look again at Acker's reference to bodybuilding in *Demonology*: 'THE ACT OF BODYBUILDING PRESUPPOSES THE ACT OF MOVING TOWARD THE

BODY OR THAT WHICH IS SO MATERIAL THAT IT BECOMES IMMATERIAL' (1994: 110). The body is wrapped up in the kinds of destruction and death that Acker tries to engage with through bodybuilding. Further, it is through destruction and death, perhaps, that the body 'is so material that it becomes immaterial.' The full meaning of this cryptic phrase is not easy to glean, but it can be connected back to the category of the base. Within the schema of baseness, the body is base insofar as it is susceptible to illness and death, but also, contradictorily, insofar as it is strong and virile: the proletarian vigour of the ditch-digger as opposed to the cerebral prevarications of intellectuals. Acker tries to link these two elements in the growth-through-death of bodybuilding. The body, then, grows through self-destruction and is both irresistibly powerful and lacking in essential qualities; it is material in a way that breaks apart when we try to grasp it. This is one interpretation of the phrase 'so material that it becomes immaterial'. This interpretation also provides a possible way of joining the contradictory elements within baseness. If base entities such as the body are both irresistible and not fully describable then the kind of reductive readings attempted by Mookerjee and Dworkin fall short.

Communication and rupture

The contradictions indicated here within baseness demonstrate further that the concept of the base is not a grand explanatory theory but rather provides a convenient way of denoting a set of ideas held by Bataille and others influenced by him. In regard to Laure and Acker, the idea of the base is useful in that it facilitates both Laure's critique of transgression and Acker's critique of Laure's anti-transgressive ethic of self-reliance. Taken in dialogue with each other, these critiques present the possibility of a kind of 'base' thinking that combines the revolutionary force of Laure's attack on conventional society with the refusal of easy solutions and unified concepts expressed by Acker in her own radical writing.

One way of addressing these contradictions within the concept of the base is through the idea of communication. For both Laure and Bataille, communication is that which breaks down the reserved silence that exists between individuals. As I described in the previous chapter, for Bataille true communication is also something wherein 'inner experience' spills out of the self and connects with the experience of others; this is a communication beyond language. Though Bataille's thinking about communication arises from his dialogue with Laure, Laure nonetheless seems implicitly to turn against communication as understood by Bataille. Laure does not explicitly refer to inner experience in Bataillean terms, but it would seem that her own inner experience is something that she wants to *protect* from the dissolution implied by communication. If communication breaks down the walls of the self, Laure is determined to

build her own walls up – understandably, given the kind of psychic damage she felt the need to protect herself against.

At the same time, the way that Acker skewers the hypocrisy of Bataillean sexual politics in her description of the brothel client is also, perhaps, a form of communication. For Bataille, the baseness of 'simple and categorical' expression tears away the veil of language just as communicative inner experience tears down the boundaries of the self. When Laure, then, tears down what she sees as the pompous hypocrisy of the male communist intellectual who visits brothels, she is engaging in something comparable – communication as rupture, as tearing-away – but this time turned *against* Bataille's intellectual project. We can see another form of the same thing – base communication as rupture – occurring within Dworkin's attack on Bataille. Moreover, there are differences between Laure's base communication and Bataille's. Though Bataille and Laure are both communicating through rupture and exposure, Bataille's theory ultimately places communication in the realm of the heterogeneous, whereas Laure's deployment of rupture and exposure might in Bataille's terms belong to the order of homogeneity. This is because when Laure *exposes* Bataille's hypocrisy as a user of brothels she is doing this *for a purpose*, the purpose being to reveal something about the Bataille-figure described. Though Bataille is not named, in its context the text clearly aims to expose something that its reader does not want to acknowledge. Communication in Bataille's view, however, cannot be for a purpose: it belongs to the heterogeneous realm of excess and uselessness.

These approaches associate the base with a kind of communicative directness. As I have said, Acker problematises these approaches by viewing base entities such as the body as ambiguous, uncertain and in some sense 'silent'. For Acker, the base operation is not a violent unveiling of the truth but something harder to describe: something is being revealed, perhaps, but its unveiling only creates more questions. The structure of Acker's novels refuses any easy resolution. However, at points *Demonology* does seem to engage in the Dworkin-like action of tearing away constructs in order to unveil a perceived political reality underneath. In one section, the patriarchal figure who is elsewhere identified with both Bush and Bataille here appears as an archetype of the privilege male artist. Speaking as his daughter, the narrator says:

> Both my father's attitude towards sex and his sexual behaviour were typical
> of artists at that time. Any girl… had to be fucked, over, because she was out
> to steal his money or his soul. If the chick managed to fight back
> successfully, the only possible indication of integrity, she might be worth

respecting, though then she would probably be too damaged to fuck. Think

of _____, and _____. (1994: 93)

Here the artist-father is portrayed as an exploiter of women who refuses to see them as anything other than objects to 'fuck'. We might recognise this portrayal from any number of critiques of the behaviour of powerful men within artistic scenes; this is particularly true in the wake of the Me Too movement but is also, of course, nothing new. The names blanked out in the last sentence create the impression of a reference to real events, perhaps in the New York art scene, in which this passage is explicitly set. Of course it is difficult to know whether such direct biographical references are present, but there is certainly an impression of the gossipy divulgence of an artist's bad behaviour. We might argue, then, that like Dworkin, Acker is pointing to the reality of women's exploitation by men that lies 'behind' the man's status as artist. 'Father was interested only in the pursuit of knowledge,' the narrator says later in this section, and yet her matter-of-fact exposition of his 'typical' attitude towards women serves to make these claims of intellectual high-mindedness appear bitterly sarcastic. Of course, Acker's text is far too ambiguous to be reducible to this Dworkinesque model, but we can gain further understanding of *Demonology* by placing it within this framework. This painting of iconic male artists as misogynistic monsters is a recurring theme in Acker's work. Acker uses this technique to detourn and critique the personae of the men who influenced her: Rimbaud in *In Memoriam to Identity* (1993: 3), Genet in *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984: 117), and now Bataille.

The section in which the above description occurs appears to be entitled '(Beatrice's Story)'. I say 'appears' because in *Demonology* narrative fragments flow into each other in a way that resists a neat division into sections. However, the appearance of 'Beatrice' does appear significant in that it is famously the name of Dante's guide in the *Divine Comedy*, just as *Laure* is *Laura*, the addressee of Petrarch's love poetry (this may have the reason it was chosen). Both names, then, are associated with muses: women figured as inspirations for art rather than creators of it. Beatrice, Laure and the other narrative voices that slip in and out of each other in *Demonology* are among other things negotiating with their figuration as sexual and aesthetic objects in relation to their fathers, lovers and other overlapping male authority figures. If we stick with the Dworkin model, then, we can see passages like the above as tearing away literature's aesthetic vision of the female muse to expose the artist-patriarch's violent subjugation of women. As Acker writes elsewhere, '[o]f course, a woman is the muse. If she were the maker instead of the muse and opened her mouth, she would blast the notion of poetic creativity apart.' (2006: 4)

What is fascinating about Acker's denotation of this power relation is that she takes it still further. Not only is 'Father' a violent exploiter of women, he is also presented as an agent of the gentrifying violence of capital. Acker notes that Father is also 'a businessman' (1994: 97) who receives financial backing from the political and financial establishment. Acker describes how 'Mayor ____' – likely identified with Ed Koch, New York's market-liberal mayor up to 1989 – 'made a pact between the largest bank, the real estate moguls, and himself or the law' (90). As a result,

> the bank, through white artists' organizations, was helping the artists gentrify their spaces. It was well known that Mayor ____ loved art… Mayor ____commissioned my father, as the most well-respected artist of his time, to make a portrait of New York large enough to cover a wall of [mayoral residence] Gracie Mansion's main reception room. (90, 97)

I quote this section of *Demonology* at length because as it develops it draws together the themes of misogyny, capital and Bataillean transgression in a way that is highly revealing of Acker's relationship to Laure and Dworkin. To continue, then, Beatrice describes how

> Father informed the mayor that in order to paint what he had been commissioned to paint, he had to have an innocent girl… he wanted a crowd of men to set fire to a young girl. Including the mayor. That is, he wanted to see a crowd of men set fire to a young girl. Seeing isn't the same act as doing. (107)

Inevitable, the victim in question ends up being the daughter-lover-muse figure, Beatrice. When asked by the mayor why the painting has to take this form, Father replies that

> "To paint horror, I have to eradicate all distance between horror and me: I have to see/show my own horror, that I'm horrible."
>> The mayor said, "Do what you have to do. I want the painting."

What is especially striking about this passage is that it seems to be a response to, or perhaps parody of, Robbe-Grillet's *Project for a Revolution in New York* (1970). As I discussed in chapter one, this is one of the examples Suleiman gives of a text that presents scenes of violence against women that are often ignored by critics in favour of its structural and linguistic experimentation. One passage of *Project* describes 'three actors' (1973: 27) giving a lecture on the theme of

"the color red," considered as a radical solution to the irreducible antagonism between black and white.

> Right now each of the three voices is devoted to one of the main liberating actions related to red: rape, arson, murder. (27-28)

The lecture culminates in 'the conclusion of the account': a description of

> the perfect crime, which combines the three elements studied here… the defoliation, performed by force, of a virgin, preferably a girl with milky skin and very blond hair, the victim then being immolated by disembowelment or throat-cutting, her naked and bloodstained body having to be burned at a stake doused with gasoline, the fire gradually consuming the whole house.'
> (30)

The parallels are clear. A spectacular and sacrificial act of violence against an archetypal female victim is presented by men as the solution for an intellectual problem; though the nature of the actual problem to be solved remains murky.

The killing in *Demonology* could conceivably be seen as a radical act: an experimental gesture in the Robbe-Grillet mould, or a revelatory sacrifice in the Bataillean mould. However the text makes it clear that it remains a 'procedure' calculated to suit the needs of power and capital: 'The girl… would be set on fire in a part of the city where there were only dead buildings. Almost no buildings. For the mayor wanted this painting, but he also had to preserve real estate values' (109).

We have a fairly clear example here of an act that fits into Bataille's modes of transgression and sacrifice and yet has none of the radical or disruptive quality that Bataille and others have associated with these modes. Instead, the act serves to fulfil a desire on the part of the father and the mayor that appears aesthetic and libidinal yet also maintains the relationships of property and capital that keep these men in their positions of power. An act of extreme violence occurs and the social order is unchanged. The structure of power is not changed because the violence is enacted on the powerless by the powerful. We are in New York, but there is no revolution[38]. Acker, then, enacts the same kind of base exposure as that undertaken by

---

[38] It is worth pointing out here that the title *Project for a Revolution in New York* is already in itself somewhat ironic: Robbe-Grillet is not straightforwardly positing the violent acts in his novel as revolutionary (Ramsay 1992: 116).

Dworkin, but arguably does so in a way that is both more complex and more concrete than what we find in Dworkin's work. She exposes not only the work of male supremacy but also the dead hand of capital in the institution of art. Further, she does this in the context of an exploration and appropriation of Laure's relationship with Bataille, meaning that her intervention is both a critique of Bataille and an extension and complication of Laure's concerns. Insofar as Bataille is 'Father', Bataille's transgressive, heterogeneous approach is attacked for its imbrication in structures of male and capitalist domination. Laure, in turn, is lifted out of Bataille's shadow to have her base approach reinstated as a legitimate challenge to Bataille. However, Laure is subject to critique too: as I have said, her valorisation of life and strength is problematised by Acker's acceptance of death and self-destruction.

Seen in the context of Bataille and Laure's intellectual legacies, then, *Demonology* functions as a juncture between transgression and the base that both insists upon the importance of these phenomena and critiques them from a political standpoint. This type of engagement with Bataille will prove to be emblematic of the New Narrative movement with which Acker is frequently associated, and to which I turn in the next chapter.

Like Acker, he may be describing sacrifices that have become mechanised and been hollowed out of their social meaning. The ones describing the sacrifice are 'actors,' reading from a script, and they speak in an artificial and mechanical way, 'all three reciting the same text together, in the same neutral and jerky voices in which no syllable stands out' (1973: 30).

Chapter three

Impossible relations and possible solidarities: the detainee, the queer subject and the paradoxes of Bataillean community

The New Narrative tendency of the 1970s and 1980s is a major inheritor of the legacy of Bataille, and in its queerness offers a necessary development of Bataille's themes of eroticism and community. I want to unpack these themes in the context of the current geopolitical system of oppression that encompasses Islamophobia, carceralism and sexual violence among other things. Bataille's thought on community has much to offer by way of suggesting possible alternative social relations and modes of resistance to this system, but requires much in the way of critique in order to bring it into engagement with these contemporary problematics. I effect this engagement by tracing the developments of Bataillean thought through the work of New Narrative writers such as Robert Glück. This leads me to a sustained consideration of the contemporary poet and critic Rob Halpern, who uses techniques derived from New Narrative, among others, to address imprisonment, queer eroticism and the War on Terror in ways that are both fascinating and highly open to critique.

I then offer a counterpoint to this treatment of Bataillean thought with reference to another of Bataille's major interpreters, Jean-Luc Nancy. Finally, I bring these strands together in a consideration of the work of Talha Ahsan, whose work is not explicitly indebted to Bataille at all and yet proves surprisingly generative of responses to these problems of community, oppression and exclusion. I also turn to an obvious, though apparently unintended, parallel with *Common Place*, namely Kenneth Goldsmith's 'The Body of Michael Brown.' I use this example as a basis for exploring how these aforementioned issues play out in the context of poetic performance and the possibilities for political community that such performance might evoke. In keeping with this departure from Bataille, I spend much of this chapter working with theorists influenced by Bataille, such as Nancy, before returning to Bataille himself to bring the discussion directly back into the context of his ideas.

Ecstatic Community: Rob Halpern and New Narrative

Rob Halpern's engagement with New Narrative is longstanding and crucial to his practice. Indeed, his work provides a useful introduction both to the New Narrative movement and to the current resurgence of interest in it. As I mentioned in my introduction, the New Narrative-affiliated writer Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* was republished in 2016 to significant mainstream acclaim and has now been adapted into a TV series; Kraus has recently brought out a biography

of Kathy Acker, who also had strong ties to the movement. An anthology of New Narrative writing edited by Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian also came out in 2017. Halpern has been central to many other developments in this resurgence of interest. A conference on the New Narrative featuring Halpern was held at UC Berkeley in 2017, and *From Our Hearts to Yours*, a book of critical writing on New Narrative edited by Halpern along with Robin Tremblay-McGraw, also appeared in 2017.

I turn to Halpern and McGraw's introduction to *From Our Hearts to Yours* as an initial approach to New Narrative. Halpern and McGraw describe New Narrative's emergence in the late 1970s in the San Francisco Bay Area, centred around Robert Glück, Bruce Boone and Steve Abbott, who

> asserted the critical and imaginative values of identity and storytelling for a formally innovative and activist writing… at a time when "self" and "story" were arguably considered retrograde by the avant-garde of the US writing scene within which New Narrative located itself… Together, Abbott, Glück, and Boone theorized their practice as they elaborated a range of tactics negotiating writerly pleasure, self-fashioning, social engagement, and reflexive accountability. (2017: 7)

New Narrative, then, responds to avant-garde movements such as Language Poetry, which Halpern describes elsewhere as 'New Narrative's friendly antagonist' (2011: 85), by relocating their experimental techniques within narratives of personal and lived experience while also, crucially, using the same techniques to interrogate and politicise the categories of the personal and the lived. This activity took place (and continues to take place as the influence of New Narrative continues to make itself felt) within a specifically queer and leftist set of experiences and concerns, including 'the AIDS crisis, the politics of race, the structural impacts of neo-liberalism on urban space, and the movement across queer, straight and transgender subject positions' (Halpern and McGraw 2017: 10). By exploring these regions New Narrative offers 'one response to some unresolved impasses between Gay Liberation, the Avant-Garde, and a New Left that seemed at times unresponsive to the exigencies of sexual politics' (Halpern 2011: 82).

As with many such literary tendencies, the 'membership' of New Narrative has never been formalised: depending whom one asks, Kathy Acker and Dennis Cooper are either New Narrative writers or fellow travellers of the movement. Certainly all the above writers are linked by an exchange of ideas and friendships as well as by a set of influences; most

importantly, for our purposes, the influence of Bataille. Bataille was introduced to New Narrative writers through Steve Abbott's *Soup* magazine, and his concepts of community, eroticism and transgression are crucial for New Narrative (Halpern 2011: 89). Just as Acker invoked Bataille as an instance of 'nonpatriarchal language' that could disrupt unified meaning and bring experience back to the body, so Glück (in particular) used Bataille to think through ideas of queer subjectivity and queer community. As Halpern puts it, 'the subject of New Narrative is a *potential* subject and one excluded from presently sanctioned ideas of social being' (2011: 89). The New Narrative writers considered such a subject in relation to Bataille's thinking of a communication that ruptures the individual subject towards a wider continuous community. For Bataille erotic sexuality is one of the privileged modes within which this communication takes place. This kind of sexuality is paradoxically both forbidden by and central to conventional society, because it disrupts the boundaries this society relies on and yet also reproduces it by maintaining community. It is thus transgressive. This idea of a communicative and transgressive eroticism informed New Narrative's writing of a queer community bonded together by a politicised sexuality (or sexualised politics) that is violently rejected by mainstream society (a violence that reaches an apotheosis in the AIDS crisis) but that for this very reason fosters community among those who share it.

A key example of Bataille's influence on New Narrative can be found in Glück's *Jack the Modernist* (1985), a novel that describes sex, love and intellectual exchange between the narrator, the titular character and others. Halpern suggests that the 'convergence of the personal and the impersonal' found in Bataille – in other words, the way the deeply intimate rupture of the erotic dissolves the self – 'underscores the stakes of Glück's entire project,' specifically the way he writes about 'the body in orgasm' (Halpern 2012b). Early in *Jack the Modernist*, then, Jack and Bob (the narrator) are on a date and discussing the theme of gossip, a key concern for New Narrative. Bob says that '[g]ossip registers the difference between a story one person knows and everyone knows, between one person's story and everyone's. Or it's a mythology, gods and goddesses, a community and a future.' Jack asks what he means by community and Bob replies 'Ecstatic sexuality' (1995: 9). Soon afterwards this ecstatic sexuality is manifested between the two characters, as Bob describes how 'We eroticized a finely-honed attention which challenged terms as soon as our bodies invented them' (1995: 11). 'Sex was the answer to any question,' we are told (1995: 10). Among other things, we seem here to be in the realm of Acker's nonpatriarchal language of the body: the 'body in orgasm' breaks down and reconstitutes meanings as it experiences pleasure. As with Acker, the influence of Bataille is clear in the complex of ideas presented here by Glück. The communication of gossip brings together individual and community, and this realisation of community reaches a new height in sex, which breaks down conventional meaning and locates community in the body.

Impossible community: Halpern's Placeholder *series*

I mean that, after getting over the unpleasant feeling of having profaned a corpse, this game, for which a corpse is the

pretext, gives me great freedom.

Jean Genet, *Funeral Rites* (118)

Halpern's work in *Common Place*, then, takes place within the context of New Narrative and Bataille's influence on it. Specifically, it tries to respond to some of these specific problems of individual and community in the context of the militarised and hypercapitalist society of the early twenty-first century. Halpern outlines some of these problems in 'Useless Commodities, Disposable Bodies,' an essay published in 2017 that situates his work within the theories of community that concerned New Narrative while also placing an emphasis on the relation between this community and commodity culture[39].

In 'Useless Commodities,' then, Halpern argues, among other things, against 'a whole hypostatisation of the 'negative community' deriving from Georges Bataille, as well as Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy' (2016: 158). The critique of this notion of community is one of the points of departure for *Common Place*. Striking out away from New Narrative's investment in Bataille, Halpern seems to argue that Bataille's notion of community presents us with a contradiction that it cannot or will not resolve. This contradiction is as follows:

> For Bataille, there can be no communal relation because his theorisation of
> communion denotes a rupture of the subject's boundaries, a breakdown of
> the human being's integrity that can only compromise, if not destroy, the
> communitarian subject. But if community can only exist at the point where
> it comes undone, then any communism is hopeless. This is the disaster.
> (2016: 160)

Halpern suggests that though Blanchot and Nancy elaborate on this theory they have not been able to resolve this problem. Rather than trying to work through this contradiction, Halpern argues, Bataille, Nancy and Blanchot merely posit it as something unspeakable and unthinkable and in doing so leave it as a mere abstraction. For Halpern, at least part of the reason for this failure has to do with Bataille's theory being too abstract and insufficiently historicised. If

---

[39] Halpern is also drawing on Bruce Boone's crucial articulation of relationships between community and commodity in texts such as *Toward a Gay Theory for the '80s* (1981: 1 *passim*).

community has been undone, Halpern seems to argue, this is more because of commodification and state violence than because the communal subject is *inherently* impossible. The latter abstraction is, Halpern suggest, Bataille's position. Further, this abstraction fails to resist the logic of the commodity that has made the relation between an individual and communal subject impossible in the first place:

> [T]his elaboration of relation's impossibility in a world whose dominant
> logic is inseparable from exchange value becomes just another metaphysics
> of capitalism, whose forces produce occulted relation in the commodity form
> itself. (2016: 159)

This materialist critique of Bataille has much to recommend it; however it may not be entirely fair to Bataille's inheritors. Jean-Luc Nancy may in his own critique of Bataille provide some answers to this quandary that Halpern does not fully acknowledge in 'Useless Commodities.' First, though, I look at how Halpern's 2015 book *Common Place* tries to respond to the problems Halpern identifies. Halpern, then, presents his approach in terms of 'the need to move beyond the 'absent site of community,' an absent site whose historical materialisation is inseparable from the history of communism's failures in Europe' (2016: 160).

Halpern's move towards concretising and historicising the 'absent site' takes place through a return to the physical in the shape of the dead body of a Guantanamo Bay detainee. Importantly, this is a physicality that has already been commodified. *Common Place*, then, might be Halpern's attempt at a response to this 'disaster'; albeit a response that acknowledges itself as inadequate. *Common Place* is the last in a linked series of books that began with 2004's *Rumored Place* and continues through *Disaster Suites* (2009), *Music for Porn* (2012) and others. Parts of this series were collected and reconfigured in the Enitharmon edition *[____] Placeholder*, also from 2015. *Common Place* extends the sequence's theme, summed up by Halpern with the question 'What does it mean to desire "community" under current conditions of geopolitical crisis?' (Halpern and Spinosa 2016), by quoting and responding to text from the autopsy report of Mohammad Ahmed Abdullah Saleh al-Hanashi, a Yemeni detainee in Guantanamo Bay who died aged 31 in 2009, the official reason being given as suicide, though this account has been challenged. Al-Hanashi had been held in Guantanamo's psychiatric ward and subjected to force-feeding prior to his claimed suicide (McFaden and Coto 2009).

Common Place must among other things be understood as a continuation of the project initiated in *Music for Porn*. In *Music for Porn*, published three years before *Common Place*, the focus is

on the dead bodies of American soldiers killed in the course of the War on Terror, in part seen through the autopsy reports written about these bodies. These bodies are taken as markers of the 'absent site of community' in that the perpetuation of a capitalist and imperialist social order can only occur through their exposure to death in the field of combat and yet at the same time a full acknowledgement of this death would disrupt the social order. 'What happens,' Halpern asks, 'when the thing we need to see in order to know ourselves is a corpse withdrawn from view, and when even the language denoting that body has been buried in an autopsy report[?]' (2012: 6).

Halpern then reads these bodies through a number of other figures, in particular the sexualised soldier that has become a trope in gay (and other) porn and the dead Civil War soldiers that Walt Whitman erotically mourns in sections of *Leaves of Grass*. Halpern responds to the New Narrative tendency towards evoking erotic community by presenting desire not as an intimate exchange within a community of friends and lovers but as a distanced, alienated and pornographic desire for the dead body of a soldier (Luker 2015: 109)[40]. This desire remains a desire for community, but this desire has been distorted by the fact that the community it reaches towards can seemingly only exist through exploitation and war because the existing social order has occluded other possibilities. *Music for Porn*'s voice continues to push towards the possibility that community could emerge at the site of this dead body, but this possibility is endlessly frustrated and made impossibly contradictory. The desire becomes violent, predatory, something that the speaker is ashamed of, yet still in a contradictory and ambiguous way:

> My body keeps channeling so many contradictory feelings around the figure
> of a soldier *intensity of shame* as his body becomes the object of my violence
> and my lust. I want to kill him for blocking my dream of a demilitarized
> future, and I want to be fucked by him because the repressive sublimation of
> his body has become unbearable, the way the realization that I, too, stand in
> the way of that other future has become unbearable. (2012: 47)

As Sam Ladkin puts it, the pornographic status of the speaker's desires for occluded bodies and absent community marks the violence that this desire has developed into 'the replacement of a "natural" affection for intimacy… with the perverted and fetishistic desire for the damage and commodification of suffering in the war economy' (2015: 138).

---

[40] Distanced and alienated desire does have its place in New Narrative, though, as I explore below.

Halpern's address towards his object of desire and the community represented thereby is in this sense a 'failed address' (Ladkin 2015: 133). At the same time, though, Ladkin describes how this pornographic address is for Halpern 'ambivalently utopian' (2015: 137). What, then, could be the utopian dimension of this violent and alienated desire? The answer has to do with the placing of the desired body at the site of the desired but absent community; but this answer is not as fully sketched out in *Music for Porn* as in *Common Place.* As we have seen, the focus of desire in the latter text has shifted to a different 'inappropriate' body, that of al-Hanashi[41]. Al-Hanashi is named once within *Common Place* but elsewhere within this text is denoted as 'my detainee' or his name is replaced with the bracketed space featured in the title of *[____] Placeholder*. This 'placeholder' seems to denote the absent possibilities suggested by the detainee's also-absent body. This body is absent in a number of ways: absent because he is dead, and also because he has been legally occulted and removed to the hidden space of Guantanamo Bay. Halpern argues elsewhere that, as a space paradoxically both within and outside the United States, Guantanamo Bay upholds the security and rights of those within the boundary of the US by casting others outside it to a place where no such guarantees of personhood exist (Halpern 2016b: 157).

Halpern's work obsessively exposes the bodily presence of the speaker of the poem in relation to al-Hanashi's absent body. This is done in a number of ways. Halpern has quoted from al-Hanashi's autopsy report, and describes how the process of transcription drifts towards a series of sometimes-violent fantasised erotic entanglements with the detainee's body:

> So I place the cord around his cock while looking sadly at my own,
> establishing equivalence between organs and garbage. He claims to be much
> older, without having achieved a single orgasm in his twelve years behind
> bars. Yr body, my devotional kink, what do I mean when I say 'I burn with
> love for you'? I'm still seeking a lyric structure that might allow me to ask
> this question, a sentence feeling for its own conditions but whose words
> continue to elude them, for example, "On my knees, in the back of the cell,
> he holds my head to the rim of his latrine, just close enough for me to smell

[41] Though it is not my focus here, M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) presents both a precedent and a contrast to *Common Place.* Like Halpern, Philip transcribes a technical document that records a situation of imperial violence, in her case the *Zong* massacre of 1781, in which 470 slaves were murdered by being thrown overboard from the titular ship (Philip 2008: 189). Like Halpern, she narrates her own troubled transcription of the document (191-192). Like Halpern, she describes her transformation of the text into poetry in terms of violence, in her words a 'murder' of the text (193). She even says that in writing *Zong!* she has 'only revealed what is *commonplace*, although hidden' (199, my emphasis). The major contrast with Halpern might be that where his speaker obsesses over his own complicit presence in the text, her poem aims to erase any sense of a lyric subject. Subjectivity is reintroduced in her paratextual commentary, which paradoxically describes this attempt at self-erasure while again wrestling with complicity (199). Further, her violence is framed as violence toward the text rather than towards the bodies of those killed – while retaining an awareness that the two cannot straightforwardly be separated.

the crap he left there only an hour ago, and this fantasy turns me on to such a
degree that I can feel a tiny bead of cum on the head of my dick, though I'm
not even hard, as if whatever I'm breathing from that metal expanse might
coincide with the limit of our episteme and the whole taxonomy of signs that
make our life world visible at the expense of what cannot appear here." (68-
69)

I quote the passage at length to give some sense of the cumulative effect of the text's relentless
pile-up of contradictions: it continually questions itself, particularly in terms of the relationship
between the body of the poet and the excluded body. By questioning itself, however, the
passage raises issues that require further interrogation. The passage, like much of *Common
Place*, focuses on a fantasised sexual relation with the detainee (drawing on the ecstatic
sexuality of New Narrative) rather than other types of relation we might imagine. For example,
to be prosaic, we might imagine poetry that reports on actual attempts at communication and
solidarity with detainees, not that this would itself necessarily be unproblematic. The poetry is
very aware that it is choosing this relation rather than any other, and of the 'improper' (64)
nature of this choice. This focus on the sexualised or pornographic relation (see *Music for
Porn*), functions, I think, to emphasise the ways in which this relation is for 'us' both distant
and intimate and in that sense impossible. This, of course, is precisely the problem with
Bataille-derived theories of community that Halpern has identified. The passage, then, raises a
number of questions, some of them ethical in nature. The work could certainly be critiqued
from the ethical viewpoint. If we take this approach we might ask whether Halpern as a writer
has the right to use al-Hanashi's name in this way without, presumably, the approval of anybody
who knew him[42]. This critique is legitimate, but at the same time can be countered by the fact
that *Common Place* is in a sense precisely *trying* to be unethical. We can better understand this
deliberate anti-ethicism if we think about Jean Genet.

Failure and evil: Common Place *and* Funeral Rites

As well as a response to Bataille and Nancy's project of community, both directly and as it was
developed through the New Narrative movement, *Common Place* is also explicitly a response to
Jean Genet's *Funeral Rites* (1947). This is made clear by the section of *Common Place* entitled
'Funeral Rites' (79), which according to Halpern's endnotes 'moves through several passages of
Jean Genet's novel of the same title' (164). The connections to *Funeral Rites* are fairly obvious

---

[42] Hollywood critiques Bataille's own comparable engagement with the photograph of the Chinese torture victim in
similar terms, reading Bataille's 'use' of this photograph as among other things an Orientalist appropriation (2002:
89-90).

even before we delve deeper. Like *Common Place*, *Funeral Rites* concerns a relation characterised by varying combinations of tenderness, mourning and necrophilia. As Leo Bersani describes in his book *Homos*,

> *Funeral Rites* was inspired by the death of one of Genet's lovers, Jean Decarnin, a… resistance fighter shot down in 1944 on the barricades in Paris "by the bullet of a charming young collaborator" (12)[43]. The avowed aim of *Funeral Rites* is "to tell the glory of Jean Decarnin," but as Genet confesses at the beginning, the work may have some "unforeseeable secondary aims" (9). Indeed, a curious aim gradually takes over: that of praising the murderous collaborator (Genet names him Riton) and, more generally, the Nazis who were Jean's (and France's) enemy. In other words, Genet mourns Jean through an act of treachery. (1995: 155-156)

Genet's status within the history of queer writing is of course well known, and a large part of why he is one of the central writers for Bersani's theses on the sociality of homosexual desire. Halpern's engagement with *Funeral Rites* can thus be seen as part of *Common Place*'s relationship to the deeper histories of the writing of queer desire, with New Narrative forming another historical strand.

What then, is *Common Place*'s response to *Funeral Rites*? For Bersani, Genet's focus on betrayal is among other things a 'defiant refusal of the codes of mourning' (1995: 156). We might then see Halpern as taking this idea of refusing conventional mourning as one of his starting points. For him the insistence on violating the conventional ethics regarding how we engage with dead victims of US imperialism precisely means refusing a conventional form of mourning that could be co-opted. *Common Place*, then, is according to its own claim trying to show the impossible nature of the relation that forms the basis of the social order within which *Common Place* appears. Bataille invoked 'evil' in his own account of *Funeral Rites*, and we might in this light understand *Common Place*'s erotic exploration of this relation as an 'evil' activity (Bataille 1985: 185). To label a text 'evil' in this sense does not mean to censure it or say that its existence is morally unacceptable, but rather to say that part of the book's project is its violation of conventional ethical rules and norms of social interaction. *Common Place*, then, takes upon itself the task of exploring the impossible relation *including* everything about this relation that might, if one tries to speak in ethical terms, variously be described as wrong, evil, inappropriate or unacceptable. In this view *Common Place* is an 'evil' text insofar as it

---

[43] I have altered Bersani's page references to match my edition of *Funeral Rites*.

participates in a communal relation that can only exist in 'evil' terms. *Common Place* is evil because we, its readers, are part of an evil society. My emphasis on the concept of 'evil' here should not be taken to occlude *Common Place*'s ultimately Marxian insistence on the material, economic and political nature of the impossible relation. Indeed, this insistence is another reason for *Common Place*'s taking an evil approach. It *must* do this in order to avoid becoming bogged down in the conventional moral assumptions that would get in the way of its engagement with the real social relations that morality occludes. As Ladkin, discussing *Music for Porn*, puts it, 'Halpern's task is to maintain "improper" feeling, feeling not bound by the efficacy expected of social relations, and outside of the logic of ownership (of property)' (2015: 136).

As long as we understand ourselves in moralistic terms, the argument might go, we are avoiding thinking about the fact that our social existence can only be understood politico-economically. This is of course a classically Marxist argument, and a compelling one. It is also, as I have tried to show, the approach that Bersani finds in *Funeral Rites*: the approach that refuses conventional morality in order to say and do things that conventional morality cannot contain (Bersani 1995: 151). In this sense *Common Place* defies ethical critique. I would argue that a sense of the 'wrongness' of the text's relationship with al-Hanashi is worth holding onto as part of how we engage with *Common Place*: to forget this might be to forget that al-Hanashi was a real individual who lived. But as we have seen, *Common Place* already knows that what it is doing is wrong, and this wrongness is the whole point.

Halpern, then, might be said to take as one of his starting points Genet's refusal of conventional mourning. If read through this understanding of mourning, *Common Place*'s project would be to violate the conventional ethical codes regarding a dead Guantanamo detainee – to do it 'wrong' – precisely in order to refuse a conventional form of mourning that could be co-opted. As we have seen, this refusal of conventional mourning can be read either as a deliberate *failure* that illustrates the limits of mourning in a commodified social order, *or* an attempt to transfigure this failure into something actually approaching community; and it is the assertion of the latter possibility that might be the least convincing thing about *Common Place*. We might then provisionally say that the difference between Genet and Halpern might be that Genet is not trying to turn his 'inappropriate' desire for Nazis and corpses into something other than it is. The voice of *Funeral Rites* explores these desires obsessively as an act of mourning by turns horrific and beautiful, but does not attempt to break through into something else.

This 'failure' to break through is precisely what Bataille took issue with in his own response to Genet. In the chapter of *Literature and Evil* concerned with Genet, Bataille takes issue with

what he sees as a coldness and a lack of seriousness emerging from Genet's insistence upon an 'evil' approach. Bataille was himself interested in evil. He considered Nietzsche a 'philosopher of evil' (1994: xxiv), and at times aligned evil with sacrifice and therefore community (1994: 20). However, Bataille feels that Genet's insistence upon evil ultimately becomes servile and falls short of the sovereign communication Bataille wants to find in literature (1990: 188). 'Genet,' says Bataille, 'refuses to communicate. By so doing he never reaches the sovereign moment, the moment when he would at last cease bringing everything back to his own obsession with isolation' (1990: 203). Bataille, as Nancy indicates, wants to reach toward a kind of community achieved through reading and writing, despite his ambivalence about both. The failure of Genet, for Bataille, is that he refuses to reach toward this point of communal relation. This, of course, is precisely why Genet is pertinent to Bersani's project of queer antirelationality. Bataille wants to go through language to reach a more profound sense of the communal, but language must fall short of this point, must fail. Community is in this sense founded (impossibly) by the failure of language. But Genet, in Bataille's view, does not even try.

This characterisation of Genet ignores a number of the dimensions of his work, but it does present some interesting implications. Let us, then, stay with Bataille's view that Genet's work is characterised by failure. Reading Halpern through this understanding of *Funeral Rites*, the strength of both Halpern and Genet in the context of radical politics might be that they insist on failing, on indicting their own love for its complicity in oppression: Halpern because his love reproduces the violence towards the detainee, and Genet because his love becomes first love for fascism and then a destructive rejection of any category of value. Each occupies a set of contradictory roles, both radical and reactionary, *and acknowledges the contradictory interrelation of both roles*. *Common Place*'s speaker occupies the roles of both queer sexual outlaw and imperialist exploiter. Meanwhile Genet's characters switch between queer outlaws, Resistance members, Nazi collaborators and finally Hitler himself (1973: 232).

In order to understand this blurring of the categories of queer and fascist we need first to consider what is different about the types of 'wrongness' presented by queerness and fascism respectively. The queer 'wrongness,' queer refusal of ethics, that I have identified in both Halpern and Genet arguably presents the possibility of a radical resistance to the heteronormative capitalist social order: queerness in its most radical forms transgresses conventional ethics *and* goes beyond this to challenge all social conventions of sexuality, the self, property relations and so on[44]. In contrast, Nazism 'does wrong' and transgresses

---

[44] Of course, the themes of failure and anti-ethics have been profoundly important in recent works of queer theory, most notably Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and Lee Edelman's *No Future*.

conventional ethics only in order to reaffirm the most traditional forms of social relation. To reiterate the point I made in chapter one, transgression is a moveable category: it may be either reactionary or liberating depending upon who is transgressing what law. However, we now encounter a further twist: the point of Halpern's and Genet's 'wrongness' is that it *blurs* these seemingly different kinds of transgression in a troubling and complex way that forces us to look at potential complicities. Being queer, Genet and Halpern tell us, does not exempt one from complicity in military domination. 'Wrongness' in the eyes of the hegemonic social order can still be recuperated to that order. The acts of sexual violence that American society nominally finds unacceptable became military policy in Abu Ghraib (this being another reference point for *Common Place*)[45].

One way of understanding this recuperation of wrongness is in terms of *failure*. We might say that Halpern's images are effective insofar as they show 'our' relation with the detainee as one that fails because of its social conditions: 'What community will emerge in so negative a place without being sentenced in advance?' the speaker asks (128). As in Genet and in *Music for Porn*, this failure manifests in the collapse of the attempted relation into fantasies of, among other things, violent sexual exploitation, as in the sentence, occurring soon after the long passage quoted above: 'And so I hollow out a cunt in his corpse *my opening to the other* and fuck a patient orifice' (70). This appears to be an expression of sexual dominance using language evoking a misogynistic violence used against the feminised body of the detainee ('hollow out a cunt').

The violence of this passage is, to me, shocking and upsetting. Of course, it is meant to be: the relation it describes should be shocking and upsetting, and *Common Place* knows it. In this sense *Common Place* is enacting a representation of violence precisely in order to expose a real violence. Are there, though, other dimensions to the exclusion of al-Hanashi and the overall violence of the text that *Common Place* does not fully account for in its self-critique? There are a couple of possible answers to this question. One answer has to do with the specific composition of the community within which *Common Place* situates itself. A second, related answer regards what *Common Place* is ultimately trying to *do* with its wrongness and failure and what problems this might generate. I want to address both of these possible answers, and will turn first to the issue of community.

[45] Jon Clay (2013: 169 *passim*) has written perceptively about treatments of Abu Ghraib, and the questions of Western complicity and empathy pertaining thereto, in the poetry of Halpern's contemporaries Andrea Brady and Keston Sutherland. In particular he draws attention to rhetorics of misogyny and sexual violence in Sutherland in ways that speak to Halpern's work (2013: 174-175). Further, the comparison between Halpern and Philip's work and other recent poetry on Abu Ghraib has been drawn by Tyrone Williams (2014).

Let us, then, look again at *Common Place*'s situating itself within a community based upon an impossible relation. This situating would arguably imply that not only the text but its presumed audience and readership is part of this community, the community of which al-Hanashi is specifically *not* part. What community, then, is al-Hanashi being sacrificed to ensure? In reading and responding to the book we are arguably figured as having the same distanced relation as that possessed by the 'I' of the text. It is worth asking what it would mean if the 'us' were to include people who may not feel this kind of separation from Guantanamo Bay detainees because, for example, they are exposed to the kinds of racist and Islamophobic violence that Halpern, as a white American, is not subject to but that detainees are (though as a queer man, of course, Halpern is certainly exposed to other forms of political violence). What role does the attempted relation of *Common Place* have for this 'us'?

Halpern acknowledges this point to an extent when, in an essay reflecting on *Common Place*, he says, referring to Black Lives Matter and protests against murders committed by the police, that 'In our current moment… the issue is not civilian noncombatants abroad but 'surplus population' at home' (Halpern 2016). The question remains, however: does this relation to the 'surplus population at home' then present a problem for the fantasised sexual relation to the detainee far away? What happens when someone who is black, Muslim, Hispanic or otherwise figured by the US system as a member of its 'surplus population' is considered as a possible reader of *Common Place*, as having their own response to this fantasised relation? It is not that the book explicitly refuses such readers, but rather that, I would argue, the book *presumes* a reader who is similar to the 'I' of the book in the sense of being a Western citizen who is both radically distanced from and complicit in the violence being enacted against the detainees excluded from Western society. It presumes this reader in that most of the book's effect emerges from the pathos of this intimate separation and the sense that bridging it is impossible. I and many other readers of the book can be fairly safely categorised as *this* kind of reader: I am a white, middle-class English academic. The question remains, though: how does *Common Place* relate to possible readers who do not start from this position of presumed separation?

To move onto the second answer, there is also in *Common Place* an attempted move towards a relation of love, of 'devotional kink' (155), which, it seems, wants to occur *through* this relation of violent failure (this violence, of course, being that of the objective carceral system, not just occurring in the reader's mind in response to Halpern's images). The book concludes:

> Maybe this is what I mean by love, the failure of my name for you. And if
> this tenderness is true it will shatter the truth that excludes it, realizing my
> heresy by exhausting every identity in glamour and void. (163)

What, then, is the relationship between, on the one hand, the failure to relate indicated by the passages of sadism towards the detainee's body and, on the other, this move towards shattering love? There is a risk if the work insists on the possibility of this relation of love; in other words if the work insists on *not* being failure, on trying not just to indicate the non-relation but in so doing to *realise* the relation. This risk is that the subject's sometimes-violent fantasy of sexual relationship with the detainee's body becomes not the marker of the Western 'I's limitation but rather may function to shore up the relative power and privilege that this subject already possesses. This is because even though the 'I's attempts at relation fail and are exhausted, this failure and exhaustion nonetheless takes place on the terms the 'I' has established. As Halpern himself comments, the detainee 'has been sacrificed to ensure' the bourgeois subject's 'proprietary relation to a secured and securitised personhood' (Halpern 2016: 157). Here Halpern is echoing (no doubt consciously, since he cites her elsewhere) Jasbir Puar's concept of homonationalism, defined as

> The management of queer life at the expense of sexually and racially
> perverse death in relation to the contemporary politics of securitization,
> Orientalism, terrorism, torture, and the articulation of Muslim, Arab, Sikh,
> and South Asian sexualities. (Puar 2007: xiii)

I will return to Puar, but first I want to make the following argument: *Common Place* risks at times going beyond just exposing this sacrifice of the racialised Other to *give primacy to the relation based on this sacrifice*, downplaying other possibilities in the process. In this reading, the book's sadistic scenarios, in their very force, resist rather than moving towards the 'suspension of one's self-enclosed individuality' (2016: 157) that Halpern invokes in his essay, and that thus block rather than opening possibilities for relation. Even the scenarios where the 'I' takes on a masochistic role ('he holds my head to the rim of his latrine,' 68) are still assertive of one particular relation over other possible ones in the sense 'I' has generated the terms of the fantasy and the language with which it is evoked.

What precisely does it mean for the 'I' to generate the terms of the fantasy? What, indeed, is the status of the 'I' of *Common Place*? *Common Place* is very much a text that performs the act of its own composition, in a manner that that seems to draw on a range of literary tendencies. We are in the New Narrative territory of intimate confessions located in the experience of life in a specific community, and we are also in the mode of lyric poetic address. A good example is the following passage, which could be autobiographical narrative or lyric prose-poetry or both:

> There are so many things I want to tell you, things that embarrass me most,
> though it's hard to voice any of them, even for you whom I've come to trust.
> So far, all my writing amounts to strategies of evasion. That's what I was
> telling Dana & Lee, sitting outside in the late August heat as we tried to
> grasp where it all might be going. (35)

The 'I' in this passage, then, is presumably Halpern insofar as he is narrating an incident that we infer occurred in Halpern's life during the composition of the book we are reading. It is useful, nonetheless, to make a provisional distinction between Halpern the poet and then there is the 'character,' so to speak, of the poet within the text. It might seem overly precious to insist upon this distinction between the poet who wrote *Common Place* and the poet who appears within *Common Place*, especially given the blurring between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the text effected by much of the gossipy, semi-autobiographical writing of New Narrative. However, it is useful to do so in order to talk more concretely about the status of the 'I' as setting the terms of the relation described within the text. While there may be some interest in reading into Halpern's subjectivity as an author, this is not the mode of criticism I attempt here. Instead, I am interested in how *Common Place* describes and performs, in abundant detail, the process of its own composition by the poet who appears as its speaking voice. This process includes the choice of al-Hanashi as an object of desire, the labour of copying out his autopsy report, the fantasies and dreams the speaker has about al-Hanashi, and so on. To return to my earlier point, then, the speaker of *Common Place* not only *says* 'he holds my head to the rim of his latrine' but also performatively describes the act of writing down this and other fantasies as part of a poetic project. If, then, the fantasised sexual relation is intended to materialise the detainee's body as both the path to and the obstruction to community, this relation may in some ways *insist upon*, rather than simply materialising, this obstruction. In this view the poem's 'I' can try to explode this obstructed relation only from the starting point of having invoked it *as obstructed* rather than as any other possible kind of relation we could imagine.

Again, *Common Place* acknowledges these problems, and in part the work of the poetry is *about* these problems. 'I wonder,' asks the speaker, quoting a friend's comment on the material,

> whether it's possible "to transmute death, torture, hatred into love,
> communion, life"… or whether the writing can only materialize the ethical
> bind that traps this erotic transfer of energy, arousing the affective blocks
> and psychic clots that keep his body emotionally remote. (92)

In this sense the work pre-empts my critique of it. One of the poems in *Common Place* is even playfully titled 'Contribution to a Critique of my Philosophy of Ardor' (2015: 85). However, it also seems possible that *Common Place*'s acknowledgement of this problem functions not just to expose the problem but to emphasise that the 'I' of the book, as the one who is free, alive and has a platform, who is, as Halpern acknowledges, 'white, American, male… protected,' (2016: 161) is the one *in the position to make such an acknowledgement*. In this view the 'I' of the book is the one with the *power over* the language of racialised and/or sexual violence. The role of 'I' would then echo the role of the aggressor in real-life acts of systemic sexual violence, the roles of the rapist and/or police officer, all roles that, again, Halpern's work acknowledges an implication in. The 'I' is explicitly and anxiously aware of the problems associated with what it is doing, but this awareness, perhaps despite itself, may in fact reinforce the 'I's status as the powerful aggressor within the relation.

We might make a parallel here with Sara Ahmed's description of the tendency whereby the 'permission to speak about racism becomes evidence of antiracism' (2012: 154) so that 'antiracism becomes a matter of generating a positive white identity that makes the white subject feel good' (2012: 170). The parallel is far from exact, of course. *Common Place*'s speaker is not concerned with moralistically declaring himself anti-racist, even less so with 'feeling good'; on the contrary, his position is one of continual anguished self-criticism. My point in invoking Ahmed here is to say that in continually *displaying,* speaking about, this self-criticism, the figure of white privilege in *Common Place* could be seen as implicitly asserting its own importance and centrality. The fact that this attention-grabbing figure of white privilege is anguished rather than feeling good about itself does not make it any less central or dominant; indeed, one might see something self-indulgent or even sentimental about the specific focus on anguish. Indeed, Ahmed mentions the counterpoint to her own account of 'feeling good' in

> the work of bell hooks (2000) and Audre Lorde (1984), who both emphasize
> how feeling bad about racism or white privilege can function as a form of
> self-centeredness, which returns the white subject "back to" itself as the one
> whose feelings matter. (Ahmed 2012: 169)

Here is another way of putting the potential problem. The insistence on the obstruction is coupled with the figuring of the sadistic 'I' as both the source of the obstruction and the one whose 'love' tries to overcome it. This means that the text seems to be saying that representations of violence, including sexual violence, from the point of view of the aggressor (however contextualised) can form part of an attempt (however desperate) to overcome the society that, on systemic and interpersonal levels, makes such violence happen. This suggestion

is troubling because it implicitly places the power to overcome a violently exploitative social relation in the hands of the one who is fantasmatically portrayed as the enactor of such violence and as controlling the terms in which this violence is represented and theorised, namely the privileged and protected 'I' of the text. We might think here of David Marriott's comment, regarding the work of Kenneth Goldsmith and Tom McCarthy, that for many white artists 'the black corpse is able… to transform murderous violence into beautiful social fact, white narcissism into a public good and aesthetic value into deadly perfection' (2017)[46].

Of course, the queerness of Halpern's speaker must also problematise this idea of the speaker as privileged or powerful. If the speaker is seen as the queer white male favoured by homonationalism, we must remember Puar's caveat that

> to aver that some or certain homosexual bodies signify homonormative nationalism… is in no way intended to deny, diminish, or disavow the daily violences…. that sexual others must regularly endure… most queers, whether as subjects or populations, still hover amid regimes of deferred or outright death. (2007: 10)

In this regard the speaker of *Common Place* can be seen as paradoxically both occupying the same kind of subaltern space occupied by al-Hanashi and being radically different from this body with regard to incarceration and racial oppression. It is this difference in forms of oppression and othering that, along with the concrete relations of securitisation and commodity fetishism, establishes the separation, exclusion and 'impossibility' of the relation. To put it another way, *Common Place* draws on a long history of queer writing about "violent sex and sexual violence" (to use Stewart Home's phrase[47]) – a history that includes Genet and New Narrative – to position the abused queer body of the speaker and the abused Muslim body of al-Hanashi as parts of the same continuum. At the same time, as I have said, the text is profoundly concerned with the radical difference between these two bodies, and in particular the way the speaker's body is part of a social order from which al-Hanashi is necessarily excluded. Puar speaks to this exclusionary relation when, building on Ahmed, she addresses 'the material, cultural and social capital and resources that might delimit "access" to queerness, suggesting

---

[46] Clay's *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze* discusses Marriott's approach to marginalisation in innovative poetry in terms of Deleuzian deterritorialisation (2013: 153). Marriott himself has also discussed the fetishizing of images of black bodies and deaths beyond contemporary poetry. In 2000's *On Black Men* he analyses photographs of lynchings (1 *passim*) before turning to the racial politics of Robert Mapplethorpe's erotic photographs of black men (28-29). While it is not my focus here, I want to acknowledge the thematic connection to this chapter, considering in particular the uncanny echo of Mapplethorpe's *Hooded Man* photograph (1980, reproduced in Marriott 2000: 31) in the Abu Ghraib photographs. This parallel was also noted by Mike McGee (2004).

[47] Specifically, the phrase appears in the back cover blurb of Home's *Slow Death*. While Home is not straightforwardly aligned with the literary tendencies I am describing here, the phrase seems apposite.

that queerness can be an elite cosmopolitan formulation contingent upon various regimes of mobility' (2007: 12).

When speaking of what has been excluded, we might go yet further and ask where al-Hanashi's own subjective sexuality is located in relation to the erotics of *Common Place*. After all, homoerotic sexuality is something projected *onto* al-Hanashi as a fantasy rather than in any way located in his lived experience – not that to attempt the latter would be unproblematic either. Speaking about the sexual violence of Abu Ghraib, and the many assumptions made about sexuality and Islam by Western commentators in the wake of that atrocity, Puar argues that 'Muslim masculinity is [understood as] simultaneously pathologically excessive yet repressive, perverse yet homophobic, virile yet emasculated, monstrous yet flaccid' (2012: xxv).

These assumptions – mystifications about Muslim men that deny them sexual agency by prescribing a neurotic sexuality for them – are surely in the background when *Common Place* fantasises about al-Hanashi, and we might argue that the book is furthering these mystifications itself, however self-critically. By imagining a sexuality for one who cannot speak, the speaker of *Common Place* is in a sense asserting his facility to do, and in this sense asserting rather than undermining the social position he implicitly has. Further, as Jennifer Cooke has pointed out, *Common Place* 'fails to imagine how the detainee's family' – and, we might add, friends and other loved ones – 'might feel about the sexual use to which his corpse is put, and fails to imagine that the detainee, before his death, would likely have interpreted such a use as yet another violation committed against him' (Cooke 2017: 162)[48].

The question, then, is what this relationship of power and exclusion means with regard to the language of sexual violence used by the speaker. Let us consider the readership of *Common Place* and who might be implicitly excluded from it. To return to my earlier point, the 'enforcement of impossibility' that I mentioned earlier might come into play in the case of the reader of the book who is different from this 'I,' who is *not* separated in the way that the book presumes. This reader, arguably, is faced with the (metaphorical) violence of a separation that, for her, does not exist in the way that is being assumed (of course there is no denying that the separation of incarceration *does* exist). She is being told, arguably, that the enactor of this metaphorical violence, the 'I' of the poem, is the only one who can overcome this violent separation precisely by pushing its violence to the limit. She might respond that this separation

---

[48] In her paper Cooke refrains from using the detainee's name in order not to perpetuate this use of him. I have elected to use his name in an attempt to combat the depersonalisation occurring in both his real-life treatment and in *Common Place*, but it may be that Cooke's approach is ultimately more appropriate than mine.

only needed to be overcome in this way because the 'I' insisted upon it, and that other possibilities have been blocked in the process.

The live reading and the dead body

The nature of this blockage can be further illuminated if we consider Halpern's own live readings. In 2015 Halpern gave a series of readings, academic talks and interviews in the UK, centred around the release of *[___]* by Enitharmon Press. I attended a number of these readings. The readings from *Common Place* were intense, emotional, anguished and at times revelatory. Halpern gives a highly physical reading, bending his body and contorting his face as he moves through the poems' erotic struggles towards community. The image of erotic anguish is profoundly Bataillean, reminiscent of what Bataille saw in the images of tortured saints and Christs over which he obsessed. In his readings, then, Halpern to some extent embodies what is at stake in *Common Place*'s desperate attempts at community. By the same token, the performance reproduces the problems with these attempts. If *Common Place*'s focus on the anguish of the subject's desire for relation functions to occlude other possibilities for relationality, so the actions of Halpern's body on the stage provide a physical manifestation of this occluding anguish. Halpern speaks as the 'I' of the poem and so the anguished movement of his body focuses the attention back onto this 'I'. It is this 'I' who is embodied in Halpern as he reads. The 'I' reaches out to the body of al-Hanashi, but al-Hanashi's body is necessarily not physically present.

The problems with the kind of embodiment occurring in Halpern's live reading became especially clear during one incident for which I was present. At a house reading during Halpern's stay in London a friend, whom I will call X, was triggered by Halpern's references to sexual violence. Passages from *Common Place* reminded X of experiences of sexual violence from their own past, with a retraumatising effect. X left the room and went outside in order to regroup. The reading went on. It took a day or so for X to recover. After the fact X, who had not been previously familiar with Halpern's work, felt that Halpern should have warned the audience beforehand of what he would be talking about. The triggering effect was, X felt, compounded by the positioning of the poems' 'I' as the perpetrator of the sexually violent acts in the triggering passage[49].

I can only recount this incident anecdotally, but it is worth recounting because of what it says about Halpern's treatment of desire, violence and community in the context of performance.

---

[49] I am also aware of other comparable instances at Halpern's readings, but cannot describe them without the permission of the individuals concerned.

The incident raises once again the question: to what 'we' does *Common Place* address itself? By presenting the speaker as violently exploiting al-Hanashi's body, *Common Place* examines the ways in which al-Hanashi is excluded from the community – the 'we' – to which this speaker apparently belongs. New Narrative texts read as if their readers are part of their speakers' shared community of politicised and embodied desire, creating the possibility that the readers would become part of this community through reading. Halpern's work takes on this project and alters it: now the community shared by speaker and reader is constituted by its exclusion of the speakers' object of desire, and both reader and speaker must suffer through this knowledge. Yet the overwhelming insistence on this exclusion functions, rhetorically, to foreclose *any* possibility that a community could be formed on the basis of including such excluded bodies. In the triggering incident I described, the problem with this foreclosure also manifests from the point of view of *Common Place*'s audience. If X felt, overwhelmingly, that they could not be in the room to hear the speaker of *Common Place*, then X was in that situation excluded from *Common Place*'s community of listeners, viewers and readers, its 'we'. Perhaps this exclusion is a necessary consequence of the suffering that *Common Place* seems to demand of its speaker and audience. But if this is so, then the problem of the community's excluded body is compounded. If *Common Place*'s positioning as a move towards impossible community can only occur at the cost of the exclusion of some of its potential community of readers, then the sense persists that a potential for real community has been denied through the insistence on *(im)possible* community.

Some caveats are required here. X's exclusion cannot be equated with al-Hanashi's. The situation of walking out of a poetry reading is clearly not the same as the situation of extralegal imprisonment and death. Moreover, the community that could be constituted through a poetry reading is not necessarily a politically adequate community any more than the fantasised communion with al-Hanashi would be. This is particularly true of an invitation-only house reading such as the one where the incident I describe took place. Nonetheless, the exclusion remains a problem. Despite the major differences, the sexual trauma experienced by X is still part of the wider system of violent sexual oppression and exploitation in which Halpern's *Placeholder* cycle acknowledges its imbrication. One problem, then, is that the poetry insists upon its own relationship to this systemic violence in a way that rhetorically reproduces it and in doing so excludes some of those who have already been its victims. *Common Place* knows that it is reproducing this violence in order to critique it and it knows that such a critique is inadequate. But at whose expense is this inadequacy manifested?

As I have acknowledged, this inadequacy may simply be within the task the poem sets itself of attempting the impossible relation by materialising the obstruction to it. The possibility

remains, however, that the *way* the obstruction is materialised functions to assert and reinforce the impossibility of the relation rather than exposing this impossibility in the attempt to overcome it. As I have noted with regard to Puar, there is a way in which the poetic speaker's acknowledgement of this problem functions not just to expose the problem but to emphasise that he, as the one who is free, the one who is alive, the one who has a platform, is the one *able to make such an acknowledgement.*

To speak of Halpern's performances in this way is reminiscent of another contentious poetry reading: Kenneth Goldsmith's notorious 'The Body of Michael Brown.' There are clear parallels between 'The Body of Michael Brown' and *Common Place,* and yet radical differences in approach between the two writers, who emerge from quite different poetic lineages. I want to use precisely this tension between Halpern and Goldsmith to extend my analysis of Halpern's work. Goldsmith's work incurred a backlash in a way that Halpern's work so far has not, and there are various reasons for this difference in reception. I use the example of Goldsmith to illustrate further how the relationship figured by Halpern between the poetic speaker and the excluded body can be queried in terms of what bodies it actually privileges.

'The Body of Michael Brown,' then, was a piece presented at the Interrupt 3 event at Brown University on 13 March 2015. It consisted of Goldsmith reading a reordered version of the autopsy report of Michael Brown, the unarmed 18-year-old black man who was shot to death by the white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri on 9 August 2014, resulting in protests and riots in Ferguson which were met with police repression. To write about Goldsmith's piece now is odd because neither the piece or any record of the performance of it are now available to view, precisely because of this controversy: Goldsmith apparently requested that the video of his reading not be uploaded to the Brown University website because 'There's been too much pain for a lot of people around this and I do not wish to cause any more' (Steinhauer 2015). My purpose here, then, will be to write less about Goldsmith's conceptual practice than about the reports and responses to Goldsmith's reading given by others. Where the analysis of a poem would usually require me to read or hear the poem, in this instance I can only analyse the reporting and reception of the poem. Further, it is notable that a piece based around the reading of an autopsy report is now only available to us through the reports provided to us by those who attended this reading. The response to Goldsmith's broadcasting of the autopsy report has been a kind of rebroadcasting of Goldsmith's own work: it comes to us via people's reports and commentaries, particularly on social media.

Goldsmith, then, was accused of appropriating Brown's body and turning it into poetry, shoring up his own white privilege in doing so. Jacqueline Valencia, interviewed by Jillian Steinhauer for the arts website *Hyperallergic.com,* said:

> I have to think about the poet as a vessel of messages. In this case, Goldsmith is the vessel of the data of the autopsy report… He is not black. He is not from Ferguson… are we to think that Brown's death, because of that freely available autopsy report, are we to believe that Brown's body is now freely available to the public? This is a black body that Goldsmith is rendering in his reading. (Steinhauer 2015)

The sense, then, is that Goldsmith is exploiting Michael Brown's body and, crucially, that the physical presence of Goldsmith's body onstage functions to confirm this relationship of exploitation. The fact that Brown's graduation photograph was projected behind Goldsmith as he read can be seen as expressing the simultaneous presence and absence of Brown's body[50]. The body is present in the poem and in a sense on stage but only as an image and only in the terms decided by the poet. The power and privilege that enables the white poet to do this is, we might argue, confirmed precisely by the physical absence of Brown's body from the room in which the reading takes place. Further, this room is in an Ivy League university and is imbricated in all the attendant structures of privilege.

Brown's body is removed from the sphere in which Goldsmith's reading can take place in a number of ways: Brown's physical death, broadcast by the autopsy report; the removal of agency, the lack of consent or decision from Brown or anyone associated with him for this material to be used; and the lack of legal recognition of Brown's murder given Darren Wilson's legal exoneration for the killing. This physical absence then serves in turn to emphasise the physical presence of Goldsmith, who gets to be on stage in a way that Brown's body could not possibly be. We might also say that it was the presence within the room of people, such as Holland, who wished to gesture towards this absence of Brown's body and agency, the absence with which Goldsmith himself does not engage, that makes possible the disruption of the sphere defined by this absence. Faith Holland reported that Goldsmith's 'reading was unemotional and relatively even and his feet moved rhythmically the entire time' (Steinhauer 2015). There are two major points to note here. Firstly, Holland responds to Goldsmith's reporting of the anatomising of Brown's body by talking about Goldsmith's anatomy: how his feet move.

---

[50] This absence reproduces the separation from Brown's body that his own relatives underwent. As Claudia Rankine notes, 'Brown's mother… was kept away from her son's body because it was evidence' (2015). This reassignment of Brown's body as evidence rather than the remains of a person is perhaps repeated in Goldsmith's use of the autopsy report.

It is obvious that we could ask many of the same questions about Halpern's piece that were asked about Goldsmith's. We can paraphrase Valencia's question about the former: are we to believe that al-Hanashi's body is now freely available to the public? How might this idea of being 'freely available to the public' interact with and problematise Halpern's ideas around community and the common place? Of course, for Halpern the audacity is the point, and he acknowledges the audacity of his own use of the autopsy report in a way that many felt Goldsmith did not. *Common Place* obsessively announces that what it is doing is wrong, thus attempting to pre-empt any outrage on the part of the reader. Goldsmith, as far as we know from reports, did not make any such announcement. We hear from Holland that Goldsmith's reading was 'unemotional' and that he 'made very few introductory remarks'; this suggests a lack of context given to the poem. We might see a lack of reflexivity in the lack of attention drawn to the process of the poem's production. This is especially stark in comparison to *Common Place*'s obsessive exposure of its own process, and is precisely Halpern's point in criticising Goldsmith's 'total failure to demystify the autopsy report itself or to foreground its politics or draw attention to all the antagonisms around its production' (Halpern and Spinosa 2015).

Despite *Common Place*'s intense self-awareness there remains a need to bring the same concern to bear on Halpern's work that we bring to Goldsmith's. We are still faced with the white male American poet's body occupying the stage, the space of reading, and in the case of *Common Place* the space of writing and publishing, while he speaks of the dead and penalised body of a person of colour somewhere else. Notably, the two poets use similar phrases when describing the genitalia of the autopsied body. Phrases along the lines of 'unremarkable genitalia' or 'the genitalia are unremarkable' appear to be standard language in autopsy reports, and both poets seem to have encountered this phrase and focused on it. Again, since the two were unaware of each other's work, the overlap of language was a coincidence, but a telling one. What does it tell us that two poets with radically different priorities and praxes both focused on this type of phrase? Let us compare the respective appearances of the motif. Holland describes how Goldsmith read "The remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable" as the last line of the autopsy report and how she later discovered that Goldsmith 'had rearranged the material' to make this the last line (Steinhauer 2015).

Meanwhile, in a passage that bears close reading, Halpern describes how the detainee's body has been deprived 'of any singularity in excess of the process that has tagged its parts,' with an example of this tagging being 'the reported appearance of his "unremarkable genitalia," extraordinarily rendered' (2015: 39). The detainee has been filed away within interconnected

military, carceral and medical systems, robbed not only of 'singularity' but of the heterogeneous 'excess' that in Bataille's thought could go beyond and disrupt such systems. This juxtaposition of 'excess' and 'process' reinforces Halpern's claim that within US imperialism such disruption has been made impossible. The phrase "unremarkable genitalia," a bizarre phrase when taken out of the context of the autopsy report, is a sign of this impossibility. But Halpern then goes further, describing how the phrase reminds him of 'my first fuck, a boy named Andy… whose genitals were anything but unremarkable' (2015: 39-40). The link is drawn between the speaker's own sex life and the reach towards the detainee; but that phrase 'anything but unremarkable' also feels like a joke, a wink to the reader. As with so much of *Common Place* the joke does many things at once. Its humour underlines the absurdity of the phrase 'unremarkable genitalia' and thus the inadequacy of the autopsy report's language. This absurdity is also connected to the absurdity of comparing the speaker's own sexual memories with the description of genitalia in an autopsy report. Further, this comparison feels to me trivialising towards the corpse, as if the speaker is pointing at al-Hanashi's genitals and laughing. As ever, the utter inappropriateness of this laughter is part of the point: the poem knows it is wrong and is trying to show us the full extent of this wrongness.

Both poets, then, inappropriately appropriate the language of the autopsy report and rearrange it to their own ends. Both poets emphasise the genitalia of the body in a way that can be read as an insult towards the deceased. The difference is partly a matter of self-awareness. At the same time, Holland also paraphrases Goldsmith as saying at the reading that the poem was 'something to do with quantified self' (Steinhauer 2015). We might align the phrase 'quantified self' with 'the process that has tagged [al-Hanashi's] parts' in *Common Place*. In both cases there is a sense of a human being having been made into a thing to be measured and catalogued. The poem as reportedly performed, then, does make some kind of paratextual claim to comment on, perhaps even criticise the autopsy report rather than merely repeating it. However, this claim is oddly contradicted by the statement Goldsmith later posted on Facebook. Here, in an apparent attempt to 'justify' the poem, he emphasises its status as found text and thus implicitly downplays his own culpability. 'I took,' he says, 'a publicly available document from an American tragedy… and simply read it.' While he acknowledges that he 'altered the text,' he claims to have done so only 'for poetic effect,' to make 'the text less didactic and more literary'. Finally he falls back on the integrity of his poetic practice, emphasising that he

> didn't add or alter a single word or sentiment that did not preexist in the
> original text, for to do so would be go against my nearly three decades'
> practice of conceptual writing, one that states that a writer need not write any

new texts but rather reframe those that already exist in the world to greater

effect than any subjective interpretation could lend. (Steinhauer 2015)

What is striking here is how Goldsmith slips into editorialising just as he claims to be merely reporting. He asserts that Brown's death was a 'tragedy' (a term that might be objected to on the grounds that it arguably depoliticises the event). He argues that his changes to the text make it 'less didactic and more literary' yet without outlining what 'literary' means within his conceptual poetics or in what way the bare language of an autopsy report is 'didactic'. These conceptual ambiguities would not be so troubling except that they add to the sense that Goldsmith is bringing a specific agenda to bear upon the autopsy report while insisting that he is not doing so.

Goldsmith, then, is susceptible to the criticism that he is hiding something in a way that marks a clear difference from Halpern. Given *Common Place*'s relentless exposure of its own complicity it would seem to be hiding nothing. Moreover, where Goldsmith does not verbally acknowledge the role played by his bodily presence onstage, Halpern's work obsessively exposes the bodily presence of the speaker of the poem. As I have said, Halpern's experience as a queer man and what that means for his body is also crucial to the distinctiveness of his practice. Halpern's work with New Narrative and his more recent poetry in *Touching Voids in Sense* make explicit the specific types of violence to which the queer male (or male-assigned) body is subject. Halpern's project considered in relation to Goldsmith, then, is to interrogate the relationship between the body of the poet and the excluded body that Goldsmith elides. However, as I have noted, the implications of *Common Place* are far from being this simple. Halpern's interrogation of this relation between bodies is constructed in such a way that it requires the materialisation of the blockage to this relation. This blockage makes itself known through a rhetorical violence that occludes the possibility of other forms of relation taking place.

Ironically, this approach may mean that Halpern falls into precisely the same trap of abstraction that he says Nancy falls into. Halpern tries to combat abstraction by insisting on the materiality of al-Hanashi's body. Yet Halpern is still *making* something of this materiality, in a way that arguably engages in its own kind of abstraction. We are not given many details about al-Hanashi beyond the bare details of the autopsy. We do receive some information about al-Hanashi's life in the short section entitled 'Flashback' in which we are told, for example, that

> several trucks transported him to the gathering centre in the Khwaja Ghar
> area near a river close to the border of Tajiskistan… While there, he heard
> on the radio about the 11 September 2001 attacks, which he noted were

wrong because Islam does not permit the killing of innocent people. (2015: 73)

What is striking about this section, though, is that, aside from this one mention of al-Hanashi's opinion on something, the information we are given is predominantly limited to the circumstances leading to his capture and thus to his death. He is mostly defined through how he was apprehended by the US authorities rather than through other aspects of his subjective existence. The obvious reason for this, of course, is that little other information about al-Hanashi is publicly available, at least based on my own online researches. However, regardless of the reasons for it, the particular framing of the kind of information presented about al-Hanashi has a particular effect. This effect is a kind of reduction to the physical – not Acker's disruptive physical but rather the physical reduced to technical forensic cataloguing.

As Halpern says, this strategy has the effect of removing certain possibilities for an easy sentimental empathy. However, what it does not succeed in doing, I would argue, is effecting a move away from abstraction. We are abstracted from the specifics of al-Hanashi's life and experience. We are abstracted from whatever real network of social relations and political ideas al-Hanashi may have been imbricated in. This imbrication, after all, presumably produced the reason, however spurious, for his detention. I do not, of course, mean that we should try to justify or rationalise this detention. On the contrary, I would argue that if we are to engage antagonistically with the carceral logic of Guantanamo Bay there is surely an argument for attempting to excavate the lived experience and political subjectivity of its detainees that is otherwise occluded by the propagandistic official documents through which we know of their existence. To do this, as of course many journalists and activists have done, is arguably to refuse abstraction and to bring concreteness.

It may well be that *Common Place* could not have done other than it does with al-Hanashi given the relative lack of publicly available information on him; but this does not explain away the problem presented by the lack of detail (a problem that, as ever, the text is aware of). The project of excavating further detail would perhaps be the role of a journalist, not a poet, theorist and academic like Halpern. However, we might argue that this separation of roles (division of labour, even) is itself part of the problem. *Common Place* chooses for its object a detainee about whom little seems to be known beyond the inherently commodifying language of official reports, and does not make the attempt to go beyond these initial reports in its gathering of information. This is part of the text's project, of course, insofar as this project involves showing how any desire for community is subject to precisely these limits set by commodification. However, we could also say that by accepting this project the book also accepts the limits of

what poetry can do in terms of excavating this kind of officially redacted information. This is not to say that *Common Place* 'should' have chosen a more journalistic project, for example, but simply to say that this is another way in which its project inherently involves a narrowing of focus onto a restricted set of (im)possibilities for relation to and representation of al-Hanashi.

This insistence on impossibility is complicated further by Halpern's own praxis outside *Common Place*. As *Common Place* briefly mentions, Halpern teaches writing workshops in women's prisons (165). In one sense, then, he is involved in precisely the kind of direct practical relation with prisoners that *Common Place* refuses. There are caveats to this, of course: the incarceration of US citizens on the mainland, though still an aspect of state oppression, is different to the situation of detainees in Guantanamo Bay who have even less access to the outside world and to the law. Nonetheless, it is fascinating that engagement with the carceral spans two such different aspects of Halpern's work. This means, among other things, that *Common Place* cannot be seen as really blocking the relation in any material sense; indeed, there is no way that it could meaningfully do this. Rather, what it is doing, according to my argument, is *performing* the 'impossibilisation' of the relation in a way that still generates all of the problems I have described.

It is worth returning here to *Funeral Rites* by way of comparison, and in particular Bersani's interpretation of it. What Bersani and Halpern may have in common here is a sense that failure and wrongness could just be pushed beyond itself into something more politically radical and even emancipatory. Like Bataille, then, Bersani reads *Funeral Rites* as evil, cold and insisting on isolation. To this extent he agrees with Bataille in terms of seeing *Funeral Rites* as being characterised by failure. However Bersani takes things in a different direction. For him the point of Genet's 'absolute evil' is that it gets beyond sociality altogether, thus presenting the possibility of something entirely new (1995: 172). For Bataille, Genet's solitude merely means a form of transgression that does not move towards communication. For Bersani, in contrast, Genet's isolation can mean a retreat from the field in which transgression takes place, thus getting away from the dead-end of the circular relationship between law and transgression (1995: 163).

Bersani and Halpern thus posit two different kinds of non-relational relationality. For Bersani it is a retreat from conventional social relations and then turning back outwards with something different, the relation of 'homoness'. For Halpern it is a dive into conventional social relations *at their most horrific and exploitative* in order to come out the other side. Both Jean and al-Hanashi are inappropriate and public objects of desire. But Genet (if we read him through Bataille and Bersani) does something different with this object of desire than Halpern. Genet

dives into his dead lover's anus in order that the 'wrongness' of this act will drive him away from society (Bersani 1995: 158). Halpern's similar dive moves him further into society in all its wrongness. Perhaps this is in part because of the different social dynamics that have produced these respective objects of desire. By the time of *Funeral Rites* Germany has been defeated and positioned as 'the enemy' of the France of which Genet is a citizen (of course France effaces its own history of collaboration in the process) (Bersani 1995: 156). Genet's desire for 'the enemy' moves him away from French society; Halpern, in contrast, is a citizen of the country that imprisoned al-Hanashi and is responsible for his death, whether directly or indirectly depending how you interpret the circumstances of this death. Halpern's relation with the corpse, then, brings him closer to the heart of the society in which he is situated – albeit of course a side of this society that it doesn't want to acknowledge.

Halpern's 'failure to fail' might then leave the speaker of *Common Place* asserting the position of power over al-Hanashi that it is also trying to criticise. The same, of course, can be said for the 'I' of *Funeral Rites* as it moves toward glorifying Nazism and even assuming the position of Hitler himself. Both are deliberately politically self-contradictory. If there is a difference between the two texts, it may lie in the multiplicity of characters in *Funeral Rites*. In *Common Place* the speaker is presented as a fairly consistent 'I,' not in the sense of a conventional literary character but in the sense that the speaker's social position, sexuality and concerns always appear to be roughly the same. As I have said, within the text the speaker announces himself explicitly as someone trying to write about al-Hanashi. The reveries and scenarios of the text, even as they move beyond the conventional limits of subjectivity, nonetheless continue to assert that the speaker is this subject. This is very different from *Funeral Rites*, where we begin with Genet as a character in his own semi-autobiographical book narrating his mourning for his dead lover, and then jump between a number of characters who both exist discretely within the narrative and blur into each other in their sharing of the 'I': the collaborator Riton, and ultimately Hitler (Bersani 1995: 171).

Thus the sexual and power relations between the 'I' and the object of desire, the dead Jean, are moved around as the 'I' switches between characters. Initially the 'I' is Genet, desiring Jean; then he is Riton, killing Jean and desiring Erik; then he is a queered parody of Hitler, sexually desiring Jean's brother and politically desiring the genocidal mastery of Europe (and of course these sexual and political desires are inextricable from each other) (Bersani 1995: 171). Jean's body is decentred by the end of the book, and so the text does not have *Common Place*'s quality of a continual drilling-down into a single object of desire. The book does not ultimately hold up Jean's body as a way into anything that would undo the social order that has left Jean dead; whereas *Common Place* announces itself as attempting precisely this manoeuvre with the body

of al-Hanashi. While everything about the speaker's reasons for desiring al-Hanashi and writing about him is questioned, the text never wavers from al-Hanashi's body as the object of desire and thus the site of the undoing of the social order. It is this quality of continued *insistence* that arguable makes it different from *Funeral Rites*, and corresponds to the hope that it maintains for a radical possibility generated by this insistence, a possibility that *Funeral Rites* refuses in its continual dive into a wrongness that cannot be redeemed.

The aspect of *Funeral Rites* that provides us with a vantage point from which to critique Halpern, then, is precisely that aspect to which Bataille most objects. Bataille thinks that Genet's irredeemable wrongness is what holds him back from the attempt at communal relation. Yet, at the same time, Halpern draws on Genet for a communal project that is supposed to respond to the shortcomings of Bataille's 'negative community.' What happens, then, when we resituate *Common Place* within the Bataillean lineage that Halpern aims to critique? I have said that *Common Place* might paradoxically hypostatise the blockage to relation that it envisions precisely through its redemptive attempt to overcome it: its failure to fail. Among other things, this may be precisely what Bersani warns against when he argues that '*the value of sexuality itself is to demean the seriousness of efforts to redeem it*' (1989: 222, his emphasis). Moreover, Bersani's interpretation of sexuality is explicitly Bataillean in its opposition to redemption and its attack on conventional subjectivity.

In one sense, then, my critique of *Common Place* is entirely in line with Bataille's approach. Bataille has already told us that the communal relation of sexuality is bound to shatter the subject and thus to destroy community: thus Halpern's attempt is doomed to fail because he precisely cannot escape 'negative community' in the way he wants to. Halpern has failed to learn Bataille's lesson and so is doomed to repeat it. His attempt to negatively redeem his relation with al-Hanashi collapses into sexual aggression for the same reason Bataille's attempts do: redemption is impossible because the sexual relation is lacerating towards subjects. Where Bataille is 'even less Hegelian than he thinks,' Halpern is even more Bataillean than he thinks. The more *Common Place* tries to escape Bataille the more it becomes like him. Both Bataille and Halpern, in their own ways, embrace failure. But by the same token they still want to *get to* something via failure. Genet's text, in comparison, just fails, and in doing so dives into something utterly irredeemable and unacceptable in a way that now seems quite different to what Halpern attempts.

The abstracted object of desire: Halpern and Robert Glück

We might able to gain a better understanding of what Halpern is doing here by comparing *Common Place* to another New Narrative text, Robert Glück's *Margery Kempe*. The inappropriate object desire in *Margery Kempe* is Jesus Christ. *Margery Kempe*'s narrator reaches for this object of desire through a number of further layers. Glück's novel unfolds through an engagement with the medieval visionary writer of the title. Margery's fantasised sexual relation with Jesus (something that the original text already strongly implies but that Glück makes explicit) is sometimes explored through images of violence and necrophiliac eroticising of the corpse (1994: 61). The relationship between Margery and Jesus then overlaps between the love held by Bob (the autobiographical narrator) for his somewhat unattainable boyfriend named as L (118). One thing that makes *Margery Kempe* different from *Common Place*, then, is that in the former there is a kind of quadrangular relationship: Bob's desire for L is mapped onto Margery's desire for Jesus. Bob's desire for erotic community reaches out in multiple overlapping directions: towards L in sexual desire, towards Margery in the desire to explore of his story through hers, towards Jesus as seen by Margery, towards L imagined as Jesus, and so on. This shifting multiplicity of desire perhaps places Glück's novel somewhere between *Common Place* and *Funeral Rites* in structure. Where in *Funeral Rites* the object of desire is decentred through a series of jumps between characters who desire each other, in *Margery Kempe* the character perspectives shift but the focus of desire continues to focus on a space occupied alternately by L and Jesus.

What is striking is the parallel between al-Hanashi and Jesus and objects of desire: each is in his own way marked as inaccessible and inappropriate. Jesus is inaccessible because he is God, his physical body was only present on the earth long before either Margery or Bob, and even when he was on earth it would be forbidden to touch him sexually. This inappropriateness and inaccessibility is expressed in highly Bataillean terms whereby visceral description of Jesus's dead body becomes inextricable from both Jesus's erotic power and his divinity. Here we have Bataille's equation of the erotic, the repellent and the sacred as three overlapping categories. Of course Bataille and Glück are drawing on one of the core tropes of the representation of Jesus in the Catholic tradition: the more repellent and disturbing the appearance of the crucified and tortured Jesus, the greater the indication of his divinity, for it is this divinity that draws him to suffer so greatly on behalf of humankind. As in Bataille's reading of religious sacrifice (which Glück would be aware of), the more abject Jesus is, the more he is God. It has become familiar to the point of cliché that this representation of Jesus contains an erotic dimension that the

Church has both reproduced and tried to deny. This is of course the complex of ideas that both Bataille and Glück are responding to, albeit from radically different points of view[51].

What, then, does reading *Margery Kempe* tell us about *Common Place*? Al-Hanashi is inaccessible and inappropriate as an object of desire. Crucially, al-Hanashi is also Jesus-like in that he has been sacrificed to ensure the social order within which the poem's speaker exists. If we read *Common Place* through *Margery Kempe*, then, we can see the positioning of al-Hanashi as a Jesus-like figure as another form of abstraction away from al-Hanashi's real existence. We might even say that *Common Place* risks falling into a religious logic of redemption. Jesus is the figure by which community can only ensure itself through sacrifice. The echoes of Jesus in *Common Place* thus strengthen the sense that al-Hanashi is something like a redemptive sacrifice.

It is also worth noting at this point the different direction that Halpern's more recent work has taken. In *Touching Voids in Sense* (2017, unpaginated) Halpern turns further towards the autobiographical, speaking about James, a past lover who according to the text died in 1994 after years of suffering from sarcoidosis. Describing his memory of a hole in James's side into which a catheter runs, Halpern describes how

> My intimate relation to this hole is antecedent to my fantasies of other holes
> – a soldier's wound, for example, around which I organized a whole book of
> poems, never once thinking about James's back, and several years later, the
> catheter reappeared disguised as the feeding tube of a hunger striking
> detainee at Guantanamo Bay, and then the ligature with which he allegedly
> hanged himself. These lines of flight – metaphors, or transfers – have been
> persistent, operative, and submerged to the point of my own misrecognition.

This passage is shocking in its apparent diminishing of the entire *Placeholder* project. It claims that the suffering objects of desire in *Music for Porn* and *Common Place* were merely disguises, metaphors, displacements, projections of something that Halpern encountered in his own life, namely James's sickness and death. James forms, Halpern says later in *Touching Voids*, 'the untouchable center of absence itself, around which other bodies assume their shape and power: a soldier, a detainee, a day-laborer, an inmate.' In a few short passages Halpern appears, at first glance, to have 'solved' the problem of the earlier series: the placeholder, the absent site of community, is James.

---

[51] Amy Hollywood has also pointed out Bataille's reliance on female Christian mystics such as Angela of Foligno for his thinking of inner experience (2002: 72). Bataille looks to Foligno just as Glück looks to Kempe.

Of course, it is not really this simple. Even if Halpern's version of al-Hanashi is ultimately an avatar of James, this does not explain away the ramifications of *Common Place*'s political project that I have outlined. The introduction of James into the frame *does*, however, present another way in which al-Hanashi is abstracted. Read through *Touching Voids*, he is being used as an allegory for something and someone else rather than being considered in his own specificity as a social and political subject.

Communication or communion: Halpern and Jean-Luc Nancy

Does Halpern, then, succeed in breaking any new ground in terms of the non-relational relation? The difference between Halpern's position and the position he criticises is that Halpern's relation is grounded in the body, or a version of it, whereas the negative community (evoked in different versions by Bataille, Nancy and Blanchot), is (Halpern argues) based in something more abstract. Yet the problem remains: Halpern is still trying to reach a kind of community by moving away from what is normally thought of as the social. And rather than reaching a radical new form of sociality, this reaching may in fact unwittingly fall into forms of abstraction that perform a conservative function.

As I noted earlier, Nancy may in fact have more of an answer to this quandary than Halpern acknowledges. Halpern is responding to Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (first published in 1986), which is in turn partly a response to Blanchot's own reading of his friend Bataille in *The Unavowable Community* (first published in 1983). Tracing back this chain of responses we can see an elaboration on Bataille emerging in *The Inoperative Community* that Halpern does not fully address. For one thing, Nancy does have at least some sense of history with regard to subjectivity and community. Nancy implicitly acknowledges, for instance, that the model of the subject as we have it is a product of capitalism's suppression of the communist ideal when he says that the individual should not be seen as 'the norm by which to measure all our collective and communitarian undertakings' but rather is 'merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community' (1991: 3). Quoting Jean-Paul Sartre's famous phrase, Nancy states that in 'political, ideological, and strategic' senses communism remains "the unsurpassable horizon of our time" (1991: 1). Despite Halpern's qualms, then, Nancy's account of community does in its own way demand the placing of Bataille's thought within the social history of the twentieth century.

Nancy, like Halpern, acknowledges that Bataille's answer to the perceived failure of community comes partly in the form of a communicative erotic ecstasy. As Halpern would acknowledge,

his claim that 'For Bataille there can be no communal relation' is informed by Nancy's claim that 'Bataille… remained suspended… between the two poles of ecstasy and community' (1991: 20). Halpern's claim, read through Nancy, would be that Bataille's attempt at community collapses because he wants to achieve community through ecstasy and yet the two cannot co-exist. In Halpern's words, quoted previously,

> [Bataille's] theorisation of communion denotes a rupture of the subject's boundaries, a breakdown of the human being's integrity that can only compromise, if not destroy, the communitarian subject. But if community can only exist at the point where it comes undone, then any communism is hopeless.

Thus far, Halpern and Nancy are in similar territory. Nancy, however, frames the problem slightly differently: for him, community is linked to but *resists* ecstasy,

> and this resistance is the fact of being-in-common as such: without this resistance, we would never be in common very long, we would very quickly be "realized" in a unique and total being. For Bataille this pole of ecstasy remained linked to the fascist orgy[.] (Nancy 1991: 20)

In Halpern's view, Nancy and Bataille are tackling the same perceived quandary, namely that community can only be achieved by its dissolution and is therefore impossible. Halpern's counter-claim is, I think, that if this dissolution is historicised and seen in terms of the commodity relation then the 'impossibility' comes to appear less fixed and other possibilities are presented. *Common Place* is then Halpern's attempt to dive into the impossibility defined by the meeting of ecstatic, communal and commodity relations and to explode it from within through erotic and visceral affects. However, what Halpern does not fully acknowledge is Nancy's sense of the *resistance* of community to ecstasy, within a framework wherein community is aligned with communism or at least the left, and ecstasy is aligned with fascism. This is of course another historical point, as is clear when we consider the poles of fascism and communism that Bataille was navigating in the 1930s. For Nancy the ecstatic 'community' is *not* a community but rather a fascistic communion of death. Halpern glosses this by saying that Nancy, with Bataille, regards the communal relation as *impossible* because it leads to this kind of communion. But this is not quite right. Nancy does not say that this communion inevitably makes community impossible but rather that community *tends to resist it*, and that there are dimensions of possibility for this resistance. Further, Nancy continues to find resources for resistance in Bataille:

> The practice of "joy before death" that Bataille tried to describe is a
> ravishing of the singular being that does not cross over into death… but
> rather attains… the extreme point of its singularity… Joy is possible, it has
> meaning and existence, only through community and as its communication.
> (1991: 34)

There are various theoretical implications to Nancy's notions of 'singularity' that I am not able
to explore here. What I want to focus on is that Nancy wants to retain community but to
counter the communion that dissolves the singularity of the individual subject. He wants a
community of singular subjects, not a communion that tends towards fascism, and *also* not the
collection of discrete individuals that constitutes the capitalist liberal-humanist social order that
both Nancy and Halpern reject[52]. Nancy's proposed solution to this conundrum is to claim
Bataille's notion of communication as specifically *different from* Bataille's notion of ecstatic
communion, and to posit communication as a basis for community. This communication is
resistant to capitalist individualism because it radically *exposes* subjects to each other (Nancy
1991: 30), but it also resists the communion of death because the exposure does not result in the
subject's total dissolution. As he later glosses it, '[n]othing is given… as the substantial unity
of a community but "community" names the fact of incessant sharing that… becomes the
condition of being-exposed,' in the Bataillean sense of exposure (2016: 9). Such a community
thus refuses the conventional relationality marked by capitalist individualism and the
commodity form, while also refusing the (in Nancy's view) fascistic relation of ecstasy. Both of
these relations are, in Halpern's terms, impossible. The capitalist relation is impossible insofar
as the commodity form occludes the real basis of social relations meaning that social relations
based on the commodity form *cannot be what they are*. The ecstatic fascist relation is
impossible becomes it collapses human subjects into each other, meaning that they cease to be
subjects who could relate. The relation proposed by Nancy, though, might just avoid falling
into either of these two traps.

Halpern, it seems, is trying to resist what we might call the 'impossibilisation' of community
that in his reading is enacted by Bataille and Nancy; and yet the form of his resistance results in
the insistence on a different form of impossibility. Whereas the French thinkers insist upon
community as a kind of impasse, Halpern counters them with a thinking of community that tries
to break this impasse by pressing on it with ever greater violence and eroticism until it explodes.
The wager made in Halpern's work is that this violence can make something happen that has

---

[52] As Alexander Irwin emphasises, Nancy's approach here is also ultimately a refutation of the sacrificial. (2002: 38)

not been permitted to happen within the impasse of Bataille and Nancy; but Halpern's writing produces an impasse of its own. The relation described in *Common Place* between the speaker and the detainee is, I have argued, one often characterised by violent domination. Nancy, then, suggests a notion of community based not on collapsing the impasse between subjects but rather on *radically sharing this very impasse*; Halpern, in contrast, suggests a community based on a kind of relation which, through its dominance, pushes out and forecloses other kinds of relations[53].

Other possibilities for relation: praxis in Century of Clouds

All of the above risks sliding into the very abstraction that Halpern rightly criticises. However, there are accounts of queer community that explicitly draw on Nancy's approach. For example, Jose Esteban Muñoz used Nancy's approach to frame his discussion of the community around the band the Germs as a 'punk rock commons' (2013: 96). Describing the 'Germs burn,' a circular cigarette burn that fans of the band were supposed to wear as a secret marker of belonging to that community, and that echoes the circle on the cover of the band's 1979 album *(GI)*, Muñoz argues that

> The mysterious blue circle that was the Germs' symbol is a sign of simultaneous singularity and plurality – it is descriptive of Jean-Luc Nancy's idea about the way in which interlocking singular senses of life and experience pluralize to form our notion of the world. (2013: 101)

Unlike Halpern, then, Muñoz sees ways in which Nancy's particular version of negative community can be *lived*. Moreover, this Nancyan approach is explicitly framed in opposition to the antirelational approach that has been associated with Bersani and Edelman and which I have argued is partly rooted in a particular interpretation of Bataille. Muñoz plays off another legacy of Bataille, that of Nancy, in a way that is worth quoting at length:

> Although the antirelational approach assisted in dismantling an anticritical understanding of queer community, it nonetheless quickly replaced the romance of community with the romance of singularity and negativity… if one attempts to render the ontological signature of queerness through Nancy's critical apparatus, it needs to be grasped as both antirelational and relational… antirelational approaches

---

[53] There is an echo here of Sartre's accusation that Bataille 'claim[s] to wish to communicate while writing with a contempt for his audience that blocks communication'; I quote Amy Hollywood's phrasing (2002: 31). Sartre was wrong about Bataille in many regards, and it would be wrong to accuse either Bataille or Halpern of 'contempt' for the reader, but the sense of blocked communication does persist.

to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference. (2019: 10-11)[54]

Moreover, for Muñoz 'Queer utopian practice is about "building" and "doing" in response to that status of nothing assigned to us by the heteronormative world.' (2019: 118). If the fantasmatic relation of *Common Place*, then, is in this sense a 'romance of the negative,' let us look at a more 'lived,' more 'doing'-oriented vision of queer community drawn from New Narrative.

Bruce Boone's *Century of Clouds* (first published in 1980) is a seminal work of New Narrative, and Boone is very much connected to Halpern through both influence and friendship. Halpern writes the introduction to the 2009 reprint of *Century of Clouds*, and *Music for Porn* mentions a conversation with 'Bruce,' likely Boone (3). Moreover *Century of Clouds* is concerned with some of the same themes as Halpern, as in the passage where the narrator suddenly moves outwards from musings on his own experience to the global picture:

> There's an explosion when I think these thoughts. Letelier is being blown
> up in his car by the agents of Chilean reaction. The sound of nearly silent
> bullets – and 9 black men are dead in Oakland from police assassination.
> Racism; poverty. Lives of women and gays oppressed in patriarchy. Daily
> violence done to workers. A workers' movement now bloody and sundered
> with wounds.
>   These thoughts large and public, how to relate them to my life?
> (Boone 2009: 4)

This question of how personal experience relates to global politics, how the two might inform and problematise each other, is central to much New Narrative writing and forms one of the key components of Halpern's *Placeholder* project. As Halpern asks in his introduction,

> how does one relate one's life to social phenomena that whose scale
> threatens to eclipse us? what is the relation between sexual politics and
> global disasters? who is privileged to speak of these things? with what
> language? (Boone 2009: xiv)

---

[54] Making a similar critique of Bersani and Edelman, Tyler Bradway expresses a wish to 'part with the emphasis on anti-social *corrosion* as the primary or most critical force of queerness,' arguing that 'In addition to corrosion, queerness also offers an *adhesive* modality.' (2017: xlv)

As we have seen, Halpern's later answer to these questions involves a kind of projection of the personal into the global that takes place on the level of fantasy. Precedents for this fantasmatic relation are found in Genet's narrator's fantasies of fucking both his dead lover and his dead lover's killer, and in Glück's fantasies of Margery Kempe fantasising fucking Jesus.

Nonetheless, there are striking differences between Halpern and Boone's approaches. For Boone there is also a bleed between his lived experience and wider political movements, but it takes a much more practical form. Where *Common Place* reaches out to the wider social order by dreaming about the corpse excluded from it, *Century of Clouds* describes the lived experience of the narrator's intervention on behalf of 'the gay movement' at a conference on Marxism. Describing the familiar problem of straight leftists believing that 'the gay movement [is] divisive for socialism' (68) Boone then describes the change that dialectically emerges from his intervention on the matter:

> I had done what I intended. And if the effect of my intervention was limited,
> it was real – it was measured in the expressions of solidarity that came from
> new friends and allies in the days that followed… I had learned a little bit
> about practical action – how to get something done politically – and the
> others had learned about gay oppression. There seemed to be a reciprocity
> in this… We were learning to speak each other's languages, in the most
> literal, ordinary of senses. (68-69)

Boone goes even further in terms of practicality in *Towards a Gay Theory for the '80s*, a pamphlet initially circulated in 1979 and revised in 1981. Here he describes 'the need for a new and appropriate organization' to combat capitalism and homophobic state violence. 'Such an organization,' he says,

> would need trained and skilled persons willing to work on a variety of
> educational tasks in a variety of areas. These areas would include:
> demonstrations, posters, tracts and other educational activity that linked up
> our movement with feminism, union organizing etc…. High priority in all
> this would be assigned to relations with the women's movement, the
> workers' movements and the third world. (1981: 5).

This potential for praxis places us in profoundly different territory from *Common Place.* While *Century of Clouds* is in no way straightforwardly 'feelgood' or affirmational, it nonetheless presents possibilities for things people can do in their lives and social situations in a way that is

quite alien to the project Halpern's poetry pursues, with its emphasis on the negative, the impossible and the fantastical. *Century of Clouds*, then, offers an alternative model of how a queer community might respond to the kind of problem Halpern outlines. *Common Place*, we might say, posits a kind of relation that assumes a particular audience and therefore a particular community for itself, and both enacts and critiques this relation through a performance of the alternate violence and care towards of al-Hanashi. *Century of Clouds* is concerned with those who are excluded from both bourgeois and some Marxist communities (gays, women, people of colour) but speaks from the point of view of the excluded and posits attempts to bridge this exclusion that are less focused on the impossible[55].

The strategy of *Common Place* does not constitute an attempt to discursively *rule out* the kind of community building that *Century of Clouds* describes. However, in his introduction to Boone's book Halpern does argue that ''*Century of Clouds*' vanishing point may also be our present, from where we can read it as a swansong for a history that never was, an elegy for the lost potential of its own historical moment' (2009: xii). It might be, then, that the absent community of *Common Place* is located at the 'vanishing point' of *Century of Clouds* – that *Common Place* takes on its project in response to the community described by Boone having become impossible. This conclusion seems to be suggested if we read the two books together. It is not clear that *Common Place* sets such a totalising remit for itself, though. It would be wrong to say that Halpern himself has withdrawn from the kind of social project described by Boone. Further, the social project described in *Century of Clouds* has its own inbuilt limitations on community and solidarity, restricted as it mostly is to circles of academic and literary friends. Nonetheless, it is striking that *Common Place* as a text, as a discourse, seemingly withdrawn itself even from this field in order to focus on the impossible over the practical, the fantasmatic over the lived.

We can argue, then, that while *Common Place* does not precisely constitute a denial of the possibility of other kinds of relation than the one it proposes, its obsessive focus on the impossible relation does constitute an act of representational and discursive violence against one form of community (the community of possible readers who could imagine a more practical kind of community with Guantanamo bay inmates, one that might preclude verbal evocations of violence against their bodies) in order to reach toward an impossible form of community. This may, indeed, be precisely the point: *Common Place* moves towards an antisocial sociality,

---

[55] Boone also discusses this sense of exclusion in regard to Frank O'Hara's poetry in 'Gay Language as Political Praxis'. Here he describes how in some academic contexts O'Hara's work was both treated as unserious owing to its gay 'content' *and* evacuated of this 'content' in order to be analysed as poetry (1979: 60). There is a parallel here with Barthes' (in Suleiman's view) evacuation of *Story of the Eye*'s sexual aspects. In both cases criticism has turned a blind eye to certain kinds of disruptive, erotic experience.

'evil,' in the specific sense applied to Genet, precisely because the type of sociality described by Boone has been exhausted, and in order to draw attention to the body that this sociality excludes. Yet, as I have said, this approach remains troubling for two reasons: even in drawing attention to this excluded body it also repeats the insistence upon its exclusion, and in this drawing attention it *does* try to found some kind of community and thus no longer stays within the realm of exhaustion and the impossible. By trying to make the impossible possible *Common Place*, despite itself, establishes the subjectivity of its own speaker as the privileged source of this miraculous transfiguration.

Solidarity without relation: Talha Ahsan

My task in this chapter has been largely to stay within the terms *Common Place* sets for itself and try to understand where it might fall short and what other directions there might be. So where can we go within the political order *Common Place* describes to find an alternative approach? What if we take on *Common Place*'s wager and try to look at it from a different side? My example here is a poem by Syed Talha Ahsan, who was himself detained without trial for six years in HM Prison Long Lartin on highly spurious terrorism charges before being extradited to the US in 2012 and held in solitary confinement (he has now been released). Ahsan's poem 'Life Sentence' provides an important counterpoint to Halpern's work if we are considering excluded and imprisoned bodies and who speaks for, about, in relation to and from these bodies:

> to kill
> is to erase an image
> off a mirror:
>
> swift glance &
> side-step,
>
> no body
>
> just a gaping hole
> upon an indifferent world (Ahsan 2011: unpaginated)[56]

---

[56] This poem is also quoted in Nisha Kapoor's *Deport Deprive Extradite* (2018: 1).

This poem is intriguing in this context because it seems to address the same theme as Halpern's work, namely the (im)possibility of social relations within a space of negativity and occultation, yet in a sense it speaks from the opposite pole of the relationship. Written while Ahsan was still imprisoned in the UK, the poem, like *Common Place*, defies any easy interpretation as a poem carrying a 'political message,' but is nonetheless profoundly political. The poem describes an act of killing that is at once the erasure of an other and a reflexive mirroring gesture towards the self. The pun of 'no body' describes both the removal of a physical body and the erasure of a person, the creation of a 'nobody'. Even if we refrain from reading Ahsan's poem biographically, the title 'Life Sentence' and the poem's inclusion in a collection subtitled *Poems from Prison* leads us to identify this act of murderous erasure with life imprisonment, suggesting an incarceration that becomes a living death[57]. The erasure leaves a 'hole,' suggesting both the gap left by the removal of the person – the space the person is *taken out* of – and the 'hole' the prisoner is *put into* when imprisoned. In a further paradox – and here is where we encounter a species of Halpernesque relationality within the erasure – the hole also seems, like a window, to open 'upon' an outside world that is nonetheless indifferent. The prisoner, then, is both erased from the outside world and opened to it. The outside world, in turn, is 'indifferent' to this view of the prisoner, wants to 'side-step' the issue, but at the same time sees the prisoner as the mirrored image of itself. The prisoner is the Other that the non-prisoner must simultaneously acknowledge and erase in order, perhaps, to continue to exist. In erasing the prisoner, though, the non-imprisoned subject loses something: loses its reflection, and leaves a hole in the world.

There are many dimensions to this short and yet incredibly rich poem, not all of which I can do justice to here. I want to focus on what happens when we read *Common Place* through the paradoxical system of relations that 'Life Sentence' sets up. If, as I have suggested, the prisoner-figure in 'Life Sentence' occupies the opposite relational pole to the speaker of *Common Place*, then 'Life Sentence' offers a kind of response to *Common Place* in its own terms. Like *Common Place*, 'Life Sentence' posits the prisoner as the nothing that guarantees the existence of everything else. The person outside prison has a non-relational relation with the prisoner because the prisoner's erasure secures the non-prisoner's social existence. The difference between 'Life Sentence' and *Common Place*, though, is that 'Life Sentence' does not posit an obvious subject-position: there is no 'I' in the poem. Whereas *Common Place* speaks from the point of view of a relatively privileged subject as he considers his own relation to the

---

[57] With both this and Halpern's work we are also of course in the realms described by biopolitics and necropolitics. While I am not focusing on these frameworks for my readings in this chapter, biopolitics does explicitly feed into Halpern's work, and the influence of Bataille via Foucault on Giorgio Agamben's biopolitics forms another connecting strand.

non-place where Muslims are imprisoned, 'Life Sentence' seems to speak *from* this non-place, this place that, in the relational terms I have described, does not have an 'I'.

At the same time, 'Life Sentence' appears within a collection, *This Be the Answer*, that contains poems that *do* feature an 'I': 'It is I who is abandoned in paradise,' for example, is a line in the poem 'Untitled.' The poem thus refuses a conventional subject while appearing within a collection that in its very structure insists on a relation of solidarity with the political subject constituted by the imprisoned person who wrote it. The introduction to the book by Richard Haley, head of SACC (Scotland Against Criminalising Communities, a group that organises against state persecution associated with the War on Terror) seems, in a subtly radical move, to insist on practical solidarity with Ahsan as a necessary part of the process of reading his poetry:

> Talha Ahsan's poems are the songs of a caged bird. Read them and enjoy
> them. But if that is all that you do, you will be a thief. The caged bird's
> song has this price: that you accept the obligation to do whatever you can to
> set the bird free.

We could thus argue that 'Life Sentence,' read within the context of *This Be the Answer*, offers a kind of bridge between the non-ecstatic, non-relational relation evoked by Nancy and the kind of practical action that Nancy's highly theoretical essay does not take into account. 'Life Sentence' is enigmatic and elusive in a way that refuses a convention relation of empathy towards an individual, as well as any kind of ecstatic collapse of reader into subject; yet *This be the Answer* as a whole insists on a relation of practical solidarity with the now de-individualised individual it has identified as its imprisoned author. It thus offers a kind of bridge between the still-conflicting realms of non-relationality and lived experiences of politicised community.

Ahsan's poetry, then, presents the possibility of a practical realisation of the non-relational relation in the form of a community of literary and political solidarity. 'Life Sentence' addresses the reader from the point of view of imprisonment while refusing to provide us a conventional subject to empathise with. By doing this it offers a mode of relationality and solidarity that is neither the liberal humanist empathy that *Common Place* disavows nor the putting-into-operation of the prisoner's body that *Common Place* engages in. In 'Life Sentence' the prisoner's body is not present, is 'no body,' and thus is not accessible to any of the operations that *Common Place* puts into play. The prisoner's body and subjectivity are, perhaps, inoperative in the sense of Nancy's *Inoperative Community*. At the same time, this inoperative status does not correspond to a making-impossible of solidarity or a relegation of all relationality outside the social and political spheres. The paratextual emphasis on the poems'

emerging from prison and the demand for solidarity with their author insists upon some form of communal relation, yet without this relation being based on a belief that we can relate to the prisoner through empathy, intersubjectivity or fantasy. This presents the possibility of a community based neither on commodification nor communion[58]. Such a possibility might also be hinted at in the writings of Laure, who wrote to Bataille that '[t]he best thing [between us] would be exchange, not identification,' and that '[t]he only coincidence that can happen between us from now on is an exchange of strength… or even simple joy' (137, 139).

The project of practical solidarity that I am trying to describe is, of course, precisely *not* what *Common Place* tries to address. However, the existence of this kind of practical solidarity does put into question the valence of the communal project that *Common Place* sets for itself. It is probably wrong to talk of this project in these terms pertaining to *value*, given Halpern's emphasis on 'Useless Commodities' and 'Disposable Bodies'; indeed, this essay appears in a collection entitled *Against Value*. Nonetheless, *Common Place* clearly is *reaching* for something pertaining to community; if it sets itself against conventional notions of value, it is equally strongly opposed to any kind of nihilistic total evacuation of meaning. *Common Place* is *trying to do something*, and so we are faced with the question of where this 'something' stands in relation to the projects of community in relation to Guantanamo that already exist. As Andrea Brady has pointed out, *Common Place* is still 'forcing the "disposable body" to work, to create the surplus value which is its theory of the commons' (quoted in Cooke 2017: 162). Further, if the 'impossible relation' is already being attempted in the more concrete ways I have described then we must ask what *Common Place* is *doing* towards this relation other than describing in intimate detail precisely how impossible it is from the point of view of a Western subject. As I have said, this performance of impossibility and failure has its own literary role to play, but if the work insists on being more than failure, on *doing something* towards the relation, then it arguably must be considered in terms of the concrete relations that already exist, relations to which *Common Place* does not necessarily have a response.

---

[58] There are interesting parallels here with the work of Talha Ahsan's brother Hamja Ahsan, whose *Shy Radicals* (2017: passim) calls for a movement of radical introverts that would resist conventional bourgeois forms of sociality while also insisting upon the solitude and quiet contemplation associated with introversion and thus refusing a communion based on merging.

Postscript to chapter three: exposure, the base, and conceptualism's 'hidden agenda'

There is another element of the Goldsmith controversy that speaks to the themes of this thesis in ways that should be addressed. The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo (MCAG) is an online collective that was highly active in attacking Goldsmith for his Michael Brown poem, as well as attacking fellow conceptual poet Vanessa Place for her project of tweeting sections of the racist novel *Gone with the Wind*. In an interview with Molly McArdle for *Brooklyn* magazine in 2015 MCAG gave its aims as being to 'KILL CONCEPTUALISM' and 'DISMANTLE WHITE SUPREMACY' amongst others (McArdle 2015)[59]. As part of a wide range of critiques of white supremacy in poetry, MCAG specifically argues that

> the irony of conceptual poetry is that it "says" that it will ostensibly evacuate the fetishism of the subject. Ummmmm NOPE. When Goldsmith blocks detractors and Place claims persecution, their lies become obvious. If the subject isn't the center of the piece, then does it matter how people respond?… Subjectivity and subjectification don't cease to exist because they say it's what they "want". (McArdle 2015)

This is a useful elaboration of the idea that Goldsmith's conceptual poetics is merely an evasion of responsibility. The claim is that he does have an agenda, one that centres him as a white subject, and that his claim of 'only' uncreatively repeating material acts as a smokescreen to cover this up.

The poet Eileen Myles, a fellow traveller of New Narrative, makes a related point regarding Place's *Statement of Facts*, which 'appropriates accounts of sexual violence from Place's work life as a lawyer' (Myles 2013: 4). Myles describes this work and the critic Marjorie Perloff's valorisation of it. The problem, Myles argues, is not that Place and Perloff present this emotive and traumatic material to an audience as poetry but that they also demand that we 'merely *evaluate* it' rather than having any more visceral affective response[60]. Perloff's account of Place, as Myles quotes it, is that Place "force[s] the reader to reevaluate the meaning of seemingly simple propositions" (Myles 2013: 4). Myles, however, argues that it is to say the least counter-intuitive to expect the poem's audience to respond in this way. Implicitly there is

---

[59] In giving this answer to the question regarding its aims MCAG also implicitly critiqued the question, saying 'A lot of people ask us what our "goals" are as if we had a little sticky note on our fridge with a list of things to do this lifetime.'

[60] There are many other important accounts of the controversy around *Statement of Facts*, notably that by Steven Zultanski (2012), but for the sake of brevity I limit myself here to Myles.

a rhetorical violence directed at the audience in expecting them to suspend their emotions in this manner. Here, again, is the blind spot I described in chapter one. As with Suleiman's account of Barthes and *Story of the Eye*, the text can only do what the critic insists it does if we ignore how the text connects to certain kinds of traumatic bodily experience. Myles draws out the violence of this blind spot when they describe Place and Perloff's approach as both 'traumatized… and privileged' (5). The use of 'traumatized' rather than 'traumatising' here is interesting. The poem might indeed be traumatising, or retraumatising: Myles describes feeling 'violated' by hearing the work read out loud in a way that may be connected to having themselves 'experienced sexual violence' (5). However, the work is also 'traumatized,' perhaps, in displaying a numbness to its own violence that could be read as a traumatised desensitisation.

This is only one reading of Myles' ambiguous use of the word. My point is that Myles draws attention to Place's work as being violent in a number of ways: in describing violence, in shoring up Place's 'privilege' by enacting a rhetorical appropriative violence on the person whose testimony is quoted (Place displays her 'access' to '[t]he worthless body of the victim'), and in demanding that the audience shut down certain affective responses. There are many implications here for conceptual poetics, but what I want to focus on is the sense that conceptual poets like Goldsmith are *hiding something*. In this regard MCAG's attack on Goldsmith follows the same logic as Dworkin's attack on Bataille. It insists upon unveiling a truth about the text that the text wants to hide: this truth is that despite its experimental literary trappings the text is in fact entirely complicit in an oppressive status quo.

It might be that MCAG can be accused of being reductive in the same way as Dworkin. Dworkin relies on unjustified assumptions that pornography is always misogynistic violence and that once a text is 'revealed' to be pornography it can then be *nothing but* misogynistic violence. It could be argued that MCAG does the same thing with conceptual poetry, ignoring its poetic implications in order to insist upon it as a shell for white supremacy. However, to claim that MCAG and Dworkin are equally reductive might be itself a reductive claim. The stakes of MCAG's struggle are quite different, involving deep intersectional critiques of imperialist, heteronormative and patriarchal thinking. Dworkin's *Pornography*, in contrast, mostly restricts itself to critiques of misogyny, displaying a feature of second-wave feminism that has often been seen as insufficiently intersectional. In specifically rhetorical terms, meanwhile, the difference between MCAG and Dworkin might be (much as with Goldsmith and Halpern) one of self-reflexivity. In the McArdle interview MCAG emphasises the need to de-essentialise its own identity as a collective, saying that 'the "we" of MCAG is not totalized' and that its (anonymous) members have 'never claimed a unanimous consensus model'. Further,

MCAG often deploys a markedly unserious, sometimes ironic tone that undercuts any sense that it presents itself as an authority offering absolute truths. The use of phrases like 'Ummmmm NOPE' in the passage quoted above is one example. Another is that as well as the ones I quoted MCAG lists 'aims' including 'BUY EGGS,' 'ORGANISE MONGREL BBQ' and 'MAKE THOSE BITCHES EAT IT'. Though they may well be entirely serious in their reflection of the desires of members of the collective, these phrases are 'unserious' in the sense that they do not conform to the intellectual conventions that broadcast a desire to be taken seriously. They are also very funny. There is a marked difference from Dworkin in this regard. Nonetheless, the move to expose the reactionary aspect of the artwork is a common thread.

As I have shown, the attempt to produce this kind of space comes into conflict with the kind of space that emerges, albeit in different ways, in performances of *Common Place* and 'The Body of Michael Brown.' What is notable in the negative responses to both of these performances is how, once again, there is a base character of exposure to the callouts and walkouts that have occurred. The move towards 'exposing' Goldsmith in particular as merely reinforcing white supremacy strongly echoes the different attempts by Dworkin, Laure and Acker to 'expose' Bataille. In all of these cases we see a rejection of the intellectual claims of the white male artist and an insistence upon seeing him only as a bearer of class and gender power. This gesture is likely to be reductive, but its very turn towards reductiveness can be read as a political act, just as Dworkin's base reductiveness is an integral, and paradoxically Bataillean, part of her mode of reading.

Conclusion

Iterations of the base

Where, then, do these texts leave us? In this conclusion I build on the view of the base set up in the preceding chapters and then try to critique and develop this view with the introduction of some specifically Marxist and anti-racist perspectives. I consider how these interventions into the idea of heterogeneity and the base speak to contemporary problems pertaining to radical political struggle and community-building.

First, then, I sum up the observations I have made in the previous chapters about the contradictory phenomenon of the base. What qualities does the base have? I speak here in very broad terms in order to give a general picture of what I am trying to describe. The base, then, is that which disrupts from below, from outside, from within. It has no respect for hierarchy, nobility, dignity, intellect or any notion of 'the establishment'. The base can be connected to notions of folk politics and folk wisdom but also troubles these ideas with its vulgarity. It refuses any idea of a noble, dignified working class. Perhaps its closest correspondence is to the carousing lumpenproletariat who are both scandalous and alluring to the bourgeoisie in Stallybrass and White's accounts. The base is philistine: the barbarian at the gates of thought.

Yet at the same time, the base is not an 'essence' possessed by the proletariat or by anyone else; it is not meant to posit the existence of 'ordinary people' who threaten an imagined intellectual elite. The base is not necessarily a politically progressive force. It may mock the niceties of language and intellect to the point of anti-intellectualism. The base is ever-shifting, corresponding to different forces in society at different times. It has a radical and a reactionary dimension: the votes for Trump and Brexit might be base insofar as they are shocking to many middle-class liberals. Again, I do not want to essentialise about class here, nor do I want to maintain the myth that 'working-class racism' was the motor behind these votes. Ultimately the bourgeoisie voted for Trump and Brexit more than the working class did, and even those liberals who opposed these moves have done much to perpetuate narratives of racism and xenophobia in less explicit ways. It is precisely the *shock* of how explicit, vulgar and so on a figure like Trump can be in his bigotry that might be seen as base. The Trump example is instructive here in that he is a figure who could present his politics as an attack on 'the establishment' despite being deeply embedded in the ruling class himself. The base mounts attacks on 'the establishment' but is also already within the establishment. The base manifests equally in contempt for right-wing politicians and contempt for left-wing academics.

The base also corresponds to a move of unveiling and exposure. The major instances of this move that I have discussed are Laure's exposure of Bataille's hypocrisy, Dworkin's exposure of Bataille's misogyny and Acker's exposure of the operations of patriarchy and capital in the production of art. The base manifests the motion of a tearing away of artifice to reveal reality, but it does so without there being an objective 'real' to finally refer to. The point, rather, is in the violence of the movement of unveiling. As I discussed in chapter one, this movement of exposure also corresponds to some extent to an assertion of 'content' over 'form.' For example, Dworkin asserts a misogynist content hiding within the highbrow language of *Story of the Eye*. In this schema content corresponds to reality and form to artifice. As I have indicated, such a schema is necessarily reductive and ultimately inadequate, relying as it does on an essentialised binary of form and content. Once again, though, the power of this notion of 'content' is not in any ultimate 'truth' that it holds but in the violent power with which it disrupts form. Kathy Acker has said in a critical essay that 'there's no escaping content' (2006: 4) but, as we have seen, for Acker and others this inescapability of content does not mean that content is ultimately knowable or fixable. Speaking aphoristically, we might say that *the base is not a truth but the performance of a move towards truth*.

Given this ambiguous status of the base, then, why has it been so important for my purposes here? As I have said, the base presents a challenge not only to traditional hierarchical models of authority but also to seemingly more radical modes of thought, including those found in the academy. Stallybrass and White have observed that '"rigorous theory" has tended to look down upon "mere content" as obvious, crude and vulgar, redeemably only through a process of abstraction and refinement' (1986: 192). Theory, though, cannot in fact avoid this 'content' and attempts to do so manifest only in repression. I further explore this sense of the base as that which even left intellectual tendencies have often repressed by looking at the relevance of the base to two thinkers not normally mentioned in association with Bataille: Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Rancière.

Bourdieu: the base and cultural capital

I showed in chapter one how the base functions for Bataille as a proletarian intervention that disrupts the languages and narratives of the intelligentsia and bourgeoisie who try to lead and speak for the working class. I also showed how this association runs into problems because of Bataille's reductive and masculinised portrayal of the proletariat, as well as the fact that he himself remains attached to some form of elite vanguard that speaks *for* the proletariat without necessarily being part of it. Bourdieu's work can shed more light on the role played by class

here. In order to show why this is the case I must first give an account of Bourdieu's overall approach.

In his key sociological work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), Bourdieu explores the extent to which our understandings of art and culture are shaped by class, particularly as it affects education. Far from being purely motivated by an appreciation of the aesthetic, he argues, the value we place on art and literature is always heavily informed by our position in the social hierarchy (2010: xxvii). The appreciation of the bourgeoisie for 'high art' is thus not merely appreciation but rather constitutes what Bourdieu calls cultural capital (2010: 5). Just as the bourgeois' position in society is constituted and reproduced by her or his control of goods and capital, so her or his appreciation of art functions in the same way. The bourgeois maintain their status as bourgeois by knowing what kinds of art, music and literature are the 'right' ones to value in what Bourdieu calls an 'aristocracy of culture' (2010: 3).

Bourdieu's analysis thus goes beyond simply critiquing the status of artworks as commodities to challenge the very notion of engagement with artworks. Bourdieu interviews a range of subjects from different class and educational backgrounds about their artistic and intellectual preferences, and through detailed statistical analysis repeatedly demonstrates (at least according to his own terms) how the aspects of art that are considered radical, challenging and cutting-edge are primarily considered as such by those who, by way of their level of education and economic position, are in fact already part of the ruling class (2010: xxv). What this means is that radical, challenging and experimental art loses at least some its claim to be aligned with any kind of political liberation.

As I explore below with reference to Rancière, Bourdieu's method of statistical analysis has itself been critiqued. Leaving this aside for now, we can see here how Bourdieu might be relevant to Bataille insofar as Bourdieu's challenge to 'highbrow' appreciations of art maps onto Bataille's sometime emphasis on the proletarian base over the discourses of the intelligentsia. The Surrealists whom Bataille so virulently attacks in 'Popular Front in the Street' are precisely the kind of artists who in Bourdieu's schema only *appear* to be radically engaged with social transformation, while in fact their work conforms to the values predominantly appreciated by those who are already in a dominant class position and thus have no concrete investment in such a transformation. So far we stay with Bataille's critique of appearances; but there is a further twist. Bataille's own writings, both his theoretical ones and novels such as *Story of the Eye*, would equally operate as units of cultural capital. This returns us to the problem of who gets to speak in 'Popular Front in the Street.' While Bataille challenges certain aspects of the idea of an intellectual vanguard he nonetheless to some extent appoints himself as a member of such a

vanguard through the positioning of the text. However 'base' Bataille's approach, he still primarily writes with the kind of complex and elevated language that in Bourdieu's terms is aligned with cultural capital.

Insofar as Bataille's work can be critiqued in these terms, then, we can also place Dworkin's critique within Bourdieu's schema. In claiming that Bataille's highbrow status as 'high-class pornography' (1982: 175) in fact only hides that what he is doing is straightforward misogyny, she refuses to appreciate his work aesthetically and instead sees it merely as a marker of his status as belonging to the 'dominant class' of men. As with Sade, Dworkin believes Bataille's radical and highbrow pretensions mask the fact that he is only serving the interests of his class and his gender. We see a similar operation in Acker's exposure of the operations of patriarchy and capital in art in *Demonology*, albeit with the greater complexity that we would expect from Acker's work as opposed to Dworkin's.

What Acker and Dworkin are doing, in different ways, is looking at 'highbrow art' through the lens of socio-economic and gender analysis in a way that, in Bourdieu's terms, is *not supposed to happen*. Bourdieu specifically describes this operation as one that 'transgresses one of the fundamental taboos of the intellectual worlds' (2010: xv). Relating intellectual production to social conditions is, then, an implicitly prohibited practice. Social relations form the basis for intellectual discourse that this discourse must hide in order to justify itself; in Stallybrass and White's terms (and they are certainly influenced by Bourdieu in this) social relations are the 'content' that some theory wants to repress. We thus see the Bataillean alignment between transgression and the base, rupturing operation that exposes the socio-economic forces hidden by artistic and intellectual discourse.

Further, if we compare bourgeois highbrow art with the art that is predominantly preferred by Bourdieu's proletarian interviewees it is often the kind of art that from the standpoint of 'high art' is seen as kitsch, vulgar and unserious (2010: xxix). In this sense, recalling Bataille's challenge to the elevated pretensions of Surrealism, the vulgarity and lowness of a proletarian sensibility according to Bourdieu would correspond to the proletarian vulgarity and lowness of the base. Here, though, we see a problem. Any sense of a 'proletarian sensibility' arguably represents a fetishizing and reification of 'the proletariat,' and we saw in chapter one how Bataille's notion of a proletarian baseness risks precisely this kind of fetishizing, one that ultimately denies proletarians their agency and foregrounds the role of Bataille's texts as speaking on their behalf. Thus in this sense Bataille's notion of the base risks reinforcing existing class structures in precisely the way that transgression reinforces existing systems of law and prohibition by containing exceptions to the system as safely other. It would not be right

to say that Bourdieu envisages a single 'proletarian sensibility' in his subjects: his research is much more subtle than this and takes into account complex intersections of class and education, as well as gender (2010: 103). Nonetheless, this very researcher-subject relationship has formed the basis of a critique of Bourdieu by Jacques Rancière.

Rancière: the heterogeneity of the proletariat

The main thesis of Rancière's book *The Philosopher and His Poor* is that philosophy has historically functioned by exclusion of the 'poor' of the title. Rancière's initial example of this exclusion is Plato, whose Republic can only be constituted by the allocation of thought to a class of philosopher-kings and the insistence, conversely, that the manual workers who keep the city running do *not* think, for this would interrupt the progress of their work (2004: 38). For Rancière, this tendency to see the realms of thought and manual labour – intellectual and material production, we might say – as mutually exclusive runs through the whole of Western philosophy. Because of this, even the most radical left-wing philosophers lapse into an effectively elitist, vanguardist position wherein their role is to *think for* the proletariat, the 'poor,' who by definition cannot do this thinking for themselves. Even Marx himself, according to Rancière, falls into this trap by allocating the proletariat the historical role of productive labour and thus neglecting their capacity to think for themselves insofar as thinking and labour are seen as mutually exclusive (2004: 80)[67]. This tendency is then perpetuated by other Marxists, particularly Sartre, whom Rancière accuses of treating the proletariat reductively by insisting that they 'stay in their place' as one discrete term in Sartre's particular dialectical system (2004: 138).

Rancière acknowledges that there are material reasons why it is more difficult for proletarians to give time to intellectual production – the very domination of their time by work that characterises them as a class also means they have less time for intellectual pursuits. However, Rancière's counterpoint to this is that, historically, proletarian revolutionary thought and praxis has often functioned precisely by *refusing* this kind of organisation of their time and energy. In his key early work *The Nights of Labour* (2004: xii) Rancière describes historical situations wherein proletarians have refused the revolutionary model that requires them to produce while others think for them, instead wresting back time and energy from the workplace to engage in study, debate and the making of art: precisely the things that philosophy, according to Rancière, says that workers are categorically incapable of under capitalism (2004: 131).

---

[67] We might also compare this to Monique Wittig's claim, from a feminist perspective, that 'Marxism has denied the members of the oppressed classes the attribute of being a subject' (1992a: 17).

Whatever we think of Rancière's take on Marxism and class struggle, we can see how his schema has much in common with Bourdieu, particularly in the context of the base. Like Bourdieu, Rancière points to how the dominant classes have tended to claim intellectual production for themselves while treating proletarian intellectual activity as irrelevant, and to how the intellectualism of the dominant classes has made universal claims for itself by effacing and denying its own class-based aspects. Thus once again the proletariat appears as the base element that is heterogeneous to dominant orders of thought and comes to trouble and disrupt them. However, as I mentioned, Rancière is critical of Bourdieu, too. In Rancière's view, Bourdieu also repeats the separation of thinkers and proletarians. This is in part because Bourdieu's research method, Rancière argues, limits the possible answers proletarian respondents could have to art through the framing of its questions, thus in a sense ensuring the answers are known in advance. Because of how the questions are phrased, we already know proletarians will respond positively to the art seen *a priori* as appropriate to them: Bourdieu's 'questions designate in advance what the better rankings are' (Rancière 2004: 187). Further, in its intricate detailing of the forms of cultural consumption adopted by each class, Bourdieu reinscribes the separation of the different classes and does not allocate to the proletariat any agency to undertake action troubling this system (Rancière 2004: 195)[68]. He also, significantly, leaves race out of the equation (Rancière 2004: 197). As I have said, for Rancière class struggle often takes place through a disruption of the categories of class and through proletarians' insistence on engaging in activities seen as inappropriate to their station. Rancière's thought thus presents a further challenge to Bourdieu's understanding of intellectual production by refusing to allow the proletariat to remain comfortably 'outside' it.

We can thus see how Rancière evokes a more mobile and active conception of the base as compared to Bourdieu's. What he shows is that, seen through a Bataillean lens, Bourdieu risks falling into a version of the transgression trap wherein the proletariat, heterogeneous to bourgeois intellectual production, is contained as a fixed element that will never come to trouble this intellectual production. Bourdieu's work is highly generative in its grounding of what I have described as the base in social relations of intellectual production and categorisation. This more concrete understanding of the relation between base and class is what Bataille so often lacks. However, Rancière can go further than Bourdieu in his evocation of the proletarians breaking down the gates of knowledge and claiming it for themselves. For him the proletariat refuses to be the fixed limit of thought and rather disrupts this limit by insisting on thinking for itself.

---

[68] We could also relate this to the 'impossibilisation' and insistence upon separation that I have argued takes place in Halpern's work.

For Rancière, one of the implications of this is a rejection of the idea of a working-class identity: for him, 'working-class emancipation' requires precisely 'a strong symbolic rupture… with working-class "identity"'. There is not any essential proletarian culture or mode of thought; rather, the working class in struggle is characterised by its disruption of categories, its 'transgressive will to appropriate' those things that have been seen as inappropriate to it (2004: 219). We see here what we might call the heterogeneity of the proletariat. Here the proletariat exists not as the effaced limit of thought but as the potential dissolution of all limits. It is unknowable, not in the sense that it is inaccessible to intellectual discourse but rather in its refusal to be defined by any of the categories assigned to it, *including that of being inaccessible to intellectual discourse*. If we put this in the context of the base we see a retention of the 'low culture' assigned by Bourdieu to the base proletariat but with an extension into the realm of the heterogeneous, a heterogeneity that cannot be contained. The main characteristic of the base proletariat is that you don't know what it will do next.

We might also see in Rancière's approach a Bataillean troubling of the dialectic. If the base proletariat refuses the term in the dialectic that some orthodox forms of Marxism have accorded to it then we are returned to the notion of a base that refuses enlisting into a dialectical model. This, of course, is Bataille's challenge to Hegel: heterogeneity constitutes a negativity that cannot be contained within a dialectic that, as Allan Stoekl puts it, 'sets as its major task the recuperation of negativity' (Bataille 1985: xv). This is notable insofar as the dialectic has remained a major structuring force in much twentieth-century left-wing thought in the wake of Marx. I want to look more deeply at the implications of Bataille's base and non-dialectical negativity for political struggle, specifically in the context of race and anticolonialism.

Fanon, Marriott, Moten and Harney: planning against politics

David Marriott's recent book *Whither Fanon?* (2018) takes as one of its themes Frantz Fanon's contentious relationship with the Hegelian dialectic. This relationship plays out in the famous passages in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* wherein Fanon, like Rancière after him, challenges the primacy given by Sartre to dialectical thought. Fanon, of course, challenges the dialectic specifically because of the lack of centrality and agency it gives to blackness. Infamously, and akin to most of the Eurocentric white thinkers of his time, Hegel did not consider Africa to be part of the historical movement of mind that he described in the dialectic. For Fanon, this racist exclusion is not a thing of the past but continues through Sartre and other left-wing white intellectuals of Fanon's own time (Fanon 2008: 112). Fanon responds to Sartre's essay 'Black Orpheus' ('Orphée Noir') in which Sartre expresses admiration for the *négritude* movement but also argues that this movement is limited in its attachment to a black

identity and must ultimately find its realisation in being subsumed into a more dialectical movement towards universal freedom. Fanon viscerally objects to this. For him, the placing of blackness[69] as a term within the dialectic constitutes a limiting of its full potential that merely reinforces white society's removal of agency from black people. Fanon's critique of Hegel goes further still. Looking at the master-slave struggle also critiqued by Bataille, Fanon argues that whereas in Hegel's scenario the master and slave achieve a mutual recognition as subjects, in the colonial situation the colonial master gives no such recognition to the colonised, who are enslaved both literally and metaphorically. For Hegel the slave still has a subjectivity, and can achieve agency through the process of work; Fanon, though, emphasises that in his Eurocentrism Hegel has left out the reality of race as it pertains to this agency and subjectivity (2008: 191). The colonised, then, cannot have a subjectivity because she or he will never be recognised as having such by the coloniser. The colonised can be killed or enslaved by the colonial master with no possibility of escape from either.

The colonised is in this sense relegated to negativity within the Kojèvian-Hegelian model. As I described in my introduction, in the conventional master-slave dialectic negativity corresponds to death, which is overcome in the mutual recognition of the parties: the master prevails by being willing to die and the slave is made to be a slave by his unwillingness to risk death, but neither party actually dies. If either party *were* to die this would constitute a negativity no longer useful for the purpose of dialectical progress, since death is, tautologically, a dead end. Death is a possibility both master and slave pass through in order to move beyond it. For Bataille, as I have shown, death cannot be so easily overcome: the possibility of death constantly remains as a heterogeneous excess that cannot be enlisted to dialectical progress. For Fanon, meanwhile, death and negativity become central to blackness because the black colonised subject precisely *can* go unrecognised and therefore be killed, or live under a perpetual threat of death that becomes a living death, with no consequence to the colonial master. The black 'subject,' who is in fact a non-subject because of this lack of recognition, is in this sense no longer part of or useful to the dialectic, and is discarded as an excess, a waste product (Marriott 2018: 15, 20).

For Fanon, then, blackness constitutes a negativity that the dialectic does not recuperate (Marasco 2015: 9). Fanon states this with defiance in relation to Sartre, as he claims blackness as political in its own right rather than subsidiary to a larger political struggle; but there is necessarily a profoundly pessimistic dimension to this negativity insofar as it emerges from having been overwhelmed by the colonial master's capacity to inflict death. As Marriott

---

[69] This is not to say that blackness and *négritude* are interchangeable for Fanon, who also had significant criticisms of the latter movement.

describes in detail, this aspect of Fanon has been profoundly influential on some afropessimist and necropolitical tendencies in recent thought (2018: 35, 209). It also corresponds fairly clearly to Bataillean heterogeneity, a point to which I return presently. Firstly, though, I want to look more closely at Marriott's work. Marriott's own approach to Fanon is, among other things, to emphasise the anti- or post-dialectical aspect of his negativity as it pertains to political struggle. Key here is Fanon's notion of the *tabula rasa*. In Fanonian thought the *tabula rasa* corresponds to the moment of anti-colonial revolution. It is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, in the sense it entails an overturning of all that went before and the institution of a new social order. In Marriott's view, this overturning is related to the heterogeneous negativity of Fanon's view of blackness. Whereas Sartre insists that blackness be enlisted into a dialectical process of revolution, Fanon's black revolution (in Marriott's interpretation) can only occur as a rupture. This rupture cannot be thought from the point of view of a dialectical approach, nor any other approach. Marriott frequently uses specifically Bataillean language to describe this rupture (2018: 31).

In Marriott's view, then, Fanon parallels Bataille's attempted move outside the dialectic but for perhaps more urgently political reasons; Alexander Hirsch (2014: 289) and Robyn Marasco (2015: 17) have made similar observations. Fanon's blackness must operate as heterogeneous rupture because dialectical thinking, embedded as it is in the Eurocentric perspective of much of Western philosophy, can never account for blackness. We see here once again the operation of the base as that which disrupts established modes of though, here specifically those associated with Eurocentrism and colonial domination. We also see specifically how the base, understood as anti-colonial in its heterogeneity to Western philosophy, might be specifically anti-dialectical, where dialectics is seen as a Eurocentric system of thought that is not adequate to comprehending black struggle[70]. Just as for Rancière the proletariat cannot be fixed as the excluded 'other' of any system of thought, so for Fanon blackness cannot be fixed as the negative term of any dialectic[71]. In both cases, the heterogeneous, base element disrupts the system from within and below through its political struggle.

A caveat is required here. It would be reductive to say that all decolonial thought or even all Fanonian thought is anti- or post-dialectical: this would be to dismiss the wealth of thought that has developed on the Marxian dialectic rather than trying to get 'outside' it. After all, the point of the dialectic is change, and it may be that dialectical thought itself has the resources for overcoming those of its aspects that have become fixed or reified. Nonetheless, in the

[70] As Ranjana Khanna (2013: 136) notes, the concept of the lumpenproletariat was also important to Fanon, constituting another link to the base.
[71] Joseph Winters has recently discussed blackness in a different Bataillean context, that of expenditure and the gift (2018: 1).

specifically Bataillean aspects of Marriott's approach to Fanon we see an instance of decolonial thought that has seen the dialectic as part of the problem. In terms of the base, we see here how the resistance of the base to being contained might have more directly political implications. This double insistence on the political and heterogeneous aspects of the base might be a way of rescuing it from the reification to which it is sometimes consigned by Bataille. These senses of blackness as negative, as heterogeneity and as *tabula rasa* are explored further in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons* (2013). It is not possible here to do justice to all of the aspects of this complex and ambiguous book, but I want to draw out some elements that are relevant to my present purpose. Most significant here is the possible alignment of the base with the 'undercommons' of the title. What, then, is the undercommons? The 'commons' part of the word pertains to some degree to the position occupied by the commons in much discourse around class struggle. Historically, of course, the commons is the zone where the public could live and interact with relative freedom from the structures of work and commodification, a zone that was progressively privatised and encroached upon, first by the aristocracy through the process of enclosure and then by the bourgeoisie. This is not to say that the commons has ever been a utopian space fully free of these influences: as Stallybrass and White point out, the commons (represented for them by the public square in which markets and carnivals take place) has always been a 'hybrid' space of tension between freedom and control, expenditure and accumulation (1986: 27-28). Nonetheless, in the imaginary of many left-wing thinkers the commons represents the space, metaphorical and literal, in which community could emerge in a revolutionary sense. This sense of the commons also corresponds to Halpern's 'common place,' the impossible zone where community could take place had it not been blocked by structures of military, police and capitalist domination. This is one starting point for understanding what Moten and Harney are trying to describe, and indeed Halpern cites them in his own work (2016: 152-153). This sense of the commons would also correspond to the base insofar as it is a proletarian and heterogeneous zone bearing a potential for disruption.

As for the 'under' of the title, one way of understanding it is in terms of Fanon's claim that blackness has been relegated to a lesser, abject status within Western philosophical and political systems. Clearly, this relegation to a lower, lesser position is horribly literal, manifesting in particular for Moten and Harney as the hold of the slave ship where black people are dehumanised (2013: 94). At the same time, there is revolutionary potential in this very 'lower' status. Continuing the language of enclosure in a specifically colonial context, Moten and Harney consider the contemporary white American political establishment as akin to the colonial forts that served as the initial outposts of imperial control. 'The fort,' they say, 'really was surrounded, is besieged by what still surrounds it, the common beyond and beneath… enclosure.' (2013: 17). In this shift from 'was' to 'is' they indicate the continuity of white

supremacy between the initial colonial era and today, while also suggesting that the 'common' both predates and continues to 'surround' this colonial imposition. The undercommons is 'both beyond and beneath': it both goes beyond and undermines from beneath the enclosure. We see clearly here a model comparable to base heterogeneity. The base commons is relegated to a low position but disrupts from beneath; it exists beyond the limit of the political establishment represented by the wall of the fort, yet also cannot be relegated to a safe position beyond the wall. It can already disrupt from within because it has dug tunnels underneath.

Yet Moten and Harney go further. Moten and Harney frame the activity of the undercommons as opposed not only to imperial control but to politics itself and, further, to any idea of founding a law or system. This also means the undercommons cannot claim a subjectivity for itself. Subjectivity and politics are projected onto the commons from the point of view of the colonial establishment. Thus the temptation to 'take possession of ourselves' – to assert a political subjectivity – in fact means only to reach for 'an illusory right to what we do not have, which the settler takes for and as the commons.' To act politically is already to succumb to the enclosure's sense of what the commons is, whereas in fact the commons must be something other than this, something heterogeneous. In this sense 'even the politics of the commons, of the resistance to enclosure, can only be a politics of ends, a rectitude aimed at the regulatory end of the commons' (2013: 18). To act towards a political end is to stay within the dominating logic of the enclosure.

It is not possible here to fully explore the implications of Moten and Harney's claimed rejection of the political; to do this would require a fuller theorisation of what the political *is* than I have been able to provide. Nonetheless, we can at least see here a parallel to Bourdieu and Rancière's determination to challenge not only traditional and conservative forms of political thought but also the very principles by which many forms of left-wing political thought have been constituted. While Rancière does not attack the Marxist dialectic *per se*, he does radically challenge some of the basic assumptions underlying how thinkers including Marx himself have conceived it. Moten and Harney, meanwhile, stay with Fanon's notion of the *tabula rasa* to propose a notion of the commons that cannot be contained by any sense of politics or subjectivity insofar as these concepts are already colonial and belong to the enclosure (2013: 138). Moten and Harney also take this thought in a more explicitly Bataillean direction by insisting that to act towards an end also belongs to the subjectivity of the enclosure. Here we are in the realm of Bataillean sovereignty, where to act towards ends is always servile and always constitutes one as an unfree subject. Moreover, the undercommons is also commensurate with Marriott's Bataillean understanding of Fanon as anti-dialectical. Insofar as it has no end and no subject, the undercommons corresponds to that negativity that escapes the

dialectic and cannot be enlisted to its teleology. It is non-negational: 'the positive practice of freedom, not the negative struggle against a particular oppression,' as Bataille puts it in *On Nietzsche* (1992: xxvii). The undercommons, then, is base in a number of Bataillean senses.

Importantly, the refusal of ends does not necessarily mean a refusal of praxis. Here we see the undercommons acting as other to, heterogeneous to, politics, while also retaining the claim to communal social action that frequently goes missing from Bataille's work. Where Bataille's praxis moved towards the closed ritual activity of Acèphale, Moten and Harney look at praxis with reference to the Black Panthers, who according to them

> theorised revolution without politics, which is to say revolution with neither
> a subject nor a principle of decision… they practiced an ongoing planning to
> be possessed, hopelessly and optimistically and incessantly indebted, given
> to unfinished, contrapuntal study of, and in, the common wealth, poverty and
> the blackness of the surround. (2013: 18)

This is an extremely dense set of propositions and again I cannot do justice to all of its implications. What I want to emphasise is Moten and Harney's notion of 'revolution without politics,' which seems to mean a militant engagement with social transformation that nonetheless does not require a 'subject or principle of decision' and thus is not contained by the political thinking of the dominant order. Though not political, and perhaps not philosophical in any conventional sense either, this notion of revolution is nonetheless active and intellectually engaged insofar as it is allied to both 'planning' and 'study'. These latter two terms are also key for Moten and Harney – their book is subtitled *Fugitive Planning and Black Study* – and among other things serve to emphasise that the undercommons' refusal of politics does not mean it is passive or anti-intellectual. Rather, Moten and Harney seem to be trying to decouple the idea of a socially and intellectually engaged praxis from any conventional idea of politics. Moten and Harney also find in the Black Panthers what they call the 'violence of innovation' (2013: 18), akin to the 'invention' that Marriott points to as part of the rupture of Fanon's *tabula rasa*: it corresponds in the latter to a generation of new social phenomena that cannot be known in advance. These notions of invention, planning and study might thus correspond to what Rancière sees in the unpredictable, generative thought and praxis of the proletariat, which refuses to stay in the place given to it by the dominant orders of political thinking.

What this reading of Moten, Harney, Marriott and Fanon provides in terms of the base is a sense of how it can be a challenge to accepted models of thought and politics without lapsing into being safely contained as other, as is always the risk with heterogeneity. It avoids this lapse by

retaining an insistence on praxis and thought, particularly as expressed through the notion of planning (2013: 18). Does planning, then, avoid the recuperation to which heterogeneity is prone? As Jean-Joseph Goux has pointed out, Bataille's claim that the rupturing, de-individualising and expending activity heterogeneity presents a challenge to the accumulative logic of bourgeois society may already have been superseded by capitalism in its current stage of development (1998: 199). In a post-Fordist age where capital thrives on instability and pretences of capitalism towards fostering social democracy and individual freedom have been widely abandoned, the possibilities for Bataillean reckless expenditure to be recuperated into capitalism, particularly in the aspect of consumption, have become more pronounced. In this view, then, heterogeneity may be relevant only as the marker of a capitalist excess that is a danger to us. After all, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs frequently use the language of disruption. This capitalist disruption manifests through art as much as anything else, as we see in Acker's portrayal of the artist as gentrifier in *Demonology*.

It is here, though, that the base comes into play as an iteration of Bataillean disruption that could resist these capitalist tendencies. As I have shown, Moten and Harney emphasise in their radical praxis an intransigent refusal to be enlisted for politics. They are also, though, invested in an idea of 'planning' associated with the Black Panthers' focus on self-defence and the reproduction of the conditions of survival for black communities. This emphasis on *survival* recalls the turn towards life and strength manifested by Laure and Kathy Acker which, as I argued in chapter two, can be read as an alternative iteration of the base. The point here is that the base, strangely, links these more praxis-based tendencies with a more heterogeneous dissolving tendency, and in doing so reveals commonalities between the two that might not otherwise be seen. These commonalities, then, present the possibility for radical thought and praxis of not getting caught in, on the one hand, a notion of heterogeneity that becomes part of capital's avant-garde or, on the other, an intransigent resistance that becomes trapped in reified notions of self.

We would have a way to go here before we could present anything like a Bataillean praxis. There remain many questions about precisely how this iteration of the base could exist without either transgressively falling back into existing orders or generating a new fascist heterogeneity. We could, though, perhaps point to Nancy's understanding of community as explored in chapter three. For Nancy, a community that moves away from bourgeois individualism also risks falling into a fascistic communion in which both individuality and sovereignty are lost in a morass of power and domination. However, community can also resist communion insofar as it is constituted, negatively, by this very refusal of communion. Still, though, there are questions.

As I have said, Nancy's argument is fairly abstract and raises issues of how it such a community might behave in terms of praxis.

We can consider, though, a reading of Bataille that recognises his delineation of limits without necessarily trying to surpass these limits. If heterogeneity, with all its dangers, is what we find when we cross the limit, then perhaps we want to stay within the limit and be homogeneous, in the sense of remaining attached to that which is knowable, calculable and recognisable as an end. The refusal to see heterogeneity or transgression as ends, values or inevitable facts does not mean that we reject the existence of ends, values or unavoidable facts altogether. We may well still want to pursue such ends as class struggle, decolonisation and sexual and gender liberation, to name a few obvious ones. We may still want to retain values in the sense of valorising solidarity, the communal sharing of resources and so on. We may still see the influence of capitalism, sexism and white supremacy over the world as currently unavoidable facts – albeit, crucially, facts that can be *altered*, not through the propagandistic proclamation of 'alternative facts' but with material changes to the social order. After all, facts about how the world *is* should never be mistaken for facts about how the world *must be*.

In this view, what would remain relevant about Bataillean heterogeneity is how it shows the necessary limit to such values – the fact that there is always an excessive 'accursed' element that marks a limit on what these values can do. And the knowledge of this inadequacy is crucial because it resists the constant risk of the hardening of our value-systems into reified laws or commodities. Thus the heterogeneous would not be a source of political liberation per se but rather the mark of the limit of how far values and projects can take us in terms of liberation. As ever, this limit is not only at the border of the thinkable but within thought as an internal disruption. This kind of limiting disruption to thought might be seen in, for example, Marriott's interpretation of the Fanonian *tabula rasa* as a revolutionary possibility that not only cannot be fully thought about in advance but also refuses any temporality that would enable us to place it 'in advance' of us (2018: 25). It thus refuses all history and teleology. Crucially, here the *tabula rasa* is not an absolute limit to the possibility of political thought or action but rather something that we cannot think or act towards using the structures of thought and action *we currently have*. We could only think this revolutionary situation by being in the kinds of thought that could only occur if we were in it already.

The heterogeneous, then, could still form the basis of praxis, but not a praxis that is thinkable from the standpoint of homogeneity – and in the schema I am describing, homogeneity would include all of the political praxis we are capable of enacting or thinking, even the most radical praxis we can imagine. This is because any praxis that was heterogeneous would no longer be
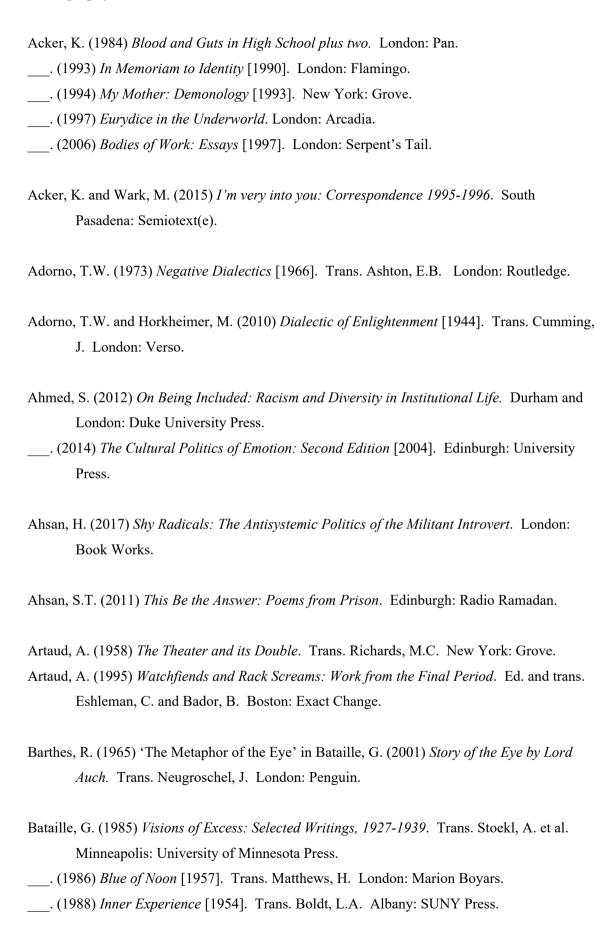
political in any recognisable sense. The 2011 London riots, for example, still belonged to homogeneity insofar as they were *about* something: they responded to racialised police violence with a reclaiming of the streets and a ransacking of commodities and so, however destructive they were, they still corresponded to a system of means, ends and interactions with the world that are recognisable through the lens of the political. If there were instances of violence and destruction occurring as part of the riots that genuinely defied any recognisable motive or explanation then these would indeed be heterogeneous; but these would be precisely the aspects of the riots not commensurable to political understanding. Further, I do not wish to assert that such instances of inexplicable violence did indeed occur since to do so would risk falling into a right-wing narrative wherein the riots can be dismissed as motiveless criminality. Here again is the problem with the transgression-prohibition model. Insofar as the riots can be seen as inexplicable – heterogeneous to the possibility of explanation – they can still be contained as such and forgotten about as soon as the police re-established order.

We are, then, left with the question: is the base something we can think or is it the limit of thought? We might argue that the base is the move of rupture that nonetheless remains within homogeneity in Bataillean terms in that it is still trying to *do something*. If we take Dworkin's exposure of Bataille's misogyny as a base operation, it is still homogeneous insofar as it has a clearly defined goal, namely that of Dworkin's particular version of feminism. If this is right then Bataillean thought remains valid as a means of thinking two distinct concepts: firstly heterogeneity existing as the limit of the thinkable, and secondly the base operating as a move of unveiling that nonetheless stays within the realm of the thinkable. In this regard the base and the heterogeneous contrast radically with each other. After all, from the standpoint of the base one might view the heterogeneous 'thought of the unthinkable' as mere abstraction – it wants to take us back to 'lived experience'. Conversely, from the standpoint of the heterogeneous the base is an inadequate model since it does not take into account that *lived experience is limited in its thinkability*. This, of course, is the critique that can be levelled at Dworkin: she assumes that her totalising view that pornography is always misogynistic and violent can be applied to all situations and will always be adequate to them. In the polemic of *Pornography* Dworkin does not allow for the possibility that there might be limits to her thinking of sex. The recognition of the aporias and unexamined essentialisms of the work of Dworkin and others is of course one of the characteristics of more queer and intersectional feminisms. Thus the base, we might say, moves towards exposure but falls at the point of heterogeneity. Heterogeneity is the recognition that *not everything can be exposed*, in the sense that not everything is thinkable and understandable.

If there is this contrast between the heterogeneous and the base, can it be bridged? If so, would such a bridging be desirable? A meeting of the base with heterogeneity would look something like a base move towards exposure that nonetheless recognises that we cannot expose everything, that there will always be something that remains hidden and evades exposure. In terms of political praxis, this might be an attempt to enact social change in a way that recognises the limits of how far the implications of such change can be known. This does not have to place a limit on the *possibility* of social change but only on its *knowability*. Both Fanon and Rancière evoke an *active* and *committed* sense of the unknowable in the unpredictable emergence of new cultures and ideas through class struggle. For Rancière there is not in this sense a knowable, fixed proletarian culture that can exist as an Other to bourgeois culture, nor for Fanon is there a fixed sense of blackness that can act as the stable Other of whiteness. Further, this model of the heterogeneous as a kind of 'limit of politics' is different from the negation found in the dialectic in the sense that this heterogeneity can no longer be reclaimed by political thought and praxis as part of the latter's continuing development but rather remains as an ever-present disruption. The tension between Bataille and the dialectic, then, remains pertinent as a way of thinking some contemporary problems of left thought. His emphasis on the transgressive and non-recuperable can be seen in the theories of queerness, blackness and feminism that emphasise the useless and the negative, the embrace of a heterogeneity that does not 'fit'. At the same time, Bataille's emphasis on the male experience of the erotic indicates the possible recuperation of the heterogeneous: a situation where heterogeneity would become merely an experience of otherness which, once its nervous energy has been expended, turns back to reinforce the border outside which it lies, accepting its status as 'wrong'.

The most utopian thing we can take from Bataille, perhaps, is the idea that sovereign heterogeneity in the last instance undermines *all* principles, including the principle that would valorise heterogeneity or set it up as a goal. Sovereignty, heterogeneity and the base do not, at their extreme, either reinforce existing orders nor lead to the founding of a new order, but rather they operate as the disruptors of all order. Further, this disruption manifests as a refusal to reify or valorise disruption itself. Instead, heterogeneity persists as the simultaneous aporia, limit and potentiality of politics, leaving us to compose a praxis that can respond to its challenges without falling under its spell.

Bibliography

Acker, K. (1984) *Blood and Guts in High School plus two.* London: Pan.

___. (1993) *In Memoriam to Identity* [1990]. London: Flamingo.

___. (1994) *My Mother: Demonology* [1993]. New York: Grove.

___. (1997) *Eurydice in the Underworld*. London: Arcadia.

___. (2006) *Bodies of Work: Essays* [1997]. London: Serpent's Tail.

Acker, K. and Wark, M. (2015) *I'm very into you: Correspondence 1995-1996.* South
        Pasadena: Semiotext(e).

Adorno, T.W. (1973) *Negative Dialectics* [1966]. Trans. Ashton, E.B.   London: Routledge.

Adorno, T.W. and Horkheimer, M. (2010) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1944]. Trans. Cumming,
        J. London: Verso.

Ahmed, S. (2012) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life.* Durham and
        London: Duke University Press.

___. (2014) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion: Second Edition* [2004]. Edinburgh: University
        Press.

Ahsan, H. (2017) *Shy Radicals: The Antisystemic Politics of the Militant Introvert.* London:
        Book Works.

Ahsan, S.T. (2011) *This Be the Answer: Poems from Prison.* Edinburgh: Radio Ramadan.

Artaud, A. (1958) *The Theater and its Double.* Trans. Richards, M.C. New York: Grove.

Artaud, A. (1995) *Watchfiends and Rack Screams: Work from the Final Period*. Ed. and trans.
        Eshleman, C. and Bador, B. Boston: Exact Change.

Barthes, R. (1965) 'The Metaphor of the Eye' in Bataille, G. (2001) *Story of the Eye by Lord
        Auch.* Trans. Neugroschel, J. London: Penguin.

Bataille, G. (1985) *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939.* Trans. Stoekl, A. et al.
        Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

___. (1986) *Blue of Noon* [1957]. Trans. Matthews, H. London: Marion Boyars.

___. (1988) *Inner Experience* [1954]. Trans. Boldt, L.A. Albany: SUNY Press.

___. (1989a) *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy,* Vol. I. Trans. Hurley, R. New York: Zone.

___. (1989b) *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy,* Vols. II-III. Trans. Hurley, R. New York: Zone.

___. (1990) *Literature and Evil* [1957]. Trans. Hamilton, A. London: Marion Boyars.

___. (1991) *The Impossible: A Story of Rats followed by Dianus and The Oresteia* [1962]. Trans. Hurley, R. San Francisco: City Lights.

___. (1992) *Theory of Religion* [1973]. Trans. Hurley, R. New York: Zone.

___. (1994) *On Nietzsche* [1945]. Trans. Boone, B. St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon.

___. (1998) *The Collected Poems*. Trans. Spitzer, M. Chester Springs, PA: Dufour.

___. (2001a) *Story of the Eye by Lord Auch* [1928]. Trans. Neugroschel, J. London: Penguin.

___. (2001b) *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*. Trans. Kendall, M. and S. Ed. Kendall, S. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

___. (2001c) *L'Abbé C* [1950]. Trans. Facey, P.A. London: Marion Boyars.

___. (2006) *Eroticism* [1957]. Trans. Dalwood, M. London: Marion Boyars.

___. (2011) *Guilty*: *Le Coupable* [1944]. Kendall, S., trans. Revised ed. Albany: SUNY, 2011.

___. (2012) *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man.* Trans. Wainhouse, A. London: Penguin.

___. (2012a) *Madame Edwarda, Le mort, Histoire de l'oeil*. Ed. Pauvert, J.J. Paris: Éditions 10/18.

___. (2012b) *Ma Mère*. Paris: Éditions 10/18.

___. (2012c) 'Molloy's Silence,' trans. Pilling, J., in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. Gontarski, S.E. London: Anthem, pp. 103-110.

Bataille, G., ed. (2004) *The Trial of Gilles de Rais.* Robinson, R., trans. Los Angeles: Amok.

Bataille, G. et al (2017) *The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology.* Eds. Galletti, M., and Brotchie, A. Trans. Lehrer, A. et al. London: Atlas.

Bellamy, D. and Killian, K., eds. (2017) *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing 1977-1997.* Callicoon, NY: Nightboat.

Benjamin, W. (2007) *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Trans. Jephcott, A. Ed. Demetz, P. New York: Schocken.

Berlant, L. and Edelman, L. (2014) *Sex, or The Unbearable*.   Durham: Duke University Press.

Bersani, L. (1987) 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' *October* 43, 197-222.

___. (1990) *The Culture of Redemption*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

___. (1995) *Homos.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bersani, L., and Philips, A. (2010) *Intimacies*. Chicago: University Press.

Blanchot, M. (1988) *The Unavowable Community* [1983]. Trans. Joris, P. Barrytown, NY:
    Station Hill.

Bois, Y.-A. and Krauss, R.E. (1997) *Formless: A User's Guide.* New York: Zone.

Boone, B. (1979) 'Gay Language as Political Praxis: The Poetry of Frank O'Hara.' *Social Text*
    1, pp. 59-92.

___. (1981) *Toward a Gay Theory for the '80s*. Vancouver: Self-published pamphlet.

___. (2009) *Century of Clouds* [1980]. Callicoon, NY: Nightboat.

Botting, F. and Wilson, S. (eds.) (1998) *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Bourdieu, P. (2010) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [1979]. Trans.
    Nice, R. London: Routledge.

Bradway, T. (2017) *Queer Experimental Literature: The Affective Politics of Bad Reading.*
    New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Butler, J. (2006) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990]. New York
    and London: Routledge.

Carter, A. (2000) *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* [1979]. London:
    Virago.

Cavarero, A. (2011) *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* [2007]. Trans. McCuaig, W.
    New York: Columbia University Press.

Clay, J. (2010) *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Intensities*.
    London: Continuum.

Clover, C.J. (1996) *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* [1992]. London: BFI.

Colby, G. (2012) 'Radical Interiors: Cindy Sherman's 'Sex Pictures' and Kathy Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*.' *Women: A Cultural Review* 23.2, pp. 182-29.
___. (2016) *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*. Edinburgh: University Press.

Connolly, S. (2010) 'Laure's War: Selfhood and Sacrifice in Colette Peignot.' *French Forum* 35.1, pp. 17-37.
___. (2014) 'Georges Bataille, Gender, and Sacrificial Excess.' *The Comparatist* 38, pp. 108-127.

Cooke, J. (2017) 'Violations of Empathy.' *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics* 89-90, pp. 153-169.

Corbin, A. (1990) *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850* [1978]. Trans. Sheridan, A. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

De Boever, A. (2013) *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Dean, T. (2009) *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
___. (2011) 'The erotics of transgression' in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing*, ed. Stevens, H. Cambridge: University Press, pp. 65-80.

Derrida, J. (1998) 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve' [1967]. Botting and Wilson eds., *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Direk, Z. (2007) 'Erotic Experience and Sexual Difference in Bataille,' in *Reading Bataille Now*. Winnubst, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 94-115.

Downing, L. and Gillett, R. (2011) 'Georges Bataille at the Avant-Garde of Queer Theory?: Transgression, Perversion and the Death Drive.' *Nottingham French Studies*, Vol. 50 No. 3, pp. 88-102.

Doyle, J. (2006) *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Dworkin, A. (1982) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. London: The Women's Press.

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

Fanon, F. (2008) *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952]. Trans. Philcox, R. New York: Grove.

ffrench, P. (1999) *The Cut: Reading Bataille's* Histoire de L'oeil. Oxford: University Press.
___. (2007) *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community*. Abingdon: Legenda.

Foucault, M. (1998) 'A Preface to Transgression' [1963] in *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, eds.
    Botting, F. and Wilson, S, pp. 24-40. Oxford: Blackwell.
___. (2010) *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1* [1976]. Trans. Hurley,
    R. Excerpted in Leitch, V. et al, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*.
    2nd ed. New York: Norton.

Gasché, R. (2012) *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmology* [1978]. Trans.
    Végsö, R. Stanford: University Press.

Genet, J. (1971) *Funeral Rites* [1948]. Trans. Frechtman, B. St Albans: Panther.

Girard, R. (2009) *Violence and the Sacred* [1972]. Trans. Gregory, P. London: Continuum.

Glück, R. (1994) *Margery Kempe*. London: Serpent's Tail.
___. (1995) *Jack the Modernist* [1985]. London: Serpent's Tail.

Goldhill, O. (2017) 'The neo-fascist philosophy that underpins both the alt-right and Silicon
    Valley technophiles.' *Quartz*, https://qz.com/1007144/the-neo-fascist-philosophy-that-
    underpins-both-the-alt-right-and-silicon-valley-technophiles/ [Accessed 31 January
    2019]

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

Halpern, R. (2011) 'Realism and Utopia: Sex, Writing and Activism in New Narrative.'
    Journal of Narrative Theory, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 82-124.
___. (2012a) *Music for Porn.* Callicoon, NY: Nightboat.

___. (2012b) 'Where No Meaning is: Robert Glück's *Jack the Modernist* and the Expulsion of Desire.' *X Poetics*, https://xpoetics.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/rob-halpern-on-robert-Glücks-jack.html. [Accessed 12 September 2017]

___. (2015a) *Common Place*. New York: Ugly Duckling Presse.

___. (2015b) *[------] Placeholder*. London: Enitharmon.

___. (2016) 'Useless Commodities, Disposable Bodies: An Essay on Value and Waste' in *Against Value in the Arts and Education*, eds. Ladkin, S. et al. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

___. (2017) *Touching Voids in Sense.* London: Veer.

Halpern, R., and Spinosa, C. (2016) '"An intense desire for relation at the place of relation's prohibition": an interview with Rob Halpern.' *Open House*, https://openhousepoetry.com/2016/02/15/an-intense-desire-for-relation-at-the-place-of-relations-prohibition-an-interview-w-rob-halpern/ [Accessed 12 July 2017]

Halpern, R., and Tremblay-McGraw, R., eds. (2017) *From Our Hearts to Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice*. Oakland: ON Contemporary Practice.

Harney, S. and Moten, F. (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions.

Hirsch, A. (2014) 'Sovereignty surreal: Bataille and Fanon beyond the state of exception.' *Contemporary Political Theory* 13.3, pp. 287-306.

Hollywood, A. (2002) *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. Chicago: University Press.

Home, S. (1996) *Slow Death*. London: Serpent's Tail.

Hussey, A. (2006) 'The Slaughterhouse of Love': The Corpse of 'Laure'', in Hussey, ed., *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 81-90.

Ioanes, A. (2016) 'Shock and Consent in a Feminist Avant-Garde: Kathleen Hanna Reads Kathy Acker.' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 42.1.

Irwin, A. (2002) *Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred*.
	Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Jardine, A. (1985) *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*. Ithaca: Cornell
	University Press.

Kapoor, N. (2018) *Deport Deprive Extradite: 21ˢᵗ Century State Extremism*. London: Verso.

Kennedy, K. (2018) 'Heterology as Aesthetics: Bataille, Sovereign Art and the Affirmation of
	Impossibility.*' Theory, Culture and Society* 34.4-5, pp. 115-134.

Khanna, R. (2013) 'The Lumpenproletariat, the Subaltern, the Mental Asylum.' *The South
	Atlantic Quarterly* 112.1, pp. 129-143.

Kingston, A. (2014) 'Bataille and Feminist Theory.' *Academia.edu,*
	https://www.academia.edu/7044627/Bataille_and_Feminist_Theory [Accessed 1
	February 2015]

Kojève, A. (1980) *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the* Phenomenology of
	Spirit. Eds. Queneau, R. and Bloom, A. Trans. Nichols Jr., J.H. Ithaca: Cornell
	University Press.

Kraus, C. (2015) *I Love Dick* [1997]. London: Tuskar Rock.
___. (2017) *After Kathy Acker*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Kristeva, J. (2002) *The Portable Kristeva*. Updated edition. Ed. Oliver, K. New York:
	Columbia University Press.

Ladkin, S. (2015) 'The "Onanism of Poetry."' *Angelaki* 20.4, 131-156.

Land, N. (1992) *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism*. London:
	Routledge.

Laure. (1995) *The Collected Writings*. Trans. Herman, J. San Francisco: City Lights.

Lloyd, H.M. (2013) 'The Sovereign Subject and Its Heterogeneous Other: Beauvoir's Use and
	Critique of Bataille/Hegel.' *Intellectual History Review* 23.4, pp. 565-581.

Lorde, A. (2007) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing.

Luker, E. (2015) 'True Love, True Labour: Rob Halpern's *Music for Porn*.' *Hix Eros* 6, pp. 109-113.

MacGregor, C. (2006) 'The Eye of the Storm: Female Representation in Bataille's *Madame Edwarda* and *Histoire de l'oeil*,' in Hussey, ed., *The Beast at Heaven's Gate: Georges Bataille and the Art of Transgression*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 101-110.

Mandlis, L.R. (2011) 'Whose Crazy Investment in Sex?' *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, pp. 219-236.

Marasco, R. (2015) *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory After Hegel*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Marriott, D. (2000) *On Black Men*. Edinburgh: University Press.
___. (2017) 'The Perfect Beauty of Black Death.' *The Philosophical Salon*, http://thephilosophicalsalon.com/the-perfect-beauty-of-black-death/ [Accessed 7.05, 1 February 2019].
___. (2018) *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*. Stanford: University Press.

McArdle, M. (2015) '"I Arrived at the Revolution Via Poetry": An Interview with the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo'. *Brooklyn*, http://www.bkmag.com/2015/07/22/i-arrived-at-the-revolution-via-poetry-an-interview-with-the-mongrel-coalition-against-gringpo/ [13.50, 27 Jan 2019]

McFadden, D., and Coto, D. (2009) 'Military: Gitmo detainee dies of apparent suicide.' *Associated Press*. Available from: http://www.webcitation.org/query?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2Fhostednews%2Fap%2Farticle%2FALeqM5hVbNZcN5Ks9DDeoPRHAwXW576ClwD98IR8SO0&date=2009-06-02 [Accessed 12 July 2017]

McGee, M. (2004) 'XXX Files.' *OC Weekly*, https://ocweekly.com/xxx-files-6380079/ [Accessed 29 January 2019]

Mookerjee, R. (2013) *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*. Houndmills: Palgrave
    Macmillan.

Muñoz, J.E. (2013) '"Gimme Gimme This… Gimme Gimme That": Annihilation and
    Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons.' *Social Text* 116, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 95-110.
___. (2019) *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity: 10th Anniversary Edition*
    [2009]. New York: University Press.

Myles, E. (2013) 'Painted Clear, Painted Black.' *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of*
    Poetics 29, http://www.thevolta.org/ewc29-emyles-p1.html [Accessed 29 January 2019]

Nancy, J. (1991) *The Inoperative Community* [1986]. Ed. and trans. Connor, P. et al.
    Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
___. (2016) *The Disavowed Community* [2014]. Trans. Armstrong, P. New York: Fordham
    University Press.

Neeper, L. (2008) 'On Teaching Transgressive Literature.' *The CEA Forum* 37 (2),
    https://web.archive.org/web/20121001010332/http://www2.widener.edu/~cea/372neepe
    r.htm [Accessed 19 April 2016]

Nelson, M. (2011) *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*. New York and London: Norton.

Nietzsche, F. (2003) *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music* [1886]. Trans. Whiteside,
    S. Ed. Tanner, M. London: Penguin.
___. (2009a) *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*.
    Trans. Nauckhoff, J. and del Caro, A. Ed. Williams, B. Cambridge: University Press.
___. (2009b) *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic* [1887]. Ed. Ansell-Pearson, K. Trans.
    Diethe, C. Cambridge: University Press.

NourbeSe Philip, M. (2008) *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*.
    Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Noys, B. (2000) *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pluto.

Pitchford, N. (2002) *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker*
    and Angela Carter. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.

Puar, J.K. (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham and
  London: Duke University Press.

Ramsay, R.L. (1992) *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity: Science, Sexuality and Subversion*.
  Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Rancière, J. (2004) *The Philosopher and His Poor*. Ed. Parker, A. Trans. Drury, J. et al.
  Durham: Duke University Press.

Rankine, C. (2015) 'The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning.' *The New York Times
  Magazine*, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-
  is-one-of-mourning.html [Accessed 29 January 2019]

Robbe-Grillet, A. (1972) *Project for a Revolution in New York* [1970]. Trans. Howard, R.
  London: Calder and Boyars.

Rubin, G.S. (2011) *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Durham and London: Duke University
  Press.

Sebald, W.G. (2012) *On the Natural History of Destruction* [1999]. Trans. Bell, A. London:
  Notting Hill Editions.

Sontag, S. (2001) 'The Pornographic Imagination' [1967]. In Bataille, G., *Story of the Eye by
  Lord Auch*, trans. Neugroschel, J., pp. 83-118. London: Penguin.
___. (2004) *Regarding the Pain of Others* [2003]. London: Penguin.

Stallybrass, P. and White, A. (1986) *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London:
  Methuen.

Stockton, Katherine Bond. (2006) *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where 'Black' Meets
  'Queer.'* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Suleiman, S.R. (1990) *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge:
  Harvard University Press.
___. (1994) 'Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s.' *Critical Inquiry*. 21 (1),
  61-79.

Surya, M. (2002) *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*. Trans. Fijalkowski, K. and
    Richardson, M. London: Verso.

Sweedler, M. (2009) *The Dismembered Community: Bataille, Blanchot, Leiris, and the Remains
    of Laure*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.

Tauchert, A. (2008) *Against Transgression*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Taussig, Michael. (2006) *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. Chicago: University Press.

Turcotte, L. (1992) 'Foreword' in Wittig, M., *The Straight Mind and other Essays*. Hemel
    Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Williams, T. (2014) 'The musics of war…' *Jacket2*, https://jacket2.org/commentary/musics-war
    [accessed 29 January 2019].

Windeatt, B.A., trans. (1985) *The Book of Margery Kempe* [c. 1438]. London: Penguin.

Winnubst, S. (2007) 'Bataille's Queer Pleasures: The Universe as Spider or Spit.' *Reading
    Bataille Now*. Winnubst*,* ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 75-93.

Winters, J. (2018) 'The Gift, and Death, of Blackness.' *Journal of Africana Religions* 6.1, pp. 1-
    26.

Wittig, M. (1975) *The Lesbian Body* [1973]. Trans. Le Vay, D. New York: Morrow.
___. (1992a) 'One is Not Born a Woman' [1981] in *The Straight Mind and other Essays*.
    Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
___. (1992b) 'The Straight Mind' (1980) in *The Straight Mind and other Essays*. Hemel
    Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Wilson, S. (2017) 'Frenzy, Feeder, Falcon: Eroticism in the Twenty-First Century.' *Georges
    Bataille and Contemporary Thought*. Stronge, W., ed. London: Bloomsbury.

Zultanski, S. (2012) 'Short statement in five parts on 'Statement of Facts.'' *Jacket2*. Online,
    accessed at http://jacket2.org/reviews/short-statement-five-parts-statement-facts
    [Accessed 29 January 2019]