

The Switch: Freedoms in Sexuality, Desire, Gender, and Identity

By

Lesley C. Graydon

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York
2013

© 2013

Lesley C. Graydon

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Lyn Di Iorio

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Mario Di Gangi

Date

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee

Lyn Di Iorio

Wayne Koestenbaum

James Wilson

The City University of New York

Abstract

The Switch: Freedoms in Sexuality, Desire, Gender, and Identity

By

Lesley C. Graydon

Advisor: Lyn Di Iorio

The broad aim of my dissertation is to expand the horizon and discourse of variant gender and sexual identities and practices through introducing the theoretical model, practice, and typology of the switch and switching; radical acceptance, understanding, and a new theory emerge. This emergence has the added impact of immediately and powerfully validating people's lives and experiences; by extension, the possibility for all to live with greater freedom, self-expression, and authenticity in exploring and playing with identity, desires, roles, and practices is established.

My specific focus is to look at and celebrate non-normative/variant gender and sexual identities. My specific aim is to reveal where and how gender and sexual variants create, revise, redefine, and play with language, roles, desires, bodies, public and private sex practices and identity in the action known as "switching." To *switch*, and the process of engaging in the action of *switching*, can most broadly be described as dwelling in, and having the intention of, honoring, exploring, and sharing different, switchable aspects of a state of being, idea or concept, person, persona or character.

I am looking at the intersecting practice of non-normative gender, sexual, and identity switching that all of my experimental authors and their characters play with. Gertrude Stein, Jeanette Winterson, Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles, Anne Carson, and Anne Carson's translation

of Sappho all demonstrate switching. The identities deconstructed in this dissertation create and give space to, by their playful and exploratory nature, a great deal of gender, sexual, and identity play and masquerade (whether they are stable or in flux); they elicit openings, possibilities, and ambiguities in writing, reading, deconstructing and recreating gender identifications, sexual identities, sex and gender roles, subversive and perverse practices, as well as subcultural and personal practices. Thusly, my project has a simple foundation: it is grounded in the possibility that anything is possible and that every one of us lives a life of full self-expression and freedom.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my deepest gratitude for the support, guidance, encouragement, shared excitement, and joyful nature that every teacher, friend, professor, family member, colleague, lover, student, and partner has so generously given me. This project has taken me many years and a great many people have supported me as both it, and I, have morphed, changed, and evolved.

First, thank you to my committee. Lyn Di Iorio courageously stepped in to aid me in re-forming my committee and completing this important project after my long-term advisor, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick passed and I had taken a long break from the actual writing of my dissertation. You have been a zealous supporter of my writing since we first met fourteen years ago and I truly cherish how you think and the spaces you create and allow me to go with your generous listening. Wayne Koestenbaum, you astound me, continually, with your generosity, flare, and brilliance. The way you think never fails to spark new ideas and actions; you have been one of my biggest inspirations at The Graduate Center and I am deeply honored by your continued feedback, direction, and who you create me to be. Jim Wilson, thank you for joining us with such ease, professionalism, and theatrical appreciation.

Second, I have many wise, generous, and loving teachers and friends in my life. Many of you have supported me by reading my work, others by allowing me to attend yoga classes at a discounted price; some of you have been coaches, others the most loving housemates and open-hearted friends I could ever ask for. You give the space so that I can continuously explore the freedom to be me: to know this transformed life of freedom, possibility, and love. You inspire me to love and give more than I think or know myself to give/be; you inspire me to live my dreams, step into my leadership, and reflect the most

beautiful mirror back to me: Paul Matthew St. Pierre, Scott Humphries, Elysia Brunet, Wilbur Turner, Sean Saunders, Ricky Boscarino, Oonagh Krieg, Suzanne Faith Slocom Gori, Reno Munez, Gayle Smith, the sweetest, most accepting Mum a daughter could ask for, James Earnest Graydon (RIP), my dedicated and loving Dad, the most determined, charismatic, risk-taker I will ever know, Sebastian Graydon Flynn, my ever loving son, who, at seventeen, continues to surprise and inspire me daily with his Zen wisdom, humour, and loving, all of my family, everyone at LE who listened, coached, and stood for me being the most powerful leader I can be, especially Treya Klassen, Chad Gibson, and Emily Hostetter, everyone who takes a seat in the Sunday night meeting and the open-hearted friends who walk the path of clarity and who are always available to listen, share, and talk, everyone who's ever made me a cup of tea, contributed to a yard sale, done an interview with me, attended one of my workshops or lectures, played with me, and supported this work, my journey, and what I had to do to get here: thank you, thank you, thank you!

Third, gratitude and praises to the Creator, my ancestors seven generations before, with, and after me, all the doers and thinkers who have contributed to paving new avenues of freedom and celebrating life from a loving place, and everyone who works to make a difference in this world! My head is bowed in thanks.

This dissertation is dedicated to D. Scott Humphries, Sebastian Graydon Flynn, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, without whom I would not be who I am or where I am today.

You have my deepest love and gratitude.

This dissertation is also dedicated to every one of us gender and/or sexual variants, those of us who switch, and especially those of us who live a life unattached to identity.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	vi
Table of Contents	ix

Introduction:

“Thinking Sex:” Presentation, Representation, and Manifestation; An Unveiling.....	1
--	---

Chapter One

And The Tickertape Reads “A Fraction of a Shudder”; Hidden Spaces and The Switch: Gertrude Stein Does Man-Space and Girl Pink.....	52
--	----

Chapter Two

Theory Must Be Doing: Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles and Jeanette Winterson Traffic and Switch in the Spaces and Language of Non-Normative Identities and Desires ...	
My Business Is Circumference.....	115

Chapter Three

“‘Allegory Holds Fast to The Ruins’: Memoir, Girl and Teen-hood—The Body, and Deviancy in Kathy Acker, Anne Carson, and Sappho”.....	162
--	-----

Conclusion

The Possibilities For Sexual and Gender Variancies and Freedom That Await.....	204
--	-----

Bibliography	227
---------------------------	-----

Introduction: “Thinking Sex:” Presentation, Representation, and Manifestation; An Unveiling

“The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex.”

(Alfred Kinsey, 1948)

The broad aim of this dissertation is to expand the horizon and discourse of variant gender and sexual identities and practices through introducing the theoretical model, practice, and typology of the switch and switching; radical acceptance, understanding, and a new Sexuality Studies, Queer, Feminist, and Identity Theory emerge. This emergence has the added impact of immediately and powerfully validating people’s lives and experiences; by extension, the possibility for all to live with greater freedom, self-expression, and authenticity in exploring and playing with identity, desires, roles, and practices is established. My focus is on contemporary and 20th-century women¹ writers who traffic in queer identities and subversive, perverse, sexual practices.

This introduction’s chief aim is to map out my focus, present the premises and vocabulary necessary, position my work in relation to specifically relevant historical and

¹Like me, you may be curious as to the identification of my writers as “women”: why just women writers, or, why even make note of the gender when, more often than not, the gender of the writers is not noted in academia. Often, this is because the gender is either exclusively male (which bizarrely draws no attention to itself. A great question would be why and how does the male writer speak for all humankind) or there is a combination of male and female writers being discussed. There is a saying: “I’ll be a post-feminist in the post-patriarchy” which speaks to the need and/or spaces that women’s writing can traffic in; that said, while all the writers of this dissertation are women, what is absolutely critical is that you, as the reader, do not think that this project is solely concerned with women—it is not—or that women writer’s do not have something to offer to all—they do—regardless of their or your gender, or even, sexual preference. Similarly, while the primary directive of this dissertation is queerly focused, the theory I am introducing is one that readily and very importantly applies to all sexualities and preferences. For the sake of scope, I have narrowed this dissertation to queer practices, however, by the time you reach the conclusion you will see that my concept of the switch reaches into every sexual preference and gender, thus providing a whole new lens by which sexuality can be explored.

contemporary conversations concerned with sexual and gender expressions and freedoms, introduce my key theoretical concepts, subjects, and method, and invite an openness with which to delve into an understanding of my topic. In this introduction, I call attention to past and contemporary conversations that illustrate the policing of sexual and gender self-expression. However, let me be clear that my dissertation's intention is to engage in a creation-based (rather than past-based) dialogue.

My dissertation has a simple foundation: it is grounded in the possibility that anything is possible and that every one of us lives a life of full self-expression and freedom. If you, as reader, think that you and your identity, interests, and/or preferences do not fall into my specific focus, I urge you to read on: please do not get hung up on what does not fit your lifestyle, preferences, identity, or academic focus: take what works and leave the rest. Trust that my project offers inspiration, a fresh perspective, and some critical, outside-the-box, thinking that will serve you and what you are committed to; know that your identity, person, preferences, choices, and points of view are very safe even as you may experience a challenging idea or topic. My dissertation comes from the place that there is nothing to fix and nothing is wrong, there is nothing to argue and I have no agenda even as it may, at times, seem otherwise. My perspective is not the truth, it is simply one point of view. My theoretical proposal and readings point to a needed future of freedom from the confines of identity that can, at times, seem almost inconceivable, yet this freedom is utterly within the realms of what's possible.

Focus and Terminology

My specific focus is to look at and celebrate non-normative/variant gender and sexual identities. My specific aim is to reveal where and how gender and sexual variants create, revise, redefine, and play with language, roles, desires, bodies, public and private sex practices and identity in the action known as “switching.” To *switch*, and the process of engaging in the action of *switching*, can most broadly be described as dwelling in, and having the intention of, honoring, exploring, and sharing different, switchable aspects of a state of being, idea or concept, person, persona or character. These different aspects could, and very often *are*, seen or constructed as opposites or incongruous, so by its very nature, the switch is riddled with complexities and uncertainties that can be very individualistic and hence not easily classifiable or conducive to generalization. Honoring each of the different aspects and ways of being as *equally authentic* and valuable is, at heart, one of the most necessary outcomes of this project.

More specifically, a *switch* is someone who shifts between roles, desires, identities or ways of being in the realms of gender and/or sexuality. Switching has almost exclusively been referred to in a BDSM context (bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism): within the loci of sexual roles and play. My theory proposes a new definition wherein switching reaches well beyond BDSM and the sexual: it is an identity, which may or may not be a pleasure-centered action that moves into the broadness of a destabilized identity. A switch incorporates and moves between gender and sexual identities; this project asserts that switching gendered bodies and sexual identities and roles is a profound route by which to re-examine the notion of stable and/or destabilized identities.

In the area of gender, switching can be located in shifts of experimenting and playing with gender preference and identity, feminine and masculine clothing, appearance, presentation, naming and/or playing with the performative aspects of expected versus unexpected gender expression(s). Physical features, such as switching between masculine and feminine features, traits, and/or body parts, and gender-bending to and from differing gender locations are all gender-switching moments. Any gender, male or female, including genderqueer, two-spirited, bi-gendered, or a trans-identified person, can switch and move betwixt and between the varied ranges of feminine and masculine facets, roles, and/or identities.

In the area of sexuality, switch moments are marked by shifts in the language of sex and orgasm—profanity and language occurring as a key turn to switch— in moving between gentle or loving sex and rough sex, when moving between vulnerability and strength, when adhering to acceptable social conventions versus overturning them, in the locations of sexual taboos, sexual games, pleasure making and giving, pleasing and being pleased, and, of course, in switching between roles: between top and bottom, receiver and giver, dominant and submissive within a BDSM and/or erotic context. As with gender switching, there are no constraints to sexual switching: one's sexual preference is irrelevant.

In the overlap that intersects both and/or either sexual and gender switching, shifts in roles, fantasy, desire, time, spirituality, language use, concepts of identity, spirituality, point of view, age, playfulness, and a s/witchy magical realism are locations of switching intersection. The locations of certainty and uncertainty, time shifts that accompany

gender and sexual shifting, and adhering to versus overturning acceptable social conventions are also switch moments that can be sexed or gendered.

Many years ago I coined the term: lostlessness, which speaks to a location that will often present itself, usually early on but at some time or another, in a narrative or life of switching: lostlessness is a space of uncertainty, emptiness, endless unknowingness, where, in occupying the space between and betwixt, something unknown is about to be birthed, occur, exist, and/or hover. This in-between space of unknowing can be one of vacillation or pause; what is key is that there are switch occurrences that bookmark the transformative self. Surprise, delight, freedom, peace of mind, loneliness, and/or confusion can all occur in these previously unknown spaces. Lostlessness disappears identity even as it might create it; who one thinks one is set aside to create a space where identity is allowed a re-invention. While lostlessness may occur or be experienced initially as uncomfortable, this type of switching actually is a place of excitement and celebration, where adventure exists, rather than loss.

My primary focus is thus specific: I am looking at the intersecting practice of non-normative gender, sexual, and identity switching that all of my experimental authors and their characters play with. Gertrude Stein, Jeanette Winterson, Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles, Anne Carson, and Anne Carson's translation of Sappho all demonstrate and play with switching; also, all of their narratives can be described within a sexually variant and gender variant reading. While my project is specifically centered in gender and sexually variant writing, reading, and/or experiences, I want to stress that this project resists all "strategic essentialism" of gender and sexual variability (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 146). The identities deconstructed in this dissertation can create and give space to, by their

playful and exploratory nature, a great deal of gender, sexual, and identity play and masquerade (whether they are stable or in flux); they elicit openings, possibilities, and ambiguities in writing, reading, deconstructing and recreating gender identifications, sexual identities, sex and gender roles, subversive and perverse practices, as well as subcultural and personal practices.

This dissertation is concerned with “variant” and “non-normative” gender and sexual identities, performance, and exploration. I use these terms to illustrate mutable locations, instances, preferences, and choices that are different from or outside the standardized ideologies and points of view that govern socially conventional sex and gender norms. Variant, non-normative gender implies locating one’s gender identification, playfulness, choices, and/or performance outside of the mainstream, male/female, masculine/feminine fixed gender norm binary; variant, non-normative sex and sexualities imply locating one’s sexual preferences, desires, and/or practices outside of the mainstream, heterosexual, reproductively based, acceptable societal norm.

By *gender variant* I mean anyone who chooses to live outside of the mainstream, socially proscribed, sanctioned gender roles, duties, performances, presentations, and identities of what it means to be the gender “woman” in North America. S/he may choose to stay in their born female or male body, or choose to morph, alter, or transition their gender in some way. Some gender variant women may consistently or mercurially appear to exhibit androgynous, masculine, and/or butch traits, behaviors, presentations, preferences, identities etc. By *sexually variant* I am referring to those who choose to dwell outside of the socially proscribed and sanctioned “normal” (hetero) sexual roles, desires, identities, duties, performances, presentations, and practices acceptable in North

American culture and society. This would include looking at those who desire and/or engage in non-mainstream, non-reproductively based sex.

Simply put, the gender and sexual variant is outside mainstream societal structures in her/his gender and sexual preferences, choices, and practices. To support their choices, s/he may choose to be part of one or more of the vast networks of feminist, gender bending, and/or pro-sex subcultural streams that allow for greater gender and/or sexual fluidity. These communities actively seek to honor and support the authentic self rather than the socially constructed, mandated self; these safe, inclusive spaces may be found in organizations and neighbourhoods, at events and online. The gender and sexually variant woman (or man) may identify as a dyke, lesbian, queer, trans, trans-identified, transgendered, intergendered, ambigendered, two-spirit, bisexual, pansexual, gay, a fag or however she may refer to herself.

Another popular term used to describe gender and sexual variants is *genderqueer*. I use the term *genderqueer* as an umbrella term for all gender identities that are outside the heteronormative gender binary system of assumptions that entertain only two genders. Genderqueers most often use the term to situate an internal, self identified, and constructed sense of gender and gender identity. Certainly, genderqueers may also identify with some of the other identities as noted above (such as woman, man, trans etc.). Genderqueers may embrace a range of feminine and masculine sensibilities, reject any gender category, ebb and flow on a gender continuum, and/or create, seek to live within, and be sustained by a third, fourth, or fifth gender identity. Some genderqueers use the term to blur some *or* any and all lines of gender and others will blur the lines of both gender and sexuality.

Depending on the circumstances, genderqueers may choose to “switch” up their use of pronouns as they switch in their gender identity, thus using both *she* and *he* depending on the circumstances. Thus, some genderqueers may use different or multiple pronouns such as *he*, *she*, *him* and *her*, whereas others prefer *they*, *ze*, and/or *hir*, and/or some may prefer to only use their given or chosen name for all self-references, thus circumnavigating the issue of gender assumptions and designations all together.²

²It should be noted that in addition to the open-ended usages noted above, some individuals may adopt using the terms *queer* or *genderqueer* for political reasons: to identify themselves as non-normative, outside the mainstream, progressive people of politics; others take on the term to *queer* their gender expressions and have their gender expressions live outside the traditional, conservative female/male determinants. In the 1990s the term **queer** was reclaimed by leftist, very politically astute, sometimes sexually deviant and/or pro-sex, LGBT folks to differentiate themselves from mainstream LGBT movements. It was a similar reclaiming as the word *dyke* was in relation to the word *lesbian*. Since then *queer* has replaced *bisexual* as to be *bi* has somehow become passé for non-mainstream progressives: the term *pansexual* more accurately disrupts the either/or binary that many bisexual folks would seek to challenge, which is put forth as one reason to ditch the descriptor *bi*, however few people use the term *pansexual*. Instead, since the mid 2000s or so, a new evolution of the term *queer* has emerged: interestingly, straight (or mostly straight) queer allies have moved to take on the identity of *queer* as a catchall to identify their political and social allegiances. *Queer* is now a term that has been adopted by progressive, queer friendly (and maybe leaning) straight people (with many divergent identities and experiences of their own). It might be seen that *queer* has become the new cool among the young, progressive set. Suffice to say, one can never be sure if a person or organization using the term *queer* is an ally to LGBTQ progressive politics, sexually exploratory, a gender bender, or LGBTQ (some might assert that this line of thinking now applies to gender as well). Thus, for some, the term *queer* no longer functions as powerfully as it once did: as a descriptor and code for gender and sexual variant people active in progressive politics. For those queers who deem ourselves to be radical sexual *and* political beings, this conflation can confuse what have been (and may still seem like) important lines of individual and community identification. At the most extreme, it can seem an appropriation. That said, as the term *queer* is delineated and becomes a lucrative catchall, our larger, ultimate goal of inclusivity and acceptance may be becoming much more actual and real: LGBTQ communities and spaces may no longer be needed, let alone isolated: locations based on sexuality have been moving into including radical, progressive politics within the acceptance and blurring of sexual fluidity and identity. Perhaps, if the long-term goal is a society that is equal, free, and respecting across all spectrums and among all people—with ethnicity, sexuality, gender, age, ability—no longer how we define ourselves and/or others, we will no longer need spaces where identity is the signifier: it simply will no longer be necessary as we will gather as humans instead of identities. One might argue for a conversation of imitation, of course, asserting that we still need separate, identity-based spaces and that mainstream politics and decades of activism do not corroborate this progression to oneness.

The term *gender* is used to refer to one's sense of self, regardless of genitalia.³ This implies that gender is socially constructed, that we have choice, and that gender is mutable.¹ When I use the words *women* and *woman* it is the broadest sense possible and with all the vastness that can be implied; thus, *women* includes both cisgendered (assigned female at birth), transgendered women, and anyone who identifies as a woman however that looks like and is for her. I also use *she* and *her* throughout my work, while occasionally using s/he or substituting he, for the sole purpose of readability and flow.

While many people resist and/or dislike the term *woman* or *women*, *she* or *her*, because of the words historically, culturally, and socially constructed constraints and assumptions (which is *one* effective strategy for ushering in a rethinking of gender and identity categories), I choose to challenge the assumptions that are evoked by the term *woman* precisely by using it within a revisionist, progressive, feminist framework and context. Using the word *people* or *folk* is often not descriptive enough and, while these terms allow for openings of gender variance and possibilities, they could lessen the importance of this project's particular focus and impact, which is to look at a very underrepresented and understudied segment of our culture and academic milieu: gender and/or sexually variant women who switch.⁴

The Fragility of Society:

“Present fears are less than horrible imaginings” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)

³I will briefly look at the social constructions of gender and sexual norms further on in this Introduction. Throughout this dissertation biology is irrelevant unless I make a point of it being relevant.

⁴Indeed, this dissertation is only the beginning: future books and projects on other gender and sexual identities, age groups, and/or practices in switching are to follow.

To consider and be comfortable with authentic displays of variant genders and sexualities seems such a basic, healthy, productive, powerful, potentially opening and enlivening premise; yet, sometimes, when switching presentations or ways of being occur conflict, questioning, confusion, doubt, judgment, invisibility, and shame arise—both within the personal life or the text/narrative *and/or* in the external, outside community, society, and/or reading. Why dwell/consider variance is one question to ask, but much more empowering is to ask: why not?

In his groundbreaking two-volume *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault asked readers to begin to look at their individual and societal beliefs and values and to be open and willing to reconsider their positions and points of view regarding sexuality.⁵ He encourages us to consider: “there are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is going to go on looking and reflecting at all.” I invite us all to *really* take on what Foucault is asking us to do: give up what we perceive and think we know as the truth in regards to sexuality and gender; give up knowing what we think we know and be willing to consider thinking and perceiving differently than we do. In the areas of sex and gender, which are two areas of our life and society that are heavily and emotionally laden with predetermined knowing, this is a fundamental step in opening up what is possible both for us as individuals and for the larger society.

⁵For cross-disciplinary, historical approaches to Western sexuality from the ancient world to the sexual revolution and into the early contemporary present please see: *Sexuality* ed. Robert A. Nye (Oxford UP 1999), *We Are Everywhere* Ed. Blassius and *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. I would offer that Jeffery Weeks’ question “so what is a history of sexuality a history of” ignites each of these anthologies. For more biological based discussions, see Anne Fausto-Sterling’s books and publications, specifically *The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough* in *the Sciences* March/April 1993 as cited in *Sexualities: Identities, Behaviours, and Society*. Ed. Michael Skimmel and Rebecca F. Plante. NY: Oxford, UP 2004.

An important first step is to reflect on the conscious and unconscious moral rightness that is embedded and accepted in our culture vis à vis heteronormativity. Western society is infused with an ethics-constructed (made up) history of proper sexual and gender conduct. Sexual and gender conduct is regulated by ideologies that have found their way into our laws, administrative, governmental, legal, social and family codes, procedures, and foundations; and these avenues of socialization, religion, education, and institutions of mainstream ideology, expression, and thought are powerfully influential, heavily guarded, and maintained. Our society does not view the co-creating of authentic sexual and moral norms as valuable; rather, constructive criticism and creative contribution are often highly suspect and shunned. It is thus exceedingly important that those of us committed to supporting full expressions of gender and sexuality expose and pay attention to the false and constricting stereotypes that form and influence our gender and sexual expressions. Both intentionally and unintentionally, North American society, our smaller communities, and even our subcultures keep non-traditional and non-normative identities and desires (and arguably, desire in general) closeted. Controls around desire, sexuality, and identity are delivered both overtly and covertly.

The invention of sexual norms and conduct—and its wicked sister sexual perversion—was a gradual process that took form over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Sexologist and psychiatrist Richard Von Krafft-Ebbing was an influential voice as 19th-century psychiatry accepted his theories, which still permeate modern thinking. He wrote, “every expression of [sexual instinct] that does not correspond with the purpose of nature—i.e.: propagation—must be regarded as perverse” (*Psychopathia*

Sexualis, with Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct, 52-53, as cited in *Sexuality*, Ed Robert A. Nye, 149). For some, this may seem a comical view of sexual pleasure or instinct. However, consider how propagation/reproduction still informs the notion of sexual instinct; consider the mainstream, heteronormative current that runs underneath most cultures and religions: a woman is made for a man, our language-based culture defines a woman's vagina as a sheath for a sword (Oxford Dictionary), and most organized religions of the world advocate the doctrine that sex ought to be propagation/reproductively based. Krafft-Ebbing's theory specified that "*perversion* of the sexual instinct ... is not to be confounded with *perversity* in the sexual act ... in order to differentiate between disease (*perversion*, seen as involuntary) and vice (*perversity*, seen as willful), one must investigate the perverse act. Therein will be found the key to the diagnosis" (as cited in *Sexuality*, 147). The involuntary willful distinction still informs, most obviously, psychiatry and law. It could be asserted that the rigor and zeal with which some 20th-century psychologists (such as Freud) and sexologists (such as Krafft-Ebbing) had for investigating perversity were acts of perversity themselves, outweighing any of their subjects acts: willful or involuntary!

In Arnold I. Davidson's 1990 *Closing up the Corpses: Diseases of Sexuality and the Emergence of the Psychiatric Style of Reasoning* Davidson takes Krafft-Ebbing's defining one step further. He writes, "in order to be able to determine precisely what phenomena are functional disturbances or diseases of the sexual instinct, one must also ... specify what the normal or natural function of this instinct exists in. Without knowing what the normal function of the instinct is, *everything and nothing* could be counted as a functional disturbance. There would be no principled criterion to include or exclude any

behavior from the disease category of perversion. So one must first *believe* that there is a natural function of the sexual instinct and then believe that this function is quite determinate” (italics mine 148-49). And so Krafft-Ebbing and Davidson’s concept of the heterosexual, reproductive function of sexual instinct form a belief and criteria system of sexual normality’s and perversions. *Functional deviations* was another term used to describe unnatural sexual instinct. These interpretations became natural and, without doubt, “had anyone denied either that the sexual instinct has a natural function or that this function is procreation, diseases of perversion, as we understand them, would not have entered psychiatric” study and psychology (149). Homosexuality, as well as S/M and fetishism all became perversions. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s 1870 novel *Venus in Furs* gave birth to the term *masochism* via Krafft-Ebbing, while the Marquis de Sade ushered forth the term *sadism* via his exploratory novels.

By the turn of the 20th-century, the spectrum of social variability and individuality had contributed to the notion that any perversity might become a potential perversion, a perverse individual, and a pervert. Perversion began to have autonomous meaning when compared to the unexamined norm of reproductive sex (*Sexuality*, 143). In *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance, 1871-1914*, Lawrence Birken writes that in the context of celebrating the cultural right to self expression “we must perceive a moral basis for the universally experienced but radically idiosyncratic desire that fuels the sexual revolution. The most varied sexual repertoire, the most abandoned promiscuity takes on a positive moral significance, however loath we are to admit it, in a culture in which the desire of the masses is as important as their labor” (12).

The term *perverse* is currently defined as “showing a deliberate and obstinate desire to behave in a way that is unreasonable or unacceptable, often in spite of the consequences; contrary to the accepted or expected standard or practice” (Oxford English Dictionary). The first part of this definition certainly may be seen to apply to non-consensual, heinous acts, such as rape or molestation. However, as many pro-sex advocates have asserted and relentlessly sought to explain⁶ the context of consent and pleasure is most often absent when the word *pervert*, or *perverted* is used in the mainstream; this absence has a profound effect on how we view sexual activities and proclivities. If we hold the belief that only we as individuals have the power to name whether if the actions we consent to are empowering or not, how can *any sexual act we choose* be perverted, “unreasonable, or unacceptable”? To pervert is to “alter (something) from its original course, meaning, or state to a distortion or corruption of what was first intended” or to lead (someone) “away from what is considered right, natural, or acceptable.” A “pervert,” even if one considers themselves at the source of choosing what is acceptable and consensual, thus becomes someone “whose sexual behavior is regarded as abnormal and unacceptable.”

The majority of Krafft-Ebbing’s reproductive, propagation, heterosexually based perspectives and judgments continue to form our sexual belief and practice systems. They can be seen in our language use and word meanings. For example, adjectives of the word *perverted* as found in *The Oxford English Dictionary* support the negative,

⁶See Pat Califia, Gayle Rubin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jeffery Weeks, Annie Sprinkle, and Dan Savage to name a few. Surprisingly, a quick Google search of “sex positive feminism” brings up a surprisingly excellent Wikipedia entry that includes well-researched paragraphs on gender, sexual identity, and BDSM (even including a very accurate, dyke-centric photo of a BDSM scene).

unhealthy inference and run along the lines of “unnatural, deviant, warped, corrupt, twisted, abnormal, unhealthy, depraved, perverse, aberrant, immoral, debauched, debased, degenerate, evil, wicked, vile, amoral, wrong, bad; informal sick, sicko, kinky, and pervy.” What is pertinent here is the base assumption and foundation of the unacceptability of difference or *different* from that which is normal and/or standard; different *becomes* and is seen as a negative—often to be avoided and/or thwarted. Charting this point of view on sex and sexuality, which has an implicit moral judgment within it, allows for us to create and make visible another point of view: we can distinguish that something new is possible. The awareness of how the word *pervert* or *perverted* came about allows us some space to reconsider different points of view concerning what *is* normal, reasonable, and acceptable.

Havelock Ellis was one of the most influential, forward thinking sexologists of the 20th-century. Unlike many sexologists and psychologists who offered a plethora of interpretation, Ellis, with research based, methodological consistency, detailed hundreds of cases without coming from a reproductively based point of view or perspective to distort them. His two volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* is still indispensable as a resource for case studies of sexual study and variability. In his preface to Volume I, Ellis writes, “in this particular field [of sexology] the evil of ignorance is magnified by our efforts to suppress that which never can be suppressed, though in the effort of suppression it may become perverted” (*SPS, Vol. I: The Evolution of Modesty: The Phenomena of Sexual Periodicity, Auto-Eroticism*, 1919, iii-v). First published in *Sexual Inversion*, 1897). It was Ellis who brazenly led the way for future sexologists and philosophers, like Kinsey and Foucault, to examine sexuality and perversion without

interpretation and without the moral judgment or belief system of “wrong.” Ellis wisely asserted that “when the rigid secrecy is once swept away a sane and natural reticence becomes for the first time possible” (*SPS, Vol. I: The Evolution of Modesty: The Phenomena of Sexual Periodicity, Auto-Eroticism*, 1919, iii-v.).

Bringing further awareness to the construction of sexuality, this time from a woman’s perspective, Margaret Sanger advocated for birth control and thus the visibility of women’s sexual emancipation. Theodor van de Velde and Marie Stopes asserted that oral pleasure was important, and Alfred Kinsey extensively studied varying sexual practices over a forty-year career. Kinsey’s commitment to honoring sexualities which had been previously deemed “unnatural” had him document 20,000 interviews; in an effort to position what was perceived as “abnormal” Kinsey’s research demonstrated that “abnormal” sexualities were, really, quite normal. In 1948 he would assert that the “heterosexuality or homosexuality of many individuals is not an all-or-none proposition ... it is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tried to force facts into separated pigeon-holes” (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, 638-39).

One can scarcely fathom that this 1948 concept has not taken to shape our society’s proclivity to put ourselves and others in simply constructed and easily identifiable familiar boxes. Kinsey worked tirelessly in his effort to expand gender and sexual norms and paved the way, much as Ellis did, for all those that would take on the study of sex and sexuality. Consider that Judith Butler’s entire oeuvre could be seen to be based on a few lines of Kinsey: “the living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we

shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex” (Kinsey 63). Certainly, we could take out the words “sexual behavior” and “sex” and put in *any* descriptor that equates to full self-expression and living a life of aliveness: the sooner we move the theory that the living world and human beings are a multi-dimensional continuum, ever changing and fluid, the sooner we reach a radically accepting reality of being diverse humans.

Concurrent with some of the movements in sex studies noted above, emancipation led the discussion of the responsibility of both participants (sex happened in couples) to take place. In “New Male Responsibilities: Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Techniques, which was published in 1930, T.H. Van de Velde wrote: “monotony can only be relieved by variation” (338). A radical concept for those who choose monogamous and/or reproductive based sex! Van de Velde would still equate sex with love and within marriage, however. He asserted, “as a rule women are frigid and cold,” yet made this leap: “until taught by her husband, after which, if successful, her desire efficiently will be at least equal to his endurance, if not surpass it” (271). I raise this notion from 1930 to make the point that while reproductive sex was the “norm,” other currents of sexual liberation were operative.

Libertine Obstacles

For the most part, heteronormativity, bourgeois hegemony, sex role stereotypes, and a culture of surveillance continue to govern and dictate the display of North American gender and sexual identities. Asking oneself “where is heterosexuality *not* privileged” allows one a little clarity in seeing how heteronormativity governs our world.

Without even really choosing for ourselves, we hold fast to a center of societal values, which are constructed as “normal.” These values are primarily based on reproduction and are seen as consistent, unquestioning truths to be lived and carried out without deviation. These values influence how we are raised and child-rear, how we are educated and educate, how we read and write, how we consider Literature and Theory, how we vote, how we consider ourselves, our communities, and our world. And it is these values and social contexts and sexual socialization that provide us with “the institutional and cultural arena in which we create our sexualities” (Kimmel & Plante, 73).

In a thoroughly evocative study that asks “How Libertine is the Netherlands?” Gert Hekma sites five obstacles to sexual freedom, five frameworks that create our sexual arenas, that have prevailed in Western thought and thinking despite our experiencing many sexual and identity revolutions: *The first obstacle is “the sexual-gender division”* (212 italics mine): basically, sex exists within the male sphere or domain. Women’s spaces, engagement, and sex practices are barely visible and/or demonized compared to men’s. Consider two glaring examples which demonstrate dramatic gender inequality: the first is that women’s sexual visibility most predominantly exists in prostitution and the selling of something via their bodies: women’s bodies are often used against them; the second is the “just say no” campaigns, which are most often related to girls, rarely to boys. Our culture promotes sexual gender divisions with the foundational and passionate belief and dichotomy that sexually engaged girls are “easy,” “loose,” or “sluts” while boys are “experienced.” And, while many women are liberated in their sexuality and body, it could be argued that “no one in this culture has a sexuality that is completely unfettered from these moral and ethical pronouncements” (Kimmel and Plante 73).

“The second is the view that sex and sexuality belong to nature” (Hekma, 212).

This belief can readily be seen in the fact that “masturbation is not considered something you have to learn; supposedly, it comes naturally.” For some, even more pronounced than the radical notion that sex and/or masturbation would be something that our teens may need to learn is the notion that it is healthy. For girls, especially, masturbation and touching oneself is, often, harshly discouraged. While masturbation is seen to come naturally, it is also linked to unhygienic, inappropriate, and promiscuous actions; similarly with boys, touching oneself is often associated with having aversive affects later in life (desensitization is still a common angle of approach to discourage masturbation while past approaches within the medical and psychiatric fields included homosexuality and penile dysfunction). So while we live in a culture that screams sexuality via images, media, advertising, jokes, representations, and conversations, sex education is, generally, approached as teaching our youth the biological functions of the sexual organs and “the prevention of disaster, not about the producing of pleasure” (214). Sex is seen as a natural drive, instinctual: “although most contemporary social theorists believe that sex is culturally constructed, very few people outside this discipline or academia share that view point” (214).

The third obstacle “is that sex and love should be combined” (Hekma, 212). For much of the industrial world, sex is equated with love. Sex is often associated with love, commitment, and/or potential love or marriage: marriage is the future expectation. Interestingly, faithful, monogamous sex is a recent 20th-century invention. For the most part, gay men, straight closeted men, sex trade workers, and a few liberated others are the only ones that separate love and sex. Sex consumed for pleasure (which includes the

need to relieve stress and tension as well as the need and quest for intimacy) is, for the most part, removed from society's conversations of/on "healthy" sex. Kimmel and Plante make the added claim that "sexual identity itself is the basis for inequality as gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people ... and those who practice marginalized sexual activities are marginalized, labeled deviant, and the subject of scorn ... and discrimination. To desire the "wrong" person and enjoy the "wrong" behavior, may be risking your life" (73).

The fourth obstacle "is that sex is a private affair" (Hekma, 212). As Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia and many others have documented, "the idea of sexual privacy is deeply ingrained in western cultures and makes all signs of sexuality in public highly problematic, from sex acts to sex education to erotic imagery on the streets and in the media" (217).⁷ Consider that the public sides of sex and sex education mostly consist of laws, policing and enforcement, scandals (usually in the realm of politics), social ostracization, and social, institutional norms. Those who engage in public displays of affection witness the chagrin and finger wagging of those around them, which is often accompanied by the clichéd advice to "get a room."⁸ To add, while our "sexual culture shrouds sexuality in secrecy and shame – it's dirty and shameful—"it also exists as

⁷This topic, as well as both authors noted, will be discussed further on in this Introduction. See also Lisa Duggan "Queering the State" in *Sex Wars* and Jyoti Puri's "Sexuality, State, and Nation" in *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*.

⁸Hekma's article is specifically concerned with looking at the fact that counter to the notion of Amsterdam being a place of sexual rights, freedoms, and acceptance, the Dutch are as repressed and restricted as any other country. Strong, state controls around the Dutch red light districts, public displays of the erotic, sexual advertising, and homosexuality are severely policed and geared toward a tourist market. The "filthification" of public culture with erotic postcards, for example, is noted as forbidden. To add, gay and lesbian parades have strict rules, routes, and regulations, sex shops and cinemas have been closed down, and cruising walkways have been curtailed and restrained by changing the cities infrastructure via adding buildings and bicycle lanes (218).

delightful and ecstatic within the “proper” spheres (Kimmel and Plante). Hekma makes the keen, often unconnected, assertion that the “rejection of claims to space by Gays and Lesbians and others with alternative sexual interests makes public space into a heterosexual, respectable sphere that confirms the heterosexism of ... society” (217).

The fifth obstacle is the notion that “sex should be non violent” (Hekma, 212).

While some may have resistance to looking at intersections of roughness and sex, because we equate sex with love—and thus loving, tender acts—Hekma raises the point that “sexual pleasures can be stimulated by various contrasts, such as gender, bodily aesthetics, power, age, class, color and so forth ... difference, like disgust, is a frequent companion to desire” (219). Yet, like all the obstacles noted, real aspects of sex are silenced, understated, controlled, repressed, admonished, and thus our society remains stagnant in our sexual expressions and lives: healthy, full self expressions of desire are hardly seen and witnessed in main stream culture. As I will discuss further on, expressions and denials of sexuality only lead to underground, distorted, and hindered expressions.

Carefully examining our own belief and truth systems as we consider some of the above provides a framework to unpack and reflect where we, as keen thinkers, theorists, and cultural makers may sit in our beliefs, fears, and discomfort with sex and gender norms and variances. This important step is often shied away from, yet acknowledging our points of views and moral judgments and/or biases, where and how they are formed, and what conversations and contexts they are *really* based on, is something to be very mindful of. Let us then consider: where do we allow ourselves room to reconsider,

rethink, and move beyond what we know to be “true”? These reflections are advantageous for us as scholars.

Transgressive Shifts and Building Bridges

While the larger society often seems overly committed to upholding these sorts of moral policing and enlists shame, embarrassment, and the fear of being “abnormal” when one operates outside of these “normal” values, queer (sub)cultures—academic and non-academic—are not immune to this policing; in fact, subcultures have become very good at it. Sexual and gender deviance, most especially, are often met with discomfort, confusion, confrontation, antagonism, and/or disbelief: “deviance” is thus kept on the margins and fringes of our treasured communities, society, and academic discourse.

In the still profound manifesto “Thinking Sex” Rubin discusses the history and concepts surrounding the visibility and inclusion of transgressive sexual and identity practices. She challenges sexual essentialism and hierarchies and introduces a very useful tool: “the wheel of sex hierarchy”⁹ to begin to question where we stand in accepting or damning gender and sex practices and preferences. This wheel juxtaposes “the charmed circle” of “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality” with “the outer limits” of bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality” (13). The wheel illustrates ideological beliefs and values as relational (consciously or not) and operative when thinking, reading, and theorizing about basic sexuality, gender, identity, and transgressive practices. The charmed inner circle comprises of heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-

⁹I add and amend Rubin’s wheel in later chapters in the hopes that this visual tool (and her analysis in “Thinking Sex”) will enter into current gender and sexual theory, discussions and analysis. Fausto-Sterling’s diagram of sexual and gender continuants, in *Sexing the Body*, is also an incredibly rich place to situate bold new queer theory.

commercial/free, coupled, in relationship, same generation, private/at home, bodies only, and vanilla sex practices and preferences. The damned outer circle comprises homosexuality, unmarried/in sin, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial/for money, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, public/outside the home, pornography, manufactured objects, and sadomasochistic sex practices and preferences. As with any binary there exist gradations between what is considered normal and unnatural, dangerous and safe, good and bad.

Bridging sex panic and negativity with pro-sex arguments is useful when beginning or dwelling in a conversation on gender and sexual variancy. The sex panic of the 1970s followed from the anti-abuse and anti-porn crusades of the 1960s. The religious right and the second wave feminism of antiviolence and rape crisis activists, most notably voiced in the work of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon became strange bedfellows. Sex was wrong and a defamation of character and personhood. For the prudent feminists, sex was positioned as abuse, with women either in the position of victims, with such phrases as “vaginal sex/thrusting is persistent invasion” (*Intercourse* 122); while for the religious right, sex was still equated to love within the marriage system.

We have witnessed the notion, belief, and construction of “bad sexual citizens” move through the state-sanctioned harassment and persecution of the 1950s, through the liberationism of the 1970s and into the assimilations of the current decade. Decades of waves of legal reform and activism that have balanced tolerance versus equality still have us existing in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” society where we exchange marriage vows and desires in closets free from public scrutiny, policing, and acceptance. The “national ideal

of the heterosexual citizen” is still challenged enough to be unable to witness and honor same-sex marriage vows, the vows and legalities of a marriage commitment defended as reserved for those that are citizen enough. It could easily be argued that liberationism lives “primarily as a cultural sensibility” (Seidman 227). The community movements and activism of groups such as The Gay Liberation Front, The Mattachine Society, The Daughters of Bilitis, Act Up!, NOW, The Lesbian Avengers, Sex Panic!, Radical Faeries and Furies, and Radicalesbians having worked, lobbied, sustained, and celebrated huge efforts towards equality and celebrating differences, yet the main structures of heteronormativity and control still very much govern our society and sensibilities.

What require transparency are the dichotomous norms of gender, sexuality and difference: these dichotomies lie behind state controls, repression, policing, and fear of the “other” or different. We want to continue to engage in some probing questions: where do we witness inequalities between “normal” and “abnormal” sexualities and sex practices? Where do we witness inequalities between “normal” and “abnormal” genders and gender identities? If we as a society seek to value celebrating our differences, might social controls and policing of choices that support the dichotomies of “good” or “bad” citizenry need to cease at all levels?

Assimilationist organizations, like The Gay Activist Alliance, have demonstrated a mainstreaming of our differences and alternative lifestyle choices to move us from the margins as outsiders to the center as acceptable citizens. Whereas it used to be that “the fight for gender justice was viewed as inseparable from struggles to transform gender roles, the institution of marriage and family, and the political economy of capitalism and imperialism” Seidman and others assert that assimilatory politics and practice do not

challenge “the broader spectrum of sexual-intimate norms that govern behavior, such as the norm of marriage, monogamy, or gender norms of sexuality” (226-27). The question of marginal or central lives and acceptance raises the question: can one absorb, resemble, and integrate without losing that which makes one different?

While some may not want to be different, others seek to celebrate difference and want the freedom to live those distinctions fearlessly. Conversely, might the radical notion that sex differences and queer desires are not personal, not to be owned, claimed, or worn as badges serve one not only individually but also as a society? Would a depth and resonance of acceptance and authenticity that has never been known be possible? Might this freedom be worth considering accepting that people simple *are*, and thus double as a way to resist all strategic essentialism?

The construction and sensibility of outsider, if ceased in all structures and thinking within our society, not just within sexual or gender constructions, would allow for equality to have the wide range and effect that many of us seek. In *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* Urvashi Vaid writes:

Civil rights strategies do not challenge the moral and antisexual underpinnings of homophobia because homophobia does not originate in our lack of full civil equality. Rather, homophobia arises from the nature and construction of the political, legal, economic, sexual, racial, and family systems within which we live. As long as the rights-oriented movement refuses to address these social institutions and cultural forces we cannot eradicate homophobic prejudice (183).

Building bridges among movements of equality, or engaging in either coalitional or social justice work as it is sometimes called, is something that predominantly feminist women of color, many of them lesbian, began in the 1980s. Groundbreaking anthologies, lectures, community gatherings and activism were rooted in the teachings and personal

life examples of Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldula, bell hooks, and many others who worked to deconstruct connected systems of oppression. Many coalitional politics now link human rights and sexual rights.¹⁰ As Vaid notes above, we must continue to challenge systems that do not work to foster equality; further, we must create new paradigms for equality at all levels to be fully experienced.

In the informative book *Sex in Crisis: The New Sexual Revolution and the Future of American Politics*, Dagmar Herzog supports a key aspect of this dissertation: that inclusivity is paramount in our movements that advocate for a world where sexual and gender equality exist. She writes that what remains missing is:

A defense of sexual rights that does not privilege those who match the norm over those who do not, that does not lie about the complexities of human desire, that does not need to pretend that sex is perfect every time (if only you follow the rules and/or buy this product), and that does not root sexual rights only in the negative imperative to reject sexual victimization but also affirms humans' rights to sexual expression, sexual pleasure, and the freely chosen formation of intimate relationships. What's missing is the basic idea that sexual rights are human rights — for adolescents, sexual minorities, and for individuals both within and outside the institution of marriage (182).

¹⁰At present, for example, we are either participating in or witnessing the OCCUPY movement, which links all systemic oppressions and seeks to create a world of equality for all. OCCUPY is the only current *global* example of a community group and movement wherein the main tenant is accepting, valuing, and honoring *all* differences and *all* people as equal regardless of how difficult or problematic those differences may be. The goal of the movement, on a global scale, is the equality and thriving of all people, across all spectrums of society, and, further, for all sentient beings and our planet. No doubt, it is a movement that is born out of decades of coalitional activism and theory and, especially, the coalition building across social justice and equality movements that so many of us have been active with over the past two to three decades. The bridging of every grassroots movement for equality, justice, and acceptance, be it racial, gender, sexual, or environmental equality, forms the roots of the OCCUPY movement. The economic discussion is simply one important component in the global effort of setting a very high (and unknown) bar, which would see all people standing in a self-expressed, creation based world. The movement courageously aims high within notions of freedom and inclusion, recognizing, as many do through coalition work, that each effort and step toward equality and justice is interconnected. While my project takes on looking at gender and sexuality variances and how the us as individuals can dwell in the freedom to shape our erotic lives, my project is connected to every single movement for social and economic justice by nature of celebrating and creating a world where anything and everything is possible.

Yet, the anti-pornography and anti-BDSM activists, scholars, and writers, self-identified as either feminists and/or organized religion leaning folks, would question how pornography or BDSM could be regarded as a sexual and human right. For such advocates, the notion that such acts and preferences could be consensual is regarded as false. They further assert that BDSM is simply replicating oppressive hierarchies and relationships, which is a similar line of thinking to the notion that butch/femme relationships mirror the heterosexual model.

Many decades of confusion and fear-based reactivity around BDSM have served to produce a two-fold effect: *the first* is to elicit a political and social agenda that is remarkably anti-sex and restrictive of personal choice, freedom, and action. The fact that gay men cannot donate sperm or blood in Canada and that same-sex marriage and adoption is still illegal in many countries of Europe speaks volumes on how we view sexual difference. Same-sex sexual activity is still illegal and punishable by way of prison terms in countries ranging from Western Africa and Western Asia to the Caribbean and Central America. The age of consent laws are increasing, rather than decreasing, in both Canada and the US despite the fact that teens are having sex at similar ages and rates as before. Sexism, paranoia, fear of the unknown are subtle when countries like Canada, England, and the United States support anti-erotica, pornography, and BDSM censorship legislation and laws that, effectively, make adult consensual acts and choices illegal; consent has become “immaterial”¹¹ and pro-sex arguments are “degrading and dehumanizing.” Consent laws in many US states, Kansas and Georgia for example,

¹¹From the Court of Appeal ruling in England, February 1992, wherein fifteen men (none of whom brought charges) had home-made sex videos confiscated and were given prison sentences up to four and a half years. See “Sado-masochists jailed for ‘degrading’ sex acts” in *The Guardian*, December 1990.

punish young people for consensual homosexual acts with far greater penalties than for heterosexual consensual acts. Concurrently, fourteen US states are taking a stand for a responsible safe sex education program, refusing federal funding for sex education owing to the federal requirement that schools only teach abstinence. The “don’t ask, don’t tell” and “just say no” policies and laws stifle sexual and gender identity and expression as our North American legal and legislative system punishes mothers and women especially, but also fathers and gay men, who are LGBTQ and deemed deviant. Countless political scandals and dismissals, military discharges, corporate and educational firings, school ground beatings and murders, and a long historical, medical, political, legal, and cultural record of the suppression of sexual and gender “deviancy” and “perversion” have produced a pervasive culture of fear and cover-up, closeting and secrecy.

The second effect, of course, is that consensual pro-sex, BDSM, and alternative gender and sex communities and activities are pushed underground. Isolation, repression, silence, and a loss of visibility and community are the results. All one has to do is peruse the “casual encounter” advertisements of any city’s Craigslist site to find a plethora of perverse, subversive desires seeking manifestation. Further, the free, culture newspaper of any big city, such as *The Village Voice* in New York, offers similar advertisements and searches: many either originating from and/or geared to relatively conventional, middle and upper class men. One could also visit a bathhouse or rest stop to find heterosexual, married men seeking out same sex, casual encounters (while insisting they are straight), walk past a street corner where sex workers stand waiting for their next customer, or curiously ask those who are willing to be honest about their desires and preferences a few questions. The casual encounters ads and the street corners specifically cater to the

plethora of mostly married, “straight,” and otherwise conventional men looking for something very much outside of their “normative” lives. These ads, seeking out, and experiences are not rare or even uncommon: they are regular/normal occurrences in a culture of reproductive, heterosexual, monogamous sex even as the culture deems them deviant and suppresses the discomfort underground.

This is the same climate that considers feminism an “f” word and Women’s Studies an over-funded, illegitimate department run by man-hating, over-determined, angry lesbians who are simply “in need of a good lay.” Feminists and LGBTQ people continue to be seen as *queer* in the 1920s connotation of the word, gay men continue to be the brunt of purse jokes, flips of the hand, and raising the octave of the voice until a suitable amount of laughter is heard, and lesbian/queer/dyke women are at the butt end of bulldagger, not man enough, trying to be or act like a man, not attractive enough to get a man, can I get in the middle, who wears the pants jokes, commentary, and affronts. The hostile, violent, offensive, and accusatorial interactions that many genderqueer and queer women (and men) experience when attempting to use a public restroom, with security guards and fellow attendees, are numerous enough to fill a monthly magazine. Policing, enforcing and living from the stereotypes and norms of what a woman or man *should* look like, how they ought to present themselves, dress, appear, and/or be, limit the world for everyone. Ought the same not apply to our sexual choices?

There exists North American and European access to pride days, LGBTQ centers and organizations, human rights legislation, same sex marriages in some states, provinces, and countries, a visibility and acceptance that no other decade has witnessed. Further, legislative and social reforms are continually being sought. For example, in

September of 2011, the addition of an “X” category of gender/sex (the terms are used indiscriminately) to identify intersexed and transsexual people (to which a person must have Doctor’s note and/or be undergoing “clinical study”) on passports from Australia was approved. Yet, a network of large-scale walk-in closets and silences abounds as North American undercurrents of anxiety and fear surround “deviant” LGBTQ sex and proclivities.

Those who occupy variant or non-normative combinations of the above, even within our don’t-box-me-in LGBTQ subcultures, do not always experience positive press or visibility. Sometimes non-normative folks are categorized as confused, wrong, weird, abnormal, and the like. Understandings of normal and abnormal genders and sexualities can be deeply internalized: one is either male or female, butch or femme, boy/i or girl, feminine, masculine or androgynous, man or woman, top or bottom, sadist or masochist. As much research has shown, individuals who challenge societal norms of binary conceptualizations of sex and gender, who may live androgynously between genders or be fluid in their gender expressions, are likely to be ridiculed and stigmatized. Living a life on guard takes a serious toll on one’s internal self-acceptance, integrity, and place in society as many personal narratives have recounted:

I don’t live without gender. Every day I’m forced to make a conscious choice about what part of myself to reveal on that specific day. How vulnerable am I willing to be? How strong do I feel? Somedays its great fun and sometimes it’s a real drag. It’s never not an issue, but it makes me who I am. (Justin Bond in Kate Bornstein’s *My Gender Workbook*, 283)

Issues of safety for genderqueer people are often a daily occurrence.

Experiencing the fear, anger, disbelief, and questioning when we leave the house and use public transit or a public restroom—and the discomfort that some folks experience and

have when sharing space with us—can serve to constrict authentic displays of gender and sexual variability as well as authentic displays of our common, heart-centered humanness. Individuals and allies, who make up LGBTQ and humanitarian focused communities, are called upon to double our efforts in being alert to how we, individually, constrict our own gender and sexual displays as well as those of others. Looking at how one feels and thinks when experiencing a challenge to the binary systems that are held as beliefs is critical.¹²

Gagne, Tenksbury, and McGangley’s research corroborates the reality that “gender is not a natural and inevitable outgrowth of sex.” They conclude, “those who are not comfortable expressing gender that is congruent with genital configuration experience an overwhelming urge to experience gender in alternative ways. Nonetheless, the vast majority stay within the gender binary as masculine men and feminine women” (247). The tendency to “stay within the binary gender system is so strong” that researchers¹³ have asserted that “gender determines sex, rather than the reverse. Given the limited range of identities available to them it is interesting, but not surprising, that the

¹²For example: when someone publicly shares that they are a male person with breasts or a female person with a penis, not ostracizing the person any more than they already are would be a progressive action; considering the barriers that each person may experience at every level of society; being willing to (re)consider the gender presentations that we are use to and/or comfortable with in order to provide a safe space for transgressive individuals to express themselves; constructing our response outside of the emotional and physical abuse that those who are publicly perceived as “not woman” or “not man” experience; engaging in a more inclusive awareness and mindfulness as people in our life cross over into gender and sexual choices that are “other.”

¹³Gagne, Tenksbury, and McGangley cite Bernice Hausman. On Hausman fitting into Sex Studies, see *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* Ed. Chris Beasley, Sage Publications. See also: Bernice Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1995 and “Cosmetic Surgery and Transgender Discourse in the Twentieth Century,” *Digital Anatomy*. Christina Lammer, Ed. Vienna: Turin and Kant, 2001 (86-97). In these texts, Hausman is mostly concerned with transsexuality as a way to unpack the historical and social constructions of our sex-gender systems. She critically examines the relationship between transsexuality and the medical field and practice of sex reassignment surgery.

overwhelming majority of transgendered individuals adhere to traditional conceptualizations of sex and gender” (247).

So while many feminists, progressives, LGBTQ folks, medical professionals and theories have to varying degrees sought to disrupt gender binary systems, conservative sexual judgments, and the fear of appearing or being deviant, or worse *perverts*, these “normalcies” continue to be ingrained in all aspects of North American society and academia. The fear and paranoia that guide such policing, while sometimes based on a past traumatic or isolated experience, are most often based on unfamiliarity. One might argue that having to defend sexual pleasures and choices is only as unreasonable as attacking and problematizing consensual sexual pleasure choices.

When the historicity is distinguished, most North Americans would assert, at a base level, that each of us has the moral and constitutional right to choose and name what brings us—as individuals—pleasure and happiness. If we take it that, in actual fact, there never has been nor could there ever be, any real, upheld basis for consensual “conventional” sexual norms, despite the fact that many folks attempt to have it otherwise, the notion of subversion or perversion actually becomes illogical and preposterous. For, truly, sexuality and desire are so individualistic and impermanent that no consensus on what is “normative” or conventional can ever—truthfully and authentically—be reached.

Sexual conventionality can be deconstructed as a lie, and wherever there is a lie there is deception, manipulation, and lapses of integrity: within a lie, and within any hidden, lurking desires, no possibility for honest, integrity based, self-expressed living and being exists. Thus, the sooner we bring the lies of our past-based, made-up,

conventional “norms” to light, to begin to look at the negative impacts of upholding any lie is a good place to start, the safer, happier, self-expressed, and more joy filled we all will be (no matter how conservative we may choose to be).

The freedom that comes when one chooses to be open and honest about one’s sexual lives and preferences are truly remarkable. Why else would pride parades be such jovial, celebratory events? Accordingly, some pro-sex variants reclaim and find empowerment in words like *pervert* or *perverted* in suiting the need to name, identify, and sex up variant, consensual, playful practices outside of mainstream, conventional, vanilla sex practices and culture.¹⁴ Thus, throughout this dissertation, I will use the definition of *pervert* and *perverted* in a positive, pro-sex context: a pervert moves from being a degenerate to someone committed to “allowing imagination, intelligence, and choice to create sex for pleasure, as opposed to restricting ourselves to instinct, hormones, and religion, and limiting sex for procreation” (Califia 178).¹⁵

On the Construction and Realm of (Variant) Sexualities and Identities

In *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* Pat Califia asserts that our dependence and belief in sex differences are primarily driven by sexual pleasure; this pleasure thus

¹⁴The term *vanilla* is most often used by BDSM practitioners and allies to describe “normal,” conventional sex and sexual proclivities. Gender is irrelevant to the term’s implications, although, to many, normal sex is still regarded as only occurring between a male born man and a female born woman. “Vanilla” could also be described as sex without much variance. Culturally, “regular/normal” sex involves a set standard of predetermined and assumed basic practices, positions, and preferences. Vanilla sex implies a certain sense of “purity”: the purist form of vanilla sex would be sex not for pleasure but for reproductive purposes only. “Kinky” is often a word used to refer to non-vanilla sex. For example, a “kinky,” perverted or subversive reading of even the term “vanilla sex” might see the assumption of purity as an invitation to play with the notion of virginal and/or purity. More will be said on cultural norms when discussing Gayle Rubin’s “wheel of sex hierarchy” later.

¹⁵As noted in footnote 4, more will be said on sexual norms and deviance later.

becomes the most common perversion. The fact that eroticization of the other clearly drives our society allows only two genders; it is a system that works effectively and often fanatically, to keep gender and sex differences polarized. “Strict gender division,” Califia asserts, “is so important to people’s sexual pleasure that they want to disguise it as nature or biology, so nothing will threaten to change it. The differences between men and women are seized upon, encouraged, artificially exaggerated, and even lied about to create a distance and a tension that give heterosexuals [and those finding heterosexual, male/female modalities sexually pleasing] something to struggle with, a strange territory to explore, a mystery to apprentice themselves to and celebrate” (178).

Pat Califia asserts that rather than celebrate gender diversity, the eroticization of the other, combined with the fear of losing the object and source of one’s sexual desire, drives institutional sexism and heteronormativity. This pattern is “so recalcitrant” Califia writes, “because even people who realize how bad it is are afraid that getting rid of it would mean getting rid of the pleasure they obtain from the dual-gender system.” Homosexuality “both challenges and reinforces this system ... the dialectic – the fact that homosexuals are challenging and resisting, yet simultaneously dependent upon and deeply attracted to gender differences” contributes to a relatively closed and coded gender and sex system (178-79).

Continuing to look at the dual-gender system In *The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough*, biologist, feminist, and historian of science Anne Fausto-Sterling states that during the 20th century the legal and medical communities have completely erased “any form of embodied sex that does not conform to a male-female, heterosexual pattern.” She notes the irony of “a more sophisticated knowledge of the

complexity of sexual systems” leading to “the repression of such intricacy” (41). If we are to think about how can we actively choose to be in progressive action(s) with fully accepting and honoring the ever-evolving ranges of modern gender identities and sexual deviances—no matter how “different” they are from our own experiences or how seemingly hostile, antagonistic, or threatening they may appear—it seems incumbent that each of us ask:

why should we care if a “woman” defined as one who has breasts, a vagina, a uterus, and ovaries and who menstruates, also has a clitoris large enough to penetrate the vagina of another woman? Why should we care if there are people whose biological equipment enables them to have sex “naturally” with both men and women? The answers seem to lie in a cultural need to maintain clear distinctions between the sexes.¹⁶ (Fausto-Sterling, 41)

Probing questions indeed: why are we so wedded to maintaining singular, clear, identity distinctions that do not serve us, people we may know, or our progressive feminist communities? Why are we seemingly committed to notions of identity as fixed, invariant, and stable when we know that changeability is the only constant of time? Seeing the payoff to this kind of attachment to traditional beliefs about sexual and gender difference is important, but more important is the action of giving up that we need such singular, mono categories and distinctions in the first place. Fausto-Sterling

¹⁶While I will not broach the debate of the historically complex and political hot topic of the womyn-born-womyn attendance policy of The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, to not mention the exclusionary admittance policy of the longest running, contemporary, progressive, feminist, mostly LBQ community event would be remiss. The policy of the festival is a very clear example of how some women can place and value the gender identity assigned at birth over chosen gender identities; further, it is an example of how hostility, fear, and threat can undermine an otherwise very progressive, inclusive, and liberating value system of a large, intentional group. I will note that transsexual and transgendered womyn *do* attend the festival: often with full disclaimer when purchasing their tickets and/or by sharing their male born womyn identity during the festival. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival is an example of a progressive, intentional, and in some ways utopian community that is in dialogue with attendees, workers, and staff with how to honor and maintain an original intention while being open to change and evolution.

contextualizes the increase in post-1960 surgical interventions with inter-sexed and differently gendered people with societies “mandating the control of the body”: because those of us that are different “blur and bridge the great divide”; by challenging traditional beliefs we “possess the irritating ability to live sometimes as one sex and sometimes the other” thus raising “the spectrum of homosexuality” (41).

Making other people’s choices and claims of identity our business, or having meaning about us, blurs the bridges that connect us. We might also ask ourselves: what is one assumption, fear, or judgment I can give up: right now, in this moment? What is one action I can take, no matter how small or large, that would contribute to my community’s base being that of equality and safety rather than scarcity, survival, and/or profit? Fausto-Sterling echoes:

What if things were altogether different? Imagine a world in which the same knowledge that has involved me to intervene in the management of intersexual patients [or any sexually or gender variant subject] has been placed at the service of multiple sexualities. Imagine that the sexes have multiplied beyond currently imaginable limits ... oppositions and others would have to be dissolved as sources of division. A new ethics of medical treatment [as well as laws, education, social systems, and structures] would arise, one that would permit ambiguity in a culture of divisions. Conforming to society would no longer be the medical issue (41).

These imaginings and questionings are important because despite over two decades ripe with scholarship, discussions, and active social movements on diversifying gender identity, sexual identity, and variancy we *still* live in a dualistic, two-sexed, masculine/feminine, sexually repressed and controlled world. Despite forward thinking books like *My Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You, or Something Else Entirely* (published in 1998), generations and professions being bridged extensively enough to modify medical plan coverage to pay for gender-based,

surgical procedures and reassignments, universities expanding their Women's Studies department's to include Gender and Sexuality Studies, and countless personal narratives and organizational actions that have made it to the mainstream media to challenge what it is to be a "real" woman or man, the third gender, trans, and non-normative genders and sexualities continue to be hyper-eroticized and/or unacceptable. We simply are still in the process of connecting movements for inclusion, respect, equality, acceptance, imagination, and compassion. We still live in a world of tolerance towards sexual and gender division and difference rather than a creation-based culture.

Jonathan Ned Katz proposes an additional way to challenge the "historical relativity of sexual behaviors ... identities, meanings, categories, groups, and institutions": he asks us to consider: "if sexual behavior is more than just a conjunction of organs, if it is always shaped by the partial system within which it functions, and if it always includes a mix of socially defined feelings and meaning, behavior is just as historically related and constructed as identity" (44). To speak of heterosexuality [or homosexuality] as having a historical, various past and thus an undetermined future "challenges our usual, implicit, deterministic assumption that heterosexuality [or homosexuality] as fixed, timeless, biological" and synchronous with female and male bodies (44). Katz sees this challenge as "subversive when applied to erotic and gender history, for it challenges our stubborn, ingrained idea of an essential, external heterosexuality and heterosexuality." He involves Karl Marx's idea that "people *make* our sexual and affectional history" (italics mine), and that we are "given by the past and altered by [our] political activity and organizations ... [our] visions of a valued future".

Creating a clearing for gender and sexual identities and relations to *always* be in a

mode of construction and reconstruction is a step. Katz argues that moving away from a history of “homosexuality and heterosexuality to a history of eroticism and gender ... empowers a pragmatic, strategic, conceptual advance, allowing us to ask new questions.” The notion that heterosexual or homosexual feeling, actions etc., are “not omnipresent, not a biological fate;” gender, affection, and eroticism are historically diverse and historically varied (45-46).

Katz asserts that we need to become neutral, technical observers of sexual behavior, which is difficult in a “world where no one escapes pressure to monitor personal sexual standards and desires” (49). Certainly, most of us would agree to be wary of universal truths and of fusing our cultural, historical, and personal beliefs and concerns as we take on best practices in our research. Even for us progressive, post-modern academics and feminists, many of us can move to pay more personal attention to the post-modern agenda as it works or appears in our day-to-day lives. If desire is part of a “continuing process of creating the self” by allowing multiple experiences of satisfaction then what may be

required more than anything else, if a promise of a post modern sexuality is to be realized, is a self-conscious effort to free the sexual from the intellectual isolation within which the modernization of sex originally prospered ... no easy task. At a minimum it requires that we place all sexual behavior in the larger context of the lives lived by those having these experiences and that our “theories” of sexual behavior is made responsible to our sense of the human. (William Simon, *Postmodern Sexualities* 38-39)

Allowing each of us to define the sexual lives that are most appropriate and healthy for us, without being influenced by societies scripting or conforming, is one “responsible” way to validate both our humanness and our academic disciplines and offer

a praxis that serves us. Specifically, we could choose a daily cognizance that reflects challenging the foundations of our society that operate with an absence of consensus. Choosing to dwell in a consensus-based framework for creating our identity and sex based conversations, we could not accept the gifted scripts: from identity and sexual scripts to racial and consumer ones.

In *Postmodern Sexualities* Simon asserts, “few instances of human experience are more fully reflective of the dialogical character of human existence than is the relationship of object choice to sexual identity and of the relationship of both to social life” (43). It is precisely the intersection of object choice and the standard, socially acceptable sexual and identity scripts that he delineates in the following:

If I am a Y, I must desire an X.
Or
If I desire an X, I must be a Y.
If I want to be a Y, I must desire an X.
Or
Z wants/expects me to be Y, so I should try to desire X.
Or
If I am X, I should have to be X₁, X₂, X₃ ... X_n,
Or
Being X, it is easier to be X₁, X₂, X₃ ... X_n.

As we can clearly see, the scenarios above leave little room for variance, yet isn't that part of what our postmodern theories are grounded in? Simon articulates that the logic(s) above “allow individuals to volunteer for standardized identities that organize standardized scripts in order to avoid a crisis of individual cohesion occasioned by a failure of societal integration” (*Postmodern Sexualities*, 43). Recognizing standardized scripts as operative challenges what are often socially proscribed “beliefs” rather than actual “truths.” Truly, following constructed, laid out, socially acceptable scripts is laid

out as the easiest path: failing to integrate within society, at any level, is often a huge concern that parents and we as individuals, fret over; Wanting to “fit in,” avoiding a “crisis of individual cohesion,” and the fear of failing to integrate with society keeps many of us script bound (in one way or another). What is often not publicly discussed—until a GLBTQ murder or suicide makes the front page of the mainstream press—is that the consequences are dire when we follow the unoriginal, predetermined, generic identity and sex based scripts that don’t authenticate who we are and, thus, which do not hold true for us.

We can continue to think diligently and educate outside of such insidious scripts and boxes. We can revisit the notion that Radicalesbians offered: to define who and what a lesbian (or any aspect of chosen human nature or behaviour) was became transformed into and through a very fluid and non-linear language, while acknowledging that categories are often useful, they can be limiting, constructed as deeply invested in rigid sex role definitions, and thus lead to inauthenticities.

Judith Butler explored the concept of gender fluidity and called for a total dismantling of gender categories in her text *Gender Trouble*. Disengagement with internalized conditioning is still a necessary step that begins the “revolution to end the imposition of all coercive identifications, and to achieve maximum autonomy in human expression” (Radicalesbians, 399). Key to my dissertation is Kinsey and Butler’s argument that there are no “true” or ideologically sound sexualities—and here I would add that their gender or any aspect of human “nature” categorization—and that this location encourages us to give up all staticism, as well as fixed notions, judgments,

senses of “right,” “wrong,” or even distasteful, of the gender identities, sexual practices, fantasies, and desires of others.

In *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, Lawrence Kritzman offers that a truly radical, Foucault-inspired position would “destabilize our ability to decide about the ‘typical’ or ‘unusual’ in sexuality, or draw any conclusions about frequency or infrequent phenomena. If sexuality and its meaning is entirely dependent on the context in which it occurs, so the argument might go, what significance can we attach to its vanity or commonality?” (6). This radical departure would allow the dharmic concept of “empty and meaningless” to drive a fearless self-expression in our sexuality and gender. Conclusions would be mute, redundant. The experiential would be our immediate, temporal, ever-changing context.

Foucault wrote, “good critical historical method involves ‘making visible a *singularity* at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical construct’, so that ‘what reason perceives as *its* necessity, or rather, what different forms of rationality offer as their necessary being can perfectly well be shown to have a history ... the network of contingencies from which it emerges can be traced.” Through getting present to the historical trajectory of singular instances of occurrences that have formed our points of view, we can proceed to the incredibly opening place of recognizing that “since these things have been made they can be unmade, as long as we know how it was that they were made” (Michel Foucault, “Critical Theory, Intellectual History” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, 37). The art of allowing thus begins when we clear the present of the past, and come from a place of nothing interfering in our self-expression: gender, sexual, or otherwise.

For example, through the tireless work of Foucault and Weeks in unpacking the essentialist tendencies and theories and the social construction of identity categories, the “‘axiomatic’ distinction between sex acts and identities” is now relatively accepted in the field of Sex Studies (Beasley 146). Sexual identity is a relatively new idea, and is something that *can be* invented and reinvented, independent of the physical body; further, sexual identity can alter and change pre-existing historically based views and interpretations of sex acts.

On Creative, Expressive Subcultures

The reality is that queer folk, like any other “outsider” or “non-dominant” group, have long established subcultural practices, language, and community spaces to serve our needs. These needs take the form of creative outlet, community building, activism, and relationality. The closets mainstream society has constructed, to place that which is offensive, different or feared, have given rise to a plethora of spaces in which to play. In her excellent discussion of how lesbian and androgynous female coded fashion and constructs have proliferated mainstream media and advertising, Danae Clark claims that lesbian readers are no longer outside heterosexual/heterosexist culture, but rather “insiders privy to the inside jokes that create an experience of pleasure and solidarity with other lesbians ‘in the know’” (“Commodity Lesbianism,” 194). Elizabeth Ellsworth notes that lesbians “‘have responded to the marginalization, silencing, and debasement’ found in dominant discourse ‘by moving the field of social pleasures ... to the center of their interpretive activities’ ... reinforcing their sense of identity and community” (ref)

And so LGBTQ people have developed subcultures and codes of our own making and created liminal, fluid, and dynamic communities and spaces that serve us. One such pro-sex, gender fluid subculture is the BDSM community, which exists in every city through events and play parties and online via social networking sites.¹⁷ Because the state and society regulate, control, and monitor homosexual and variant sex to such a high degree, BDSM communities exist to offer sites of fluidity, belonging, ambiguity, and affinity within a structured environment that holds “safe, sane, and consensual” as its mantra.

It is here, in feminist pro-sex communities, that folks can come together for convivial community through sexual belonging, regardless of their political or social affiliation. BDSM communities welcome people with multiple (sometimes conflicting) identities, who engage in multiple communities. The “concept of the neotribe,” writes Darren Langdrige, can be applied to S/M communities and has “increased in popular culture studies as a heuristic for understanding the ways in which nebulous communities might serve the needs of their members in a time still dominated by a culture of individualism” (“The Time of the Sadomasochist: Hunting With (in) the ‘Tribus,’” 375).

Where Can We Go From Here Queer Theory?

While room has been carved out for gender, sexual, and identity deviancy in queer theory and in queer activism, academic discourse shows a need for continued dialogue and acceptance. The absence and resistance to deviancy (without labeling such deviancy as “other” or “perversions”) opens up a site for serious research, scholarship, and theoretical proposition. Specifically, I want to offer a serious scholarship on

¹⁷ Some of these spaces and communities will be addressed in my conclusion.

switching. The last two decades have seen a good deal of scholarship and progressive activism arise for LGBTQ people: for femmes, butches, and transsexual genders and identities as well as for gay, lesbian, and pansexual sexualities and perspectives. Yet, there exists no oeuvre, no real framework or analysis, inside or outside of scholarly academic discourse, for North American gender and sexually variant women and people who choose to embrace all of the following: 1. identify outside the hetero or LGBTQ normative identities of gender; 2. identify and play with variant sexual roles and desires; and 3. play with these variant identities by way of switching. The visibility of this location, identities, and roles is hazy and relatively invisible outside of sub-cultural, fringe pro-sex, BDSM¹⁸ circles; and even here, genderqueer women who actively identify and embrace switching especially if it is with other genderqueer women (or men!)¹⁹ can be regarded with skepticism and perplexity. Women switching identities, roles, and/or gender preferences is still a concept in its infancy: because it has not been given serious scholarship or infiltration into the collective consciousness, in part, perhaps, because switching is not an either/or, easily identifiable category: it actually resists either/or and

¹⁸BDSM can refer to any of the following activities and/or modes: bondage, dominance, sadism, and/or masochism. To engage in BDSM is always a consensual choice and can most broadly be described as involving, often intense, playing with power, roles, and sensations. I love Pat Califia's description: "S/M eroticism focuses on forbidden feelings or actions and searches for a way to obtain pleasure from them. It is the quintessence of non-reproductive sex" (*Public Sex*, 170).

¹⁹The notion of "real" dykes playing with and/or being attracted to men is still a subject of controversy for many gay folks. There is a degree of judgment and distain, if one steps outside of the norms of LGBTQ choices of same sex attraction, even if the sex is "queered." For most, having an opposite sex attraction would be labeled, at best, bi or pansexual, and at worst, a traitor to whatever component of the LGBTQ community the person may belong to. A person might be stripped of their LGBTQ identity, losing friends, chosen family, community, and perhaps professional alliances and work; whereas genderqueer women who might entertain playing, engaging, and/or switching with a man (who may be gay or queer himself) almost always would still regard herself as a dyke or queer woman.

binary based frameworks, which subcultures pride themselves on being outside of yet still argue for.

Some, like the editors of the recently released *After Sex: On Writing Since Queer Theory*, walk a tightrope of claiming an “after” in the queer, theoretical present, asserting the concept that legendary queer theorists (Kosofsky-Sedgwick and Butler are named) are no longer writing about queer theory because it is no longer interesting and/or they are “distancing themselves from their previous work” (2). Perhaps it is a rhetorical question. However, the idea that each new wave of theory or our new ideas and movements need to distance themselves from the past, or that present benefits of thought are somehow unrelated to a predecessor’s paving, or even more extreme, beyond any point of relevance or interest has always struck me as unproductive to progressive practice. Carve out the new, yes, but apropos is the notion that there are no new ideas, just methods of delivery and experience.

Queer theory is still interesting; there is no “post,” we simply dwell in it differently. After many years of Ph.D. coursework, Ph.D. dissertation supervision, and personal conversations with the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, it took me cumulative years of personal, spiritual searching and journeywork to reveal much of what she encouraged me to dwell in: just how perfect the practicing of Buddhism/dharma is to a real, lived queer theory. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* Kosofsky Sedgwick questioned “the strategic banalization of gay and lesbian politics,” wondering if “the moment may be past when theory was in a very productive relation to sexual activism” (13). For Sedgwick, our progressive possibilities exist in a complete openness, dismissal of categories, and radical acceptance.

Lauren Berlant similarly questions the state of queer theory and postness: “is *everyone* beyond sex (not just the queer scholars who might have, you know, been there and done that, aged out, made art, bought property, endured AIDS, forged a couple, taken hormones, had events, reproduced, got tenure, had episodes, done new research, said what they had to say, heard what there was to hear, looked around the room, gotten bored)?” (*After Sex*, 79) For those that may still see the benefit in exploding a hinderless, pro-sex, gender and identity free politic in our personal and theoretical lives there is an urgency in bridging theory and sex while at the same time abandoning any constructions that may limit what is possible.

Carla Freccero’s first chapter of *After Sex* echoes this desire: “I want to preserve sexuality’s importance to the notion of queer mostly because there are other concepts that convey the work of denormativization, broadly conceived, for other domains. Queer, to me, is the name of a certain unsettling in relation to heteronormativity. It can be thought of as, and is akin to, the ‘trace’ in the field of sexuality” (*After Sex*, 17). It is this “unsettling” of our preconceived notions and “beliefs” in regards to gender and sexuality that is still so very much needed and necessary. Freccero summarizes a foundation of Foucault’s brilliant philosophy quite well, writing that “historical time was multiple and that multiple temporalities could be seen to coexist synchronically in any given historical formation” (*After Sex*, 19).

A Project Concerned With The Erotic Life

This dissertation is primarily concerned with switching that occurs at the level of language and practice. However, the experiential will also be deconstructed to fully

introduce and expand my ideas. I am predominantly engaged with 20th-century modern and post-modern contemporary narrative texts, including selected fiction, poetry, memoir, letters and essays. Throughout this project, I examine crossovers of the personal and memoir with the performativity of the authorial voice and illustrate how occupying a gendered body, versus not occupying a gendered body, complicates notions of gender and identity. Through this active phenomenology, I unpack and connect a wide range of genderqueer, gender, and sexually variant “switches” so that the much needed continuums of identity, play, and practice can enter the study and reading of Literature, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Theory in visible, accessible, and meaningful ways.

My chosen authors, Gertrude Stein, Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles, Jeanette Winterson, Anne Carson, and Sappho, all write in a verse that employs innovative and unorthodox uses of punctuation, line spacing, and grammar that prove a key way to hone in on a subject’s ambiguity via creating the physical space to allow alternative makings and meanings to present themselves. All actively employ switching gendered bodies, gendered identities and/or sexual identities and sexual roles to such an elevated degree that stable notions of any of the above are continually, and very wonderfully, destabilized. Rather than this destabilization creating chaos or mayhem what opens up is a space for inquiry and accessibility: curiosity about constructions of the self, our identities, roles, and desires, unfamiliar wonder, and unlimited and unrealized possibilities are made available.

Chapter One, “And The Tickertape Reads ‘A Fraction of a Shudder’; Hidden Spaces and The Switch: Gertrude Stein Does Man-Space and Girl Pink,” brings to light

the gender, sexual, and BDSM switching in the now published private letters of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas and in some selected writings of Stein. In Chapter Two, “Theory Must Be Doing: Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles and Jeanette Winterson Traffic and Switch in the Spaces and Language of Non-Normative Identities and Desires ... My Business is Circumference” I focus on how these gender and sexually variant authors practice, evoke, and play with ideas and concepts of desire that truly encapsulate subversive sexual and identity practices. Chapter Three, “Allegory Holds Fast to The Ruins’: Memoir, Girl and Teen-hood—The Body, and Deviancy in Kathy Acker, Anne Carson, and Sappho” maps out a rampant perversity: gendered and sexualized perspectives, locations, and boundaries are seen from a young person’s perspective. Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* read along with Anne Carson’s reading of Sappho in *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* creates and displays desire, how the characters shift in roles and identities, and thereby how they birth a reinvented language and meanings that are acutely subversive. My conclusion, “The Possibilities For Sexual and Gender Variancies and Freedom That Await...,” brings together my pattern on non-normative genders, sexualities, identities, and desires, noting some current locations for sexual and gender variancies as well as some personal stories and reflections on how switching is navigated. My conclusion thus bridges the personal and the theoretical and paves the way for future research in examining the language, agency, and locations of subversive and perverse desires in contemporary writing, subcultures and artistic endeavors.

Method: A Third Way Between Any Two Sides That Tend to Divide the World into Them and Us

The theories that influence and inform my methodology are deconstruction and progressive feminist, queer, and cultural theories and criticism. I deconstruct and conceive of switching, gender, and sexual identity and variance from an experiential methodology. Murray S. Davis takes a similar approach in *Smut: Erotic Reality/Obscene Ideology* wherein he treats sex as “an *experience* that the individual wants to undergo and that society may encourage, rather than as an *instinct* that the individual wants to express and that society may repress” (xv-xvi). I agree with Davis when he notes that the general acceptance of instinct theory, to explain sex and sexual expression, has “reduced its potential to generate the intellectual excitement necessary to stimulate further explorations of the unknown” (xv). As my dissertation is boldly concerned with explorations of the under-researched in sex, gender, and identity studies and literature, I have chosen not to neutralize my (sexy) subject matter.

My method is not one of scholarly detachment, bland, uninvested subjectivity, highly abstract theory or vocabulary, or filled with jargon that is only applicable in rhetorical, academic discourse and to be spoken and read by fellow scholars only interested in my specific subject matter. Why? Because one of the main goals of this dissertation is to make a difference: a difference in how we read, witness, talk about, theorize, and dwell in literature and constructed spaces that take on sex, gender, and identity; a difference in the lives of genderqueers, gender, and sexually variant people in that a visibility, acceptance, and celebration of those differences is made available; and, even more broadly, a de-closeting, acceptance, and birthing of the beautiful realities that occur when we celebrate our variances, identities, and roles regardless of gender, sexual preference, or identity.

While the risk to such an approach might be great, nevertheless, as Davis notes, “the intellectual benefits derived from drawing on direct subjective resources in the study of sex far outweigh the personal risk involved. The maxim, “nothing ventured, nothing gained,” is nowhere more aptly applied than to sex research” (xxi). Kate Bornstein asserts that when the majority of people transcend gender, when most of us say

‘Yeah, I transgress gender,’ then gender will be relegated to the status it deserves: a plaything. When that happens, there won’t be any value to the term ‘transgender’ and a new challenge will have risen up, new political identities will raise their heads, and the transgender movement will be shown to its proper place as some historical oddity, back in the days when people thought there were only two genders. (*My Gender Workbook*, 280-81)

Moving into the realm of playing with gender and sexual identity, a driving question of this project is: where in the schema of queer and sexual/identity theories, writing, practice, and subculture do the subversive and perverse desires of gender and sexually variant authors who play with switching in their writing have visibility and room to play? I discuss and illustrate variations on how queer/gender and sexually variant switching is created, manifested, and seen.

My chapters explore this question by deconstructing how, when, in what contexts and spaces my subjects choose to illustrate transgressing, ambiguity, shifting and switching: in the being, language, and slippages of sex, gender, identity, roles, text, language, and performance. This project aims to create a stage to witness and bring about enriching possibilities that will deliberate, discuss, and address gender and sexual variance, identity, and desire in diverse forms and as worthy of our fullest unveiling,

presentations, representations, and manifestations of what those possibilities might look like or be.

My work addresses how we can, as intelligent, complex human beings who, *even if it is not one's experience*, come to a progressive understanding that gender and sexuality are constructs to be played with, (re)invented, read, written, and lived; no matter where one chooses to locate oneself, we can all be open to creating and allowing space for difference, and that includes moving from fear of what is different and into an acceptance (not necessarily and understanding yet much more than a tolerance) of more than one gender, sexual role, and/or identity existing and ... these multiplicities being seen and accepted as normal. A primary question that drives my work is where, in the schema of queer sexual/identity theories, writing, practice, and subculture do the subversive and perverse desires of gender and sexual variants that switch have visibility and room to play? This dissertation offers some answers and possibilities!

Chapter I: And The Tickertape Reads “A Fraction of a Shudder”; Hidden Spaces and The Switch: Gertrude Stein Does Man-Space and Girl Pink

Gertrude Stein said to Picasso: “Paint what is really there. Not what you can see, but what is really there.”

This chapter looks at how Gertrude Stein creates, displays and meditates on desire, how she and her subjects shift in roles and identities, and thereby how Stein subverts, births, and reinvents the language of desire and the erotic. My aim is to display the places Stein is consumed with *being* in action around desire; to see her writing as locations of gender, identity, and sexual play as she “asks questions of everyone” (*A Stein Reader*, 3), especially her switchy self, as she kneels “to be ... to be pleased and to please” (*Idem* as cited in *A Stein Reader*, 378). This chapter thus establishes a new and exciting reading of Stein’s work. I engage in this process by embracing the complexities of desire, switching, sexual difference, sexualities, identities, roles, and language play found in Stein’s earlier and romantic work, primarily *Tender Buttons* (1911-12), *Pink Melon Joy* (1914), *Lifting Belly* (1914/15), *Idem the Same A Valentine to Sherwood*

Anderson (1922), *A Book Concluding With A Wife Has A Cow: A Love Story* (1923), *An Elucidation* (1927), *Stanzas in Meditation* (1929-33), *Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded* (1930), and perhaps the most evocative of Stein's work, *Baby Precious Always Shines: Selected Love Notes Between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas*.

Stein's opening lines in *Descriptions of Literature* share her interpretation of the drive behind all literature and writing: "a book ... shows that the next and best is to be found out when there is pleasure in the reason. For this reason. To be distinguished is what is desired" (cited in Dydo, *A Stein Reader: Gertrude Stein*, 471). With "pleasure in the reason" I will deconstruct "what is desired" and demonstrate that Stein can be considered one of the leading erotic writers, if not the most brilliantly sexy and evocative, of the 20th century.

Stein's work illustrates a deep commitment to writing the poetics of the body, pleasure, and lover-ship. Stein was writing subversively, perversely, yet "passing" as nonpornographic. Her writing is full of the nonconformity she was attracted to, leaving and critiquing her bourgeois American upbringing and life to favor an unconventional, avant-garde lifestyle. In *Poetry and Criticism*, Edith Sitwell would write that Gertrude Stein is "bringing back life to our language by what appears, at first, to be an anarchic process. First she breaks down the predestined groups of words, their sleepy family habits; then she rebrightens them, examines their texture, and builds them into new and vital shapes." Her writing centers on playful language, orgasm and sex metaphors, her books are titled as much, and yet we have de-sexed and sought to conservatize this playful

modern genius.²⁰ Perhaps it was her way of speaking: a serious monotone when reading her work, or her oh so proper woolen skirt suits and highly buttoned shirts, or perhaps even how she and Toklas looked stoic and formal when photographed that have had the bulk of scholarly discourse limit Stein?²¹ Might her no-nonsense approach to much of life, her dedication to her writing and producing, or her scholar-like, yet avant-garde and poetic, writing on topics like grammar and writing literature, have us not see her as simultaneously playful, sexy, and fetishistic? Could Stein's brilliance with language – she is considered intimidating, unreadable, or childish by some — have distracted us? Or

²⁰ Prior to sexuality and gender studies entering academia as a discipline, most Stein discussion was either heavily formal and influenced by a formalist critical theory, focused on the modern, art (Picasso especially) connections, and/or Stein's political affiliations during a time of war. Some will have noted that Stein was a lesbian of course, and may even nod to her relationship with Toklas, which might occur as subversive enough to a conservative reader; however, the brushing over of sex, the body, and eroticism can be, at times, quite maddening considering how consumed and overt Stein was. Some examples would include the work of Harold Bloom, Julian Sawyer (who, in *Gertrude Stein, A Bibliography*, would write that Stein's writing from 1912 to 1936 was "essentially concerned with geography" page 13), Peter Quartermain, who downplays Stein's sexuality by saying it is "insignificant" (*Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Page 32), and Richard Bridgman, who talks about her sexuality in a tame fashion (see *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Lucy Daniel would write, as if she knows for sure, that "a large part of Stein's cultural significance as a gay icon is due to her 40-year old monogamous relationship with Toklas, because it was both so very groundbreaking and so obvious and unembarrassed" (97) This is not a criticism of what others choose to research and focus on, rather it is just to point out that what for me is the juiciness of Stein's oeuvre has not been fully tapped.

²¹ Ulla E. Dydo is perhaps the most ambitious and bold of all the Stein scholars. She continuously produces alternative readings and openings. See *The Language That Rises: 1923-1934 with William Rice*, her comprehensive *A Stein Reader: Others who, like Dydo, do not shy away from the erotic and sexy nature of Stein* would be Kay Turner, see her Introduction and work with the love letters, Karin Cope, especially her *Passionate Collaborations: Learning to Live with Gertrude Stein*, Catharine Stimpson is a leading Stein scholar, who has very articulately wrote on Stein's sex and articulated that *Lifting Belly* concerned the "repeated, repeatable sexual act" ("The Somograms of Gertrude Stein," *Poetics Today* 6, No. 1-2 (1985) p 74). While her scholarship is not as evocative as Cope's, Dydo's, or Stimpson's, I have a personal affinity for Judy Grahn, (see *Really Reading Gertrude Stein: A Selected Anthology with Essays* by Judy Grahn. Freedom: Crossing Press, 1989) as we share a similar heart-wrenching experience: Cope was reading the Stein/Toklas love letters as she was going through a break up, I was taking my Ph.D. oral examinations, with the love notes a foundational part of my project, two days after a break up. Wayne Koestenbaum, Cyrena N. Pondrom, Judy Grahn, and Jean Mills are a handful of other Stein scholars who have brought thoughtful, new readings to Stein's work.

could it be our own discomfort with sex and intimacy? It's time to bring the erotic back into Gertrude Stein: back into her letters and writing, back into Alice B. Toklas's *cookbooks!* I recognize and will deconstruct how Stein was writing in roles, driven by a freedom to "speak of it" (*Pink Melon Joy* as cited in *A Stein Reader*, 282).

Vivant parmi les fleurs

Gertrude Stein (February 3, 1874 - July 27, 1946) and Alice B. Toklas (April 30, 1877 - March 7, 1967) met on the first day Toklas arrived in Paris, in 1907. Toklas moved into Stein's residence in 1910 and they were life-long partners until Stein's death. In addition to the role of wife, Toklas acted as Stein's editor, typist, secretary, and muse. Both Stein and Toklas were writers, intellectuals, and art patrons. They were key members of the vibrant expatriate community of writers and artists in Paris. They hosted a salon at their home, on Rue de Fleurus, that served to create a space and community of mutual support for many of the great writers and artists of the 1920s and 30s. Many of these writers and artists dealt in lesbian and homoerotic art and writing. For example, in 1925, Stein saw the work of Russian-born artist and set designer Pavel Tchelitchev. His homoerotic, bold work was controversial, but for Stein her appreciation led her to purchase the entire contents of his studio after seeing his work. He would go on to do portraits and sketches of both Stein and Toklas (Starr, *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts* 329-30). Similarly, Stein was one of the first Americans to befriend and support the work of bisexual painter Marie Laurencin. Stein endorsed homoerotic photographer and artist George Platt Lynes, who took one of the most stoic and familiar of Stein's later photographic portraits, titled "Bilignin" (*The Queer Encyclopedia of the*

Visual Arts, 1931). And Stein was an early supporter of Picasso, with whom she was a dear friend, buying his pictures “when no one else in the world wanted any” (Lord, *Six Exceptional Women*, 16-17).

Paris, like most large cities that sexual and gender variants have always gravitated to, was a place of exploration, freedom, and self-expression for many of the modernists. Djuna Barnes’s *Ladies Almanac* (*The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*, 1928) is a bold, erotic lesbian satire of the “literary women of the Left Bank,” or “the Academy of Women,” which gathered at Natalie Barney’s weekly Salon. These now famous women of letters included Stein, Toklas, Barnes, Barney, Mina Loy, Sylvia Beach, and Radclyffe Hall among others. There is a naiveté in any assumption that the modernist women of the 1920s and 30s lacked the sexual enlightenment of our own time; however, before the 1960s women’s and sexual revolution, Barnes’s *Ladies Almanac* is just one striking example of how pornography, erotica, and taboos were boldly at work in the writing *and* lives of the modernist lesbian women.

Women were not the only ones exploring their sense of expatriate freedom, of course. Many experimentally focused male writers and artists gathered at Stein and Toklas’s home as well, and much has been written on Stein’s loving friendship with Picasso and shorter friendships with Matisse and Cezanne. Interestingly, the men—the producers of art and letters—would often gather in one room with Stein, while the wives/women would often join Toklas in a separate room (Imhof, *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*, 278). That said, I want to urge caution in the fallback tendency for some readers to box Stein and Toklas in delineated, unshifting, heterosexually based wife and husband roles, as this reduction will not be supported in

this chapter. I will demonstrate that Stein and Toklas's switching between roles, genders, and identities, the couple switching and playing with dominance, submission, giver, and receiver is frequent, organic, and authentic, even as some roles predominate both in their public presentations and in their letters. Stein as the dominant, bulldagger husband and Toklas as the supportive, submissive wife are not quite as solid in stature as their stoic photographic images might have us make meaning of; in fact, both women were absolutely committed to a very maternal caring and nurturing of the other in a marriage of equality.

This chapter looks at Stein's writing that shares her sexual longing despite knowing "that there is politeness" (*Pink Melon Joy, A Stein Reader*, 282) when discussing sex, especially lesbian desire and lust. Does politeness evoke propriety or shyness? Discomfort or awkwardness? Or possibly shame? Much of Stein's work spends at least a few sentences questioning the silence and unjust illegality around LGBT love and romantic union. Lest we neglect the obvious, Stein and Toklas lived together, as an out lesbian couple,²² married unto themselves, for thirty-six years—starting in 1910, a time when homosexuality was illegal and punishable by law and with imprisonment. Much of Stein's work constructs and shares the couple's wedding vows, lesbian love, and union. Stein's life was housed in her love and marriage with Toklas: her pronouncing "it is to be certain that love is lord of all" (*How to Write*, 28) proves to be foundational to her life and work.

While most of the photographs of Stein and Toklas have them at a domestically familiar yet polite distance, Cecil Beaton's 1936 photograph stands out as the most

²² While they may have been understated in their being a couple, not marching in any parades and such, they were "out" in the way we term a married couples in the contemporary.

familiar, loving, and comfortable; Stein is in a nightgown or housedress on the terrace at Bilignin while Toklas is standing very close and right behind her, with her hand on Stein's shoulder, almost holding her in place. A bouquet of roses is in Toklas's other hand as Toklas gazes down at Stein while Stein looks to the camera smiling. Both of them look rather smug, and the roses, well, being in the atmosphere of such a love, desire, and metaphor, the roses are very large and in full bloom. This couple's love existed outside the laws of marriage and the privileges legality affords, yet their commitment was apparent, visible, and shared with us. In her Introduction to *Baby Precious Always Shines: Selected Love Notes Between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas*, Kay Turner writes "in the happiness of being one, Gertrude and Alice created a unique blend of the conjugal, the erotic, the domestic, and the artistic ... while maintaining separate identities" (35). She further notes that "the alliance and affection—the marriage—between Gertrude and Alice was truly their religion" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, Introduction, 35), which is a wonderful way of expressing the honoring, idolizing, and ritual that these two women shared; the meditations on their love and each other are the content and foundation to much of Stein's writing.

Toklas's poverty, her unfortunate legal and estate experiences after Stein's death, exemplify some of the unfairness Stein would write about; the refusal for societies to fully and legally recognize same-sex love and marriage continues to be something same-sex couples experience as painful over seventy years later. So while Stein would write and publish their vows, stating that their love and selves are complete without the permit of marriage: "I am not missing. / Who is a permit. / I love honor and obey I do love honor and obey I do" in *Sacred Emily (Geography and Plays*, 178). She would also write:

“they will be felt not well / not as ours hours are polite. / Or they think well or violent or weeding / or maybe they be spared ... it is not ordinary standing or standard” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, 24). Making the point that disturbed sensibilities, judgment, or violence, the “weeding” out of unsuitables that are “not ordinary” are not in alignment with being “well.” She continues to offer that while people may experience fear, love is a gift and there is no difference between a heterosexual or homosexual union: “now I know everything of which it is that there is no difference / between then and now but very much the same / as of course teen it was not only here. / There they came well / here they come well / often make it believed that they marry / it is not only that there was no doubt. / Indicated why they left in fear” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, 24). Stein grappled between the social climate of her time being somewhat liberated, acknowledging, “that they see this” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, 24) while also recognizing that modernity engaged in a backlash against the bolder Victorian times, to which Stein would ask: “please forgive a mess” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, 25). So while Stein lived and wrote with incredible boldness and freedom, she also could be affected by the world around her. She agreed for some of her more personal material to be published at least twenty years after her death, for example.

For the most part, however, Stein and Toklas both refused to be closeted and bound by imagined, perceived, or substantiated societal prudery. Thus, variations on the word *polite* occur six times in the first six pages of *Pink Melon Joy* to create a clearing for what is to come. Notifying the reader that this poem is “not polite” (*Pink Melon Joy, A Stein Reader*, 281), Stein created a space for forty-one variations on the words *to please* and *pleasure* to then be articulated. By acknowledging “that there is a politeness” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 282) Stein creates the tension and seduction of upcoming taboo

desires while powerfully choosing to dwell in and describe pleasure, to smell the rose and, further, to invite us into the room where the rose lay open. She does this similarly throughout *Stanzas in Meditation*, in a tug and pull of silence and speaking, insisting that she is and is not polite, writing, “I refuse I I refuse or do / I do I do I refer to refuse / or what what do I do ... I feel the necessity to do it / partly from need / partly from pride / and partly from ambition” (Part IV, Stanza III) so that “they were not denied their pleasure,” and to “say yes ... we will say yes” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part II, Stanza IV 42-43).

In *Stanzas in Meditation* Stein wrote:

Let me listen to me and not to them
May I be very well and happy
May I be whichever they can thrive
Or just may they not.

(Original version from the original manuscript as cited in “Notes,” *Stanzas in Meditation*, 8).

I am addicted to this stanza because it holds both action and non-attachment in a ridiculously perfect and beautiful poetic form. To add, this stanza is Stein’s ultimate “fuck you” to fear and constraint. This stanza succinctly epitomizes Stein’s entire life: from her personal choices to her impressive oeuvre. This short passage quite perfectly expresses the essential backbone of Stein’s philosophy and way of being in the world. Stein was a woman who (very early on) recognized what many human beings struggle a lifetime to even remotely comprehend: that it was *up to her to create* her life as happy, fulfilled, and powerful. Each poem she wrote, each artist she supported, each person she loved was undertaken from this location of self-love and self-pleasing, which resulted in

her life being one of inspiring velocity and astounding aliveness. This stanza holds the gift of self-love and self-respect and serves as not only an explanation, but also an invitation, to her as to us as well, to live our lives with freedom, full self-expression, and power—regardless of the circumstances or end result. Simply put, we will thrive, we will be well and happy, out of having chosen and acted out of being so. Rather than acquiesce to what others may think or want, and thus be at the affect of life, Stein’s philosophy was to look within, to “listen” and act from that internal place of knowing. Further, she took on a listening *for and to* others. She writes, “should there be a call there would be a voice” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 504). The voice and this place of thriving exist where “anything is righteous” in “cadences, real cadences” and the diversity of “all accounts and” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 504) are intimately shared.

One of those internal places of knowing shows up where Stein worked to challenge defining “true” sexualities, desires, and practices that would have (perceived) societal norms and binaries frame who and what any person may be: all women are..., all butches are..., all Daddy’s are..., etc. For example, the husband/wife, butch/femme, boi/girl, top/dominant/sadist and bottom/ submissive/ masochist roles or ways of being can lead to specific and pre-defined assumptions regarding behaviors, preferences, and modes of conduct. These can prove limiting, in affording people—regardless of their sexual or gender identity—much play in their identity. As my Introduction demonstrated, mainstream North American society and culture put a great deal of emphasis on the consistency of identity and the ease of the familiar that it brings; yet all the while sexual and gender variants and theorists speak and live an identity and sexual politics, as Stein did, that voice dissent to any set of expectations. While there are very real, tangible, and

productive reasons for celebrating the characteristics that make up these roles and identities, this chapter and project work to *transgress* these boundaries *while still allowing* a strong sense of identity and or role. To be as “we may thrive” becomes the chosen performance of gender and sexual freedom advocates.

We can thus begin to ask fun and opening questions such as: how did Stein’s role of being a husband benefit and work for her? How freeing was it for her to then switch and play with being the “wife” who would go on her knees for her lover? How did Toklas’s being a wife contribute to her sense of being a top? How did the marriage and love-ship of these two women allow for a body of work that lays open the switching, sexualized, and loved body and domestic life? There is ample reason and room to challenge the fixation on policing roles and identities as I outlined in my Introduction; further, we can choose to feel safe, rather than disoriented, as we dwell in the incredible galaxy of *not* knowing, where multiple truths and possibilities exist by embracing the complexities of their play with the language of sex, sexuality, identities, and roles. Consider this playful gender switching, and the room it leaves for choice, from *Tender Buttons*: “the sister was not a mister. Was this a surprise. It was. The conclusion came when there was no arrangement. All the time that there was a question there was a decision. Replacing a casual acquaintance with an ordinary daughter does not make a son” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 500).

For creating space to play and share identities really is at issue here. Amber Hollibaugh, in her book *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*, asserts “erotic identities are not just behaviors or individual sexual actions; they reflect a much broader fabric that is the weave and crux of our very personhood; a way of

mediating and measuring all that we experience, all that we can interpret through the language of our bodies ... erotic identity is not simply a specific activity or ‘lifestyle’” (258). For many, their identities as dominants or submissives, switches or egalitarian lovers, carry over into the realms *outside* of the sexual. And so it is with this chapter: I am fascinated with the crossover of the personal/memoir with/in the textual as Stein and all my authors in this project reveal. According to Hollibaugh, “queerness, our desire, our otherness, *cannot be removed from place and context*. We are queer at the tables we eat at and at the tables we serve. Queer: femme, butch, transsexual, bisexual, wanting. Needed. Necessary.” (268, italics mine). Let us explore a Steinian scholarship about her writing on sex, leather and BDSM - topics no one has had the interest or courage to look at in her work.

How Pink is Your Melon, Joy?

Ulla E. Dydo, Stein scholar and editor of the selected works collection titled *A Stein Reader: Gertrude Stein*, writes that *Pink Melon Joy* is “the most lighthearted, humorous, and erotic work” of the early World War I time; further, she writes that *Pink Melon Joy* “absorbs events and objects into its verbal process” and that “Stein’s verbal games are not fictions *but always start from facts*” (*A Stein Reader*, 280, italics mine). Similarly, Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation* (written in 1932 and published after her death) is an erotic set of meditations on perceptions. Stein would say the long poem was an “exactitude of abstract thought” achieved in a disembodied form (cited in Dydo, *A Stein Reader*, 569). The work actually reads as a meditation: the stanzas are meditations on the body, desire, lesbian sex, and love. The first part of much of Stein’s erotic work, and

these texts are no exceptions, is almost entirely made up of answering questions, thus allowing an understanding of sexually variant sex: she explains that which *seems* different really isn't.

To add some complication to the erotic narrative, Toklas, in her editing process, removed almost every word "may" from the stanzas. She replaced *may* with *can*, which is hardly as evocative. The reason? When typing the manuscript she discovered Stein's early (and previously unmentioned) affair with a woman named May Bookstaver. May is one of the three love triangle characters, named Helen Thomas; in Stein's autobiographical *Q. E. D* (which wasn't published until after Stein's death) the other two are Stein (named Adele) and Mabel Haynes (named Mabel Neathe) (Dydo, *A Stein Reader*, 568). The word *may* thus evokes the lesbian love triangle, the name of a woman, or, in this case, Stein's lover, the season and last month of spring, named after the Greek Goddess Maia (a Goddess of fertility), which begins with the holiday of May Day and the tradition of dancing around the maypole. *May* can also refer to a distinguishing feature of Stein's work: "one's bloom or prime" (*New Oxford American Dictionary*) and the notion of conceivability, possibility, permission, and a wish or hope for something; whereas the word *can*, while similar in evoking possibility and opportunity, denotes capability more than a permission.

The underlying themes of pleasure and desire and the erotic nature of the stanzas, despite or due to abstract language choices comparable to *Tender Buttons* and other works of Stein, stand out powerfully. So while Douglas Messerli's reading concludes that the *Stanzas* are not "primarily about her personal relationships" (Notes on the Text, *Stanzas in Meditation*, 10), it is the author herself who *tells us* in Part IV that "this is an

autobiography in two instances” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Stanza XIII). Stein also cautions that you/ “they are very likely not to be / reminded that it is more that ever necessary” additionally, “they should never be surprised at any one time / at just what they have been given ... they can easily indulge in the fragrance” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part II, Stanza I, 38). Are you ready to be surprised, yet not surprised, by what you are being given: my sexing of Stein? According to Stein, the reader consensually accepts something as they pick up the text: “pleasure” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part II, Stanza II, 38).

Beginning with the title of the work, *Pink Melon Joy*, Stein invites us to participate, voyeuristically, in just how joyful the act of making the melon pink is. The melon: round, soft, fleshy and like one of the pleasure centers of a woman’s body: the clitoris. The outer skin of the labia, which house and hold the clitoris safely so its delicate skin does not bruise, protects the clitoris. The g-spot is Stein’s other melon, with the walls of the vagina, the pelvis, and layer of skin the protective shell that can be easily bruised, yet keeps the sweet, fleshy inside so safe until one is given permission to open and penetrate through the outer shell. Stein’s melon is a woman’s sexual pleasure zone, of which Stein is absolutely fascinated with making, witnessing, and describing how they are made pink. To be made pink, they must be touched, pleased, and brought into a state of in-joy.

One can of course, as with all of Stein’s writing, switch the pronouns and play with the gender of the subject. Gender switching is recurrent, as I will explore, with subjects inhabiting both female and male identities and roles: Stein was both husband and wife to Alice, so there is no reason to confine oneself to a gynocentric reading of Stein’s work. Stein was a lesbian *and* she was a gender and sexual variant and exploratory; she

uses phallic and penetrative imagery often, for example. Thus, one could easily say that her *pink melon* is variant: the delicate pink head of her “can be can be men” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part IV, Stanza VII, 107) gendered, mental or affixed penis, protected by the shaft, which grows more pink and redder with each joyful touch, and the tender prostate gland, which is similar to the g-spot in that one has to “hunt” to find in order to please, protected by the walls of the anus. Pink melons equate to joy in this text, and are no doubt for many feminine, and, we can genderqueer them any way we wish!

A further switching occurs, and it’s a switching that occurs in all of Stein’s work that I will be discussing, between the role of the narrator and subject. The “I,” “you,” “they,” and “me” are not always clear and switch often, causing an ambiguity and haziness to exist between the speaking voices. Cyrena N. Pondrom notes, “information is withheld for clear attribution of speaking parts to be made, and the resulting imprecision mimics both shifting roles and a dissolution of ego boundaries between the two lovers” (*Geography and Plays*, “Introduction,” xlvii). This shifting and dissolution of subject positions are key in allowing for the switching of roles to be articulated and explored. Switching within roles, identities, and sexual top/bottoming is very much about the melting of the ego; not only is intimacy birthed, but the pleasures reaped from switching are allowed space to be in action when the ego stands back. Similar switching occurs within the texts of other authors I explore later in this dissertation, particularly Jeanette Winterson and Anne Carson.

Let us now begin to boldly explore *Pink Melon Joy*, a long poem that is divided into three parts and consists of many small segments that have subheadings. Let us quickly note the poetic flow and evocative content of the subheadings, which read like a

poem in themselves. Citing just a few: “Exchange in Bicycles,” “Fourteen Days,” and “Pillow” are followed by “That’s Right,” “Very Likely,” “I don’t care what she mentions,” “I did do it then,” “Oh dear,” “That’s a picture.” She continues with the peaceful “All recovering” making way for “This is it mentioning,” “Feeling Mounting,” “What is the matter with it,” and, of course, the act of being “Willing” to the invitation to “Come in.” “Polite,” “Absolutely,” “I Come to Say,” “Come in,” “I meant to stay” and “put in in” are followed by the BDSM influenced “Not any more begging” “please be dark,” “Anything,” “Harnessing on or another. Harnessing another.” The lover then shares “I went Faster” with “Two hands.” The last subheading of the poem “I cannot count” can reference the number of orgasms throughout the entire poem or the number and myriad of ways she loves her lover; “I cannot count” is ever so sweetly followed by the last lines “Would you have another. What. Kiss.” These last lines evoke a depth of emotion and commitment. Happiness, connection, and communication are what complete the poem.

Stein writes early on that for “fourteen days” she “was aching” (*Pink Melon Joy* in *A Stein Reader*, 282). This Stein, who was seemingly “meant to be closeted,” boldly uses the first person “I” to describe her hunger: “I was aching,” she writes, when “I saw all the rose.” The botanist definition of “Labium” refers to “the lower lip of the flower of a plant” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). Flowers are the reproductive/sex organs of a flowering plant, and so a woman’s sex and sexuality have often been represented as a flower in literature, art, and song. Such is the case with Stein’s poem: in a flower, the sex organs are contained *within* the flower and so too the *rose* of *Pink Melon Joy* has labia petals which can be spread open, those inner and outer folds of the vulva opening and

closing around the clitoris and vaginal opening. Apply this image to where the rose and other flowers appear throughout Stein's work and gardens of colorful sensuality and pleasure explode all over the page.

Metaphors of the rose—used for a woman's name as well as the flower—come into play as Stein sees “all the rose”: love is a red, red rose after all and it was Stein who wrote “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” in the 1913 erotic poem *Sacred Emily* (later published in *Geography in Plays*, 187; the line repeating in homogeneous forms in *Operas and Plays* and in many other works). Stein's rose is a “loveliness extreme ... sweeter than peaches and pears and cream” (*Sacred Emily, Geography and Plays*, 187). Stein is so enamored with the gorgeousness of her created turn of phrase that the wax seal she used to seal the back of her letters bore the saying “A rose is a rose ...” (*Correspondence: Pablo Picasso Gertrude Stein*, 308). To add, she had the phrase written on china, on her ceiling, and on linens. Embossed printed, and embroidered sex. Sex, a woman's genitals, desire: all over the home, integrated into a life and the sharing of that life.

In her Introductory essay to the 1993 edition of *Geography and Plays*, Cyrena N. Pondrom does a fine job of deconstructing the sexual and intimate layerings of Stein's *Sacred Emily*.²³ Pondrom provides a complementary reading to mine and supports the sexual unmasking and deconstruction of Stein's work. She notes, for example, that previous Stein scholars have drawn attention to the fact that when reading “a rose is a rose is a rose” quickly, the repetition can read and sound like the word *eros*, so “a Rose =

²³ Pondrom's thorough and unabashed work is why I do not need to undertake the book to any large degree even as Stein echoes many of the same themes in *Sacred Emily* as she does in *Pink Melon Joy, Stanzas in Meditation, Tender Buttons, Lifting Belly, and Baby Precious Always Shines*.

eros = eros = eros” (*Geography and Plays*, “Introduction,” xlv); thus, a rose becomes equated to sexual love and desire.²⁴

On Stein’s narrative strategy, and what is underneath it, Pondrom writes that

extreme hermeticism ... provided Stein with the opportunity to write of very private matters without public outcry, and several of these poems celebrate lesbian erotic joy ... Critics ... have argued that the hermetic style is motivated by the desire to code lesbian erotic experience... [Stein’s work] is a sustained effort to speak female experience, finding methods that lie beyond or outside the male-centered symbolic order, the order of traditional language ... her effort is not to recuperate herself to the (patriarchal) world, but to reconstitute and revalue that world—to ‘act,’ as she commanded in *Tender Buttons*, “so that there is no use in a centre. (*Geography and Plays*, “Introduction,” xliii)

And so, the majority of Stein’s poetic narratives weave together female identity, lesbian-love making, and female love relationship (xlvi). In *Stanza in Meditation* the exploratory garden is diverse, and flowers recur repeatedly: “only one dahlia” and “she has been very kind about pansies,” while of course, “a rose which grows” is the dominant flower, “after all it astonishes even me” (Part IV, Stanza XXIV, 133). How the rose becomes redder than red is what *Pink Melon Joy* dwells in. The intimacy that comes when a woman’s pleasure is unfolding, each petal a layer of pleasure, unfolding to its own rhythm, becoming the entire rose: the lover fully open, receptive, each petal soft, delicate, vulnerable. The rose reveals its beauty and unique scent ever so slowly as it opens. Stein’s “aching” holds suspense and craving – it is the kind of yearning for pleasure that makes any lover anticipate the layers that intimacy and sex bring, as the rose eventually opens and flowers, wave upon wave of opening of pleasure.

²⁴ Stein was not the only influential artist playing with the word *eros*. Marcel Duchamp’s persona Rose Sélavy sounds like *eros*, *c’est la vie* and is translated as *eros*, such is life or *eros*, that is life. Man Ray’s stunning 1920s photographs of Duchamp as Rose Sélavy reveal an alluring woman, a *femme fatale*, *diva dandy*, who is playing with notions of both gender and desire.

Stein instructs us how and where we are to behold the rose: “all of it on leather” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 282). We can now see skin on skin, the rose being sweet smelling, the leather being both a luxurious animal product, soft and subtle, and ... BDSM code. Those who have gravitated toward using leather for sensual pleasure date back centuries; leather objects and textures can be seen from the earliest erotic photography and published pornography to contemporary 21st-century haute couture fashion and marketing strategies that allude to locations for queer and sexually deviant folk to celebrate sexual variance and BDSM play. In fact, the language of BDSM and taboo pornography, such as flagellation and role-play, has never appeared more pronounced than in Victorian times. Pornographic books such as *My Secret Life* and *The Pearl* make pornography of the 21st-century seem quite monotonous. And so our bold, determined Stein takes on what many of us are inclined to do, but unable:

She can think the thought that they will wish
And they will hold that they will spell anguish
And they will not be thought perverse
If they angle and the will or which they wish as verse
And so may be they can be asked
That they will answer this.
Let me see let me go let me be not only determined
But for which they will mind
That they are often as inclined
To have them add more than they could ...
They will be left to be determined
As much as if they pleased they pleased

(*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part II, *Stanza XIX*, 62)

This is an autobiography in two instances

(*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part IV, Stanza XII, 114)

And so variations on perversity and verse, which leave us empowered, “determined,” and “pleased,” look like the words *present, horses, harnessing, resist, surprise, astonishment, satisfaction, believe, miracle, toys, and spread* that are repeated throughout *Pink Melon Joy*, while in *Stanzas in Meditation* we have variations on the words *pleasure, please, I do, like it, pink, satisfy, cows, fasten, will, willing, would, wish, may* (changed to *can* in the revised text), and *accept*. It is no coincidence that Stein’s word choices occurred equally as often in modern erotica and subculture conversations and writing²⁵: discussing sex with an openness, freedom, and honesty that plays with taboos and experimentation is something Stein was very adept at. This is a Stein who wants her lover to “please be restless” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 305); a Stein “willing for needing” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part I, Stanza XV, 35); a Stein who writes of “harnessing on ... harnessing another. Harnessing on or another is a great success.” Toys are harnessed, lovemaking is harnessed, and lesbian sex is harnessed. Stein harnesses a BDSM context when she writes: “I offer. I offer. I offer. I do need it” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 301). A distinctive pleasure seeking is echoed, rhythmically, as is submission and the giving over to her dominant lover. She shares “I meant to be told,” which illustrates the verbal dominant/submissive play they engage in (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 301). She is “beautifully rich” as “harnessing is a great success ... a result. A repetition ... an offspring” has been produced (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 301). And this lover proves just

²⁵ And it still continues today: erotic language and leather, BDSM, and LGBTQ subculture uses coded words just as Stein did.

how much she “needs it” when she shares: “I knew I wanted four hundred” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 301).

She writes that she *will* “speak of it ... in the retracting glory” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 282). Like all writers, Stein is intent on composing and then sharing her worldview. However, she goes one step further in that she seeks to speak on the sexually giving and receiving self. What is the *it* she is speaking? Might *it* refer to the rose or the pink melon? Or might *it* have something to do with one of Stein’s most written of subjects: Toklas producing a cow? In Stein’s writing, endings and completions repeatedly look like a wife having a cow (more on this later when looking at *Baby Precious Always Shines* and “A Book Concluding With As A Wife Has A Cow: A Love Story”). What is retracting? Retracting means to pull in, to draw back, to withdraw. The Latin origin of the word *retract* means “drawn back” and derives from the verb “retrahere” from “re” (meaning “back”) and “trahere” (meaning “drag”) (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). Therefore, to retract is to drag back. What is dragging back from the rose on leather? That which brings the rose and pink melon joy? Stein’s phallus? Alice’s? The poem shows throughout that whatever is retracting brings joy.

Stein asserts that in the retracting glory “there is more choice” than that which is proscribed: “there is what is threaded.” Leather culture is very much grounded in choice and variation, each generation playing with choice to live a life of aliveness. To thread is for something to run through, or “on the inside of a cylindrical hole, to allow to parts to be screwed together.” To thread is to “pass through something into the required position for use” and to “move carefully or skillfully in and out of obstacles” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). To thread implies a running through the center. A body is

threaded through the center when receiving penetration. And yet Stein also counsels us to “act so that there is no use in a centre,” which implies that any threading “spread” and be felt through and into the entire body to bring us into a space of “nothing” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 498).²⁶ To thread can evoke pushing, poking, weaving, to inch, to pass through and into. The switch weaves and threads what is threaded. No coincidence, similar wording recurs through Stein’s work: in *Tender Buttons*’ “Objects” she writes: “I hope she has her cow. Bidding a wedding, widening received threading, little leading mention nothing” (*Selected Writings*, 474). Treading, threading, widening, having her cow. Stein’s switchiness continually weaves and threads to create a new, unpredictable being; what is threaded is woven, complicated by choice, and is a glory to be present to, to speak of and share. In *Stanzas in Meditation*, she writes:

There has been a beginning of begun.
They can be caused.
They can be caused to share.
Or they can be caused to share....
It gave me pleasure and fear
But we are here
And so far further
It has just come to me now to mention this
And I do it

(Part V, Stanza LII, 190-91)

Penetration and describing the genitals can also take on a poetic language that carries a pornographic boldness. She writes that when “they were alone ... little pleasures are seeking after not exactly a box then comes the time for drilling” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 281). The statement “little pleasures are seeking” offers such a

²⁶ Further readings of this passage occur further into this chapter.

welcome invitation to the reader for it allows desire to be pleased and room to be made for it. We are left seeking after something with Stein. Is she seeking “not exactly a box,” or does the “drilling” occur “after” the boxing? Is “box” a verb, and action here? A penetrative one unto the box itself. The predisposition to vulgarize the word “box” can be offset here: boxes are containers, they have sides, and their contents are safe, enclosed, protected. Boxes hold secrets and hidden spaces. The term *box* can also refer to “any of a number of trees that have similar wood or foliage” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*), and, seeing as both women have similar foliage to their trees of life, this could work nicely with the sentence that follows “not up Really believe me it is sheltered oaks that matter”; a woman’s genitals sheltered, boxed, her genitals not up, roots nestled inward, foliage on top, the box, the oak tree, has its acorn (the clitoris) sweetly hanging, but protected. Or might Stein be voyeuristically or sadistically witnessing a drilling and be left to relish in her own “sheltered oak”? The familiar proverb “mighty oaks from little acorns grow” alludes to the overall impressiveness of the human body, desire, love, sex, and intimacy over time: the little acorn a “little pleasure seeking.” Sweetly, she ends with describing the subject and the subject’s subject, as “it is they who are sighing it really is.” A pause is then followed by “not when I hear it,” which can be read as an ironic playfulness because, really, “it really is.” Further readings could have the difference allude to the meanings we add that support different points of view: the same sex sounds sounding and resonating very differently to different people.

In a room with the smells, touch, and instruments of leather Stein adds that in this choice, in this threading, “I don’t mean permitting” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 282). There is a taking of her lover, a dominance and submission; a fetishizing to her taking and

watching *all the rose*, lush, open, and blooming, on the sweet, robust-smelling, soft skin of an animal. Stein's romantic and adoring self drips sexiness from every unpredictable turn of phrase as she (re)creates, writes, and switches in her roles, genders, sexual identities, and desires. Stein's seeking "harnessing" and "kneeling" actions may seem benign: they are not; we are a witness to their sex, time and time again. We are a voyeur to both women in the active "to be" state of being pleased and pleasing (*Idem the Same, ASR*, 378). Stein is fixated on desire, roles, sex, orgasm, fetish objects, and various modes of pleasure.

The language of Dominance and Submission is further evident in Stein's repetition around begging and asking: submission and dominance play out with the lover saying she is "Willing. Willing, willing. Willing willing ... it was deepened" (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 286). Willing to do what her lover wants these lovers are willing to take what is deep to a point of it being "deepened." Being "willing" pulls for the notion of pleasing her lover by being "willing," of pleasing her Master, Mistress, wife, or dominant, or of pleasing the submissive, making sure she is taken care of and enjoys the deepening. Later she will instruct, "leave it in there for me. Leave it in an especial place." She tells her lover not to "make that face. Show it by the indication." For, she writes, she means to put a "spell" on her lover, asking/telling her: "believe me." (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 288). When she writes, "I am not pleased. I am not satisfied and pleased. I am not pleased and certainly I am not more pleased," she answers with: "I am so repressed and I can state it. I can say" (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 286). And she does say, and this communication allows for different actions to produce different results. The "I" subject (lover? writer?) becomes "satisfied" even as the "we" neglect their life by "not

resting” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 288*). In a lovely turn of phrase, Stein asks “shall it be continuous the liberty of sobriety ... little tremors ... with a wide piano. Come. Neglecting cherishing says shall I mistake pleasures. In mistakes there is a salutary secretion. What. I said it” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 288*). With a clearheadedness the “little tremors ... with a wide piano” of penetration are felt, the beneficial orgasm and release of fluids are made, and the subject shares: “I shook.” The we and I playful here, the mistakes not mistakes but pleasures brought about by a spell that has one believe in love and trust.

I seek, as Stein did, to be reminded that sex and our sexualities can be as open as we are: “She reminded me that I was as ready as not and I said I will not say that I preferred service to opposition. I will not say what or what is not a pleasure” (from “To Remind,” in *A Book Concluding With As A Wife Has A Cow: A Love Story*,” cited in *A Stein Reader, 459*). For Stein and Toklas, explorations and the nature of play in pleasure are a healthy and key part of their relationship. To explore “service to opposition,” submission to dominance, or, because she is unsure what will be pleasurable, switching anywhere on the spectrum. She did not have to choose between service and resistance, service and defiance, servicing and topping. All she had to choose was to be present. The loving act of reminding each other to engage in the fluidity of choice in the present moment, rather than act out a scripted role or scene, is clear in this passage. “She reminded me” is such a loving holding onto the unknown: you are ready; you are as ready as you ever will be. This is a loving act of expressing that there is no need for perfection, waiting, wondering about, or being good enough; there is no need for postponing

pleasure and play. There is no need to know anything for certain: who is going to do what, who is going to be pleased, how.

“Anything can astonish a citizen ... I believe in the best”

(Pink Melon Joy, A Stein Reader, 303)

The subheading “Feeling Mounting” describes more of the doing: “she was standing filling with a pepper thing and she had a collar not on her head but because she was shining. She was shining with gloves.” So the retracting of earlier might be any kind of instrument inserted for pleasure, a “pepper thing,” and also, a hand or hands. The fetishization of objects and BDSM recurs throughout Stein. Here it is a “pepper thing” filling her lover and the “collar” around her neck (not *on* her head, but nearby, on her neck) and heightening the sensory pleasure that contributes to her shining. The gloves are shining from pleasing her, she is shining from being pleased, and here Stein openly and honestly shares: “this is a new destination ... I never was surprised before” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 286*).

Lesbian sex often makes especial use of the hands, and when practicing safe sex, gloves are used. Was Stein practicing safe sex? We can not know, however, what we do know is that leather gloves are a very accessible BDSM tool. Gloves recur later in the poem when an attentive, caring lover, post orgasm, details the post sex scene: “little dove little love I am loving you with much more love ... I saw an extraordinary mixture. By nearly leaving out gloves and washing them ... and towels, by nearly leaving out towels and all of it by way of reminding every one of every time, by leaving out invitations ... Not with the carelessness ... I meant to do it” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 297*). Not only do

we have description of orgasm and ejaculation as “an extraordinary mixture,” but we have the detailing of what was used to bring it about (gloved hands) and catch it (towels). Visitors to the home are “nearly” invited to be exhibitionists, with one of them leaving the accessories of their sex “out.” This invitation by way of seeing the room almost littered, carelessness not difficult in the post orgasmic state, but, possibly with intention as she “meant to do it.”

Later, “two hands” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 303) are used after “harnessing on or another is a great success” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 301). Harnessed up, the lovers and their hands are compared to horses. Stein confesses, “I believe in two horses ... it was a surprise then I said I would stand. It was pleasant. It was not gentle. It was black and hopeful.” We watch the lover standing and being filled with two hands the size of horses, or is it what is harnessed that is the size of a horse? Are the lovers the two horses or are there two “horses” being harnessed? The description reads that it is “principally very shapely.” It would seem a dildo would be in the harness. The dildo, or instrument of pleasure, is a recurring theme in Stein’s work and is always worded in code, allowing for us to imagine *all* the possibilities that would “surprise” both her and us as readers. Is she standing for comfort while being penetrated or is she alluding to the surprise of being able to stand after such a successful session of being harnessed? Lest disbelief or prudery step in, she writes, “anything can astonish” but “I believe in the best” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 303). The best equates to whatever makes these lovers happy, pleased, and surprised. The “best” is having had a “great success” after “harnessing;” the best is when a lover tops from the bottom, speaking “I offer. I offer. I offer” myself to your harnessing because “I do need it” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 301).

The lover is instructed to “go slowly and carefully and love your dearest” and also “to place a cloth ... where I have hotter water, to place paper where I have hotter water” to catch the orgasm and ejaculate that is sure to come (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 289*). She then asks, “shall I be splendid.” The answer is a resounding yes as the lover brought to a place of uttering ”Baby mine baby mine I am learning ... to be sent baby mine baby mine” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 289*). The lover is the baby, the ejaculate is the baby, and the lover is learning to explore and birth her baby; to add, there is a possessive ownership over baby, baby is “mine,” which illustrates a giving, a receiving, a holding of that which a lover can give to her lover: her body, her ejaculate, her orgasm. The narrative then moves to more horse and BDSM imagery and language as Stein describes: “this is a place to water horses” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 289*). The horses thirsty, the paper or cloth laid down, the lover can then relax into “I like to be excellently seized” whereupon they switch in their giving and receiving so that she now says, “I like to be excellently seizing / north north I went around and went in that minute” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 289*), and so we have the tender button in the north, which likes to be touched round and round, and then, within a minute, the penetration. The lover begins to “like to be excellently searching” then (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 290*).

In *Stanzas in Meditation* she shares “that is why a like in it with it / Which they gay which they gay / But not only just the same” (Part III, Stanza VIII, 77). The substitution of “a” for “I” a clever way to offset the “gay” and the bold liking “in it” and “it in,” but hardly convincing to her audience who reads her erotic coding. The remainder of the stanza explains her use of subtleties and language, her choice to not name in an effort to create a largeness that a more specific referent could not offer; they

are, after all “not only” gay—our sexualities being just one part of an identity and lifestyle, many queers dwelling in varied and various complex identities and preferences that fuel other aspects of one’s identity —while at the same time, the poem goes on to celebrate their touching, noting they are not the first to utter tenderhearted sentiments and commitments such as: “tell me darling tell me true / Am I all the world to you” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part III, Stanza VII, 77)

Which returns us to the recurring of the talking, darkly, dirtily, with her lover, the entire poem filled with word play. The black and beautiful could also be the dark beautiful recesses the hand or dildo enters, which could be the vagina or the anus as Stein writes of “the description of mud” (*Pink Melon Joy*, *ASR*, 303) as well as the mental, physical, and emotional space that opens up in the body and mind when sexuality is pushed beyond any limit previously known. In *Stanzas in Meditation* she asks us to “remember this once they knew that the way to give / was to go more than they went / for which they meant immediately faster / it is always what they will out loud” (Part II, Stanza VII, 49). Stein is asking us to meditate on stasis, on going further in how they love, in what they will, to go faster and to say it out loud, to remember how to give. Giving and receiving pleasure, and remembering to give, recur over and over again in the *Stanzas in Meditation*, as this passage illustrates:

And if they offer you something and you accept
Will they give it to you and will it give you pleasure
And if after a while they give you more
Will you be pleased to have more
Which in a way is not even a question
Because after all they like it very much

(Part II, Stanza II, 39)

The best would include “rubbers” bought with mindfulness: “the mischief lies in getting the wrong ones. They are remarkable in many shapes and when you ask for hurrying see that you get it” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 304). Unhurried, these lovers have not only chosen each other with great consideration—Stein was thirty-six and Toklas was thirty-three when they moved in together—but they also choose their sexual aides and accouterments without hurry, making sure to get the right shapes. Stein expands into diversity when she writes, “there are plenty of rubber wheels of a kind,” implying that there are diverse degree of variancies within the spectrum of human kind; that the “many shapes” of “a kind” are to be considered fully, lest mischief result. A more specific reading would have this passage acknowledging the many variancies within subcultures such as theirs, which might include varying sex practices and preferences among lesbians and homosexual men, for example. As Stein so often wrote in perverse verse, there is no doubt she would turn a polite nod of inclusion and welcome to her more conservative sisters and brothers and those outside her spectrum of sexual freedom and preference; *while at the same time* writing of the full, complete, and sexy nature and composition within the circle of deviance she, Toklas, and others of her time reveled in.

This new destination Stein and Toklas are encompassing is a queer, genderqueer sex that surprises and delights her with each new turn of joy-seeking. So while much of *Pink Melon Joy* occurs without a clear referent as to who is pleasing whom, consider one instance of the writer speaking Alice’s name and the gender switch that happens in this flow of subheadings (noted in italics) with first lines: “I cannot mention what I have. I have. Guess it. I have a real sight. This is so critical. Alice. *Put it in.* Put it in ... I

wish I was a flower ...*That is.* That is astonishing. *Mother.* I meant it ... I said whisper. *Anyway pink melon or joy.* Is that the same. Pink melon and enjoy. Pink melon by joy. Is that in him. Is that in. Positive” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 293-94*). Not only do we have Stein asking Toklas to “guess” what she has (a phallus, a “pepper thing,” a pink melon?) which is a “real sight,” which implies a largeness, we witness her asking to “put it in” in repeating, submissive, begging-like intonations. The penetration, the wanting, the *begging* to “put it in” proves so astonishing that she calls out “Mother.” If we read just the subheadings we read: “Put it in. That is. Mother. Brutes. Anyway pink melon or joy” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 294*). Mother resonates a call out to mercy, and comes directly after “that is astonishing” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 294*). Mother attunes the sacred Mother, a Mother who tends to and nourishes her “baby” in an endless giving, a Mother who gives birth to babies. *Baby* being code for Stein and Toklas’s orgasms, *Mother* evokes the bringer of pleasure here. The pleasure has the lover saying “pink melon and enjoy / pink melon by joy,” and then a gender switch occurs when the pleaser, Alice, asks “is that in him. Is that in” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 294*), which not only allows Stein to dwell in her he but also to dwell in being submissive while being pleased. The lover being asked provides a space for dialogue and communication for their pleasure and pleasing. Stein concludes the stanza by answering yes, “positive,” it’s in (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 294*).

Stein continues to tease out the dominance and submission between the two lovers. While not content to have “any more begging” she simply asks—or is she instructing?—to “please have it ready” (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR, 295*). The *Stanzas* see that “all can be glory can be can be glory” in a kneeling, after which they were “fortunate ...

after it is all given away ... and so it is ... come” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part I, Stanza VI, 21). Orgasm is a gift, possible ejaculation something fortunate to give to her lover, something that is glorious: magnificent, praise-worthy, holy. Pleasure through multiple orgasms is “theirs to undo/ getting it better more than once alike / for which fortune favors me” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part I, Stanza VI, 21). She continues with “all who come will will come or come to be / come to be coming that is in and see / see elegantly not without enjoin ... shall we be there I wonder now” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part I, Stanza VI, 22). To dwell in enjoining, wonder, the repetition of the action *to come*, the *glory* of the being and doing follows with the remarkable pondering and switching occurrence of if “every one knowing this could know then of this pleased / she can be thought in when in which it is in mine a pleasure” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part I, Stanza VII, 23).

In the sub-headed section “Hymns,” a recurring object appears: the table. She writes, “I have forgotten the height of the table” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 283), perhaps out of arresting thoughts and being so ultimately present, perhaps out of Toklas being away from the table because she is now laying on leather in this poem. Stein writing about forgetting the height of the table simply brings attention to the height. As in, what does it evoke? Why would it be important? The height of a table is only as important as it is used for harnessing and birthing a cow or baby. Hymns sound like “we were right. We meant pale. We were wonderfully shattered. Why are we shattered. Only be an arrest of thought.” And yet, she claims, “I don’t make it out,” suggesting, toying with, reflecting, and perhaps singing: “Hope there. Hope not.” (*Pink Melon Joy*, ASR, 283).

The most evocative reference to the table as a facilitator of pleasure occurs in *Tender Buttons*'s "Objects": "a table means does it not my dear it means a whole steadiness. Is it likely that a change ... a table means necessary places and a revision a revision of a little thing it means it does mean that there has been a stand, a stand where it did shake" (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 474). The table is shaking from their revisionary love making, the table is a stand for their lovemaking and their romance, whereas the state will not take a stand for them having marriage. The revision of the word *stand* to evoke standing with and for someone or something is interesting here. A revision of a little thing, the meaning of a table, the angle of penetration, the necessary places broached, the steadiness of a table not only needed, reliable, and trustworthy, but also an erotic piece of furniture once employed in the service of pleasure opens worlds of possible interpretations. The notion that the table will always be looked at as a place to make shake, a place of their lovemaking and sex, turns their room, that table, into a sexual mnemonic.

Act so that there is no use in a centre. A wide action is not a width

(*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 498).

The Rue de Fleurus contains "Objects," "Food," and "Rooms" that are made up of the tenderness of buttons being looked at, eaten, explored, written, lived in; the rooms of these two lovers are the boxes, the containers for purses that are "hardly seen," tables that shake, and tender buttons that show "shudders" and "spread into nothing" (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 469, 473, 474, 472). For Stein, "the difference is spreading" as she wills and manifests that "she has her cow" through a "widening received

threading, little leading mention nothing” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 461, 474). Her lover, and we as existentially-minded modernist readers, are led with “little leading” along spiritual, enlightened paths of threading and spreading *into nothing*. With tenderness, we are ushered to sit in an open field of Zen mindfulness where we are to “act so that there is no use in a centre” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 498). And like every enlightened teacher, Stein offers us line after line of reasons and riddles as to *why and how* we might want to do this: because “a wide action is not a width” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 498). Stein creates this mantra as a way of knowing the serenity of living without a centre that binds us. To “act so that there is no use in a center,” knows “the hope” which “necessarily” will “spread into nothing. Spread into nothing” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 498, 474). The subject, and we as readers, are asked to give up our center, what we think we know, and “spread into nothing.”

Stein’s philosophy of action: to “act so that there is no use in a centre. A wide action is not a width” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 498) is an essential tenet of my project and of switching. “To act so that there is no use in a centre,” knows that action, not belief, creates a new realm of being and of what’s possible. To know, to allow, and then to act as if “there is no use in a centre” creates the decentering necessary to create a space where variance can breathe; it creates the space where a victory in self-expression and connectedness can be experienced and breathed. Stein continues to write that “the hope” of this action is that, “necessarily,” there will be the experience to “spread into nothing. Spread into nothing” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 474). By acting as if “there is no use in a centre,” by *giving up* her centre, a new hope springs forth: a hope, which is so free it “spreads into nothing.” Nothing is not a scary, isolating place, it is the

location of everything and freedom, it is the nothing by which anything can be created, free from constraining past-based frameworks or imagining. Creating out of something “is not a width.” It’s creating on top of something. Creating out of and from nothing is the space of genius and transformation. Nothing is the space of freedom and pure creation. Contrast is absent in the space of nothing. This is why the mantra “a wide action is not a width” comes after the teaching to “act as if there is no use in a centre,” because it is a new, creation-based future she is pulling us to.

Do not think that “a wide action is a width,” she writes. A wide action is a wide action; a width is a width. The clarity of this teaching and practice occurs as a singular action: do the action, practice the action, and do not get muddy with it. The action is: “act so that there is no use in a centre.” Just do that, she seems to tell us. Practice that: acting as if there is *no use in a centre*. In this space, everything opens up into connected nothingness. Stein then offers a tool to dwell in a more feeling, heart-centered place in accessing this mantra: “the difference is spreading” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 461). There is an openness to a spiritually enlightened mind here: no overthinking or analysis is present in spreading, it simply is. The difference between happiness and unhappiness is in the spreading, in the acting as if, in accepting that creating out of nothing in the present, rather than attempting to create on top of old, past-based concepts, thoughts, actions, creates something new and life-giving. The difference in getting it or not is practicing the spreading into nothing: to allow one’s mind to spread into nothing. Spread wide: a wide action is called for: spread, she says, that is the difference, which is the access.

Like her *Stanzas in Meditation* and much of her work, these lines are actual meditations: thoughts meant for contemplation, deliberation, rumination, study, and prayer. They are sutras: threads by which teachers can then extrapolate and expand in the effort of furthering the initial teachings and practice. The practice of meditating on the idea and the action of “acting so that there is no use in a center” involves acting so that there is no use in any structure that would bind our heart or mind. This is her practice and gift to us as teacher. One only has to listen to the recordings of Stein reading her work to understand that practiced meditation and mantra are at work and play.

The queer temporality of Stein evokes a present tense narrative rendering of “the continuous present,” and any meaning we may make of it, to “spread into nothing” (From “A Little Bit of a Tumbler,” *Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 472). In the section sub-headed “Pauline” Stein shares that “a little called anything shows shudders” (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 473). Any movement, any “difference,” any “spreading,” any action, any practice of “acting so that there is no use in a center” “shows shudders.” The wording of “a little called anything” in showing “shudders” resonates the language and conversational dialogue that Stein writes as happening in sex: the naming, the speaking of that which shudders. The invitation to name is itself a generous and courageous act. Calling it “anything” leaves the naming up to the individual or the lovers. Calling it “little” evokes a delicacy, tenderness and even a safety and enclosed place. Calling it “little” also evokes the contrast: what is filling up little to make it shudder? Something big? This is the dialogue of little and of baby, of husband and wife, of “Aunt Pauline” ending the erotic poem *Lifting Belly* with the song of orgasm. Showing shudders anew, the shudders of orgasm or thought, the shudders of releasing past patterns and ways of

being, the shudders of words that resonate aliveness and spark, the shudders of *each movement toward a decentered* way of walking and being in the world, the spreading into the nothingness of the universe, the tenderness of each unbuttoning is Stein's orgasm.

The shuddering, spreading, freedom-loving place that Stein speaks and writes about contains urgency. At the individual and collective level, there is no time to waste: sooner rather than later is when action is required. Do not postpone freedom, love, joy, she writes: "the sooner there is jerking, the sooner freshness is tender, the sooner the round it is not round the sooner it is withdrawn in cutting, the sooner the measure means service, the sooner there is chinking ... the sooner there is none do her, the sooner there is no choice, the sooner there is a gloom freer, the same sooner and more sooner, there is no error in hurry and in pressure and in opposition to consideration" (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 481). Stein carves out a large space, a large field, with each of her texts wherein we can examine the roads that lead to happiness. Her invitation is one that involves a great deal of open-mindedness, willingness, and trust.

Stein's questing after a "sooner" pleasure and freedom finds expression in "top and bottom" living to explore "much heating" as "all the pliable succession of surrendering makes an ingenious joy" (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 484). Surrender to the lover, surrender to joy, surrender to not knowing or being attached to a center, Stein seems to say. Surrender. Top and bottom live to make joy and poems of telling tenderness that take "care with which there is incredible justice and likeness" and which, in all their likeness they make a "magnificent ... fountain" (*Tender Buttons, Selected Writings*, 509). Outside of center, the fountain of orgasm reappears.

Stein's work is filled with much pink and pleasure-making as orgasm after orgasm take on a striking language. She explains in *Stanzas in Meditation* "it did it a great deal of good to rub it" (Part IV, Stanza I, 101). I giving up politeness and choosing to "pilot it ... not polite" (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 282) the pleasure seeking, request to "do satisfy me" is granted. The "Hymns" of sex contain "words of praise" alluding to a vocal, word-play component to their sex as she "rushed in" (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 283). Stein writes, "the reason I mention what is happening is not by way of concealing that I have babies. I don't mean to leave so and I shall speak in silence. What is a baby." (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 289). She now knows "what to say": she will not conceal that she has babies and what a baby is: the pleasure of orgasm and ejaculation (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 289). The process of baby making leaves Stein to write "we were wonderfully shattered" (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 283). Words like "shattered" and "shutters" occur throughout Stein's writing. I love the use of the word *shattered* here: it's unexpected and evokes an experience of total exhaustion after the rush of sex. She writes, "an arrest of thought" is what shatters, implying seizing and attracting that which serves as pleasurable, as well as stopping any thoughts that might come from politeness or interfere in the uninhibited acts of sex. In "Pillow" Stein then very tenderly writes of Toklas, whom she often called *baby*, and additionally, writes of orgasm experiences, because *baby* is also a term they used to describe having an orgasm: "this is to say that baby is all well. That baby is baby. That baby is all well ... this is to say that baby is all well. This is to say that baby is all well." (*Pink Melon Joy, ASR*, 283). The repetition of soothing, tender, comforting, and sexy words holding the lover in a perfect, loved completion.

In the *Meditations*, completion sometimes looks like sharing the intimacy of food: “it is well known that they eat again ... nearly often after there is a pleasure” (*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part I, Stanza II, 15). Other times, completion comes as the narrative ends by acknowledging that “there has been a beginning of begun. / they can be caused ... we are here / and so far further (Part V, Stanza LII, 190-91). And so the narrative of their love and love-making as told in the *Stanzas of Meditation* affirms: “I wish once more to mention / that I like what I see (Part V, Stanza LXI, 201), the lover’s only regret being “I wish that I had spoken only all of it” (Part V, Stanza LXIII, 203). Witness how in one meditation Stein’s stanza can be seductively subtle, philosophically questioning, and open-ended while at the same time sexually aggressive, evocative, and explanatory:

Which they tell which they fill
Could they make might it be right
Or could they would they will
If they might as if they will
Not only with a will but will it
Indeed it will who can be caught
And sought
For which they will in once
Will they they will ...
It is of every ready pleasure
To add treasure to a treasure ...
Shove
Shove is a proof of love ...
And now they add this which
In which and well they wish
They add a little pink...
We had been as well
And we do.

(*Stanzas in Meditation*, Part V, Stanza LXVI, 204-06)

Summoning the courage to speak it all, she boldly shares that “shove is a proof of love” (Part V, Stanza LXVI, 205), shoving into love “they add a little pink” which could be the color changes to her lover’s “treasure” or the color of the item being shoved into her treasure. “We had been as well / and we do” affirms the living “proof of love” (Part V, Stanza LXVI, 206). “I need not hope to sing a wish” Stein affirms, “there is no hesitation” (Part V, Stanza LXVIII, 207). The last lines follow as an empowering, choice-and-pleasure-driven completion: “everybody knows that I chose ... I will be well welcome when I come. / Because I am coming. / Certainly I come having come. / These stanzas are done.” (Part V, Stanza LXXXIII, 218).

Precious, Precious Baby

In *Stanzas in Meditation* Stein wrote, “can we call ours a whole. Out from the whole wide world I *choose* thee” (Part I, Stanza VIII, 25). These two lovers choosing to dwell in this realm of vast, complete, world-size love that finds expression in *the* most exciting publication of Stein’s writing: *Baby Precious Always Shines: Selected Love Notes Between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas*. I contend that, because of the long time span that the love notes cover, from 1935 to 1946, and the emotive, uncensored, and courageous quality of these love notes, they actually are the most stirring and telling of any published in the genre of romance, romantic letters or correspondence, and/or partnered/union writing. They are letters that speak an entire relationship made of humor, loved-filled years where “every New Year is a happy new year for the

Cuddlewuddles” (*Precious Baby Always Shines*, 146). They are letters that speak of a love that makes our author “just cry when I think how tenderly / you are me and I am thee” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 134).

The notes between Stein and Toklas were actually never meant to be published; Toklas gave them to the Beinecke Library at Yale, which houses the manuscripts, notebooks, photos, correspondence, and entire written archive of Stein’s work and life, by mistake. When Toklas was made aware of her gift, she asked that the notes be destroyed; thankfully, she was convinced to have them kept in safekeeping with the agreement that they never be made publicly available. However, fourteen years after Toklas’s death, in 1981, archivists at the library chose to make the notes accessible for research and in 1995 they were officially added to the catalogue of the Stein/Toklas archive. There now exist “a little over three hundred notes—two hundred ninety-five from Gertrude and seventeen from Alice” that we can peruse and get lost in (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 6).

There can be no doubt as to why Toklas wanted the notes to be destroyed, or, at the very least to stay forever private and never made public: the love notes are of a very deeply personal, open, and revealing nature. In fact, the notes are dripping ripe with desire and sensuality; an intimate language of the heart, role-playing, gender-bending, and switching is exposed. We can begin with noticing that Stein completes every note with the closure “Y.D.,” your darling. This is not only a loving and endearing closure, but also a chosen, consensual, offering of herself to her partner and lover. Stein’s repeated *I am yours* is powerful and not to be glossed over as we read the notes. Stein never deviating from ending a note with *I am your darling* illustrates her unwavering commitment to Toklas.

The love notes allow us to witness two women choosing dynamic, flowing, effortless expressions of love, pleasure, identity, and role-playing with each letter. One such expression, which is also found in Stein's epic, erotic poem *Lifting Belly* and in "As A Wife Has A Cow A Love Story," is in the recurring discussion of one of them having what the two women playfully term as *having a cow* or *baby*. Speculating on the meaning of the phrase *having a cow* has occupied some time of Stein scholarship. The term remains ambiguous regardless of interpretations; there are contradictions to any solitary meaning and charting-to-prove the code-word meaning *one thing* can produce no certainty. That said, there are two main interpretations and I propose to add a variant third.

The first interpretation is held by the majority of scholars²⁷ who view Stein's linguistic creation of *having a cow* as code for "making love" or orgasm. It's important to note the terminology used by scholars: *making love*. The foundation of the act is repeatedly created as soft; Stein's erotica and pornography are constructed as a sharing and expressing of love. And while Stein's erotica is soft, loving, and tender, the act of having sex for release as well as the rawness that can accompany sex is also present, and so I move to include those aspects in my reading of Stein's erotica. The pleasures derived from sex are many and multiple, so having an orgasm is sometimes added to the *having a cow* expression of love, especially by feminist and lesbian scholars. This

²⁷ See: Ulla Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923-1934* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002; Jane Goldman, *Modernism 1910-1945: Image to Apocalypse* New York: Palgrave, 2004 (where she states that cow is "slang" for orgasm, page 192); Janet Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*. Yale University Press, 2007; other writers who have referred to Stein's cow as an orgasm include Jeanette Winterson ("All I Know About Gertrude Stein," *Granta* 115; Summer 2011).

addition is a welcome one and connected to my third interpretation of what it may mean to have a cow.

Kay Turner has offered a recent, second reading in her introductory essay to *Baby Precious Always Shines*. Turner notes that her reading may be disconcerting to some as she understands *having a cow* as code for having a bowel movement (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 25). She reveals that Stein's notes with Toklas explicitly write cows as stools: "what is a stool. That was / the elegant name for a cow" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 79). Turner further notes that this interpretation is based on Stein's concern for Toklas's digestive and expulsion issues. She writes that this fact supports "the degree to which Stein was Toklas's caretaker as much as Toklas was Stein's" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 27), which is, actually, quite plainly obvious in all of Stein's writing and their correspondence.

While the two interpretations above certainly work, with Turner's being quite exciting, so much so that I employ them earlier in this chapter, a third reading would add another layer: ejaculation. Ejaculate or ejaculation holds a slight degree of difference from having an orgasm: it accompanies orgasm and has its own referent. That no one has broached ejaculation as Stein's cow is not that surprising; while female ejaculation is an accepted medical and biological fact as the physical affect of orgasm and pleasure for many women seen in an ejaculate of clear fluid from the urethra, the term is bizarrely still defined and reserved for a male's orgasm and ejaculation of semen. A dictionary definition makes no mention of the fact the female body ejaculates and for some reason it's still regarded as a mysterious, freak happening despite many people viewing it as

quite normal. Thus, applying this reading to Stein's *having a cow* opens up a larger spectrum of possibilities and variances to these two women having sex or making love.

In one love note Stein congratulates Toklas on having an "extremely promising husband" who "promises everything / and he means it too. He did not not / mean it. He means it. The darling. This ejaculation refers to Mrs. not to Mr. / as might be erroneously supposed" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 75), clearly linking promising happiness and "everything" with the speaking of Toklas experiencing female ejaculation. Stein continues, "Mrs is the fountain of all good / all beauty and all sweetness. Mrs. / is a graceful fountain" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 75), which allows for Toklas's ejaculate to be regarded most highly, as beautiful and sweet, fountains being places of centrality, art, and celebration in any city. She continues to say that the grace of Toklas's fountain is that "she plays over Mr. who is certain that / Mrs. Is a grateful fountain which / means that it is grateful to / Mr. to have Mrs. Play over him" and yet Stein too is a "Mr. ... so grateful" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 75). So we witness Toklas playing over Stein, playing with Stein, ejaculating over Stein. We also witness both lovers experiencing the gratitude that comes with intimacy and pleasure.

In another erotic poem, Stein shares that the lover experiences and emits a "thunder" when the belly is lifted (*Lifting Belly*, 20); thunder and lightening become another lovely metaphor for an ejaculation which effortlessly fits into many of the readings where cows happen. As noted earlier, Stein writes of having cows with the rose's full opening and blossoming, after the belly has been lifted. Stein or Toklas having a cow is a *result*. As discussed above in *Pink Melon Joy*, the result looks like extraordinary mixtures of fluids all over the table that will serve as evidence to their

visitors of an afternoon of sex and splash like fountains (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 65) unless they clean up. Turner's experience may be that "orgasms are not 'smelly,' nor do they go 'splash,' (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 27), and certainly those adjectives can describe defecation. However, my experience as a sex educator would assert that in fact orgasms can be just that! Stein's describing Toklas as a "fountain," during and in sex and intimacy supports that ejaculations can go "splash"! The fluids may be female ejaculation or urination, both of which can occur when orgasm takes place. Once alert to this notion, one can quite easily read female ejaculations and/or urination happening all over Stein's pages.

Having a cow is a type of completion to her poems, one in which a post-organic body emptied of its contents, exhaustion sets in afterward. A consistent holding, sweet talk, and comforting, usually by Stein, often immediately follows having a cow; Stein's writing shows her attentively following the post-bliss exhaustion of orgasm, ejaculation, and vulnerability that accompanies intense sexual fulfillment and release. Toklas is a "graceful fountain" to which "this ejaculation refers to Mrs. And not to Mr. As might be erroneously supposed" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 75); while both lovers are babies to each other the cow is "to be found. Close inside Mr" which comes from "filling," idolizing, and adoring (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 149) with the result of a "baby achieved by Mr. And Mrs" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 75). The couple's switching between, roles, gender, identity, dominance, submission, giver and receiver is continual, often, organic, and authentic, even as some roles predominate both in their love notes and in her public presentations.

For a professionally-driven, upper-class, traditional yet unconventional, modernist woman such as Stein to own and write the private acts of lesbian sex, the body, and female ejaculation a great courage was summoned; even as she writes of society being “polite” and heteronormative, any fears she may have had concerning public scorn, refusals of publication, loss of reputation, and/or friendships never appear in Stein’s work. Her intentions and conversations thus remain free of any disempowering context, which makes them even more powerful; Stein’s writing is not a response to what is missing: it is purely creation-based. And like any great and influential writer or artist, Stein creates and shares from the created space or clearing of anything is possible: *this* kind of love, *these expressions* of love and desire, is possible, is real, and is beautiful. In her unfailing, relentless, and consistent presentations of variant lesbian sex, Stein presents us as readers with a space to *live* the possibilities of owning our own bodies, genders, identities, variant sex acts, pleasures, and creative, erotic language. I thus assert that the variant spaces and renderings Stein provides us with are actually incomplete without reading the ejaculate.

Stein’s penetrating and shoving, producing cows and babies, open up many possible interpretations to the variant ways female ejaculation and orgasm can be experienced; these openings allow the giver of pleasure (Stein or Toklas), and us as readers, to witness a queering and switching of gender, sexual, and identity variances: they are birthed and have visibility with ejaculation. Another example where gender and identity variances are allowed space is evident when Stein takes on a “he” role and pronoun. The “he” role allows Stein to inhabit her gender genderqueerness or gender variancy; it is an identity that complicates and expands what being a she or woman is:

this queerness expands with and into Stein's sexual identity. One way Stein's "he" can appear is with the he'ing of the penetrative, pleasing—metaphoric or mental—dildo or penis.²⁸ In one note Stein writes that her baby "will smoke / me instead of cigarettes and that / will do" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 100). The love notes illustrate very clearly that Stein embodied aspects of the he, and that Toklas provided space and support for this aspect of Stein's identity to be seen and celebrated.

Stein's birthday note to Toklas begins with the sex act of Toklas sitting on Stein's "bough": "my baby is a birdie sitting on a / bough, and the bough is hubby ... my baby is a treasure sitting on / its pleasure, and its pleasure is / its hubby" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 134). Sexual taboos and variances are allowed space by the very nature of these acts not being written in a mainstream, heteronormative, and cultural context. So while many scholars have noted orgasm as a probable meaning for cow, and Turner has noted the passing of feces, I suggest we add the tangible ejaculate of female fluids and orgasm to the list of possible meanings as we read the cows, ejaculate, and fountains of Stein. I would further propose that all these interpretations can co-exist as possibilities, that we don't need to pick one definitive interpretation to the exclusion of the others; concurrent readings respect and pay tribute to her playfulness with language and honor how effervescently Stein sought to create an abstract, ambiguous, and fun world.

Bringing the porn back into their notes, let us look at some additional contexts and spaces where these lovers transgress and shift in their sexual and identity roles.

²⁸ This genderqueer, transgendered, or transsexual identity location – of actually having, knowing, and thinking from and with a mental penis - is very real for some genderqueers and gender variants, as well as for some butch women and trans folks; it is worth noting that this is an aspect of sexual and gender identity that is not often spoken of or seen in LGBTQ dialogues. I would suggest that this notion could best be seen in the art, photograph, erotica, pornography, and BDSM subculture of gender variant dyke and trans folks.

When Toklas writes to Stein, she describes her as “good baby,” a “baby boy” who is “better behaved every second” (*Baby Precious Always Shines* 158, 159). Behaviour, good or bad, alludes to playing with power dynamics. In another note Toklas tells Stein that “no more naughty’s be endured” when the “husband is an instantaneous obediencer,” which brings the Submissive/Dominant dynamic into full view for us. Toklas’s word choice of “instantaneous” in describing Stein’s obedience positions Toklas quite solidly in the dominant, top role, which she takes on with exacting standards and firmness. The repetition of the word “obey,” in various forms, is constant in their love notes. To command, instruct, direct, submit, follow, and behave are underlying themes of the Toklas/Stein relationship; and while they are mostly seen in the love notes, the land of obeying is in nearly all of Stein’s published work. Their relationship writes what it is to obey. Both lovers occupy a space of flux and switch in her role depending on who wants to be in control of what.

Stein is described as “he likes to be well / and be hers” which presents us readers with an unsure sense of who the he is: is the he Stein herself, Stein’s dildo or mental member? Toklas writes, “Mrs. Speaks he ups & obeys her” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 160) which again adds ambiguity: is Stein’s member “up,” to enter Toklas, does she rise or get “up” physically, or is she opening “up” to allow Toklas to enter her? What is clear is the two lovers dancing with role playing and Dominance/Submission. The words “Mrs. Speaks” and he “obeys” are just one point of role-play; the tone of the line also illustrates how Toklas tops Stein from the bottom; topping from the bottom recurs for both partners, switching between dominance and submission, quite often. She says that Stein is “no toy” and both a “baby boy” and “a strong-strong husband” to Toklas

(*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 158). With topping and bottoming comes a coexistence of equals, the switch nature of them both, Toklas tells Stein: “I don’t obey / do this you say / well do it together and / that’s the way we obey” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 158). She chooses not to want to “obey” her Wife, yet, what is alluded to in the language of the notes indicates play with dominance and submission. “Do this you say” is consensually played with in some locations, whereas other instances have an equal doing “it together.”

Toklas writes that her loving and sexing Stein is Stein’s “constant food” as she seeks “to delight with all my might / hubby is my pleasure” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 158). She delights in affirming that they are always near and that “wifie’s good / hides it under a thick hood” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 158). The *it* repeating is ambiguous: *it* is hidden “under a thick hood” and “*it*” is Stein’s “constant food.” Stein’s—or is it Toklas’s?—hood could very well be her clitoris; the *it* could also be what is inserted and penetrated just underneath the hood: that which is penetrated becomes hidden when inserted. Fingers, a hand, or the head of her penis/dildo could be the *it*. Toklas may be genderqueering herself or her lover in this note as gender switching happens throughout.

Toklas is very intentional in feeding Stein: from taking care of the food purchases and meals in their household to taking care of Stein’s sex appetite. This is Toklas’s Christmas note to Stein, after all, so in the time of culinary decadence Toklas writes that “it” will be Stein’s constant craving, her constant hunger. She then evolves her love note to the second stanza which takes a turn toward possession and S/M ownership: “good baby / is all me / to delight / with all my might / hubby is my pleasure.” The words *all*

and *my* echo here and throughout the notes; it is Toklas's role to please *all* of Stein: no part of her reserved or left for anyone else. The present of Stein is *all* Toklas's pleasure. Toklas's gift is to please with all she has, all she can give. We can almost here her say *mine mine mine* here. Stein is coaxed and stroked with the affectionate "good baby" who Toklas wants to "delight" her "with all" her "might," implying some effort or force here.

Talk of rough sex is endearingly in the notes and in Stein's writing. One love note has Stein entering their bed where "love is sleeping sweetly" to "shove the hotties too near," and another note has the using of "her / big finger and her whole hand ... and the two little apples inside her" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 62, 63). Other notes write of the lover having "nothing but sweet breath" as she is "coming softly" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 55). The content of Stein's oeuvre, which is very layered, is comprised mostly of speaking lesbian erotica, which can allow us to conclude that not only did Stein have a very active sexual imagination and obsession with thinking about sex and intimacy, but also these two women had a very regular, perhaps daily, sex life. Toklas tells us this when she writes to Stein that their lovemaking or sex is *a hunger*: these lovers are each other's "daily food" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 91). The Christmas note/poem moves to end with a third stanza wherein Toklas affirms that her lover is "no toy / but a strong-strong husband" who she invites to "do it together" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 158).

Stein declares herself to be a "good obedient hubby" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 98), which is a term often used to describe Stein's relationship to Toklas in the notes. Stein describes herself as being "devoted" to Toklas (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 90). What does this look like? In another note, which is actually a poem Stein

wrote to Toklas titled “A Command Poem,” Stein is “commanded by wife ... who is always commanded ... loves to be commanded” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 109). Stein is “commanded by wife to be wifey’s / hubby and he is, would be even if he wasn’t / commanded cause *he just is* but loves to be commanded” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 109, italics mine). Stein *just is* submissive to Toklas; she *just loves* “to be commanded” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 109). Don’t question it, revel, *and be* in it, Stein seems to tell herself.

Stein creates her *self* with her writing to Toklas. This is memoir at its finest: this lover is sharing herself, discovering herself, and creating herself, through a love note and poem to her partner. Stein genders herself he and hubby and dwells in being submissive and submitting as she longs to be commanded, and yet even without command *she creates the space* to be submissive to her wife. The intense pleasure of submitting consensually, by one’s own nature and accord, allows commands to grant a beautiful, big space of expression here. Stein carves out this sexy identity and location for herself. She gives herself this space! And she is asking Toklas to step into her role by extension: *please, please command me* she is asking. Stein’s love notes and poems cannot be underestimated: they are extraordinary moves of genderqueering variancy and Dominance/Submission. They are also bold and unconventional acts of self-love and actualization *while being at the same time* bold and unconventional acts of generosity within a partnership.

In the same poem s/he asks Toklas to listen to her, to “feel it to see ... inside in me” and tells her to make sure “they are tight” the plural of which is interesting here (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 109). Stein speaks of countless kisses, of not missing

anything in their kisses, of hitting the mark, and how blessed they are. With Stein asking to be commanded, we witness a Stein topping from the bottom here. And at the end of this confessional, asking-to-be-commanded poem where she has been filled, tightly Stein is a “blessed baby ... tired ... sleepy” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 110). Her last words are her biggest offering, which occurs in other poems and notes as well: “I am all yours” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 110). The offering of the self, I am *yours*, repeat and repeat with this couple and, truly, is the biggest offering one can make. The “I am yours,” relates back and into Stein’s ending each love note with “your darling.” We can look at related words to “darling” to expand Stein’s offering to Toklas: “precious, adored, loved, beloved, cherished, treasured, esteemed, worshiped” are all adjectives that relate, which allows Stein’s closing term to really speak to not only her, but the couple’s, unwavering commitment (*New Oxford American Dictionary*).

One expression to *darling* that stands out is *worshipped*, which allows us to see yet another angle in the switch of their relationship. An implicit reverence, devotion, and adoration exists in Stein’s offering herself up to and for Toklas *to adore and* a similar worship/idolizing reverence, devotion, adoration through her consistent, full, and giving submission of herself to the belonging and care of Toklas. And this exaltation switches as when Stein writes: “I adored my wifey, I just completely / and entirely *idolized* my wifey” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 149, italics mine). In another letter Stein writes to Toklas that she is “my adored one,” continuing to express that she loves Toklas “here / here in my heart in me all through / and I am in she” (*Baby Precious Always Shines* 148). The *you are in me and I am in you, you are mine and I am yours* is a felt connection echoed throughout the love letters. That particular letter ends with lines of repetition

declaring their both offering themselves up to the other: “I am all her treat and she / is all mine and together we shine brightly” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 148).

There is a Dominant/Submissive context to the word choices that speak to the rationality of belonging to each other; Stein’s ending of *your darling* allows a context that holds the specific taste and flavor of Dominant/Submissive/switching sexiness that only happens when one offers oneself to someone. To be treasured to the point of being owned and possessed, to give oneself over to be someone’s, to give oneself to be in *their* care, to be *their darling* is a submission that is untouchable and unmatched. No offering can match the humility and trust that comes with the giving of one’s self *over to the care* of another as it implies the surrendering of one’s will, one’s being. And so for Stein, this offering is a total surrender of herself to her lover, to the love-ship, to the “whole” of what they are together as partners.

This submission and giving over exist for both lovers. Toklas writes to Stein, most probably from another room in the house, that she is “quietly waiting” for Stein to “call your dove,” adding that she, Toklas is Stein’s “own” (*Baby Precious Always Shines* 157). Toklas speaks in the third person as she offers herself to be Stein’s. This particular letter has a reassuring tone to it as Toklas tells Stein to “know always” that “she’s mating / with her dored own boy” (*Baby Precious Always Shines* 157). Despite being Stein’s typist, Toklas also plays with words or typing mistakes: “dored” can read adored or, more playfully, as affixing her boy Stein with the aspects of a door; considering the content of mating and waiting in the note, I would assert she is referring to Stein’s door handle here: the metaphoric and tangible handle to grab onto being an adornment to a boy and thus to Stein. So this note constructs Toklas as waiting to mate, being in constant, “always” state

of wanting to mate with her partner. It also constructs Toklas as Stein's in "she's your own" and Stein as Toklas's with "her dored own boy." So the act of possession, dominance/submission, and ownership, giving of oneself is very much a reciprocal part of the couple's intimacy and role-playing.

A fluidity of roles surfaces in all of Stein's erotic literature. However we can begin to distinguish that this fluidity exists most especially in the love notes between her and Toklas. Stein identifies as a needing husband, a boy, and a submissive *as well as* a care-giving husband, daddy, and dominant: she takes on the role or identity of a man and a he *as well as* that of a woman and she. Toklas, for her part, keeps up with an often (but not always) easygoing, accepting, and rarely seen switch nature of her own. Toklas is a "happy queen for her little King" (*Precious Baby Always Shines*, 113) and is most often referred to as "wifey," "baby," and "baby precious." Revealing, teasing out, and unpacking the gender and sexually variant identities of the letters exemplify Stein and Toklas's deep love as well as how both women played with non-normative sexual identities, practices, roles and desires.

This kind of possessional giving and owning may be seen as dysfunctional outside an S/M context. General psychological well-being would have us see and want our relationships to be formed from distinct, independent individuals forming a union as two entities joined for a common purpose, with no possessiveness or jealousy present. The Dominance/Submission context of *yours and mine*, which is a constant in the relationship between Stein and Toklas, is a consensual choice to play with owning, possessing, taking, and offering. Perhaps because to own a person is such a taboo, and to give up one's self also something of a risk, this type of consensual role-play is an allowing like no other and

can produce results that are enticing and incredibly freeing. The entire being of the lover is in the hands and care of her lover: it is a complete and utter surrender. Stein's submission speaks to the very foundation of S/M: to explore *all* the senses beyond that which we know in an effort to reach new heights of sensory pleasure and experience, new depths of connection, with one's self and with one's lover are enabled and activated.

We witness a Stein asking to be controlled, dominated, and restrained. She is intent on "filling" her "baby precious" who "needs filling with love / every second and she is she is / she is filled up full every / second" and "nicely every day" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 98). Producing a cow "not every second but nicely every / day" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 98). Turner's reading applies here in addition to mine: the daily cow, the filling every day: and it is Stein who fills, repeating verbal play with Toklas with "she is she is she is filled up"; the talking of the act while in the act put down in note to resonate the sexiness they have when Stein is not writing and Toklas not sleeping or typing. We get a sense from the notes that when not living and attending to life, these lovers were in relatively constant state of passion, sex, and lovemaking. Wishing and fantasy, dreamscapes of connection, are evident. Quite honestly, there is an obsession with the amount of sex they have, and it's rather refreshing in its openness, quantity, and quality. In one note, when Stein is busy with life she laments not being able to be with Toklas, writing, "not yet but to-morrow you / bet he will be as stimulating as a / cigarette for his pet and in that / way will after the light of day he / will give the blessed sweetness a cow" (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 96).

Of course, Stein can not stop there and must give either herself or Toklas the verbal foreplay towards "tomorrow" or "later" that these notes are so ripe with. She

continues to share that “here he is being a cigarette / to his pet, an anything be more contentful / to blessed baby than a nice fat cigarette / you bet and he is it, for his pet ... a big cow / now, I am your cigarette blessed pet” (*Baby Precious Always Shines*, 96).

Stein’s Tender, Tender Buttons of Elucidation and Teaching

Stein and Toklas were masterful at the art of clarification and illumination, especially when it came to elucidating their love, relationship, and connection. Stein will thus begin her poem “An Elucidation” by encouraging one to “elucidate the problem of halve. Halve and have” (2). Stein is going to elucidate a problem, rather than solve it: something only a master and never a student would do. “An Elucidation” is actually a manifesto, a call to action, wherein Stein explains that no problem is really a problem at all, rather, the task is for us to unravel and unpack ideas, concepts, and ways of being toward a new understanding: an elucidation. The subject: “halve and have,” plays on the words *half* and *to have*. Stein is playing with multiple dualities here: two halves (individuals) co-existing as part of a whole (in relationship and/or union), the switching that occurs between the two lovers of the poem as well as the occupying a “having” of the lover, a possession, or an occurring of what there is to have and elucidate: pleasure and the space of poetic exploration.²⁹

One can read two individuals outside of a romantic union; pleasure and lover-ship is merely the access route Stein uses to get to an idea here; pleasure and lover-ships are merely one location Stein uses to exemplify what she is asking us to consider. “An Elucidation” lays out an introduction to understanding and unveiling, by various points or

²⁹ “An Elucidation” was first delivered as a lecture at Oxford and entitled “Composition as Explanation.” It was later printed in the April 1927 issue of the Hogarth essays titled *Transition*.

“examples,” the abstraction, relativism, and construction of shifting pleasure sites, identities and community, which in turn gives rise to identity (at the personal and communal level) as inherently self (or community) defined, self-created and self-constructed, and thus switchable, changeable, and always up for creation and recreation.

Stein begins switching and considering the places between and betwixt in the very beginning of this poem. Her first heading is “Madrigal and Mardigras” (“An Elucidation,” 2). The poem is a madrigal: a song made of parts for several voices and strongly influenced by text. The poem is also the ritual of mardi gras, a time of carnival and celebration, costumes, masks, overturning social conventions, and parading; mardi gras is bookmarked by devotion as it begins on or after the feasts in celebrating the Epiphany and before the day of confession, fasting, mourning, and repenting of Ash Wednesday/Shrove Tuesday. Stein sets up the subject of the ritual with the lines “she is in and out” (“An Elucidation,” 2): neither displaced, both in and out at the same time. We are welcomed into a world where Stein “happily ... gives examples” and is “very communicative / on pleasure,” (“An Elucidation,” 3) switching in identity and actions, between in and out, celebration and devotion, overturning social conventions and adhering to social conventions, between traditional ritual and language and playful experimentation with ritual and language, between masculine and feminine, top and bottom, submission and dominance, between the pleasure and elation of sacrifice and confession and the pain and suffering of sacrifice and confession.

Stein’s focus is, once again, on the interiority of what is happy-making. She writes, “I will give other examples to you ... in a place, / a place for everything and everything in its place. / In place in place of everything, in a place. / Again search for me.

/ She looked for me at me” (“An Elucidation,” 3). The placing and what is to be placed are explored later with the notion of the “stall,” and so one reading can be the placement of pleasure within the body, the notion of the body’s containers, or stalls, as a place of pleasure, searching, and looking. The looking for self, the lover looking, the creating of self through another’s gaze, the creating of self and couple through placing and gaze becomes clear. A few pages later, a most powerful line resonates this looking with Stein: “do you all understand why she sees me” (“An Elucidation,” 8). The “do you” indicates a directly posed question: do you get it, she seems to be asking, and the “why” also gives room to question. Yet the why and how are implicit even as the sentence is a statement of invitation to query and look at the how behind the “why” of seeing and knowing of a lover, partner, or another.

She affirms their pleasures as “our fancy pleases” (“An Elucidation,” 4) allowing for the fancy and the pleasure of the fancy to have space. *Fancy* seems such an old-fashioned word that resonates with dandyism, the highly decorated, and the imagination. The term stems from the Middle English word *fantasy*, thus allowing Stein to explore how fantasy pleases her and Toklas, the “our” so key here. And so Stein enables their fantasy to be made visible: they will indulge their fancies and pleasures and, by extension, permit us as readers to do the same. Stein affirms: “so we may be fancy as we please, we may fancy what we please” (“An Elucidation,” 4).

Stein addresses the reader and audience, and perhaps Toklas more covertly, when confirming that they “do understand ... yes you do,” yet Stein will take the time to “completely introduce” her “explanation” and not leave any aspect out (“An Elucidation,” 4). The reader will “come at the end” declares a Stein that is “dealing in

accelerated authority ... dealing in their delight” (“An Elucidation,” 5). We understand how and why this love is seen, how fancy pleases, all that involves an exploration on love: we understand Stein’s commitment and confidence when she declares: “I know how to please her” (“An Elucidation,” 5). Stein’s “authority” has “regularly arranged decision” and deals with a masochistic giving over that plays with that which is “to diminish” yet has “no fear” (“An Elucidation,” 5).

The poem continues to write and repeat the pleasures of placing pleasure and switches voices and point of view as it does. The happiness the lover experiences when receiving the intentionality behind pleasure: the *placing* and how communication is key to this pleasure figure prominently. The poem has switch voicing: moving from one woman’s voice and point of view in asking the lover to “happily say so” to recreating the lovers’ communication: “too happily say so / very communicative” (“An Elucidation,” 3). The switch in voice and perspective joins the lovers in a dance of speaking desire. For these lovers, no happiness with placing pleasure exists without communication, and it is constantly praised when and as “it is placed in there” (“An Elucidation,” 3). Stein repeats the language of placing and to place, echoing the rhythmic movements of sex as “everything” is “in its place,” which permits a begging lover to have space to say “again search for me” (“An Elucidation,” 3). The “do you understand why she sees me” is answered repeatedly throughout the poem, early on with response to searching and placing it in again: “She looked for me at me” (“An Elucidation,” 3). The interiority of looking for self, when selves and interiority are present, as the lover looks at and through her, creating her in her gaze, presents the human quest of self-searching within self and also outside, in the social world of mirrored recognition and oneness. “A fourth example

shows more plainly what it does show, what does it show, I see you and you see me, I see that you see and you see that I see. A fourth example shows a tendency to declaration” (“An Elucidation,” 5).

Stein’s elucidation is, like much of her writing, full of declarations. The power of the act of declaring what is, what is shown and what is seen, who is shown and who is seen, cannot be overestimated. To declare something makes it real in the world, it allows the subject to carry a personal and social accountability through the presence of word; word creates world and through our word, our speaking, others are invited and allowed to witness, support, and participate in what is being declared. Stein thus declares the liberation that comes with seeing and understanding: “when we see that they are not as we understood they would be when we see, when we say we see we hear, and when we say we hear we feel and when we say we feel we see and when we say we see we hear. In this we declare we declare all of us declare what do you declare, declare to me. Declarations rapidly reunited” (“An Elucidation,” 15). The creating of self, community, and world occurs in these declarations.

She immediately follows with the statement that “action and reaction are equal and opposite. Astonishment means list of persons and places and if she were to be represented there if she were to be represented there. Call me a smiler and fit the fifth exactly. I fit the fifth exactly” (“An Elucidation,” 15). I am particularly taken with Stein calling for action rather than reaction; she was a model for this as is any producer of original work. Stein evokes the larger community and collective of representing and seeing of “she” and of an “us.” She also draws attention to the notion of fitting into a structured system and, by extension, her revision and creation of a structured, numbered

system—this poem—where self-representation counts. Stein continues in a conversational back and forth on the conscious construction of what, how, and who one wants to be, how one wants to be seen, and what the astonishment can look like: an exact fitting into what the self declares, even as shifting, what the self declares to be seen as. Through this creation, the honoring of self and whom one declares one wants to be, worlds open.

Stein opens these worlds as she explains that “this is not an instance,” this location is not fixed, it is not isolated, it is not a passing now, rather it is a constant, creation-based place to come from, be in, and return to: “this way makes rounding out rounder” (“An Elucidation,” 15). “This way makes rounding out rounder” is one of those “wow, the sky has just opened into the vastness of the universe” type of Stein sentences; similar to her declaring that “a wide action is not a width,” “this way makes rounding out rounder” allows the reader to dwell in the location of being, and choosing to be, in thoughts and actions of expansiveness and opening, of rounding, rather than past-based confinement, rigidity, and closedoffness. She continues to elucidate her point: “it is round around and rounder if it is around and we tell all we know let me explain directly and indirectly. In the fifth instance there *was no coincidence*” (“An Elucidation,” 15, italics mine). The rounding, cylindrical forms of the body, the rounding of the thoughts, the fitting of the roundness, the action, like the roundness and vastness of the cosmos: there being no coincidence in and to any of it; the largeness of this poem is related to a liberated existence and being in the world: identity, sex, and pleasure are an access to examine ways we declare being in ourselves and the world.

Stein writes that she will “lead” us to “yes”: that saying yes, that willingness, is the location to birth the roundness. Further, she asks us to lead—and be led to “yes.” She includes the individual reader directly as well as the larger we that we collectively form: the communities and world that we form as individuals that are a part of something bigger are an important aspect to the activism within this work. She tells us: “you lead to yes you do, we lead to yes you do they lead to yes you do” (“An Elucidation,” 16). Stein ends “An Elucidation” by explaining what is necessary for the “yes”: honoring our humanness while at the same time stepping beyond what we have known and are familiar with. She writes that we must understand differently, that we must “undertake to overthrow our undertaking” (“An Elucidation,” 16), or put another way, reconsider that which we thought we understood. She says “we understand you do understand that we will understand it correctly”: do not concern yourself about being understood, do not get obsessed with getting it right and looking good because “correctly and incorrectly, prepare and prepared” will all be present. She asks us to thus move forward, “patiently and to prepare, to be prepared and to be particularly and not particularly prepared” (“An Elucidation,” 16). Stein then brings her manifesto home with calling us forth into action:

Do prepare to say Portraits and Prayers, do prepare to say that you have prepared

Portraits and prayers and that you prepare and that I prepare.

Yes you do.

Organisers.

Yes you do.

Yes you do and you, you do.

To portraits and to prayers.

Yes you do.

(“An Elucidation,” 16)

Stein is creating us as leaders in our own evolution here. She is asking us to construct our own portraits, both individual and organized community, which are likened to prayers; she is asking us to pray, which is to honor thyself as a temple; she links the self with the ritual and humility of prayer. With the head bowed, the chin humbled, the heart leading and the prayer offered. The song, the elucidation, has many voices heard, seen, offered. Ian Hacking writes that “if new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence” (“Making up People” in *Forms of Desire*, Ed. Stein, 78 as cited in *Sexuality*, ed. Robert Nye, 8). Stein’s oeuvre gives us just that: new modes of description, new possibilities for action. Stein’s work is a manifesto for action towards elucidating our happiness, in whatever form that looks like and is for us as reader.

Stein’s writing and my readings thus serve to mean something in the direction sexuality studies is taking: a more inclusive, liberating, and sexy theory and practice of sexuality and identity. Stein and Toklas demonstrate a metamorphosis into different identities and loving transactions. An intimacy is continually birthed through their switching, and it is this “spreading into nothing” and giving up of the center through intimate sex and/or love actions that permits switching that ranges from BDSM and rough sex to being pleased and pleasure making. The decentering of their identity, through a continuous falling and surrendering into oneself and the other, allows the reader to give up her/his own centre. Toklas would metaphorically write in *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present*: “very few people are indifferent to either the aroma or the flavor ... there is a harmony and a suitable progression ... there should be a climax and a culmination. Come to it gently. One will suffice” (xxv-xxvi).

But what's more, that Queer and Sexuality studies continue to take these types of bold steps is not only essential for our full self-expression: our bold and daring readings and openness can not help but transfer into the mainstream body politic, thus allowing for the celebration of variant, multi-dimensional identities and practices for all. In my subsequent chapters I will show how these identities and practices switch and move into the realm of complete absence from identity while at the same time existing in a created contrast of perverse and subversive desires. For transformation and pure creation to take place, my upcoming authors traffic in true Steinian form, subverting what it is to not be a width and to exist in contrast.

Chapter II: Theory Must Be Doing: Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles and Jeanette Winterson Traffic and Switch in the Spaces and Language of Non-Normative Identities and Desires ... My Business Is Circumference

This chapter focuses on how three gender and sexually variant women. Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles, and Jeanette Winterson switch to practice, evoke, and play with concepts of desire that encapsulate subversive identity practices. Acker, Myles, and Winterson all actively employ switching gendered bodies, gendered identities, and/or sexual identities and roles to such an elevated degree that stable notions of identity and role are continually, and very wonderfully, destabilized. Dwelling in these experimental locations, I specifically look at where and how gender, sexual, and/or identity switching allows for my chosen characters, and us as readers, to rework and play with gender and sexual identities so as to create an access to aliveness, authenticity, and freedom.

This chapter asks to what degree these queer and/or gender and sexually variant women are practicing, evoking, and playing with desires that elicit exciting and

subversive sexual and identity practices. Further, to what extent do private desires become public celebrations of freedom from identity and exploring variability?³⁰ Looking at how the variant gender identifications of the lovers and the characters' love quest contributes to an opening of what's possible. Within this context, all of my chosen authors make incremental, degree-like movements towards both love and pain; I will deconstruct the BDSM translation of those degrees—the slow gradual movement without any certainty, foreseen finality, or exit—as well as the masochistic or surrendering practice. Subversive and perverse desires can be seen in the gender slippages throughout these authors' textual performances. This chapter demonstrates how the non-normative genders, sexualities, identities, and desires of these authors map out *circumference*, a term Emily Dickinson used anew as she turned her poems in and around desire and the love-quest, specifically the masochistic.

“You can change the story. You are the story.”

(Jeanette Winterson, *The Powerbook*, 288)

Jeanette Winterson's *The Powerbook* (2000) and *Written on the Body* (1992) offer a joyous, refreshing, and unfamiliar place to begin to gather with the variant and non-gendered. The driving promise of both lyrical, romantic, love-driven books is bold: desire and freedom from identity. Winterson thus locates gender and sexual variability as a real possibility for living. In both novels Winterson's main characters are gender and sexual variants that are in love with women and have rich fantasy and role-playing lives.

³⁰ Public celebrations of variability and freedom from identity occur at the individual, family, group, community, organizational, governmental, and global level. In this chapter, I will be concerned with individual and local celebrations, later I will look at how these celebrations move from the individual and family outward into the community, and I will connect my main ideas at the world level.

In choosing to switch and alter a gendered or non-gendered body and to switch gender and sexual identities and roles, Winterson designs unimagined possibilities for her characters and us as readers.

In an Interview for *The Paris Review* Winterson attributes her characters to having

something of the hero archetype about them in that they are largely stripped of context. But they offer a kind of operatic salvation, for themselves and for the reader in that through their lives one's own struggles can be experienced without being overly definitive, without pinning them down too much, which I wouldn't want to do. Obviously I have been able to escape that by setting something in an imagined past or in an imagined present, tinkering with place and time so that the reader can't quite say, Oh yes, I know where this is, I can identify here. I want them rather to identify with a being, with a state of consciousness, with a particular kind of imaginative value rather than some sort of TV character. ("Jeanette Winterson: The Art of Fiction," *The Paris Review*, No. 150, Spring 1999)

And it is this "imaginative value," this inability to know, conclude, pin down, or fix her characters, that is so appealing in Winterson's work. To "identify with a *being, with a state of consciousness, with a particular kind of imaginative value*" is indeed the fundamental intoxication of Winterson's work. Operatic? Yes, most definitely.

Similar to Myles and Acker, as I illustrate later in this chapter, Winterson must create a suffusive world, a kingdom, where her characters can play with transgressing role and identity and where she can offer up the possibilities she sees and seeks. Her characters straddle the worlds of role and identity. While Winterson takes time to explore occupying the male and female body and roles, what's much more exciting is how she takes up the challenging inquiry of what it looks like to be and occupy either a genderqueered or a genderless body. Further, she lyrically explores who and how one might occupy variant gender and sexual mind frames.

Winterson thus broaches where and how it occurs to occupy locations outside of the norm or expected. In *The Powerbook* Acker's playfulness with sexual switching, dominance, and submission is located in occupying a narrative core that destabilizes her character's roles and place in society. She writes of the places 'betwixt and between,' two worlds, those locations and ways of being traversed by many variants yet still remaining out of reach, high above dominant discourse, like a tightrope. "I keep telling this story" she writes "—different people, different places, different times—but always you, always me, always this story, because a story is a tightrope between two worlds" (*The Powerbook*, 141).

Choosing to walk the tightrope of variancy, where multiple worlds and characters co-exist and are drawn together by the commonality of sexual and gender variancy, Winterson creates her kingdoms, one of which illustrates a castle housing a lover's body, who under falcon hands finds the pleasure to be "as shocking as the thought of pleasure" and then marries its brother (*The Powerbook*, 148). The writing unravels, and discovery of a cohesive narrative, even among vignettes that stand alone as short stories, is like "the partition between real and invented" and as "thin as a wall in a cheap hotel room" (*The Powerbook*, 108). Her main characters are in an "exile" longing for a "narrative of its own" in a "kingdom she could control" (*The Powerbook*, 166).

The Powerbook begins with the gorgeously titled chapter "language costumier." This very short chapter begins with a character telling her/his mother that s/he is going to do volunteer work for the poor when instead she enters an empty costume shop asking, with quest-like urgency, for "freedom, just for one night" (3). She continues to ask to buy "the freedom to be somebody else" (*The Powerbook*, 3). The character seeks to be

fashioned and “transformed” into and through an “invented world” (*The Powerbook*, 4), one of her/his making where freedom is created and lived. A transformation is a creative and intentional act of metamorphosis, a “process by which one figure, expression or function is converted into another that is equivalent in some important respect but is differently expressed or represented” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*).

As different identities are tried on, the worlds that allow for gender and identity exploration expand. As in other Winterson novels, the characters of *The Powerbook* time travel. The multiple worlds where transformative locations exist in *The Powerbook* range from the sixteenth century to the present contemporary world. And while the secondary character asks for the freedom to be someone else, it is the narrator of *The Powerbook* that takes this freedom into the realms of gender and sexual identity. Gender bending begins soon after the request to be transformed into somebody else and as early as 1591, where the mother of a girl child argues to save her life (the father wanting to drown her) by disguising the girl as a boy child who can thus work to improve the family’s economic situation. The main narrating character thus begins her gender-bending adventures, which include being charged with transporting tulips by ship. With the help of her mother s/he hides the species of tulips, named Key of Pleasure and Lover’s Dream, in her pants. The mother constructs a leather harness, sewing and fastening a narrow leather strap, which is affixed around her hips to hide the bulbs.

A dialogue of intimate fixing and constructing the character’s gender identity with the aid of hidden embalmed tulips ensues. The tulips are shaped and hidden but the mother realizes there is “something missing” (*The Powerbook*, 12). After the mother compares the character’s package to the father’s “the bit in the middle” is the “something

missing” and is deemed necessary to complete the gender modification (*The Powerbook*, 12). The character then goes “up into the hills” and finds a tulip with “a well-formed fat stem supporting a good-sized red head with rounded tips” (*The Powerbook*, 12). Her created member is “about eight inches long, plump, with a nice weight to it” (*The Powerbook*, 11-12). Once her gendered piece is attached and the switch complete, mother and child inspect the gender variant youth to realize that no legend can compare to her; she is a unique genius, an original. What’s more, she is self-created and hand-crafted, designed and made from organic materials. The character is now given a gender: she is now a he.

There exists a potential perversity in the mothers next action, when she smells the character’s genital area; a closeness that seems unfamiliar to our modern time takes place as the “mother knelt down and put her nose close.” The familial scene ends with the mother saying, “you smell like a garden” (*The Powerbook*, 12). This shared, consensual intimacy: both the close proximity and the awakened sense of smell speak a sensuality, yet we are left with no more, and no less, than the passage above being followed by an ellipsis after which the character is on a ship, bound to deliver the bulbs. Likening a self-made, gendered anatomy to a garden, one that is constructed of flowers, is a remarkable way to begin to build a foundation for switching and variancy, for new beginnings, freedom, and re-created story. The seed was planted and now is the time for the flower to burst open.

Kidnapped by pirates, the character is chosen to initiate and educate a Princess in the art of sex; he is chosen precisely because he is just a boy he can do her “neither hurt not insult” (*The Powerbook*, 23). The princess has never seen a man before, so seeing the

tulip, which the character tells her is called “my Stem of Spring” and the bulbs, which he shares are named “Key of Pleasure” and “Lover’s Dream” (*The Powerbook*, 25), elicits laughter and a playfulness. The Princess “kissed the red flower” and the flower comes to life: “its petals fastened tight into a head” (*The Powerbook*, 25). The character then morphs into his creation: “a strange thing began to happen. As the Princess kissed and petted my tulip, my own sensations grew exquisite, but as yet no stronger than my astonishment, as I felt my disguise come to life. The tulip began to stand” (*The Powerbook*, 25). This type of enlivening, of the affixed penis becoming part of and at one with its wearer’s body and psyche, is an association and feeling common for gender variants who, in whatever way, occupy both genders and/or have clear, deeply known associations with the penis of their mind: it is constructed and real in the mind, it—the desire and standing, the coming to life of the penis—is actually felt in the body and in desire. There is a s/witchy magical realism to this scene wherein Winterson gives the genderqueer and/or gendervariant space to exist and, what’s more, to be in sexual relation and discovery.

As the harness is hidden, and the members attached securely, all the Princess is said to see and feel “was the eagerness of my bulbs and stem” (*The Powerbook*, 26). When the character looks down he comments “there it was, making a bridge from my body to hers” (*The Powerbook*, 25-26). The “tulip waving” the character *feels* “the firm red head and pale shaft plant itself in her body” (*The Powerbook*, 26). The character *knows* what it is to have and feel a penetrative object attached to the body, to want to use it, to want to insert it. The character is genderqueered of body and mind, and with an ownership in dwelling in her created gender. The next line details “a delicate green-tinted sap dribbled

down her brown thighs” as an offering to the reader, locating us in the virtual world of sex, of the fluids and the body, and is followed by “all afternoon I fucked her” (*The Powerbook*, 26).

And here a very direct switch in the language of desire, of desire itself, occurs. Within a breath of a sentence, there exists a switch in the action and perception of the moment. A rapturous act and uninhibited language enter the scene and are used to describe this moment of consummation and connection between Princess and prisoner. Reading the passage together magnifies the direct switch: “a delicate green-tinted sap dribbled down her brown thighs. All afternoon I fucked her” (*The Powerbook*, 26). The switch is an abrupt and clever one that triggers the reader to move from the erotic to the pornographic. Is Winterson’s intention to shock the reader with this unanticipated and swift switch movement from the descriptive, “delicate,” and flowery language of the body and their actions to the vulgar and crude?

This hard switch of “I fucked her” not only ends the scene, it ends the chapter and this particular vignette. What occurs next is a switch from the previous time, location and experience of identity, gender, and sexual play to a new, yet connected, location and experience. The narrative that follows moves us into the contemporary time, where the two lovers—who have previously been the shopkeeper and customer and then slave and princess—are now in an internet email exchange discussing what will come next. The main character is weaving yet another story of fantasy so that the secondary character can have the “freedom to be somebody else – just for one night” (*The Powerbook*, 32). The writer of this new narrative creates a romantic/sexed encounter of multiple infidelities, the game of the chase and conquest, vulnerability, and abandon.

An unquestioned effortlessness is present in the character's switch nature. For example, Winterson slips into the narrative that the tulip-wearing lover of many women has breasts to accompany her mind-made phallus (*The Powerbook*, 67-68). The lover has breasts and a phallus of the mind, a phallus that is conjured in a switchy magical realism space of fantasy and wish-fulfillment. This character is a remarkable example of a gender switch. The mind birthing a self-created, gender and sexual switch body and self that functions to support the roles that desire seeks. While the tulip does not surface in the chapter "New Document" the hotel room sexual encounter with the married woman has the narrator instructing: "get on top of me. Ease yourself, just there, just there ... push ... harder" (*The Powerbook*, 68). We are exposed to a phallus *and* breasts, which serve to genderqueer the character. For some readers who revel in the genderqueer narrative, what is evoked in the character having breasts followed by her instructing her lover to sit on her dildo, provide an affirming visibility that is rare and delicious.

The directive sentences that follow: "make me come. Make me" illustrate our narrator luxuriating in topping from the bottom. S/he also enjoys verbal play: language and words are a turn on. The repetition is especially delicious and a cue. Notice the switch: the Dominant/Submissive aspect of "making" someone do something, telling the lover to make her have an orgasm, the instructing to the lover to "make her" and yet in a supplicating, repeating way. A beseeching tone can be read here, and the line serves to unmask the receptive nature of the narrator. There is a real vulnerability to her verbalizing what s/he wants, to her seeking connection as well as satisfaction. This too, is a switch: from confident, strong, take charge lover to vulnerable, open, and receptive lover. S/he is in action position with the phallus, while also on her back, so she is rather

passive even as she controls the scene by way of instruction. Another switch in language then occurs as s/he tops from the bottom: s/he moves from “make me come. Make me” to the last lines of the scene, “Just fuck me ... fuck me” (*The Powerbook*, 68). The language of desire indicates a subtle switch here: from “make me,” which is a seeking of dominance, to “just fuck me,” which is a telling of what to do; additionally, and this is a key switch of language that repeats throughout Winterson’s work, the character once again moves into a switch that is a trigger to orgasm. The language switch, the repeated words, the subtle, but very deliberate switch to a more crass “fuck” is her switch to orgasm.

What is soon made apparent is that Winterson has constructed each chapter to serve a narrative that is concerned with switching temporality, surroundings, circumstances, and identity through an ever-present, larger thread. This larger thread constructs the fantasies, roles, and desires from what seems a consistent yet gender-bending, genderless first-person narrator. While the narratives occur in different time and space continuums there is a similar, overarching first-person narrator in every vignette: so while each chapter stands alone, they are deeply interconnected.

At the same time, Winterson complicates any knowing or wanting to assign a overarching, genderless main character, indeed, any of her characters, with certain characteristics or genders. The most surprising uprooting occurs when the main character assigns the color of what was perceived as his (her) tulip to the Princess/lover of the previous chapter! When Winterson constructed this next episode, one of *The Powerbook*’s foundational tropes in switching occurs: the secondary character’s urgency to experience the “freedom to be anyone else” allows a totally unpredictable switch to

occur when the main character asks her accomplice what color hair she wants. The conversation that follows ushers in this confusing switch as the lover replies with: “‘Red. I’ve always wanted red hair.’ To which the main character asks: ‘The same colour as *your tulip*?’ ‘Look what happened to that.’ ‘Don’t panic’ the weaver of the stories states, ‘this is a different disguise.’” (Italics mine, *The Powerbook*, 31).

While the “your” of this dialogue is easily glossed over, it unpredictably acts to bring forth the previous chapter and a dramatic switch: in the preceding sentences, as well as in the previous chapters, the character who is the “your” is the secondary character and not the tulip wearer. The roles are thus switched here; with the simplicity of owning a tulip, a gender, sexual, and identity switch has occurred. Later the narrator will write: “your hair like a bonfire ... red, spread out, sparks flying ... I want to climb through the fire until *I am* the fire” (*The Powerbook*, 204).

As Winterson links her vignettes to the whole of a powerful book, we think we know who is who in the journey: the “I” writing and weaving each vignette of fantasy is the gender variant to whom gender nor identity are to be made and unmade. S/he is a character that responds to the question are you “male or female” with “does it matter?” (*The Powerbook*, 30). This main character has been one whose gender can be constructed to suit her/his wants and needs.

We may have begun to think we have some clarity on knowing who is who in this novel: who is seeking to assign a gender, who is the gender variant, who is wanting “freedom for one night”, and who is providing that freedom. Further, we may begin to understand which character is led into stories of freedom and disguise and which character is writing their script? We are led to believe that we know who donned the

tulip phallus and switched her gender to a he as a child. We think we know who is the Princess and who is the slave, who is being penetrated and who is doing the penetrating and yet ... with the simple question of hair color, of matching the carpets to the drapes, Winterson twists and turns the gender variant character inside out, complicating and switching any sense of knowing for us as readers. There is an uncertainty to this narrative and that too is an aspect of the topology of the switch.

A more daring reading of the character switching allows the switching and morphing of the characters: not simply within the fictional whole, but with each character being a switched facet of the narrator. Might there not be multiple characters after all? Could this character be in the conversation of created romantic, failed but requited love, fantasy worlds with her/his self? A single character playing all the roles of the erotic, fantasy screenplay she has written, directed, and stars in? After all, isn't this what it often is to dwell in the gray matter of a fantasy? We create and seek out others to act in and play supporting roles we have designed and created to fulfill our script's intention and direction. This character is an outsider who, "like other exiles" experiences that her "longing grew a narrative of its own. Her desire told itself as memory" (*The Powerbook*, 166). Common, but not exactly reliable. She continues, "her past was ... the only kingdom she could control" (*The Powerbook*, 166). And so, while it's common to resist the responsibility involved, Winterson asks us to consider that we actually control our kingdoms: we write, direct, and star in the screenplay of our life, as we have created it; what's incredibly freeing is to write, perform, and daily choose a script that authentically inspires us rather than what we think we ought to do to survive. The characters in our life are our own creations, formed from our point of view, entering and leaving our life as

directed. Don't we create every character in our lives to mirror the star, to allow her to shine or allow him to look at what does not? Winterson illustrates a choice: live with the tarnish, bring out the polish, or recycle!

Unpacking the switching moments of Winterson's work opens up endless opportunities for aliveness. Winterson's character *is* the story, we *are* the story (*The Powerbook*, 288): all of it and "the stories are maps. Maps of journeys that have been made and might have been made. A Marco Polo route through territory real and imagined" (*The Powerbook*, 63). We create the story, chart the map, and are at the source of the journey. The narrator is not a writer, crisscrossing countries and centuries, by coincidence, no, this time and situational traveling mirror a life of switching and directing one's crafting, editing, and choosing a life's script. She is out to find the treasure of her life, which as a child she is told that as she ages "you'll be looking in the wrong place ... people don't know where to look" (*The Powerbook*, 168). However, the child is prone to see other worlds and experience the trance of them (*The Powerbook*, 170).

Thus, we can read *The Powerbook's* character to be powerful, effective, and aware at playing the game of creating her life and kingdom with illustrating the variances of gender, sexuality, and identity, having switch conversations of choosing and allowing in each moment of doing so. She is a narrator who is her "own hero" winning at what matters to her by her own strength, in her own way (*The Powerbook*, 183). This may go undetected by any reader unfamiliar with the rapid-fire quickness of authentic switching that can occur for a switch hero. Winterson leads the way by having her character ask what color her alter ego's hair would like to be; this is our first covert access to a reading of the strategy of oneness. With this question the character may be asking a basic

question: might s/he like the same passionate color as the phallic tulip or something unfamiliar and not yet foreseen?

A close, gender and sexually variant reading offers that we are invited into the performance and pleasure of creating a character to penetrate and switch within their own switchiness. Winterson is putting the most private of internal dialogues of the mind, those secret longings and fantasies, those unspoken wants, desires, and questions, the ego's many faces and defaults, which are "real enough" (*The Powerbook*, 30) to paper. The most secret of longings see her occupying the locations of desire and sex as a permanent country of anarchistic citizenship. No "rights or territories" would be sought, no "frontiers or controls," and as such it is "a model of government for the world" (*The Powerbook*, 205). This present-day kingdom of the bed is a "country without ruler" where she is "free to come and go as I please." It is ... Utopia" and she laments that "it could never happen beyond bed (*The Powerbook*, 205).

"You need a label. But I'm not a piece of furniture with the price on the back"

(Jeanette Winterson, *The Powerbook* , 65).

Another facet at the heart of *The Powerbook* is the freedom that comes when no identity is present, when identity is not something to construct, but something to release and be free from. Second and third-wave identity variants have often clung to identity politics and lifestyle as a way to validate that which society does not: from the adamant insistence of being called by one's chosen or given name, rather than a pronoun, to the overly polite and discretionary question of which pronoun to use when addressing or referring to a genderqueer. Identity politics is a living, breathing experience: it is deeply

personal, confrontingly political, and tenderly profound. Communities and subcultures of identity give many gender and sexual variants the support and safety of a chosen family and, while absolutely imperative, the housing of the home can also become constraining and limiting if and when hard switching of identities are sought.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick would often encourage my young thirty-something identity, which seemed quite fixed with labels and idealistically driven, to take my writing, this writing, to spaces outside of identity. *My identity? Our marginal identities?* Yes, she would say. Many years of living, learning, and spiritual study later, I now know what my former Buddhist-leaning academic advisor was guiding me to. I now experience structures and housings based on identity to easily slip into and become prone to meaning making that does not serve to lead to limitations and confinement. They become traps to a life of spirit, a life of creating and being at the joyful and powerful source of causing and experiencing real freedom now—not in opposition or protest to something as my activist self once thought necessary, but as an act of authentic creation, a life that practices nonattachment and seeks, as she always had, the interconnection between all sentient beings. Without identity we are able to “see through the disguise” because the armor of identity is taken off (*The Powerbook*, 74). Winterson writes “I’ve been looking for us both all my life” (*The Powerbook*, 74), implying much more than a singular, external, separate other, but a seeking of unity and supportive co-existence. Without identity, our connection actually becomes much more real and attainable. We can stop looking; we can start be-ing.

And so Winterson invites us to consider the freedom that comes in a world of choosing freedom from identity. She writes: “there are nights when I’d prefer nothing at

all. A structure without cladding. As you get older, the open spaces start to close up ... you keep the form and the habit of what you have, but gradually you empty it of meaning.” (*The Powerbook*, 44-45). Rather than base the present and future on an already existing inherited, unyielding, or fixed cladding, by clearing the space and coming from nothing one can choose to create a new, inspiring be-ing. To get to nothing, yet remaining with the familiar form of body, what *is* can be stripped like an old, outworn coat to a “structure without cladding”; removing the outworn layers, and the significance and meaning attached to them like layers of lint, is the access. Beginner’s mind and the notion of impermanence can guide such a freedom: it becomes a place to stand in, and from there, choosing that which serves to inspire and feed grounds and leads, rather than any set dogma, point of view, affiliation, social conditioning and/or structure. Winterson (as well as Buddhist texts) refers to this location as a “middle ground” (*The Powerbook*, 47).

Winterson’s characters are written as “happy...with the lightness of being in a foreign city and the relief from identity it brings,” alerts us to the freedom, lightness, peace of mind that we receive and can give *if* we release ourselves and others of fixed ways of thinking, being, and construction. But it takes something. And that something is often much more than the geographical shift that affords one the freedom to step out of the past of what has been and the limitations of who one knows and constructs themselves to be. It takes rewriting the book, asserts Winterson, and “sometimes a letter at a time is all we can do” (*The Powerbook*, 90).

If the only point of view we can ever know is our own mind’s thoughts and creations, the stories we construct, then the people who morph in and out of the roles we

assign them, including ourselves, might experience new heights of freedom and connection if we release our attachment to our thoughts. Our version of reality is just a version, yet it occurs as what is *real*, what is *really* happening. Winterson's world weaves her story "trying to collide the real and the imaginary worlds, trying to be sure which is which. The more I write, the more I discover that the partition between real and invented is as thin as a wall in a cheap hotel room ... as soon as I reckon I know the geography of what isn't and what is, a chair scrapes in the room beyond the wall and a woman's voice says, 'You don't understand do you?'" (*The Powerbook*, 108).

We may think we are in reality, know what is really going on *out there*, and are in communication with people, when, really, our mind is mostly busy whirling assessments, judgments, and evaluations around in an uncontrolled, unconscious manner. "The world is a mirror of the mind's abundance" Winterson writes near the end of the novel (*The Powerbook*, 263). She sandwiches the large landscape of a whirling mind of abundance with her seeker character realizing that she can "Really Quit" the drama because "everything I had sought had been under my feet from the beginning" (*The Powerbook*, 261) and a new chapter titled "Restart" that begins with the opening lines "the map. The treasure" (*The Powerbook*, 267).

Before we reach the end of the novel, however, we witness that the majority of conversations with others in the novel (as in life) take place with individuals who are distracted with their own internal dialogue; what is really going on in the present moment outside of the mind is mostly missed. Like the unanswerable question that the woman in the hotel room asks, which speaks to her internal dialogue and mind's roaring abundant dialogue, Winterson's variant narrator is asked such a pseudo question by her lover: is

her name “real?” S/he responds that her name is “real enough” (*The Powerbook*, 30). Here again is a switch as we glimpse into perceived reality versus point-of-view, that any answer is rather irrelevant as the questioner will make her evaluations, assessments, and judgments of labeling based on her point-of-view and her interpretation / meaning-making of the response, quite regardless of what is actually being said. What is real, what is false, is already decided. These scenes allow us access to what is being intentionally versus unintentionally created.

Worlds upon worlds of experiences that feed into this narrator’s life, as is the case with all my writers, point to seeking a switchable, identity-free life. Winterson’s character writes of her own overarching narrative:

I talk to people whose identity I cannot prove. I disappear into a web of coordinates that we say will change the world. What world? Which world? It used to be that the real and the invented were parallel lines that never met. Then we discovered that space is curved, and in curved space parallel lines always meet. The mind is a curved space. What we experience, what we invent, track by track running together, then running into one, the brake lever released. (*The Powerbook*, 108-09)

Readers will begin to notice where the mind collapses story and reality, where this character disappears and feels an outsider, where she creates like an exile, ever seeking to be part of yet staying “on the run” (*The Powerbook*, 185). She is in a constant state of being open to redrawing, revision, and rewriting. Switching to free up identity and allow for multiple points of view, ways of being, and existences to occupy the narrator’s journey drive this novel; indeed, they can serve to mirror our own lives and that of humanity.

We come to know multiple roles and characters, with shifting, ever-malleable identities, sexualities, and genders throughout the novel, throughout a life, perhaps

experiencing and playing with many s/witchy magical realism spaces in a day. Each variancy, each switch, is authentic and worthy of celebration and acceptance rather than occurring as occasions to question, compare, tolerate, and/or doubt. Each variancy and switch is able to be created in a present, now phenomenon of momentariness while also existing in the space of play and s/witchy magic. This play, this ability to dwell and switch between multiple variancies is, most especially, what the switch excels at, seeks to embody and celebrate!

Accepting herself as that which is not solid or fixed, but mutable and open to switchability, she affirms: “nothing is fixed. These are images that time changes and that change time, just as the sun and the rain play on the surface of things” (*The Powerbook*, 52). How simple to create ourselves as effortlessly and changeable as rain drops! Rain drops *playing*! Seeking, exploring, finding solace in comparable forces of nature like the sun and rain, which radiate unpredictable and complex beauty at the micro and macro level just like the human body, the narrator stretches out her mind in order to free it: “my mind reached forward into the unlimited space it can occupy when I loose it from its kennel” (*The Powerbook*, 52). A willfulness, and a willingness, exists here and a possibility: it’s a space she “can” occupy, not one that is given up easily by her surrounding environment perhaps. Society, like the mind, can be such a prison, a “kennel” keeping the dogs confined to that which the dog never agreed to or created.

For this narrator, to be free from the prison of the mind involves many moves and shifts, one of which is moving to another location, somewhere “*foreign*.” This geographical shift away from the familiar and known allows the narrator to take steps on a new path, one with more openings, more possibilities, and more play. The escape, or

switch, known as a “geographical cure”; is a current running through *The Powerbook* as our narrator echoes many gender variants who have lived many lives, switching their identity many times, the reality of them occurring “like another life” (*The Powerbook*, 59).

Lives and identities seem very removed “until I remember it was my life, like a letter you turn up in your own handwriting, hardly believing what it says” (*The Powerbook*, 59). Winterson’s metaphor of rain is resonant: as rain is formed from recycling the Earth’s rivers, lakes, oceans, and seas, human beings are likewise called to reform ourselves by way of recycling that which already exists but is in need of transformation to serve us better. As the play of the raindrop that emerges from a cloud as a droplet is enlarged by moisture from the surrounding air and then coalesces with other raindrops as it descends to take its form, this narrator, like all of humanity, needs a surrounding community with which to coalesce and form an altered, new self. Winterson explains that

in those other worlds events may track our own, but the ending will be different. Sometimes we need a different ending. I can’t take my body through space and time, but I can send my mind, and use the stories, written and unwritten, to tumble me out in a place not yet existing—my future. (*The Powerbook*, 63)

And it’s the invented choice of futures that Winterson concerns herself with. The stories are simply “maps. Maps of journeys that have been made and might have been made” (*The Powerbook*, 63).

The invented points of view and familiar stories, fed over years, add layers of accumulated weight to a life; the “story on story, map on map ... warns me of the weight of accumulation,” writes Winterson’s narrator (*The Powerbook*, 64). “The other worlds I

can reach need to keep their lightness and their speed of light” she writes, for “what I carry back from those worlds to my world is another chance” (*The Powerbook*, 64). A lightness, another chance, increased possibilities free from a confining past or identity is sought. Those who want to limit or box in the narrator are confronted with an unstoppable urgency in being free: “you want to explain me to yourself” the narrator says to her lover “You’re not sure, so you need a label. But I’m not a piece of furniture with the price on the back” (*The Powerbook*, 65). As with my other authors, Winterson’s writing is concerned with the existential questing of “more life into a time without boundaries” (*The Powerbook*, 53).

A life, a time, without boundaries, a book, a life, rewritten with each turn of the wheel is adventurous and courageous, it is also filled with uncertainty and trust.

Winterson shows that love, romantic for some, global for all, is at the heart of a life of exploration and seeking, and it is this searching and seeking that her character is led by:

Only the impossible is worth the effort. What we seek is love itself, revealed now and again in human form, but pushing us beyond our humanity into animal instinct and god-like success. The love ... has a wildness in it ... human love ... is an encampment on the edge of the wilderness ... the wilderness is not tamed. It waits—beautiful and terrible—beyond the reach of the campfire. Now and again someone gets up to leave, forced to read the map of themselves, hoping that the treasure is really there ... I do not know if what I hear is an answer or an echo. Perhaps I will hear nothing. It doesn’t matter. The journey must be made. (*The Powerbook*, 91)

While there are many readings, switches, and shifts in the speaking of *The Powerbook’s* narrator, what is consistent is the overarching theme given to each vignette, chapter, and story weaver. Even in fluctuating time and space narrative we are invited into the world and voice of characters who writes stories that are predominantly centered around boundaries and desire (*The Powerbook*, 40) and what it means to be open, to love,

and to be on the journey of a life. The raw vulnerability that comes from the tender openness of revealing oneself through one's surroundings is what gives an extraordinary context and *power* to *The Powerbook*.

There is today a revision of the map (*The Powerbook*, 38).

At heart, *Written on the Body* is a lyrical romance novel. It is also a novel that comes early on in Winterson's career: it is a novel that, like all her work, is extremely bold in presenting a gender-free/variant narrator, bringing awareness to the possibility of queer lives and love, and a work that gives us powerful, lyrical poetic lines to roll in. Overarching the top layer of the novel is a flowery, tragedy-lurking, romantic innocence. The language and writing style that predominates the novel is almost love-sick. While much has been said about *Written on the Body*, it is still a benchmark for writing a gender-neutral character that falls in love and has intimate relations with a woman. Digging deeper, we have an obsessive character who confronts identity and self and who switches to do so.

Written on the Body is a work that has attained critical acclaim for being a romance/love questing novel wherein the narrator's gender remains anonymous. To preclude an opportunity for gender assignment throughout a novel that is highly attuned to the body, sex, and love is quite a feat. Winterson rejects even opting for a gender and invents a gender-neutral, nameless character with an undefined body. The character is a self-described bottom (*Written on the Body*, 10) who, like the character creations of Acker and Myles, is playful: she anamorphosizes her lover, a married woman named Louise, who is likened to butterflies and trees (*Written on the Body*, 29), a cat, a filly, and

a sea anemone (*Written on the Body*, 73). The mythical Pegasus is also called forth as the narrator seeks to ride and tame the God who “would not be saddled” (*Written on the Body*, 131).

Her novel has the highest level of integrity in that Winterson is consistent in never allowing or permitting a gender to be revealed; to add, she has kept this silence in every interview since the publication of the work, refusing all those who desperately want her to gender her narrator. *Written on the Body* is thus a work that can be hailed as an example of how genderqueers and gender variants can experience the freedom in choosing to live without fixed gender assignments. The value of this aspect of the novel is both profound and revolutionary. The novel is an example of how we can write our bodies and our love interests in any manner that serves us, whatever that looks like! Her novel is an example of how anyone can live identity and gender-free while still writing and experiencing the body, sex, making love, falling in and out of love in beautiful, heart rendering, connecting, tender, and meaningful ways.

No matter how hard readers and critics may try to distinguish or identify the character’s gender or sexual identity, it is all for naught; any reader who is tempted to match socially constructed behaviors, language, actions, and assumptions of gender is stymied: Winterson refuses any knowing or disclosure. We experience a who rather than a what: a romantically driven character who begins and ends “alone on a rock hewn out of my own body” (*Written on the Body*, 9). This body is never described or gendered, the author and narrator maintaining full control and ownership over the body.

The degree to which Winterson controls our experience with gender variability allows her to ask us as readers to suspend how, when, and where we gender behavior,

actions, and thoughts. Rather, we are urged to consider the absolute redundancy of a gendered body. For a novel that is centered on sex, love, obsession, and the mental landscape of negotiating the terrain of falling in love it is a remarkable feat to maintain a consistency of abstract and undefined gender and identity. The fact that Winterson has successfully accomplished this task is perhaps enough of a statement of purpose: a gender and identity-free lifestyle or even momentary interactions and happenings are available.

Winterson creates what some of us will come to love and appreciate in her fiction: another sassy narrator who takes lyrical, dramatic, and metaphorical turns inward. This s/hero, like many of Winterson's main characters, seems to ache for the release of love and leans in to the hope, and ultimate pain, of a happy ending that never comes. Hope without faith, trust, and action don't often make for results, however, and such is the case in this fictional work. More than her other novels, *Written on the Body* is obsessively focused on the love interest and the interior ticking's of the mind as they specifically pertain to the lament of the love quest. Other Winterson novels bear similar internal dialogues, but they involve the outer world more: landscape, color, interpretations of the outer world; in this novel, it is another person, the lover, who is the sole obsession. Anything surrounding the married lover and the love triangle becomes superfluous.

One of the rare locations of Winterson linking the character's obsession with her love interest within a larger context occurs with mapping, which is a lovely metaphor that I addressed above in *The Powerbook*. In *Written on the Body* mapping occurs when she is leaving her lover Jacqueline for her new lover Louise. Winterson writes, "now, standing here in this in this familiar unviolated space, I have already altered my world and Jacqueline's world forever. She doesn't know this yet. She doesn't know that there

is today a revision of the map” (*Written on the Body*, 38). What is so refreshing is Winterson’s calling on the character to take ownership and design of her life. A revised topology of the map of one’s life, and to another’s life by extension, is hers to draw and create. Here the character is coming to terms with the fact that her choices in revising the map of her life has an effect on others, in this case the lover she is about to leave. She creates the space of their home as unviolated, which she is now going to alter. It will become a violated home, a violated space, with the introduction of the new lover. The ownership of her life is what’s striking with this narrator: she is ready to bear the consequences as she revises the map of her life, in full control of which bodies of water she will swim in, which continents she will travel over.

Written on the Body is a novel that allows the reader to get lost in chapter after chapter of love-seeking, unraveling desire and the quest for love and pleasure through sex, while dwelling in both discomfort and serenity: each reader has the choice of uncertainty. There is the uncertainty of love being reciprocated, the uncertainty of the affair moving into a relationship of its own, the uncertainty of consequences, and the uncertainty of the two staying together despite the obstacles. Something the novel thus broaches, while also avoiding it, is the fallacy of a happy ending, of any certainty, of even the most committed of promises being honored and unmessable. *Written on the Body* constitutes a triumph of inquiry into love and pain, gender and identity, love and loss.

Don’t be rehearsing be doing it for the first time

(Eileen Myles, *Skies*, 82)

Eileen Myles, very similarly to Kathy Acker, as I will demonstrate, unearths how the interior self's non-acceptance and resistance, as well as society's, poses many rapturous dangers. Myles is similar to Winterson (and later Carson) in that both explore gender switching: magical realism informs the body morphing and switching into a new version of the self, often animalistic and/or anthropic, that serves sexual desires being fulfilled.

In *Skies*, Myles reveals a vulnerable truth when she writes: "how I see is in constant danger" (37). Of all of Myles's work, *Skies*, her 2001 book of poetry, brings an ethereal and expansive openness to gender ambiguity and variancy: the "sky's the limit" as she titled the panel discussion, held in 1999, that is presented as an Introduction to *Skies*. *Skies* is similar to Myles's previous books of poetry in presentation: her lines are short, there is very little punctuation, and there is an economy of language; however, *Skies* differs from Myles's previous work in that it is, like its title, ethereal. *Skies* contains no anger, no hostility, no conflict; rather, it is a book of poems that speaks a deep maturity of awareness and observance.

Dwelling on the queerly sexed body and mindset, the infinite sky truly *is* the limit for my chosen writers. While there is an infinite sky and infinite possibilities for gender and sexual expression, my authors portray their characters' *seeing, feeling, living, and being* in a world that switches between both a location of danger, and a location within which their ways of walking the world are dangerous. A complicated, differently gendered and sexed-self is the distinction here; it is the non-normative, switch-like state of identity awareness and existence that is precariously hinged.

In *Skies*, Myles explores the island or cloud in the sky-like mental communities that we humans can create to thrive and exist in, be we poets, writers, artists, teachers, food growers, crafters etc., offers us solace to create, yes, and that solace can easily move into rooms and landscapes of isolation and made up, constructed difference; rooms where our color-filled, ritually led, art-inspired, safe environments form a “culture of one” (*Not Me*, 202). The china tea cups that sit with my feline companion and me as I write are great company *and* I sense they may long for other fingers and the semi-annual tea party. In her 1987 postscript to her early book of poems *Not Me*, written between 1986 and 1989, Myles relates to what many of us writers, creative thinkers, and makers may experience: while our “culture of one” is very satisfying, we also want to be a part of the larger, outside culture to which we belong. She writes that she begins this process “by making work which violates the hermetic nature of my own museum” and shares this action “as a friendly gesture towards the people who might recognize me” (*Not Me*, 202).

And so it is that each word, each poem, each shared creative crafting *is* a gesture to recognition. We recognize ourselves in these writers. We associate with them: their feelings, ways of viewing and/or experiencing the world, thinking. We readers feel “got” when we read of similar or familiar experiences on the page; what’s more, we feel gotten when we read a familiar *way* of thinking, of linking thought to perception to world to word. It’s the speaking of the world that we associate with the most, perhaps, the world that makes and remakes us continually with each passing, shared breath.

There is an unlatched quality to Myles’s articulation here. Myles creates the process as almost violent by describing the making and releasing of her work as a violation: sharing her poetry “violates the hermetic seal of” her “own museum.” There is

a rupturing, a forcing, and a willful destruction here. *Skies* is noted for beautifully portraying “the sweet metaphysical tragedy of having to bear lonely witness to one's own experiences” (Scarf, 85); the sharing of this lonely experience, the breaking of the hermetic seal, is necessary because if Myles (and we) do not speak, if Myles (and we) are not recognized and seen, who are we? How are we constituted if we are not seen? We are formed by the communities and worlds around us, forging our lives through connection, even if we might at times buy into the lie that we are alone, isolated islands in a sea of chaotic human behavior and action. Truly, these are key components to this chapter and my writers: there exists a ripe space of journey and navigation to deconstruct, one that carries many cresting waves of switching in identity, gender, sexuality, place, community, connection, what it is to explore and dwell, to watch and ride this tidal sea of connecting rivers and streams.

There is always community waiting, the community of being human, which has a very strong pull yet can be navigated with trepidation at times due to the sheer numbers and vastness of our common humanity. For Myles, who occurs as introverted, the gift of sharing must trump the familiar holding onto oneself: the opening up of the museums of life becomes imperative to her survival. Like any modern museum, Myles has constructed a written catalogue of sorts, so that those interested in what she has to show-and-tell can quickly located her ideas and choose either the vulnerable or the machismo. The beauty in *Skies* is that the reader can show up like s/he would for the odd craft fair, book reading, lecture, community event, or opening.

Myles's next line notes that the writing and sharing of the self is “exhibitionist work” to which she adds the quip “really,” and it is, of course, yet the display is often an

unspoken element. Myles introduces a concept really key to this dissertation: are we all either exhibitionists or voyeurs? Are we all not variant? Acting like we are not? Might reinventing and shining the light on what exhibitionism is and could equate to a quantum leap in how we view each other, difference, and the nature of what it is to be a thinking, feeling human being?

I assert that Myles asking “really” points towards a reinvention. Even if we are sexual progressives, many would not self-referentiate or refer to other writers, artists, or anyone who creates and shares their work, as exhibitionists; if it’s done, it’s most often not complimentary or something to admire and emulate. The word *masochist*, like the word *exhibitionist*, is used in a similar, colloquial way: here occurs a referent of what one *does not* want to be, or what one may wish to avoid. Yet, isn’t this what novelists, poets, and memoirists, who are most often concerned with interiority, are engaged with? Isn’t every creative sharing a revealing of various intimacies of one’s self? And isn’t our reading an exhibitionist act?

Might we begin to translate the word and notion of “exhibitionism” as simply “self expression?” This new usage would mean a move towards a less reactive and reactionary, judging and judgmental society: we could allow people to exhibit, or engage in exhibitionism, without the negative connotation. *Exhibitionism* is defined as “*the desire to expose parts of one’s body,*” and an exhibitionist is one who “*behaves in an extravagant way in order to attract attention,*” and an “extrovert” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). What if we reconstituted *exhibitionism* by using the words I have italicized above? If we removed what confines the term to a damnation? If to be an exhibitionist

were to expose parts of oneself, in an extravagant way or not, might this lead to a society with more acceptance?

In “The Guest” Myles’s exhibitionist self is not quite “good enough,” not quite masculine or handsome enough and so is posed as a guest: “I truly have/given up/on handsome” (*Skies*, 194) she confesses. The giving up on one or another aspect of the self, to fit into a way of being, is what the switch will challenge. Having admitted this, perhaps even accepted it, she is at least “animal pleased” as she remembers “rumpled sheets” and faces the hardened reality that she has “never loved anyone” (*Skies*, 194). As I will later demonstrate with Acker and then Carson, the guest in Myles’ body resorts to bestiality or an identification with an animal: satisfaction with one’s complex and variant sexual and/or gender roles and identifications gives rise to animalistic behavior; that is, within or without, a foreign species is used to explain the occupying deviancy. To not be good enough, to refuse the loving of the self, can leave no room to love another; the ego of the animal resides here now. Switching from an unlovable, unsexy genderqueer to a sexed animal is one method to deal with self-deviancy and desire.

Later in the poem, Myles will switch to introduce tropes of gendered femininity—lavender, scents, baskets: women’s work and female healing herbs—are situated in stark contrast to her masculinity and inability to be feminine: women’s “laughing/and healing” are witnessed via photographs sent in the mail, and she sits steeped in her gendered discomfort. Being/feeling handsome while also being feminine in her facial features, the figure in the poem stands between and betwixt a place of gender variancy and genderqueerness in both body and mind. The face and chest often gives a switch away: there is nowhere to hide in masculine androgyny or butchness when the eyes look down

and caress the softness of the chest, the interior shape shifting, disappearing as the viewer attempts to makes sense of and orient the person before them by fixing a birth gender and identity.

A discerning reading would allow for Myles making small, incremental movements towards looking at the complexity of women's voices and women relatives, as well as male relatives, passing on traits and mannerisms; for these locations of voice, mothering, and the feminine are something many genderqueers, butches, transgendered, and gender variant folk often wrestle with when locating the self as our body to create and own. It would thus be remiss to note that for some, difficult choices of switching exist: between honoring one's desire to create one's identity, body, and life and honoring one's ancestral line and gifts for example.³¹ The links between gender identity, the body, and shape

31 As a mixed race person, relating and honouring my matrilineal heritage, which begins with the seven generations before me, moves through to those living during my life, and then carries forward to the seven generations that will follow my life, honouring and connecting these ancestors with my life is something that I experienced a navigation with as far as my gender identity. Variations of self-expression became points of conflict for me. The most significant struggle was living with the pitch and tone of my voice. My voice has always existed precariously for me, especially once I began to live in a climate of modifying the body and voice to match one's gender identity. To alter a voice I haven't been comfortable with for most of my adult life was something I considered and debated for decades. The voice as an intersection point between honouring who I am and who I create myself to be has a long sequence: at seventeen I would answer the phone to my house and be asked if my Mum or Dad was home, there has been an element of not being taken seriously (which speaks to sexism much more than my gender identity), and then, in my thirties, wanting a voice that matched my genderqueerness and the more masculine and manly aspects of my person; all the while, from the start of my adult life to now, I have wanted a voice that resonated the powerful, sexy, wise, adult person I feel and think myself to be. Considering taking testosterone to lower my voice, having my adenoids taken out, or voice lessons have been recurring thoughts over the many years. I have gone so far as to discuss the matter with most trans friends I know and have had their Dr.'s lined up to discuss prescribing me an antidote. It took nine years after my very beloved Grandmother died combined with years of rigorous personal transformational work for me to begin to hear my Grandmother's voice in my Mother's, and both of their voices in mine: I became aware of how I have inherited their voices. Studying with some of my teachers and elders, I then came to recognize and appreciate that their voices were gifts to me and that to alter them to match something external: matching my outward appearance and presentation via the voice (and how other's view me) would be a refusal of their gift and a refusal of my self and who I am in spirit. I want to be clear that this is my experience on my journey: I have no judgment on any one altering what they may to serve them and have

shifting can be experienced and move like a storm at sea, rapturous. This is perhaps why Myles and, as I will show later, Carson, morph and shape-shift into having either animalistic qualities and features or inhabiting an animal. Not only is bestiality a sexual taboo, which is a variant, switching sexual desire, but also they are a location of safely exploring one's internal switch nature.

In an interview published in *The Paris Review*, Jeanette Winterson speaks to this notion of tradition and what we carry forth. She comes to the discussion by way of her relationship to the Bible and her Christian upbringing. She writes that her journey is actually a very typical one and that

if you have been immersed in something, there will come a point when you have to rebel against it. It was necessary for me to leave behind my entire early background—physically, emotionally and intellectually . . . to have nothing to do with it. *Oranges [are not the only Fruit]* was a way of cleansing myself from all that, of saying, No, this is what I am. Not this other thing, this made thing. Now I am going to make myself, I'll be self-invented. Over the years—since I wrote *Oranges* eleven years ago—I have continued to think long and deeply about those issues that I suppose I have thought about since I was a very small child. Now I feel comfortable again to use the Bible as one source book amongst many others, but as a very important one. It is

made various artistic body modifications in ritual myself. With my voice, however, I realized that I could practice being mindful of the tone and manner with which I speak, which is actually quite easy to alter. To achieve the degree of elocution I seek I can take voice lessons. Coming to accept that my voice is sweet and feminine has been a long process and is one I am still negotiating, yet, for reasons I may not always be aware of, I have the choice to accept the gift or refuse it and I choose to accept what my female ancestors passed down to me. My wanting my voice, or anything else, to be other than it is it is an insanity of sorts. It is through acceptance of what is that we mature into grace and ease, as well as our power. My voice, while feminine, is very powerful and can boom to a room of 300 with ease and without a microphone. Choosing to gracefully accept the gift of their voices gave me a freedom: the freedom that comes from honouring the generations and the freedom that comes with acceptance and practicing and receiving grace. In a society that swims in the notion that we are independent, isolated agents, my example, as well as those of Myles and Acker, is an interesting angle for some of us to consider: I think the spiritual and ancestral honouring aspects of identity are an interesting and ripe topic in scholarly discourse and theory, as well as in identity, gender, and performance politics. While many of us have taught writers who dwell in these topics and explored the intersection of sexuality, gender, and identity with spirituality and traditional practices, I aim to take the exploration of these topics and teaching to the next level and advocate for courses, not just rogue syllabi, on the subject.

something that I know so very well that it would be ridiculous for me to try to do without it. And there's no point. I don't accept the God myth of the church. I think it's hogwash. But that doesn't mean that I don't accept the essential mystery of the scriptures and of the religious faith. "Jeanette Winterson: The Art of Fiction," *The Paris Review*, No. 150, Spring 1999.

Her comfort with something that was at one time so uncomfortable and in need of an early rebellion: the carving out who she was and could be exist here. She points to looking for what is of value in the traditions passed down, what can be appreciated and accepted in a very generous way, even in something that is not fully workable. The interviewer then asks her if she feels the need to fight against that which she does not accept. Winterson's reply is candid, astute, and wise: "absolutely not," she says. She explains: "it's of much more use to me as an ally. But that's only because of this relationship whereby it was everything, then it had to be nothing, and now I have come back to a point where it is as though a friend walks beside you, neither in front nor behind." ("Jeanette Winterson: The Art of Fiction," *The Paris Review*, No. 150, Spring 1999).

Myles, Carson, and Winterson all broach this topic of reconciling the past, tradition, and identity in different ways. Almost identical in wording to Acker, Myles tells us that how she sees "is in constant danger" with her whistled voice "the desperate/sound/of a storm/at sea" (*Skies*, 196-97). The seeing and seas of the world are a dangerous terrain for one who has a map that deviates from the normative navigational system. So again Myles will associate human and animal; she asks: "don't you/know/that/you're the/horse? Rearing/through your life" (*Skies*, 199). The running and rearing of an animal indicates a hostile environment, one that is survival based. Later she laments: "I was your/landscape/Here I am a cold chunk/of marble" (*Skies*, 199). The

animalization and the question of what the I has become when choice seems limited and/or severed is cold: cold stone, cold marble. And cold stone is a body that “has no friend” (*Skies*, 201).

For Myles, desensitizing and living in rented rooms with broken toilets are her life. She may put the “final/touches on/your handsewn/manuscript/made out of/your mother’s/old clothes” but the writer is clearly a guest to the feminine mother’s clothes she does not sew, wear, or otherwise appreciate (*Skies*, 198). Who wears a “woman’s/hat ...an easter bonnet ... a band” with “little purple flowers” is her friend Tim. Tim brings an absurdity to the feminine however, as Myles describes the accessory as “an old lady’s/hat like a rug/with a muscle” (*Skies*, 198).

Myles wears shirts, not blouses. These are stuffed in nooks: housed in rented rooms, cheapened: the interior selves, the gendered aspects of a self not seen or wanted are no longer visible. Identity is likened to cold marble; tragically, she’s turned herself off. A cold stone of a woman she will write “I hate my/autonomy/cold knuckles” (*Skies*, 196). This poem ends with “my body/has no friend” (201) a bleak reminder of what happens when we do not/choose not to honor all the aspects of ourselves: masculine, feminine, and everything in-between. The inauthenticity that Myles writes of living with demonstrates a very clear pathway for my research by showing the importance of not stuffing the many different aspects and parts of a self into nooks—to gather dust, to be forgotten—the importance of not closeting that which is gendered or sexually complicated. Silently resting/retiring the desires of a life, in dusty nooks, draws attention to living authentically and free.

In “Writing” Myles addresses not wanting to look at oneself, confessing a resistance to what is. She does not “want to/see my/face in/the mirror” (*Skies*, 81). She “can’t/bear” her “thoughts” (*Skies*, 81). There is a discomfort and shame in not being able to do anything with the reflection. An element of the victim in not being able to bear one’s thoughts is present. There also exists a self-loathing and resistance to what is. The body and mind seem out of one’s control, one is a puppet, masterminded by an outside force of hands. Yet this writer “can/connect/any two/things” to which she equates to being “god” (*Skies*, 80). Perhaps the cathartic action of writing may begin to presence what is, to offer an acceptance of what is. Surely God is that merciful?

Another poem, “Nameless,” begins to boldly encourage authenticity with one of my favorite lines in the book: “don’t be rehearsing/be doing/it for the first/time” (*Skies*, 82) – an apt mantra for this project and switching if ever there was one. Myles writing that “language/takes/the size/of your/life” (*Skies*, 96) surely allows one to create our life with what language we choose: how else are we created if not through word? Language being and becoming one’s life complicates yet informs what we *can do* through switching. In *Skies*, names, performance, presentation, identity: our narratives and stories, the activity of writing and living, creative expressions all give way to birth a life of acceptance. For Myles, it is merely an ok-ness with one’s difference, a navigating of what is, what is wished for, and what isn’t; it’s a navigation of “the way everything moves in/my head (“Road Buddy,” *Skies*, 189) that is sought.

Myles has her speaker switch through confronting and revealing both patterns and intersections. In a poem that is titled the symbol of a black dot she confesses “I don’t know...I’m trying/to read/the world/a smoky/criss/cross in the

sky/paths/intersect/occasionally” (*Skies*, 161). These lines encourage the reader to pause and see how the switch can take on a visual, criss-cross image, and, further witness how switching is a location of crisscross, smoky ambiguity. Myles’s empowered, higher self then switches in to respond: “we were/a miracle/once” as if to remind her that she still *is*, that we still *are* walking miracles (*Skies*, 161). Her resigned self seems defeated, her fight ended, she gives over to her top with the short non-committal, submissive answer of “I’ll try” (*Skies*, 161). Myles enjoys dwelling in the not knowing, in the ambiguous, and in her masochistic pain with lovers and love.

The miracle of accepting simply what is runs through *Skies*. At the same time, the reader may want to will Myles to stop repeating the looping insanities of non-acceptance; there is relief when she switches and crisscrosses and there is celebration and appreciation in those moments when Myles relaxes into self-love. Such moments are truly glorious and epic. In another poem that is simply titled the image of a black dot she writes: “My mind’s/pretty/juicy/pretty crayon-/y/” (*Skies*, 87). One wonders how this inspiring poet can then turn so damning on herself when she writes a lushness: her mind is juicy, crayony, and akin to a “full moon” (*Skies*, 87).

And this is the switch we want to feed, this is the mind we celebrate and dwell with: a juicy one, a layered one, a loved one, a full, juicy moon of mind! *Skies* evokes the never-ending vastness of the miraculous as her speakers switch and morph with time, gender, subversive same-sex desire, and the play that exists between the masculine and feminine, the body and role, want and need. As the sky is unlimited and never ending so to are we human beings: we are capable of creating ourselves and our world beyond what we can even conceive or imagine. We are just as full of promise as Myles’s *Skies*.

What you risk reveals what you value. (Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*, 91)

Kathy Acker recalls Gertrude Stein in that both writers were determined, courageous, and bold pioneers of avant-garde, experimental writing. For Acker, switching is perverse and is located in language, relationships, the body, sex, and the unpredictable; more subtly, Acker's perversity and switchness can be seen as a movement, a fetish, a masochistic performance, and a feminist statement, which is most explicit when talking about ecstasy or pain. Acker's life and contributions were tragically cut short by cancer at the age of fifty (she lived from 1947 to 1997). She wrote prolifically for twenty-five years and is hailed by some as one of the most influential, transgressive writers of her generation; others would propose of the later half of the century.

Looking at one of Acker's first published works, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* (1973) alongside one of her last published works, *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996) illustrates bookmarked ends to an oeuvre of perverse switching and an explicit pornography of identity and sexuality; her characters are constantly moving, celebrating and struggling simultaneously between locations of sexual being and sexual objectification, becoming an animal and then either rejecting or embracing one's humanity, occupying multiple genders at the same time while struggling to maintain, create, or be free from an identity or the self. Acker's work courageously and rigorously demonstrates the discomfort and anxiety of these sometimes conflicting and simultaneous processes; at the same time, Acker consistently exhibits her commitment to writing a "complete sexuality" as it "occurs within" even as "the ground pulls out from under my body" (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 49).

In the thorough yet brief “Introduction” to the book *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, Jeanette Winterson, who was a good friend of Kathy Acker’s, writes:

Acker believed that desire is the only honest part of us, and she believed that art is authentic desire. She never expected that art itself could transform the world, but she knew art could awaken in us the authentic desire buried under the meaninglessness of modern life. The responsibility to act on that desire is up to us. (ix)

And thus in the effort to awaken the authentic and dispense with the “meaningless of modern life” Acker writes: “I’m trying to figure out what reality is” (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 25).

Acker’s writing discloses the tenuous and fragile intersections between what is natural and unnatural, what constitutes normality and the abnormal. As with Stein and my other writers, this writing of intersection constitutes all of Acker’s work and takes the form of a deep, first-person inquiry where the personal is and/or becomes the political. Ambiguous spaces of relationship, family, connection, love, order and disorder, subcultures, sex practices, and the body weave continually through the written texts and bodies of this blazoning author. These spaces and themes function as axes where Acker provides a viewing into:

the relationship between erotic acts and erotic identities ... the status accorded to the genitals in defining sexual acts ... the fine line between virtue and transgression, orderly and disorderly homoeroticism ... the relationship of eroticism to gender deviance and conformity ... the relevance of age, class/status, and ethic/racial hierarchies to erotic relations ... the division between public and private sexualities ... the differences between concepts of erotic identity, predisposition, and habitual behaviors ... the dynamic of secrecy and disclosure, including covert signs, coding, and open secrets. (Traub, 133-34)

Acker's writing is a graphic, hard-edged, explicit pornography of all of these themes, with identity and sexuality at the crossroads with abnormal and normal. Acker and her characters move between being sexual beings and objects, where the character's sexuality and sex practices are at once her everything, to locations of nothingness, her sexuality becoming "impersonal," and a disconnection which leads to a dead end road of confessing "I'm rapidly losing my identity" (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 51).

Acker confesses in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*: "I've always feared most that someone will destroy my mind" (41). She engages her own confusion with the unpredictable with a daring courageousness; the results are narratives of continual slippages of gender, identity, and perversity. Her characters can occupy multiple genders at the same time, have the anatomy of a woman and that of many animals simultaneously, and exist in a drug-like, experimental world of poetic self-discovery, reflection, incest, fantasy, sex, BDSM, exhibitionism and voyeurism, bestiality, personal authorship and creation. Non-normative sexualities, genders, bodies, desires, and expressions are the waters Acker swims in. She is slippery and loves slippage—it is both the access to her sanity and her insanity—and while some may avoid for fear of falling into an unknown pain, Acker explores to a dark, scary depth.

Acker provides such an utter subversion of predictable or socially acceptable content, language, narrator, and characters. She is a writer who shifts in and around gender, identity, sexual practice, desires, and what normativity and perversity may be and look like. One chapter begins, "I'm two people and the two people are making love to each other" (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 29). Later, "the big toe of my left foot

is making love to the toe of my right foot. The toes become two people” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 33). One of Acker’s gifts is to speak a literature of pornography and fantasy: the subversive and perverse have her switch roles, desires, personas, in a dreamscape.

Like Winterson, Acker takes a geographical cure to open herself to other worlds, to allow for her dreamscape to pop in Technicolor. Moving to San Francisco has her “begin to copy my favorite pornography books and become the main person in each of them” (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 29). And so she is attending a girl’s school while also unable to “decide whether I’m a woman giving birth to a brat or a five-year-old girl” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 29). After having sex in the bathroom with a female classmate the character will say to her lover “I want to blow my identity outward away, until I’m always running in a black ocean under a black sky and I can control my emotions” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 33).

Acker’s character, the black tarantula, exists in a hazy world of poetic self-discovery, reflection, and sex. She is a character riddled with switching. She is both “helen seferis, and then, alexander trocchi” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 41). She is in a perpetual state of switching between becoming and/or having the anatomy of a man, a woman, and an animal in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*. A few examples have the reader witness the main character get “rid of myself as a woman” to become “king” of a gang (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 25). A page later she will switch to “want to be the Virgin Mary” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 26). The sacred mother becomes an antidote to a shy, tired man who gets refused and is not able to bed who he wants (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 26). Later in the work

she will take on an anatomy that, when s/he wears tight pants, will “watch my cock rise and fall it looks like a small animal only I know it’s me” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 35). Still later she is “a young lesbian in a French boarding school who’s growing up too quickly to have a childhood” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 38).

At other times her quest to find out what it is to be real and to live in a reality outside the meaningless, drab, mainstream existence has her become an animal or “take sex with animals” (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* 26). She is at once “a black dog” and “the black leather Virgin Mary” and she is able to change her costuming and character as fast as she can construct and switch them mentally to suit her: “At this point I change my costume; for the rest of my life I wear only men’s clothes” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 28). Acker writes that losing her identity is “the last part of my boredom” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 51).

The rest of her life passes in a glimpse, of course, as time in all of Acker’s narratives, is as utterly unreliable as a gendered identity or fake promise. Later she will write that, at the same time, she “became a man and a woman” (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 49). This is the work of an author who has distaste for consistency: “I don’t want to hide. I want to hide,” she writes. (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 39).

Her experiences illustrate a clear discomfort with the process: “the ground pulls out from under my body I feel the anxieties I felt as a kid ... I stay with the anxiety to find out what’s happening I forget who I am I don’t know who I am I see a huge soft black widow no identity a large tarantula I have no feelings I begin to float” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 50). As with Eileen Myles and Jeanette Winterson, sexual deviancy

and the woman's sexual body can move into existence and identification with sister and mythic animals and through an ethereal space and time.

Acker then switches to wonder if her "work means less to me than my sexuality" and if so, does the compromise into the perverse depths of her desires constitute her life as "a failure" (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 50). In this moment and in slippages for the rest of the work Acker is writing on writing, bridging her character's sex work or sex addiction with writing, something so clearly echoed in Acker's own life she seems to be using her experience as material. To fail is not to be able to bridge her work, which is writing, with sex while also to fail is to let sex become personal and thus grab a foothold on her identity and safe world of self. If "the complete sexuality occurs within" she writes, and is "not expressed by, the writing" she has somehow failed (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 50). To live a fully expressed life, without constraints, a life that encompasses all the aspects of who and what she is, is her sanity (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 50). Without her writing of her external and internal sex worlds she is in a perpetual state of anxiousness (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 50).

Floating thus is a common theme for Acker's characters, who are either swimming in an ocean of heady reflection and experience or attempting to feel alive and exist in a sea of pornographic sex that is extremely perverse, subversive, and situated in BDSM. Throughout Acker's texts primarily two spaces exist: spaces of "complete disorder" (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 60) and spaces of sexual switching – both reveal just how urgent her "explaining everything about my sexual life as fully as possible" is when considering that what is on the other side for Acker is death and her fear of it. At the same time, Acker uses her writing to "get rid of all feelings of identity that aren't my

sexuality” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 50), which complicates any theory that her writing is all sexual practice.

Acker has her character’s identity inextricably joined with a dysfunctional, unsatisfied sex life while also switching to question if the character can attempt to have a sex life that is somehow functional: connecting, personal, complete and satisfying. There is a constant back and forth switching between ambivalence and seeking to want live another way. Acker’s character repeatedly chooses to swim in the losing of her identity and the dysfunction of her life. She then laments it, repeating the insanity, dwelling in it until she is spent with pain or hollowness.

Having sex and orgasm, masturbating herself and others, pleasure itself, becomes a vicious cycle for all of Acker’s characters. She is desperate for it and yet it makes her sick, diseased, and causes her extreme pain. Sex becomes the chosen weapon and it is one that, like any person causing violence, hurts the one inflicting the violence in deep and long-lasting ways. Having sex outside with a female lover she writes, “I have to orgasm to blank everyone out” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 55).

Her characters are in a constant state of questioning their worth, ability, and identity: “I don’t know what would help me and I’m too far gone to do more than act through my delirium.” She writes “I’m completely involved in my delirium” (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 59). They switch from clinging to and repeating outworn patterns to a desire for a new life in the shape of their Goddess and animal strength and power, to know another way to live by shedding a dysfunctional, delirious identity that does not serve the character:

As the man’s cock enters me, every muscle of me begins to shake, every nerve begins to burn and quiver. I’m both liquid and solid. I’m completely

pleasure. At this moment. (1) I'm opening enough to contain all identities, things, change everything to energy, a volcano. (2) I'm constant energy and I can never be anything else. (3) I have no emotions; I sense textures of everything against textures; I'm completely part of and aware of the object world. I don't exist. My nerves quiver, quiver burning, up and down the secret inflamed passages of my skin, the nerves tensing my muscles so that my blood zooms to the edge of my body, swells and inflames me, and unable to burst, I begin to come. These sensations—I don't know how to describe them—last for hours. I come again and again and again I am now equal to everything and nothing am completely dependent on the pleasure this stranger is giving me. (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 60)

There seems to exist a salvation in moving out of the drama of the delirium, yet it is an evasive action that the character seems constantly thwarted by and at war with. The ego and discomfort is too familiar and at constant war with the higher self, energy, and volcanic spirit who knows another world possible. Acker's character's are "completely dependent" on sex, touch, physicality, and being wanted in order to survive in a nightmare of neediness (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 55). A continual and constant needing, being left, seeking, running after, listlessness and control of the addiction runs throughout each narrative. Her characters are hated, "too fat" to be wanted, told they are disgusting, unwanted, and ugly; her characters also have surreal intelligence and abilities.

For Acker's character the quest for what is reality and what is rebellion coexist in the tenuous spaces for the character. S/he engages in orgasm "until there's no difference between coming and reality" (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 49). Her escape into dreamscapes and the harshness of reality continue to do battle as she forages for an identity. "I'm still me," she writes, "still scared by my passion and sex. Reporting involves memories involved identity: I have my identity and I have my sex: I'm not new yet. I have to be careful for I may be visited at any moment" (*Childlike Life of the Black*

Tarantula, 49). Constructing and reconstructing the self and identity in the present, but trapped in working from the past and memory, creating a future not based in fear seems impossible—and it is.

Her characters know no boundaries and as a result a hyper-mania and instability lurks. The Black Tarantula writes she “would have slept with my brother, after my mother died, but he chases me away” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 61). This exacting, repetitious trope reflects the seemingly unyielding political, social, economic and personal lives of women in the world. This is not a powerless victim of a character, however, even as she may totter and fall more often than she stays in the saddle; she straddles both empowering and disempowering selves, falling into her familiar, victim self often, yet this character firmly tells us “mostly I feel the pleasure of the masochism which occurs *only* when I give my consent. If I consent, now, I can do anything” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 61). Off-putting for some? Maybe. Courageous, experimental, confronting? Yes!

Acker’s texts, while pornographic and perverse, are feminist manifestas, cries and speeches, shouts and sobs, as to what it means to walk the world as woman, as sexual being, as related to and with. “I’m scared to always follow my desires in this sick society” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 90), she writes as she fuses her writing and character with the Marquis de Sade’s notions of pleasure, offense, and society’s prudery. She writes, “I love only what occurs in my mind. I’ve remade the outside prison inside me because there’s no difference between outside and inside my mind: they release me from prison and I am still in prison” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*,

83). She writes: “I’m speaking to you directly. Complete disorder exists” (*The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 61).

Acker’s characters are people who “fear everyone” and yet also quest to ask “is it possible to come to the end of my fear?” (*Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, 82). All of Acker’s work resonates a working out the proverb “insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.” Through each of her narratives, Acker steps closer to answering her evasive question on fear. What remains is a body of work that wrote and screamed liberation through exposure of the self for the purposes of discovery while remaining very much muddied and mired in self-imposed constraints and fears. In the darkness, and also in the light, of Acker’s fiction a deep fear of moving forward into an unknown freedom in identity resounds. Acker creates and feeds her characters in a survival-based, escapist, addictive, dark chaos; they then chose to explore themselves and triumph, knowing a freedom where the character’s perversity and switchiness can thrive, or not. Acker’s characters attempt, but are unsuccessful, in living and creating a loving world of balance and trust; rather, they are kept at arm’s length and left unknown and inexperienced.

All of us Girls Have Been Dead so Long (Kathy Acker, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, 109)

Writers who navigate the more subversive and s/witchy elements of sexuality, desire, and identity—and really, this applies to writers who ruminate in any field that questions the status quo, normative views, assumptions, how we view both what we hold to *be* “true” and what we believe—can have those elements ignored in their work; non-normative, perverse locations make up the fringes of discourse and theory (even within

feminist, women's, and queer studies). The more "perverse," "freakish," or "radical," the more likely they are to be relegated to the sidelines of what is considered "Literature."

Looking at how switching with identity, desire, sexual, and gender practices are delineated, explored, and complicated in my authors, this chapter asks us as readers to consider to what extent the private is really becoming public as far as desire is concerned: to what degree are queer people and/or sexually variant women practicing, evoking, and playing out/with ideas and concepts of desire that truly encapsulate the subversive sexual and identity practices. Not only is switching happening on the page, but also beyond the page, beyond the mind, beyond the bedroom even, and into the realm of the "real" of the text and its performative function(s).

Winterson herself would write of risk-taking, art, and writing in *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*: "the riskiness of Art, the reason why it affects us, is not the riskiness of its subject matter, it is the risk of creating a new way of seeing, a new way of thinking" (52). Truly, this is the call my authors have answered: each of them taking great risks with publishing and sharing her writing, inventing and creating needed new ways of thinking, seeing, and experiencing the world by "overturning the habits and conventions of previous generations" (*Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, 52). Certainly, the risk-taking and visionary newness is at the heart of the authors I have chosen, and indeed, all of my readings. I see these writers as having a creative genius that stands in great courage. The experimental, vanguard writing of all of my authors is a contribution to what Winterson calls "the rebellion of art ... a daily rebellion against the state of living death routinely called real life" (*Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, 52).

Chapter III: “Allegory Holds Fast to The Ruins’: Memoir, Girl and Teen-hood—The Body, and Deviancy in Kathy Acker, Anne Carson, and Sappho”

This chapter dwells in and reveals how Kathy Acker, Anne Carson, and Sappho, as translated by Carson, traverse the ever-changing landscape of youth/teen affection, desire, love, identity, self, gender and sexual deviancy. Angles and perspectives, proximity and location, boundaries and autonomy become blurred and then recrystallized as subversive, intersecting worlds of investigation and self-growth when seen and then written from a child’s or teen’s perspective. I address how the teen narratives of Kathy Acker and Anne Carson play with conventional and accepted behaviors and established practices of sexuality and desire, recreating them in exploratory ways.

Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*, Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*, and Anne Carson’s translation of the entire collection of Sappho’s poems, all of which exist in fragments, in *If Not Winter, Fragments of Sappho*, create narrative occasions that carve out spaces for the reader to inquire into how youth are written to traffic in queerness, perversity, identity, and sexual practices; further, readers are privy to witness the raw experiences and sensations of the youth of these texts wherein a youthful

curiosity carries excitement, shame, possibility, and confusion.

Let us begin with entering that child-turning-youth world through the opening words of the lyric “Blind” written by the musical collective Hercules and Love Affair and

Antony Hegarty:

As a child I knew
That the stars could only get brighter
then we would get closer
get closer
As a child I knew
That the stars could only get brighter
Then we could get closer
Leaving this darkness
behind

This chapter sheds light on how the characters’ explorations into identifications and roles—as a girl, boy, or other, as a daughter, son, daddy, or brother, as a top or a submissive—get played out. These identifications sometimes move through moments of switching within and from each young person’s identity and perspective, creating compelling turns in mapping out new gendered and sexualized locations, identities, and boundaries. In addition, this chapter also examines how undoing “the latches of being” (Carson’s, *Autobiography of Red*, 4) complicates notions of sexuality, identity, and roles. Let us return to the middle and end of the lyric “Blind” above, applying it to the sexual and gender turnings and experiences that some youth may take in their journey through teen-hood and into adulthood:

Now that I’m older
The stars should light upon my face
But when I find myself alone
Find myself alone
Now that I’m older
The stars should light upon my face
But when I find myself alone

I feel like I am ... I am blind
I wish the stars could shine now ...
I wish the light could shine now ...
It is closer...

It makes my past and future painfully clear
To hear you now
to see you now
I can look outside myself
I must examine my breath
I look inside
To see you now
to hear you now
I can look outside myself
I must examine my breath
and look inside
Because I feel blind because I feel blind
I feel it ... I feel it ... I feel it
Like I am blind
Feel it ... feel it ... I feel it ... feel it ... feel it

(“Blind,” Hercules and Love Affair with Antony Hegarty)

Why I take the time to quote this lyric and link it to my chapter’s topic and the youth therein, is that with switching there is an emphasis on the discomfort and the joys of being variant. In addition, there exists an elusive, yet future present, comfort and peacefulness that come with s/witchy self-acceptance. “Feel it” is a line that is repeated twenty times to close the lyric, which emphasizes feeling as well as knowing/trusting: to feel and know the power and comfort that comes from accepting the shining uniqueness of one’s life and birth, to know and accept—and then take on powerfully—one’s inner star light and life purpose as something sacred, loveable, wanted, necessary: a gift, is key to this chapter, and indeed, this entire project.

These youthful experiences, star bright and surreal, at times occur as seemingly colossal, out of one’s control, and isolating-self-contained yet world-determined experiences and occurring. There thus exists, through the child and/or youth narrative

and experience, a visible link to the bigger picture through present awareness: a link to cosmic consciousness and the world “outside” of oneself. This consciousness creates the kind of space needed for identity-play, construction, and reconstruction; identity formations and associations can then open up into a beginner’s mind, Zen-like context wherein identity and labels actually become empty and meaningless. A large-scale, cosmic size view of the world and stars gives rise to a light impermanence and shininess.³²

Children and teens present this shineiness and present moment awareness directly: a child will experience trying something new and be absolutely present, and in a moment, switch to a new task or take on a new understanding of the same task, all so effortlessly, with the result that meaning or significance is either added to the switch or not; and so it is in these narratives: there are moments when the child/teen engages in switching effortlessly, without adding any meaning or significance to the switch or the switching action, and there are moments when the switch signifies identity formation, meaning-making, and a relationality with the world and others that may or may not be disempowering.

I approach the writings of Acker, Carson, and Sappho from the internal storms that are presented: examining the breath inside that shows a character feeling/experiencing being blinded, out of control, and/or at the affect of others and external circumstances, while also uncollapsing these struggles to witness the calm, ease, peacefulness and internal knowing that occurs for these characters.

In Chapter Two I referred to part of Valerie Traub’s creative list of deviant topics.

³² More will be said on this opening up of identity in my conclusion; for now however, I invite openness in locations of identity, gender, and sexuality that equate to a cosmic bigness.

The overlap and remainder of them serve as connecting points for the reader as s/he grapples with the societal definitions and challenges, social significances and explorations of this chapter. The more perverse of her crafted list of deviant topics and tropes of homoerotic writing, which Traub asserts have “more consequence to female bodies,” but which clearly apply to the child/teen body regardless of gender, are listed below as they apply to both Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* and Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*; thus they are tropes I pull and thread through this and my subsequent chapter. For, indeed, as Traub notes that the female body is particularly at the effect of the below relationships and axis, the teen/youth/underage body is, most certainly, greatly affected. Traub’s seductive connections and means of relationally range from:

the relationship between erotic acts and erotic identities ... the status accorded to the genitals in defining sexual acts ... the fine line between virtue and transgression, orderly and disorderly homoeroticism ... the relationship of eroticism to gender deviance and conformity ... the symbolic and social functions of gendered clothing ... the relevance of age, class/status, and ethnic/racial hierarchies to erotic relations ... the role of voluntary kinship and familial nomenclatures in mediating and expressing erotic bonds; the relationship of homoeroticism to homosociality ... the role of gender-segregated spaces, including religious, educational, criminal, and medical institutions ... the existence of communities and subcultures, including public sexual cultures and spaces ... the division between public and private sexualities ... the effects of racial, geographical, religious, and national othering ... the effects of social and geographical mobility and “traveling” sexualities ... assessments of appropriate erotic knowledge, including the ambiguous line separating medicine from obscenity ... the credibility of religious, medical, scientific and legal discourse in the production of sexual categories, including definitions of nature, the unnatural, normality and the abnormal ... the differences between concepts of erotic identity, predisposition, and habitual behaviors ... the dynamic of secrecy and disclosure, including covert signs, coding, and open secrets. (“The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography,” as cited in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, 133-34)

In addition to the axis above, which I will pull through this chapter, the specifics of this chapter indubitably benefit by looking at and including “*the relationship between erotic subject and erotic identity.*” I assert that both Acker and Carson explore this relationship via the fine lines between addiction, pleasure, pain, and identity and the connected finer lines of escapism, avoidance, and fantasy with reality and the undesired. My writer’s address the impact of these choices and locations on a life: on workability, integrity, social responsibility and social connection ... the blurred or strict relationship between consensual acts and non-consensual acts, between victim and perpetrator, subject and object, what is inappropriate, taboo, forbidden and/or unspeakable and what is appropriate ... the relationship between the non-normative and the sometimes disconcerting and/or uncomfortable.

In looking at the historiography of LGBTQ writing, Traub astutely writes that many deconstructionist readings “yield ample evidence of queerness located within ostensibly heterosexual literary texts” (“The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography,” 137). This definitely applies to Acker, Carson, and Sappho’s work: their writing concerns a *variant loci*, can be read both outside of a sexual identity while within a queer loci and also with a “ostensibly heterosexual” lens.³³ These types of texts, according to Laura Doan, “enable us to ascertain the ‘imbrication of alternative possibilities within normative sexualities’” (quoted in Traub, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*, 137).

It is precisely *the overlap* of “alternative possibilities within normative sexualities” that interests me with these gender-bending, youth-driven narratives, while also, and

³³ Acker’s movements are all within a sexual and identity variant milieu whereas Carson’s subjects and thematics span out much broader.

perhaps even more intriguing is the *overlap* of alternative possibilities with non-normative sexualities, which can be either masked or presented as normative. This chapter will reveal the exuberant and lush perversities, both sexy and sexualized, that gestate here.³⁴

Aberrations a go-go: “Shall we find our way out of all expectations”?

(Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School*, 147)

The accessing of taboo subjects and language that many feminists might experience as violation—even when experienced consensually—are, in Acker’s writings, presented as ripe, switch-like sites of confusing topics one wants to linger over and digest. Her writing can be unnerving and raw, disconcerting and repetitive, to the point that a reader can tire of the addictive nature of the sex and drama, as well as the seemingly endless circularity of victimization and perpetration. Acker’s repetition is no accident however, and is key to the innovative grappling of her characters and narratives.

Another way in which Acker uses repetition is in the writing of others. Acker

³⁴ Before engaging in such a chapter, I would like to offer a disclaimer as well as an invitation: First, I want to be clear that, while this chapter will address incest as well as the pornography and eroticism of youth in new, subversive, ways, there is absolutely no room or condoning of incest or pornography, in any form, in any real-life context, with children and/or youth. Second, I invite each individual reader to briefly contemplate what boundaries permeate and form the thoughts and theories, the points of view and/or beliefs about what can be a delicate and controversial topic: variant child and teen sexuality specifically, and variant gender and identity as well. Third, I request that once those points of view are identified and/or come up as you as a reader move through the chapter, that readers suspend any morality, right/wrong judgments, assessment, and opinions with the subject matter, and instead choose to welcome the subject of this chapter as a way to look at variant sexuality and gender in youth characters. This welcoming involves trusting that the texts I am engaging with are fictional narratives written by adults and that consensual adult narratives can engage with taboo subjects in an empowering way. As my Introduction made clear, I am engaged with adult written fiction that is written for adult readers that consent to engaging in the process; thus, as a consenting adult, I want to invite you to read the chapter from this open minded place and give you the opportunity to consent to this process and engaging in my chapter’s content knowing you have the choice to read this chapter or not.

would drop published writing into her narrative, thus changing and recontextualizing the original to accompany her narrative, as if in a dance. Another repetition, which I share at the risk of conflating the author and her work, is that Acker herself periodically appears to get looped into a drama of survival, victim, and “story”³⁵ that is the world of her characters. Winterson writes that “Acker saw herself as dispossessed” and that Acker, along with her female characters, react to life with acts of “revenge” (“Introduction,” *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, ix).

Acker’s writing is regarded so highly and with such reverence because it preempted second and third wave feminist, LGBTQ pro sex, and sex industry activism and analysis while she was writing an entire oeuvre that tackles these exact subjects. She was much more gritty, direct, intense, and uncompromising, often harshly so, in her writings than any other woman writing during her time; one could argue subsequently as well, accessing a very personal attraction to and survival in the perverse. Acker was, unquestionably, at the forefront of dangerous, frontier-like fictional writing.

Of course Acker was in a large sea of daring, with other feminist women writers and change makers who were addressing intense subjects and subjectivity, often in non-

³⁵ I refer to the Buddhist, and/or the conscious raising/awareness training, definition of the word “story” here, which uses the direct, dictionary definition of the word “story” rather than the literary/narrative based context and/or definition of the word: a story is fictional, not real, and is most often composed of what is *seen as* real when, in reality, what seems or occurs as real is an imagined distortion; a story is “used to lament the fact that a particular misfortune has happened too often in one’s experience,” and, often to the listener as well as the storyteller, the story “indicates that a particular bad situation is tediously familiar” (*New Oxford American Dictionary*). The “tediously familiar” aspect of a story exists, in this context, because *all story* is past-based point of view, not reality: a story is a past and personal view based, individual/me centered, most often inaccurate and a displacement, complaint, assessment or judgment point of view on something that happened; it has nothing to do with what is the present reality, what actually happened or is happening; even while the story *may seem* to be what is occurring or experienced as real or the fact, it’s not. Stories are also likened to dreams in Buddhism: where life is all a dream and thus any interpretation of that dream is a story.

fiction, shorter work, and performance. Individually and also collectively, they recreated women's roles, perspectives, and points of views as each woman's own and as part of a large sea of waves upon waves; angst was spun into gold:

You who dream of liberty ...

I am my mother's daughter
And I see myself in you ...

I dreamed a thousand
It was you and you and you

And while the city sleeps so quietly
There is something we must do

And you may say ...

I don't think this has anything to do with me
But did you ever think you could be wrong

Human strength will fill the streets

And the artist's will be there
And it won't take long

"I don't know how to be a part of that"
"don't you want to see yourself that strong"

You may say "I'm afraid to be a part of that" and it makes me want to Say
"Come on, come on".

For you sagging diplomats
For you will not hear one gun
And though our homes be torn and ransacked
We will not be undone
For as we let ourselves be caught
We're gonna let ourselves be free
And if you think we stand alone
Look again and see
We are children in the rafters
We are babies in the park
We are lovers at the movies
We are candles in the dark
We are changes in the weather
We are snowflakes in July

We are women thrown together
We are men who easily cry
We are words not quickly spoken
With a deeper side of try
We are dreamers in the making
We are not afraid of why.

I will not be complacent
I will not be complacent
I will not be complacent
I will not be complacent
I will not be complacent
I will not be complacent

(Ferron, "It Won't Take Long," *Boulder*)

A short but varied list includes Sedarius, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Annie Sprinkle, and there many others: all were direct, unapologizing, women of the 1970s who were courageously producing and releasing lyrical, feminist work in the face of fear, rejection, and ridicule. They were women who were writing and performing works of daring feminism, social commentary, personal experience, and point of view often in response and/or reaction to the conditions of patriarchy and silence they experienced.

To release their work, these women created the demand for LGBTQ and/or alternative press houses, record labels, and theatre spaces and/or formed their own. All of Acker's writing was published by Barney Rossett, who, from 1951 to 1985 established Grove Press as one of *the* avant-garde publishing houses that brought the independent, cutting edge, erotic, pornographic literature and counter-culture into the North American mainstream. Grove took many a risk on writers that no one else would publish as well as many works that would be banned in various countries/states. Despite the sub-cultural demand for the work he published with Grove publishing some of the most daring of writers in the US at the time and being lauded as a cultural contributor and facilitator of

the arts, Rossett would sell Grove due to many years of union and feminist conflicts and protests (*New York Times*, February 22, 2012).

Poetry, performance, and non-fiction were the mediums Acker's contemporaries used, whereas Acker wrote fictions and novels primarily. Winterson would write:

her vulnerability as a woman in a man's world set her to use her body as text. She would be a writer—fuck 'em—but she would write from the place of denied, despised, and desired by men. She would not deny her own body, indeed she treated it like a fetish item, adoring, tattooing, and piercing it (“Introduction,” *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, ix-x).

What has Acker stand alone, maverick-like, is her fetishization: not only did she write on sexual behaviours that are generally regarded as abnormal or unacceptable, but she also crafted a style of writing that was non-normative. Acker's work is consistent in being utterly unreasonable.

Some have confused her grit, street savvy, and perversity—her “fuck youness”—with the uneducated and/or unrefined, yet Acker was raised upper class and was very well schooled. She always kept her upper-class appreciation for fashion and turned to buy her haute couture clothes second hand. Acker chose her writing style with intention: as a personal and a political act of protest. Certainly, part of that protest existed in her taking a reversed refuge in choosing to live a life outside of the circles of her upbringing. In her 1988 interview with William Burroughs³⁶ Acker appears a victim of her choices, particularly with money: she seems a victim of her circumstances and lack of money rather than the painter of her own canvas, creator of her own life. Her loss of social status and monetary prowess in the conventional world gave way to an iconic

³⁶ The thirty-five minute interview is directed by Fennella Greenfield and took place at The October Gallery in London, at William Burroughs's first exhibition of paintings in the United Kingdom. It was part of the “ICA Guardian Conversations,” via The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London.

status within many avant-garde subcultures.

Blood and Guts in High School holds a large mirror up to teen perversity, confusion, the body, incest, fantasy, and desire and it is this I want to delve into by offering some new, bold readings of Acker's teen girl Janey. Acker's post-porn-punk-feminist novel of psychology and perversity is layered with the personal and political, yet it is the young Janey who is most compelling in her navigations. Janey is the keeper of a perverse identity and perverse experiences; a switch nature speeds through her narrative as she lives in the complexity of that identity and experience.

Looking at Janey's walk with heterosexual sex, incest, rape, exhibitionism and voyeurism, and BDSM—not simply with likely physically, gendered, identified, or politically similar partners/viewers, but with those dramatically opposite, taboo, undesired, and/or usually negated (as well as other sexually taboo fantasies)—Acker engages in a revolutionary and courageous act by presenting alternative sexualities, identities and lifestyles. What is groundbreaking is that Acker writes and reveals these paths of Janey's as confusing *and* troubling *while also being* life-sustaining, alluring, and stimulating. Acker asks her readers to loosen into trust with her as we read: the act of surrender and trust, into the narrative, into Acker's weaving of mindsets, point of views, and narrative turns, is essential if we, as readers, are to allow the narrative to unfold.

Acker's experimental, shape-shifting narrative is divided into three parts: "Inside High School," "Outside High School," and "A Journey to the end of the Night." The first section of the novel begins with the subtitle "Parents stink" and lays out the incestuous and tormenting relationship between Janey and her Father Johnny. It is this complicated and dysfunctional relationship that opens the novel: "Janey depended on her father for

everything and regarded her father as boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father” (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 7). And thus begins a narrative that sails over waves of insanity, jealousy, and co-dependence, using sex as a seeming anchor to feel and know the self through the body, being wanted and wanting. Sex as an anchor for being and experience is not only Janey’s but also her father’s, her abductors’, and the other characters of the novel; Acker uses the writing of sex and sex obsession to traffic in the stormy seas of identity-construction, knowing, control, relationality, power, intimacy, relationship, love, and ... sex.

Returning to Valerie Traub’s list above, what I like about her gendered, sexual, body, identity, and action-based specifics is that we can map them onto Janey’s deviant narrative in *Blood and Guts in High School*: where and in what forms do these turns of relationality show up in Acker’s adolescents? What does switching between these acts and identities look like for an adolescent?

For Janey, this occurs in locations of switching. Acker creates Janey’s switching in the first part of *Blood and Guts in High School* as especially jarring and disturbing; the exterior worlds of discomfort mirror Janey’s inner turmoil. The switching occurs as fast and furious, challenging, and complex. With her father, Janey is constantly switching between her need for her father’s attention and the need for her father-as-her-lover’s attention. Janey vacillates and switches between a jealous and needy desperation and a passive-aggressive pushing away; there is a fast-paced switching between a narrative of introspection and awareness to a narrative of utter abandon and swallowing of addictive patterns.

Janey’s incest with her father and the language she uses is atamorphic—with a

lusting after the subject. Janey's high school daze follows with long graphic scenes of abortions following her rejection from her father. Alongside Janey, we are abandoned into a world of procedures and being done to. The narrative then moves to a more disjointed switching when Janey is seen to go into Bloomingdales to steal. Here the scene will have a switch every paragraph between Janey planning her theft in Bloomingdales to her being with her Daddy in a hotel in Laguna Beach, yet her father is absent, in another room with his lover. Janey's room is the room "no one else in the world wants" (36) and this really is the drive of the narrative: Janey exists to be wanted. Through coarse, dramatic sex, often via rape, abduction, and slavery, Janey questions her sense of value and experiences these circumstances as a reliving of her past, where she sought the approval and love of her Father, and also, her self.

Janey's identity is constructed by others and her experiences with the characters in her life rather than created or generated by herself: their influence, point of view, and Janey's being so influenced by them determines who Janey is and chooses to be. Self-construction seems absent even as there is a pervasive self-referentiality; Janey is a character who stands in contrast to others wanting her. There is no self-love or worth, she must receive it, and in most cases not receive it and/or give it away, through the violence and sex of others. Amy Scholder writes that Acker brought to her work a "visceral understanding ... a totally unromantic perspective on relations between men and women" ("Introduction," *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, xiii), and while this is very accurate, and gives a very solid grounding for reading Acker, Acker will construct her Janey to sometimes frantically cling to a sense of the cultural norms of romance, attempting to place them on top of a perverse situation, such as being

in love with her father. These oscillations and moments of switching provide ripe places for the examination and deconstruction of the topics of love, sex, and power.

While all of Acker's narratives consist of an experimental writing style, *Blood and Guts in High School* has many additions to the pornographic, troubled narrative as well as many more switching moments: drawings of female and male genitalia and naked bodies move from being object to subject; maps and diagrams depicting dreams move to visions with both hyper-descriptive words in tiny print and drawings to accompany the story-telling; a hyper-large, hand-printed poem consists of Persian and then English translations, the language switching every line, with Janey attempting to teach herself Persian; and a multitude of different typesets and narrative formula such as repeating the same paragraphs and words, "no," for example, which communicates both an adamant refusal and openness.

For example, Acker switches from narrative story to the hyper-sexed "SUCK ME" for paragraphs or sections of text in bold type (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 109-10). The "no" seems directed to "all you creeps in the streets" yet switches to a familiar knowing with "oh suck my cock honey suck my cock / that's what it's all about / I love how you turn yourself / around and upside-down inside-out / for me / just for me / oh I know / I must taste sweet" (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 109-10). There is an intimate instruction to please and do which speaks to an aspect of desire that is often not theorized. Acker creates a scene of action, verbal sex play that includes word cues, possessiveness, connection, and role play. Is he really a stranger on the street, a creep? The use of "honey" and the familiarity of the scene with "I love" could imply a past encounter and/or the language is used to bring a familiarity forth; too add, "how you turn

yourself around and upside-down inside-out *for me just for me*” also implies a familiarity already in existence (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 109-10).

Acker is in the company of many erotic literary writers³⁷ with the exploring of the often taboo desires and turn-ons that occur with language and verbal play. I think that because of the base sexedness and pornographic/erotic charge of such writing, there is not a lot of discussion on the sexed nature of such narratives. Mostly literary and psychological theorists will talk around the desires, addressing them yes, but never getting into the dynamics of sexed word play and language. I have aimed to take on and discuss subversive and perverse desires with my dissertation—and verbal sex language and play, also known as dirty talking—is one such aspect of desire.

The not speaking about it keeps the desires hidden: the desires and practices stay hidden and people stay silent. The idea that conversation stops at desire and sexuality renders a silence around desires and sex—this is apparent even with those that are dominant: a quiet, demur-turn ensues, as if to cast a quaintness to the sexual act, saving “good women” from being perceived as “whores” or “sluts” and “gentlemen” from being perceived as “predators.” Verbal sexting/dirty talking is not the language of “making love” and so becomes relegated further and further outside of the speaking of a culture despite the fact that sexual pleasures and the different ways the mind clocks desires is made manifest and clear, like all things, via communication.

There is a quiet that almost invades the conversation when it comes to expressing sexual wants/desires. The impact of this silence is that shame is experienced instead of embracing a turn-on or desire—self-expression and self-knowing is limited—seeking the desire out, which is inevitable, manifests itself in ways that are not powerful. One

³⁷ More on some of them follows shortly.

becomes the affect of what one resists, rather than embracing and/or at the very least accepting, the human desire to explore sex, sexuality, and desires through language, words, and Dominant/ Submissive/Masochistic verbal play.

Verbal sexing (dirty talk) has thus become a language and speaking of desire that, even when in literary work, is left to the nether realms: usually of written pornography proper and pornographic videos. Like all things sexual, it's a preference and/or interest that is not explored or of interest to everyone. However, it is interesting to merely note that even in the realm of pornography, videos/movies will go to great lengths to cover up the sounds of sex, with music and such, while others have no verbal language play at all.

And so it is with literature: we skirt around the pornographic, perhaps a little scared that it is too revealing of our desires/sexing ourselves. In this scene of Acker we witness the repeated pornographic words, which are trigger/cue words of desire: the giving of instruction and the act of even talking about the giving and receiving of instruction, is part of the nature and turn-on of this connection and language of desire and playfulness: the man sharing how he loves to have her give herself to him: "turning yourself around and upside-down inside-out for me" opens up her hunger and willingness, the possessive turn on of "just for me," offers the context of play with possession and giving, which is a BDSM location (*Blood and Guts in High School* 109-10). The turning inside out "for me / just for me" communicates an intimacy that, when adjacent to the repeating verbal play of "SUCK ME" holds a space for a comfortable, confident lover to ask for and speak what is wanted in the sexual intimacy, and, no doubt, it is Janey that seeks this and pulls it out. Janey is the space or clearing for the verbal play to show up, the space for needs to be expressed safely and received to be given no

matter what they look like.

There exists a lot of switch-hitting in this one scene: he is telling her to suck him yet also creating the wondering/almost question-like of how sweet he will taste; he is instructing but it is potentially she that is driving the scene. It's a topping from the bottom that might exist for both characters: him in instructing, her in being the one controlling the scene via the action, he in speaking, her in doing, he in encouraging her to do what is needed so that she can then get what she wants, he getting what he wants all the while. The language of the scene is so simple, yet the dance can be so rich! This scene is followed by a full paragraph of "SUCK ME SUCK ME SUCK ME" pornographic, turn on, trigger language full out, which is then followed by the delightful last line of "sex is sweet" (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 109-10) which utterly destabilizes the pornographic edge of the instruction and chosen trigger language.

These spaces side by side are what brilliantly Acker excels at, yet how easy it would be to miss the intimacy and, for some, the raw sexiness of these scenes by focusing on the abruptness or unlyrical, untempered aspects of her writing. To add, if one comes to Acker's language of pornography with limited interpretations/points of view, much of the above can be missed.

Scholder adds that Acker "discovered a political use for pornography, a way of disrupting polite society;" further she is "always oscillating between worlds—bourgeois and bohemian, narrative and avant-garde, couture and biker. Inserting porn into the literary, she refused to choose sides. What cannot be overestimated is the pleasure Acker took in writing porn, finding the exactly right cadence and rhythm: using language, pushing limits, turning on" ("Introduction," *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of*

Kathy Acker, xiii).

It is precisely in this tradition of “turning on” that Grove Press published and Kathy Acker wrote: to sidestep the pleasure of the text, the joy and turned on factor of the text, is a silencing not worthy of our scholarly rigor of upturning and delving into. As Barney Rossett, the owner of Grove Press from 1951 until he sold it in 1985, would assert, in his 2008 interview with *Newsweek*: “he printed erotica because it ‘excited me’” (quoted in *The New York Times*, February 22, 2012). This is enough, for him and for us: after all, why do we write, teach literature and writing: in some manner, we find the writing process and the reading, that voyeuristic activity, pleasurable, exciting, and life giving. If we read Acker in the tradition of other erotic and/or pornographic, taboo, and/or BDSM writing, the content and/or writings of the Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille, and Pauline Réage and Anais Nin are similar and a sexiness is revealed beneath what could be missed, hidden, and/or interpreted as crass, undisciplined, or unliterary.

Acker’s writing style and subversive pornographic content in *Blood and Guts in High School*, as well as the psychology and perverse boldness of her characters, were no doubt heavily influenced by the writing of Georges Bataille and Pauline Réage. Bataille’s first-person male narrator as well as the character of Simone, both perverse, sex-driven youth, in *Story of the Eye*, and Réage’s submissive, slave character of O most particularly, and also the young Natalie who seeks to be a slave, and the masters Rene and Sir Stephen, in *Story of O* are sources for Acker’s Janey. Bataille’s novel, like Acker’s, engages in extreme boundary pushing and is a graphic, perverse, and pornographically written narrative, while Réage moves deeply into the layerings of identity (re)formation(s) and notions/explorations of love and BDSM, as does Acker, but

in a writing style that is not graphic, but rather, much more erotic.

When Réage has O turned over, face down, over an ottoman, to be examined by a Mistress who is considering borrowing her for a week, the woman orders O not to move and seizes her lips. *The Story of O* follows O's thoughts:

After all, she was no longer mistress of her own fate, and that part of her of which she was no longer mistress of her own fate, and that part of her of which she was least in control was most assuredly that half of her body which could, so to speak, be put to use independently of the rest. Why, each time that she realized this, was she—surprised was not really the right word—once again persuaded, why was she paralyzed each time by the same feeling of profound distress, a sentiment which tended to deliver her not so much into the hands of the person she was with as into the hands of him who had turned her over to alien hands, a sentiment which drew her closer to Rene when others were possessing her and which, here, was tending to draw her closer to whom? To Rene or Sir Stephen? She no longer knew ... but that was because she did not want to know, for it was clear that she had belonged to Sir Stephen now for ... how long had it been? (145).

We witness a similar giving over of the self: both Janey and O give up being responsible for their life, preferring to give themselves over to fate. Both O and Janey also switch between being curious about their submission: both surrender into it while also, at times, questioning it. However, what trumps the questioning hand is the deep pleasure and satisfaction that both women derive from relinquishing control. Janey and O have a submissive love, attachment, and inclination toward fully giving themselves over to the men who possess them, want them, vie for them. This attachment (and often jealousy) extends to the lovers of the men who love them as well.

The exhibitionism/voyeurism as well as ownership/possession/ aspects in both characters and narratives are delicious and ripe: Réage would write O as being taken by her love, lover, and master Rene in front of Sir Stephen, hair pulled, hand around her throat, after which she would open her eyes to be:

completely stunned and bewildered ... gasping with joy ... able to see that he [Sir Stephen, who she has just met] was admiring her, and that he desired her. Who could have resisted her moist, half-open mouth, with its full lips, the white stalk of her arching neck against the black collar of her page-boy jacket, her eyes large and clear, which refused to be evasive? But the only gesture Sir Stephen allowed himself was to run his finger softly over her eyebrows, then over her lips. Then he sat down facing her on the opposite side of the fireplace...(*The Story of O*, 72)

The male characters of both novels—Bataille’s first person narrator to some degree and Réage’s characters of Rene and Sir Stephen even more—find themselves in Acker’s male protagonists. The former novel was first published in 1928, the later published in 1954. The publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert published both novels in Paris. In addition, both novels were published under pseudonyms, most probably due to the pornographic language and the sexually subversive, boundary pushing, BDSM content and context of both works.

While taking on similar subject matters as Bataille and Réage, Acker chose to publish under her own name, to be an “out” writer of avant-garde, literary pornography, BDSM, and the eroticism and complicated nature of sexed, perverse identities. The scenes of Acker’s novel are revisions of similarly evocative scenes in both writer’s work: scenes of urination, the language of pornographic, and at times exploitative sex are common, yet Bataille and Réage wrote with an ease and grace that Acker never possessed or chose to engage with. Acker is disjointed, truncated, and, at times, wearing, whereas the writers she would copy directly from, admired, and was influenced by, writers such as Bataille and Réage, Artaud and Verlaine, Rimbaud and Genet, Sade and Burroughs had a grace Acker refused. While she would “borrow” their writing, revising it to suit her narrative and vision, her use of the word “cunt” is hard and affecting, their use much softer; this speaks to her challenging and confronting the status quo, male writer’s

privilege, and the structures and boxes of “literary” tradition. Acker looked to these male writers with a longing, even if her lifework was consumed with challenging capitalist patriarchy, because, like her, they challenged normative thinking and writing.

Acker would say in an interview with Larry McCaffery that she “definitely” places herself “in that lineage . . . and I very much hope I do enough significant work that I can someday be seen as belonging to that lineage. If someone tries to place me in another lineage, they’re mistaken” (*Some Other Frequency: Interviews With Innovative American Authors*, 19). She would also state that she and these writers share an intense “deeply sexual perspective, which insists upon the connections between power and sexuality. It’s basically a world-view. There’s also the use of non-social realist language and imagery that is very involved with areas of the mind which are not rational” (20). Acker’s Janey also specifically evokes Jean Genet. She writes directly to him, ushering the perversity of Genet into her own text by naming a character Genet. Acker also brings forth such authors by directly inserting their writing into her plagiarizing as a way of homage.

Part of the end of the novel takes place in Egypt, and Acker writes the narrative out in scenes as if to be acted on a stage. The scenes move from reflection and social commentary to perverse speaking and desire. As with *Story of O* one scene begins in a brothel where “it is clear that the whores regard what most people regard as (them)selves as images. Sex, that unblocked meeting of the selves, is the most fake thing there is” (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 129). Scene one is compelling because Acker’s voice of Janey as social commentator begins:

Janey to herself: Genet doesn’t know how to be a woman.
He thinks all he has to do to be a woman is slobber. He has

to do more. He has to get down on his knees and crawl mentally every minute of the day. If he wants a lover, if he doesn't want to be alone very single goddamn minute of the day and horny so bad he feels the tip of his clit stuck in a porcupine's quill, he has to perfectly read his lover's mind, silently, unobtrusively, like a corpse, and figure out at every changing second what his lover wants. He can't be a slave. Women aren't just slaves. They are whatever their men want them to be. They are made, created by men. They are nothing without men. I have to decide what the world is from my own loneliness.

In scene 8 the Genet of *Blood and Guts in High School* and Janey are locked in adjacent cages. Acker's Genet calls Janey a "lousy stinking pervert" (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 136) to which Janey replies in a whisper "the night is opening up, to our thighs, like this cunt which I'm holding in my hand cuntcuntcuntcunt. And we descend, / like we're in a tunnel or a / cave inside the mind, / night is opening all (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 136). It's a turn, a switch, of absolute freedom and possibility when Janey responds to Genet: she grants an adventure rather than a finality.

Scene 10 is also opening as it is here that Janey moves into an even more independent state of mind, wherein she takes some control and ownership over her experience and asks for what she wants. The italics in parenthesis show an internal dialogue that illustrates that Janey is still run by some self doubt—one does need to gain courage when one is filled with courage, it's simply present or not and when not, either absent altogether or in need of summoning—at the same time she has a directive quality in her dialogue with Genet that evokes a deep, solid control over her choice of submission:

Janey: I'll obey you. But I want, (*gains courage and firmness, decision*) I want you to forget who you are. (*Corrects she.*) Been. I want you to lead me without hesitation into the land of the shadow and the monster. I want you to plunge into endless misery and hardship. I

FUCK YOU SHIT PISS (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 108). And yet what more is Acker attempting to deliver and/or uncover in these lines? Winterson would write that Acker's

female characters are both dispossessed and abused, but they are strong too, and full of hope that is not disgust ... there is no disgust in her work. Vomit, shit, urine, cocks, cunts, assholes, blood, and the body are intimately described, and not in the language of cloudy romance. Yet there is no disgust. Disgust is reserved for the hypocrites, the morons, the authority figures, the moneymen, the politicians. Transgression is never disgust—it is a way of surviving ... she was a moral writer—she had high ideals and a cause ... she was edging fiction forward, just as she was trying to jab humanity into a little bit of consciousness. (“Introduction,” *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, ix-x)

This jabbing into consciousness is exactly what the switch moments are locating; switching occurs throughout the text in clearly visible depictions such as Acker adding the self-referential, identity-questioning statement with an arrow pointing to an in-between the third and fourth “I” in the quote of “IIIIIIIIII” above: “I wish that there was a reason to be-lieve this letter” (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 108). To question the “I,” in a hopeful yet doubtful way, at the third “I” or “eye” location of the text is telling: Acker is referencing the Hindu concept of the third eye being the center point of wisdom and power located in the forehead, the location of insight that is activated through meditation and yoga, as she questions her own existence. To skew the I of the sacred Hindu teachings and texts speaks to the depths of listlessness Janey experiences: a hardness *and* a compassion that Acker traffics in; it speaks to the many who, no matter how honoring of themselves, can, at certain times, be pulled into a quicksand that reek of a disempowering, helpless, havoc.

The novel ends with a chapter entitled “A second of time,” which does not occur

as a normal chapter heading would, but rather at the end of the last chapter. We only know it's a chapter title by following the Table of Contents. Then, on the following page occurs a section entitled "The World," which is the only section in the novel without page numbers and contains a mystical, hieroglyphic depiction of images and words, none of which are troubling, but rather liberating. Again, fonts and typesets are played with and there is an innocent, beginner's mind to the section. Acker asks "shall we look for this wonderful book [an ancient, most important book on human transformation wherein the ways humans can become something else is explicated]? Shall we stop being dead people? Shall we find our way out of all expectations" (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 147).

"The World" of Acker then moves into "The Journey," which loses the innocence of "The World," and pulls for humanity to win. One page has the words "the Devil uses every trick in the book to win." There are pictures of people having sex, birds in flight holding onto elephants by talons, Kali, dismembered bodies, and people having sex. The caption "The Devil is an image. Imagine Hell. We grab the book, and run" implies a deep belief and hope in humanity as well as a playfulness in not only imagination but in testing, thwarting, and challenging the fates.

The following page presents yet another switch, bringing the reader from ancient Egypt and India to New York City, the East River, a black and white division, birds flying up and down to the words "light is before us / darkness closes behind us / and we fly." The section ends with the words "so we create this world in our own image" which is actually quite profound because it speaks to the notion that we actually do create our world through point of view. How we see and experience "this world" is based on our

points of view, which can sometimes be determined by a “that world” context, and, as well, mostly based on past experiences.

Following is the last chapter entitled “So the doves...” which is Acker’s one-page finale of the novel. Janey has passed and is in a grave in Luxor. Doves coo, “whispering of their own events” over Janey’s grave. We read that “soon many other Janey’s were born and these Janey’s covered the earth” (*Blood and Guts in High School*, 165). And here Acker concludes with a healthy Janey, a world of healthy Janey’s, who know what it may be to love outside of the world of high school, parents, boyfriends, teachers, who are in control of their life, their sexuality, their wants and desires in a way that resonates the freedom of travel by train or ship, the freedom of open roads and ocean, a life of choice. At the same time there is also the world and identity of Janey as sexed, the world of her life revolving around sex, being wanted, and wanting. This last chapter and ditty of a passage has a grown-up Janey show up and be present to a push and pull desire that is a recurring theme:

Blood and guts in high school
This is all I know
Parents teachers boyfriends
All have got to go.

Some folks like trains,
I like the way you move your hips
All I want is a taste of your lips,
All I want is a taste of your lips.

Some folks like ships,
boy,

(*Blood and Guts in High School*, 165).

In the process of this desire, Acker gives us the sexiness and resonance of the

word “boy.” We are pulled into the world of very alive women in Acker’s work: alive in desire, in the wanting, the longing, the craving, and the imagining the be-ing and becoming. Acker’s women are “sexually voracious, they have exploits which leave them ravenous, humiliated, and victorious all at once” (“Introduction,” *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, xiii). Scholder would write that for Acker her women exist in the space of desire as “a place of not yet having: (“Introduction,” *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, xiii). And it truly is this “not having” that pushes the narrative with relentless fearlessness.

Autobiographies Colored Red; Fragments Colored Ripe

Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* offers readers a beautiful, lyrical journey through adolescent inquiry, perversity, and the cloaked sexual and gender identities of a modern teenager turned winged, red creature. *Autobiography of Red* is profound in both composition and scope and could be considered one of the greatest contemporary lyrical compositions. Carson blends the coming-of-age story with Greek myth to allow for the erotic and desire, the body and identity, fantasy and BDSM to be explored; sex and intimacy with the self and in relation with others, brother/brother incest, mother/son relations, other-worldly, animalia anamorphousness, and the spaces of lostlessness and seeking that these locations elicit.

I created the term *lostlessness* when beginning my first memoir, about fifteen years ago. I seek to introduce the term to imply the vast, uncertain, and expansive spaces that can swirl around a person and their life experiences. *Lostlessness* evokes movement and fluidity and is a between and betwixt location. It is not a static or stationary place or

way of being. The energy around *lostlessness* can be rather somber, but not necessarily sad; the energy can also be carefree and beginner's mind/child-like. *Lostlessness* is a solitary experience that is marked by a quiet and reflective internal dwelling, it's not social or loud.

Carson invites us in to play and switch. Right from the beginning of the novel, switchness exists in Carson's characters. Like Stein's, Carson's perversity has been downplayed and ignored, with more sedate readings offered. And, like Acker's work, *Autobiography of Red* is a labyrinth of poetic perversity and adolescent seeking where the main character, Geryon, dwells on interiority and "the difference between outside and inside" (*Autobiography of Red*, 29). Carson's character reconciles that while his brother may negotiate to own his exterior body the "inside is mine" (*Autobiography of Red*, 29). He then begins to write "his autobiography" in which he will "set down all inside things / particularly his own heroism" (*Autobiography of Red*, 29).

Geryon, like Janey, is self-referential. However, Carson creates Geryon to coolly omit "all outside things" in the exploration and telling of the self. This deliberate act of looking inward for the answers illustrates a character that is willing to take responsibility for his own world and experiences. His world intersects with others, but he alone is responsible for how the world occurs to him, and it is this narrative he will tell.

Carson invites the reader to look at what happens—at the level of language and identity—when her small town Ontario boy child switches to and from a genderless child, a (homo) sexed child and teen, an animal, and the Greek mythic hero Herakles. Changes of subversive agency, subject, and object are presented as Carson's main character writes his autobiography far outside of the charmed circle of "normal" adolescence. For

Geryon, “androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate” (p. X, Carolyn G. Heilbrun *Towards Androgyny: Aspects of Male and Female Literature*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1973).

I will now map out Carson’s main character’s desires and sensibilities, chart how “the fantastic fingerwork of his wings is outspread on the bed like a black lace map of South America” (*Autobiography of Red*, 97), and how “a romance” (*Autobiography of Red*, 21) with his brother and others play out sadistic and masochistic fantasies, desires, and roles. If we readers are willing, we are allowed to get in bed with a gay genderqueer and know his gender variant body and sexually variant thinking intimately. The gender switching and performances of Carson’s characters, the queerness, the incest and other fantasies that she explores, directly challenge what it is to hold an epic court.

The intimacy between Geryon and his mother is layered, beautiful, and rare. She is described as being the “engineer of his softness” (*Autobiography of Red*, 10) which is perhaps the most beautiful description of a mother’s gift to a son I have ever read. It speaks to the boy and young man’s openness to the gifts of his mother, the mother as embracing her own archetypal feminine and her willingness to share it with her son and nurture him into what he needs. It also speaks, of course, to who Carson is: a scholar of ancient Greek writing and culture who has fully taken on some of the most profound teachings of that time: she not only reflects on the oracles of Delphi, the Goddess worshipping, the honoring of the feminine and the feminine archetype in all her manifestations but brings the sacred herstories and qualities of the feminine forth into our own time as a way to honor and presence the divine feminine now.

And so Geryon’s relationship with his mother is one that is incredibly tender and

profound. Even the title of the poem, entitled “Geryon’s Reversible Destiny” contains a switch: the notion that destiny—fate predetermined—could be reversible. In this poem it is written: “His mother saw it mothers are like that / Trust me she said Engineer of his softness” (*Autobiography of Red*, 10) to which she tells him that he has time, he can take time, to make up his mind, to choose, meanwhile she is fiery, even as she is the Engineer of his softness, “behind her red right cheek Geryon could see / Coil of the hot plate starting to glow” (*Autobiography of Red*, 10). Geryon acknowledges the wisdom and knowing of his mother as he is faced with making choices. She is softness, yet she is switchable: she is fiery and red, hot and glowing, while she is also soft and trusting. She is “a Nymph of a river that ran to the sea” while his father “was a gold / cutting tool” (*Autobiography of Red*, 14).

Geryon’s relationship with his mother, which is one of hand-holding on the first day of school, one of safety and nurturing, sits in juxtaposition with his relationship with his brother and father: tools that cut are switched in and out for the naturalistic spirits of nature and water. Switching is ever-present in this narrative: Geryon’s hand moves from the safety of his mother’s as she walks him to school on his first day to his brother teaching him hard “justice” (*Autobiography of Red*, 23) through layers of toughness, “hatred” (*Autobiography of Red*, 27), and verbal put downs of “stupid” in telling him to go into school alone (*Autobiography of Red*, 24). The sensitive Geryon does not, can not, rather he waits in the bushes until he is noticed and brought in: standing motionless, gripping his book bag with one hand, stroking a lucky penny in his pocket with the other, he stands so still that the first snow of winter lands on his eyelashes to match the snow-covered branches that surround him in silence (*Autobiography of Red*, 25).

Geryon's world switches often from the loving experiences he has with his mother to the tenuous ones he has with his brother: juxtaposing and switching spaces, ways of being, and navigating these switch moments occupy a lot of space in the narrative. And it is these spaces, these navigating spaces between outside and inside, tender and hard, mother and brother that occupy the switch narratives. The incestuous relationship exists under ominous threats to Geryon's sense of self as well as his relationship with his Mother. For example, Geryon's brother states that he will tell their mother that no one at school likes Geryon, which the older brother knows will embarrass and shame the younger boy.

An "economy of sex" is established as the older brother promises Geryon a prized cat's eye marble in exchange for masturbating his brother and then, later, letting the brother play with Geryon's penis in some way (masturbation and/or oral sex is implied). The brother becomes kinder in speech and action after sex is established; yet the younger brother Geryon moves more and more inward. The older brother witnesses this process, as does Geryon himself, yet no action is taken by either to confront this slippage.

The mother then takes on a heroic, shiny, rhinestoned bravery. Geryon stares at his mother in "amazement ... she looked so brave. He could look at her forever" (*Autobiography of Red*, 30). There is then a moment which eludes him, and the brother switches into the scene: the mother nears the door and then is gone, the room circles in for the young boy, breath becomes harder, he wants to cry but instead turns inward. It's an agony to watch him be silent with the wanting to be near his mother when she is unavailable. The brother takes her place, switching the scene from one of love, longing, and missing, to that of the playfulness and mockery of his older brother and the "wrong

voiced” (*Autobiography of Red*, 31) stand-in for his mother, a babysitter whom Geryon tolerates with a politeness rather than a connection that enlivens.

The switch between the brother snapping elastics against Geryon’s legs bleeds into the day of Tuesday. Every second Tuesday of the winter season exists as, simply, the “best,” for that is the day Geryon’s brother plays hockey, which allows Geryon and his mother to have supper and evening alone. Geryon’s mother describes Geryon to her friend on the phone: “he’s right here working on his autobiography ... a sculpture [as] he doesn’t know how to write yet” (*Autobiography of Red*, 35). The mother *seeing* Geryon’s creation as autobiography and adding the descriptor of sculpture speaks to her creating him as powerful, intelligent, artistic: all the things he does not experience elsewhere. This particular Tuesday evening ends with the mother saying “maybe next time you could use a one-dollar bill instead of a ten for the hair” and one is left to wonder: what is not to idolize in this mother: she is all compassion, all loving, the archetype of the mother figure, truly (*Autobiography of Red*, 35).

I want all of us readers to comprehend how revolutionary this relationship is, how revolutionary this mother is, how revolutionary it is to have a mother show up as *all* loving and compassionate, as utterly worthy of worship and honor: as bravery itself. This neither is not standard teen narrative perspective nor is the listening they provide for each other typical or normal. An elevated way of relating exists here. This is not how mothers or mother/son relationships are depicted/written/formed in North American culture. Mother/son relationships are most often depicted as fraught with some percentage of blame, dependence, or make wrong. The action of the mother very simply suggests that her son use a lower denomination of bill for the hair, no make wrong, no explanation, just

a request, allows the son to know a profound level of freedom. Carson gives us a mother who says to her hesitant and resisting to-going-to-school son “this would be hard for you if you were weak but you’re not weak,” as she neatens “his little red wings” and encourages him out the door (*Autobiography of Red*, 36).

The mother helps to build Geryon’s foundation for his evolution and development, a rare depiction of love and parenting, especially for the mother figure and role. The freedom of flying is so present for Geryon, his big wings seen only by his mother at this point in the narrative, so that when Geryon learns to write, he begins to write his autobiography. He writes his mother as “a river that runs to the sea the Red Joy River” and his father as “gold.” Here Carson is evoking the most evocative of Stein’s poems, which I referred to in Chapter One, “Pink Melon Joy” as she creates the mother as “Red Joy River.” Geryon himself is the red winged creature, his mother the red joy river.

The narrative moves on to Geryon falling in love, at the age of fourteen, with a teen boy of sixteen named Herakles. They spend time together at night, and Geryon spends less and less time with his mother. As the relationship dissolves, without any real mechanisms that would indicate a dissolving or ending, yet seemingly the ending coming from Herakles who says they will “always be friends” (*Autobiography of Red*, 62), which turns Geryon’s heart and lungs to a “black crust” (*Autobiography of Red*, 62), Geryon moves more and more into the interior realm of his mind and safe space, as he did as a youth, hiding, telling himself to listen to what the outside world is saying while retreating, unable to find his breath, red walls come down all around him slicing “the air in half” (*Autobiography of Red*, 62). Red is the color all around Geryon, flames being to “along the floorboards inside” of him (*Autobiography of Red*, 63). Lava, that deep red

molten substance that has no end and no method of rivering, becomes their destination: visiting volcanoes and “bouncing from rock to rock / as if looking for lost kin,” Geryon and Herakles traverse the lava, traverse memories, traverse belief and fact, dancing in a “memory burn” (*Autobiography of Red*, 65).

The narrative then switches back to the home and Geryon’s mother, who is there, “sitting at the kitchen table” (*Autobiography of Red*, 68) as he comes home after a seven-hour car ride of tears and weeping. Geryon wants to retreat to his room, yet when he sees his mother, he sits down. His mother reads, in appreciation, what is written in “red singlet with white letters” across the t-shirt Herakles gave to Geryon: “Tender / Loin” (*Autobiography of Red*, 68). The loin, the sexual center, tender, hurt, wounded for Geryon.

Fragments of identity, tender, follow. The reader has watched the youth move through a child and teen-hood of innocence, identity-building, love, and shame. Volcanoes, lava, the color and evoking of red, wings, mythic names and creatures, silence and hiding, risk and pleasure have moved back and forth, switching between safe and dangerous spaces as this young man ponders “the cracks and fissures / of his inner life” with a “kiss”:

A healthy volcano is an exercise in the uses of pressure.
Geryon sat on his bed in the hotel room pondering the
cracks and fissures
of his inner life. It may happen
that the exit of the volcanic vent is blocked by a plug of
rock, forcing
molten matter sideways along
lateral fissures called fire lips by volcanologists. Yet
Geryon did not want
to become one of those people
who think of nothing but their stores of pain ...
“...I will never know how you see red and you will never

know how I see it.
But the separation of consciousness
Is recognized only after a failure of communication, and
our first movement is
To believe in an undivided being between us...”
As he read Geryon could feel something like tons of black
magma boiling up
From the deeper regions of him.
He moved his eyes back to the beginning of the page and
started again.
“To deny the existence of red
is to deny the existence of mystery. The soul which does
so will one day go mad.”
A church bell rang across the page ...
I am not the one who is crazy here,
Said Geryon closing the book. (*Autobiography of Red*
105).

It may happen, Carson writes, that “the exit of the volcanic vent is blocked by a plug of rock, forcing molten matter sideways along / lateral fissures called fire lips ... yet Geryon did not want to become one of those people” and he does not. *Autobiography of Red* reveals the boiling points of a youth, gay or not, and the volcanic interiority of what it means to be an adolescent. The switch nature of every unpredictable moment, and a life of red-winged flight, Geryon is painted to be the son of a red river flowing towards a miraculous love and acceptance.

Geryon, ever the switch, has a hopeful heart even as he runs from his feelings. “There are no words for a world without a self, seen with impersonal clarity. / All language can register is the slow return / to the oblivion we call health when imagination automatically recolor the landscape and habit blurs perception and language / takes up its routine flourishes” (*Autobiography of Red*, 107).

Carson's Sappho: Sites of Crossing and Dissent in Anne Carson's *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*

If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho is Anne Carson's recreation and translation, from Greek to English, of the entire collection of the fragments that exist from Sappho's nine books. I have chosen to discuss the groundbreaking and gorgeously lyrical *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* in conjunction with Carson's *Autobiography of Red* as they are in direct alignment. Both Carson's revision/recreation of the fragments and the fragments themselves speak directly to the gender and sexual ambiguity of my chapter and also the main direction of this project. Like my other writers, Sappho's poetry transcends location, circumstances, and time: she creates and displays a raw desire, shifts and switches in roles, and births not only a reinvented language, but also identities, with acutely subversive meanings. Carson's *Autobiography of Red* read along with Anne Carson's reading of Sappho in *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* creates revolutionary displays of desire: the characters shift in roles and identities, and thereby they birth a reinvented language and alternative, subversive meanings.

Carson's translation of Sappho's lyrics provides elliptical brackets that look like [and/or] throughout the text where destroyed papyrus or illegibility omissions occur (and is the first of any of Sappho translations to do so); this addition, combined with Carson's eloquent translation itself, allow readers to have a closer relationship to the subversive desires Sappho was exploring and ushering into existence. Carson writes,

even though you are approaching Sappho in translation,
that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to
read a papyrus torn in half or riffled with holes or smaller
than a postage stamp — brackets imply a free space of
imaginable adventure ... at the inside edge where her

words go missing, a sort of antipoem that condenses everything you ever wanted her to write. (“Introduction,” *If Not Winter, Fragments of Sappho* xi and xiii)

I love what Carson is alluding to here with “everything you ever wanted her to write” – what is this for you? What might this be for Carson? What might have been in the missing, which, if present, would have made a difference: such an interesting concept, to look at what is missing, the presence of which would make a difference.

In a very similar fashion to Stein, Sappho’s poems and songs are laden with sex, desire, and instruction. Both women poets were consumed with *being* in action around their desires: Stein and Sappho offered up prayers of desires that sought a craving. The body’s need for intimacy, touch, and connection is the silk that holds each weaved lyric together. Carson translates a Sappho who “prayed/this word:/I want (*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* #22, 41) “of desire...from every care] you could release me] dewy riverbanks] to last all night long” (*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* #23, 42).

Sappho creates a language of choice. Burning, longing, dripping, loosing, opening, and the gaps, provide much more. Sappho explores what it is to have “two states of mind in me” (*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* #51, 107), exploring, as my other authors do, what it is to wrestle with complexities of desire, roles, gender, and sexuality as Eros shakes her “mind like a mountain wind falling on oak trees” (*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* #47, 99). It’s *that kind* of thundering that Sappho dwells in: fragments of masterful seeking “long and seek after” (*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* #36, 73) submissive invitations like “as long as you want” (*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* #45, 95).

Below I have constructed the most beautiful and evocative selections of fragments

– they occur in close succession in the text—and I have bridged them to be a most beautiful lyric. The sections that are further indented to the right offer additional layers to the poem I’ve constructed, yet, it is my intention that the poem is read by way of the left hand margin first, without those layers, and then follow with a subsequent reading that opens up the poem even further.

I long and seek after (#36)

In my dripping (pain)

The blamer may winds and terrors

Carry him off (#37)

You burn me (#38)

The feet

By spangled straps covered

Beautiful Lydian work (#39)

For you beautiful ones my thought

Is not changeable (#41)

Their heart grew cold

They let their wings down (#42)

]

]

]

] beautiful he

] stirs up still things

] exhaustion the mind

] settles down

] but come O beloveds

] for day is near (#43)

...

as long as you want (#45)

and I on a soft pillow

will lay down my limbs (#46)

Eros shook my

Mind like a mountain wind falling on oak trees (#47)

You came and I was crazy for you
And you cooled my mind that burned with longing (#48)
...
I don't know what to do
Two states of mind in me (#51)

The love affair, the hunger, the desire of this poem, as well as the switching and “two states of mind,” are utterly rare and a sacred gift. Carson’s translation is the most fair a writer has ever been to Sappho: it is alive with lust and want, her lyrics drip a sexiness. There is at once a powerful agent of her own desires being met and a level of submission. Sappho’s switching is clear, her two states of mind seductive even as they provide a space of confusion for her. A poem without gaps reads: “I want to say something but shame/prevents me/ yet if you had a desire for good or beautiful things/ and your tongue were not concocting some evil to say, / shame would not hold down your eyes / but rather you would speak about what is just” (*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* #137, 279).

Sappho has another moment of quizzical wonderment when she writes “what country girl seduces your wits / wearing a country dress / not knowing how to pull the cloth to her ankles?” (#57, 119). Thinking back to the Hercules and Love Affair song and the lyric “Blind” we are presented with links that represent the child/teen world as playful, confusing, and osculating. These songs, spanning thousands of years, speak of a child/teen-hood darkness and the light that will come ... even if it is in noticing the prudery all around the writer.

This Conclusion is “Sinful” (Sappho, #69, 141)

In this chapter I have addressed how through verse and deviant teen-hood my chosen authors dwell in, complicate, and reject conformist gender and sexual binaries and carve out room to play with their gender and sexual variance. Kathy Acker, Anne Carson, and Carson’s rendition of Sappho disclose a perversity that can be both unchecked and free while also hesitant and restrained. Both the sexy and sexualized exists in these girl, boy, and gender-neutral narratives. These writers invite an authentic conversation about teen sexuality and variance of the type where something new is created. The spaces of possibility are located in conversations around torn fragments, with room for new interpretations: “] desire] but all at once] blossom] desire] took delight” (#78, 153).

Further, the perspectives, locations, boundaries, autonomy-seeking, and creation-based living (or victim-based living) as seen from a young person’s point of view provide the reader with the invitation to look boldly at the variances, layers, and unknown/unforeseen possibilities of youth. This chapter—these writers—have sought to mindfully consider some of these questions: How do these locations, perspectives, boundaries, and autonomy-seeking actions provide spaces for us, as adult readers, to look at the inauthenticities of our own lives? How we can begin to take ownership over mapping these past based inauthenticities and/or fears onto our present? What new ways of navigating non-normative spaces are now open to us?

How can we have more awareness and action around experiencing ourselves newly? Once we have gotten present to our inauthenticities, are we are now free to choose to entertain—perhaps even invite in and embrace—the unknown and unfamiliar

of sex, sexuality, desire, and identity? With the teens and youth in our life? With others, society, and, most importantly, with ourselves? How do the desires, roles, and identities of a young person get negotiated, traversed, and birthed? How pornographic are these narratives? And what does that mean for us as an adult reader, if anything? These questions are raised for us to ponder, not necessarily answer. Further questions that may be in the space of this chapter are: what happens when and/or if the child narrative spills into adult perversity? And what ramifications for queer and sexual studies and theory might a chapter such as this have?

After writing on the longing and seeking after, the dripping and longing, the holy and the beautiful Sappho beautifully writes on identity and desire thusly: “you will go your way among dim shapes. Having been breathed out” (#55, 115). For it really does take a mindful and acknowledging breathing out and a surrender to follow the inner journey these writers so skillfully navigate and write for us: the character may carry on in a dimness, as Janey often does, never really shining a light on the cobwebs of her mind and world, yet others may experience and traverse the sweet resistance and release of what was, and how things occur: attachment to one’s past and self, to the construction of others, show up as color-filled next to the “dim” and predictable shapes.

To dwell in the difference, knowing the freedom of breath outside of the body, rather than a contained, inward, surrounded breath, to know the breath and self as free is beyond any knowing. Sappho writes that this state is a wisdom and rarity: “not one girl I think / who looks on the light of the sun / will ever / have wisdom / like this” (#56, 117). She tells us when too: “] /] / right here /] /] (now again) /] /] for /] “ (#83, 161).

Conclusion: The Possibilities For Sexual and Gender Variancies and Freedom That Await...

This dissertation has brought together narratives and theories that offer up non-normative genders, sexualities, identities, and desires in a climate of semi-compulsory heterosexuality and normativity; it has introduced the notion of switching and reflected on how switching is navigated in the lives of 20th Century and contemporary gender and sexually variant authors and narrators. I have sought to shine a light on the subversive and perverse desires located in the avant-garde writing of Gertrude Stein, Jeanette Winterson, Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles, Anne Carson, and Sappho.

My specific aim with this dissertation is that the idea of the switch—and all variant identities—be seen, acknowledged, and taken up as an access to freedom. The notion of switching between and within variancies is necessary to introduce, carve out, make visible, and/or just be with, however mistrusting of sexual, gender, and/or identity identifications a person or one's culture or society may be. The action of switching, specifically, as seen in all of my writers, allows all participants to experience themselves as accepting, open, and free: free from the constraints of identity, politics, society, and/or self.

Judith Butler drew attention to the paradox of foundationalist frames which would fix or constrain “the very ‘subjects’ that it hopes to represent and liberate” in her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* (189-90). She asked us to consider that “if identities were no longer fixed ... cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather, their present proliferation might then become articulable within the

discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binaries of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness” (*Gender Trouble*, 189-90).

The notion of anything fixed as fundamentally unnatural is obvious to many of us post-post modern, post third-wave feminists, queer and Buddhist theorists and scholars, yet, it is a notion that has no “articulable” or established “intelligible cultural life” or discourse in the mainstream of society. And no matter how free we may individually seek to be and are, how enlivening the possibilities some of us may create, the majority of us are conditioned to survive a set of eternal world views and circumstances that may not share or support our visions. We live in a climate that leans into having sexual and gender identities structured, known, and certain —fixed identities have a seductiveness in the illusion of comfort and constancy. If we (at the individual and community/group level) are committed to the long-term goals and values of living free from identity and constraint it is incumbent upon us to notice and challenge any fixed ways of being/thinking as they come up. Where and when do we create and live in unintelligible, counter-productive binaries of our own making, and, conversely, when and where do we create and live in spaces that serve and open us up into new possibilities?

All of my writer’s, Stein, Winterson, Acker, and Carson especially, ask these questions, through the action of switching. The action of sexual and gender switching – the switching on and off moments that exist through language, roles, desires, rears up the asking of what might the undetected, binary-based blind-spots and barriers be so that we can enable a greater clarity and success in that which we are committed to. We can make clearer connections that bridge, rather than looking for that which divides: expanding into

something new is what results when switching and uncertainty are given some room to be expressed.

There is a tendency to grant a degree of import and emphasis on consistency and the ease of the familiar that it brings, yet all the while many of us speak of identity and sexual politics that scream for binary disruption. Yet, when binaries are disrupted what actually occurs? What affect does it have? For example, if Stein were alive today, complete with her butchy mannerisms yet wearing a skirt, how might she be regarded, respected, seen? How would our minds, so wanting to categorize and find consistency, read her gender and sexual identity? Would we want to even describe her as “butchy”? How would we regard the revered and brilliant Stein if we knew she had a fetish for leather and BDSM?

The process of identity construction, begun in childhood, and more fully formed in teen-hood, reveals a gradual adoption of ways of being and acting to deal successfully with things that, most often, did not go the way youth think they should. By the time later teen-hood and adult-hood are reached, a set of practices and approaches, attributes and characteristics, that seem to give a certain measure of success, make up one’s personality and who we consider ourselves to be. We might consider, then, that the identity of the adults of these narratives, and identity in general, is put together in response to something that is determined as what *shouldn’t be*. Seeing where switch moments occur, which occur constantly when one is made aware of the pattern, allows a person/reader a much larger space to play and create.

What does considering this make possible? Especially for readers and writers who may be wedded to their identity and/or the meaning that society, the culture, or the

individual themselves assigned? Contrasting questions aid in answering this question: who do our narrators never get to be when they are that all they are is their fixed identity? What constraints do they experience? What payoffs—and costs—result from focusing on identity rather than desire and what enlivens us in the present moment? Naming ourselves based on something we like to do? What worlds are closed? What I have explored in these text is the new-found freedom that comes from focusing on what doors are open: in saying who they/we are, a fundamental shift in how the world and identity occurs and is possible.

An identity-free society may be what many of us progressives put our attention and focus towards; however, in an identity-driven society it takes all of us attending to the payoff/cost questions above and ... to a larger than ourselves base-line commitment; the commitment to peace on the planet and all beings knowing peacefulness, for example, or the world in love, or everyone living a free existence. As we read, write, teach, live, and love, we can choose to celebrate that which serves and inspires our authentic commitments—regardless of our opinions, judgments, assessments, and attachments. This process is not new, every baby and young child is free of them. It simply takes a returning to.

Someone who switches and/or is variant in any way with their sex practices, desires, gender experiences, body, and/or identity may not often fit in to the relatively fixed, singular categories of gender and sexual practices and identities—many years of study have shown this—there is still a need for subversions of identity, and circular, intersecting identities, rather than linear ones, to have the space and acceptance to be seen, respected, and possibly known. Intellectual, activist, literary, and academic

dialogues have been confronting and bridging interlocking oppressions for decades; however, in *every* area, profession, and walk of life, including the intellectual and philosophical, we need to now bridge and include variant desires and sex practices.

Berlant and Warner argue for the need and safety of visibly queer and sexually variant spaces that “support forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity,” (562) to counter hetero-normative hegemonies. Their point of supporting that which empowers a person in all aspects of their life can not be underestimated as a foundation for a society and culture committed to freedom.

Why? Because while sex and sexuality are all around us everyday by the nature of what it is to be a human being walking the planet, media, and culture, texts, bodies, and - experiences have been desexualized while also being hyper-sexualized, sex and desire have been constrained while also being fetishized, and gender has been compartmentalized—boxed up and in—while also abandoned with a fundamentalist zeal.

Looking at public/shared spaces where subversive and perverse practices, explorations, and ways of being are accepted illustrates that for sexual and gender variants these spaces are underground; this is especially so for women regardless of their sexuality.³⁸ The discursive cultural and visual norms of sex and sexuality and the secrecy, the hiddenness and silence that lie in the participatory relationships between pornography, BDSM, performance, internet, and visual locations of desire illustrate a world of dichotomies, pluralities, and absence. The plethora of women/gender variants,

³⁸ That being said, it is especially so for queer women by the nature of the numbers and population: there are fewer options available. For example, in most small to medium sized cities in North America, there are no consistent, regular public spaces and/or events for queer women to explore sexual variance, with BDSM for example.

transgressive sexual and identity spaces of practice occupy a relatively invisible space; compared to heterosexual and gay men, for example, there is just no comparison: women and gender variants have little to no public spaces to explore, either voyeuristically or exhibitionistically, sex and their desires.

Straight men have gentlemen's and strip clubs, escort services, massage parlors, and, in some cases, access to powerful, economic positions that allow for sex and desire to be an acceptable form of masculine expression. Gay men have an enormous range of acceptance of deviancy; further, they have a host of locations and spaces within which perverse and subversive gay male sexual practices and identities can be accepted, explored, and honored.³⁹ Gay and bisexual men especially, and heterosexual men as well, have mastered the art of cruising and public sex; they use simple body language and glances with an optimum degree of efficiency and/or outcome. In contrast, women, regardless of their sexual preference or gender identity—who are similarly transgressive in their identity and/or sexual desires—have fewer communities and networks and less visibility and acceptance.

Of course, dialogue on women's transgressive and alternative sexualities and desires does exist in many of the big, LGBTQ mecca cities in North America, in New York and San Francisco particularly. These spaces are fairly underground and publicized in LGBTQ alternative list-serves, with those in the subculture also taking ownership over getting the word out. In New York, there is one, monthly sex and BDSM party for queer women. Submit Party has undergone changing locations, dates, and names over about a decade. However, for the last seven years it has been a consistent,

³⁹ From bathroom stalls and bath houses to parks and rest stops; from nightclubs and bars to community organizations and online networks.

reliable, monthly women's party for lesbian, dyke, bisexual, queer, straight, transgendered, male to female and female to male transsexual folk. Similarly, Spam, which is in its sixth year, is a monthly sex and BDSM party that is open to all of the LGBTQ community, both women and men. The criterion for Spam is that the attendees be queer. Both events were founded and are organized by a queer, dyke woman in her late forties who has a long-term commitment to providing safe spaces for queer folk to engage in consensual sex and BDSM practices.

The Submit website states what happens versus what doesn't happen at the monthly party and handouts with this information; guidelines about the mandatory safe sex rule and consent are also posted. The commitment to what the evening provides ranges from:

having big fun and satisfying your sexual and sensual fantasies and desires; You can watch all night if that's what you want. BDSM play from the mildest of spankings to the heaviest of scenes. Cruising, asking, and trying something or someone new. You and your date can make out in dark corners or fuck in the middle of the room. You and your friends can cruise till you all pick up that hot stranger and all go at it. (<http://submitparty.com>)

The commitment to what the evening is *not* about ranges from: "judgment, coercion, drugs, stupid, drunken behavior, abuse, and non-consensual anything" (<http://submitparty.com>).

Community connection and visibility along with socializing and a space for radical acceptance accompany the fun. I have the memory from one Submit party, many years ago, of a dyke friend of mine who sat in one of the big rooms knitting in a chair the entire evening. Voyeuristic? Yes, most certainly, and when I asked her what her intention was for the evening she replied that simply being in the room, among other perverts, while

she did her own thing, was a huge gift and the reason she was there. Her intention and method of participating in a sex party, by way of the “click click” of her two knitting needles, speaks to spaces, people, and community validating the various aspects of who we are as varied people.

When we consider public spaces as locations of community connection and validation, there really is no difference between the Submit party and a Yankees baseball game. While it may seem an odd comparison, this is actually the case because the restroom at a Yankees game will find gay men cruising. However, as with the Submit party, it is not something that is publicized or known by those outside of a very small circle; thus at Yankee stadium, as at the midtown New York Public Library, a specific bathroom may be the main restroom gay men cruise in, while the others are left for the officially intended purpose of the restroom.

Another example of a space that allows for perverse desires to be expressed is the online classified site Craigslist, whose free service exists in almost every country worldwide, in each of the US states and Canadian provinces, in every major cities, most small cities, and many large towns. In the “Personals” section of each city’s site the following categories are available: “strictly platonic, women seeking women, women seeking men, men seeking women, men seeking men, misc. romance, casual encounters [both of which allow one to choose which advertisements to read based on the gender(s) a poster is and the gender(s) they are looking for: w4m, m4m, m4w, w4w, t4m, m4t, mw4mw, mw4w, mw4m, w4mw, m4mw, w4ww, m4mm, ww4w, mm4w, m4ww, w4mm, t4mw mw4t], and missed connections [often has the categories: w4m, m4m, m4w, w4w]”.

There is gradation of perversity in the “Personals” of Craigslist that is relatively reliable even as it varies from city to city, and that gradation is in the order Craigslist lists the sections. The one exception: there exists little difference between “misc. romance” and the “men seeking women,” and “missed connections” is tame. So “misc. romance” will be somewhat similar, but with a little more perversity, than the “men seeking women” or “women seeking men” section; the “men seeking men” and the “casual encounters” are the most perverse and explicit. These pages contain either casual sex for the night and/or some type of perverse sex: be it role-play, fetish requests, oral sex, a particular attraction/turn on to a body part, size, age, marital status, multiple partners, BDSM, verbal play etc.

In large cities, there are hundreds of postings in the subversive sections per day/evening: London has almost 500 postings in “casual encounters” on a Friday night, while the San Francisco Bay Area will have over a thousand. The amount of people posting and using Craigslist for intimacy and sex is indicative of the widespread social practice of sexual perversity. The reality is that perverse desires are not as uncommon as our society thinks. Rather, they are common for a wide-spread average within our society.

The internet has become a location for many types of intimacy and sex to be sought and gotten. Craigslist is just one service. OK Cupid is another free, online dating, classified site where people seek out friendships, romance, relationships, sex, and play. By posting a profile with, usually, a photo, and filling out sections such as “self-summary”; What am I doing with my life; I’m really good at; The first things people usually notice about me; favorite books, movies, shows, music, and food; six things I

could never do without; I spend a lot of time thinking about; on a typical Friday night I am; The most private thing I am willing to admit; I'm looking for; and You should message me if?'. Users then answer as many (there are close to eight hundred, with the average user answering between two hundred and four hundred) OK Cupid member-derived questions, after which, a math-based system matches users up by percentages: a user notes their answer, how they would like someone else to answer (to which multiple answers are allowed), and then states how important the issue is to them. Percentage match rates are calculated based on which common questions two people have both answered, and, further the percentages are divided into categories: romantic match, friendship match, enemy match.

What these sites allow and provide are for single, poly-amorous, and non-monogamous folks who are busy with their lives to seek casual sex or a relationship. Dissatisfied married people appear on such sights, often seeking casual sex and/or a lover. What this speaks to is that either these men have an inability to speak up and ask for what they want (shame, guilt, and/or fear may be present, or a lack of communication skills), they are not able to receive what they want with their partner (due to some sort of limitation: physical, emotional, etc.), and/or addictive behaviors are at play (avoiding etc.). People selling sex and buying sex appear on sites as well, especially on Craigslist. Most certainly, there are a range of people: satisfied and content to lonely people like Acker's characters, some of whom have sexual compulsion and addiction issues. The plethora of free, non-judgmental services that are now available for people to meet and engage others in regular, anonymous, casual, or relationship-based sex is an indicator of

how variant our cultures really are when it comes to sex and sexual identity. What these sites also provide is a space to safely and voyeuristically watch/read the profiles.

Other sites that display and connect desire, sex, and identity, between the personal and private with the community and public, are many musical groups, artists, art collectives, curated exhibitions, performers, fashion, media/marketing, sex and/or erotic clubs/events, community gathering events, competitions, and such such as Folsom Street Fair, Ms. And Mr. Leather, bootblack competitions, BDSM play parties, workshops and such. An example of a musical group that traffics in much of what my authors do (Carson, Winterson, and Acker especially) is the avant-garde Canadian electronic-dance band Lesbians on Ecstasy. Since 2003 the four- to five-piece band have made a semi-successful career with producing albums and going on world tours. They perform with each of the members wearing some kind of leather accessory or clothing item, none of which are the same. Both feminine and masculine women are members of the group, and so the spectrum of gender identity is represented well with the band. In addition, their lyrics are not only pro-sex, but also political and edgy; the band has a wide contemporary queer appeal.

The song “Revolt” is a great example of pushing boundaries as it takes on role-play, BDSM, and dirty talk. The character is in school and is a “bad girl” who is brought into the Principal’s office for being with a girl in the restroom. The Principal subverts the role of caretaker and takes on being a pervert who dirty talks with the young woman. BDSM come into the song after which “manipulation” is introduced, specifically, the notion of sin and guilt over the main character wanting to engage in BDSM play and make her girlfriend scream.

Performance artists and artists that traffic in subversive sexual practices could include the Kiss and Tell Collective of Vancouver, BC, which, in 1991, produced a groundbreaking, interactive, travelling road show, photography event. Travelling back and forth across Canada the collective elicited people's views on lesbian sex and desire. It was entitled "Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall." The exhibit consisted of over 100 photographs of lesbian sexuality, ranging from less controversial to the subversive and "heavy." Baskets of markers and paper were provided so that spectators could post their comments next to the photographs.

Another interesting component of the interactive, audience-based participatory aspect of the exhibit was that only two models were chosen, Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones. This was done so that any "judgments [were] to be about sexual representation, not about whether viewers find a particular size, shape, or color of woman attractive ... by using the same, we attempted to limit the judgments to being about what the models are doing and how it is depicted" (from the original papers housed at Simon Fraser University's Special Collections Library, unnumbered and unauthored save and except for "The Kiss and Tell Collective"). The collective also made postcards, which they titled "The Show: 100 Photographs of Lesbian Sexuality" and which were published by Press Gang and a video.

Annie Sprinkle—one performance I attended had three remarkable components, among many. One was that she was unabashed in sharing her history with sex, her body, her identity in a fun and healthy narrative with slide-shows, props etc. Who she was in the effort to have her audience get all of her world, and thus to be open and get their own, was a courageous woman telling her narrative/story as liberating; two, during the

intermission the bathrooms, after a certain time, had the distinct smell of male ejaculate; and three, she ended her pro-sex memoir performance with an invitation to an orgy. Sheets of plastic were put down and audience members were invited to engage with other audience members. There was a range of experiences for those audience members who did not participate: to watch or not watch, to leave, to step down and get closer and engage, in some way, with the people having sex etc.

The Personal Praxis of the Switch: “You can say almost anything you please can’t you” (Alice B. Toklas’s note to Stein, *Baby Precious Always Shines*, 161)

Through various forms of switching, the writer, authors, and narrators of this dissertation de-center the discursive cultural norms of sex and sexuality, desire and identity; each is independent, yet when read and weaved together they are connected by the similarly felt thread of each author’s narrative drive and structure. The drive of these works, and indeed of this thesis, is exploring the variances of desire, role, sex, gender, and identity through a new lens: the lens of the switch.

A bold and fearless writing of sexual and gender switching has emerged, one that complicates the preconceived notions and patterns of what these authors are exploring. Additional language to accompany the theory of the switch and this new pattern in reading variances might be employed: active use in further code-switching might use descriptors like *gendershift* and *sexualshift* as adjectives, nouns, and adverbs: *switchshifter*, *genderswitcher*, *gendershifter*, *sexualswitcher*, *sexualshifting*, etc.⁴⁰ My

⁴⁰A genderqueer may or may not see themselves as gender switching, of course, and may or may not engage in the act of sexual switching.

intention is that by reading any of my chapters, by now, the idea and theoretical model of the switch is made visible in a universally accepted way.

The narrators of this dissertation are privately and publically bound and connected to each author's transgressive undertaking: weaving chapters that boundary cross as they craft books of power. Powerful ideas, open skies, and pirateous ways of being and thinking about gender, sexuality, identity, roles, desires, the self in the world and the transgressive practices that fuel such be-ing are made evident.

Consider what could evolve if the typology of the switch and switching was seen. More sites and demonstrations of self-expression and variancy would present themselves; further, they would be welcome additions to our culture(s). Quite possibly, a creation-based society rather than a complaining, endlessly consuming one would manifest. The uselessness of self-consciousness and the preoccupation with looking good and fitting in, which directly, albeit convolutedly, pave the way for radical outsider-ship as it resists conformity and the notion of main-streaming, would become things of the past. We would experience more recognition and affiliation in and with the other, who would become each other / one another. We would experience more connection and less isolation by way of seeing and sharing all the parts of ourselves, all of which reflect our common humanity; and hiding and living in secrecy, guilt, and/or shame would occur much less if at all. Authenticity and connection across our variancies, and a oneness of spirit and the divine nature of each being would show up more; and, as a result, the incessant self-centered, unmindful, me-ness of our society and humanity as a whole would show up less. Perhaps even fade into nothing like a bad dream?

The chapters and authors you have been reading were chosen to present a new, exciting, bold, and subversive methodology and theory: the switch is the interconnection between each chapter, author, and life. My writers write variations of the self, pages of seas and oceans and rivers of selves winding to connect as they seek the freedom to know and experience their humanness. With an urgency that means a life; our very aliveness rather than living a life of deadness, survival, making it and making do, my authors create streams of intoxicating poetic lyrical turns that have the beauty of exploring the depths of these seas with an eye on the political or social waves of constraint.

My narrators play with switching in the most unconventional ways, and so it has been for the author of this dissertation, who could not possibly deconstruct the layers of these switches without having undergone both soft and hard switches of gender, sexuality, identity, and roles herself, from before the conception of this project almost eight years ago to the writing and completing of this particular “book of hours” (*The Powerbook*, 289) in your hand.

While this dissertation has been located in the narratives and theoretical model of the switch, without much connection to subculture, I would like to introduce a personal narrative to round out Toklas’s notion of the freedom that exists when we can say “anything.” For in a dissertation on switching, wherein stable notions of identity are destabilized through my deconstructing the pattern of switching gendered bodies, sexualities, desires, roles, and identities, wherein I have illustrated that this pattern of switching is one of the most liberating and freeing actions one can take, it ought to be possible to bring in the personal, and even, dare I say it, the “I.”

On “National Coming out Day”, Thursday, October 11, 2012, I wrote and published a very casual (so as to be fully accessible) public blog that shared some personal transformations with switching that I have experienced over the last few years. It was not a blog post that I put a lot of attention or detail to, it was more a heart-felt response to the day. A great many people (about forty) commented that I had put words to what they never had the courage to; others were inspired to either think about how they had been judging themselves, me (!) or others based on gender or sexual identity and/or presentation; still others commented that without such honest discussions, the world was doomed! My coming-out day post was meant to de-closet myself and allow a space of freedom to show up for myself, and by extension, others. In that, it was successful and so I offer it here in switch-like subversive fashion:

So it's national coming out day. HI! I'm Lesley. Some dear-hearts call me Lester. Don't make my nick-name mean anything: it was given to me just as my masculine self was wanting to be called something other than my birth name. The truth is, I identify as a lot of things on the gender and sexual continuum. Like really. In fact, I'm writing a book all about it and ... while I'm never done exploring my own gender and sexuality, the book is almost done! Brass tax is I'm gender and sexually queer. Queer meaning super rad and not on one end of any binary you could dream up when it comes to how I experience, play with, and enjoy my body, gender, identity and sexuality. It's pretty glorious being queer, I have to say! Possibilities beyond possibilities are open to me and occupy my days.

Oh, and while I'm "coming out" don't get freaked out my radical, leftist, feminist, dyke sisters and allies, but I'm currently attracted to people again. That's right, human beings who are lit up from the inside and emanate a confident, suave sexiness and adventuresome spirit, who are in connection with the divine within and all around them, regardless of their physical, outward gender. Some of them are gals, but some occur as not gals, and ... I'm still very, very queer. Now, please don't get attached or box me into that identity (which identity you ask? The confused one, sometimes known as “bisexual”) because I, Lesley (also known as Lester) am one of the most transforming butterflies you will ever meet and I am open and subject to change any and all parts of me, which includes my predilections, at any given time and without any notice.

Oh, and while I'm coming out, some of you may have noticed I have re-embraced my feminine on the outside again. I am experiencing an incredible freedom from embracing both my love and attraction to humanity and my womanly physical attributes. I am no longer taming or controlling my locks, or myself but letting myself run free and wild. I've received a lot of comments—from "you look straight now," to "I like you much better like this" on my change in presentation. I want you to know that while I really do appreciate the compliments, and while I have a lot of compassion and sensitivity toward others being attached to gender presentations, my androgynous, sexy, masculine one to be specific, I really could care less if you like my hair short or long, or if you prefer me with or without lipstick. My capital S Self is a loving, divine, constant and it is this Self who cares for you and who you will appreciate and love, or not; how I look and identify, who I fuck, suck, or plug is really quite irrelevant ... isn't it? I ought to make a t-shirt saying that!

And so, as I and many others come out of whatever closets we've constructed and made for ourselves and our lives, I encourage all of us to go to the nearest garbage can and dump any incessant, lingering-like-a-bad-flu thinking patterns, opinions, judgments, assessments, and meaning-making that has us boxing ourselves and others in. You know those times when you think/gossip about what you like or don't like about another's personal choices, or where you feel shame over a desire or fantasy, well, it's time to give up the right to gossip, judge, and make wrong; it's time to give up having everything and everyone figured out, controlled, and boxed in, including ourselves.

Join me in practicing giving up attachment: to the made up concepts of gender, sex, identity, and the body. And please, while you are at it, let's not assume anything, anymore.

ALL of life is impermanent and this life is really just a game to enjoy and play! The question is: do you want to play the game, sit in the stands and watch, or be in the locker room prepping for the game of life? The game is now folks. And now. Don't let anything or anyone stop you from playing YOUR game!

Happy coming out day to ALL however that looks like and is for you! May we all spread our big, variant wings and fly!

These are high stakes of uncertainty here. The switch need not be an identity that limits, fixes, or constrains—it need not be an identity that is juxtaposed or compared—it can be an identity that exists in a realm where there is “no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender [or sexuality] ... the “postulation of a true gender [and/or sexual] identity would [thus] be revealed as a regulatory *fiction*” (italics mine, Judith Butler, 180). I propose that my writers all explore this fiction of gender and sexuality through the action

of switching in their narratives, and, by doing so they lead the way in experiencing greater freedom in gender, sexuality, and identity. Literature, like academic discourse and theory, represents life: the imagination and worlds of creation are ours to step into.

After many years of Ph.D. coursework, Ph.D. dissertation supervision, and personal conversations with the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, it took me cumulative years of personal, spiritual searching and journeywork to reveal much of what she encouraged me to dwell in: just how perfect the practicing of Buddhism/dharma is to a real, lived queer theory. I was not able to sustain a space of nothing until after she passed. The default brain pattern of meaning and confusion, of fear and clinging, of being deeply uncomfortable with being uncertain and not having control, were seemingly the truth of reality and life.

She and I had long conversations on this dissertation: what it would mean and how it could go. My new advisor now has predicted that readers may ask a question I asked Eve many years ago: where are the boundaries to variancy, perversion, and does anything really go? I remember Eve being adamant that age of consent laws were counter-intuitive and damaging and, as a mother to a young son, I found myself wondering how that could be. The answer is consent and trusting one-self to make the best, right choices in the moment. And, later, if those choices were not empowering, to take responsibility for them, forgive, and move on. Is a youth, or anyone, really empowered by being told that something is off limits? For whom do age of consent, or any other sexually or gender related laws, serve? The youth or the adult? How is having a law permitting something contributing to knowing freedom and/or evolving through personal, consensual experiences?

Readers may want to complicate this but it's actually very simple. Sexual progressives spend a great deal of time talking about boundaries, as that is what keeps edgy sex and play safe, and yet, it would be interesting to consider that boundaries come from the place/space of no trust, which is rather a disempowering conversation, especially if one does not trust themselves. The needing to control, oneself but especially others, out of fear and protection is also rather absurd. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick questioned "the strategic banalization of gay and lesbian politics" wondering if "the moment may be past when theory was in a very productive relation to sexual activism" (13). For Sedgwick, our progressive possibilities exist in a complete openness, dismissal of categories, and radical acceptance.

Lauren Berlant similarly questions the state of queer theory and postness: "is *everyone* beyond sex (not just the queer scholars who might have, you know, been there and done that, aged out, made art, bought property, endured AIDS, forged a couple, taken hormones, had events, reproduced, got tenure, had episodes, done new research, said what they had to say, heard what there was to hear, looked around the room, gotten bored)?" (*After Sex*, 79). For those of us that are still see the need of exploding a hinderless, pro-sex, gender and identity free politic in our personal and theoretical lives, I find an urgency in bridging theory and sex—through the model of the switch—while at the same time abandoning any constructions that may limit what's possible.

Any and all resistance to the idea that freedom need somehow be constrained to be manageable opens up a site for diligent personal and community reflection and discussion, research, and theoretical examination. Judith Butler drew attention to the "internal paradox" of foundationalist frames, such as feminism, which can fix or

constrain “the very ‘subjects’ that it hopes to represent and liberate” (*Gender Trouble* 189-90). She cautioned feminism, and this could apply to any progressive group, to “be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion” (viii). Once there is awareness of this paradox, which is often made present by a complaint, judgment, fixing, constraint or resistance—a “something is wrong here” (with me, with you, with the situation) conversation that can, sometimes, arise out of idealism—one can choose to approach the subject with a little more space and freedom.

There is a sometimes loud but still very small conversation concerning full sexual liberation and expression that exists within a very loud, binary, past, fear, and boxed-based conversation; it is up to any and all of us who support, appreciate, love, live, and/or engage with sexual, gender, and identity variability to choose and create the conversations we wish to further: how can we be as bold as these writers are in expressing what enlivens us? How can we be as bold as these writers are in creating conversations that empower hybridity and variability? How can we contribute and become more allied with a complex, variant world that favors aliveness and transformational occurring over morality, scarcity, and fear?

Do we want to create our freedom out of something that is “wrong” or out of possibility? We are well beyond reacting and pushing up against the parameters of politically correct or incorrect fantasies, desires, roles, and lifestyles. There is nothing inconceivable about living free from the constraints of the past once we give up that we have to survive some external circumstances. We are also well beyond being interdisciplinary in our academic pursuits, we are multi-disciplinary thinkers who can

have sex without gender, who can be free around gender, who can be free around sex: what has the chance to show up, once we get authentic about the make wrongs, binaries, and blind-spots we swim in, is a space to create what is possible, rather than fitting in or fixing, which often comes from an “in order to” motive. In her ten-year anniversary “Preface” to *Gender Trouble*, in 1999, Judith Butler would write:

I opposed those regimes of truth that stipulated that certain kinds of gendered expressions were found to be false or derivative, and others, true and original. The point was not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might then serve as a model for readers of the text. Rather, *the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized.* One might wonder what use ‘opening up possibilities’ finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is “impossible,” illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question. (italics mine, viii)

Creating the world we want, as a way of being, for the sole purpose of living an empowered, free life—*from a field of possibilities*—within the miracle of our humanness, becomes available. Within this, the commitment to having full self-expression and a new-found freedom to experience and be with sexuality, gender, desire, and identity becomes possible.

Bridging the personal and the political has historically paved the way for mindful self-reflection, activism, and future exciting research. In the case of this project, identifying the pattern of the switch and examining where switching occurs in language, agency, and locations of queer and/or variant desires in the writings of Stein, Winterson, Acker, Myles, Carson, and Carson’s translation of Sappho, as well as looking at the historical and current conversations and some site-specific spaces and subcultures, provides an opportunity to galvanize the study of literature, gender, sexuality and identity studies to the extent that the process of transformation is possible.

If we clear the space for anything to show up—really, anything—all there is to do—really, ever—is to create who we want to be, what life we want, and what world we want both for ourselves and others to experience. It’s time. It’s time to remove the significance and attachment to singular forms and expressions of gender, sexuality, identity, desire, roles, fantasy, and performance. It’s time to create new possibilities and a playful existence with the impermanent bodies and minds we have been gifted. It’s time to say good-bye to any and all constraints: constraints from the past, one’s culture, family and one’s family’s senses of morality. We may not be able to live fully free of gender and sexual identity categories in our society yet, but we are very free to live within them! What’s more, we are each responsible for the continued writing, directing, designing, and performing the script of our life in a way that both serves and enlivens us and, by extension, those around us. Coming from a “yes” of freedom and what’s possible rather than coming from a “no” of survival, switching is one sharp tool to use, one multi-colored pattern to notice, and gives an author, narrator, and reader a profound sense of freedom and play.

Switching is an incredibly powerful, action-based idea because it “coexists synchronically” and with “multiple temporalities”; the term can be used outside of a BDSM context yet still be infused with a BDSM context. This dissertation gives the switch some room to play by illustrating sites of switching that are excitingly prevalent in literature, culture, and subcultures and by demonstrating that the concept of switching is an essential addition to reading, understanding, and expanding the existing canon of Literary Theory, Queer Theory, Women’s Studies, Identity Studies, Studies in Gender and Sexuality, and LGBTQ Studies. These disciplines will benefit from introducing the

worthy terms and ideas associated with the switch: as nouns, adjectives, descriptors, and practices they elicit numerous and infinite possibilities (especially as we deconstruct texts).

Without question, the addition will be a marked revolutionary step in identity politics, sexuality studies, and queer theory and is actually *foundational* for Feminist and Queer Theory to continue to thrive and move into new, groundbreaking arenas. My project has the capacity to have real, tangible, positive impacts on people—not just women, queer folk, gender variants, or sexual variants—living empowered lives from a place of everything and anything is possible. The reality is that the concept of the switch is much bigger than any department or theory: actual lives—as well as the work of many cultural contributors—are waiting to be voiced and to be made visible by witnessing the pattern of the switch. It's time that switches had their experiences validated through a collective witnessing of our lives; the switch will then become a concept, tool, and model of valuable, and dare I say mainstream, currency.

Bibliography

- Acker, Kathy. *Blood and Guts in High School*. New York: Grove Press, 1978.
— . *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*. Amy Scholder and Dennis Cooper, Eds. New York: Grove, 2002.
— . *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. New York: Grove, 1996.
— . *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*. Originally published in 1975 by TVRT Press and Viper's Tongue Books, New York. Reprinted in *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels*. New York: Pantheon, 1992.
- Beasley, Chris. *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* Ed. Chris Beasley. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005
- Berlant, Lauren. "Starved," *After Sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory*. Halley, Janet E. and Andrew Parker, Eds. Durham: Duke UP, 2011 (79-90).
- Birken, Lawrence. *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance, 1871-1914*. Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1988.
- "Blind," Hercules and Love Affair and Antony Hegarty. DFA Records, March 03, 2008.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Bornstein, Kate. *My Gender Workbook*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Carson, Anne. *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*. New York: Knopf, 1998.
— . *IF NOT, WINTER: Fragments of Sappho*. New York: Knopf, 2002.
- Clark, Danae. "Commodity Lesbianism," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, David M. Halperin, Eds. New York: Routledge, 1993. (186-201)
- Davidson, Arnold I. "Closing up the Corpses: Diseases of Sexuality and the Emergence of the Psychiatric Style of Reasoning," *Meaning and Method: Essays in Honor of Hilary Putnam*. Ed. George Boolos. Cambridge UP, 1990 (307-309).
- Davis, Murray. S. *Smut: Erotic Reality/Obscene Ideology*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1983.
- Doan, Laura. *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Dworkin, Andrea. *Intercourse*. New York: Free Press, 1987. Ellis, Havelock. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume I: The Evolution of Modesty: The Phenomena of Sexual Periodicity, Auto-Eroticism*. Philadelphia: F A Davis Co, 1919.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne, "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female are not Enough" from *The Sciences* March/April 1993 reprinted in *Sexualities: Identities, Behaviors, and*

Society. Michael Kimmel and Rebecca F. Plante, Eds. NY: Oxford UP, 2004 (39-44).

Ferron, "It Won't Take Long," Nemesis Publishing (BMI), 1983. Reissued on *Boulder*. Short Story Records, 2012.

Frecero, Carla. "Queer Times," *After Sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory*. Halley, Janet E. and Andrew Parker, Eds. Durham: Duke UP, 2011 (17-26).

Foucault, Michel. "Critical Theory, Intellectual History," in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*. Ed. Lawrence Kritzman. NY: Routledge, 1988.

— . *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* New York, Vintage, 1978.

— . *The Use of Pleasure: Volume II: The History of Sexuality*. Trans. R. Hurley. New York, Vintage, 1985.

Gagne, Patricia, Richard Tenksbury, and Deanna McGangley, "Coming Out and Crossing Over: Identity Formation and Proclamation in a Transgendered Community," *Gender & Society* 11(4): 478-508, Sage Publishers, 1997.

Hacking, Ian. "Making up People" in *Forms of Desire* Ed. Stein as cited in *Sexuality*. Ed. Robert Nye, New York: Oxford UP, 1999.

Halley, Janet E. and Andrew Parker, Eds. "Introduction" *After Sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011 (1-16).

Hekma, Gert, "How Libertine is The Netherlands? Exploring Contemporary Dutch Sexual Cultures," *Regulating Sex: The Politics of Intimacy and Identity*. Elizabeth Bernstein and Laurie Schaffner, Eds. New York: Routledge, 2005 (209 – 223).

Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Towards Androgyny: Aspects of Male and Female Literature*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1973.

Herzog, Dagmar. *Sex in Crisis: The New Sexual Revolution and the Future of American Politics*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Imhof, Robin, *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts* Ed. Claude J. Summers. San Francisco: Cleis, 2004. 277-79.

Katz, Jonathan Ned. "Homosexual and Heterosexual: Questioning the Terms" *A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Martin Duberman, 1997. (177-80).

Kimmel Michael S., and Rebecca F. Plante, "Becoming Sexual, Introduction" *Sexualities: Identities, Behaviors, and Society*. Michael Kimmel and Rebecca F. Plante, Eds. NY: Oxford UP, 2004.

Kinsey, Alfred C. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co. 1948.

Krafft-Ebbing, Richard Von. *Psychopathia Sexualis, With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct*. Trans. Franklin S. Klaf. NY: Stein & Day, 1965 as cited in *Sexuality*, Ed Robert A. Nye NY: Oxford UP, 1999.

Langdridge, Darren. "The Time of the Sadomasochist: Hunting With(in) the 'Tribus,'" *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*. 2nd Ed. Steven Seidman, Nancy Fischer, and Chet Meeks, Eds. NY: Routledge, 2011.

Lord, James. "Where the Pictures Were," cited in *Six Exceptional Women: Further Memoirs*. New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1994.

McCaffery, Larry. *Some Other Frequency: Interviews with Innovative American Authors*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.

Madeline, Laurence, ed. *Correspondence: Pablo Picasso Gertrude Stein*. Trans. Lorna Scott Fox. New York, Seagull, 2008.

Myles, Eileen. *Chelsea Girls*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1994.

— . *Maxfield Parrish*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1995.

— . *Not Me*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.

— . *Skies*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 2001.

Nye, Robert A., Ed. *Sexuality*. NY: Oxford UP, 1999.

Radicalesbians. "The Woman-Identified Woman," first published in May 1970, as cited in *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, Eds. New York: Routledge, 1997 (396-99).

Rosset, Barney quoted in "Barney Rosset Dies at 89; Defied Censors, Making Racy a Literary Staple," Douglas Martin, *The New York Times*. February 22, 2012

Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Abelove, Barale, and Halperin, Eds. New York: Routledge, 1993 (13-44).

Sawyer, Julian. *Gertude Stein, A Bibliography*. New York: Arrow Editions, 1941.

Scharf, Michael. "Skies: New Poems / On My Way," *Publishers Weekly* 249. 3 (Jan 21, 2002): 85-86.

Seidman, Steven. "From Outsider to Citizen" *Regulating Sex: The politics of Intimacy and Identity*. Elizabeth Bernstein and Laurie Schaffner, Eds. New York: Routledge, 2005 (225- 245). Simon, William, *PostModern Sexualities*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Simon, William. *Postmodern Sexualities*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Starr, Daniel. *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts* Ed. Claude J. Summers. San Francisco: Cleis, 2004. 329-30.

Stein, Gertrude. *A Stein Reader: Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Ulla E. Dydo. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993.

— . *An Ellucidation*. Printed in *Transition* April, 1927.

— . *Geography and Plays*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.

— . *Lifting Belly*. Rebecca Mark, Ed. Tallahassee: Naiad, 1995.

— . *Stanzas in Meditation*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994.

— . *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*. Ed. Carl Van Vechten. New York: Modern Library, 1962 edition.

Toklas, Alice. *Aromas and Flavors of Past and Present*. Harper & Brothers: NY, 1958.

Traub, Valerie. "The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography," *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*. Ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry. Blackwell, 2007. (124-45).

Vaid, Urvashi, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sexuality*. London: Routledge, 1986.

Winterson, Jeanette. *The Powerbook*. New York: Knopf, 2000

— . *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. Vintage, 1995.

— . Interview: "Jeanette Winterson: The Art of Fiction," *The Paris Review*, No. 150, Spring 1999. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1188/the-art-of-fiction-no-150-jeanette-winterson>

— . *The Passion*. New York: Grove, 1987.

— . *Written on the Body*. New York: Vintage, 1992.