

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Anarchic Intimacies: Queer Friendship and Erotic Bonds

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/76510324>

### Author

Dumortier, Laurence

### Publication Date

2016

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Anarchic Intimacies: Queer Friendship and Erotic Bonds

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Laurence Hilary Dumortier

March 2017

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Jennifer Doyle, Chairperson

Dr. Steven Gould Axelrod

Dr. George E. Haggerty

Copyright by  
Laurence Hilary Dumortier  
2017

The Dissertation of Laurence Hilary Dumortier is approved:

---

---

---

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous support and guidance of my dissertation committee, Jennifer Doyle, Steven Gould Axelrod and George E. Haggerty. Their advice, suggestions and encouragement have been invaluable. I also want to recognize how inspiring they have been to me as examples of brilliant scholarship, dedicated teaching, and personal integrity. I'm also grateful to Stephen Koch who granted me several lengthy personal interviews about his recollections of Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz, and who allowed me to study previously unpublished photographs and contact sheets from the Peter Hujar Archive.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Anarchic Intimacies: Queer Friendship and Erotic Bonds

by

Laurence Hilary Dumortier

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English  
University of California, Riverside, March 2017  
Dr. Jennifer Doyle, Chairperson

What makes a friendship “queer”? The queerness of the friendships I will explore in this project is, in part related to, but not co-extensive with, the sexual orientation of its participants. In all of the pairings I examine, at least one, if not both, of the friends is non-heterosexual. However, what makes the “queerness” of each of these friendships is not only the orientation of its participants, but the relationship’s exceeding of the conventional boundaries and definitions of friendships.

“Friendship” is a contested and yet vague term, in both straight and queer relationships, in part because of the opposition between ‘*éros*’ and ‘*philia*’ in the conception of human relationships. For gays and lesbians—often excluded or distanced from their birth families—one appealing way of understanding friendship has been through a reworking of the structures of kinship. There has been substantial important work on gay and lesbian kinship since Kath Weston’s pioneering *Families We Choose*

(1991), including Elizabeth Freeman's nuanced contemporary analysis in "Queer Belongings" (2007).

While theorizations of queer kinship tend to enfold and absorb friendship into the rubric of "chosen family," one of the things that makes friendship friendship is its ability to exist as an alternative *to* family, even as these queer friendships can *also* offer the possibility of forming a kind of family that departs from heteronormative models. In other words, the important work done on queer kinship cannot take the place of the still-necessary work on queer friendship. The deep difference between friendship and family cannot be resolved by the catch-all-ness of kinship. My dissertation argues for a theorizing of relationships that is not coextensive with either romantic and sexual couplehood, *or* kinship, a theorization that has the potential to open up the greater possibilities of the way human beings can relate to one another, not outside of, but pushing or playing against the conventions of family, couplehood, and sexual exclusivity, in ways that are affectively meaningful and politically potent.

## Table of Contents

Chapter 1	Introduction to Anarchic Intimacies	1
Chapter 2	Peter Hugar and David Wojnarowicz	40
Chapter 3	Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton	88
Chapter 4	Nan Goldin and Cookie Mueller	125
Chapter 5	Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe	161
Notes		197
Bibliography		210



## List of Figures

2.1. <i>Untitled (Paul Fisher and Paul Thek with Garland Crowns, Green Hill, Rhode Island)</i> , 1957 by Theodore Newman.	50
2.2. <i>David Wojnarowicz</i> , 1981 by Peter Hujar.	56
2.3. <i>Untitled (Peter Hujar)</i> , c. 1982 by David Wojnarowicz.	58
2.4 <i>Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian</i> , 1982 by David Wojnarowicz.	59
2.5 <i>Thek in the Palermo Catacombs (II)</i> , 1963 by Peter Hujar.	69
2.6. <i>Seagull</i> , 1983 by Pete Hujar.	80
2.7 <i>Wing of a Blue Roller</i> , 1512, by Dürer.	81
2.8. <i>Wind (for Peter Hujar)</i> , 1987 by David Wojnarowicz.	82
2.9. Quilt panel for Keith Davis by David Wojnarowicz.	84
2.10. Quilt panel for Peter Hujar by David Wojnarowicz.	84
2.11. <i>Untitled (Earth Mandala)</i> , circa 1974 by Paul Thek.	86
4.1 <i>Nan after being battered</i> , 1984 by Nan Goldin.	128
4.2. <i>Nan on Brian's lap, Nan's birthday, New York City, 1981</i> , by Nan Goldin.	129
4.3. <i>Cookie with me after I was punched, Baltimore, Md., 1986</i> , by Nan Goldin.	143
4.4. <i>Cookie Mueller</i> , 1981 by Tobi Seftel.	145
5.1. Protestors against the Mapplethorpe obscenity trial, 1989.	164

5.2. <i>Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith at the Chelsea Hotel</i> , 1971 by Judy Linn.	173
5.3. Poster for Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe's joint show at the Robert Miller Gallery, 1978.	179
5.4. Patti Smith by Sam Wagstaff, circa 1976.	194

## Chapter 1

### Introduction to Anarchic Intimacies

1. In the “Stolen Phone” episode of the subversive and bizarre millennial sitcom *Broad City*, twentysomethings Abbi and Ilana sit on Ilana’s couch with their laptops open, idling away the time, when Abbi decides suddenly that she should ask a guy out on a date instead of waiting to be asked out. Where Ilana is free-spirited and fearless, Abbi is reserved and self-conscious, so this unexpected move thrills them both. Comparing them to modern-day Amelia Earhearts— “We’re feminist heroes!,” Abbi exults—she and Ilana go on an asking-out spree, contacting old high-school crushes and way-back coworkers on Facebook to summon them on dates. Elated, Ilana exclaims: “This is the Abbi I love and fell in love with and am obsessed with!”<sup>1</sup>

Cut to: 36 rejections later, the dispirited pair get off the couch and head to a bar to do things the “IRL” way. While Abbi chats up a dude, Ilana shows another guy picture after picture on her phone ... of Abbi. “We’re best friends,” she tells him. “It’s, like, *cool*, you know.” Manifold volumes of meaning are contained in that statement. Then when Abbi and her prospect exchange numbers, Ilana sidles up to him, both to grill him (when was the last time he was tested for STDs?) *and* to coach him on how best to seduce Abbi. Ilana wants Abbi to be safe but she also wants her to have fun and get off.

In another episode, Abbi calls Ilana from her longtime-crush/first-time-lover Jeremy's bathroom, freaking out and needing advice. Misunderstanding Abbi's suggestion that they "switch things up," Jeremy has just handed her a strap-on and Abbi is not quite sure she is ready to peg him. Ilana talks her down from the ledge and offers a steady encouragement. Later, when Abbi tells Ilana that she did end up pegging Jeremy, Ilana bursts out, "This is the happiest day of my life!"<sup>2</sup>

The joke (aside from Ilana's shouting this out at her grandmother's shiva) is that Ilana should care so deeply about what happens in Abbi's (sex) life. But it's not *just* a joke, it's also an earnest comment on how profoundly joined and supportive of one another the two friends are. While absurdist and frequently surreal, the show is also a paean to what one critic called "the greatest semi-platonic love story of all time"<sup>3</sup>

Great semi-platonic love stories are precisely the subject of this project. I am not a millennial—and the relationships I describe in this project are firmly rooted in the twentieth century—but I delightedly recognized in *Broad City*'s characters a friendship that completely spills outside of its designated boundaries. They call each other "best friends"—that's the closest term at hand, because *there is no term yet that better describes what they have*. They aren't lovers or relatives or roommates, and at the same time their friendship is also far more consuming and supportive and erotically charged than those of the women on *Girls* and *Sex and the City*, Abbi and Ilana's nearest television antecedents. As writer and comedian Jenny Jaffe wrote about *Broad City*'s

characters, they are “each other’s absolute anchors” in the world<sup>4</sup>. To be anchored to, understood, and loved by another person—even when that person is not a girlfriend or lover or spouse—is the central drama of this study, and it is, uncoincidentally, a way of relating that one almost never sees represented.<sup>5</sup>

There is within Western culture a constant policing of the boundary between romantic-sexual love and the love of friends. In her brilliant essay, “Between Friends,” Jennifer Doyle describes the “tenacious opposition” between the classical concepts of *eros* and *philia*.<sup>6</sup> Under this persistent assumption, a bond between two people must be one or the other, it cannot be both, or in between, or its own *mélange* of the two. There is also a *de facto* hierarchy that puts traditional romantic-sexual partnerships (in the form of married couples, life partners, and love affairs that appear to be leading in that direction) ahead of other kinds of relationships, including friendships.

Both of these directives are deeply embedded in a patriarchal and heteronormative structure of love, relationships, and even feelings themselves. Shulamith Firestone argued that “Culture was built on the love of women, and at their expense.”<sup>7</sup> To this stunning statement, I would add the *sous-entendu* “for the benefit of straight cis men,” broaden the harm done to include queer men, and enlarge it to say that society itself was built in this fashion. What I call here *queer friendships* destabilize that structure, which is why they are so seldom represented, and also why they deserve more attention.

It should come as no surprise that the writers and artists who participated in these queer friendships, the people who, to introduce another term, created *anarchic intimacies*, are women (straight and queer), and gay and bisexual men. That is, the people least likely to benefit from the ideology and enforcement of the patriarchal heterosexual romance structure, and most likely to see the potential in non-normative structures of feeling and connection.

*[T]wo young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other's asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour. There you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease, Michel Foucault observed, explaining that this "neat image" is reassuring because it cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force<sup>8</sup>. Though Foucault was commenting on friendship between gay men, I want to extend here the subversive potential of friendship, affection, camaraderie to bisexual men, and to women (both queer and straight) too. Heterosexual love has benefited straight men and come at the expense of women and queer men. The relationships that defy the preeminence and compulsory nature of heterosexual romance are also ones that create "new alliances" and tie together "unforeseen lines of force."*

2. I felt a thrill of recognition seeing semi-platonic love represented in *Broad City* because I have experienced it myself, several times. The summer after my sophomore year of college I lived in Boston, working at a store on Newbury Street, and taking summer school classes. My friend Maggie was working in Wellesley at the Center for Research on Women. We'd known each other and been friends all that year, but it was in a group setting, and now we were getting to know each other one-on-one. With a giddy excitement, I looked forward to taking the commuter rail from Boston into Wellesley. The dorm was empty and we felt a delicious privacy and freedom. We'd sit on her bed in her room and smoke cigarettes. If we got hungry we'd take the elevator down to the dorm basement where the vending machines were, and used our change to get a bottle of fruit punch and a bag of Funyuns to share. Sometimes we'd take walks around campus, around Lake Waban, into town to Pete's Pizza, which was greasy and glorious. Back in Boston I noticed little things that I thought would charm or amuse her and stored them away for when we'd see each other next. We were like flints sparking against each other, riffing endlessly, finding more minute and absurd and delightful resonances in every thing that surrounded us. Together we were our brightest and funniest selves.

It was like falling in love. No, not *like*, it *was* falling in love. Just... a different kind of love than what counts in our culture, which is romantic-sexual love. That wasn't our jam. With each other at least. There were other people we wanted to have sex with, and we talked about sex a lot. But we had our own jam together and it was enough. It was more than enough.

This: the kind of falling in love I describe above, and the complicated evolution of a relationship between people who are not conventionally coupled up (that is to say in a romantic-sexual partnership), is the central concern of this project. These relationships, outside of conventional parameters but as thrilling, intense, sustaining and deeply meaningful as romantic and sexual coupledness, are what I call here *anarchic intimacies*.

3. As is perhaps already evident by the brief story above, central to my project on anarchic intimacies is what Jane Gallop called *intimate knowledge production*. That is, knowledge that is formed through experience and that gets handed down through stories, in conversation, and through anecdote. Knowledge that evades theory's "will to power" while also being able to constitute theory of its own.<sup>9</sup>

Anecdote remains suspect, because of its proximity to the "personal," because its scope is by definition shorter and more intimate than the grand strokes of historical narratives, and because it borders on the disreputability of gossip. From one point of view those are drawbacks or weaknesses, but tilt your head just a little and they appear as strengths and appealing qualities.

The anecdote by definition depends on lived experience. It is, as the late Joel Fineman put it, "the literary form or genre that uniquely refers to the real."<sup>10</sup> That special relationship of the anecdote to the real, and its position to the side of "formal knowledge" and high theory means that it can intervene in these realms by forcing a shift of focus. It can puncture the sense of epistemological totalizing that theory aspires to—and from



which it has often left out marginalized communities. Barbara Christian crucially noted in her seminal essay “The Race for Theory” that

*people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic... often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language... And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world.*<sup>11</sup>

Theorizing *through* an interest in and attention to the “personal” has been crucial for people of color, for women, for queer people, for the disabled. The impulse and assumption of white straight male able-bodied culture (that is to say, for most of the Western world through most of time, simply: the culture) has been to see the reflection of its own (frankly limited) point of view as somehow universal, and to designate any narratives which differ from that grand but “neutral” point of view to the category of personal. Personal being a code word for narrow, limited, and impoverished. In this project I reject the false binary of these designations and choose to prioritize the personal as a way of theorizing ways of being and relating in the world.

Feminist theorizing of the second wave also has a tradition of going hand-in-hand with personal experience as well as literary production. Scholar T.V. Reed notes that “consciousness-raising was crucial in forming feminist thought on a whole range of issues, from economics to government to education, but it was particularly useful in giving a name to the ‘nameless’ forms of oppression felt in realms previously relegated to

the nonpolitical arena of ‘personal’ relations.”<sup>12</sup> Feminist poet and theorist Minnie Bruce Pratt explains, “we were, within the movement, being trained to draw on our experience as raw data.”<sup>13</sup>

In keeping with the feminist axiom that the personal is political, the use of anecdote in this project is *a political choice* which foregrounds the stories and the lived experience of the subjects of this study. While I also look at more canonical “texts”—works of art and literature—the stories between and about the people I write about are the principle object of thinking through.

I also include my own stories here because they have been central to my process of discovering and understanding anarchic intimacy. They have been, to use Minnie Bruce Pratt’s expression, the raw data of my analysis and theorizing. Beginning in young adulthood I felt a gap between the kinds of relationships I knew existed between friends, having firsthand experience of them myself, and the way they were represented in the culture at large. I didn’t have the right language to name these relationships, or to describe them to my puzzled family and boyfriends. At times I doubted the rightness of these emotional intensities or whether they existed in the way I perceived them. The doubting was brief because the rightness of the feelings themselves always, or almost always, asserted itself, but I eventually stopped trying to make these relationships understood to others. Writing these stories now is a way of remembering the moments when the world seemed to be remaking itself in more fluid and exciting ways than I’d been taught to expect. It’s also helped me to better see within the lives of my subjects the central drama that I’ve found so compelling, and elucidate the political potential that their

lives and loves epitomized. That said, my thinking about anarchic intimacies is *also* greatly indebted to the work of feminist and queer theorists from whom I've learned so much about how to think through and describe, on the page, the finer points of the anarchic experiences and experiments that have captivated me.

4. The opposition between *eros* and *philia* is a long-standing feature of Western culture, as Jennifer Doyle pointed out,<sup>14</sup> taking various shapes at various times. More recently the question of what kinds of relationships qualify as friendships and which as love relationships has been a subject of debate within queer studies. What follows are some of the outlines of these discussions.

If we can locate a beginning to this conversation, or at least a recorded beginning, it must be with Plato's *Symposium*. As Avi Sharon, one of the dialogue's modern translators, makes clear in the following brief accounting, Plato's framing of love has made its influence felt throughout the centuries within the most consequential of texts in Western culture—though it has often been *misinterpreted*—“St. Paul's *Corinthians* ('Make love your aim'), Dante's Renaissance *Commedia* ('Love divine, which first set in motion these lovely stars') and Freud's more contemporary discontents. The dialogue's vast influence on the mind of Europe, from Plotinus to Proust, is everywhere in evidence. Yet today when we talk of 'Platonic love,' we could hardly be further from Plato's conception.”<sup>15</sup>

The error comes from a persistent misunderstanding of *eros* and *philia*. Whereas the phrase “Platonic love” is typically understood as meaning a non-physical, almost spiritual love, Sharon reminds us that the Greek *eros* “was a near synonym for ‘sexual desire.’”<sup>16</sup> The confusion comes in part from the fact that, in Greek, there are several words that have been translated as “love.” *Philia* is the more general of these, designates the “strong fraternal or familial bond or the friendship between allied states,”<sup>17</sup> whereas *eros* denotes the bodily appetites of hunger, thirst, and sexual desire (for example, Homer writes in the *Iliad* ‘They put aside their *eros* for food and drink,’) <sup>18</sup>. With time its field of meaning has become focused on sexual lust, but Sharon emphasizes the fact that in the Symposium, Plato revises the

conventional Greek understanding of erotic desire, widening the semantic register of the world to encompass everything from the blind impulse of the sexual itch to the transcendental longing for absolute truth... From this radical new perspective we could begin, for the first time in our history, to discern in the ecstatic groping of the sexual act a semi-conscious desire for an incorporeal ‘something else’ (*allo ti* in Greek). Raw desire could not conceal a metaphysical yearning. No single word in English will comprehend the breadth of this new Platonic *eros*.<sup>19</sup>

Strikingly, this Platonic desire for “something else” feels akin to the erotic diffusion into all aspects of life that Audre Lorde, some 2,500 years later, described in her seminal essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in which she called for *eros* to be

released from its narrow confines and allowed to color the world with its ecstatic potential.

David Halperin has reached further back still, to study the friendship of Achilles and Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad*, writing, "The high pitch of feeling evident in the relation between Achilles and Patroclus has led scholars to argue interminably about whether their romance was a sexual as well as a comradely one [...]"<sup>20</sup> I applaud the desire to analyze and better understand how Homer understood the relationship between the two men, but I remain baffled that these are the only two categories that seem to have any meaning for scholars, and that there is fighting to pull the pair into one camp or another, as though the relationship could not occupy distinct territory of its own.

Halperin believes that once we better understand the context of sexual and other relationships in Homeric Greece, a clarity will descend on our apprehension of the Achilles-Patroclus relationship, because it will be unclouded by later-Greek contexts, not to mention our own modern one. But that presumes that all relationships are understood *in their own time*. And the pairs in my study belie that premise.

Jacques Derrida, in the lectures that would become *The Politics of Friendship*, also looked to the Classical past to initiate his exploration of friendship, beginning with a deconstruction of the phrase attributed to Aristotle, "O my friends, there is no friend." In particular Derrida calls into question the distance that friendship seems to require, as against the compression of distance in love relationship, though Derrida finds no clear delineation exists to separate friendship from love.<sup>21</sup> Derrida takes notice of the way friendship deemed worthy of study and admiration in classical Western culture is coded

as de facto masculine. Montaigne for instance, in his essay “Of Friendship,” posits friendship as definitionally occurring between men, and antithetical to the kind of emotion experienced by women, as well as the love and lust felt by men towards women. This is indeed the foundational framing of friendship as contrary to romantic-sexual love that has been so structuring of thinking on this subject since Montaigne’s writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Like so many conversations in queer studies, the one about the distinctions and overlappings between friendship and erotic love vary according to the historical periods in question. And also whether we are discussing friendships between men or women. There has been, moreover much less written about the friendships *between* men and women, in part because of the historical segregation of men and women into different spheres of influence and activity; in part because of the erasure of bisexuality from many accounts of queerness; and in part because of the opposition between eros and philia, and the flattening of much of what exists between the two, means that friendship between a man and a woman cannot be mined for its queerness because it reads as either strictly non-sexual, or as just another example of straight erotic attraction. Doyle’s “Between Friends” is a notable exception, paying sustained attention to the queer friendships between men and women in real life and in cultural representations.

George Haggerty’s work on love and friendship between men—and the frequent overlapping of the two, both linguistically and conceptually—in the 18<sup>th</sup> century has,

among other things, illuminated the contours of acceptability for men's expressions of passionate erotic love.<sup>22</sup> His work on the elegy demonstrates the channeling of erotic feeling between friends into poems of passionate love and grief, once the physical possibilities of erotic communion were foreclosed by death. His work on Walpole's letters to his friends illustrate a complex performance of masculinity that enabled equally complex epistolary friendships in which sexy badinage and off-color witticisms took their place alongside earnest intellectual inquiries.<sup>23</sup> Haggerty has also highlighted the way that notions of friendship and kinship imbricate within E.M. Forster's early novel *The Longest Journey* in considering the *offspring* of a couple's bond, whether it is *procreative* or *creative*.<sup>24</sup>

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men*, a work regarded as initiating the field of queer studies, offered the radical insight that Victorian men often used women as triangulating mechanism for their own "homosocial" desires<sup>25</sup>. Claude Lévy-Strauss had already demonstrated the way women in patriarchal societies functioned as tokens in systems of exchange designed to consolidate power, but Sedgwick's analysis focused on the affective, relational, and (sub-rosa) erotic dimensions of this triangulation. Another way of looking at the work is that, beyond a binary distinction between traditional heterosexuality and subversive homosexuality is a whole field of play for same-sex connections, which all the while deny sexuality and affirm heteronormativity.

Michel Foucault provided a powerful recentering of friendship within queer studies in a late interview with the French gay magazine *Le Gai Pied*. Titled in translation "Friendship as a Way of Life," Foucault's interview explores friendship between men as

“the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure.” This expansive notion of gay male friendship is one that has been ignored and erased in conventional representations of homosexuality. As Foucault points out, gay men have themselves participated in this flattening portrait of gay relationships, as a kind of compromise to straight society. Foucault argues:

One of the concessions we make to others is not to present homosexuality as anything but a kind of immediate pleasure, of two your men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other’s asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour. There you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease... it cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can’t allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force.<sup>26</sup>

In effect Foucault is saying that tolerance of homosexuality within straight culture is tied to a reductive understanding of it, with which queer folks comply out of a sense of necessity. Gay sex, Foucault argues, does not threaten the structure of the system already in place. Friendship—defined with a radically broad stroke: *the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure*—has the potential to form and deploy powerful non-heteronormative alliances.



Recently Jane Ward has explored the gay eroticism built into white straight bro identity, demonstrating that “straightness” for young white men is often constituted through elaborate rituals of male-male sexual contact and erotic humiliation.<sup>27</sup> In other words, demonstrations and reinforcements of friendships, in fraternities and in the military for instance, are often sexual in nature. The tradition of the elephant walk as a fraternity hazing initiation is one particularly colorful and striking example of Ward’s argument.

In terms of studies of women’s friendships, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “The Female World of Love and Ritual” represents one of the earliest efforts within queer literary studies to excavate same-sex relationships residing within the denomination of “friendship.”<sup>28</sup> The article has been generative, particularly in Smith-Rosenberg’s contrasting of the binary opposition between heterosexual “normalcy” and lesbian “deviance” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the lack of pathologizing of women’s “passionate friendships.” Still, Sharon Marcus argues that Smith-Rosenberg’s attempt to demonstrate a homogenous “female world of love and ritual” has led to a conceptual impasse in which all forms of feminine intimacy are lumped together in one indiscriminate category, such that “for every scholar who cites [Smith-Rosenberg] to explain that Victorian women could have sexual relationships with each other without incurring social stigma, another uses it to prove the sexlessness of the most passionate, enduring, and exclusive love affairs.”<sup>29</sup>

Martha Vicinus’s study of passionate friendships between women, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been praised for its highlighting of the

intricacies of feminine relational intimacy, at the same time that it has been critiqued for an ahistorical impulse to read these women through identity categories not in existence at the time. Judith Halberstam remarks that given the richness of these women's relationships: "full of intrigue and outrage, sexual liaisons and anguished but chaste involvements, and, above all, drama," that it might be said that "while lesbianism cannot be called a transhistorical phenomenon, dyke drama apparently stretches through the ages, with or without concrete identity formations."<sup>30</sup>

Still, Vicinus recognizes a central dilemma in considerations of passionate friendship, noting that depending on one's point of view, the phrase "intimate friends" is either "an enabling metaphor, capacious enough to embrace a very wide range of erotic behavior and self-presentation. Or it is an obfuscating term that conceals sexuality and over-privileges emotional compatibility."<sup>31</sup> In effect this is a restatement of the opposition between *eros* and *philia* that has been so persistent in Western culture.

Although Adrienne Rich's notion of the "lesbian continuum" undermines that opposition, by seeing all forms of affection, companionship, erotic connection between women as belonging to a continuum of female love, this construction has been critiqued, by Gayle Rubin among others, for deprivileging a lesbian identity based on actual lesbian sex in favor of solidarity or political affiliation.

Sharon Marcus's *Between Women* (whose title pays homage to Sedgwick's classic work) calls into question the idea that women's erotic connections were subversive to Victorian heteronormative culture and makes the case that, in fact, "mainstream femininity was not secretly lesbian, but openly homoerotic."<sup>32</sup> Marcus argues that

intimate, passionate friendship between women was not seen as challenging compulsory heterosexuality, but rather as a complementary rather than competing form of relationship to heterosexual marriage bonds.

For queer folks who have often excluded or distanced from their birth families, one appealing way of understanding friendship has been through a reworking of the structures of kinship. There has been substantial important work on gay and lesbian kinship since Kath Weston's pioneering *Families We Choose*,<sup>33</sup> including Elizabeth Freeman's nuanced contemporary analysis in "Queer Belongings."<sup>34</sup> The exploration of kinship and families of choice, though, tends to fold friendship *into* family and to flatten the difference between these two different kinds of relationships.

One of the important things that makes friendship friendship, though, is its ability to exist as an alternative *to* family, even as these queer friendships can *also* offer the possibility of forming a kind of family that departs from heteronormative models. In other words, the important work done on queer kinship cannot take the place of the still-necessary work on queer friendship. The deep difference between friendship and family cannot be resolved by the catch-all-ness of kinship. As Judith Halberstam points out, "*queer kinship itself* has a complex relation to reproduction, cultural production and assimilation."<sup>35</sup> I remain, therefore, committed to a theorizing of relationships that is not coextensive with either romantic and sexual couplehood, *or* kinship, a theorization that has the potential to open up the greater possibilities of the way human beings can relate to one another, not outside of, but pushing or playing against the conventions of family,

couplehood, and sexual exclusivity, in ways that are affectively meaningful and politically potent.

5. I remember talking to my mother after my first year of college about Joan, one of the friends I'd made that year. I had had close female friendships before, but none so compelling and involving and complicated as this one. I explained to my mother some of the things that made it so interesting and at the same time so complicated. After a moment, though, she stopped me, "Why do you keep saying *relationship*?"

I think there was some mild homophobia in her question. She was puzzled and a little put off by the application of the word to my friendship with a woman. It reflected the worry that the word might conceal, behind the façade of friendship, a lesbian romance. There was also the sense that it was somehow unseemly to bestow the word "relationship" on something as straightforward and relatively unimportant as a friendship. She probably wouldn't have thought twice about my dishing about boyfriend-intrigue, but it seemed bizarre to her to think deeply about how my friend and I interacted together. It was a sign of a disorder in the friendship: that it was overflowing its definitional bounds and spilling over into something else.

We are caught between these two poles. We are confused about friendship. We are instructed to be suspicious of close friendships of the same-sex variety—they may be a cover for queerness. And we do not believe that hetero close friendships are possible at all.

To be categorical, there are three major types of relationships that are widely recognized in American culture: family, romance, and friendship.

Each of these relationships is defined by the roles of its participants, the kinds and degrees of intimacy. The policing of those bonds, and the policing of appropriate nomenclature is near constant, though often unnoticed because it is part and parcel of the culture, and therefore, like the air around us, difficult to discern.

David Halperin writes that “friendship is parasitic in its conceptualizing on kinship relations and on sexual relations. That is, it must borrow terminology and imagery from these other spheres of human relations in order to identify and define itself.”<sup>36</sup> Though generally sympathetic to many of Halperin’s claims, on this point I would argue the opposite—that kinship and sexual relations have colonized all the available relational space, and that friendship, low in the hierarchy of relationships, has had to *make do* with concepts and language not its own, cramping its range of expressions and limiting its possibilities.

Attempts to multiply the number of categories occasionally succeed, but they are for the most part treated as somewhat suspect, shady, and inferior. *Friends with benefits* is an in-between category, but it carries with it a sheepish air, like a stop-gap solution, and in any case the very necessity of specifying that one has a friendship “with benefits” proves the assumption that friendships are defined by their absence of sexual intimacy.

Friendship, then, by definition, is a zone of no-sex. This is clear, also from the recent term *friendzone*, which describes the unwelcome restriction to a zone of

“friendship” when one wanted to go “beyond” friendship, into sexual intimacy. The term implies the inferior and lackluster qualities of friendship as compared to sexual and romantic intimacy. To be friendzoned is to be relegated to a lesser category of relationality. To be kept *from* sex. To be considered unworthy of physical intimacy. Friendship, in this vision, is the consolation prize for those too undesirable for more.

6. I first encountered *friendzone* when I was teaching composition, reading a student’s essay defining the word. It took me a minute to understand the student’s meaning, because from my vantage point, to be assigned the title “friend” was an honorific, not a consolation prize, or even worse, a kind of branding: “loser,” “unworthy of sexytimes.” My student’s essay was humorous, but its point was that humor is necessary to deal with the indignities of being friendzoned.

Later the term appeared in grimmer circumstances, in conversations surrounding the massacre at Isla Vista. Elliot Rodger had gone on a rampage on the UC Santa Barbara campus, leaving a manifesto that detailed his rage against women, especially those who bestowed sex and romance on “alpha” males, while relegating “betas” like himself to mere friend-status. This is an extreme example, but an instructive one nevertheless, of the hierarchy in which our culture assigns different value to different types of relationships. Unsurprisingly, this hierarchy is steeped in heteronormativity, patriarchal values, and racism (see the parts in Rodger’s manifesto about “alpha” masculinity being assigned to white men, “beta” going to Asian men, and black men being unworthy of the attentions

of white women at all)<sup>37</sup>. It also suggests how intertwined masculinity is with what Adrienne Rich called *the ideology of heterosexual romance*<sup>38</sup>—and how violently humiliating and threatening it can be to imagine oneself excluded from it. As though outside of that system were just an icy and empty planet with no other form of love or erotic satisfaction. The subjects of this study show otherwise. They offer lessons in the pleasures and satisfactions of anarchic intimacies.

7. In that groundbreaking essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich writes about the means by which women’s “total emotional, erotic loyalty and subservience to men” are enforced. Those means “range from literal physical and enslavement to *disguising and distorting of possible options*.”<sup>39</sup> This project is an attempt to shine a spotlight on those possibilities not widely recognized as valid in the culture, in order to understand how they work, what they look like, what they can do.

Rich’s focus is on women’s lives, but, as some of the examples above briefly suggest, men too are impacted by the dearth of imagined relational possibilities. That masculinity has been defined *precisely through its sexual subjugation of women*, reinforces the twin toxicities of misogyny and homophobia. The rage and anguish of men who cannot successfully “compete” in this distorted sexual economy is very real. It is also very frightening to those—women, queers, children, people of color—who must live in the shadow of its fallout.

8. *When Harry Met Sally* was a big romantic comedy the year I started college. The R.A. on my floor announced that it was her favorite movie. It was seen as a witty and charming subversion of the genre.

In their first meeting Harry tells Sally: “You realize, of course, that we can never be friends. Men and women can’t be friends because the sex part always gets in the way.”

Sally: “That’s not true! I have a number of men friends and there is no sex involved.”

H: “No you don’t. You only think you do.”

S: “You’re saying I’m having sex with these men without my knowledge?”

H: “What I’m saying is, they all want to have sex with you. No man can be friends with a woman that he finds attractive. He always wants to have sex with her.”

Five years later, when Harry and Sally bump into each other on a business flight, they pick up the conversation about friendship. At first, Harry tries to suggest an amendment to his earlier rule: that a man and a woman *can* be friends, *if* they are both involved in other relationships. But then he recants: “That doesn’t work either because what happens *then* is the person you’re involved with can’t understand why you need to be friends with the person you’re just friends with. Like, there’s something missing from the relationship, that you have to go outside to get it. Then when you say, *no, no, no, no, it’s not true, nothing is missing from the relationship*, the person you’re involved with accuses you of being secretly attracted to the person you’re friends with, which you probably are, I mean c’mon, who are you kidding.” The amendment is actually only an elaboration and reinforcement of the earlier prohibition.



When Harry and Sally meet up five years after *that*, Harry is getting divorced. He is sad and chastened and his know-it-all-ness has receded to tolerable levels. Sally, also on the heels of a breakup, is pleasantly surprised to discover she enjoys talking to him. For half of the rest of the movie Harry and Sally insist that they *are* friends, though their other friends don't believe it. "And the great thing is, I don't have to lie," Harry tells his pal, "because I'm not always thinking about how to get her into bed. I can just be myself."

Watching the movie again now, I feel sad, remembering how it was hailed as a delightful take on romance. It was my R.A.'s favorite movie—why? Because it reaffirmed the preeminence of "love"? True, by the end of the movie Sally has been paired off with Harry. But who would want him? He lies to all, or almost all, of his dates, and then tells himself that they made him do it. They *made* him, with their expectations and hopes. He thinks of his friendship with Sally as a sign of his developing enlightenment because he doesn't lie to her--not having to, since he isn't scheming to get her to sleep with him. When he *does* sleep with Sally, he freaks, treats her condescendingly, and then gaslights her about what happened--"I didn't intend to sleep with you but you were looking up at me with those puppy-dog eyes, what was I supposed to do?" Sally rightly tells him to go fuck himself and stops talking to him. But he is able to win her back by pleading with her that he *really* does love her and need her.

Only in a culture that indoctrinates girls into the ideology of heterosexual romance, would such a dismal day-late-and-dollar-short move work to convince Sally to

take him as her husband. Only in culture that offers so few choices for emotional and sexual fulfillment could marriage to an unenthusiastic and emotionally cowardly Billy Crystal be seen as the pinnacle of coupled bliss.

Despite the movie's having very little to do with friendship—the audience intuits from the beginning that this is no actual “friendship” but just an antechamber to a conventional romantic and sexual coupling, with marriage as the endgame—Harry's line about the impossibility of friendship between a man and woman has stuck. It stuck because it captured ideas that were already (long) in currency, and distilled them to a blunt statement of absolutes. Such a thing—friendship between the sexes— is impossible. Not just unlikely, *impossible*. And this, even though the world that Harry and Sally live in seems desperate for *more* possibilities of friendship, not fewer.

Aside from Harry, Sally has two friends, one whose name we never learn, and the other (played with classic depressive wit by Carrie Fisher) Sally wants early on to set up with Harry so that they don't drift apart. Because, Sally explains, friends always drift apart when they get coupled up, unless all parties are already friends. Given the scarceness—and wispieness! ready at any moment to blow away—of these friendships, combined with the prohibition against male-female friendships, no wonder there is such gigantic pressure on romantic relationships. Under these circumstances, romantic partnerships are the only ones that offer the hope (or just the illusion?) of companionship, deep emotional satisfaction, and long-term stability. Naturally, Sally is desperate to find her own.

At Wellesley, my handful of friends and I felt we didn't quite belong. We weren't that interested in boys but then again we weren't obviously gay either. Our intensity and our exclusivity made us suspect. We didn't much care how we appeared to others, except that it bonded us closer to one another.

Caleb, Joan's best friend from high school, was at Wesleyan, and he had his own passionate friendships with two other guys, their names said so frequently together that they became like a single name. When we went down to Wesleyan to visit, or they came to Wellesley, it was fascinating to see our bond reflected in theirs. We felt a sense of giddy exhilaration of meeting on the same ground, with the same understanding of what *relationships* could be, outside the confines of the binary of eros and philia. In general, Wesleyan seemed like a place where people were exploring anarchic intimacies. At least it looked that way to us, entering their world, meeting their friends, observing the easygoing sexual flow that ebbed and receded without seeming to follow the traditional patterns of "dating."

A few years later Joan told me about a weekend she spent with Caleb and Eli, in her parents' home in the small California town a few hours north of San Francisco. Joan and Caleb's relationship had encompassed many periods since their high-school best-friendship, including a stormy boyfriend-girlfriend phase followed by a period of estrangement, and now they were close once more. Also, Joan and *Eli* had had a year of cohabitation and sexytimes. Now all three of them were hanging out in the hammock and talking. And then the idle touching of one another—three people in a hammock, even a gigantic one, cannot *not* touch—became more focused. The incidental eroticism of bodies

compressed became the deliberate sexual energy of a threesome among friends.

What I remember most about her telling me about it later—aside from my feeling *I wish I had been there too!*—was her lack of panic about how this would change their relationships. I can't help but think again of *When Harry Met Sally*. When Harry and Sally surprise each other by having sex, the audience is not surprised, since the entire premise of the movie is that men and women cannot be friends. When, in the end, Harry and Sally, end up together, two central "truths" are reaffirmed: a) friendships between straight men and women can never work and b) that sex among friends will either destroy the relationship or transform it into romance (either way, obliterating the friendship). That my friends, in contrast, neither wished to make their bonds romance, nor worried about the end of the friendship made me swoon with giddiness and possibility, for them, for myself, for the world.

9. There was, at times, friction between my friends and my boyfriend(s). If sex and friendship are supposed, in our culture, to stay within their definitional lines, in order to be the things they are, then the spilling over outside the boundaries of the friendship becomes an ontological threat to the sexual-romantic relationship.

I felt this most acutely in college. And, especially, when, my Junior year, I fell in love more deeply than I'd ever been before with either of my two previous boyfriends. Senior year, Arthur and I were still together and I still felt saturated by my feelings for him. He was at Brown and many weekends I went to visit him. My friends saw this as a

bit of a betrayal. I was abandoning them, casting aside our unity. I was rogue, exploring other pleasures, having other adventures.

Once or twice they took me to task. Why must I spend SO MUCH time in Providence. I tried to explain what it was like, the physical longing to see and touch him. Once or twice I mentioned to Arthur that my friends were hurt at my being away. He wanted to reassure me that I was doing nothing wrong, he wanted to take my “side,” but his reassurances also carried the whiff of disapproval. In his view my friends were *too* attached. Such an attachment was unnatural. Perhaps even unhealthy. These were excessive friendships. Too much for their own good.

But one weekend I took Maggie with me down to Providence to visit Arthur. The three of us took acid. I remember the tenderness of being we three together. We were like small children in a world gone strange. We had to look out for each other. Each of our observations held something fresh and magical. We were a little scared but we had each other. I didn't feel divided between my love for Maggie and my love for Arthur. Both could coexist side by side. Each was its own thing.

There have been ups and downs in my friendships. There were a few devastating fights. In fact, with both Joan and Maggie, at different times, I had quarrels that I thought would lead to permanent breaks. There were times when I thought of these as refutations of the possibilities of these kind of passionate friendships. What was the point of these relationships if ultimately they failed? If in the end they led to heartbreak?

But! That would be like renouncing romantic-sexual love just because most of the time love affairs don't last forever. Oh, someone somewhere (or rather, everyone everywhere) had their heart broken in a love affair? Clearly the concept is a failure! Let's toss it out, repudiate it!... In the end it shouldn't matter whether any particular passionate friendships survived or not. The value of the concept is not in its eternal endurance.

Greedily, I also want to take the opposite tack. *It should mean something that with both Joan and Maggie, we found our way back to one another.* There it is—proof of concept. True, our relationships don't have the scorching, full-flame ardor as before. But my husband and I, in our love affair, also don't have the crazy, manic intensity of the early days and no one finds *that* strange.

10. I didn't know at the beginning of college about the people I am writing about now. Or rather, I knew about some of them—I wrote one of my college-application essays about Mapplethorpe—but I didn't know about their anarchic intimacies. When I read about David Wojnarowicz, he and Hujar were characterized as lovers—erasing the long non-sexual intimacy that they shared. Mapplethorpe's passionate friendship with Patti Smith was buried beneath the (often phobic) impulse to characterize him as the 80s homosexual *par excellence*, promiscuous, pornographic, anti-romantic. Sylvia Plath was portrayed as jealous of women, incapable of friendship with her sex, too ambitious and phallus-obsessed to be friends with other girls. And I hadn't yet come across Nan Goldin's work

at all.

When I first encountered David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives* my Junior year of college, I knew very little about his relationship with Hujar. I read and wept at the chapter about their visit to the charlatan AIDS doctor, but I didn't know the depths and intensity of their long-friendship. One of the things that struck me most about the book was his way of describing sex, and the searing eros of his anonymous sexual encounters. The dismantling of the sex-romance system—or rather its expansion into more, and more fulfilling, possibilities—seemed to me to be accomplished through the realm of sex. Have more. Do not confine it to marriage or long-term relationships. Defy the strictures of heterosexuality. Of vanilla. I didn't yet know about Rubin's work in "Thinking Sex," about the charmed inner circle of sexuality, and the reviled outer limits.<sup>40</sup> But I intuited that to break the conventions of relationships one must do it *through* sex, and by means of pushing of boundaries ever outwards.

Later, reading more about Wojnarowicz, and wanting to know more about Peter Hujar, I was moved to discover how much they loved one another, in spite of not being "partners" in the conventional sense of the word. It felt familiar and right, in the most moving way, to read about two people who felt a tremendous allegiance and loyalty and tenderness to one another, though they did not live together, were not married (such a thing, of course, was still impossible in the 1980s when they knew one another), were not romantically a couple. They were briefly lovers when they first met but for most of their relationship they didn't have sex, though they continued to find each other sexy, and there was an erotic tension that vibrated throughout the course of their relationship.

It became frustrating to me to see them referred to in books and articles, again and again, as “lovers,” not because the sexual connection between them was not real, but because it seemed to disregard *everything else* that was so beautiful and true and particular and *theirs* about the relationship.

At first Peter Hujar existed for me only as the Peter from “Living Close to the Knives,” the man whom Wojnarowicz loved and cared for. The man whose arms were “spinning like windmills” because illness had robbed him of feeling in his legs and of his sense of balance. The man who was dying at the beginning of the narrative but would be kept alive in Wojnarowicz’s work. It wasn’t until I got back to the U.S. and could fully access my college’s art library that I started to learn about Hujar’s own work. I was startled at first by the apparent dissimilarity in Hujar’s and Wojnarowicz’s visual styles. Hujar’s photographs were masterworks of classical portraiture, all purity of line and masterful control of tonality in the use of lighting and in the printing. Wojnarowicz’s visual work was often chaotic and deliberately “ugly”, and he borrowed liberally from the iconography of grocery-story flyers and Mexican wrestling posters. Pastiche and collage were techniques he used frequently. It was hard for me to reconcile the artistic kinship between the two men. Although I was from the first struck by the beauty and intimacy of Hujar’s portraits, it took some time for me to see the way he used classicism to dissident ends. Ultimately the bond between the artists was not linked to some aesthetic sameness but was rather a deep emotional, moral and erotic kinship that transcended the boundaries of relationship hierarchy and that fueled work of compelling political impact.



Visiting Nan Goldin's show at the Whitney in 1996, I was transported, not just by the beauty of the images, but by the repetition of faces in picture after picture, over time. Aside from Nan's lover Brian, who beat her and left her for dead, I couldn't tell exactly what the nature of the relationships in the pictures were. Or rather, I *could* see the nature of the relationships, because the pictures themselves told the stories, I just couldn't fit them into the off-the-shelf boxes: friendship, sex/romance. It was not possible to see a clear hierarchy between love affairs and friendships. Lovers were pictured nude and so were friends. Conventional relationships were beside the point, they were not particularly glorified in her work, as they were in almost all other arenas of the culture.

Exploring Goldin's work and her milieu, learning about her great friend Cookie Mueller's life and writings, reading about Hujar and Wojnarowicz, I started thinking that, though sex has so often been positioned as the ultimate subversion of cultural conformity, these artists were also enacting the radical possibilities of love and friendship. What if we were to remove the *cordon sanitaire* between sex and friendship? What would happen if we expanded the possibilities for human relationships—with or without genital sexual activity—and allowed all kinds of intimacies to flourish?

I feel a certain apprehension, writing about the erotic connection between Plath and Sexton. I worry that people will think I am arguing that Plath and Sexton were lovers. The desire to sensationalize their art and lives and deaths—and the backlash resistance to reading them biographically or affectively—creates a context that is overheated and also paranoid. Like I feel right now.

The word erotic, too, is misunderstood. It is so often equated with genital sexual contact, that it is difficult to look past that blunt definition towards something more expansive and diffuse. Audre Lorde tackled this misdefinition in her essay “Uses of the Erotic,” writing, “The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women.”<sup>41</sup> The subtitle of Lorde’s essay is “The Erotic as Power.” Power, in fact, and its unequal distribution between men and women is precisely why the erotic has been so sharply limited. Women have been taught to respond with fear and suspicion to their own erotic powers, and to imagine that eros should only occur in the context of the marital bedroom.

11. Thinking about this project, describing it in its early stages, I have used the term “queer friendship.” It seemed to me that there was something decidedly queer about the friendships I was describing, and that the concept of friendship was being queered by these friends. But what I’m talking about both is and isn’t related to sexuality, in the same way that these friendships both are and aren’t about sex. That is, that the relationships I’m talking about aren’t related in any clear way to sexual orientation or preference. This project benefits greatly from queer theory and sexuality studies, but part of the point of my project is to unsettle the primacy of sex—or at least the sex-romance system—from the way we conceive of love and relationships. And yet I suppose this project, at least in one way, is perfectly aligned with queer studies. After all Foucault once argued that “the

development towards which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship.”<sup>42</sup>

Then again I’ve also foundered over the word “friendship.” I’m not sure if the fault is primarily with our language—that there are too few words to describe the bonds between people, and that in between lovers and friends there isn’t anything. Or if the fault is mostly in the narrowness of our conceptions of relationship themselves. The two issues are related, of course. I stumble over and over with this. Why bother using the word *friend* if in the end I am mostly claiming that these relationships overflow friendship? In the end the word *friend* both fails and doesn’t. It fails in that it is defined too narrowly. It remains because words can be capacious.

I suppose, in the absence of coining a new word, I want to make room in friendships for what may seem antithetical to its meaning. In the end I don’t want to reject the word friendship, though I chafe at the narrowness of its usual definition, since I want to claim these relationships *as* friendships, and at the same time show how they overflow the word itself.

George Haggerty’s seminal work on queer masculinity in the eighteenth century *Men in Love*, includes the striking anecdote of a colleague in early modern cultural studies searching for a word to describe a particular kind of desire and dynamics between women, a “romantic friendship” that also included “the element of lust.” Haggerty points out that Western culture already has a word for that, and it is “love.” As a vigorous

debate ensues, Haggerty points out that “love has functioned in Western culture precisely because of the ways in which it euphemizes desire (lust), and a heteronormative culture has always been able to use it to short-circuit, as it were, questions of sexuality and /or same-sex desire.”<sup>43</sup> *Love* is simultaneously large enough to contain these relationships, and deliberately obscuring our view of them.

Nan Goldin mused, *In my family of friends, there is a desire for the intimacy of the blood family, but also a desire for something more open-ended. Roles aren't so defined.*<sup>44</sup>

In one way, *family of friends* reflects the failure of language, but it is also a way to expand the vocabulary of relationships. To bridge the gap between friendship and kinship systems. To explain something that requires explanation since it defies and spills over the conventional definitions. There is a groping in language because language hasn't yet given us the proper words to describe these things. Or perhaps culture has warped, by limiting the meaning of, the words—*friendship* and *love*—that otherwise could be capacious and complex enough to work.

I also want to lay claim to the potential and possibility of relationships changing over time. I want to help undo the sense of a normative trajectory. I want to trouble the distinction between sex and love. I want to honor the relationships people want to have. I want everyone to have the tools and language for laying out and negotiating the terms of the relationship, even as those may change.

To trouble the distinction between friendship and romance does not mean to flatten all bonds into an indistinct soup—but rather to acknowledge that things can be messier and yet also more precise and more their own than we give them credit for. I want also to acknowledge the misogynistic and homophobic *ways* in which friendship has been kept from the top of the relationship hierarchy, and the misogynistic and homophobic reasons *why*.

12. My choice to attend a women’s college was in part an attempt to enter the world I had built in my imagination from the stories my mother told me about her growing up. Unlike her, I’d grown up in Europe and though I’d spent time in the U.S., visiting with family, I’d never gone to an American school, and my ideas about American life were heavily influenced by stories of her childhood in Washington State in the 1950s. I pictured a women’s college as a realm in which things were neatly divided, studies and feminine friendship during the school week, boys and dating on the weekends. (I’d also been a devoted, if somewhat baffled reader, of *Seventeen*, where the world was similarly divided between female friendship on the one hand and romance with boys on the other.) The clarity of such a world appealed to me.

But, once there, my fantasy of 1956 small-town America began to dissolve around me. I found I didn’t like going into Cambridge for parties at Harvard or MIT. I hated the ritual of taking the bus—the atmosphere accurately captured in the “Riding” chapter of Susan

Orlean's first book *Saturday Night*.<sup>45</sup> I hated the apparent calculation of the whole thing. I hated kegs. I hated the sense of entitlement from MIT frat guys. I hated the warnings given by our dorm's R.A.s, to always observe the buddy system. I hated the idea that without such a system we were signaling our vulnerability as easy prey for college rapists. I hated the obvious resentment and disdain of the other women at Harvard parties, *What are you doing here? How pathetic, you have to actually come out here to meet men. Can't you see you're not wanted?*

None of it appealed, and it all seemed... not worth it. Because what was the goal, ultimately? To meet a guy, to fuck, to have a boyfriend? But what kind of boyfriend, under these circumstances? The men seemed so self-congratulatory. And at the same time, looking to one another endlessly for reassurance that they were... sufficiently or appropriately masculine? It only took a few weekends of this kind of partying for my antiquated fantasies about life at Wellesley to dissolve.

At the same time, my sense of awe for the women around me grew. Although we didn't think of ourselves as women then. We were girls. We didn't need to be mature or sophisticated. We didn't try to be sexy. Watching movies on the tv in the dark of one of our dorm rooms, five to a bed, like a pile of snoozing puppies, our legs flung over one another. Heads on tummies. Breathing in sync. Attuned to one another and the flickerings on screen.

*Oh, but of course, you were among your own sex,* I hear a voice in my head say. *No big deal. What's so special about that.* And then my mother's voice, on the other hand, "why do you keep saying *relationship?*" This project is an attempt to answer that question.

13. This project exists at (one of) the intersection(s) between queer studies and feminist theory. The problem of love is both a feminist one and queer one, in that the terms of love within the culture have been set by people who were not queer and not women. I subscribe to Shulamith Firestone's point that any book on radical feminism that did not tackle the problem of love would be a failure, because the the concept of heterosexual love is central to women's oppression (then and still now). Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" ably demonstrates not just the assumption but the imperative of straightness within Western culture.

Gayle Rubin, though, has critiqued the apparent "displacement of sexual preference with a form of gender solidarity."<sup>46</sup> While I agree that the idea, and effects, of such a displacement are troubling—because it "sanitizes" female friendship, evacuating sex from lived relationships, because it reduces, or papers over, the specificity of sexual relationships, because it dilutes the meaning of the word "lesbian" to something unrecognizable as itself. Yet at the same time I too want to displace sexual preference. Not to place "solidarity," or even friendship, above it. But rather to displace the hierarchical preeminence of sexual preference in favor of whatever the subjects

*themselves* want to prioritize—whether it is sexual preference, or kinship, or friendship, or solidarity, or some form of relationality for which we do not yet have adequate words.

To do this work, I look to DuPlessis’s idea of “both/and vision.”

This is the end of the either-or, dichotomized universe, proposing monism (is this really the name for what we are proposing? or is it dialectics?) in opposition to dualism, a dualism pernicious because it valorizes one side above another, and makes a hierarchy where there were simply twain... A both/and vision born of shifts, contraries, negations, contradictions; linked to personal vulnerability and need.<sup>47</sup>

I want to deprivileging genital sexual contact as the either/or factor in thinking through relationships. It’s not so much *deprivileging sex*, as refuting the “this over that” thinking.

While all of the relationships in this study took place before the marriage equality of today, the examples they provide are important both within their own historical contexts, but also as path lights for alternative forms of love. Indeed, Michael Warner has argued that there exists a structuring mandate towards normalcy patterned on heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Being able to stake out different ways of loving one another may be even more crucial now that marriage is not just a choice but a mandate.<sup>48</sup>



14. Recently I've been drawn to the concept of relationship anarchy. It is a new concept<sup>49</sup> and it has only begun to be explored, primarily by those in the polyamory community. But its ideas have been practiced since—well, probably as long as there have been human relationships—without there being a specific language to explain it, and very often in contradiction to dominant relationship norms. My friends and I, in our own small ways, were doing relationship anarchy. And all of the subjects of this project were doing it too—more grandly and beautifully than I imagined was possible. Without explicitly having understood it then, I realize now that that is part of what drew me to these artists. I felt inspired by what they had created. Not just their art but their lives and loves. I hope this project—the exploration of those lives, loves, and art—will suggest some of the pathways and possibilities shimmering in the atmosphere and available to all of us.

## Chapter 2

Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz

### *Prologue*

I happened upon David Wojnarowicz's work in the spring of my Junior year in Italy. My friend Joan, visiting me in Bologna, left me her paperback copy of *Close to the Knives* and I read it, reeling with grief and incomprehension. A few weeks earlier my childhood friend Gemma had committed suicide. So far away from the scenes of our friendship and anyone who had known her, I struggled to explain to my friends in Italy who exactly Gemma had been: unconventionally brilliant, mercurial in her moods, almost mean at times in her expressions of irritation or frustration, but with a depth of empathy that was unparalleled.

This was my first real experience with grief. True, when I was younger both my great-grandmother and a close family friend had died, but these women were in their nineties, and while I missed them, their losses were not unexpected, and they did not seem to defy the natural order of things. Gemma's dying at 19 struck me like a lightning bolt of horror and confusion. Away that whole year, before the advent of email and cell phones and cheap international calling, I hadn't kept abreast of what was happening in her life. It wasn't until after her death that I learned about the odd and disturbing behavior that had caused her college to ask her to take a leave of absence. That she had then been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia had been kept hushed by her dazed and terrified

parents who were eager to get her cured and back in school. While taking the year off Gemma had worked part-time in a pathology lab at the medical school in her town where she had access to the arsenic she used in her suicide.

Each part of the story that detailed her suffering was more upsetting than the next but ultimately it boiled down to this: she was no longer here, and there was nothing that could be done about it. The fact that it was final and irreversible made the least sense of all: no one would be able to touch her again, she would never again make the skewering curveball jokes that had first made me love her. All that brilliance and wit and feeling were gone.

Except that, in remembering them, in remembering her, I still felt them all so vividly. Confused and aching, I somehow understood that thinking about Gemma, and talking about her, were ways of keeping her near.

That spring, as I read and reread *Close to the Knives*, its mixture of grief and tenderness and sexiness and rage was a balm to my inchoate anguish<sup>50</sup>. It struck me that Peter Hujar felt vividly alive in David Wojnarowicz's writing—even as his very dying was described. And that likewise David himself felt alive to me through his own words, though he had died the summer before I read them.

Because I came to know the two artists *in* a moment of my own grief, and *through* Wojnarowicz's grief-struck portrait of his relationship with Hujar, "Living Close to the Knives," I cannot entirely disconnect grief from my way of approaching the artists. Still,

I want to make the case here that grief is a crucial lens for understanding the history of their relationship and their work.

### *1. Mourning and the Elegy*

George Haggerty has written powerfully about the elegiac tradition in poetry and its making possible, in the proto-homophobic culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, expressions of male-male desire—though, crucially, such expressions could only recognize eros when the possibility of its consummation was foreclosed by death.<sup>51</sup> Haggerty also claims space for a mourning that, instead of simply accepting the consolations of a “spiritual” eros, regards mourning itself as a physical and erotic act of communion between the departed and the partner left behind. Grief extends the erotic connection between the living and the dead.

Against a Freudian tradition that opposes *mourning* to *melancholia*<sup>52</sup> —and assigns health and maturity to that which moves the bereaved into an acceptance of the finality of loss and back to normalcy, and pathology to the melancholic bereavement which refuses to move along back to reality and productivity—Haggerty problematizes the very notion of normalcy, especially for queer subjects. Michael Moon has also called attention to the capitalist underpinnings of such a concept of mourning:

One of the things that seem most wrong with the notion of grief and mourning that informs Freud’s idea of ‘working through’ is the considerable degree to which that idea is constructed under the signs of

compulsory labor and the cash nexus. One must dig one's way out of grief, advisers in Freud's tradition say, to be rewarded by a return to 'normalcy.'<sup>53</sup>

Certainly for David Wojnarowicz there was no possibility of a return to normalcy following Peter Hujar's death. His emotional anchor had been cut away, but also his whole world was being upended. And he himself was dying. There was no working "through" grief to get to some more *normal* other side.

Alongside the melancholia, that Freud considered a fixation upon the lost object, is a longing for lost time. A desire for the past to pierce through into the present. This permeability of the boundary between past and present is something that appears throughout Hujar and Wojnarowicz's relationship. There was the time before the two men met, the time of their relationship, and the time when David Wojnarowicz outlived Peter Hujar, and each period informed the others.

Wojnarowicz and Hujar met in 1980 when Wojnarowicz was 26 and Hujar was 46. At the time of their meeting Hujar had already had a whole adulthood of experiences as a gay man and as a fine artist. These were points of connection for the two men, and Hujar's greater experience was alluring to Wojnarowicz. While Hujar had not had any commercial success he was a charismatic (if difficult) figure in the New York art world and his monograph *Portraits in Life and Death* was an object of cult admiration.<sup>54</sup> He

was “the least-known great photographer in the United States” his friend the writer Stephen Koch has said.<sup>55</sup> But Wojnarowicz *did* know of him, admired the work, and was awed to meet its creator. Hujar felt himself to be on the downward slope of his life, and meeting Wojnarowicz offered him an opportunity for renewal—a new and complex emotional connection with a kindred spirit, an opportunity to mentor a young artist. Hujar saw in Wojnarowicz something that no one had yet seen in him—that he could be a very good and successful painter, when previously his work had consisted of writing, performance art and music—and was able to guide the young artist with a wisdom and a shrewdness that he had never been able to use in his own career.

In their relationship there seems always to have been both a backwards and a forwards glance. Wojnarowicz yearned towards the prehistory of their relationship and his own nostalgia for a time in gay life that he had not known firsthand but could glimpse through Hujar. The latter part of their relationship itself, in which AIDS and the suffering it wrought figured so prominently, was also suffused with backwards and forwards thinking: backwards to the time before the plague, and forwards into an unknown and terrifying future. In the time after Hujar’s death, this rearward- and forward-looking orientation, continued for Wojnarowicz, backwards to when Hujar was still alive, to all the moments in their knowing and loving one another, to the time even before they’d met, and forwards to Wojnarowicz’s own death, and the queer legacy he too would leave behind. This chapter will follow a similar backwards- and forwards-looking orientation as it traces the bonds between the two men.

## *2. Peter before David*

Peter Hujar's life was marked by brokenness and failure. Of Hujar's early poverty-stricken years in New York and New Jersey, Stephen Koch has said, "The world that Weegee took pictures of, Peter was born into."<sup>56</sup> Although Hujar survived his neglected childhood and became a brilliant portrait photographer, he had no commercial success and spent much of his adult life in poverty before dying of AIDS in 1987. Hujar's life could easily be read as tragedy, and there are no doubt tragic aspects to it, but I propose here an alternate reading, which I believe is more accurate, and more valuable. Following on Judith Halberstam's insights into queer failure,<sup>57</sup> such a reading foregrounds the way that Hujar's failures were also routes into novel and significant aesthetic and relational forms. This reading understands Hujar's orientation towards brokenness—both aesthetically and relationally—as what led him to extremely rich friendships, and an important way of visualizing the world through his photography.

Hujar's romantic history too could be seen in terms of failure. He was reportedly remarkably charismatic, and his self-portraits attest to his striking looks. It was not difficult for him to attract partners; the trouble was in making a relationship work. He had significant relationships with the artists Joseph Raffael and Paul Thek, and with the gay-rights activist Jim Fournatt, but those had ended by the early 70s. Hujar's last major romantic relationship was in the mid-70s, with Robert Levithan, who would go on to become a successful writer and psychotherapist. Koch quipped that Levithan was "the ideal husband" whose qualities included good looks, wealth, charm, honesty, humor, and

generosity. Koch recalled this as, “the one time in Peter’s life where, as a result of a relationship, I saw him happy. He was actually happy around Robert... He was having *fun*.” Koch noted that “fun” was not a word often associated with Hujar, given both his temperament and his cyclical depressions. This rare period of romantic bliss was not to last, however, and, according to Koch, “Peter proceeded to destroy the relationship, as he did all love relationships. And then he was alone”<sup>58</sup>

Although Stephen Koch says Hujar’s romantic life reads like the subject of a Cole Porter song: “he was just no good at love,”<sup>59</sup> this failure ought to be seen in the context of his tremendous success at friendship. Among those with whom he formed close friendships were Koch, Lebowitz, Vince Aletti, John Erdman and Gary Schneider, Lynn Davis, Ethyl Eichelberger, Jackie Curtis, and many more. Many of Hujar’s friendships seem to have contained an erotic valence. In fact, the expansion of eros into friendship is something typical of Hujar’s relationships. For example, Vince Aletti recalls the usual response to meeting a new boyfriend of Hujar’s, “There was always a certain feeling of jealousy of the new boyfriend. Like, why couldn’t it be me? Which I think a lot of Peter’s friends secretly felt.”<sup>60</sup> It is striking that Aletti describes this feeling as being widespread among Hujar’s friends. In other words, it is not the anomalous jealousy of a lonely person relegated to friendship when more was desired, but rather a way of *being friends* with Hujar, in which feelings of attraction, and even longing, were part and parcel of the relationship, even if those feelings were not consummated by sexual intercourse.

There were also those friendships in which sexual feelings had been consummated and then, even as they ceased to be lovers, they remained friends. This is



true most notably of David Wojnarowicz, whose friendship with Hujar was at the heart of his artistic practice, but also, of the major conceptual artist Paul Thek. It was also the case with Bruce de Ste. Croix, who was the sitter in a triptych of images that are arresting for their grace, eroticism, and frank portrayal of the physicality of the male orgasm. It is particularly striking that these images were created some years after Hujar and Ste. Croix had ceased to be lovers. Their enduring bonds of friendship nevertheless allowed for a mutual recognition and exploration of sex and sexiness at a level of graphicness never before seen outside of commercial pornography, and not attempted again in fine art until Robert Mapplethorpe's images a few years later.

“In gay porn,” Laura Marks writes, “the difference that impels the narrative is often one of power--in myriad, unstable relationships such as hustler/john, black/white, master/protégé.”<sup>61</sup> It is telling that, despite their sexiness and graphicness, the images in the Ste. Croix triptych do not suggest such a narrative of power and submission, perhaps, indeed, because the relationship between the players, both in front of and behind the camera, is among the least hierarchically freighted there is: that of friendship. For the creation of these images to have occurred, there had to be trust, but also an understanding of sexuality that spills over the limiting boundaries of such terms as *lovers*, *hook-ups*, or *tricks*. This understanding encourages the erotic intimacy that can—though it is not frequently allowed to—exist between friends.

Likewise, Hujar's friend Gary Schneider also posed for him several times. Though the two were never lovers, their friendship was suffused with an erotic potentiality that makes its way into the picture-making process. Schneider is the subject,

in particular, of two remarkable images, one seated in contortion with his back to the camera and one leg stretched around his neck. In the other Schneider has rolled onto his back and swung his legs back towards the floor. Schneider looks into the camera with a disarming frankness. Posing this way, the result might well have been an image of awkwardness or even absurdity, but instead the photograph is one of grace and playfulness, with a significant dash of sexiness. Of making these images, Schneider described Hujar's method as "waiting for the person to come to him and just being very present."<sup>62</sup>

This waiting and being present suggests the lack of a controlling agenda that was at the heart of Hujar's process and aesthetic, and that puts him at such odds so many other photographers of his generation. Schneider continues: "all of a sudden you were inside his camera with him. For me that was a major moment. Very sexual, very sensual, and very intimate. And I think that's why he got those portraits that feel like he's in some kind of really private space."<sup>63</sup> This sense of being *inside his camera with him* suggests Hujar's ability to create a magical space—not just within the studio, but inside the camera itself— in which he and the sitter were alone together, on an adventure, a journey together. The sense of ease and possibility necessary to roam freely on this journey is predicated on trust. The vulnerability of the sitter is not here pressed for advantage, but rewarded with trust, and the blooming of eros where it is not typically expected.

This eros, allowed to bloom outside of strictly romantic and sexual unions is evident in Hujar's early friendship with Paul Thek, and within their group of close friends, the

subject of an exhibition at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art.<sup>64</sup> Thek and Hujar were to become lovers in the '60s, but in the '50s Hujar's boyfriend was the artist Joseph Raffael, and Thek's was the theater designer Peter Harvey. Along with Harvey's cousin, Paul Fisher, the young men formed a circle of friends who shared a common interest in art, and who traveled together, and played together, and made portraits of one another that reveal the intimacy, and joyfulness, and beauty of their queer friendships. This, moreover, at a time when homophobia was being enforced at the state level through such mechanisms as Eisenhower's Executive Order 10450, which, in enlarging the criteria for defining security risks beyond political factors, created an equivalency between disloyalty and "sexual perversion." The climate of suspicion around men who strayed from normative masculinity and heterosexuality became even more heated as the cold war and its mushrooming rhetoric of disloyalty generated ever more paranoia and anxiety. In the midst of this, Hujar, Thek and their circle were able to create an oasis of playfulness and sexiness and languor to counteract the grim imperative to conform.

While *sexual* partnership is typically the focus of both the supporters and critics of queer life in America, the images from this period of these men's lives show how important *friendship* is to the queer circle that Hujar formed with Thek, Raffael, Harvey and Fisher. The images they created have an erotic quality, no doubt, but particularly seen together, they create a vision of unabashed queer companionship that defies the oppressive homophobia and heteronormativity of the time.



Fig. 2.1. Theodore Newman. *Untitled (Paul Fisher and Paul Thek with garland crowns, Green Hill, Rhode Island)*, 1957. Collection of Peter Harvey.

Crucially, the erotic quality that emanates from the images of these young men is not *at odds* with friendship, but rather *in concert* with it. The picture above, of Paul Thek and Paul Fisher exemplifies the earthy, playful, and romantic vibe that pervades the images, whether they be of lovers (such as Thek was at the time with Harvey, or Hujar was with Raffael) or friends. In fact, looking at the photographs it is difficult to tell which pairings feature lovers, and which feature friends. This is not to erase the difference between lovers and friends, but rather to point out the sensual warmth and playfulness that imbued both the sexual and the non-sexual relationships. Although the world around them was engaged in a homosexual witch hunt which might have had the effect of

suggesting a deeper retreat into the closet, this group exhibited an effortless gay glamour, in which art, whimsy, flirtation, and sex each had their part.

### 3. *David and Peter*

At the time that Wojnarowicz and Hujar met, Wojnarowicz saw himself as a writer (he had found a small publisher for a collection of monologues, “Sounds in the Distance,” in which he wrote out the stories other people told him), a photographer (his now-seminal project “Rimbaud in New York” had just been accepted for publication in the magazine *Little Caesar*), and a musician (the band he had recently formed with his friends, Three Teens Kill Four, No Motive had played their first gig to a big crowd).<sup>65</sup> Stephen Koch described Wojnarowicz as someone whose “gift was flying around in every possible direction, grabbing for everything.”<sup>66</sup> Hujar, meanwhile “was getting very near the end of his rope.”<sup>67</sup> Though insiders to the world of photography, including his fellow artists, recognized Hujar’s genius, no one else did, and he was feeling worn down.<sup>68</sup> Wojnarowicz himself said that at the time of their meeting he himself “had a lot of hope, and Peter had none.”<sup>69</sup>

The two men met at a gay bar on 4<sup>th</sup> Street and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue in late 1980, and when, later that night, they got back to Hujar’s loft, he showed Wojnarowicz a copy of his *Portraits of Life and Death*, saying “This is the kind of work I do.”<sup>70</sup> In fact, Wojnarowicz already knew the book, and was a little bit intimidated that the man he’d just met was the artist whose work he so admired. Wojnarowicz noted in his journal that because he knew Hujar first through his photographs, he thought of him as an artist rather

than a person, and that it took time for him to fully see him as a person.<sup>71</sup> This moment of meeting and admiration of Hujar's work is an important one for the relationship, and one that Wojnarowicz would return to after Hujar's death, when he filmed himself flipping through the pages of *Portraits of Life and Death*, for the unfinished work "film for Peter Hujar."<sup>72</sup> Jennifer Doyle notes that the monograph was not just a collection of images Wojnarowicz admired artistically, but also, in part, a record of a time that Wojnarowicz had never known—"the prehistory of their relationship"—including the erotic and creative partnership of Hujar and Thek<sup>73</sup>, and the kind of gay life that they had experienced in the 50s and 60s, and that Wojnarowicz, never having known it himself, experienced a sense of longing for.

The sexual dimension of the relationship between Hujar and Wojnarowicz was brief, lasting only about a month or so,<sup>74</sup> but even as that element ended, the relationship continued, blossoming into the most important connection either men would ever experience. Wojnarowicz told Carr that the connection between them was "a very complicated friendship/relationship that took time to find a track to run along."<sup>75</sup>

This is an arresting statement and warrants some unpacking. First let us consider Wojnarowicz's use of "friendship/relationship" to describe his connection with Hujar. This is notable given how frequently the Wojnarowicz-Hujar relationship has been categorized by others as one between "lovers," rather than "friends," though the actual sexual relationship was such a brief moment in their passionate seven-year long intimacy and Wojnarowicz refers to Hujar as his "best friend" in "Living Close to the Knives."<sup>76</sup>

The second is the actual dearth of words to describe what the two men shared—and indeed the dearth of imagined possibilities within the field of relationships.

The word “friend,” of course, has had a complicated role in describing queer relationships. It has long been used as a euphemism for “lover” and “partner,” both by those forced into the closet by homophobia, and by those eager to erase evidence of same-sex love (from “polite” society, as well as from the history of art, literature, etc.) Efforts made by those in queer movements, both pre- and post-Stonewall, to legitimize same-sex relationships have contributed to diminishing the “unspeakability” of same-sex love, and indeed of queer sex. At the same time there has been a strain within straight culture of phobic fixation on sex and sex acts as *the* defining lens through which to see queer folks, and particularly gay men, flattening and erasing all complexity in their relationships. This has taken the form of demonizing gay men by suggesting that they are obsessed with sex and bring that obsession into inappropriate arenas like teaching school or leading boy-scout groups, but it has also filtered into a mainstream way of describing gay men’s relationships. The two most recent articles on Peter Hujar in the *New York Times*<sup>77</sup> and the most recent article in *Time*, all refer to him summarily as David Wojnarowicz’s lover. And this is after the publication of Cynthia Carr’s biography of Wojnarowicz which devoted whole chapters to the Hujar-Wojnarowicz relationship and made explicit the short duration of their affair within their long, rich and highly complex relationship.

The problem, of course, is that we have so few words to describe these complex relationships in the first place, and, inter-relatedly, that we have trouble even conceiving

of various forms of relationships, when the options are relentlessly narrowed down to a binary opposition between “friends” and “lovers.” Wojnarowicz’s use of the clunky “friendship/relationship” shows the inadequacy of existing language to describe his connection with Hujar. Stephen Koch on the David-Peter relationship: “It was not a friendship. I had a friendship with Peter, and that’s too mild a word for what went on between David and Peter. It made any friendship look trivial.”<sup>78</sup>

But even more importantly is Wojnarowicz’s description that their relationship “took time to find a track to run along.” The two obviously available tracks are “lovers” and “friends with no erotic connection”—when neither of these was available to Hujar and Wojnarowicz, they had to search for an alternate track. In fact, I would go further and say that they had to *create* an alternate track. As they moved into the post-affair phase of their relationship, Hujar became a combination of things to Wojnarowicz: a mentor, a confidante, a father-figure, an older sibling, a compatriot in modern American gay life, a colleague in the art world, a companion in adventure.

Not everyone could understand the nature of Hujar and Wojnarowicz’s intimacy, or the shift from lovers to something else. That Wojnarowicz, who was at the very beginning of his career (and who as yet had no career as a painter) would get involved with an older, respected figure in the art world created a ready-made narrative peg for the relationship. “People who are not so well disposed towards David regard [the friendship] as an opportunistic move,”<sup>79</sup> Koch observed before wryly pointing out the absurdity of the supposed calculation: “if you’re going to go and find some powerful figure in the art world to manipulate into putting you in a kingpin position, Peter Hujar is the *last* person



to go up to. So if it was opportunism, it wasn't wildly bright."<sup>80</sup> Still, the narrative highlights two things: the suspicion towards relationships that don't fall into neat categories of intimacy, *and* the absence of imagined possibilities for alternatives to those ready-made categories. Since there were no narratives to already understand the Peter-David connection, a pre-existing narrative must be made to fit.

Carr quotes Stephen Koch on the evolving relationship between Wojnarowicz and Hujar, noting that Hujar "adjusted, moving into the paternal role, and when he found the paternal role, it actually was very fulfilling for them both."<sup>81</sup> But "paternal" *doesn't* really explain the nature of the bond between the two men. There are ways of trying to describe the Hujar-Wojnarowicz relationship, father-son, parent-child, mentor-mentee, former lovers, but, all of these nomenclatures reinforce the need for theorizing more complex and expansive ways of knowing one another.

Even some of those who would eventually come around to accepting the relationship had some trouble accepting it early on. Carr recounts that Hujar's close friend, photography critic Vince Aletti felt jealous and put-off upon first meeting Wojnarowicz: "I remember thinking that David was not very good-looking, that he was kind of gawky and not particularly interesting... But—it's funny. As soon as I saw Peter's photos of him, I realized what Peter saw in him. Then I could see how sexy he was. It was like seeing him through Peter's eyes in those pictures, and then suddenly I thought, oh my god, this guy is amazing. And I basically just got over myself because Peter was so taken with him, and clearly there was something very solid there."<sup>82</sup>



Fig. 2.2. David Wojnarowicz, by Peter Hujar

One crucial point of connection for the two men was their shared experience of childhood abuse and neglect. As Koch points out of Hujar, “if you had been an abused child in any way, you were instantly made a friend.” Like Hujar, Wojnarowicz had grown up in chaotic circumstances, with a violent, abusive father, and a largely absent mother. Fran Lebowitz, who became close to Wojnarowicz during the period of Hujar’s illness, talked at length with him on every subject but “especially his childhood, which was hair-raising.” As she points out, “Peter also had had a hair-raising childhood.”<sup>83</sup> Koch said of the two artists “A big part of their bond was the mutual recognition of that level of woundedness and hurt.”<sup>84</sup>

In addition to recognizing one another as fellow survivors of traumatic childhoods, Hujar accepted Wojnarowicz unconditionally, and believed unfailingly in his artistic potential. An anecdote told by Carr from the early months of their knowing one another illustrates this combination of linked affirmations. In March of 1981 Wojnarowicz had an affair with someone, to whom he showed his art. The man found the work disturbing and was further shocked by Wojnarowicz's revelation that he had once been a hustler. Wojnarowicz, upset by the man's reaction, found Hujar at their local bar and told him that

he was going to go through his work and destroy everything that was disturbing or aggressive, and Peter said, "Don't do that. Don't compromise. If you believe in your work and think it's good, don't care what other people think." And David really took that in—he had total respect for Peter. And he writes in his journal about going home that night and taking out the drawings he'd done and some of his photos and looking at them and thinking, "You know, these are pretty good. And, I'm not going to throw them away."<sup>85</sup>

Hujar's belief in Wojnarowicz as a *valuable person* is here hand-in-hand with Hujar's belief in Wojnarowicz as a *talented artist*—at the same time that Wojnarowicz's own belief in himself was being undermined on both fronts by conventional notions of respectability. Unlike the man Wojnarowicz hooked up with, Hujar did not judge Wojnarowicz or distance himself from him because of concern that Wojnarowicz had been damaged by his abusive childhood, nor did Hujar judge him for having been a

hustler as a teenager, instead he accepted Wojnarowicz as he was, including all the aspects of his life and all the experiences it contained.

Perhaps because Hujar believed unconditionally in Wojnarowicz and his talent, Hujar became for Wojnarowicz a recurring figure in his artwork. In fact, according to Carr, for Wojnarowicz “Peter was the central figure of the human, that he wanted to celebrate.”<sup>86</sup> Later Wojnarowicz would say of his oeuvre, “Everything I made, I made for Peter.”<sup>87</sup>

In or around 1982, Wojnarowicz photographed Hujar with his eyes closed, lying down on a boardwalk.



Fig. 2.3. Untitled (Peter Hujar), c. 1982 by David Wojnarowicz.

Wojnarowicz chose one image from that shoot (slightly different from the one above) to make into a stencil which he used in his painting “Untitled (Green Head).” Hujar’s reclining figure occupies the left half of the canvas, while the right reproduces it with an

exploding head. Wojnarowicz went on to create *fourteen* other works using the same image of Hujar, including *Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian*.

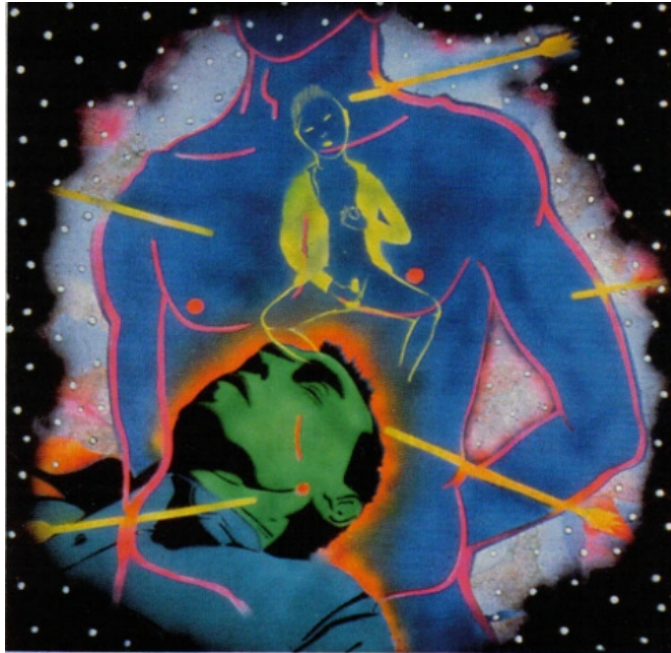


Fig. 2.4 *Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian*, 1982 by David Wojnarowicz.

Koch points out that Hujar didn't just believe in Wojnarowicz's artistry, but actually helped mold it and give it a needed maturity, arguing that Wojnarowicz had great talent "but it was all over the place. He absolutely did not know the difference between pretend avant-garde dreck and serious innovation. And that is one thing that Peter had just unshakeably. And that David needed."<sup>88</sup> Hujar also recognized Wojnarowicz as a painter, at a time when Wojnarowicz was not particularly engaged with that media. Koch recounts:

Peter at some point saw a sketch of David's and... a revelation: 'David is a visual artist.' He announced it to everyone: 'David is a visual artist. He's going to be a painter. He's going to come to my studio and he's going to paint.' All of a sudden this immaculate and empty space that used to be Peter's loft was filled with David Wojnarowicz-iana, and a canvas on the floor on which David was painting! And one of the paintings was *Peter Hujar Dreaming*.<sup>89</sup>

At the same time that Hujar was inspiring Wojnarowicz's artistic production, and guiding the direction of his output, the friendship had reenergized Hujar's own practice—and expanded his vision. Koch notes that in giving Wojnarowicz direction as an artist he had found a new direction for himself. And Hujar's own art changed as a result of the relationship: "It became more drastic, more visionary." The series of photographs that Koch refers to as *Desolation Row* feature abandoned buildings, ruins, the detritus of the urban misery which Hujar knew well from his childhood, was almost all done with Wojnarowicz by his side. Because Wojnarowicz had a car, they could drive places together and Peter would shoot. Koch notes that this was a shared experience between the two men, in which they sought encounters with the things they both found fascinating, and that the collaborative quality of these expeditions led to a series of images highlighting "beauty in brokenness."<sup>90</sup> "The images were of desolation," Koch explains. "Peter never ceased to be a portraitist," but in knowing and collaborating with

Wojnarowicz, “he developed this other visionary sense of desolation, which was really with him until the end of his life.”<sup>91</sup>

Although Wojnarowicz understood Hujar’s love as unconditional, there was one boundary that was firm. Carr recounts that early on in the two men’s relationship Wojnarowicz shot up with friends who were junkies: “Wojnarowicz’s arm turned green, and he showed it to Hujar. They were sitting in a restaurant, and Hujar told him, ‘I don’t ever want to see you again.’”<sup>92</sup> The relationship was too important for Wojnarowicz to give up, so instead he gave up heroin and eventually he gave up other drugs too.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the strength of the bond they shared, both Wojnarowicz and Hujar had complicated emotional lives. Their loving one another did not mean that they were free from loneliness, anxiety, painful self-searching or difficulties in their other relationships. In fact, they both struggled with managing anger in their other friendships. As Stephen Koch recalls, echoing others, “Peter was capable of rages that were frightening... just made your blood run cold. David also. Both of them had reservoirs of anger that you could feel.”<sup>94</sup> Nan Goldin, friend to both men, pointed out that “the only relationship David had that didn’t turn into rage was his relationship with Hujar.”<sup>95</sup> Koch concurs, and points out the remarkable nature of “the serenity of their engagement with one another. And I would say also, the certainty of it.”<sup>96</sup>

When Wojnarowicz felt lost, he seemed to be able to find his way back by talking to Hujar. From Wojnarowicz’s journal:

*I feel lonely and fear that I am totally unlike other people, that I haven't the ability to trust them completely... that I am emotionally drifting further away from myself and my abilities to show emotion. I think that I am unloved... and the longer I am not in a relationship the further I am cut off from emotions and I want to be with people but I cut myself off from people and my abilities to show emotion... and never let anyone near except for Peter and I think if he were not there I would go crazy.*<sup>97</sup>

Later the same day, though, he woke feeling more hopeful, and wrote, “Something from my conversation with Peter yesterday when he showed me my qualities—that unlocked the beginning of change.”<sup>98</sup> Wojnarowicz referred to Hujar as “My emotional link to the world.”<sup>99</sup> Importantly, this exchange was not one-sided. Koch and Lebowitz have noted that, while Hujar was charismatic, charming, and had a gift for drawing people to him, he also struggled with intimacy. “He was someone for whom closeness was very difficult,” Koch recalled. “And David made it easy.”<sup>100</sup>

Five years into their friendship came another significant change, one that had the potential to strain it past the point of breaking, but which instead ended up being a demonstration of trust, generosity and tenderness between them. In late 1985 Wojnarowicz met Tom Rauffenbart and what began as a fling turned into a serious romantic relationship. By a funny coincidence—and by virtue of Manhattan’s gay scene being, after all, a small world—Tom *and Peter* had been lovers a dozen years before.<sup>101</sup> Tom always regretted that the relationship had ended. He felt he had bungled it, not



having yet developed the ability to be in a relationship, and that Hujar was in some sense “the one who got away.” Long after they had broken up Tom continued to see Hujar in the neighborhood and think of him longingly as his “regret-of-my-life” relationship<sup>102</sup>.

Tom acknowledged later that becoming Wojnarowicz’s boyfriend caused some friction between Wojnarowicz and Hujar, explaining “David always had sex with other people, but his one relationship was always Peter. And, all of a sudden now, there was a major relationship going on without him.” The double use of the word “relationship” in Tom’s explanation (and my own use of the word throughout this chapter), demonstrates both the awkwardness and limitations of language, and at the same time the falsehood of the binary opposition between *eros* and *philia*.

As George Haggerty has aptly noted “There are very few ways to describe male-male intimacy, even in an age of increased openness about questions of sexuality.”<sup>103</sup> The word “relationship” has been conscripted to describe quite different kinds of intimacy. In Tom’s description, Wojnarowicz had other flings but his connection with Hujar was “his one relationship,” the singularity being, in this case, a key to its intimacy. Then there was “a major relationship” happening between Wojnarowicz and Tom, but not Hujar. I think the word “relationship” matters here because it is a way of saying “this is a connection that overflows traditional boundaries, both of sex and of friendship.”

In the same way that it took some time for Peter and David’s relationship “to find a track to run along,” it must have taken a moment for fresh lengths of parallel track to be laid down so that Peter and David’s relationship, on the one hand, *and* Tom and Wojnarowicz’s relationship, on the other, could run smoothly side-by-side. While David

and Peter had to adjust to a new normal in which David was sharing his life in an intimate way with another person, David and Tom *also* had to forge a novel way of being together, one that is little represented and little discussed. Indeed, in contemporary American life, romantic- and sexual-partners are expected to be each other's *everything*—there can be no other connection that equals or surpasses its importance to both people without seeming strange, deceptive and pathological, or without appearing to threaten the existence of the “primary” romantic- and sexual-partnership.

In this case, the connection between friends rather than romantic partners was the primary one, and Tom and David had to find a way to be together inside that reality. Tom knew that David and Peter were best friends but he acknowledged that he didn't at first understand “the depth of that relationship.”<sup>104</sup> David Wojnarowicz seemed to keep his two important relationships rather separate, and it wasn't until after Peter Hujar became ill with AIDS, that Tom spent much time in the presence of both Peter and David together. Tom came over to Peter's loft to cook, and the three men ate dinner together. “It became clear that these guys were cemented somewhere,” Tom recalled. “They were like extensions of each other.”<sup>105</sup>

Though Tom respected the bond that Peter and David shared, there were times when he felt uncertain about his own place in David's life. He was sure about his *own* feelings for David: “He was the love of my life.” Of all Tom's relationships, David was the person he was most “emotionally changed and moved by,” Tom recalled.<sup>106</sup> But he struggled with not feeling the same recognition coming from David. At one point they were having dinner together and Tom asked David, “What is this relationship about?

Where do I belong in all this?” David reflected, then answered that he had three priorities: “My work, Peter, and you. In that order.”<sup>107</sup>

In most conventional heteronormative (and indeed homonormative) narratives this would be the moment when Tom stormed out, or put his foot down, tired of being placed in a secondary position to his partner’s friendship with another man. But instead, Tom thought about whether he *could* live with such an arrangement. He already knew that David’s work came first since, in Tom’s words, David “couldn’t survive without making things.” Since he never felt resentful of Peter or of the time the two friends spent together, Tom realized: “I decided I could live with it.”<sup>108</sup> Later Tom said of David and Peter: “They were literally—like I say, kindred spirits. They were connected in a way, way beyond a marriage.”<sup>109</sup>

This is a remarkable moment of honesty, trust, and connection. David spoke truthfully about his priorities, and the place of both men in his life. And Tom, reflecting on these truths, accepted them. And he accepted David. It is a moment at odds with representations of love, friendship, couplehood, and represents instead a lived example of anarchic intimacy. In “Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence,” Heather Love details the hierarchy of romance inherent in contemporary representations of queer love: “Emotional conformism, romantic fulfilment, and gay cheerfulness constitute the dominant image of gay life in the contemporary moment.”<sup>110</sup> Here, between the three men, is a different kind of feeling. I am moved by this moment which is the opposite of that compulsory emotional conformism and cheerfulness, and is instead an instance of great tenderness and devotion in the midst of illness, worry and pain.

When Hujar became ill and was diagnosed with AIDS in late 1986, his community of friends sprang into action. Stephen Koch remarked that “David’s relationship to Peter from the moment prior to the diagnosis... was absolutely loyal, and absolutely impeccable, it could not have been improved upon. Where help was needed, he provided help, always. Not just sometimes, *always*. I mean I cannot imagine anyone being more supportive and more selfless in dealing with someone whose life was coming to an end than he was. It was—I would almost say it was saintly. Very extraordinary.”<sup>111</sup> Fran Lebowitz, who got to know Wojnarowicz well during the time of Hujar’s illness, echoed that appraisal, “I like David’s work, but my primary interest in David is not his work. My primary interest in David was his heroism. I mean, I would have to say that David is the most heroic person I have ever know.”<sup>112</sup> Indeed, the period of Hujar’s illness and dying was not an easy one for Wojnarowicz to navigate. Wojnarowicz recalled in “Living Close to the Knives”: “He was enraged about dying and he took it out on most of us.”<sup>113</sup>

In the same essay Wojnarowicz sketches a moment when Hujar was in the hospital and needed help getting from his bed to the bathroom. The passage emphasizes the vivid physicality of his interactions with Hujar, even as he moved in and out of consciousness.

*I manipulated the machinery in the structure of the bed so that his body rose toward me and his legs sank away. I placed my hands beneath his back, it was hot and sweaty, and I pulled him into a sitting position, took one paralyzed leg after the other pulling them over the side of the bed. Then I realized he was going nowhere. He was limp and his eyes were*

*closed and his mouth against my arm breathing wet sounds. I felt my body thrumming with the sounds and vessels of blood and muscles contracting the sounds of aging and disintegration ... the sense of loving and the sense of fear.*<sup>114</sup>

Wojnarowicz paints a portrait of the closeness and the connection that comes from caring for someone who is ill, someone who is, in fact, dying. Typically, those who care for a dying person share bonds of marriage or life-partnership, or close kinship. We don't have a word to describe that relationship, beyond the practical but clinical sounding "caretaker" which is typically used to refer to someone taking that role who *doesn't* share those bonds with an ill person, someone who is a paid professional, or a benevolent volunteer.

#### *4. "Life and Death" after Death*

"DECIDED TO MAKE THIS FILM OF THE PROCESS OF GRIEF OF what Peter impressed in me" David Wojnarowicz wrote in his journal in the days after Peter Hujar's death, in the punctuation-less mix of capital and lower-case letters that was typical of his private writing, and in which ideas succeeded one another quickly, without hierarchy.<sup>115</sup> In the same collage-like manner in which Wojnarowicz often brought pictures together in his artwork, so images also tumbled onto the pages of his diaries, in order to express a thought or emotion, or to describe the flickering pace of a dream. Wojnarowicz felt that Hujar was everywhere, and at the same time, transparent. For the film Wojnarowicz

planned to include shots of the hyenas in the Natural History Museum, Beluga whales swimming in their tanks, and what Wojnarowicz called the “Great Jersey Swamp 6000 acres [of] Virgin forest primordial place where dinosaurs once slept.”<sup>116</sup> Each of these shots meant something to Wojnarowicz, about life and about death, and about the juncture of the two. The shots were also icons of the relationship Wojnarowicz had with Hujar, tokens of their shared experiences, ways of making those experiences speak.

To Wojnarowicz, after Hujar died, everything around him seemed resonant with the emotion he felt for Hujar. As Carr points out, he probably had not fully expressed these emotions to Hujar himself while he was still alive<sup>117</sup>—and he wanted to capture the images that vibrated with his feelings of love and grief, and that would help unravel the porous boundary between life and death. In the immediate moments after his death, Wojnarowicz asked to be alone with Hujar. He filmed, making a sweeping pan of Hujar’s body, and took photographs of his face, of one of his hands, one of his feet. At Hujar’s loft, Wojnarowicz filmed all the pictures of Hujar he could find, beginning, in Carr’s description “with one little school photo of the unloved kid Hujar had been.”<sup>118</sup>

Wojnarowicz also filmed himself turning every page of *Portraits in Life and Death*, allowing the camera to rest on each of Hujar’s portraits, perhaps in the same way that Wojnarowicz himself had done when he first encountered the book. As Jennifer Doyle eloquently explains, the book functioned as “a point of connection to the prehistory of their relationship, to a moment when Hujar didn’t know Wojnarowicz.”<sup>119</sup>

Although, for Wojnarowicz, the connection between life and death became even more urgently charged after Hujar succumbed to AIDS, it had always proved a point of

fascination for him, and had long been a point of shared identification with Hujar. At the time of his first reading the book, of course, and then, later, upon meeting Hujar, Wojnarowicz could not have known how the AIDS virus was to make the connection between living and dying even more deeply personal, mysterious, corporeal, and political for them both.

What's more, for Wojnarowicz, the book was a bridge to Hujar's relationship with Paul Thek, and the artistic collaborations between Hujar and Thek in which they interrogated life and death. A photograph of Paul Thek in the Palermo catacombs literalizes the juncture between life and death that Hujar explicitly takes on as his subject in the book, while infusing it with erotic wonder and longing.



Fig. 2.5 Paul Thek in the Palermo Catacombs, by Peter Hujar.

The (seemingly) laid-back sexiness that is so pervasive in their collaborative portraits takes on a deeper charge in the (seemingly) at-odds context of the catacombs.

In representing his own encounter with the book, Wojnarowicz signals the link between all three artists, through Hujar, and through their shared interest in the interplay between eros and thanatos. Wojnarowicz also extends this connection, past Hujar's death, defying the untimeliness and absoluteness of their deaths, to memorialize the past, but also to create new points of resonance and reverberation.

Indeed, even after his death, Hujar remained very present in Wojnarowicz's thoughts, reverberating in ways that might seem unpredictable. In a journal entry from 1989, when Wojnarowicz was visiting his sister and brother-in-law in Paris on the occasion of the birth of her daughter, he recorded visiting his just-born niece and his emotion at seeing her. In a stream of consciousness entry he details his impressions of the baby:

*Denis called at 6:00—baby was born at 4:00 I went to clinic [...] I got very emotional – Tried to extend something beyond words to all of them. Later went out and walked + walked. Took photos of them all a lot of the baby. Sweet thing makes more faces a minute than I did in all of Richards movie 'Stray Dogs.' The strangest thing is imagining this large creature came from Pat's belly— it s a drift back in time then to present baby lying there. Pats belly one day before baby superimposed on memory of her (Pats) belly –imaginings of baby floating in fluid baby wrapped in cloth on desk like surface – Pats face weary and tear stained – Baby looks older*



*than I imagined pearly grey blue eyes one open at a time then both Pats  
belly the light from the window upstairs the color of the babys skin red  
then faint then red tiny fingers with tiny nails little working mouth  
Peter Peters death the shape of the earth clouds stars and space the  
darkness of the delivery room shadows around the floor + ceiling the  
memories in those shadows like films<sup>120</sup>*

While meditating on the baby's arrival into the world, and the strange suddenness of being born, Wojnarowicz's thoughts drift seamlessly to Hujar and to his death. The coming into being of new life immediately calls up the death, and the memory of, indeed the *presence* of Hujar.

Although Hujar was dead he continued to appear to Wojnarowicz, sometimes in dreams, and sometimes in waking thoughts, called forth unconsciously by a memory or a point of concordance with the past. Or Wojnarowicz himself would summon Hujar's presence, placing him symbolically in his artwork. As he had done since they first became close, so he continued to do, resisting the separation and finality of death. Whether taking conscious or unconscious forms, the queer friendship between the two continued to be as complicated, and emotionally and erotically charged as it had always been, though it did not remain fixed.

### *5. Thanatos and Eros*

Fran Lebowitz had initially dismissed Wojnarowicz as “merely” one of Hujar’s tricks, but in getting to know him better during Hujar’s illness, her sense of him changed, explaining, “after a while, I started to think of him as Peter’s son. That’s kind of what he seemed like to me. And I think that David may also have had that feeling about him, in a way. Now, of course, a lot of this was just wishful thinking on our parts, Peter would have a son, and then we would have some part of Peter.”<sup>121</sup> There is something very moving about Lebowitz’s changing sense of Wojnarowicz’s relationship to Hujar; in her deepening knowledge of her friend’s friend; in her acknowledgment of its wishful thinking; in her desire to retain something tangible of Hujar after his death. There is also something compelling in the idea that Wojnarowicz would contain, as in his DNA, at the cellular level, a part of Hujar; and also the possibility that grief and longing and yearning can transform another person by wishful thinking. But the description also feels inaccurate, or at least incomplete.

The paternal metaphor is not totally inapt, of course, and, in fact has been employed by both C. Carr and Stephen Koch in describing the Hujar-Wojnarowicz relationship. Certainly, Wojnarowicz’s desire for unconditional love, as well as guidance and mentorship, found the perfect answer in Hujar. Moreover, the kind of artistic lineage created by Wojnarowicz’s admiration for Hujar’s work, and Hujar’s direction and guidance, is often conceived of using metaphors of kinship. Still that “elevation” in Lebowitz’s sense of the changing relationship—from trick to son—as Hujar became ill

and then died, repeats the common push to erase eros from grief, and reinscribes the idea that the only kinds of relationships that count, particularly in grief, are familial ones.

Despite the assumption that the erotic angle of a relationship is foreclosed after death, Wojnarowicz's writings and work attest to his continued erotic connection with Hujar. In his *Sex Series*, paintings from 1988-89, the small photographs of sex acts that were inset into the painted landscapes and cityscapes (and famously taken out of context by Donald Wildmon<sup>122</sup>) were lifted from Hujar's old porn collection. Hujar had thrown the magazines away after receiving his diagnosis, but Wojnarowicz rescued them from the trash and, as Carr chronicles, once Hujar died, Wojnarowicz "wanted to see sexy images connected with Hujar."<sup>123</sup> In fact the whole series of paintings was conceived in response to the deaths of friends and lovers, cut down by the AIDS epidemic. Of the series, Wojnarowicz said:

*It came out of loss. I mean every time I opened a magazine there was the face of somebody else who died. It was so overwhelming and there was also this huge backlash about sex, even within the activist community. The thought police were jumping out left and right about what's proper... And it essentially came out of wanting some sexy images on the wall—for me. To keep me company. To make me feel better.<sup>124</sup>*

Against the tendency to de-eroticize the dead, and to sanitize the gay community of its sexual culture, Wojnarowicz would *reinfuse* his surroundings with eros, he would remember Hujar erotically, and he would connect to the "prehistory" of his relationship with Hujar—as well as Hujar's relationship with Thek—through these sexual images. As

Wojnarowicz told Carr some of the images from the Hujar porn collection that he used in *The Sex Series* “were really evocative of a time that I always wished I could get to—just for the sexual part of it.”<sup>125</sup> Too young to have experienced the sexual culture of the 50s and 60s that Hujar and Thek lived through and in which they forged their sexual identities, Wojnarowicz could nevertheless bring it into his work and build a bridge to the older men.

Even in his subconscious life, his relationship with Hujar followed an erotic track. A passage from Wojnarowicz’s diary from September 1990, in which he recalls the previous night’s dream, is worth quoting at length:

*Peter was in my sleep making photographs of my body. I was looking at a pile of contact sheets, black and white, small images of my body near naked, naked, piled around with wet potter clay. They were beautiful and harrowing. Wet clay with impressions of fingers, hands, pull marks, piling and pounding and at times shot from below my knees me on my back, some just shots of torsos, a large clay hard-on. I could see my nipples hard and shadowed – the light in all the photos was rich and dark shadows and every pore in the skin was evident. I was thumbing through all the contacts maybe 10-15 of them in all. Someone comes into the room I feel a little self-conscious I mean these felt like very personal explorations—Peter never photographed me nude he was always ‘protective’ in some way of what interpretations or taboos might come*

*towards me and in the photographing he was observing limits of his own choosing but there was sweetness in his limits of documenting me. In this sleep it felt like he'd freed up that stuff and the resulting images were very sexy and primal and almost what he would have dismissed as "french" or "arty" but the sensuality of the wet clay hard-on was pretty wild and even a little disturbing in the question of who? what hands made this? Author or photographed torsoe? I looked at them one last time. looked like it'd be rich in the darkroom, easy to print easy to find the right image—so many of them were beautiful. Then I put them away and woke up.<sup>126</sup>*

Wojnarowicz's dream encapsulates some of the key aspects of his relationship with Hujar. And at the same time it also extends and builds upon the relationship. In other words, despite Hujar's death, the relationship has not ended. And further, it is not static, it continues to grow and change. We see here the shared aesthetic sensibility, and also the artistic collaboration that were a part of their relationship. The erotic dimension of this collaborative process in this case also produces the erotically charged photographs. The dream also offers a way to transcend death's apparent dematerialization of the relationship—that sense of Hujar being everywhere, but somehow transparent. Here the materiality of the body, and the representation of that materiality, is at the forefront. Although Hujar doesn't himself appear in the dream, all the physical elements—the pores of David's skin, the erect nipples, the clay which has been piled around his body shows the work of the hands that shaped it—highlight Hujar's presence. The dream implies that

it was Hujar's hands who manipulated the clay, leaving the traces of their "pulling, piling, pounding" on the material itself. Although Wojnarowicz does not exactly remember it happening, Hujar's presence so saturates the dream that there can be little doubt about its having been him.

The dream also evidences how fine-grained and complicated the erotic element between them was. This erotic element already existed sub-rosa after the end of their affair. Wojnarowicz himself pointed out Hujar's self-imposed limits in not photographing David nude, though he made nude portraits of Gary Schneider, Ethyl Eichelberger, John Heys, among others. Wojnarowicz saw this decision as a sweet, protective gesture. But the breaching of the self-imposed limits within the dream is not alarming or offensive to Wojnarowicz. Rather he seems a little awed by the sheer sexiness of the images, and by the unexpected "wildness" of Hujar's having done something he wouldn't have done ordinarily. The "French" "artyness" of the images is something different for Hujar, and so is the transgression against the boundary he himself had erected. In the dream Hujar is "freed up" to go beyond the limits of their relationship, and do something new, which is surprising but also exciting in its novelty and bravery and "wildness." Within the space of the dream, the relationship between Wojnarowicz and Hujar continues, and, in fact, goes further, evolving and pushing beyond its familiar contours. Instead of being static the relationship is plastic, and contains new experiences and adventures.

Study of the elegiac tradition shows how pressing the erotic connection between the living and the dead can be, but, following Freud, the tendency is to read that erotic

longing pathologically. As Michael Moon explains, while “[c]ritics and theorists of elegy and the elegiac now routinely acknowledge the erotic dimension of mourning... since they tend to derive their terms from a post-Freudian ego-psychology model of the self, their primary terms for the mourner’s sexuality tend to be negative ones.”<sup>127</sup> Moon argues, instead, for a theory of mourning that would not only resist pathologizing the erotic dimensions of mourning but would allow the sexual connection between living and dead to continue and flourish.

The Freudian theory of mourning as a process of “working through,” in which the mourner ultimately accepts the loss and returns to normalcy, excludes the continuation of the relationship since it is predicated on *giving up* the desired object. Moreover, given the long historical association of homosexuality with “abnormality,” the idea of normalcy under a Freudian model may seem both out of reach and fundamentally unappealing for gays and lesbians. Besides, the Freudian mode of mourning offers a rather impoverished process in which meaning and possibility are significantly foreclosed. To discover models that could enrich mourning, Moon turns to the fetish.

What could fetishism—another pathologized concept—look like when freed from the Freudian apparatus of fear of castration, Oedipal complex, maternal phallus, and so on? As Moon describes it, fetishes could function as “a broadly conceived means of extending our own bodies, as well as the bodies of [the] dead, and in fetishistic practices further means of exploring and extending our relationships, including our sexual relationships, with the dead.” But for examples of how this might work one can hardly

look to someone “as timorous about fetishism and homosexuality as Freud is.”<sup>128</sup> Rather Moon directs the reader to Walt Whitman, and his *Drum-Taps* poems.

As a volunteer nurse in the Civil War, Whitman had been surrounded by the injured bodies of soldier, tending their wounds, and sitting vigil as they ailed, recovered, or died. The elegiac poetry of *Drum-Taps*, far from disavowing the homoreroticism of his earlier poems, is suffused with eros, in its tenderness, longing and grief. While the profusion of wounded flesh, and shredded bandages may at first glance work to de-eroticize Whitman’s interactions with the soldiers<sup>129</sup>, they also act as a kind of rhetorical metonymy for what Moon accurately describes as “the extraordinarily rich variety of homoerotic exchange between the poet and his patients: undressing, bathing, drying, and dressing the patients and their wounds; lifting and holding the patients, burying the patients’ bodies, and elegizing the dead.”<sup>130</sup> A passage from “The Wound-Dresser” is representative:

*I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,  
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,  
And the yellow-blue countenance see.  
[...]  
I am faithful, I do not give out,  
The fractur’d thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,  
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast a fire, a  
burning flame.)*

The poem ends with Whitman’s ardent and wistful parenthetical “(Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and rested, / Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on



these bearded lips.)” This rhetorical metonymy of bandages to represent Whitman’s grief for the soldiers and his memories of caring for their shattered bodies throughout the *Drum-Taps* poems, can be usefully thought of as a fetish since it is used to extend the erotic exchange between the living and the dead. For Wojnarowicz, who also had performed all these caretaking tasks for Hujar during his illness and after his death, and who was searching for ways of mourning, including erotic mourning, a kind of fetish in the Whitmanian mode presented itself to him in the form of Dürer’s *Wing of a Roller*.

Stephen Koch tells the story of Hujar and Wojnarowicz driving together into a run down part of New Jersey called Caven Point. There, underneath a railroad crossing Wojnarowicz found a dead seagull.

Wojnarowicz had always been very interested in animals (and indeed in animal carcasses, found in nature or squashed in the road) and Hujar shared with him this affinity for animals. Hujar photographed Wojnarowicz making the discovery of the dead gull, and then he and Wojnarowicz arranged its body upright and Hujar took a photograph of the gull in which its wings are extended from its body.



Fig. 2.6. Seagull, by Pete Hujar.

The photograph functions in three ways: as an aesthetic object; as a record of this moment of exploration and discovery with Wojnarowicz; and as an homage to Dürer. As Koch points out, Dürer's *Wing of a Blue Roller* held a special place in the pantheon of works that were particularly meaningful for Hujar. He had studied Dürer's art and had an especial interest in Dürer's animal pictures, given his own deep feeling for animals and his portraiture work with them.

When Hujar became ill he placed a print of the beloved Dürer painting next to his bed, and it stayed at his bedside until the end. For Wojnarowicz, Dürer's wing then took

the place of Hujar's own image as an echo: of Hujar's love for Dürer, but also of the image he created when he and Wojnarowicz were together; of the love of animals that he and David shared; of a past moment when the two men collaborated in the ruined New Jersey landscape.

After Hujar died Wojnarowicz continued this use of the bird wing in his own work, paying homage to both Hujar and Dürer, commemorating Hujar's artistic practice, memorializing their shared moments. The image of the bird wing appears in *Wind (for Peter Hujar)*, as well as on the tombstone that Wojnarowicz designed for Hujar, and in the quilt panel that he made for him.



Fig. 2.7 Wing of a Blue Roller, 1512, by Dürer.

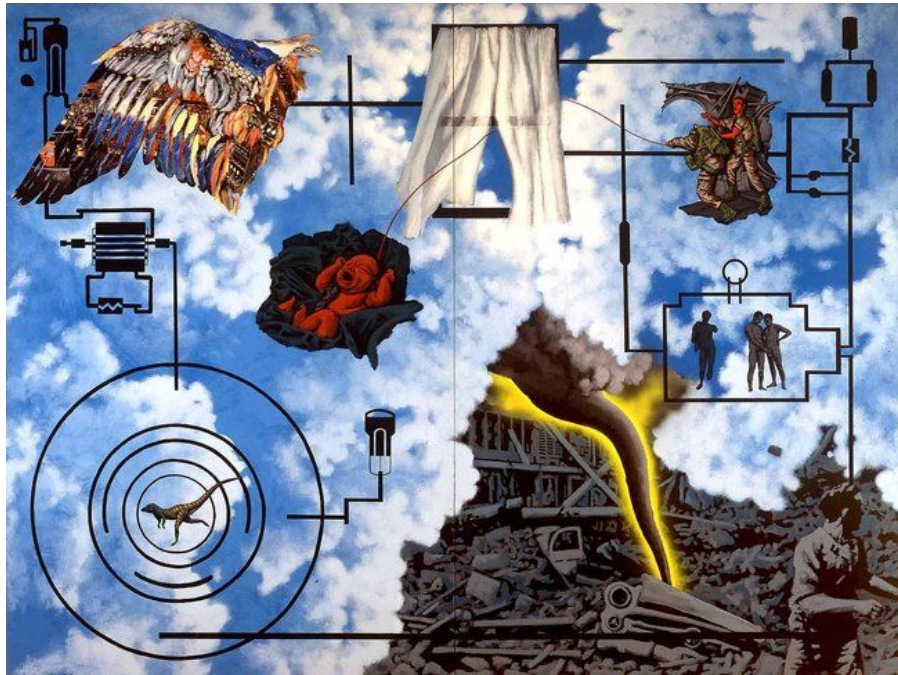


Fig. 2.8. *Wind (for Peter Hugar)*, 1987 by David Wojnarowicz.

In *Wind*, the most complex of these pieces, and the one designed to be viewed in an artistic context, the wing is part of a system of images that are connected to one another by the kind of black lines typically used to schematize an electrical circuit. Set against a background of sky and clouds, Wojnarowicz brings together imagery that could seem random but that has both a personal and political resonance. In the lower right corner is a cityscape destroyed to rubble by the terrible force of a hurricane, a human figure flees the destruction of the wind. Above this scene of ruin two men stand side by side, one holding the other's penis. Juxtaposed to this scene, which was likely also lifted from Hugar's pornography collection, is an image of a male nude sculpture in the classical tradition. Above these three figures, two pornographic, one classical, we see two men in military fatigues. One of the men, helping the other jump out an airplane, is according to Carr the

only self-portrait Wojnarowicz ever painted. A red thread connects this scene to an open window with the curtains blowing towards the viewer. The red thread is blown by the wind through the window and leads to a wailing infant, modeled on a photograph of Wojnarowicz's brother Steve's newborn baby.<sup>131</sup> In the lower left corner, in the center of a kind of bulls-eye is a running velociraptor—reminiscent of another dinosaur, the stegosaur whose plates spelled out WOJNAROWICZ from his *Something from Sleep IV* (1988-89). Above that is the Dürer wing. The iconography of war, destruction, and extinction, is juxtaposed with sex, art, and rebirth. Within this iconography of life and death Wojnarowicz symbolically places both himself and Hujar.

The quilt panel and the tombstone are much simpler, visually speaking, but have a built-in resonance and emotional intensity because of their explicitly memorializing function. The tombstone is not intended as a work of art but as a way to identify Hujar's grave, and, just as an epitaph would, to give some sense of who the deceased was. In choosing the image of wing to adorn the tombstone, Wojnarowicz was speaking about Hujar and his art and his artistic lineage, as well as immortalizing the relationship between them, the moments of joint communion—symbolically represented by the shared moment of discovering the bird wing. The gesture of engraving the wing on the tombstone makes material and quasi-eternal the relationship between Hujar and Wojnarowicz.



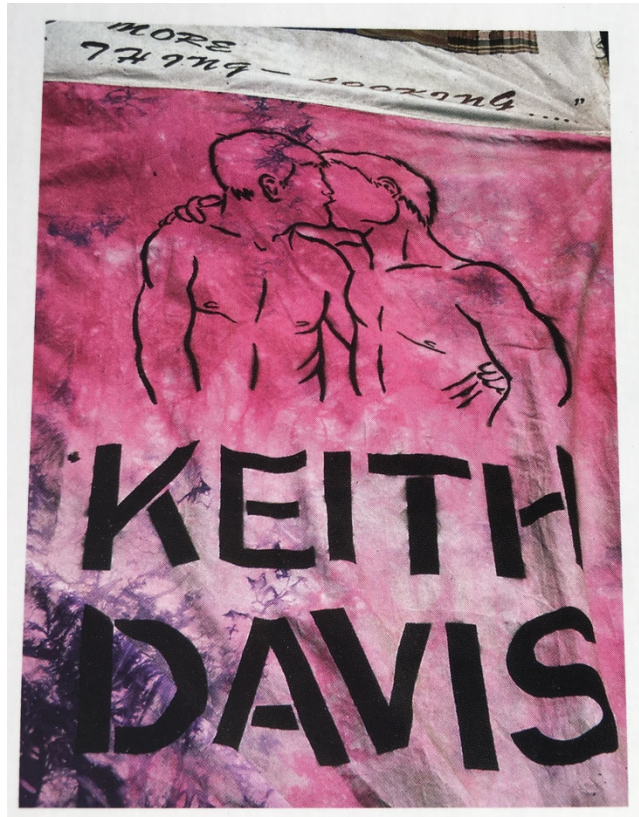


Fig 2.9. Quilt panel for Keith Davis by David Wojnarowicz. Courtesy Tom Rauffenbart.

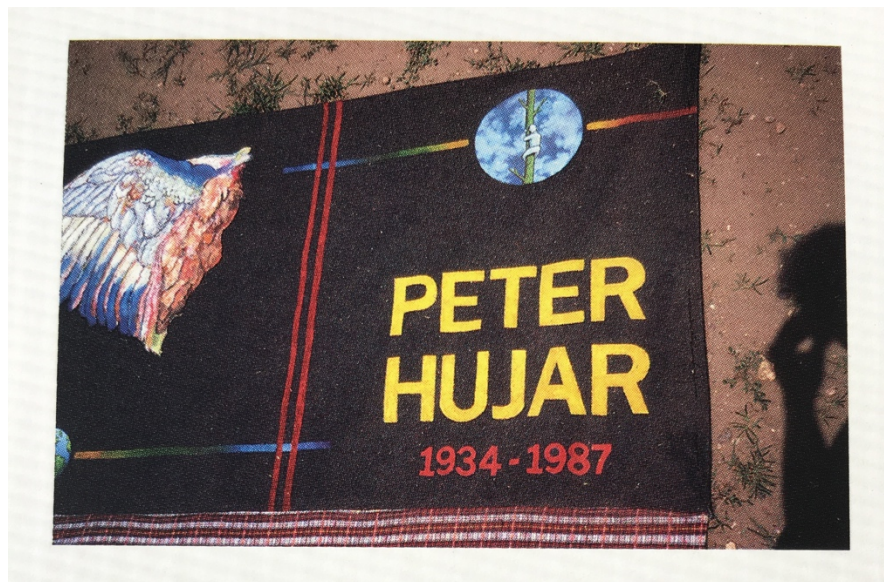


Fig. 2.10. Quilt panel for Peter Hujar by David Wojnarowicz. The earth mandala is just visible beneath the wing. Courtesy of Tom Rauffenbart.

The quilt panels Wojnarowicz made for the friends he lost—one for Hujar and one for the artist Keith Davis—occupy a liminal space between public and private, political and personal, memorial and demonstration, just as the NAMES project’s AIDS Memorial Quilt itself does. The project was embraced by some, and dismissed by others as a sentimental, sanitizing and middle-of-the-road exercise. Steven James Gambardella pinpoints the dangers of straddling multiple objectives: “The strategic gambit of this particular combination of homespun Americana and mass-mourning spectacle, as an attempt to shift mainstream attention to the AIDS crisis, is that the NAMES Project risked sanitizing or even homogenizing the particularities of the deceased to appeal to mainstream public sensitivities.”<sup>132</sup>

Wojnarowicz himself had complex feelings about memorials—“DON’T GIVE ME A MEMORIAL IF I DIE—GIVE ME A DEMONSTRATION” he wrote in his journal<sup>133</sup>, an exhortation he was to repeat in other writings and in his art. He chose nevertheless to memorialize his friends Hujar and Davis with quilt panels that would become part of the traveling exhibit, but he did not sanitize or homogenize their particularities. It is notable that for both panels Wojnarowicz used familiar motifs, or fetishes in the Whitmanian mode. In Davis’s panel he included the two men kissing from his famous 1984 painting *Fuck You Faggot Fucker*,<sup>134</sup> and in Hujar’s he included the Dürer wing.

Strikingly, underneath the Dürer wing is *another* fetish, a painting of the earth seen from space. This is a motif that appears in many of Wojnarowicz’s works; the

paintings *Anatomy & Architecture of Desire* (1988-89), *Science Lesson* (1981-82), *Fear of Evolution* (1988-89), and the sculpture *Globe of the United States* (1990), to name four. There are also several small globe trinkets in the Magic Box Wojnarowicz kept under his bed, where he stored the small curios and treasures he invested with special meaning, and which resonated with recurring motifs in his art.<sup>135</sup>

Notably, this was also a recurring motif in Paul Thek's work. Although Wojnarowicz was not a close friend of Thek's, he knew him casually and admired him as an artist. Even more importantly, Wojnarowicz knew how intimately connected Thek and Hujar had been to each other.



Fig. 2.11. *Untitled (Earth Mandala)*, circa 1974, by Paul Thek.



For Wojnarowicz to employ what Elisabeth Sussman calls Thek's "personal yantra"<sup>136</sup>, his painted, mantralike repetition of an image of the earth"<sup>137</sup> is to summon Thek into his own artwork. Moreover, to include the earth yantra in his quilt panel for Hujar is to connect all three men to one another, and, through the use of this fetish in the Whitmanian mode, to continue and indeed extend the story of their relationship into the future.

This future, the one in which write now, and the one that will follow on beyond, is made more queer by these men having known and loved one another, and by their having made the art that they did. "Queerness is a longing that propels us onward," José Esteban Muñoz wrote.<sup>138</sup> "The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic," Muñoz continued, "frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity." Within the aesthetic of Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz, and within their relational complexity, we can see the utopian promise of a world in which the binary of success and failure is broken down; the binary between love and friendship is blurred, enriched, and reimagined; the dead keep congress with the living, and continue to find new ways for us to love one another.

## Chapter 3

### Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton

*... after the class, we would pile into the front seat of my old Ford and I would drive quickly through the traffic to, or near, the Ritz. I would always park illegally in a LOADING ONLY ZONE, telling them gaily, 'It's okay, because we are only going to get loaded!'*

*Anne Sexton "The Barfly Ought to Sing"<sup>139</sup>*

In "The Barfly Ought to Sing," Anne Sexton recalls her friendship with fellow poet Sylvia Plath. The essay begins with their meeting in 1959 in Robert Lowell's poetry seminar at Boston University, and their escapades after class, when she, Plath, and George Starbuck would drive over to the Ritz to have cocktails, eat potato chips, and talk. Mostly they talked of death, and their own past attempts to reach it. Or rather, to be precise, Plath and Sexton talked, and Starbuck listened. The real energy sparked and crackled between the two women as they spoke of death—"our boy," according to Sexton's poem "Sylvia's Death," a kind of lover they shared, and the details of whom they exchanged in martini-laced confessions.

The anecdote in "The Barfly Ought to Sing" is at the center of this chapter. It is a sliver of time, preserved in the amber of Sexton's writing, when two of the great poets of

the twentieth century met and formed bonds of friendship. It demonstrates the electricity between the two women, and the subversive potential of queer friendship to enlist both eros and thanatos in creating art and in undoing the constraints of mid-century heteronormativity.

1.

Plath- and Sexton-studies have a fraught relationship to biography. In fact, confessional poetry as a field of study has a conflicted rapport with biography. There exists a chain of associations connecting the concepts *confessional*, *personal*, *autobiographical*, *emotional*, *uncontrolled*, *hysterical*, *messy*, *artless*, that, while sometimes examined and critiqued, persists in controlling the discourse. Consider a recent piece in *The New York Times Book Review*. Critic Charles McGrath and essayist Leslie Jamison were asked to respond to the question “In the Age of Memoir, What's the Legacy of the Confessional Mode?”<sup>1</sup>

McGrath delivers a reductive though common reading of confessional poetry, scorning its autobiographical aspects, and criticizing it for being too “raw” and insufficiently “transformed.” “The best poems in *Ariel*,” McGrath writes, “are [those] in which experience isn't so much confessed as transformed.” It is unclear how McGrath knows which experiences have been confessed and which have been transformed. In fact, he hedges his bets, referring to the poems he dislikes, “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” as “seemingly autobiographical.” This begs the question, if they only *seem*

autobiographical, how are they simple “confessions” as opposed to “transformations”? The bigger question, in any case, is *why* there is reflexive scorn for the “confessional” aspects of these poems when there is a long tradition of autobiography within the canon—for example, Montaigne, Rousseau, Wordsworth, among many others.

In her own response, Leslie Jamison provides an answer. In a word it is *gender*, though her elaboration is worth reading. Confessional writing, Jamison points out, “is called solipsistic or narcissistic; it gets accused of lacking discretion or craft.” She continues:

*Its heritage is often traced to women writers, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and its critiques are insidiously -- and subcutaneously -- gendered. So many of the attacks against the confessional mode come back to the language of the [gendered] body: An author is spilling her guts or bleeding on the page. Her writing whores itself out, exposing private trauma for public fame.*

Jamison accurately exposes the gendered tropes that have long bedeviled the reception of confessional writing, and in particular, the work of its appointed standard bearers, Plath and Sexton—and the misogynistic and solipsistic underpinnings of that reception history. It is, this line of thinking goes, too visceral, raw, unseemly, personal, overly focused on trauma, lacking in craft (somehow evidenced by its being too raw and real; the argument here is circular).

These gendered truisms about confessional writing—and particularly the equivalency between autobiography, (over)exposure, and lack of craft—have been

circulating since the early 60s and, despite being challenged by feminist scholars, have never been successfully put to rest. Janet Badia has written convincingly about the *mansplaining* and *concern-trolling*, to use two apt neologisms, by those who have painted Plath's readers as deluded, uncritical consumers of what they see as her least demanding work (that is, *The Bell Jar*)<sup>140</sup>.

This is why writers who study Plath or Sexton must frequently perform a kind of defensive gymnastics, disclaiming an interest in the biographical and/or the "sensational" aspects of the poets' lives, or a timid, guarded approach towards biographical readings of their work,<sup>141</sup> so suspect and disreputable are these concerns. Even critics who are sympathetic to the confessional mode have often felt the need to defend the genre from the implied charge that the work is less interesting, complex and artistically meaningful than other forms of literary expression.

I want to problematize the binarized and gendered categorization that opposes the conceptual pairs: masculine/feminine, universal/personal, thoughts/feelings, artistic/artless, imaginative/autobiographical. But it also strikes me that is because of, and also in spite of, those same systemic structures of oppression and erasure, that "the personal" remains such a rich field of exploration by writers from marginalized groups, including women and queer folks (and hence why that category is so interesting to me).

In the same vein as the ranking of poems in McGrath's piece, the gendered reception of Plath's work has generated a hierarchy of worthy objects of study, broadly related to their apparent closeness to autobiography. The poems themselves are serious objects (though

their seriousness must often be reasserted, see above!). *The Bell Jar* is more like a dishy potboiler. The *Journals* are good for mining biographical insights but are not deserving of study in their own right. The *Letters Home* are but a reflection of the sham façade Plath invented for her mother... And yet, how much untapped value—literary, emotional and political value— resides in these so-called lesser texts.

In her 1962 essay “A Comparison,” Sylvia Plath described the differences in subject matter across genres. The poet, she observed, must often eschew the familiar and humdrum objects of life in favor of loftier subjects, while the novelist has pretty much *everything* at her disposal:

*To her, this fortunate one, what is there that isn't relevant! Old shoes can be used, doorknobs, air letters, flannel nightgowns, cathedrals, nail varnish, jet planes, rose arbors and budgerigars; little mannerisms—the sucking at a tooth, the tugging at a hemline—any weird or warty or fine or despicable thing. Not to mention emotions, motivations—those rumbling, thunderous shapes.*

By contrast, she writes, “I do not like to think of all the things, familiar, useful and worthy things, I have never put into a poem”<sup>142</sup>

What Plath observed was possible for the novelist also works for the memoirist: anything— Sexton’s Ford, the city traffic, parking signs!—can be used, to add texture, beauty and meaning to the narrative. And the effect is thrilling. The inclusion in Sexton’s essay of these seemingly mundane details, paired with Sexton’s jaunty tone, creates an atmosphere significantly at odds with the angst that has typically accompanied the

reception of confessional poetry, providing an opportunity to see their works and personae in a fresh light.

Academic writing too, of course, has its own tropes and taboos, and while the novelist or memoirist will find uses for the flotsam of life, the scholar feels bound to the loftiness of canonical texts and high theory. But I am contrary; I like *the sucking at a tooth, the tugging at a hemline*. Despite its lowly literary status, and at the same time *because of it*, I embrace the anecdote. Its apparent lack of pretention conceals its narrative and emotional power.

The late Joel Fineman explained this power in terms of the anecdote's ability to "introduce an opening" within "the totalizing whole of history".<sup>143</sup> The anecdote—hybrid of literature and history, and poor relation to them both—creates a fissure within history by existing both within and outside of its teleological framework and disrupting the linear and coherent trajectory.

I admire this quality: the anecdote's disorderly relationship to history, and the possibilities contained in that insubordination. Jane Gallop expands on those possibilities by arguing that the anecdote is not just source material or evidence, but is in fact a tool that can do theoretical *work*, and even reshape what theory can be. Gallop writes:

*Theory has a considerable will to power; it wants to comprehend all it surveys. Theory tends to defend against what threatens that sense of mastery. Theory likes to set up an ideal realm where it need encounter no obstacle to the expansion of its understanding. Anecdotal theory drags theory into a scene where it must struggle for mastery. Theorizing in*

*explicit relation to the here and now, theorizing because the subject feels the need to, theory must content with what threatens its mastery*<sup>144</sup>.

In a somewhat different vein, Alicia Ostriker argues that women poets have often written and rewritten myths because in doing so, the poems “assume the high literary status that myth confers and that women writers have often been denied because they write ‘personally’ or ‘confessionally.’”<sup>145</sup> Writing myth is a way for women poets to subvert the gendered dismissal of their work as “personal.” Part of what I find brave and appealing in “Barfly,” though, is that Sexton *isn't* trying to distance herself from the personal or the anecdotal, and yet the essay accomplishes the feat of rewriting and transforming the myth of the Descent into the Underworld. At the same time Sexton explodes the fantasy of mid-century femininity and female sexuality, and wrests control of the narrative about Plath that was already in circulation.

In a daring and subversive move, instead of reaching for the high generic status of mythmaking, Sexton instead engages with the trope of the gab session. As Gavin Butt has demonstrated gossip has been stereotyped and dismissed as feminine and, hence, also as queer<sup>146</sup>. In spite of the misogynistic and homophobic dismissal within the larger culture of gossip as catty and trivial, the great feminist thinker Shulamith Firestone recognized the enormous utility and potential contained within the gab session. She wrote about them in her brilliant and scorching treatise *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, and it is worth quoting from this at length for its insight:



*Over the centuries strategies have been devised, tested, and passed on from mother to daughter in secret tête-à-têtes, passed around at 'kaffee-klatsches' ('I never understand what it is women spend so much time talking about!'), or, in recent times, via the telephone... These are not trivial gossip sessions at all (as women prefer men to believe), but desperate strategies for survival... More real brilliance goes into one one-hour coed telephone dialogue about men than into that same coed's four years of college study, or for that matter, than into most male political manoeuvres.<sup>147</sup>*

“Survival” here does not only mean staying alive, although it is that too, but also finding ways to endure and thrive in the face of a culture that has placed hetero love at the epicenter of women’s lives while also stigmatizing their feelings as moody, hysterical, fickle and so on. It is a common criticism of Plath’s diaries, that they are gossipy and trivial, when, in fact, she is dissecting and reflecting deeply upon her own and her sex’s strategies for living.

More recently, Wayne Koestenbaum has written about the importance of sharing such stories: “Gossip, hardly trivial, is as central to gay culture as it is to female cultures.” Indeed, gossip contains world-making potential: “From skeins of hearsay,” he declares, “I weave an inner life, I build queerness from banal and and uplifting stories of the conduct of famous and fiery women.”<sup>148</sup> Here, I want to build queerness—and a deeper, richer theory of anarchic intimacy—from the reminiscences of Sexton and Plath,

at the bar of the Ritz hotel in Boston in 1959, sharing martinis and potato chips and the stories of their lives. José Esteban Muñoz observed that “the work of queer critique is often to read outside official documentation.”<sup>149</sup> In keeping with that insight, I welcome the riches offered by “lesser” works. I embrace the juicy, gossipy dishiness of this moment and claim Sexton’s anecdote as a lush and resonant scene of critical knowledge production about the two poets and the moment they created together.

2.

Understanding this moment between Plath and Sexton, requires locating it in the context of the pre-Women’s Liberation era. Both Plath and Sexton grew up during a period of heightened exaltation of heterosexual romance and extreme polarization of gender roles, and both worked to forge a poetic voice in the midst of a literary and academic climate that was so male-dominated as to practically exclude women writers entirely<sup>150</sup>. The few women poets who did achieve literary success often did so by writing in a voice, and on subject matters, considered “universal.” Universal, in this context, meant adopting a “neutral,” or, more precisely, non-female voice, and ignoring the experiences of being a woman.

As a young and very competitive poet, Plath often compared her achievements to those of Adrienne Rich, and bitterly noted Rich’s accumulation of prizes and accolades. This early poetry of Rich’s<sup>151</sup> was praised by luminaries such as WH Auden<sup>152</sup> for its modesty, politeness, and respect for tradition. To succeed as a female, the template

seemed to be: emulate one's elders. These would typically be male, but if female then one's writing should be textually de-sexed. Plath was nothing if not a good student; she excelled in the study of male writers and in following their example. But she had a rebellious side too, chafing even from her teenage years at the myriad double standards applied to men and women. She also recognized the danger of having her own voice smothered by the enormous weight of the poetic authority of her literary forebears.

It was within this climate, in February of 1959, that Plath began studying with Lowell. There she met fellow workshop participant Anne Sexton. Quite unlike Plath, Sexton had been an indifferent high school student and did not go to college, instead marrying early and becoming a housewife. While Plath was fiercely proud of her intelligence and early achievements, Sexton did see herself as smart or capable, and even after great success did not think of herself as an "intellectual." Sexton, in fact, came to poetry in her late twenties, in a roundabout way when, following a mental breakdown, she was encouraged to write by her psychiatrist. In contrast to Plath's super-abundance of canonical influences upon her work, Sexton had few. Far from being burdened by the authority and influence of literary ancestors, Sexton began her writing career having read relatively little. Though she, like Plath, admired Lowell, as both a poet and a teacher, and called him her "first real master,"<sup>153</sup> she was far less the obedient student than Plath.

If Adrienne Rich was for Plath an example of the type of success she wanted for herself, achievable through a respectful emulation of the greats, then Sexton presented an

altogether different model. In fact, Plath may have gravitated toward Sexton precisely because of the self-authorizing boldness which Plath herself had not yet acquired.

Plath was drawn to the poetry workshop at Boston University because of her regard for Lowell, and seemed initially rather disdainful of the other students, but she soon began to admire Sexton's work. A few years later, speaking about the influences on her poetry, Plath praised Sexton and her "wonderfully craftsman-like poems" which at the same time had "emotional and psychological depth."<sup>154</sup> Despite their differences—Plath, the good student, and Sexton, the indifferent one—they shared many similarities. One was that they wanted sex to infuse their work. By sex, I mean their own sex, their bodies, and the experience of growing up female in the world—but also the erotic intensity of relationships, feelings, and creativity. Another similarity was their shared interest in rage, violence and death. As we shall see further in the chapter, while suicidal impulses can be seen as an almost logical response to living under a violently patriarchal system, for both Plath and Sexton, their relationship with death also represented an eroticized investment that fueled their sense of creative selfhood.

3.

Plath and Sexton admired each other's work but nevertheless, within Lowell's classroom, *he* was the influence and arbiter, the center of gravitation. Sexton recalled in "The Barfly Ought to Sing" that she and Lowell's other students let their "poems come up, as for a butcher, as for a lover" and adds in the next breath, "We kept as quiet as possible in view

of the father.”<sup>155</sup> In these three epithets, “butcher,” “lover,” “father,” Lowell is associated with violence and death, sex, and oedipal feeling, summarily capturing the mix of libidinal energy that proved central to both Sexton and Plath in their creative lives.

But while Lowell was, and continued to be, a figure of significance for both poets, Plath and Sexton felt his influence begin to wane and each other’s wax at the end of each class. Sexton writes of “ignoring Lowell and the poems left behind” in favor of their threesome with Starbuck at the Ritz.<sup>156</sup> Plath, though, was not entirely enchanted with Starbuck’s accompanying them. Here was another male poet between them, but he did not have Lowell’s gravitas or compelling artistic mastery. Plath does not seem to have felt Starbuck her equal in terms of the work, or, for that matter, that he was Sexton’s equal either.

Why then was he there? In Sexton’s description the threesome is of a lopsided one; it is she and Plath who produce the energy that illuminates the whole essay. While this unevenness might be the product of the occasion—the essay was written for a special issue of *Tri Quarterly* commemorating Plath—Starbuck confirms the arrangement in his own recollection of their evenings. He writes of Plath and Sexton: “They had these hilarious conversations,” and acknowledges that he was not so much a participant as someone who had the “privilege to eavesdrop on them.”<sup>157</sup> He takes a background role while Sexton and Plath take center stage, and concedes his role is as an “escort.” But this still does not answer the question of why they needed an escort.

Here Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theory of erotic triangulation proves useful. In the triangulated relationship between Plath and Sexton, there is a mirror of the structure

Sedgwick described in *Between Men*. In Sedgwick's formulation, the competition and jealousy between two men over a third figure, a woman, is a socially-sanctioned means for the men to explore and develop an eroticized homosocial bond that would otherwise be impossible because of the perceived danger of its association with homosexuality.

Surprisingly, Sedgwick seems to foreclose the possibility of there being a mirror structure for women. In fact her argument about the binary opposition between homosociality and homosexuality among men depends in part on the contrast she draws between this arrangement among men and what she describes as “the apparent simplicity—the unity—of the continuum between ‘women loving women’ and ‘women promoting the interests of women,’ extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms.”<sup>158</sup> The word “continuum” here suggests that this argument is built upon Adrienne Rich's seminal “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” and its exploration of a “lesbian continuum” that could be expanded to include all kinds of “female-to-female” experience including mothering, friendship, mentoring, etc. It is true that Rich envisions a continuity between women furthering each other's interests and women loving each other, but the essay was—and, in many ways, remains today—a revolutionary and radical one. The mainstream of American society, certainly, does not, in fact, see an “apparent simplicity” or “unity” between women's homosociality and promoting of each other's interests, on the one hand, and female homosexuality, on the other. The idea that sororities, sewing circles, girl scouts, etc., are uncomplicatedly seen as of a piece with female-female desire is still very much at odds with mainstream

thinking, and, for our purposes, would certainly have seemed quite alien in Plath and Sexton's world.

Sedgwick is correct however, that there does exist *some* apparent continuity, even outside of the context of Rich's radical insights, but it is of a particular and negative kind—the reactionary but common association between feminism and lesbianism. Betty Friedan, in an attempt to counter the reflexive, but strategic, move, in which the abjectness of the lesbian is used as a brush to tar the feminist, was at pains to *disconnect* women-helping-women from women-desiring-women.<sup>159</sup> She has been rightfully criticized for capitulating to the cynical demand that, women must disavow the charge or suspicion of homosexuality in order to continue the furthering the cause of female solidarity. In this way, Sedgwick is correct that no mirror can precisely reflect the structure that exists among men and that which exists among women.

Whereas for men, societal forces do not object to, and indeed applaud and encourage, the practices and institutions that promote the interests of men, while disapproving of, and even violently forbidding, male homosexuality; in contrast, the situation for women is that societal forces strongly discourage *both* feminism *and* lesbian existence. Still, I find Sedgwick's brilliant analysis of structures of desire among Victorian men extremely useful for understanding what I am calling the queer friendship between Plath and Sexton in the years before the advent of the women's movement and gay liberation.

In this adaptation of Sedgwick's theory, a male figure was both *necessary* and, at the same time, mostly *irrelevant* to the relationship between Sexton and Plath. Irrelevant

because the heat and spark was to be found between the women. And yet necessary, in the sense that his male presence both amped up—and at the same time defused—the sexual energy between Plath and Sexton, while also providing plausible deniability to the erotic tension between the two.

4.

The compulsory heterosexuality, first described by Rich in her essay, and alluded to in Sedgwick's work,<sup>160</sup> was an overwhelming feature of the historical context in which Plath and Sexton knew each other. Plath recognized her strong libido early on, but for her it was a given that it was directed towards men. Still, the journals of her late adolescence and early adulthood are often focused on the problems of being a woman possessing a sex drive; how to fulfill such a drive in the patriarchal society of the American mid-century without being caught in a marriage that would confine her and squelch her talent, creativity and the fullness of her sexual being; and what kind of a man would make a good mate for her, both sexually and creatively, given these constraints.<sup>161</sup>

A passage from *The Bell Jar* illustrates the narrowness of mid-century heterosexual romance, and the obstacle that it posed to women's sexual exploration and fulfillment. Plath's novelistic alter ego, Esther, talks to a man who describes losing his virginity to a middle-aged prostitute as being "as boring as going to the toilet." Esther counters: "I said maybe if you loved a woman it wouldn't seem so boring, but Eric said it would be spoiled by thinking this woman too was just an animal like the rest, so if he



loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business.”

Pragmatically, Esther sees this gendered double-standard as an opportunity for her own ends:

*It had crossed my mind at the time that Eric might be a good person to go to bed with, since he had already done it and, unlike the usual run of boys, didn't seem dirty-minded or silly when he talked about it. But then Eric wrote me a letter saying he thought he might really be able to love me, I was so intelligent and cynical and yet had such a kind face, surprisingly like his older sister's; so I knew it was no use, I was the type he would never go to bed with, and wrote him I was unfortunately about to marry a childhood sweetheart.* <sup>162</sup>

In this schema, a woman can either be loved for her “purity,” while a man seeks his sexual pleasure elsewhere, or scorned and used like an animal. Esther tries to use Eric back in order to lose her own virginity but ironically her plan is stymied by his respect for her.

When Plath met Ted Hughes, she discovered that he admired her creativity *and* her sexually appeal. For her part, she saw in him a man whose “hugeness” would not be intimidated by her libido and could instead dominate her in bed, and whose outsized talent would not be threatened by her own “small gifts.”<sup>163</sup> The limitation of choices was so extreme in the mid-century climate of enforced sexism that Plath was not looking for an equal partner. The most she hoped to find, after years of dating, searching and

contemplation, was a partner who could appreciate her erotic selfhood and her talent without feeling emasculated by the existence of either. It is little wonder that when she found those qualities in Hughes she threw herself headlong into the intoxication of her love story with him.

Sexton too grew up and lived in an atmosphere of compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>164</sup> She married at 19 and assumed the role of the stereotypical suburban 50s housewife, though it never suited her. Unlike Plath, whose father's death threw the family into a financial instability from which they never really escaped, Sexton was brought up in prosperous, upper-middle class privilege. Then, marrying young, making a home for her husband, and having been taught to see herself as *not-smart*, it didn't occur to Sexton to work outside the home.<sup>165</sup> Her identity as a woman was tied to a scripted set of gender-defined accomplishments whose ethos Betty Friedan skewered so electrifyingly in *The Feminine Mystique*.

Poetry opened up a new world for Sexton, outside of the proscribed and confining role of the housewife and helpmeet. In this life her emotions and libido had an outlet on the page, as well as in the social and promotional whirl of the poetry business. For both Plath and Sexton, then, sex was tied into writing, and their creative powers were linked to a robust libidinal energy. In 1959 that libido was unquestioningly assumed to be heterosexual and, moreover, highly influenced by Freudian-inflected mainstream American psychoanalysis.

Shulamith Firestone wrote about the uncanny similarities between feminism and Freudianism—and the way Freud’s theories were coopted to channel-off the revolutionary potential of feminism’s insights.

*Freudianism was the perfect foil for feminism, because, though it struck the same nerve, it had a safety catch that feminism didn’t—it never questioned the given reality [...] While both at their cores are explosive, Freudianism was gradually revised to suit the pragmatic needs of clinical therapy: it became an applied science complete with white-coated technicians, its contents subverted for a reactionary end—the socialization of men and women to an artificial sex-role system [...] The term that perhaps best characterizes this neo-Freudian revisionism is ‘adjustment.’ But adjustment to what? The underlying assumption is that one must accept the reality in which one finds oneself.<sup>166</sup>*

In other words, while Freudian theory highlighted the gendered dynamics of the family romance, it also obscured the explosive and revolutionary conclusions elucidated by feminist analysis. Instead Freud’s insights were directed towards an industry of “managing” women’s dissatisfaction, urging them towards an acceptance of and “adjustment” to, rather than dismantling, a system that oppressed them.

In the opening pages of *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan wrote of the complicity between Freudianism and the patriarchal status quo in dictating what healthy, adjusted, appropriate womanhood was—and how to fulfill it.

*Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training; ... how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting... They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents.<sup>167</sup>*

Plath and Sexton *were* those “neurotic women” who wanted to be poets. They went on, eventually, to become two of the greatest of the twentieth century, but in 1959 that was still only a shimmering, uncertain dream. It cannot have been easy for either of them to live and to create in a world that *explicitly opposed* feminine identity to intellectual and professional fulfillment.

Plath wrote about this very dilemma in *The Bell Jar* and in her journals: how to be an intelligent and ambitious woman in a world that considers those qualities oxymoronic. In the novel, Esther throws back at boyfriend Buddy Willard the Freudian language he has jokingly used to describe her. “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time,” Esther declares, “then I’m neurotic as hell.”<sup>168</sup> Esther defiantly embraces the word instead of defending herself against the accusation.

Judith Halberstam has argued that the Freudian understanding of successful femininity and psychologically appropriate feminine development, set the stage for what she calls “feminist negation” to have its appeal.

*If, as Freud asserts, the little girl must reconcile herself to the fate of a femininity defined as a failed masculinity, then that failure to be masculine must surely harbor its own productive potential.<sup>169</sup> and In fact, from the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success [and] not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures.<sup>170</sup>*

This pleasure-in-not-succeeding undergirds “Her Kind,” the poem in which Anne Sexton invokes the image of the witch *haunting the black air, braver at night*<sup>171</sup>. The poem’s speaker acknowledges the witch’s failure of femininity, *A woman like that is not a woman, quite*. But then proclaims her own allegiance to the coven of failed womanhood, baldly announcing, *I have been her kind*. In the same vein, Sexton’s “Barfly” anecdote—martini-soaked, set in the plush velvet darkness of the Ritz bar—paints the portrait of two neurotics, failing at normative femininity, attracted to the dark arts of magic and witchcraft<sup>172</sup>, forming their own little coven and trading secrets of survival and insurrection.

6.

Within the Freudian construction, the Oedipus/Electra complex was the primary lens for understanding one’s self and one’s sexual desires and neuroses. Fathers and father-figures were *always already* imbued with a potential sexual valence. In keeping with the times, both Plath and Sexton understood their relationships with their fathers in Freudian-

inflected, sexualized terms, and wrote in their poetry of incestuous bonds between father and daughter. According to Freudian logic, Lowell, their teacher,—*father, butcher, lover* in Sexton’s story—was also a father figure. In sharing both their admiration for Lowell and their resentment of his paternal influence, Plath and Sexton could partake in an eroticized bond even as they plotted their metaphorical revenge.

Just as Plath took revenge on her own father by cutting him down to size in her poetry, so, as Steven Gould Axelrod has pointed out, she also cut her poetic father down to size by giving Lowell’s nickname “Cal” to a shallow, insipid character who flirts with Plath’s alter-ego Esther.<sup>173</sup> Even more radically, both Plath and Sexton took their revenge on Lowell by outstripping him in the genre he inaugurated, confessional poetry. In fact, though the genre is commonly known as the “confessional,” Axelrod coined the more insightful and apt phrase “domestic poem,” which deftly highlights the aesthetic and strategic uses within the genre of the details and dramas of the family romance.

In Plath’s blistering “Daddy,” the daughter’s resentment of the father turns from feeling to action. In order for the daughter to survive the father must go.

*You do not do, you do not do*

*Any more, black shoe*

*In which I have lived like a foot*

*For thirty years, poor and white,*

*Barely daring to breathe or Achoo*<sup>174</sup>

The poem is both accusation and funeral song for the father. It also calls for the death of the Freudian edict that the Electra complex should dictate a woman’s development. The

*black shoe* that no longer fits is both the father *and* the oppressive sex system which has kept women constrained and *barely daring to breathe*. Having killed the father—*There's a stake in your fat black heart*— and the sex system he represents, there is rejoicing: *the villagers never liked you. / They are dancing and stamping on you.*

In my mind's eye, I picture the scene that Sexton describes: the two poets leaning into each other at the Ritz to gossip. If I squint they become two of the villagers from “Daddy,” calling into existence a potential world in which the father and the patriarchy are dead, and they are righteously gloating over the passing of a system that pathologized their desires and confined their ambitions.

7.

I want to keep thinking about about what Starbuck's presence at the Ritz meant, beyond plausible deniability, to the Plath-Sexton relationship. Starbuck was not a father figure and so his presence does not have the Freudian charge of the Electra complex, but he was an eroticized one. For Sexton, obviously, but for Plath too. Her knowing of the affair and making a trio of their outings created a kind of hothouse atmosphere of erotic furtiveness. As Sexton's lover, Starbuck's presence—more than any of his qualities or actions which are hardly mentioned in “Barfly” or in Plath's journals—lends the group an illicitness that eroticizes it. In their evenings at the Ritz, they *were*, imaginatively if not actually, a threesome in the *ménage-à-trois* sense. Starbuck says as much in describing himself as

“*cavalier servante*” to both “ladies,” referencing the tradition of married women taking on male lovers who would then squire them about town.

But like the cliché of the man who excitedly embarks on a threesome with two women, only to find himself rather left out when they pay more attention to each other than to him, Starbuck was both the *supposed center* of the erotic triangle, and an afterthought to the more interesting stuff happening between the two women. He served as an alibi for the sultry, gossipy, martini-laced encounter between the two women, and at the same time a kind of chaperone that both defused and diffused the erotic tension, making sure there was no “next level” (i.e. moving from flirtation and erotic intensity into erotic *physical* contact) to which it could progress. According to mid-century compulsory heterosexuality, the *burned-up intensity* between them that Sexton describes had to be contained, and he was useful in this way.

At the same time, Plath’s metaphorical participation in the threesome allowed her to taste something that she never allowed herself in real life. In her journal comments about Sexton and Starbuck’s affair, Plath seems caught between judgment, fascination, and envy. While Plath typically took a very dim view of lying and philandering and sneakiness in relationships,<sup>175</sup> her going along with Sexton and Starbuck to the Ritz suggests her own interest and attraction. When Plath writes of wanting to write a short story that would fictionalize the affair, the point of view she proposes to take on is that of Starbuck’s wife Jan. Later, she notes again in her journal her interest in writing a story, but now the point of view is her *own*, and she acknowledges her nosy and intrusive



interest in the affair. “NOW: the story about George, J—and Ann, and the children. An insufferable woman (myself, of course) gets involved in the separated family.”<sup>176</sup>

This suggests another satisfaction to be found in the art of failure. While Plath might have been tempted by the idealized version of marriage and family that was being marketed to girls and women at mid-century, there was a part of her that knew full well that they were being sold a bill of goods. Women were expected to put in all the emotional labor of making relationships work, of being comforting and sexy and alluring, through an elaborate performance of ultra-femininity, while at the same time being forbidden from asking for their own needs (sexual and emotional) to be met. Women were encouraged to turn a blind eye to their husbands’ philandering, with a shrug of “boys will be boys” and the promise that if they made themselves appealing and non-judgmental, in the end the wandering husband would return. In *The Bell Jar* Esther bristles at the infuriating double-standard: “I couldn’t stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life and a man being able to have a double life, one pure and one not.”<sup>177</sup>

When this is the kind of partnership promised to the “successful” and “well-adjusted” woman, then, once again, failure beckons appealingly. As Esther explains in: “That’s one of the reasons I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket.”<sup>178</sup> Sexton, in the Ritz scenario, is the woman who *has* dared to turn her back on the illusion of perfect domesticity and is finding her pleasure elsewhere. Sexton

*is*, in fact, the other woman, the bad woman who breaks up the family and threatens the order of domesticity.

Helen Michie writes in *Sororophobia* that “[p]opular culture uses the transfiguration of female otherness into the mistress to locate it outside the family; the mistress, as the not-wife, becomes the locus of all that is troubling, problematic, unfamiliar about female sexuality and sexual difference.”<sup>179</sup> Plath’s disapproval of Starbuck’s and Sexton’s betrayal is evident in her journals, but so too is her own prurient curiosity and fascination with the situation. In wanting to write about the affair, in writing herself into the story as a meddling acquaintance, Plath gave herself permission to explore the out of bounds.

And the drinking threesomes at the Ritz bar also imply a kind of identification—not with the aggrieved wife Jan, but with the other woman Anne. Implicated from the outset by having to keep the secret of the affair, Plath is already a kind of participant. The erotic triangulation between the three poets, moreover, implies that Starbuck holds a parallel relationship with Plath and Sexton. Plath too, in other words, has become the other woman by virtue of being twinned with Sexton. Such an identification allows Plath to explore her other woman-ness. *the mistress, as the not-wife, becomes the locus of all that is troubling, problematic, unfamiliar about female sexuality and sexual difference.* Given the constraints imposed on female sexuality by the patriarchy, this alternative has a powerful allure.

This identification also represents a threat to the patriarchy. As Audre Lorde remarked of women who have refused the containment of the erotic in the matrimonial

bed and instead allowed it to infuse their lives: “Of course, women so empowered are dangerous.” Lorde reminds her readers that this is why “we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex.”<sup>180</sup> Plath and Sexton haven’t kept eros contained within the bedroom but have allowed it to escape and, like a powerful smoky incense surrounding them, it has entered the classroom, followed them as they left, and enveloped them at the Ritz. Sexton’s erotic power, stemming from her knowledge of being the other woman, fans out over Plath too, conferring upon her its witchy magic. Here feminine failure, rather than being the source of isolation and shame, is shared and in fact mined for its pleasures and wisdom. In spite of their identities as respectable hetero women, Plath and Sexton are in fact practicing the queer art of failure that Halberstam described.

8.

In the months before her death, Plath separated from Hughes. After discovering his affair with Assia Weevil, Plath consulted with lawyers about the possibility of divorce. She was still legally married to him at the time of her death, though, and she died intestate, making Hughes the de facto heir and executor of her literary estate. From the moment of her death and up until his own, Hughes occupied a central, and indeed controlling, position within the Plath oeuvre: as husband, fellow poet, editor, father to Plath’s children, and guardian of her literary legacy. It is almost impossible to study Plath without taking Hughes into consideration, and in fact Plath-studies are de facto filtered

through a Hughesian lens. This is another way in which “Barfly” is quietly radical: Sexton’s unseating of Ted Hughes from his dominant place in the Plath mythology, making room instead for *her* to sit beside Plath, sharing secrets.

Susan Van Dyne has pointed out that—despite his repeatedly refusing to be interviewed by Plath biographers—Ted Hughes is *himself* one of Plath’s biographers. In addition to Hughes’s own poetic rendering of his relationship with Plath in his *Birthday Letters*,<sup>181</sup>

Van Dyne notes:

[t]hrough his control of her archive and his own, through more than fourteen introductions and annotations of Plath’s work, and in a series of litigious public and private interventions to protest against invasions of privacy by biographers and critics, he has laid claim to irrefutable knowledge of Plath’s inspiration, intentions, and writing practices, and the chronology of her work.<sup>182</sup>

Moreover, Hughes famously wanted to oversee what *others* said about Plath, granting or denying permission to quote from her work based on how closely the biographies hewed to the Hughes-family party line—which ran, more or less: Ted was not to be blamed for leaving Sylvia and the children to set up a household with Assia, since Sylvia had driven him away with her moodiness, rages, and unreasonable demands. Biographies that undermined that narrative were simply denied permission to quote from Plath’s work.

While I am not entirely unsympathetic to Hughes’s claim that he was entitled to some privacy, it seems to me he gave up the high ground in that argument with the

commissioning of Anne Stevenson's biography *Bitter Fame*, and particularly with the inclusion in the same volume of the (bitchily entertaining but frankly unhinged) memoir-cum-character assassination "Vessel of Wrath" by Plath's erstwhile "friend" Dido Merwin. But Van Dyne explains that Hughes's desire for an authorized biography of Plath was motivated in part by "his need for control over what he emphatically insisted was his story as much as Plath's."<sup>183</sup> In fact, as Ted Hughes told Janet Malcolm: "The main problem with S.P.'s biographers is that they fail to realize that the most interesting and dramatic part of S.P.'s life is only ½ S.P.—the other ½ is *me*."<sup>184</sup>

There is substantial truth to the notion that those who wanted to write about Plath inevitably wrote about Hughes too, but his claim erases the fact that he frequently *inserted himself* into the narrative, introducing her poems, her essays, etc, adding little details of their private life to provide "context," shaping the presentation and reception of her work, often forwarding—though in an almost regretful way—biographical readings of her work that emphasized the dynamic he shared with her, and his intimate, unique knowledge of her emotional life.

Given the sexism, in society and in the literary scene, that Plath and other women poets had to face in order to first, see themselves as writers, and then, put in the work of creating and publishing in a climate that was hostile to their efforts, it strikes me as comically, but also infuriatingly, predictable that the male poet should declare himself *half responsible for the most interesting part of the female poet's life*. He says it, so it must be so. *Iipse dixit*.

Two can play at that game, though. In a satisfying reversal, Sexton, in writing “The Barfly Ought to Sing,” removes Hughes from the equation entirely. He doesn’t matter at all. He wasn’t there. In Sexton’s anecdote, *she*, instead, is at the center of the story, forming a couple with Plath and together creating an erotic frisson. Sexton’s anecdote has nothing to do with Hughes, and is nevertheless hugely “interesting” and dramatic<sup>185</sup>. The two female poets take center stage, discussing their lives, their attempts to reach death, their return from the brink. If there *is* a male presence, aside from Starbuck’s insubstantial one, it is the more thrilling and erotic presence of death, *our boy*.

9.

In examining the ways women poets have used mythical narratives and figures to their own purposes, reinventing the meanings and impact of the myths in the process, Alicia Ostriker writes:

*In them the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead ... they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival.*<sup>186</sup>

“Barfly” sidesteps the frothy fabrication of mid-century femininity, rooted in the male fantasy of the domestic goddess (cheerfully industrious in the kitchen; kittenishly sexy in

bed). Instead it reveals the subversive mechanism that the fantasy obscures. Like compatriots plotting a coup, these women share a defiant and erotically charged moment of intimacy. The poets create a space in which they can revel in *the divine and demonic* parts of themselves. They trade stories of their past suffering and endurance. And while not exactly instructions for survival to readers, the anecdote is a testament to the way the two poets supported each other's survival on their own terms.

The myth that Sexton has selected for revision in "Barfly" is the descent into the Underworld. It is one of the oldest stories in Western literature, beginning with Odysseus's invocation of the ghost of Tiresias in the *Odyssey*<sup>187</sup> and continuing through Aeneas's meeting with his father in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's descent into Hell in the *Inferno*, and the poet's own in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Michael Thurston summarizes the basic schema of the descent, "The protagonist, usually at the nadir of his journey, at a dark moment of exhaustion, confusion, or despair, is driven to seek counsel and guidance from the past preserved and the prophetic vision vouchsafed to a tutelary figure in the Underworld."<sup>188</sup>

While the anecdote in "Barfly" shares some aspects with this schema, Sexton rewrites the ancient myth for her own purposes. In the bar of the Ritz the poets retread their journeys to the Underworld. Although each had earlier made her descent alone, now that the women are together conferring intimately in the bar, they are engaged in a kind of joint venture, comparing notes, sharing details, recognizing similarities from their

journeys. The complicity of the poets sets this story apart from the typical narrative descent which centers a solitary hero.

Thurston quotes Pike on “the characteristic strategy” of the descent into the Underworld functioning “simultaneously as a repository for the past and as a crucible in which that repository is melted down to be recast as something other than what it had been.”<sup>189</sup> This seems to have been the case for Plath. Axelrod makes the convincing case that Plath’s suicide attempts, including her ultimately successful one, were intended to allow her an opportunity for spiritual and creative rebirth after a period of emotional agony.

In addition to this transformation, what is the knowledge, or the prophetic vision that Sexton and Plath sought from their previous descents? Perhaps some truth about sex or love or art? In her essay, Sexton reserves the details of her conversations with Plath., those stay between them, but the language of the anecdote suggests the erotic and creative vitality drawn from their experience.

Significantly, in “Barfly” we have not the descent itself, but what comes after, which is to say rebirth, continuation, and the mundane details of ordinary life. Still, within this “ordinary” life, Plath and Sexton have found each other. They have both been on an extraordinary journey, a risky descent into the unknown. They’ve come back and returned to the routine dullness of buying shampoo and paying parking tickets and turning in grades, and they have had to bear the mantle of shame surrounding mental illness and suicide. Having found each other within the grind of ordinary life, they experience an ecstatic reunion with death, and a falling into joyous, thrilling intimacy



with each other. Starbuck is there, yes, but his protective function is pro forma. These women don't need *protection*. They have been to hell and back. They are more knowing, and more courageous than anyone who has not been there too can ever know. Their bond is immediate, intense, and lasting—beyond the years, and the trans-Atlantic separation, indeed beyond Sylvia's death.

10.

There is, in fact, yet one more figure through which the erotic tension between Plath and Sexton was triangulated, and that is the personification of death. In the erotic triangle of which Plath and Sexton formed two points, the third was occupied first by Lowell in the figure of the father, all-powerful and unreachable, then by Starbuck, the young lover, sexy and jealous-making, but ultimately fleeting. Lastly Lowell and Starbuck were displaced in the erotic triangle by death.

The language Sexton uses in "Barfly" to recount her evenings with Plath at times verges on the pornographic "sucking," "sweet," "intent eyes," "fingers clutching." The intensity of this language is directed towards death and triangulated through him towards each other. When Sexton writes that she and Plath were *sucking on it* she means they were sucking on death, and violently savoring the exchange of memories of trying to reach Death through suicide.

Before knowing one another, Sexton and Plath had each had their flirtations with death, and they both mined those experiences in their writing. The erotic intensity that

surrounded their retellings of past-deaths and imaginings of future-deaths is not coextensive with their friendship. In coming together, though, and in confessing their own attempts at suicide—and bearing witness to each other’s—Sexton describes them as sharing in death’s erotic attractions. No longer alone in their longings for oblivion, they could talk death, recreate the lust for death through words, and summon the very personification of death. In her poem “Wanting to Die,” Sexton calls death “our boy” and places him in a cab with herself and Plath, driving “home.”

One of the thrilling and powerful aspects to this anecdote, “Barfly,” is that it reverses the typical reading of Plath and Sexton as morbid women and writers. The reception history of Plath and Sexton’s work is overdetermined, in part, as we have seen, because of the gendered (mis)understanding of confessional poetry,<sup>190</sup> but also because of certain overwhelming gravitational forces at play within both the work and the critiques thereof. One of the powerful aspects of this anecdote is the reversal of that gravitational pull.

Central, of course, to readings of their work is suicide. Susan R. Van Dyne writes about Plath (but much the same could be said of Sexton), “Because the poems and novels that have made [her] name came to almost all her readers as posthumous events, her work has inevitably been read through the ineradicable and finally enigmatic fact of [her] suicide.”<sup>191</sup> Plath and Sexton scholars are often backed into a corner of saying that their work is about so much more than death; of almost apologizing for their suicides; of rejecting those readers whom they worry attracted to Plath and Sexton because they wrote about depression and suicide attempts.

11.

After my childhood friend Gemma committed suicide, I thought a lot about her life, and puzzled over her death. I knew mostly that I missed her and I struggled to wrap my head around the pain she had been in. I tried to bear witness, within myself and in conversations with others, to Gemma's life, to respect her experience, even the painful parts, and her choices, even the most frightening and bewildering one. I didn't know how to think about suicide. I found it terrifying—the finality of it, the impossibility of return, the unknown on the other side. I wanted no one, ever again, to go through the kind of pain that would precipitate such a choice. But I also rebelled viscerally at the commonplace idea that suicide is an act of selfishness or of cowardice.

12.

The challenge for Plath scholars, according to Van Dyne, “has been to puzzle out the relationship not merely of her life to her art, but of her art to her death.”<sup>192</sup> Death appears here as a stable concept. But is it? How are we to think about death—in particular, Plath's death and Sexton's death? We all must die, of course, but here their deaths are read as always already tragic, premature and pathological.

The overdetermined relationship between the poets' work and their deaths is shaped by cultural attitudes towards death, and more particularly towards suicide. Literary critic A. Alvarez, who was Plath's friend and confidante in the last months of her life, and who had also attempted suicide, wrote in *The Savage God* that

*Suicide is still suspect but in the last eighty odd years a change of tone has taken place: odium, like patriotism, is no longer enough. The suicide prejudice continues but the religious principles by which it was once dignified now seem altogether less self-evident... What was once a mortal sin has now become a private vice, another 'dirty little secret, something shameful to be avoided and tidied away, unmentionable and faintly salacious, less self-slaughter than self-abuse.'*<sup>193</sup>

The overwhelming negative aura that surrounds suicide cannot be underestimated. But embedded in Sexton's anecdote is a reframing of suicide. One of the major equations that hangs over considerations of both Plath and Sexton is the equation between suicide and suffering. I won't try to argue that Plath and Sexton did not suffer, for there is evidence in their own words that they did. But I can't ignore the way this anecdote highlights not suffering but pleasure.

After Sexton's death Adrienne Rich wrote with protective, weary grief of seeing yet another female poet take her own life: "We have had enough of suicidal women poets, enough suicidal women, enough of self-destructiveness as the sole form violence permitted to women."<sup>194</sup> I concur absolutely: woman need access to all forms of anger and all forms of resistance. At the same time I want to pay attention to the way that death is framed by Sexton herself in the scene she has conjured for her readers. José Esteban Muñoz wrote that "Death is often viewed in Western thought as quintessentially

antiutopian, because it defines the end of potentiality.” But here the meditation on death achieves its own restive potentiality.

In this anecdote Plath and Sexton leave behind the way that other people have framed suicide—frightening, sad, grim, depressing, bleak, and ultimately selfish and cowardly— in order to focus on their own relationship to it. And indeed in this story they have an entirely different affective orientation towards death. Instead of shame, secrecy and guilt, there is an unabashed reveling in storytelling and detail. The vibe is cheeky, mischievous, thrilling, sexy, defiant, devil-may-care. It is also, in a strange way, joyful. This anecdote brings us back into the present moment of the poets’ connection, when they shared confidences and were electrifyingly alive.

Plath and Sexton have typically been read as morbid, hysterical poetesses who couldn’t handle life, but their poetry, their friendship, their interest in death is is brave, questing, unsatisfied with pat answers, pushing against the limits of conventional assumptions. Suicide is commonly viewed as an act of extreme loneliness, something that takes place in solitude, but this anecdote reverses that construction. Their shared experiences of wanting to die—and the playfully macabre way of discussing it while boozing and flirting—is both a fuck-you to the shame associated with suicide and mental illness, and a subtle but potent expression of a certain kind of proto-feminism of the negative kind. Death offers an escape from the strictures, dullness, misogyny of life itself. But also, death is a kind of rebirth and renewal. Given the controls over women’s sexuality, the creation of an erotic relationship to death, as well as to the female friend, is way to defy that, to wrest control, to explore something forbidden. This feels of a piece

with the “shadow feminism” that Halberstam describes as speaking “in the language of self-destruction, masochism.” She describes its potentialities:

*A feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence, offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project, a shadow feminism which has nestled in more positivist accounts and unraveled their logics from within.*<sup>195</sup>

Death has held on to Plath and Sexton even in the critical afterlife of the two poets. Still, I want to deprivilege the finality and endurance of death, and remember instead that there was a time when death was a conduit and facilitator for the energy and spark and erotic friendship between Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath.

## Chapter 4

Nan Goldin and Cookie Mueller

*I doubt that enough feminist scholars and theorists have taken the pains to acknowledge the societal forces which wrench women's emotional and erotic energies away from themselves and other women and from woman-identified values. Adrienne Rich*<sup>196</sup>

*We are bonded not by blood or place, but by a similar morality, the need to live fully and for the moment, a disbelief in the future, a need to push limits, and a common history.*

Nan Goldin<sup>197</sup>

### *Prologue*

On the cusp of graduating from college I was trying to decide what to do with my life and where to go—and if I would do any of it with my boyfriend Arthur. My impending sense of the world breaking apart and my own self being blown away, gravitationless, was constant and ominous. My need to cling to him for safety—and at the same time my horror of clinging, unwanted—made me feel unhinged. Neither one of us was a

physically violent person, but his emotions, and mine too, seemed violent in their size and fluctuations, and the speed with which they could build, like rogue waves in the ocean. Our arguments sometimes reached a feverish pitch of anxiety and wounded egos and indignation. The worry I felt about the world and my place in it seemed, at least, to find a corollary in our outraged or anguished spats.

One afternoon, driving back to my campus from some outing, words flared between us and I felt bruised beyond all reason or caution or deliberation. I no longer remember exactly what was said but I remember my hand flying out across his face, and then his on mine. The shock of the blows, and the realization of what we'd done made us instantly remorseful and conciliatory. I was so freaked out, and ashamed, that I'd struck him, and of what might have happened, since he was driving, if he'd lost control of the car.

In the passenger-side mirror I could see my eye swelling where his hand had connected. Underneath my shame, I was fascinated by the way my body was registering so visibly the thing that had happened but was now over. That is to say, that the moment of rash desperation had passed, but it left a record in the changing colors of my eye.

Back in my dorm my friends Joan and Maggie looked at my eye with alarm. I tried to explain my role in what had happened. That I had struck first. This distinction did not appear to interest them. Their looks deromanticized what I had already started to burnish in my mind as evidence of passion and intensity.



This wasn't sexy, they told me, it was disturbing.

At first I chafed a little at this unvarnishing. A part of me had wanted to see the volatility of our feelings for one another mirrored in a physical confrontation. There was also a part of me that had *wanted* to match my strength to his—and to see mine subdued by his.

*What if inequality is built into the social conceptions ... of sexiness and heterosexual attractiveness?* Catherine MacKinnon wrote.<sup>198</sup> But my friends refused the sexiness of this idea, what MacKinnon termed *the eroticization of female subordination*.

My eye went through all the colors of the rainbow. By virtue of circumstances, I didn't see Arthur till all that was left was a yellow streak, barely discernable under my lower lash line. He didn't see the evolution of different shades. But my friends did. Their concern, love, and dark humor—not to mention their unwillingness to let me brush it off as “nothing,” and their skepticism about our volatility being evidence of the strength of our love—allowed me to see more clearly what had been confused by the wash of anxiety, and erotic desire, and the ideology of heterosexual coupling. I was to reckon over the next few years with my reflexive association between passion and recklessness.

1. “*Nan After Being Battered*”

There is a famous photograph by Nan Goldin in which she stares unflinchingly into the camera, with two black eyes, her left one still swollen and badly bloodshot. She’d been beaten by her boyfriend Brian. Her injuries required hospitalization, several surgeries, and almost cost her the sight in her left eye. Goldin writes of the importance of this photograph: “The photo of me battered is the central image of the *Ballad*; the ultimate outcome of the subtext of this book, how extremely difficult it is to be in a couple, the underlying violence between men and women.”<sup>199</sup>



Fig. 4.1 *Nan after being battered*, 1984<sup>200</sup>

The book opens with an image from the beginning of Goldin’s relationship with Brian, three years earlier. Goldin sits on Brian’s lap, her arms draped around his shoulders. She

smiles into the camera. The physical closeness of their embrace pair belies an emotional chasm. The contrast between her affectionate touch and his dead-eyed stare signal something is off about the pairing; a sense of foreboding about what's to come. Even in the early days of the relationship, before the breakdown between them, there were signs of its coming destruction.



Fig. 4.2. *Nan on Brian's lap, Nan's birthday, New York City, 1981*, by Nan Goldin.

The cover image is another tip-off. In this one, Brian sits on the edge of the bed after sex, smoking, and apparently lost in his thoughts. Nan, lying on the bed, occupies only a small corner of the image, watching him warily. Though they'd just had sex, the image taken in that instant reveals the physical and emotional gulf between them. Goldin tells the story of her relationship with Brian in the introduction to the *Ballad*. The romantic and sexual

obsession that bonded them. The connection between jealousy and “passion.” And his battering her when he discovered the journals in which she had laid out some of her ambivalence.

Scattered throughout the first section of the *Ballad* are twelve more images of Brian.<sup>201</sup> Often brooding, rarely smiling, sometimes skulking, he is the “dependency” part of the title, the drug Nan can’t kick despite what he costs her. Underneath his brutish exterior, Brian is inarticulate, dark, sexually voracious, hurting and vulnerable—and hence dangerous. Like Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he elicits women’s sympathy and lust even as he breaks things and hurts those around him. In other words, he performs a kind of masculinity that holds significant cachet in the culture.

Indeed, the sexy, dangerous allure of the brooding, emotionally remote man is part of a cultural framework within heterosexuality that bestows glamour and romance on men whose personalities offer little other appeal. Goldin herself acknowledges as much, writing in the introduction to the *Ballad*, “I’ve seen how the mythology of romance contradicts the reality of coupling and perpetuates a definition of love that creates dangerous expectations.”<sup>202</sup> Goldin’s observation contains the retrospective, hard-earned wisdom of experience. Her photographs, moreover, are a way of theorizing that attraction, and its roots in the treacherous mythology—what Adrienne Rich called “the ideology of heterosexual romance.”<sup>203</sup>

## 2. *Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Indoctrination into Love*

I have come back, again and again, to Adrienne Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" because of how eloquently, and yet searingly, it describes the basic conundrum of being a woman. And though the essay is located in a specific historical moment—one that broadly overlaps with this chapter—many of its insights continue to be pointedly relevant today.

In a forward to the republication of the essay in 2003, Rich notes that she focused on heterosexuality itself, not to create divisions between queer and straight women, but rather to push feminists to examine it "as a political institution which disempowers women."<sup>204</sup> As Rich sees it, the question of compulsory heterosexuality is both crucial and often neglected within feminism. Feminist thinkers and activists, Rich argues, must reach beyond the concepts of gender inequality, male domination of the culture, and strictures against queer sexuality, to tackle the roots of these problems within the more subtle, insidious and pervasive way that heterosexuality is imposed on women in order to ensure men's ongoing "physical, economic, and emotional access."<sup>205</sup> Heterosexuality, as Rich demonstrates, is not a natural or innate expression of human sexuality, apparently hardwired into the majority of the population, but is in fact a *political institution* whose parameters are designed and enforced to benefit men. Heterosexuality, moreover, is neither freely chosen nor expressed since it is *demande*d from all women, and framed as an inevitable and necessary component of femininity. Those women who have expressed their sexuality outside of heterosexuality have done so in spite a culture that all but suppressed representations of lesbians, and under threat of ostracism, financial insecurity,

and physical violence. As Rich writes:

*Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women, because coming out of “abnormal” childhoods they wanted to feel “normal” and because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment.*<sup>206</sup>

In other words, the enforcement of women’s compulsory heterosexuality depends on a basic carrot/stick schema. The stick: financial insecurity, obstacles to having or raising children, social ostracism and the literal pathologizing of those women who opt out of heterosexuality.

The carrot, on the other hand, the lure, is the elaborate and endlessly embroidered fantasy of romance directed at girls and women. This fantasy, Rich points out, is “beamed at her from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry.”<sup>207</sup> The thrill, the fireworks, the deepest satisfactions of life are all, the ideology of heterosexual romance assures women, to be found in love and romance.

This echoes Shulamith Firestone’s declaration that “love, perhaps, even more than child-bearing, is the pivot of women’s oppression today.”<sup>208</sup> A decade earlier Firestone hypothesized in *The Dialectic of Sex* that even as women found greater avenues for survival and self-expression outside of the limitations of their sex, the ideology of romance ramped up its allure, creating ever more elaborate rituals to seduce women into

accepting its premise. “Romanticism develops in proportion to the liberation of women from their biology,” Firestone wrote. “As civilization advances and the biological bases of sex class crumble, male supremacy must shore itself up with artificial institutions, or exaggerations of previous institutions.”<sup>209</sup> The intricate rituals of teenaged dating, for instance, as well as the glorification and eroticization of the housewife during the 1950s, Firestone argues, were a canny response to women’s entry *en masse* into the workforce during World War II and their accompanying economic empowerment—both of which needed to be reversed when men came back from war. Romance was the ideological device by which to accomplish this return to patriarchal order and to help ensure that the men returning from war would have continued access to: the jobs which wartime experience showed could otherwise just as easily be filled by women; women’s unpaid labor maintaining homes and raising children; and women’s bodies, attention and emotional care.

To be sure, this is not to argue that attraction and love cannot or do not exist between men and women, but rather that, under the ideology of heterosexual romance, it is something less than a free choice, and that *love itself* needs to be problematized.

Like Rich and Firestone did before her, Goldin works, through observation and deconstruction, to free herself from the false mythology that surrounds her. Recognizing a cultural construct does not, of course, make it disappear but it does lessen its hold. Goldin pinpoints the “definition” of love as the origin point of the mythology, something that is not only inaccurate but actually dangerous. Her photographs work to examine and

in so doing dismantle that definition, and, crucially, as we shall see, suggest a *redefinition* of love.

### 3. *Barbara, or: The Threat of Feminine Sexuality*

This channeling of women's sexuality into narrow, prescribed paths has been limiting, frustrating and painful for some women, but downright deadly for others. Goldin witnessed up-close the potential dangers of this indoctrination as a girl in suburban Maryland. When Goldin was eleven, her eighteen-year-old sister Barbara died by suicide. Goldin writes with mournful poignancy about what led to her sister's death.

*I saw the role that her sexuality and its repression played in her destruction. Because of the times, the early sixties, women who were angry and sexual were frightening, outside the range of acceptable behavior, beyond control. By the time she was eighteen, she saw that her only way to get out was to lie down on the tracks of the commuter train outside of Washington, D.C. It was an act of great will.<sup>210</sup>*

*Sexuality / repression / destruction / angry / sexual / beyond control.* The words Goldin uses echo Rich's in her essay. The forces meant to discipline a teenage-girl's sexuality and bring it back within the bounds of the ideology of heterosexual romance were, ultimately, and tragically, still no match for this young woman's enormous resolve.



Goldin has stressed how crucial it was for her, after her sister's death, to leave home in order to survive, "I realized that in many ways, I was like my sister. I saw history repeating itself. Her psychiatrist predicted that I would end up like her. I lived in fear that I would die at eighteen."<sup>211</sup>

Not wanting to die, Goldin's own survival necessitated the creation of a different life, so at fourteen she left home and made a life for herself that, while not completely free from the ideology of heterosexual romance, explored and in fact forged, through a kind of relationship anarchy, alternative possibilities.

Goldin first attended a hippy boarding school in Massachusetts, where she made friends with David Armstrong and Suzanne Fletcher who would remain among the closest friends, portrait sitters, and artistic collaborators of her lifetime. Later she moved to Boston to attend the Museum of Fine Arts school. She lived in a railroad apartment with Armstrong, who was experimenting with drag, and four other roommates, among them more seasoned drag performers. "This was my new family," Goldin has said. "It was as if we'd all escaped from America."<sup>212</sup> In Goldin's description, America itself is complicit in enforcing gender norms, and in order to move beyond those norms one has to live "outside of" American, even if still within its literal borders.

Goldin has spoken of her early work photographing her roommates as being "all about homage" because she felt the drag queens were the most beautiful people she'd ever seen. She was also intrigued and inspired by the way they inhabited gender beyond the binary polarization, seeing them as "a third gender that made more sense than the

other two.” Indeed, if the conventional understanding of gender is that there are only two, men and women, and they are required to be complementary opposites of one another, the discovery of another possibility brings into relief the falsehood and absurd limitations of the existing system.

Goldin recalls further that, *at eighteen I felt like a drag queen too*. This strikes me as poignant and lovely in its retrospective observation. I imagine a young Goldin trying to express her femme-ness on her own terms. To not be punished for it, nor to be forced into it against her will, but rather to make it her own like the drag queens were doing. As Firestone demonstrated in *The Dialectic of Sex*, the “beauty ideal” is one of tools in service to the ideology of romance, in which women strive to conform to a standard of beauty and then compete for male attention on that basis. Beauty and its expression exist for male pleasure and validation. In the railroad apartment, though, and at The Other Side, the drag bar Goldin and her roommates frequented, femme beauty and glamour could exist and flourish—and the desires of straight cis men were all the while irrelevant to these explorations.

#### 4. “Cramping Their Creativeness” / Providence

Still, Nan Goldin’s work in the *Ballad* illustrates how pernicious the ideology of love and romance remains, even among women who have extricated themselves from convention. Though Goldin fled the life-sapping conformity of her upbringing in the middle-class

suburbs of Maryland and made homes for herself, first in Boston and then in Manhattan, she was not unfettered from the conventional sexual politics of the time. She appears never to have sought a man for financial security—she created that for herself. Nor did she feel the need to marry to avoid social ostracism—she instead formed a family with her friends, likeminded artists and brilliant misfits. But love, as it was defined by the culture, remained a thorny problem with no ready solution. Even in the politically- and artistically-forward milieu of the downtown art scene, there was a persistently regressive element.

In her essay Adrienne Rich examined “*the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives.*”<sup>213</sup> Her analysis expands on anthropologist Kathleen Gough’s inventory of the characteristics of male power which have been used to enforce women’s sexual and romantic loyalty to men. These include controlling economic resources, limiting access to employment, forcible coupling (arranged marriage, rape) and many others.

I was especially struck by one item on this list of the ways men enforce women’s romantic loyalty: *cramping their creativeness.*

*to cramp their creativeness—witch persecutions as campaigns against midwives and female healers, and as pogrom against independent, “unassimilated” women; definition of male pursuits as more valuable than female within any culture, so that cultural values become the*

*embodiment of male subjectivity; restriction of female self-fulfillment to marriage and motherhood; sexual exploitation of women by male artists and teachers; the social and economic disruption of women's creative aspirations; erasure of female tradition*<sup>214</sup>

It seems a particularly cruel irony that the very means by which women have sought to understand themselves and their condition should be squelched in the service of maintaining the gender system. Even in the bohemian, artistic enclave of the Lower East side, the reactionary standards of power prevailed. Darryl Pinckney, in his essay “Nan’s Manhattan,” recalls the retrograde sexual politics of the punk and new-wave music scene that formed the center of Goldin’s social world: “though there were women in bands and women bands, it was a man’s world. Masculine prerogatives seeped into the scene and rendered personal equality for women somewhat theoretical.”<sup>215</sup> Even in the environment that Goldin had sought as an alternative to the stifling, deadly Maryland suburbia of her childhood, the allure and glamour and power of creativity belonged to men. Women, for their part, were encouraged to admire and desire and pay homage to this male creativity.

I remember this dynamic, though in the very different milieu of undergraduate life. My boyfriend Arthur was a gifted musician and songwriter. He played with his band (all guys) in the bars of Providence, Rhode Island. His friends (all guys) acted as roadies, helping the band set up and break down the gear before and after gigs. The band even had groupies (all girls). Because I was a *girlfriend* and not “just” a fling I was treated with some deference. I sensed I was expected to be grateful for the status accorded me. But

really I was still a kind of groupie. I was a girl and I was sleeping with a guy in the band. Our roles were fixed.

In comparison to my boyfriend's advanced relationship to his creativity—he had staked out and claimed his desire to make something cool, and then brought the whole thing into existence—I thought of my own talents as undersized, too puny to be worth exploring. I didn't understand then that there was a gendered disparity to the culture's relationship to creativity; that, his whole life long he had been encouraged to pursue his gifts, whereas I had been discouraged from doing so.

At the same time I really *was* turned on and inspired to be around someone so talented, who was doing his thing, and doing it beautifully, persistently. I was filled with genuine admiration for him and for his gifts. All of this acted as fuel for my romantic ardor.

It didn't occur to me, though, to wonder how the relationship might look – different? better? in what ways?—if I had felt empowered to pursue my own aspirations. Looking back, I wonder if it was necessary, for our particular relationship, that he be the star onstage, and I the adoring girlfriend in the audience. I wish I'd tested the premise, but we broke up long before I'd sorted any of this out for myself.

##### *5. The Counterforce: The Lesbian Continuum and Erotic Friendship*

*[W]e are confronting not a simple maintenance of [gender] inequality and property possession, but a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical*

*brutality to control of consciousness, which suggests that an enormous potential counterforce is having to be restrained.* Rich<sup>216</sup>

Rich's essay has been criticized for its most stunning move—the invocation of a *lesbian continuum* that would include all forms of tenderness, companionship, and love among women, and extend from a mother's suckling of her newborn daughter, through the sexual- and life-partnerships of self-identified lesbians, and through to the caregiving at the end of life that one woman may give to her dying sister or mother or friend. Gayle Rubin, notably, argued that Rich's categorization works to paper over the historical and social complexities of women loving women and to forward a “romantic, politicized, and limited notion of lesbianism.” Rubin also takes issue with the apparent prioritizing in Rich's essay of gender solidarity over sexual preference. “While female intimacy and solidarity are important and overlap in certain ways with lesbian erotic passions,” Rubin writes, “they are not identical and they require a finer set of distinctions.”<sup>217</sup>

I agree with Rubin that gender solidarity ought not to replace sexual preference in defining the term *lesbian*. I am also in complete sympathy with the idea that a finer set of distinctions is needed to discuss the overlap between female intimacy and sexual orientation. But I am still moved and provoked by Adrienne Rich's refusal to evacuate the erotic from female friendship, by her refusal of an uncomplicated distinction between forms of female intimacy, and by her desire to hold space for a queer erotic intimacy that is not dependent on genital contact.

Rich makes the point that “as the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself.”<sup>218</sup> On the one hand, this seems to confirm Rubin’s critique about making the term lesbian less specific and interesting by evacuating sex from lesbian identity. On the other hand, though, Rich’s wish not to *limit the erotic itself* addresses a pressing and necessary question about how we conceive of sex, sexuality, sexual orientation, and, in fact, love itself. It speaks to the romantic-sexual system that demands a *cordon sanitaire* between sex/romance on the one hand and friendship on the other. If we can conceive of erotic feelings between friends—even if they do not lead to, or always lead to genital sexual activity—then we’ve opened up what sex and desire can be and we’ve also opened up what friendship can be.

Rich’s work on the lesbian continuum and on the counterforce to compulsory heterosexuality echoes the insights of Audre Lorde’s generative essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” which conceives of the erotic potential within women as diffuse, expansive and transformative. Lorde argues that within the sex-class system women’s erotic power has been corrupted, distorted and hidden from view. Women have been “taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within Western society... But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation.”<sup>219</sup>

There is, in fact, evidence of another system of love at play in Goldin’s world, though, a counterforce to the ideology of heterosexual romance. As she notes in her introduction:

“The women shown together in the *Ballad* offer a sense of solidarity, almost Amazonian strength, united with deep tenderness, openly tactile without self-consciousness.”<sup>220</sup> Still the strength of the gendered-romantic-sexual system makes itself felt. There is a pull of the hierarchy. Goldin makes note of her attraction to men but her greater emotional connection to women. It would be simpler, perhaps, if the whole thing were contained in one package! But the notion of the one tidy package is a construct of the romantic-sexual system that says all your emotional energy should be directed towards one other person. The necessity to choose, or to feel disloyal about not choosing or not wanting to choose, is a figment perpetuated by the system.

Goldin uses kinship analogies to describe her connections with women, writing: “my long-term relationships with women are bonds that have the intensity of a marriage, or the closeness of sisters.”<sup>221</sup> This is the counterforce Rich noted: the tenderness, solidarity, and eros between women. While not able to completely loosen the stranglehold of the ideology of heterosexual romance, this eros offers a safe harbor from its perils, and, just as crucially, an alternative vision of what love can be.

In particular, I’m drawn to the relationship between Goldin and Cookie Mueller, whose many moments across the years unfold in the *Ballad*, and in Goldin’s later work. Both women had grown up middle-class in the Maryland suburbs. Both had had siblings die during their childhoods (Nan’s sister by suicide, Cookie’s brother crushed by a falling tree branch). Both escaped in order to remake their lives. Both were bisexual and sought the freedom to explore their sexuality and creativity outside of the confines of suburban



middle-class expectations. “Cookie was one of my best friends in my whole life,” Nan has said. “We were a family.”<sup>222</sup>

Another of Goldin’s striking images is one that she took, of herself and Mueller, after having been punched by a male photographer at a photo conference<sup>223</sup>.



Fig. 4.3. *Cookie with me after I was punched, Baltimore, Md., 1986*, by Nan Goldin.

The photograph must inevitably recall *Nan after being battered, 1984*, which is so central to the *Ballad*. The images are separated by two years, and were taken in very different circumstances, but the resonances between the two are significant. In the 1984 image,

Nan faces the camera alone. In the 1986 image Nan and Cookie stand shoulder-to-shoulder, staring down the camera after Nan's assault. The 1984 image shows the violence of a man upon a woman, the 1986 image shows the solidarity of women when one has been hurt by a man. Mueller may not have been with Goldin in Berlin in 1984 when Goldin was beaten by Brian, but she is with her in *this* moment, by her side, comforting her, standing guard for her, using her arms to encircle her in protective care.

While the 1984 image of a battered Goldin remains, some thirty years after it was taken, iconic, and brutally powerful, the man responsible for the bruising of Nan's face is but an ignoble footnote. Nan left him after the beating and his sole interest to the world is as an example of the ways that men can be brutal; the insecurities that turn to violence; and the trap of heterosexuality—a trap both men and women fall into, but whose effects are typically more dangerous for women.

In contrast, the portraits of Cookie Mueller offer a window into a complex and multidimensional performance of feminine creative and emotional agency. They also highlight meaningful moments in the continuum of women-loving-women.

## *6. Introducing Cookie*

Dorothy Karen Mueller was known to all as Cookie. Like Nan Goldin, Cookie fled the suburbs of her birth, but instead of moving to Boston she went to join the hippies on Haight-Ashbury. There, Cookie's drug use and sometimes erratic behavior alarmed her

roommates who made the decision to have her committed. She was sent back to her parents and so, for a time, she ended up right back in the Baltimore area, institutionalized at a facility in the neighborhood she grew up in. After her release she made her way to Provincetown where she joined a whole crew of Baltimore oddballs and artists. Among them John Waters, who would direct her in *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble* and other films. In Provincetown she had a baby, Max, and met her longtime girlfriend, Sharon.

Cookie, Max, and Sharon moved to New York in the late 70s, where Mueller continued her earlier pursuits of clothes-making and acting (and dealing coke out of her apartment, to pay the rent), but where she also started writing professionally.



Fig. 4.4. Cookie Mueller in 1981 by Tobi Seftel.

In one essay Mueller recalls living with baby Max at her parents' house while making *Pink Flamingos* with Waters. On set she and her fellow actors reveled in their shared

enthusiasm for the project, undaunted by the assaults on propriety in which they were about to engage (Divine eating dog shit; Mueller being fucked by a headless chicken). At home, though, Mueller had to conceal from her very conservative mother the unseemly nature of the project. One day when Waters came to pick up Mueller and drive her to set, Mueller's mother barred the way, shouting, "OH NO YOU'RE NOT! I FOUND THAT SCRIPT AND I READ IT AND YOU'RE NOT GOING ANYWHERE NEAR THAT SET!"

As Mueller recalls, she sat her mother down for a moment trying to explain:

*"Mom, it's not like you think. The movie's going to be funny. It's not porno. It's a whole other kind of film... it's art... it's...." I was at a loss for the right word, the label that would legitimize the film for her. How could she ever understand?*<sup>224</sup>

It remains uncertain whether Mueller's mother ever *did* understand, but the art and film worlds eventually recognized John Waters's subversive, gross-out genius. Cookie's renown has been slower in coming but those in her social circle long recognized her artistry, even in its ephemeral or unclassifiable forms. John Waters memorably described Cookie as "a writer, a mother, an outlaw, an actress, a fashion designer, a go-go dancer, a witch-doctor, an art-hag, and above all, a goddess." The publication last year of an illustrated oral history of Mueller's life, the remarkable *Edgewise* by Chloé Griffin,<sup>225</sup> begins to correct the neglect of Mueller as an artist, intertwining the stories of her life with those of her artistic output.

This is an apt approach, because for Mueller, as for many in her bohemian milieu, artistic production and creative, unconventional living were not so easily distinguished. The clothes and jewelry she made, her dazzling half-Goth half-glittery-Cleopatra self-presentation, the dancing till the wee hours at Provincetown and New York City clubs, were of a piece with her performance and writing work.

### *7. The Cookie Portfolio*

Goldin's photographs of Mueller likewise show her in her many incarnations; fearless, beautiful, pensive, overtaken by hilarity, or tenderly holding her son Max. While Goldin's photographs of Mueller function as a portrait of a personality, they also trace a friendship between the two women who were not a romantic-sexual couple, but, rather, and perhaps more intimately, best friends. "If each picture is a story, then the accumulation of these pictures comes closer to the experience of memory," Goldin writes, "a story without end."<sup>226</sup> In the *Cookie Portfolio*, Goldin gathers her most important images of Mueller, and for the reader the experience of flipping through its pages is like seeing a miniature movie of Mueller's life and the gritty magic of the moments she shared with Goldin.

Goldin noted the need men have to place women into distinct categories: *mothers*, *whores*, *virgins*, *spiderwomen*. In contrast, Mueller, a singular woman, is represented in Goldin's work in a multiplicity of different roles, moods, and relationships. In the

portfolio the viewer first meets Cookie swathed in what looks like striped silk curtains, artfully arranged to create a high-necked, sleeveless tunic. She is holding her young son Max. Cookie's eyes are extravagantly ringed in black kohl, a cat-eye to shame all cat-eyes. From the very first image, this is a portrait of feminine complexity. Cookie, the viewer learns is an artist, an eccentric, an affectionate mother, a party-girl. She defies the categorization of women that the culture often imposes on them.

In the following images, that complexity does not diminish. She is dancing with arms around her girlfriend Sharon's neck, smiling impishly for the camera. She is in the Mudd Club bathroom, peeing companiably next to a friend, dressed to the nines in another outfit that could be of her own making—she was a talented dressmaker and for a time made a living selling her creations. In the next image she sits in front of a drink at a bar, staring pensively into the middle-distance. In another she is caught in a fit of hilarity, one bejeweled hand at her throat, the other steadying herself against the wall.

In all of these Cookie-moments, there is also Nan. It was at Nan's Provincetown birthday party that Cookie cuddled with Max. It was Nan who danced alongside Cookie and Sharon at the club in P-town, witnessing and sharing in their moment of romantic intimacy. It was perhaps something Nan said that prompted the laughter which is shaking Cookie with such unbridled joy.

Goldin's project, in photographing Cookie Mueller, is a record of that emotional and erotic investment between two women friends. This is the great counterforce Adrienne Rich spoke of, that must be held back by coercion or gaslighting or violence, in order to

convince women that their only sexual worth and erotic satisfaction exists in subservience to men.

Curator Elizabeth Sussman notes that “in Mueller, Goldin found ideals of glamour, freedom, and friendship.”<sup>227</sup> The meanings of “freedom” here are manifold but seem especially pointed in terms of the freedom from their families of origin and the freedom of a new conceptual framework for love, friendship and sex.

Nan described Cookie as “the diva—the sort of superstar around which our whole family rotated. It was at her house we would have Thanksgiving—where she would serve opium and turkey.”<sup>228</sup> The scene Goldin conjures is in pointed and hilarious contrast to the iconic Norman Rockwell illustration of the wholesome middle-class white family gathered around the Thanksgiving table. Instead we have Nan, Cookie, and their chosen family of fellow queers, drag queens and artists, feasting on turkey and illicit drugs. Domesticity is hijacked, deprogrammed, and freed from its traditional servitude to patriarchal family values. In Cookie’s home one can embrace the pleasures of cooking a holiday meal, sprinkle in the high decadence of opium, and fuck whomever one chooses after the meal is over. In the same way that Waters deconstructed middle-class American life in his movies, Cookie performs a subverted domesticity as a liberated, perverted, queer housewife, offering hospitality and holiday cheer to the freaks and dissidents she called family.

## 8. *Anarchy in The Ballad*

The *Ballad* performs relationship anarchy rather unostentatiously, by drawing the viewer's attention to all kinds of relationships without needing to clarify which are "traditional" sexual pairings, which are friendships, which are flings, and which are complicated and variable. Relationships are not prioritized according to the norms of the sex-romance system, which would put spousal relationships at the top of the hierarchy, with long-term sexual relationships beneath it, romantic relationships with potential to be long-term underneath that, and friendships and flings somewhere on the bottom. Each relationship, instead, is presented as alluring and worthy on its own terms.

Luc Sante remembered, in his essay "All Yesterday's Parties," that "in the air around Nan could be found personal styles we hadn't begun to imagine, completely new possibilities for self-invention."<sup>229</sup> I want here to draw a link between the invention of the self and the invention of new relationship possibilities. This is a connection that works both ways, since the multiplication of relationship possibilities enables novel ways of being oneself in the world. In other words, without the enforced, binary polarization of gender and its trickle-down into designated relationship roles, the self can flourish more freely, occupying positions previously unthinkable. Goldin has said that the *Ballad* contains the "history of a re-created family, without the traditional roles."<sup>230</sup> She elaborates, "These are long-term relationships. People leave, people come back, but these separations are without the breach of intimacy ... There is among us an ability to listen and to empathize that surpasses the normal definitions of friendship."<sup>231</sup>



In describing the most important relationships in her life as a *re-created family*, in calling into question *the normal definitions of friendship*, just as, earlier, she called into question *the definition of love*, Goldin is disrupting most of the ways we have of conceiving of affective relationships: love, friendship, family. The system is fractured but from this breach comes new potentialities. “What amazed me then—and still amazes me,” Darryl Pinckney observed, “was how many people Nan knew and knew well. She has a gift for friendship.”<sup>232</sup> Part of that gift may have been simply allowing friendship to be as deep, meaningful and consuming as romantic-sexual love, and allowing eros to infuse many different kinds of bonds.

In her radical examination of the potential of erotic energy, Audre Lorde pointed out that “the very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony.”<sup>233</sup> Although the patriarchy has had an interest in confining eros to the bedroom, and limiting women’s access to it outside of traditional marriage bonds, still the subversive potential of eros cannot ever be completely contained or controlled. In Goldin’s photographs it can be seen electrifying other relationships and illuminating a path towards different ways of being.

Goldin’s “gift for friendship” also seems connected to her thirst for emotional honesty. Her desire for an affective authenticity also breaches its conventional boundaries, overflowing the bonds of sex and kinship. Luc Sante described Goldin as valuing “emotional honesty, pursuing it way beyond many people’s limits”<sup>234</sup> That Goldin would

prize candor, openness, and emotional affinity in all her relationships is another aspect of her *doing* anarchic intimacy. For Goldin *relationships* aren't just conventionally defined romantic-sexual bonds, but rather a spectrum of different ways of knowing others, including kinship, friendship, sexual intimacy, as well as social/political/creative ties with fellow scenesters, and solidarity and kinship with other queer folks and sexual dissidents.

Goldin describes her work as coming “out of my relationships, not observation.”<sup>235</sup> In contrasting *relationships* to *observation* she is making a distinction between her own process and that of photographers who are documenting scenes that are *not* their own. Unlike them she is not *crashing other people's parties*. “This my party. This is my family, my history.”<sup>236</sup> *Party, family, history* are words that rub up against one other in a funny way. But partying is a central element of Goldin's scene, her way of knowing people, and her oeuvre. “The instant of photographing,” Goldin points out, “instead of creating distance, is a moment of clarity and emotional connection for me.”<sup>237</sup> She has often said her work is descended from the tradition of ordinary snapshot photography, which, she emphasizes “is always about love.”<sup>238</sup>

Love. It is an imperfect word, as we have seen, but here, for Goldin, it illustrates the fact that love can flow through a multiplicity of different kinds of bonds and circumstances. As feminist and queer thinkers have pointed out, there has been a concerted effort to instrumentalize love in the service of heteronormativity and gendered oppression, but love will out. It cannot, like eros, ever be fully contained and it can, like eros, and like

emotional intimacy, be released to course through a multitude of relational channels.

### 9. *Memory and Mourning*

*Viewing both portrait photography and mourning as performative practices, one understands the unique linkage between the two practices—in the case of portraiture a lost object is captured and (re)produced, and in melancholic mourning the object is resurrected and retained.* José Esteban Muñoz<sup>239</sup>

The theme of preserving a lived truth that is always in danger of being erased runs throughout Goldin's oeuvre. After Barbara's death Goldin noted, "I became obsessed with never losing the memory of anyone again."<sup>240</sup> Goldin's desire to preserve the memory of someone who has died goes hand in hand with the desire to preserve the memory of an event that is at risk of being rewritten by the forces of conformity. "As a child," she recalled, "I constantly heard my family and the people around me denying... I grew up in a family of constant battles, during a period in which denial sustained suburban life." Determined to not let her reality be redrafted by denial: "I decided as a young girl I was going to leave a record of my life and experience that no one could rewrite or deny."<sup>241</sup>

There is, indeed, an impassioned, almost anguished, plea about the truth-telling value of her images that dates back from her early childhood. She recounts,

*when I was a kid, people would say, You didn't see that; that didn't happen. They would tell you what you experienced and what you didn't... there was this web of denial, and what was considered publicly appropriate. And the only way I could feel that I could survive that, and maintain my own truth, was to start writing a diary when I was really young.*<sup>242</sup>

At first Goldin used her diary to privately record her truth and push back against the gaslighting she was subjected to. Her diary functioned to document a lived reality and combat the erasure of that reality, in the face of a pressure to not talk about it, to assert that it didn't really happen, to remember some more sanitized version of how things went down. Significantly, the purpose of the gaslighting Goldin fought against was to reshape events into a "publicly appropriate" narrative, or erase them from the narrative entirely when they could were not malleable enough for such a reframing. The very idea of what is "appropriate" is part and parcel of the patriarchal romantic-sexual system. Sex is channeled into heterosexuality, into monogamy, marriage, etc., and any gestures towards an alternate expression of sexuality is violently squelched or erased.

As Goldin moved from childhood into teenagehood and then early adulthood, she supplemented her private diary writing with a public-facing photography practice. It is significant to our discussion here that this practice has functioned to hold space for groups, particularly groups of sexual dissidents, those who would have been considered outside of the "publicly appropriate" sphere. By making and sharing portraits of people

who don't usually see themselves represented in the culture at large, Goldin held space for their existence. For instance, David Armstrong remembers that when he and Goldin were in their late teens and early twenties and they lived in an apartment with his fellow drag queens, "the major activity was taking the pictures and all of us looking at them, everyone stealing the ones they liked of themselves."<sup>243</sup> The friends were young enough that they may well not have been thinking of a time when any of their group would no longer be alive—although, for Goldin, because of her sister's death, the defense against the loss of a loved one was always explicit—but there was a shared desire to look at and own pictures that reflected how they saw themselves, as a bulwark against the phobic and stereotypical images of queens that circulated in the mainstream (as well as the suppression and erasure of representations).

The photographs also make space for these groups and relationships by memorializing moments in the friendships as they are happening, and building a complex portrait of the relationships through the multiplication of these moments within Goldin's oeuvre. Elizabeth Sussman makes explicit the connection between the multiplication of images and the way that memory functions: "Goldin takes these pictures one by one, without predetermining their meanings, but then assembles them in what she calls an extended portrait. Continuously updated and thus lacking closure, they more accurately approach the way memory works."<sup>244</sup> Sussman is referring to the extended portraits of individual friends—Cookie and David Armstrong, among others—but the insight also applies to the portraiture of the relationships and friendship groups in Goldin's orbit.

Partying, in Goldin's world, was a means of connection, release, solidarity, and political engagement. "We went to clubs every night," Goldin recalls, "Everyone snorted heroin but it was a party drug. It wasn't an addiction at that time."<sup>245</sup> In the mid-1980s, though, for many people the casual, social use of cocaine and heroin morphed into full-blown dependency. Goldin recalls, "many of us became addicted...the line between use and abuse was crossed."<sup>246</sup> In 1988 Goldin went to rehab and then, for a year, to a half-way house outside of Boston. When she returned to New York, her friends Bruce and David, newly sober themselves, were waiting for her. "But," she remembered of the intervening period, "AIDS had more profoundly altered the landscape than we ever could have predicted."<sup>247</sup>

One of the many people in Goldin's circle who was impacted by AIDS was Cookie Mueller, and her death at 40 is one of the countless tragedies of the epidemic.

After her breakup with Sharon in the mid-80s, Cookie traveled to Italy to mend her broken heart. There she met the artist Vittorio Scarpati. They fell in love, and, back in New York, they married. They had both contracted HIV from sharing needles and by 1987 the virus had developed into AIDS. As Goldin remembers, "Now, Cookie, our superstar, was ill."<sup>248</sup>

Most of the photographs in the Cookie Portfolio spotlight the spiritedness and vitality of Cookie's existence, but the Portfolio does not shy away from representing her illness and death. The Portfolio begins with Cookie and toddler Max in 1976. Twelve images later, Cookie and a teenage Max are sitting side-by-side in her living room after

Vittorio Scarpati's funeral. Despite being so sick she could no longer speak or walk unassisted by a cane, Cookie still looks radiant. She would live only two months more. One of the most beautiful photographs in the Portfolio shows Cookie in bed, emaciated by illness, Sharon by her side, caring for her in her last days. The last photograph in the portfolio is of the same silk-upholstered couch where she and Max sat after Vittorio's funeral, now empty.

After returning to New York, Goldin struggled to take stock of the massive and devastating effect of AIDS on her friends and community. She organized the first exhibit featuring works by artists who were impacted by the crisis, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing." The exhibit would become a flashpoint in the culture wars because of the inclusion in the exhibition catalogue of David Wojnarowicz's searing essay "Post Card from America: X-Rays from Hell." The National Endowment for the Arts pulled the \$10,000 grant which had funded the show (partially reversing the decision after protests, but refusing to fund the catalogue) in a disturbing sign of the increasing pressure to censor and silence voices of dissent.

Goldin cared for her friends in illness but she also tried through her work to keep them alive, metaphorically speaking. Within her art she wanted to preserve their existence, their being, despite the scourge of illness, prejudice, political inaction and censorship working in unison to decimate the community. "I photographed some of them while they were ill, to try to keep them alive, and to leave traces of their lives."<sup>249</sup>

Mixed in with Goldin's belief in the photographs' ability to keep her friends alive, is despair at the futility of this action. Goldin has always been obsessed with being able to capture the fullness of a story over time but there's tension in the ability/inability to capture what something was really like. Goldin recalls of this period of devastation: "It was then I realized how little photography could preserve." The photographs cannot in fact keep people *alive*, not in the literal sense. They cannot prevent the loss of friendship, community, and history. "So many of my friends have died," Goldin mourns, "The people who knew me best, who held my history, and were meant to be my future."<sup>250</sup> The loss of Nan's friend Cookie is the loss of a whole world that she and Nan created together and that existed between the two of them.

Still, though the friendship no longer exists on this mortal plane, the world the two women created *does* live on within Goldin's photographic oeuvre. And in continuing to exhibit and to publish the images, Goldin makes that world available to others. The lessons contained in their relationship beam out to an audience receptive to its worldview.

The work and its continued presence in the culture also functions as aide-mémoire and balm to those left behind. Goldin notes that Sharon, Cookie's ex, has highlighted the importance of the images in countering the gradual effacing wrought by death, time, and forgetfulness: "She has several times gotten up in front of audiences and said, Thank you for keeping our friends alive. Thank you for keeping our friends actively among us, and for tracing the history of our friends, as an homage to them."<sup>251</sup>



## 10. *Ten Years After*

Cookie met Vittorio Scarpati in the spectacularly beautiful town of Positano on the Amalfi coast, south of Naples. She tells the story with wry humor in her essay *The Italian Remedy*, how she'd gone there after her breakup with Sharon. She didn't expect to meet Vittorio but a series of chance meetings brought them together, and they fell in love.

The Cookie Portfolio contains one image of their brief happy life together: their wedding in Manhattan, surrounded by the people who loved them best. But that photograph is quickly followed by devastating images of Vittorio's funeral; of the last weeks of Cookie's illness, cared for by Sharon; and of Cookie's own death and funeral. Goldin's slim but potent volume *Ten Years After* offers a deeper glimpse into that early life, before the toll of illness. It reveals the pleasures of Cookie and Vittorio's time in Italy. It also exposes the emptiness of that landscape after they both had died.

In the first part of the book Cookie is alive, radiant with love for Vittorio, and reveling in her new friendships with the Italians in Vittorio's circle. Again Goldin, on vacation with the couple and their friends, is at the intimate center of this world, and her camera, the extension of herself, captures the emotional closeness, and the counter-cultural subversions. Goldin doesn't shy away from photographing Vittorio and his brother Daniele shooting up. Those images take their place unsentimentally alongside of the others: Vittorio's elderly parents in post-prandial repose on their vine-shaded patio in Positano; Cookie, stretching out in the turquoise water of hotel swimming pool. The first half of *Ten Years After* is, indeed, full of people. The second half, a decade later, has a

few scattered souls but its theme is emptiness. We feel the absence of the friends lost.

Because the volume was published after Cookie and Vittorio's deaths, the pictures have an explicitly memorializing function. To keep the pair alive and visible even after death. The images are also a part of the ongoing process of mourning the calamity that Cookie's death represented for Nan Goldin. The loss of that particular life, that vitality, the loss of the deep relationship she and Nan shared. Taken together, both portfolios mourn—and at the same time fight back against—the loss of the memories the two women shared. The mourning is also for the loss of Cookie as a friend and a colleague in an artists' scene that harbored both sexism and homophobia, that is the loss of a fellow queer female artist standing in solidarity with Nan against the phobia and misogyny of that world. Additionally, the images point to the loss that Cookie's death represents to all the people in her life, and, in fact, to the culture at large. Finally, the loss represented is also the end of that particular time-and-environment, one that will never—can never—come again.

Michael Moon argued that “resisting thinking of death as absolutely rupturing the possible erotic relation of a living person to a dead one may make an important difference in our mourning practices.”<sup>252</sup> I think of Goldin's oeuvre as defying that absolute rupture and instead building a bridge of emotional intensity and erotic feeling between those who have gone and those left behind. Goldin's work also offers those outside that circle of intimacy a window into the structures of deep feeling she created with Cookie Mueller, a way to witness its message of enduring love between two queer women.

## Chapter 5

### Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe

#### *Prologue*

I first encountered Mapplethorpe's work when I was a senior in high school and "The Perfect Moment" show came to Paris. This was 1989 and I was more interested then in the questions about obscenity and censorship than in the work itself. It was hard for me to appreciate the images except in negative terms, that is to say: in defending them, in my naive way, against outraged critics, and in defending my own right to see the work and not have it hidden away from me by paternalistic figures of authority.

The next time I came across Mapplethorpe's work in person I was in Italy, and it had a different resonance for me there. In Italy I'd become fast friends with Carolyn, and I was falling deeply in love with Arthur. The three of us had gone to Venice from Bologna by train. I've written elsewhere about that transformative and magical and difficult time but this was just the beginning and I didn't yet know what was to come. All I knew was how lucky I was to have met both Carolyn and Arthur, and how ridiculously lucky—I didn't deserve such luck!—to be in Venice with them, taking the vaporetto to St. Mark's square, to feel stunned by beauty, and at the same time to be giddy with joy. There were some particular frescoes we wanted to see at a church whose name I no

longer remember. We crossed countless bridges. We could not figure out how to find a non-touristy place to have lunch so we stopped in a cafeteria and had good draft beer and not-good pasta. It had rained and we were damp and warm inside the fluorescent-bright cafe. The contrast with the ravishing beauty of the city felt salutary, like a palate cleanser. One might otherwise be made nauseous by too much loveliness. We had one beer then two and, lightweights, went back into the city streets tipsy. We were all flirting with each other. Me and Arthur, me and Carolyn, Arthur and Carolyn a little. Arthur and I kissed under the rain. And then Carolyn and I did too.

It was getting late by then and we started to make our way to the vaporetto to take the train back to Bologna. This was before cell phones and map apps and we had not bothered to purchase a paper map. We had some faith in our ability to retrace our steps but we were still tipsy—and, also, intoxicated by intimacy. It had started to rain again. We kept walking, we crossed another million bridges, our sense of certainty about where we were starting to loosen. It was raining harder now and we were without an umbrella. Then we noticed a marble plaque lit from above by a fancy outdoor sconce. It was the Palazzo Fortuny and, we gathered from a poster nearby, it was showing Mapplethorpe's work. We slipped in, slick and dripping like wet rats, but radiant in our youth and protected by our love.

The images which a few years earlier had struck me as bold but academic, and almost abstract in their clean lines and classical allusions, seemed now to speak to me in a relational way. These images weren't just of bodies—beautiful forms to be adjusted, frozen in stasis, and then displayed—or shots fired across the barricades of the culture

war, they were records of intimacy between the photographer and his subjects. With Carolyn and Arthur, I apprehended the pictures differently, through the lens of closeness and trust. We moved through the gallery rooms in hushed contemplation, taking in the scenes of love and collaboration before us. I didn't even know about Patti Smith then but later, reading *Just Kids*, I encountered that Mapplethorpe again, not the one characterized as calculating and manipulative, but the one defined by closeness and trust.

### *1. The Context*

*Robert Mapplethorpe's work is difficult to see, which is not the same thing as saying it is difficult to look at... A tangled foliage of appended context, of headlines, slogans, editorials, legal and moral and political judgments, has arisen to obstruct the sight... His photographs have become symbols of symptoms, even for their admirers. Luc Sante "The Unexamined Life"<sup>253</sup>*

I wasn't, it turned out, alone in having my perception of Mapplethorpe's work influenced by the hectic rhetoric that surrounded it. Though Mapplethorpe had already acquired some fame and success before "The Perfect Moment," the tenor of the attacks that came in the wake of the show and the obscenity trial seemed to obscure any previous understanding of his work. While the jury in the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center's obscenity trial ultimately found the museum not guilty, the furor had made Mapplethorpe

the white-hot center of the culture wars.

As Jonathan Weinberg, who read through the mountain of press clippings that Mapplethorpe and his foundation had amassed, points out, “one of the repeated themes of some of the best writing on Mapplethorpe’s work is that it is so well known, so notorious, that it is difficult to see.”<sup>254</sup> Arthur Danto, in his seminal essay “Playing with the Edge,” was one of many critics who lamented that the spectacle of the culture wars was a blinding force, and this idea was echoed by many other critics<sup>255</sup>.



Fig. 5.1. Protestors against the Mapplethorpe obscenity trial, 1989.  
Courtesy of Cincinnati’s Contemporary Art Center.

Ironically, later critics have also wondered if it is still possible to see the work “clearly,” now that we are inured to its content. Weinberg: “Either we don’t see the work because we are so upset by the moral and political controversies it elicits or we don’t see it because we have seen it all before.”<sup>256</sup> In either case, the “shocking” nature of the work (as framed by the controversies) or, ironically, our having become blasé to its shock

value, and finding it therefore devoid of that value, makes the work difficult to see clearly. Tellingly, Mapplethorpe rejected this way of framing his work, explaining, “I’m looking for things I’ve never seen before. But I have trouble with the word ‘shocking’ because I’m not really shocked by anything...”<sup>257</sup>

Reading most critics of Mapplethorpe’s work there is always the creeping sensation that the object up for litigation is actually Mapplethorpe himself. Luc Sante reviewing Morrisroe’s, Danto’s, and Fritscher’s books about Mapplethorpe notes that each of them shares “the sense that Mapplethorpe *is* on trial. Even Danto, who sets out to treat his subject on purely artistic grounds, cannot avoid sounding as if he were addressing a jury.”<sup>258</sup> The autobiographic quality inherent in the reception of Mapplethorpe’s photographs was noted by contemporary critic and friend Stephen Koch<sup>259</sup>: “It is in fact extremely rare for any photographer’s biography and personality to play so potent a role in his standing as it does with Mapplethorpe.”<sup>260</sup> It is notable that Koch’s point is not about the appraisal of the *work* but about Mapplethorpe’s *standing*. At the same time even an evaluation on those terms feels off, since the *facts* of Mapplethorpe’s biography have been ignored or misread.

The point I want to make here is that it is not just analysis of Mapplethorpe’s work that has been overwhelmed by the context of its reception in the 90s, and the ensuing fixation on his sexual persona, but also that our understanding of him as a multi-dimension human with complex relationships has suffered. The aim of this project is not to look at the work through a different context, but rather look at Mapplethorpe himself,

particularly his relational and affective qualities, through a different lens.

In a 1997 article in the *New Yorker*, Hilton Als spoke of Mapplethorpe as “rapacious,” and “narcissistic.” He also noted Mapplethorpe’s interest in the “dark side of sexuality.”<sup>261</sup> The grouping of these characteristics is striking: we have before us a gay man with a “dark” sexuality who is also rapacious and narcissistic. This is a caricature of homosexuality, and Als’s deployment of these clichés is both surprising and telling. Surprising because Als, a gay man himself, has often written in a nuanced and pointed way about gender, sexuality and race (see, in particular, his very fine collection of essays *White Girls*). But telling in that even such a gifted critic still relied on the tropes of homosexuality to inform his take on Mapplethorpe. I return to Hilton Als’s writing on Mapplethorpe several times in this chapter, not because I think it is the most egregious example of this way of reading Mapplethorpe, but rather because it illustrates the persistence of this phobic-inflected blind spot about Mapplethorpe even among very smart and nuanced thinkers.

## 2. *Patti*

Patricia Morrisroe detailed the closeness between Patti Smith and Mapplethorpe in her 1995 biography,<sup>262</sup> but somehow the importance of their relationship did not really take hold in the cultural perception of Mapplethorpe, and it required Smith’s telling the story of their friendship in her own *Just Kids*, fifteen years after Morrisroe’s biography, for the



world to adjust their vision of Mapplethorpe's capacity for multi-dimensional relationships. Because, following the culture wars, Robert Mapplethorpe's most prominent association is with the hard-core homo-erotic high-art photography that made his name, in the cultural imagination his iconicity as a creator is closely connected to his homosexuality, or rather to a certain vision of homosexuality that is reductive and impoverished compared to the queerness that Mapplethorpe lived.

In his review of Morrisroe's biography Hilton Als writes, "In 'Mapplethorpe,' much is made of Smith's love affair with the famously homosexual photographer, which began when they were both twenty and developed into one of the most sustained friendships of Mapplethorpe's life."<sup>263</sup> This is a fascinating sentence. It reiterates the public perception of Mapplethorpe as *famous homosexual*, while also revealing the element that was so long obscured from that public perception, that is his love affair with Smith, and their subsequent bond: *the most sustained friendship of Mapplethorpe's life*.

Here then the very phrasing signals the strangeness of the idea it is supposed to delineate. What are the implications of being famously homosexual? "Famously homosexual" *could* be a rich concept, depending on who is doing the looking, but most often it is a flattened one, basically a caricature. On the other hand, the word friendship (even a "sustained" one), as it is commonly understood, doesn't sufficiently capture what Smith and Mapplethorpe were to each other. They were friends; they were lovers for several years, as well as companions, and intimate accomplices in love and art. They lived together, they pledged themselves to one another, they supported each other financially, they championed each other's careers. Despite Als's suggestion that "much is

made” of the friendship—the implication seems to be that *too much* is made—my contention is that *too little* has been made of the fine points of the relationship and the queer potential contained therein. This chapter is an attempt to think through that potential.

Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe met in the summer of 1967 when they were both 19, and soon moved in together, sharing most everything. Their intimacy was sexual, emotional, and bone deep. From the very beginning of their knowing one another, Smith let Mapplethorpe into her world, confiding her most tender secret, that she had had to give up her child for adoption the year before.

*“I [told] Robert everything about my experience, thought there was no possibility of hiding it. I was so small-hipped that carrying a child had literally opened the skin of my belly. Our first intimacy revealed the fresh red scars crisscrossing my abdomen. Slowly, through his support, I was able to conquer my deep self-consciousness.”<sup>264</sup>*

Patti Smith’s recollections describe an entirely different person from the one presented in the headlines: shy, generous, trusting, and loyal.

### *3. Shared Ambition*

Mapplethorpe had as much faith in Smith’s artistic gifts as she had in his. He believed, moreover, not just in her talent but in her ability to make a *career* for herself, and he

supported her in that goal. This is striking because it was something that Smith would never experience again in her relationships. Ann Powell, who became friends with Smith when they both worked at Scribner's in Manhattan, and with whom she stayed close, said of the Smith-Mapplethorpe relationship: "I never saw them be competitive with one another. In fact, I think Robert was the only man in Patti's life who never tried to stifle her creativity."<sup>265</sup>

*Robert was the only man in Patti's life who never tried to stifle her creativity.*

This sentence is deceptively simple and ordinary seeming. It is so common a thing that Ann Powell feels no need to explain it, except as a way of noting Mapplethorpe's diverging from the pattern. It is in fact the very same "cramping their creativeness" that Adrienne Rich pointed to in 1980 as one of the ways that patriarchal norms enforce women's loyalty to men explored in the preceding chapter of this project.

Patti Smith had intimate romantic relationships with many talented men: Jim Carroll, Howie Michels, Sam Shepard, Fred "Sonic" Smith, Allen Lanier. Aside from Mapplethorpe, the men in her life—the men she loved and who loved her back—all tried to stifle her creativity. That the word love is the appropriate descriptive for something so inhibiting and corrosive—and at the same time so blandly common that it receives the barest commentary and attention—is proof of how desperately we need a new definition of intimacy. Of how broken the common conceptions of heteronormative love is and how much there is to learn from intimacies such as the Smith-Mapplethorpe relationship.

Though Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* was published 45 years ago, it still

feels bracingly necessary. Its insights resonate clearly, and the world it describes has, in so many ways, changed very little in the half-century since its publication. The shocking bluntness of Firestone's points, "love, perhaps even more than child-bearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today," suggest how deeply ingrained is the taking-for-grantedness of the ideology her work is resisting. Unlike Firestone's manifesto Smith's *Just Kids* is anti-polemical in tone, but they share a common undoing-of-expectations and conventions. Firestone's work provides the background for why things must change, and what stands in the way of broad change. Smith's account shows what that change might look like. Both are doing crucial cultural work.

That Patti Smith was able to have a career at all—let alone such an iconoclastic one—is evidence of the strength of her creativity and will, in the face of the pervasive pressures to be "less." But Smith also emphasizes how very much she was helped in her quest by Mapplethorpe's faith in her artistry, and by his help in building her career:

*Robert believed in me as much as he believed in himself, and it was incredible how much he believed in himself. He would not rest until he helped me dive down, down, down, and access my confident part. And I did access it, finally. It came out in a funny way, as a performer. But because he gave it to me so early in life, I don't have to be given it again and again—I just have it. I might have to work to find it when my world gets shook. But I can always find it.<sup>266</sup>*

Smith's words reveal how necessary confidence is to artistic development—particularly for women, who have been told since childhood that their talents are confined to the

feminine realm of homemaking, kitchen skills, crafting, and so on. *Robert was the only man in her life who didn't try to stifle her creativity.* He did not subtly sap that confidence; erect minor or major obstacles to the development or continuation of her career; suggest that a too-concentrated focus on her work was incompatible with the flourishing of the relationship; or any of the other things that men do, consciously or not to discourage a woman's career. On the contrary he understood that while her artistic sensibility might be already evident on the surface of her being, her confidence might be deeply buried by the forces of patriarchal ideology. Let us recall that included in Adrienne Rich's list of the characteristics of male power which have been used to enforce women's sexual and romantic loyalty to men is "cramping their creativeness." One of Mapplethorpe's gifts to Smith was not only his belief in her, but the determination to get her to believe in herself, and the understanding that that might take time, given the layers of societally-induced discouragement and cramping and disbelief that had to be chipped away.

#### *4. Money and Mutuality*

This help and trust was fully reciprocated by Smith. She encouraged Mapplethorpe to quit his day job so that he could make art full-time, and she supported them both on her bookstore clerk's salary. She realized that she had the energy and the mental toughness to hold down a full-time job and still pursue her creative endeavors, but he would get worn out and depleted, and found a solution that allowed them both to achieve their goals.

Still, I confess that when I first read of this arrangement, as a casual reader of Smith's book, years before starting this project, I felt a tingle of nervousness on Smith's behalf. I was probably predisposed by the common accounts of Mapplethorpe's hyper-ambition and manipulation to think of Mapplethorpe as "using" those around him. Or I bristled at the thought that Smith had had to slow down *her* career by working long day-job hours to forward *his* career—another dimension of *cramping their creativeness*. It took some time for me to understand and appreciate the mutual and yet idiosyncratic dimensions of their relationship. The way that Smith and Mapplethorpe helped one another, and forwarded each other's goals, was at times asynchronous, and success came to each of them at different times. Robert's lack of jealousy when Patti got famous first.

Later, I learned that Mapplethorpe's lover and patron Sam Wagstaff was famously close-fisted with his money. That changed when he met Mapplethorpe. Wagstaff bought Mapplethorpe a loft in Manhattan. As we shall see later in the chapter there was a great deal of mutuality and reciprocation between the two men, but this generosity towards Mapplethorpe set off alarm bells among Wagstaff's friends who thought Mapplethorpe saw him as an easy mark.

What are the typical conditions that people understand for sharing money, resources? Family bonds, or marriage bonds. When financial dependence or interdependence occurs outside of those conventional bonds the assumption is that someone is getting screwed over, being taken advantage of, and that the person on the receiving end is duplicitous and/or manipulative and/or greedy. There is a reactionary recoiling from this break in custom. The anarchic relationships, in which friends and

lovers find comfort, security, pleasure, and sustenance, make other people deeply uncomfortable. The relationships are misunderstood, or are altered in the retelling, to fit more conventional narrative purposes.

### *5. Queer Domesticity / Dreams of a Queer Childhood*

One photograph of Smith and Mapplethorpe taken by Judy Linn shows the pair in the Chelsea Hotel room they shared. On a bed cluttered with the flotsam of their lives—books, papers, clothes—they recline together. Mapplethorpe seems to feel no particular need for privacy as he makes a phone call, and Smith, a cup of coffee resting on her leg, sits beside him, comfortable and braless, as though just waking up. Their bed is like a raft made of their intimacy, and the sea



Fig. 5.2. Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith at the Chelsea Hotel, 1971 by Judy Linn.

around them is the wider world where art and success and fame beckon—but where the expectation of relationship conformity and the traps of conventionality also await. Smith and Mapplethorpe ventured out into the world daily to network and to get their names and work known, but after the hustle they retreated to the safety and sustenance of their closeness each night in order to make art, gather strength and encouragement from each other, and tend jointly to their spiritual and creative inner lives.

Smith describes the scene of that physical and creative closeness: “We gathered our colored pencils and sheets of paper and drew like wild, feral children into the night, until, exhausted, we fell into bed. We lay in each other’s arms, still awkward but happy, exchanging breathless kisses into sleep.”<sup>267</sup> What may seem like a throwaway analogy is in fact a profound rebuttal of conventional sexual norms. Whereas the ideology of heterosexual romance typically glorifies adulthood as both the condition and the reward for coupling up, Smith’s narrative prizes the childlike quality of their union. Childlike eros undermines much of the way that modern sexuality is structured—around economic insecurity, inequality of power, and the privatization of sex and romance. Kathryn Bond Stockton has written convincingly of the queerness of the child<sup>268</sup>, but I would like to reach back further to Shulamith Firestone’s radical re-envisioning of the Freudian model of the development of sexuality, from the infant’s “polymorphous perversity” to the adult’s so-called well-adjusted heterosexuality, through a radical feminist lens. It is worth quoting at length her deconstruction of the Oedipus complex as it is formed in response to the incest taboo:



*What happens at the age of six when the boy is suddenly expected to start 'shaping up', acting like a little man? ... Last year's cuddly toys are snatched away. He is led out to start playing baseball. Trucks and electric trains multiply. If he cries he is called a 'sissy'; if he runs to his mother, a 'mama's boy'. Father suddenly takes an active interest in him ('You spoiled him'). The boy fears his father, rightly. He knows that between the two of them, his mother is far more on his side. In most cases he has already observed very clearly that his father makes his mother unhappy, makes her cry, doesn't talk to her very much, argues with her a lot, bullies ... However, suddenly now he's expected to identify with this brutish stranger. Of course he doesn't want to. He resists. He starts dreaming of bogeymen. He becomes afraid of his shadow. He cries when he goes to the barber. He expects his father to cut off his penis: he's not behaving like the Little Man he had better learn to be. This is his 'difficult transitional phase'. What finally convinces the normal child to reverse his identification... is the offer of the world when he grows up. He is asked to make a transition from the state of the powerless, women and children, to the state of the potentially powerful, son (ego extension) of his father. Most children aren't fools. They don't plan to be stuck with the lousy limited lives of women. They want that travel and adventure. But it is hard. Because deep down they have a contempt for the father with all his power. They sympathize with their mother. ... It is no wonder that such a transition leaves an emotional residue, a 'complex'. The*

*male child, in order to save his own hide, has had to abandon and betray his mother and join ranks with her oppressor.*

In addition to the crisis of adjustment Firestone describes hetero men experiencing, women and queer men have also often mournfully recalled the moment when, growing up, they lost their childhood belief that they could be and behave as they pleased, as society's restrictions on gender presentation and performance came down on them. In Smith and Mapplethorpe, though, we have young adults who have managed to resist the call of adulthood. If in childhood, gender seems far less fixed and more mutable, then, in retaining the gender-fluid freedom of children in their orientation to the world and each other, Mapplethorpe and Smith see no need to reject any of qualities ascribed to the other gender. Instead of adapting to "the honorable state of manhood" and its feminine counterpart, they are in fact preserving for themselves the "immature" pleasures of childhood. They find power in the supposedly powerless state of childhood and subvert the order that this gendered and generational hierarchy is built upon.

Beyond a more fluid relationship to gender expression, the child also possesses a more integrated sensuality. While in Freud's view, "polymorphous perversity" is present in all small children but then repressed as a result of the incest taboo and channeled into "mature" forms of sexuality (i.e. heterosexual, genital intercourse)<sup>269</sup>, Mapplethorpe and Smith reject the need to be mature or well-adjusted or acceptable. They can draw and play like children, fall into bed puppy-like and kiss and fondle each other into sleep. There is no clear separation between the emotional, the sensual, and the erotic connections they have with one another.

Firestone makes the bold claim that if sexuality were no longer separated from emotion “sexuality would be released from its straightjacket to eroticize our whole culture, changing its very definition.”<sup>270</sup> This is, in fact, precisely what Smith and Mapplethorpe have done. Eros, released from its straightjacket, has diffused throughout the couple’s interactions, eroticizing their play, their work, their creativity, the space they inhabit. “One cannot imagine the mutual happiness we felt when we sat and drew together,” Smith writes. “We would get lost for hours. His ability to concentrate for long periods infected me, and I learned by his example, working side by side. When we would take a break, I would boil water and make some Nescafé.”<sup>271</sup> I am moved by the quiet tenderness of this scene of queer domesticity. And at the same time I am exhilarated by that Firestone’s vision of eros-freed-from-its-chains was actually brought into existence between Smith and Mapplethorpe.

In the last year of his life, Mapplethorpe observed with regret that he and Smith had never had children. “Our work was our children,” Smith reminded him.<sup>272</sup> Here the queer children have produced queer offspring: the work that they worked so hard on together to bring into the world. This is strikingly like the concept of poetic offspring that E.M. Forster alludes to in *The Longest Journey*. George Haggerty has so ably brought to light Rickie’s yearning for something to mark and memorialize his great friendship with Stewart, connecting it to the passages in Plato’s *Symposium* where Diotima speaks of lovers “giving birth in beauty, whether of body or soul.”<sup>273</sup> Smith and Mapplethorpe likewise have no flesh-and-blood offspring, but rather the poetic offspring of their artistic

collaborations, which have gone on to inspire generations of artists and queer youth.

#### *6. Twinning / Queering gender*

Smith's memoir shows how intertwined their convention-breaking nature of their love was with the simultaneous undoing of gender roles. "The boy I had met...liked to be led, to be taken by the hand and enter wholeheartedly another world. He was masculine and protective, even as he was feminine and submissive."<sup>274</sup> While Mapplethorpe has often been described in terms of manipulation, cunning, wiliness, etc., Smith describes him as equally interested in being led, opening himself up to another, not needing to be particularly in control. Likewise, Smith was sometimes the protector and provider in the relationship. Firestone demonstrated how destructive and distorting the cultural imposition of a gendered power-inequality can be; Smith and Mapplethorpe, in the absence of the complete dismantling of the patriarchy, have found this workaround—a fluidity of roles and expectations, allowing the individuals to demonstrate strength and vulnerability, as felt and without submission to gendered codes.

The relationship between Smith and Mapplethorpe began, in fact, with a kind of gender-fluid twinning. "It was difficult to tell where Robert began and Patti left off," observed photographer Judy Linn, who was a Pratt classmate of Mapplethorpe's and who became friends with the couple.<sup>275</sup> They saw each other as mirrors of one another—aesthetically and spiritually. They enjoyed playing up their own androgynous qualities in order to better match. Even as a putatively straight couple, before Mapplethorpe's coming out, they overflowed the boundaries of such a designation, creating other possibilities for

themselves, and in doing so created models of what that might look like. “Together they exuded all kinds of sexual possibilities,” is another of Judy Linn’s observations<sup>276</sup>. The term “genderqueer” did not yet exist but Smith and Mapplethorpe were exploring genderqueerness, individually and as a pair, in the late sixties and early seventies. While their relationship began as a *seemingly* straightforward romantic partnership, it never really was, for the reasons explored below.

In 1978, Patti Smith was offered a show at the Robert Miller Gallery on Fifth Avenue. She agreed, on condition that Mapplethorpe could exhibit his work too. In their joint artistic statement they announced that they were presenting ‘a body of work that emphasized our relationship: artist and muse, a role that for both of us was interchangeable.’<sup>277</sup>

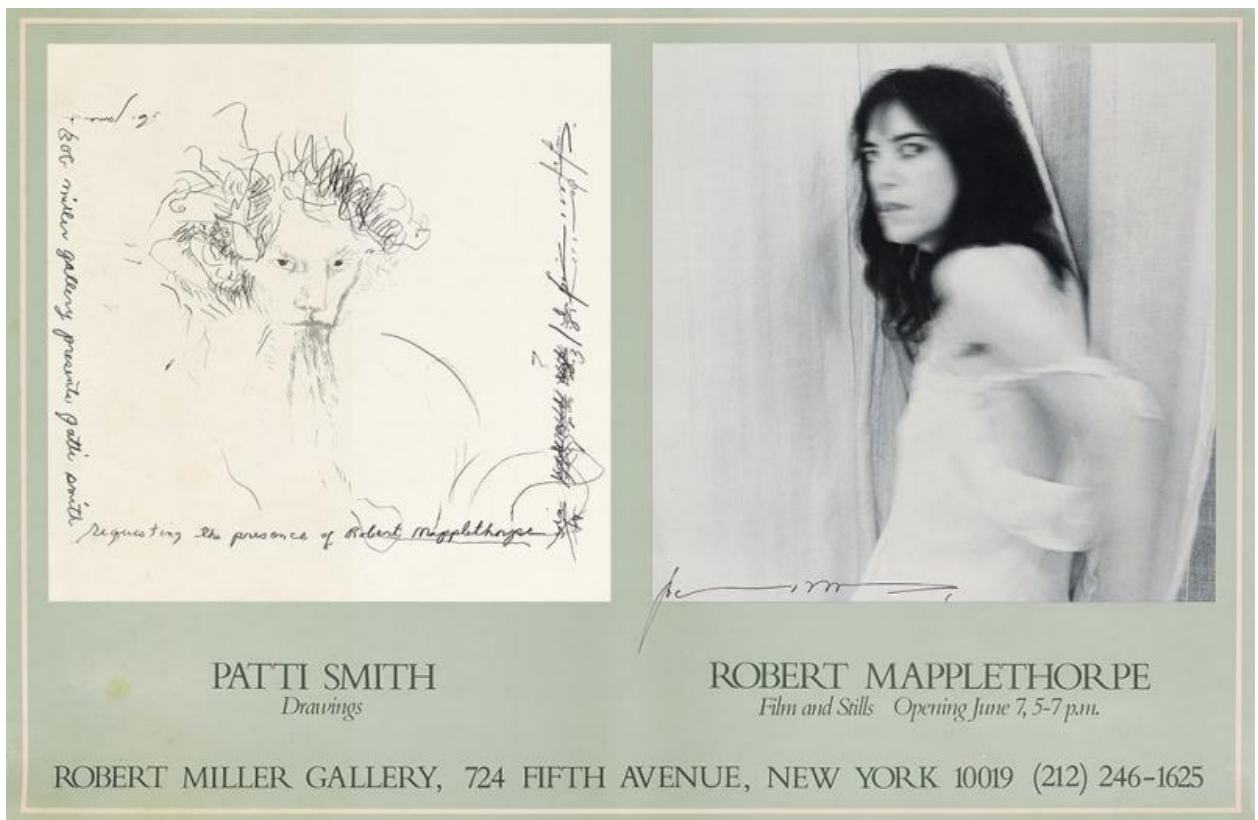


Fig. 5.3. Poster for Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe's joint show at the Robert Miller Gallery.

Given that a muse is by definition either a woman or female goddess or spirit, and that being an artist has long been the prerogative of men, Smith and Mapplethorpe's statement of the interchangeability of their roles is refreshing in its acknowledgment of female creativity, and radically genderqueer in allowing for Mapplethorpe to inhabit the role of muse too.

The *New York Times* review of the Perfect Moment show in Washington D.C. makes clear that Mapplethorpe's interest in fucking with gender continued throughout the 70s and until his death 1989. "He was determined to blur boundaries between genres, genders and races," Michael Brenson wrote. "The effectiveness with which he captures the sexual, racial and social instability of the 1980's is one reason his work is so valuable and threatening. It also helps explain why we are not close to understanding him fully."<sup>278</sup>

One of the most famous and controversial of Mapplethorpe's photographs—one of the five that was at the center of the Cincinnati obscenity trial—is the *Self Portrait with Whip*, from 1978. Jonathan Weinberg describes how carefully Mapplethorpe composed the shot, in order to show the whip's insertion into his ass, and, at the same time, his smiling face. "Fucking himself, Mapplethorpe disrupts the binaries of passive and aggressive, top and bottom, anal and phallic, flaccid and erect that so severely limit our sexual fantasies and perpetuate gender oppression."<sup>279</sup>

If not for their intimacy between Smith and Mapplethorpe, and their common

project of genderfuck, we would not have had the stunning images that Mapplethorpe and Smith made together, and that gave pictorial life to a new paradigm of androgynous beauty that has inspired so many women, femmes, and non-binary folks over the last four decades.

### 7. *Change*

The trust and intimacy between Smith and Mapplethorpe was put to the test a year into their relationship. Mapplethorpe began to withdraw slightly as he considered his emerging queer sexuality. Sensing the distance between them, but not understanding its origins, Smith in turn withdrew and began an affair with Howie Michels. This period of adjustments was no doubt difficult for the young lovers. Living in a violently patriarchal and homophobic culture, it is not very surprising that Mapplethorpe pleaded with Smith not to leave or he would go to San Francisco and “turn gay.” Nor is it surprising that Smith, at first, understood his claiming of a queer sexuality as a rejection of his love for her. As it happened, Smith did move in with Howie Michels, and Mapplethorpe did travel to San Francisco to explore the gay scene. And after coming back to New York, he began his first sustained gay relationship with a young man named Terry. Smith, feeling the need to stretch her wings, went on a pilgrimage to Paris with her sister.

Reuniting after Smith’s return from Paris, they seemed to shake free of the feeling that their relationship had failed. In defiance of the conventional wisdom that holds that relationships can’t evolve; that people are *either* straight *or* gay; that there can be no true

friendship when there is also sexual attraction; that staying friends with one's exes is unhealthy, Mapplethorpe and Smith continued to love one another. Finding Mapplethorpe weak and feverish from untreated trench mouth, Smith cared for him. She wrote of the night of their reunion that, "Despite his illness, he wanted to make love, and perhaps our union was some comfort, for it drew out his sweat."<sup>280</sup> This queer moment of care-giving and healing re-bonded them to each other, and they lived together for several more years, and stayed friends for the rest of their lives. "Both of us had given ourselves to others. We vacillated and lost everyone, but we had found one another again. We wanted, it seemed, what we already had, a lover and a friend to create with, side by side. To be loyal, yet be free."<sup>281</sup>

Luc Sante, reviewing Morrisroe's biography, summarizes the evolution of the Smith-Mapplethorpe relationship: "In their youth Smith was Mapplethorpe's twin, mother, protector, lover until he abruptly announced that he was gay, collaborator until she retired from public life to get married and have children." Sante misstates the trajectory of their knowing one another, asserting that the only aspect of their connection that endured after Mapplethorpe began exploring his homosexuality was as "collaborators." Certainly their artistic collaboration remained an important connection between them, but Sante's framing grossly distorts the record. In fact, Smith and Mapplethorpe continued to be lovers, for several months after Smith's return from Paris; room-mates, for several years at the Chelsea Hotel and later in a nearby apartment; and friends, their whole lives long.



## 8. *Sam*

James Crump's 2007 documentary *Black White + Gray* is subtitled *A Portrait of Sam Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe*, and it is that, but it also contains lovely and illuminating stories about Patti Smith's relationship with the two men. The movie opens with Smith recalling Mapplethorpe's telling her that he had met "a really neat guy." She smiles wide in the retelling, explaining, "What Robert really wanted at that time was true companionship." She continues, "Robert really loved Sam. He loved him as a man."<sup>282</sup>

Smith remembers Mapplethorpe's finding companionship with another gay man with infectious, retrospective joy. It is worth highlighting that after the period of initial uncertainty between them that followed Mapplethorpe's coming out, the pair chose to *explore* how that change would play out in their relationship in way that did not diminish the intimacy and trust between them. Both Smith and Mapplethorpe dated other men while they were still living together. And they dated other men when Smith eventually moved out on her own. All the while they continued their friendship and their artistic collaboration.

Mapplethorpe's meeting with Wagstaff was a relationship of a different seriousness and depth than he had had with a man before. Still, even after Sam Wagstaff was introduced to Robert Mapplethorpe and the two began a lifelong intimacy, Smith and Mapplethorpe's closeness continued. In fact, the three of them, Wagstaff, Smith and Mapplethorpe spent a great deal of time together throughout the 70s. Smith shared her friendship with Mapplethorpe with Wagstaff, and Mapplethorpe, in turn, shared Wagstaff

with Smith. It is notable that the narrative attempts to contain Mapplethorpe and Smith's anarchic intimacy have been mirrored by similar attempts to contain Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff's. These attempts at containment have been somewhat successful in the cultural story surrounding Mapplethorpe, which is why uncovering the anarchic reality behind the more conventional façade matters.

The appeal, for Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff, of finding one another does not seem difficult to understand. They were both strikingly good-looking, they shared an interest in the arts, and they had overlapping desires. Mapplethorpe was looking for a patron. He and Smith had spent almost a decade looking after each other in marginal circumstances, and now he wanted someone to look after him. Fortuitously, Wagstaff was looking for someone to mentor and pamper. “Wagstaff and Mapplethorpe communicated visually. They were attracted not only to one another physically but also to the way each other saw the world, operating with similar aesthetic sensibilities.”<sup>283</sup>

Moreover, while Wagstaff, as curator and collector, could mentor Mapplethorpe within the art world, Mapplethorpe could be a guide for Wagstaff— in the realm of the senses. Wagstaff had been marked by having to hide his sexual orientation in the pre-Stonewall years. In the film Smith notes of Wagstaff, “He would say things with a painful tone in his voice about the suppression and oppression of a homosexual man in the 1950s. I never asked him about it because it was the one area I could really sense pain in him.” A generation separated the two men, and Mapplethorpe, whose sexual awakening had taken place in the late 60s and early 70s, demonstrated a fearless

exploration of his own sexual desires was both a model and a magnet for Wagstaff. In a letter to Mapplethorpe, Wagstaff wrote: “Baby, I wish I could tell you how close and warm I feel about you. It’s taken me a long time of growing pains to get to the place where I could allow myself the luxury of an equal. I love you and long for you & kiss you all over your beautiful body.”<sup>284</sup> The aesthetic, artistic and sensual pleasures that the pair shared was augmented by the flourishing of trust, acceptance and multiplying possibilities.

Crump’s film spends a lot of time exploring what Wagstaff and Mapplethorpe *got* from each other. While I don’t take issue with this curiosity per se, it bears noting that this question is not asked with such pointedness of hetero romantic couplings. The notion that Mapplethorpe was ambitious and used people is commonplace, but it relies on obscuring the fact that everyone is too, so one degree or another. Bob Colacello cops to it, writing, “Robert was definitely interested in the glamorous social life that came with my job as editor of Andy Warhol’s magazine, both as a means of career advancement and because he was attracted to the world of fashionable society, as was I, to be honest.”<sup>285</sup>

Everyone is, in fact, in some way “interested.” There is no real disinterest! We do not need to assign a particular reason to a man and woman who become romantically involved (in part because the transactional quality of such couplings is both taken for granted and papered-over by the ideology of romance). The focus on assessing the reasons for the Wagstaff-Mapplethorpe pairing comes from 1) homophobia, and a longstanding phobic association of homosexuality with self-centeredness, and 2) a

misunderstanding and suspicion of non-off-the-shelf relationships. Indeed, while Wagstaff and Mapplethorpe were initially lovers, their relationship evolved over time, and though Wagstaff later developed an intimate relationship with another young artist, the bond he shared with Mapplethorpe was never dissolved. As I pointed out earlier in the paragraph, such a state of affairs is puzzling and even disturbing for some people, who are used to relationships staying in their designated categories. That Wagstaff would support Mapplethorpe financially, though they were not in a typical romantic-sexual partnership is evidence enough to some that Wagstaff was somehow being swindled by a crafty Mapplethorpe.

In the documentary, Eugenia Parry, a curator friend of Sam Wagstaff's minces no words in her assessment of Mapplethorpe's interest in Wagstaff: "I just got the feeling that Mapplethorpe had found a cash cow. Someone to publish his work, and support his work, and promote his work. And that's kind of where he was at. I mean I don't have a feeling of kindness toward Mapplethorpe. And it's nothing personal. It's just, I never witnessed it. I never witnessed any kindness toward Sam by Mapplethorpe."

*It's nothing personal*, Parry says, all the while accusing Mapplethorpe of hustling Wagstaff for his money and connections. The pejorative association between homosexuality and prostitution is a familiar one, as Jennifer Doyle has demonstrated in her essay "Tricks of the Trade."<sup>286</sup> Despite Parry's claim to impersonal objectivity, her comments continue in this phobic vein: "Mapplethorpe didn't love anybody but himself," Parry claims. "He saw in Sam a rich guy who could help promote his tastes and his art. What a little nellie Sam became when Robert was around. Mapplethorpe got really big

and Sam shrunk down to a little walnut-size guy.” If it weren’t already clear from Parry’s first statement that her disapproval of the relationship was related to a veiled but barbed homophobia, the slur “nellie” gives it away. There were probably many in Wagstaff’s world who knew about and “accepted” his homosexuality as long as it was discrete and compartmentalized, but his intimacy with the “shy pornographer” was a bridge too far. I’m struck by the juxtaposition of Parry’s comments, and Smith’s sense of Wagstaff carrying the burden of a traumatized past where he had to suppress his sexuality.

That Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff explored “extreme” sexual situations, that they took drugs, makes it easy to create a lumpy narrative soup about the “dark side” of sex and relationships, and assign the blame to a certain kind of homosexuality (i.e. not discrete, not hidden, unashamedly sexual, mercenary etc.) This way of reading the overlapping of the worlds of sex and art for Wagstaff and Mapplethorpe is explicated in Jennifer Doyle’s striking essay “Fear and Loathing in New York.”<sup>287</sup> The assumption that performing sex acts confers a special (unfair!) advantage on gay men and women is just a way of discrediting their success, while reducing them to their always-already-status as sexual objects. Despite the commonplace assertion that some women sleep their way to the top, despite the phobic conjuring of the specter of a *velvet mafia*, the naked truth is that *dick sucking doesn’t give gay men or straight women access to social or political power.*<sup>288</sup> While the idea that women and gay men trade on their sexuality for unjust professional advantages persists, the union of a two queer men (Wagstaff and Mapplethorpe) who loved one another and helped develop each other’s careers, or a queer man and a straight woman (Mapplethorpe and Smith) who did likewise, inflames

the anxieties and prejudices of homophobes and misogynists alike, and these narratives must either be distorted or hushed up.

### *9. Jealousy*

One method of distortion is to plaster over it with tropes. When presented with evidence of these unique and queer relationships, the critiques try to fit them *back* into the straight-off-the-shelf boxes of heteronormative romance. In Morrisroe's biography, for instance, the relationships that Mapplethorpe and Smith created outside of their bond are repeatedly characterized through the framework of "threat" and "jealousy." In describing Smith's relationship with the poet and memoirist Jim Carroll, Morrisroe points out that, "Mapplethorpe reacted with surprising equanimity to Carroll's invasion of their privacy and displayed no outward signs of jealousy. He and Smith had grown accustomed to leading separate sexual lives, and he did not perceive Carroll as a threat"<sup>289</sup>. When Smith and Sam Shepard took up with one another, Mapplethorpe's response is described: "Smith fell deeply in love with [Sam] Shepard, and although Mapplethorpe was still involved with [David] Croland, he was jealous of their relationship. Shepard represented more of a threat than Jim Carroll or any of the other men with whom Smith had had affairs, and Mapplethorpe never lost an opportunity to criticize him."<sup>290</sup> Later, Smith and musician Allen Lanier moved in together and Mapplethorpe's response is read in the following manner: "By the end of 1971, Allen Lanier was living with Patti Smith in the loft, and Mapplethorpe did not seem to mind the intrusion, perhaps because he was not

intimidated by him the way he had been by Sam Shepard.”<sup>291</sup>

It seems odd that it didn't occur to Morrisroe that Mapplethorpe criticized Sam Shepard, not because of jealousy, but because he didn't like him, didn't get along with him, or was concerned over Shepard's treatment of Smith, or that he took issue with Shepard's being married. And similarly, that Mapplethorpe simply *liked* Jim Carroll, or thought he was a good match for Smith. Mapplethorpe's sympathy or antipathy towards Smith's lovers is framed exclusively in terms of jealousy, insecurity, or intimidation, and Smith and Mapplethorpe's bond is viewed primarily through the lens of exclusivity and territorialism.

This framing, insistent on measuring the relationship against the yardstick of the pathology of sexual jealousy, acts to undermine the belief that a bond like Smith and Mapplethorpe's could be genuine and healthy. That there is little justification for framing the Smith-Mapplethorpe relationship this way seems not to matter terribly for critics and biographers of the pair. The cultural framework that insists on relationships being defined by their off-the-shelf categories, and then stigmatizing them for any variations from this norm, are reason enough to assign this logic to Mapplethorpe and Smith's friendship.

As an example, Hilton Als, characterized Mapplethorpe's feelings about Wagstaff's taking up the pursuit of collecting silver in this way: “Mapplethorpe (who, as Wagstaff's first wife, had never relinquished the privilege of complaining) supposedly hated and resented this.”<sup>292</sup> The misogyny and homophobia buried in this description may at first fail to register because misogyny and homophobia are so ingrained in our culture and in our descriptions of relationships that they seem not just commonplace but *natural*

*and true.* Als offers no evidence for the claim that Mapplethorpe “hated and resented” Wagstaff’s new interest, though he does hedge with the adverb “supposedly.” But even if Mapplethorpe *had* disliked the silver collection—such a thing is entirely possible!—what reason is there for portraying it in these terms? It is also difficult to understand Als’s casting of Mapplethorpe as Wagstaff’s “wife,” except, through a pejorative association between homosexuality and femininity. The tired idea that women—wives, in particular—not only complain but see that as a defining right or privilege is also jarringly phobic and misogynist coming from Als, though well within the beaten-path of Mapplethorpe criticism.

A more accurate and insightful view of the Mapplethorpe-Wagstaff relationship is provided by Patti Smith herself. Patti Smith provides moving insights about the way Wagstaff, Mapplethorpe and Smith were together.

#### 10. “Fag Hags”

Als expands this framing to explain the disapproval of Wagstaff’s old friends. “When Wagstaff’s female friends and acquaintances discuss the significant presence of Robert Mapplethorpe in his life, it’s as though they were discussing the Other Woman—the woman with whom they had to compete for the attention of a man they could never really have. Mapplethorpe’s female friends were not particularly enamored of Sam, either.”<sup>293</sup> Als provides no example that would substantiate the comparison, so it remains rather more evidence of the misogynistic stereotype of female jealousy than anything else. He



also raises the specter of the fag hag. Jennifer Doyle's analysis of the fag hag, from "Between Friends," is worth quoting at length:

*The fag hag is an overdetermined figure, her relationship to gay culture is diagnosed as stunted, as a narcissistic refusal to submit herself to the competitive economy of heterosexual culture, as an expression of her incapacity for romantic intimacy. As a stereotype (the insecure straight woman who retreats into asexual friendships with similarly stunted homosexual men) the fag hag obscures the full range of relationships between women and gay men and, indeed, the complexity of queerness itself. She serves as a symbolic distraction—a flattened out caricature who stands in for all women, including lesbians, in queer bohemia. (The fag hag thus erases lesbian friends and lovers from the scene.) When women in gay spaces are identified as 'fag hags,' their queerness may be contained and dismissed as a supplement to the 'real' story: a story about the men in the scene and their relationships to each other, in which she figures merely as part of a sham romance.<sup>294</sup>*

Thus, in raising the figure of the sham romance, Als's narrative casts shame on Wagstaff's and Mapplethorpe's female friends—too immature to seek out their own romantic and sexual partnerships, too jealous to allow Sam and Robert to have their own—but it also sides with their supposed point of view in questioning the validity and healthiness of their bond. This is a too-easy formulation that both dismisses the fag hag

herself but also misunderstands and diminishes the depth and richness of non-romantic and sexual bonds.

And yet, Smith's recollections of her time with Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff belie both the details and the spirit of that familiar narrative. Smith recalls, "If I wasn't on the road, almost all my time in the 70s was spent with Robert and Sam, and we started going everywhere together, the three of us. Robert and Sam shared their happiness and their relationship with me." In her delight and joy at Mapplethorpe's new happiness with Wagstaff, Smith dissolves the narrative of female jealousy and possessiveness. As Doyle rightly points out, the fag hag narrative obscures the queerness of the female friend, and the complexity of queerness itself. Smith and Mapplethorpe were best friends, intimate companions, former lovers, and champions of each other's art and careers. That they could let a third into that intimacy—and that, at the same time, Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff who were then enjoying their own love affair, could make room for Smith—speaks volumes about the capaciousness of love, if we let it and its potential to redefine itself outside of narrow and oppressive norms.

### *11. Change / Relationship Anarchy*

Als writes that Mapplethorpe "didn't really possess the ability to change," though, again, it is never made precisely clear from the essay why he makes this claim. In fact, Mapplethorpe's relationships with Smith, and in turn with Wagstaff, demonstrate that he

and his closest companions actually possessed a profound flexibility and willingness to allow change to happen. This is actually quietly revolutionary. Romantic relationships as they are conventionally defined and expected to evolve, along a predetermined path and at a predetermined pace, are contradictory in their premises and expectations. For instance, the hormonal chemistry that accompanies the rush of emotions of falling in love will necessarily dip and change, after the intense flush of infatuation has passed. The routine and predictability of long-term relationships is expected, and its toll on sexual desire too, laughingly joked off. Maintaining closeness with one's exes is often seen as weird, pathological, dangerous to future relationships. In the conventional structure, jealousy is the specter that looms over every romantic and sexual pairing. Any past affair possesses the possibility to reignite at any moment. Perhaps romance itself is structured on the threat of jealousy, as a spice, or a way to amp up lukewarm feelings. Feeling loved, as Firestone demonstrates in her chapter on love, is defined as feeling preferred above all others. Smith addresses that when she notes: "The three of us had a very beautiful, uncomplicated relationship. Because there was absolutely no jealousy or competitiveness."

But then she complicates the picture: "There was actually only one time, Robert was away somewhere, and Sam photographed me and Robert was a bit annoyed at him. But it was really funny, while we were doing it, we didn't do anything weird, like I didn't take my clothes off or anything, but I remember feeling slightly unfaithful. Robert got a bit upset so we were both... sorry." She smiles ruefully in the retelling. "Sam just put them away, and we didn't do anything with them."

One of those images is of Smith wearing a wide-brimmed felt hat and holding a tuxedo cat. It is a striking and quietly lovely photograph. Notably, it is less a portrait of an icon, as Mapplethorpe's portraits of Smith instantly became, and more a study of a performer engaged in intimate performance. Smith looks directly at the camera, but her gaze doesn't have the defiance of the Mapplethorpe portraits. She seems to be projecting not to the large audience that she and Mapplethorpe sought for themselves from the beginning, but rather to Wagstaff himself.



Fig. 5.4. Patti Smith circa 1976 by Sam Wagstaff.

There is something stirring about the idea of Wagstaff and Smith exploring together this

facet of their relationship. Wagstaff wanting to try on the role of photographer and Smith gingerly being his muse, but all the while feeling a bit off about the whole thing. One of the things that characterized the Smith-Mapplethorpe relationship was their creative partnership in the portraits that Mapplethorpe made of Smith. He saw her in a way that resonated with both of them, she inspired his artistic vision.

In this situation each of the three friends sensed a boundary there. They acknowledged, though wordlessly, that it had been crossed and that there were feelings as a consequence of that breach, and they silently committed not to do it again. The word “anarchy” is sometimes taken to mean chaos, complete free-for-all, the absence of order. But here it is quite the opposite of that. It is recognition of a boundary and respect for its contours. People create rituals, imbue them with meaning, make commitments to one another. Our society recognizes the commitments and rituals of marriage, but views with suspicion more idiosyncratic ways of connecting and affirming that connection. For Smith and Mapplethorpe one particular intimacy that they wanted to reserve for themselves was his making her portrait. No doubt too there were intimacies that Wagstaff and Mapplethorpe shared, that were *their* particular and confidential domain.

What do we call a relationship that varies over its lifetime? How do we name it to fully acknowledge its textures and topography? We need new words to help us name and describe these possibilities. Sam and Robert were lovers, and then they weren't. Robert and Patti were lovers, and then they weren't. But the closeness and erotic value of each of

these relationships outlived the strictly genital relations between them. We needn't view the particularities and idiosyncrasies of anarchic intimacies with suspicion. The relationship between Smith, Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff shows that love can take many shapes, and can encompass many bonds. Even when a culture built upon patriarchal and heteronormative norms denied their validity, these three friends found a way to love one another, share their love, reaffirm their bonds.

## Notes

### Notes to Chapter 1

1. *Broad City*, “Stolen Phone,” directed by Lucia Aniello, written by Chris Kelly and Abbi Jacobson (New York: Comedy Central, 2014).

2. *Broad City*, “Knockoffs,” directed by Lucia Aniello, written by Lucia Aniello and Paul W. Downs (New York: Comedy Central, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Rose Surnow, “Tell Me This Isn’t Sexual,” *Vulture*, February 17, 2016.  
<http://www.vulture.com/2016/02/broad-city-recap-season-2-episode-1.html>

<sup>4</sup> Jenny Jaffe, “Dump Out, Flawless,” *Vulture*, February 24, 2016.  
<http://www.vulture.com/2016/02/broad-city-recap-season-3-episode-2.html>

<sup>5</sup> Notable exceptions are the pathologizing of intense friendships, like in the films *Single White Female* (directed by Barbet Schroeder, 1992) or *Notes on a Scandal* (directed by Richard Eyre, 2006), in which one member of the pair wants a sexual-romantic relation and refuses to accept the boundaries of a conventional friendship.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Doyle, “Between Friends,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 325.

<sup>7</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 114.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” trans. John Johnston in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 137.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Joel Fineman, “The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Friction,” *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: October Books / The MIT Press, 1991), 67.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987): 52.

<sup>12</sup> T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 78.

<sup>13</sup> Qtd in Lisa L. Moore’s essay, “Sister Arts: On Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Others,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 8, 2013.  
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/sister-arts-on-adrienne-rich-audre-lorde-and-others/>

<sup>14</sup> Doyle, “Between Friends.”

<sup>15</sup> Avi Sharon, introduction to *The Symposium*, by Plato, trans. Avi Sharon (Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 1998), v.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Sharon, referring to the *Iliad*, bk 1. 597 and passim.

<sup>19</sup> Sharon, vi.

<sup>20</sup> David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that Giorgio Agamben, in taking up the question in Derrida's, revises the translation attributed to Aristotle to "he who has many friends, has no friends," an entirely different proposition! And one that speaks more to the intensity and intimacy of friendship as a precious and rare thing. Agamben "Friendship" *What is an Apparatus?: and Other Essays*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> George Haggerty, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> George Haggerty, *Horace Walpole's Letters: Masculinity and Friendship in the Eighteenth Century* (Plymouth: Bucknell University Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> George Haggerty, "Pan Pipes: Conjugal Friendship in *The Longest Journey*," *English Literature in Transition: 1880-1920* 57, no. 2 (2014): 155-169.

<sup>25</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 136.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29.

<sup>29</sup> Sharon Marcus. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 31.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Halberstam, review of *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*, *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2006): 373.

<sup>31</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004), xxiv.

<sup>32</sup> Marcus, *Between Women*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Belongings," in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Judith Halberstam, "What's that Smell: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6, no.3 (2003): 313-333. Italics mine.

<sup>36</sup> Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 84.

<sup>37</sup> In his manifesto, Rodger recalls a party that offended his notions of racialized masculinity, "I always felt as if white girls thought less of me because I was half-Asian, but then I see this white girl at the party talking to a full-blooded Asian. I never had that kind of attention from a white girl! And white girls are the only girls I'm attracted to, especially the blondes. How could an ugly Asian attract the attention of a white girl, while a beautiful Eurasian like myself never had any attention from them?, I thought with rage." Quoted in Emil Guillermo, "Elliot Rodger's Manifesto Shows Self-Hate Fueled Anti-Asian Violence that Kicked off Isla Vista Rampage," *Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund* (blog), May 25, 21014. <http://aaldef.org/blog/elliott-rodgers-manifesto-shows-self-hate-fueled-anti-asian-violence-that-kicked-off-isla-vista-rampa.html>



- <sup>38</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 15
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Italics mine.
- <sup>40</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 137-181.
- <sup>41</sup> Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 1984).
- <sup>42</sup> Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 136.
- <sup>43</sup> Haggerty, *Men in Love*, 18.
- <sup>44</sup> Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (New York: Aperture, 1986), 6.
- <sup>45</sup> Susan Orlean, *Saturday Night* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).
- <sup>46</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Sexual Traffic," interview with Judith Butler, *d i f f e r e n c e s: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2 & 3 (1994): 76.
- <sup>47</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 6.
- <sup>48</sup> Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- <sup>49</sup> The term "relationship anarchy" was coined by Swedish writer and game developer Andie Nordgren in "The Short Instructional Manifesto for Relationship Anarchy" in 2006. A translation in English is available at *The Anarchist Library*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/andie-nordgren-the-short-instructional-manifesto-for-relationship-anarchy>

## Notes to Chapter 2

- <sup>50</sup> At the same time, I recognized that Wojnarowicz's experience was very different than mine. I was not seeing my friends, my whole community, decimated by AIDS; I was not coping with the debilitating effects of fatal illness. I couldn't claim his pain as my own, but I could bear witness to it, sitting with his words and, among the people I loved, spreading the gospel of his artistic and political genius.
- <sup>51</sup> George E. Haggerty, "Love and Loss: An Elegy," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10, no. 4 (2004): 385-405.
- <sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 584-588.
- <sup>53</sup> Michael Moon, "Memorial Rags: Emerson, Whitman, AIDS, and Mourning," *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman, (New York: Modern Language Association of American, 1995).
- <sup>54</sup> Peter Hujar, *Portraits in Life and Death* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976).
- <sup>55</sup> Stephen Koch, interview with the author, November 12, 2002. Stephen Koch, a writer and Warhol scholar, was one of Hujar's closest friends from 1965 until Hujar's death in 1987. He is the executor of Hujar's estate and the director of the Peter Hujar Archive. The frequent reference to interviews in this project is a testament to the

centrality of oral history, chit chat, and gossip to queer history. Without the stories shared by Stephen Koch, Fran Lebowitz, Gary Schneider, and others, with me, as well as in published sources, the formal qualities of Hujar's photographs would be deprived of much of the (queer) context that informed his project. Moreover, as Gavin Butt, so ably demonstrates in his important book *Between You and Me*, stories about the *lives* of artists matter as much as the work they created to the history of art (and literature).

<sup>56</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 12, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>58</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 12, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., November 13, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 192.

<sup>61</sup> Laura U. Marks, "Love the One You're With," *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 76.

<sup>62</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 188.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> "Paul Thek and his Circle in the 1950s," Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, co-curated by Jonathan David Katz and Peter Harvey. April 12-July 7, 2013. Many of the works from the exhibition are available to view on the exhibition website maintained by the Leslie-Lohman Museum:

<https://www.leslielohman.org/exhibitions/2013/paul-thek-and-his-circle.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Cynthia Carr, interviewed by Stephen Koch for his documentary-in-progress, an oral history of Peter Hujar's life.

<sup>66</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 13, 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 12, 2012.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Carr, interviewed by Koch for his documentary-in-progress.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 134.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 134-35.

<sup>74</sup> Carr's estimate, based on her interviews with Wojnarowicz and others, as told to Stephen Koch for his documentary-in-progress.

<sup>75</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 178.

<sup>76</sup> David Wojnarowicz, "Living Close to the Knives," *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 98.

<sup>77</sup> Guy Trebay, "Peter Hujar and the Lost New York," *The New York Times*, March 4, 2016 and "Why Can't We Stop Talking About New York in the Late 1970s" by Edmund White, *The New York Times*, September 10, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 13, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 14, 2012.

- <sup>81</sup> Stephen Koch, quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 192.
- <sup>82</sup> Vince Aletti, quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 192.
- <sup>83</sup> Fran Lebowitz, interview by Melissa Harris. *David Wojnarowicz: Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*, *Aperture* 137 (Fall 1994): find page#.
- <sup>84</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 13, 2012.
- <sup>85</sup> Carr, interviewed by Koch for his documentary-in-progress.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>87</sup> Carr. *Fire in the Belly*, 179.
- <sup>88</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 12, 2012.
- <sup>89</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>90</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 14, 2012.
- <sup>91</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>92</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 443-44.
- <sup>93</sup> Carr, interviewed by Koch for his documentary-in-progress.
- <sup>94</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 13, 2012.
- <sup>95</sup> Carr. *Fire in the Belly*.
- <sup>96</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 14, 2012.
- <sup>97</sup> Carr, interviewed by Koch for his documentary-in-progress.
- <sup>98</sup> Carr. *Fire in the Belly*, 286
- <sup>99</sup> Carr, interviewed by Koch for his documentary-in-progress.
- <sup>100</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 12, 2012.
- <sup>101</sup> Tom Rauffenbart estimates his relationship with Peter Hujar happened “around 1973 or 1974.” Tom Rauffenbart, interview by C. Carr, in *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*. Interviews by Sylvère Lotringer and others, ed. Giancarlo Ambrosino (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e) 2007), 149.
- <sup>102</sup> Ibid., 151.
- <sup>103</sup> Haggerty, “Pan’s Pipes,” 155.
- <sup>104</sup> Tom Rauffenbart, quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 352.
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>106</sup> Tom Rauffenbart, *A Definitive History*, 152.
- <sup>107</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 356.
- <sup>108</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>109</sup> Tom Rauffenbart, interviewed by Koch for his documentary-in-progress.
- <sup>110</sup> Heather Love, “Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence,” *New Formations* 63 (2008): 55.
- <sup>111</sup> Koch, interview with the author, November 12, 2012.
- <sup>112</sup> Lebowitz, 73.
- <sup>113</sup> Wojnarowicz, “Living Close to the Knives,” 90.
- <sup>114</sup> Ibid., 85-86.
- <sup>115</sup> Journal entry. David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 27, Fales Library, New York University.
- <sup>116</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>117</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 543.

- <sup>118</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 544.
- <sup>119</sup> Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 134.
- <sup>120</sup> Journal Entry. David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 20, Fales Library, New York University.
- <sup>121</sup> Lebowitz, 73.
- <sup>122</sup> Donald Wildmon, head of the American Family Association, issued a pamphlet decrying NEA funding for Wojnarowicz's work, publishing vignettes from his work out of context. In 1990 Wojnarowicz sued the AFA for violation of his rights as author, and won.
- <sup>123</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 580.
- <sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 828-29.
- <sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 829.
- <sup>126</sup> Journal Entry. David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 20, Fales Library, New York University.
- <sup>127</sup> Moon, "Memorial Rags," 236
- <sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.
- <sup>129</sup> Note Moon's point that some critics seem to have looked to Drum-Taps poems, wanting a respite from Whitman's homoeroticism, neglecting to see how present it was in this elegiac poetry.
- <sup>130</sup> Moon, "Memorial Rags," 238.
- <sup>131</sup> Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 368.
- <sup>132</sup> Steven James Gambardella, "Absent Bodies: The AIDS Memorial Quilt as Social Melancholia," *Journal of American Studies* 45, no.2 (2011)213-226, p. 213.
- <sup>133</sup> Journal Entry, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 9, Box 34, Fales Library, New York University.
- <sup>134</sup> The same outline of two men kissing is also used in Wojnarowicz's 1982 Untitled, stenciled onto contact sheets .
- <sup>135</sup> The finding aid for Wojnarowicz's Magic Box at the Fales includes photographs of many of the objects he kept there. They can be seen here: <http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/fales/woj/dscref3091.html#ref3901>
- <sup>136</sup> *Yantra* is the Sanskrit word for a mystical diagram. *Yantras* come from Tantric traditions of Indian mysticism. They can be used in personal meditations.
- <sup>137</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, "Photography in Life and Death: Paul Thek in Photography," in *Paul Thek: Diver, a Retrospective*, by Sussman and Lynn Zelevansky (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2010), 28.
- <sup>138</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

### Notes to Chapter 3

- <sup>139</sup> Anne Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to Sing," *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1985), 6.

- <sup>140</sup> Janet Badia, *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).
- <sup>141</sup> Examples of this here.
- <sup>142</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts* (New York: Harper Millennial Modern Classics, 2008) 62-63.
- <sup>143</sup> Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Friction," 72.
- <sup>144</sup> Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, 15.
- <sup>145</sup> Alicia Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking," *Signs*, 8, no. 1 (1982): 68-90.
- <sup>146</sup> Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- <sup>147</sup> Firestone, 131-132.
- <sup>148</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) 83-84.
- <sup>149</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 148.
- <sup>150</sup> As Steven Gould Axelrod has shown in *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) despite Plath's having read, as a young girl at home with her mother, the work of many women writers as well as men, as soon as she entered high school, and as she continued at college and graduate school, she was educated in a canon that was almost exclusively male. This radical excision of women writers during the shift from home to school enforced the idea that "whereas an amateur reader might read works composed by women, a professional read books by men," 33.
- <sup>151</sup> This was before Rich's breakthrough into feminist poetry with her volume *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967).
- <sup>152</sup> In his introduction to her first volume of poetry *A Change of World*, Auden praised Rich for displaying "a modesty not so common at [her] age" and noted with approval that her poems "make no attempt to conceal their family tree" (ix).
- <sup>153</sup> Anne Sexton, "Classroom at Boston University," *No Evil Star*, 5.
- <sup>154</sup> Heather Cam has written convincingly about the influence of one of Sexton's early poem on Plath's seminal "Daddy" in her article "'Daddy': Sylvia Plath's Debt to Anne Sexton," *American Literature* 59, no. 3 (Oct. 1987): 429-432.
- <sup>155</sup> Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to Sing," 7.
- <sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>157</sup> From an interview with Diane Middlebrook in *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 107.
- <sup>158</sup> Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 3.
- <sup>159</sup> In 1969, Betty Friedan warned of the dangers of a "lavender menace." She feared that queer women would take over the women's movement and reinforce the stereotype that feminists were "man-hating," destroy its credibility within the mainstream. The next year lesbians within the movement staged a Lavender Menace Zap at the Second Congress to Unite Women. After dramatically turning off all the lights, the lights were turned back on, to spectacular effect: seventeen women wearing LAVENDER

MENACE t-shirts had taken control of the stage and the mic. Susan Brownmiller recalls in her memoir *In Our Time* (New York: Dial Books, 1999) that posters lined the hall: “TAKE A LESBIAN TO LUNCH. LAVENDAR JANE LOVES YOU. WE ARE ALL LESBIANS. LESBIANISM IS A WOMEN’S LIBERATION PLOT,” 98.

<sup>160</sup> Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 3.

<sup>161</sup> For instance, this passage from Plath’s *Journals*: “I am jealous of men—a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine, any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening. I envy the man his physical freedom to live a double life—his career, and his sexual and family life.” *The Unabridged Journals*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor, 2000), 98.

<sup>162</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 79-80.

<sup>163</sup> Plath, *Letters Home*, 234.

<sup>164</sup> Later Sexton would have an affair with her close friend Anne Wilder (see Middlebrook 239-240) but this wouldn’t be until 1965, some six years after the Ritz period she memorialized in “The Barfly Ought to Sing.”

<sup>165</sup> When Sexton came into her own as a poet, she started to make money rivaling and ultimately outstripping her husband Kayo as a financial provider for the family.

<sup>166</sup> Firestone, 64.

<sup>167</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.: 1963), 15-16.

<sup>168</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 94.

<sup>169</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 125.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>171</sup> Anne Sexton, “Her Kind,” *The Complete Poems* (New York: Mariner Books, 1991).

<sup>172</sup> See Plath’s poems “Ouija” and “Dialogue over an Ouija Board,” in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), as well as A. Alvarez’s story of Plath burning Ted Hughes’s manuscript along with his nail clippings in a “witch’s ritual bonfire” in his autobiography *Where Did It All Go Right?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 229.

<sup>173</sup> Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, 66.

<sup>174</sup> Plath, “Daddy,” *The Complete Poems*, 222-223.

<sup>175</sup> Plath, *Journals*, 391-392.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

<sup>177</sup> Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 81.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>179</sup> Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 3.

<sup>180</sup> Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 55.

<sup>181</sup> Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), which is a volume of poetry in which I find much to admire.

<sup>182</sup> Susan Van Dyne, “The Problem of Biography,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill, 3-20 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. Italics mine.

<sup>184</sup> Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 201.

<sup>185</sup> It is also worth noting that *The Bell Jar*, the most popular of Plath's works, has nothing to do with Hughes.

<sup>186</sup> Ostriker, "The Thieves of Language," 73.

<sup>187</sup> These works, in fact, draw upon even more ancient Greek materials, including the myths of Persephone and Demeter, Heracles's journey, and the traditions of visiting subterranean oracles. See Michael Thurston's *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 3.

<sup>188</sup> Thurston, *The Underworld*, 2.

<sup>189</sup> David L. Pike, *Passage Through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 8. Quoted in Thurston, 9.

<sup>190</sup> Recently, *The New York Times Book Review* asked essayist Leslie Jamison and critic Charles McGrath respond to the question "In the Age of Memoir, What's the Legacy of the Confessional Mode?"<sup>190</sup>

<sup>191</sup> Van Dyne, "The Problem of Biography," 3.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.* Van Dyne is talking here about biographers, but the same holds true for critics.

<sup>193</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990), 99.

<sup>194</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Anne Sexton: 1928-1974," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979)

<sup>195</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 124.

#### Notes to Chapter 4

<sup>196</sup> Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 17.

<sup>197</sup> Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 6.

<sup>198</sup> Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 220. I encountered this notion, and the accompanying quotation, in Rich's essay.

<sup>199</sup> Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 146.

<sup>200</sup> The image is so-named in Aperture's 2012 reissue of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, but has a slightly different name when it appears in *I'll Be Your Mirror*, the monograph that accompanied her 1996 show at the Whitney, where it is listed as *Nan one month after being battered, 1984*.

<sup>201</sup> *Suzanne and Brian on the beach, Coney Island 1982; Brian on the Bowery roof 1982; Brian in the cabaña, Puerto Juarez, Mexico 1982; Brian in the hotel room, Merida, Mexico 1982; Brian's birthday, New York City 1983; Brian in hotel room with three beds, Merida, Mexico 1982; Brian with the Flinstones, New York City 1981; Brian on the phone, New York City 1981; Brian on my bed with bars, New York City 1983;*

*Brian with his head in his hands, Merida Mexico 1982; Brian at a shooting gallery, Merida, Mexico 1982; Brian's face, West Berlin 1984.*

- <sup>202</sup> Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*,  
<sup>203</sup> Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 24.  
<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.  
<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.  
<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.  
<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.  
<sup>208</sup> Firestone, 113.  
<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.  
<sup>210</sup> Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 8.  
<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.  
<sup>212</sup> *Nan Goldin: In My Life*, directed by Paul Schinkel (New York: ART/new York 1995).  
<sup>213</sup> Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 20.  
<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.  
<sup>215</sup> Nan Goldin, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 206.  
<sup>216</sup> Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 20.  
<sup>217</sup> Rubin, "Sexual Traffic," 76.  
<sup>218</sup> Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 28.  
<sup>219</sup> Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54.  
<sup>220</sup> Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 7.  
<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.  
<sup>222</sup> *Nan Goldin: In My Life*.  
<sup>223</sup> Elisabeth Sussman includes that detail in her essay "In/Of Her Time: Nan Goldin's Photographs," in *I'll Be Your Mirror* by Nan Goldin, ed. Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, and Hans Werner Holzwarth. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996), 38.  
<sup>224</sup> Cookie Mueller, "Pink Flamingos," *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990).  
<sup>225</sup> Chloé Griffin, *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* (Berlin: Bbooks Verlag, 2014).  
<sup>226</sup> Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 6.  
<sup>227</sup> Sussman, "In/Of Her Time: Nan Goldin's Photographs," 38.  
<sup>228</sup> *Nan Goldin: In My Life*.  
<sup>229</sup> Luc Sante, "All Yesterday's Parties," in *I'll Be Your Mirror* by Nan Goldin, 99  
<sup>230</sup> Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 6.  
<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.  
<sup>232</sup> Darryl Pinckney, "Nan's Manhattan," in *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 204.  
<sup>233</sup> Lorde. "Uses of the Erotic," 55.  
<sup>234</sup> Sante, "All Yesterday's Parties," 100.  
<sup>235</sup> Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, 6  
<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*



- <sup>238</sup> J. Hoberman, “‘My Number One Medium All My Life’: Nan Goldin Talking with J. Hoberman” in *I’ll Be Your Mirror* by Nan Goldin, 136.
- <sup>239</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 65.
- <sup>240</sup> *I’ll Be Your Mirror* (film).
- <sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.
- <sup>242</sup> Interview with Walter Keller in *I’ll Be Your Mirror*, 451.
- <sup>243</sup> *I’ll Be Your Mirror* doc
- <sup>244</sup> Sussman, “In/Of Her Time,” 40
- <sup>245</sup> *Nan Goldin: In My Life*.
- <sup>246</sup> *Nan Goldin: In My Life*.
- <sup>247</sup> *I’ll Be Your Mirror* (film).
- <sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>251</sup> Interview with Nan Goldin *I’ll Be Your Mirror*, p. 454
- <sup>252</sup> Moon, “Memorial Rags,” 236.

#### Notes to Chapter 5

- <sup>253</sup> Luc Sante, “The Unexamined Life,” *New York Review of Books*, 16 November 1995. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/11/16/the-unexamined-life/>
- <sup>254</sup> Jonathan Weinberg, “The Promiscuity of the Archive,” in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, ed. Frances Terpak and Michelle Brunnick. (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2016), 186.
- <sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>257</sup> Susan Weiley, “Prince of Darkness, Angel of Light,” *ARTnews* 87, no. 10 (1988): 108.
- <sup>258</sup> Sante, “The Unexamined Life.”
- <sup>259</sup> The same Stephen Koch who was a great friend of Peter Hugar and who figures prominently in chapter 2 of this project.
- <sup>260</sup> Stephen Koch, “Robert Mapplethorpe,” unpublished manuscript contained in the Robert Mapplethorpe archive at the Getty, quoted in Frances Terpak and Michelle Brunnick, “1977: Stars Align,” in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, 26-27.
- <sup>261</sup> Hilton Als, “Wagstaff’s Eye,” *The New Yorker*, January 13, 1997.
- <sup>262</sup> Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe (A Biography)*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1995).
- <sup>263</sup> Hilton Als, “Their Friendship, Their Masterpiece,” *The New Yorker*, June 19, 1995.
- <sup>264</sup> Smith, *Just Kids*, 43.
- <sup>265</sup> Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 79.

- <sup>266</sup> Vanessa Grigoriadis, “Remembrances of the Punk Prose Poetess,” *New York Magazine*, January 10, 2010. <http://nymag.com/arts/music/profiles/63035/>
- <sup>267</sup> Smith, *Just Kids*, 60.
- <sup>268</sup> Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.
- <sup>269</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex”, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, New York: Modern Library, 1995, 560.
- <sup>270</sup> Firestone, 58.
- <sup>271</sup> Smith, *Just Kids*, 57.
- <sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.
- <sup>273</sup> Plato, Symposium, Alexhander Nahamas and Paul Woodruff, trans. Platho: Complete Works, John M. Cooper, ed. (Indianapolis: Hachett Publishing Company, 1997), 489. Quoted in Haggerty, “Pan Pipes,” 158.
- <sup>274</sup> Smith, *Just Kids*, 60.
- <sup>275</sup> Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 52.
- <sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>277</sup> Smith, *Just Kids*, 252. Quoted in Frances Terpak and Michelle Brunnick, “Chelsea Charm,” in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, 67.
- <sup>278</sup> Michael Brenson. “The Many Roles of Mapplethorpe, Acted Out in Ever-Shifting Images” *The New York Times* July 22, 1989.
- <sup>279</sup> Weinberg 196
- <sup>280</sup> Smith, *Just Kids*, 86.
- <sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.
- <sup>282</sup> Smith, interviewed in *Black White + Gray: A Portrait of Sam Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe*, directed by James Crump (New York: Arthouse Films, 2007).
- <sup>283</sup> Frances Terpak & Michelle Brunnick, “Instant Attraction,” in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, 90.
- <sup>284</sup> Sam Wagstaff, letter to Robert Mapplethorpe, located in Sam Wagstaff correspondence 1972-1977, Robert Mapplethorpe papers and photographs, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Quoted in Frances Terpak and Michelle Brunnick, “Instant Attraction,” in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*, 90.
- <sup>285</sup> Bob Colacello, “When Robert Mapplethorpe Took New York,” *Vanity Fair*, March 2016. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/03/robert-mapplethorpe-new-york/>
- <sup>286</sup> Jennifer Doyle, “Tricks of the Trade,” in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, ed. by Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).
- <sup>287</sup> Jennifer Doyle, “Fear and Loathing in New York,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, 15-17 (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- <sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16
- <sup>289</sup> Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 82.
- <sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.
- <sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.
- <sup>292</sup> Als, “Wagstaff’s Eye.”

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Doyle, "Between Friends," 332.

## Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio. *What is an Apparatus?: and Other Essays*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Als, Hilton. "Their Friendship, Their Masterpiece." *The New Yorker*. June 19, 1995.
- . "Wagstaff's Eye." *The New Yorker*. January 13, 1997.
- Alvarez, A. *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1990.
- . *Where Did It All Go Right?* London: Bloomsbury, 2002.
- Auden, W.H. Introduction to *A Change of World: Poems* by Adrienne Rich. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1951.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- Badia, Janet. *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011.
- Black White + Gray: A Portrait of Sam Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe*. Directed by James Crump. New York: Arthouse Films, 2007.
- Brenson, Michael. "The Many Roles of Mapplethorpe, Acted Out in Ever-Shifting Images." *The New York Times* July 22, 1989
- Broad City*. "Knockoffs." Directed by Lucia Aniello. Written by Lucia Aniello and Paul W. Downs. New York: Comedy Central, 2014.
- Broad City*. "Stolen Phone." Directed by Lucia Aniello. Written by Chris Kelly and Abbi Jacobson. New York: Comedy Central, 2014.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. New York: The Dial Press, 1999.
- Butt, Gavin. *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World: 1948-1963*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Cam, Heather. "'Daddy': Sylvia Plath's Debt to Anne Sexton." *American Literature* 59, no. 3 (Oct. 1987): 429-432.

- Carr, Cynthia. *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.
- Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987): 51-63.
- Colacello, Bob. "When Robert Mapplethorpe Took New York." *Vanity Fair*. March 2016. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/03/robert-mapplethorpe-new-york/>
- Doyle, Jennifer. "Between Friends." In *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, edited by George Haggerty and Molly McGarry, 325-340. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.
- . "Fear and Loathing in New York." In *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Edited by Amelia Jones, 15-17. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- . *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.
- . "Tricks of the Trade." In *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*. Edited by Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz, 191-209. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2006.
- Fineman, Joel. "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Friction." *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition*. Cambridge, MA: October Books / The MIT Press, 1991.
- Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970.
- Foucault, Michel. "Friendship as a Way of Life." Translated by John Johnston. In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Edited by Paul Rabinow, 135-40. New York: The New Press, 1997.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. "Queer Belongings." In *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George Haggerty and Molly McGarry, 295-314. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.

- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Freud Reader*. Edited by Peter Gay, 584-588. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995.
- . "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex." *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. New York: Modern Library, 1995.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1963.
- Gallop, Jane. *Anecdotal Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Gambardella, Steven James. "Absent Bodies: The AIDS Memorial Quilt as Social Melancholia." *Journal of American Studies*. 45, no. 2 (2011): 213-226.
- Goldin, Nan. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Edited with Marvin Heiferman, Mark Holborn and Suzanne Fletcher. New York: Aperture, 1986.
- . *I'll Be Your Mirror*. Edited by Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, and Hans Werner Holzwarth. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996.
- . *Ten Years After: Naples 1986-1996*. Edited by Gigi Gianuzzi, Nan Goldin, Guido Costa. New York: Scalo, 1998.
- Griffin, Chloé. *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller*. Berlin: Bbooks Verlag, 2014.
- Grigoriadis, Vanessa. "Remembrances of the Punk Prose Poetess." *New York Magazine*. January 10, 2010. <http://nymag.com/arts/music/profiles/63035/>
- Guillermo, Emil. "Elliot Rodger's Manifesto Shows Self-Hate Fueled Anti-Asian Violence that Kicked off Isla Vista Rampage." *Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund* (blog). May 25, 2014. <http://aaldef.org/blog/elliott-rodgers-manifesto-shows-self-hate-fueled-anti-asian-violence-that-kicked-off-isla-vista-rampa.html>
- Haggerty, George. *Horace Walpole's Letters: Masculinity and Friendship in the Eighteenth Century*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2011.
- . "Love and Loss: An Elegy." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 4 (2004): 385-405.
- . *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

- . "Pan Pipes: Conjugal Friendship in *The Longest Journey*." *English Literature in Transition: 1880-1920* 57, no. 2 (2014): 155-169.
- Halberstam, Judith. Review of *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*, *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2006), 373-374.
- . *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- . "What's that Smell: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6, no. 3 (2003): 313-333.
- Halperin, David. *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: and Other Essays on Greek Love*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Hoberman, J. "'My Number One Medium All My Life': Nan Goldin Talking with J. Hoberman." In *I'll Be Your Mirror* by Nan Goldin, 135-145.
- Hughes, Ted. *Birthday Letters*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.
- Hujar, Peter. *Portraits in Life and Death*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1976.
- I'll Be Your Mirror*. Directed by Edmund Coulthard and Nan Goldin. London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1995.
- Jaffe, Jenny. "Dump Out, Flawless." *Vulture*. February 24, 2016.  
<http://www.vulture.com/2016/02/broad-city-recap-season-3-episode-2.html>
- Koestenbaum, Wayne. *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Lebowitz, Fran. Interview by Melissa Harris. In *David Wojnarowicz: Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*, *Aperture* 137, Fall 1994.
- Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. New York: Ten Speed Press, 1984.
- Lotringer, Sylvère. *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*. Edited by Giancarlo Ambrosino. Co-Edited by Hedi El Kholti, Chris Kraus and Justin Cavin. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006.
- Love, Heather. "Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence." *New Formations* 63 (2008): 52-64.

- MacKinnon, Catherine A. *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Malcolm, Janet. *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- Marcus, Sharon. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- MacKinnon, Catherine A. *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
- Marks, Laura. "Love the One You're With." *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Michie, Helena. *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Middlebrook, Diane. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Moon, Michael. "Memorial Rags: Emerson, Whitman, AIDS, and Mourning." In *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*. Edited by George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman, 233-240. New York: Modern Language Association of American, 1995.
- Moore, Lisa L. "Sister Arts: On Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Others." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 8, 2013. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/sister-arts-on-adrienne-rich-audre-lorde-and-others/>
- Morrisroe, Patricia. *Mapplethorpe: A Biography*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1995.
- Mueller, Cookie. *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1990.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- . *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Nan Goldin: In My Life*. Directed by Paul Tschinkel. New York: ART/new york, 1997.



- Nordgren, Andi. "The Short Instructional Manifesto for Relationship Anarchy." *The Anarchist Library* (First published in the original Swedish on the now-defunct Interacting Arts website in 2006, English translation published in 2012.)  
<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/andie-nordgren-the-short-instructional-manifesto-for-relationship-anarchy>
- Orlean, Susan. *Saturday Night*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.
- Ostriker, Alicia. "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking." *Signs* 8, no. 1 (1982): 68-90.
- "Paul Thek and his Circle in the 1950s." Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Co-curated by Jonathan David Katz and Peter Harvey. April 12-July 7, 2013.  
<https://www.leslielohman.org/exhibitions/2013/paul-thek-and-his-circle.html>
- Pike, David L. *Passage Through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Pinckney, Darryl. "Nan's Manhattan." In *I'll Be Your Mirror* by Nan Goldin, 203-211.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.
- . *The Complete Poems*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.
- . *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008.
- . *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.
- . *The Unabridged Journals*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor, 2000.
- Rauffenbart, Tom. Interview by C. Carr, in *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*. Interviews by Sylvère Lotringer and others. Ed. Giancarlo Ambrosino (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e) 2007)..
- Reed, T.V. *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Anne Sexton: 1928-1974." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979.
- . "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980)," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 11-48.

- . *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967.
- Rubin, Gayle. "Sexual Traffic." Interview with Judith Butler. *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2-3 (1994): 62-99.
- . "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 137-181.
- Sante, Luc. "All Yesterday's Parties." In *I'll Be Your Mirror* by Nan Goldin, 97-103.
- . "The Unexamined Life." *New York Review of Books*. 16 November 1995.  
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/11/16/the-unexamined-life/>
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. New York: Mariner Books, 1991.
- . *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1985.
- Sharon, Avi. Introduction to *The Symposium*, by Plato, translated by Avi Sharon. Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 1998.
- Smith, Patti. *Just Kids*. New York: Ecco, 2010.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America." *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29.
- Stockton, Kathryn Bond. *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Surnow, Rose. "Tell Me This Isn't Sexual." *Vulture*. February 17, 2016.  
<http://www.vulture.com/2016/02/broad-city-recap-season-2-episode-1.html>
- Sussman, Elisabeth. "In/Of Her Time: Nan Goldin's Photographs," in *I'll Be Your Mirror* by Nan Goldin, ed. Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, and Hans Werner Holzwarth. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996),
- . "Photography in Life and Death: Paul Thek in Photography." In *Paul Thek: Diver, a Retrospective*, by Sussman and Lynn Zelevansky, 28-41. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2010.

- Terpak, Frances, and Michelle Brunnick, eds. *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*. Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2016.
- Thurston, Michael. *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- Trebay, Guy. "Peter Hujar and the Lost New York." *The New York Times*. March 4, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/fashion/peter-hujar-new-york-bohemian.html>
- Van Dyne, Susan. "The Problem of Biography." In *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Edited by Jo Gill, 3-20. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Vicinus, Martha. *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Ward, Jane. *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Weiley, Susan. "Prince of Darkness, Angel of Light." *ARTnews* 87, no. 10 (December 1988): 108-111.
- Weinberg, Jonathan. "The Promiscuity of the Archive." In *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Archive*. Ed. Frances Terpak and Michelle Brunnick. Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2016.
- Weston, Kath. *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- White, Edmund. "Why Can't We Stop Talking About New York in the Late 1970s." *The New York Times*. September 10, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/10/t-magazine/1970s-new-york-history.html>
- Wojnarowicz, David. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*. New York: Vintage, 1991.