QUEER PEDAGOGY AND AMERICAN STUDIES: A REPARATIVE RE-THINKING

By

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My project is motivated by the conviction that queer pedagogy does something not only for the field of American Studies, but also for the understanding of the “America” that grounds it. By analyzing American Studies as a social practice, I mobilize queer pedagogy to reformulate the field as a political enterprise that affirms rather than forecloses queer possibilities. In recognizing that the division between public and private is always a political one, I show how queer pedagogy can be used to foreground the fundamental connection between affective desire and disciplinary practice—an intervention that can make the practice of American Studies more attuned to the epistemological regimes that inform the supposedly private realm of sexual citizenship.

This project reinvigorates American Studies as an intellectual and implicitly political enterprise by engaging the field as an ongoing practice performed within material spaces and institutional constraints. My dissertation contends that “queer pedagogy” can compel American Studies to recognize how the most embodied experiences and private affects of sexuality are inextricably inter-connected to the critical and disciplinary practices of the
field. I approach the question of pedagogy *performatively*. In other words, I look not only at what queer pedagogy says or cannot say to the field of American Studies, but at what it can actually do. Thus the re-thinking that my project performs proposes to enable queer perspectives in the various material contexts that inform the field’s scope—in classrooms and universities, ideological and political conflicts, reformulations of disciplines and histories. My project is “reparative” since it does not merely expose the operations of queer space as it already exists or queer time as it has already taken place, or continues to take place. Instead, the project explores material relations that are conducive to the creation of queer possibilities that have yet to be imagined in relation to the practice of American Studies.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION:
QUEER PEDAGOGY AND AMERICAN STUDIES: A REPARATIVE RE-THINKING

Because the term has been understood to promise so much, it’s embarrassing that both the word “queer” and the concept of queerness turn out to be thoroughly embedded in modern Anglo-American culture . . . The term does not translate very far with any ease, and its potential for transformation seems most specific to a cultural context that has not been brought into focus in the theory of queerness.

— Michael Warner “Something Queer about the Nation-State”

Thinking of Performativity Performatively: Towards a Theory of Queer Pedagogy

This project began quite modestly as an attempt to grapple with the sense of embarrassment that Michael Warner writes about in relation to contextualizing “queer” in different cultural and historical moments. In order to test the translatability of the term, I undertook to think of the various material and social relations that enabled and foreclosed the production of queer possibilities or what Warner would call the formation of queer “counter publics.” Even as I began to examine the efficacy of “queer” as a political and theoretical category in various contexts, the process of writing this dissertation was always informed by a sense of these contexts somehow overtaking the theoretical categories that I was in the process of explicating. As a result, I often felt as if the interventions I was making were, if not completely redundant, a bit outdated and anachronistic. One could dismiss this perception of scholarly irrelevance to the obvious and inevitable feeling of self-doubt that one experiences while embarking on a dissertation project—not just the rather paranoid “it’s-all-been-said-before” feeling, but also the uneasy sense of theoretical pointlessness and political futility that result when
theoretical critique seems inadequate or unable to keep up with the ever-changing urgencies of the political moment. At the same time (and after attempting to keep my self-important paranoia in abeyance for just a moment), I found that the supposed temporal gap between political life and theoretical categories could in fact offer a more useful way of grappling with the difficulty of contextualizing the notion of “queer.” More importantly, the difficulties in keeping up with this moment perhaps demanded that the problem of translation be approached differently than a mere attempt to “contextualize.”

In “Queer Moments,” Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark offer a useful explication regarding the temporal life of “queer” and, by implication, of queer theory as well. They remark: “If ‘queer’ is a temporality, a ‘moment,’ it is also then a force; or rather, it is a crossing of temporality with force.” Quoting Sedgwick’s *Tendencies*, they go on to point out: “‘The immemorial current that queer represents’ conveys a persistent present, ‘a continuing moment’ (xi), in short a temporal force” (8). Since the above definition of “queer” has implications on the meaning and function of queer theory as well, it could be argued that a notion of performativity is intrinsic to the very definition of “queer.” In other words, if “queer” is not just a moment that happens or takes place, but is a “temporal force” that continues to shape the contingencies of the present, then it does not merely describe an already existing present that exists in time; instead, its radical scope lies precisely in its ability to create new possibilities for the present—a recognition that renders the attempt to “contextualize” into a rather limited descriptive project of exposure (and also one that assumes that “queer” is a moment that has already taken place in time). Thus rather than merely describing something that already exists (or that
is taking place), this project aims to explicate the “temporal force” of “queer” to create or point to the possibilities of creating spaces that do not exist or that have yet to be imagined. The temporality of “queer” is thus inextricably interwoven with a notion of space—as Judith Halberstam points out in the introduction to *In a Queer Time and Place*: “A ‘queer’ adjustment in the way in which we think about time, in fact, requires and produces new conceptions of space” (6). The mutual dependency of space and time is thus fundamental to the scope of this dissertation, which is invested in the processes of queer knowledge production—in how knowledge circulates, and most importantly, in what knowledge does.

My investment in the processes of knowledge production makes the notion of “pedagogy” central to this dissertation—a concept that is useful precisely because it enables an exploration into the productive tension between the conception of pedagogy as *receiving of knowledge* as opposed to an understanding of pedagogy as concerned with the performing of *knowledge production*. In many ways the motivating logic behind this dissertation is informed by a conceptual shift to the latter. My interest in the pedagogy of queer theory is not only concerned with the question of how to literally teach queer theory (which, of course, brings up the related question of whether queer theory teaches us or provides us with the tools of how to teach it); I am more invested in thinking about what queer theory itself can teach or what we can learn from it. Thus while I started out this dissertation with the meta-theoretical goal of attending to the absent cause of history within queer theory, I felt that a more useful way of attending to the question of context would be to approach the problem of performativity *performatively*—i.e., to see not only what queer theory says (or cannot say), but what it can actually do in classrooms and
universities, in ideological and political conflicts, in formations and reformulations of disciplines, histories, and nations. By attending to the performative implications of queer theory as it travels (in space and time) through these various pedagogical contexts, it might be possible to attend to the material conditions that enable those forms of knowledge production that not only tolerate or include, but actually create queer possibilities. Thus rather than transmitting knowledge that already exists, I wish to think of the pedagogy of queer theory as a framework that creates or performs new possibilities. It is thus through the more affirmative framework of queer knowledge production that I attend to the question of historical context in this project.

It is perhaps only apposite that the dissertation’s emphasis on the productive and the pedagogic aspects of queer theory is not only motivated by an epistemological interventions, but by historical and contextual questions as well. In The Lesbian Index, Kim Emery points out the U.S. as a culture has been historically “more comfortable with homosexual identity than with homosexual activity” (60). As a result, the nation state is often willing to make concessions to gay and lesbian people when homosexual “activity” is somehow safely removed from “identity.” Thus as I point out in the following chapters, the state has been relatively more willing to offer protection to queer people from hate crimes in the form of legislation and non-discrimination clauses. Conversely, the state is less accountable for basic benefits such as health care to persons living with AIDS, domestic partnership rights, or even sexual freedom that is legally denied by archaic sodomy laws, since these measures are symbolically equated with homosexual “activity” and with the creation of conditions that would be conducive for the promotion of queer culture—a promotion that would, of course, be anathema to the moral fiber of
the nation, but perhaps, as importantly, would require the state to extend material benefits to queer people. In her essay on “Sexual Rights,” Rosalind Petchesky best summarizes this dichotomy between an affirmative model and what she calls a “negative” notion of sexual citizenship when she asks: “Why is it so much easier to assert sexual freedom in a negative rather than an affirmative, emancipatory sense; to gain consensus for the right not to be abused . . . but not the right to fully enjoy one’s body?” (124).

Since the state has historically been less conducive to creating the material conditions necessary for sexual freedom or the promotion of queer culture, the radical pedagogic potential of queer theory lies precisely in its ability to demand the creation of conditions that sustain the formation of affirmative dimensions of citizenship. A focus on those dimensions that foster new possibilities might serve as a useful response to Michael Warner’s polemical question in the introduction to Fear of a Queer Planet: “What do queers want?”(vii). Moreover, such a focus on the productive or affirmative rather than the negative dimensions of sexual citizenship might enable a move away from the theoretical and political impasse that has resulted in the assimilationist v/s non-assimilationist stalemate characterizing much of contemporary queer theorizing. While the commodification of gay and lesbian culture and the consequent assimilationist tendencies within much of gay activism is undoubtedly a historical reality, there can be no easy separation between state and non-state centered interventions where the former is dismissed as “mainstream” and “assimilationist” while the latter is privileged as transgressive or more “queer.” (The reductive nature of this dichotomy is all too visible in debates within queer studies surrounding gay marriage where arguments “for” gay marriage are axiomatically coded as “assimilationist” in contrast to arguments “against”
gay marriage that are supposedly more anti-normative in scope). While I do not wish to suggest that the question of assimilation can merely be ignored, this project’s focus on the production of new conceptions of queer space and time enables a critique of a negative understanding of sexual citizenship that is, I hope, more nuanced than the blanket rejection of “assimilation.”

**Theories that Matter**

By insisting that queer theory’s radical potential lies in an investment in the affirmative dimensions of citizenship and the formation of “new” possibilities, I do not wish to ignore the material constraints that inform the creation of these spaces. Moreover, I am quite aware of how the language of novelty is fully in keeping with the logic of capitalist innovation. In order to qualify the emphasis on “new possibilities” this project’s theoretical framework brings into dialogue Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity with Eve Sedgwick’s call for a shift from “paranoid” to “reparative” readings within queer studies. I wish to suggest that an explication of the reparative tendencies within a performative understanding of the social can produce new conceptions of queer space and time that are simultaneously grounded in recognition of limits and constraints. In her essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You’re So Paranoid, you Probably Think this Essay is about you,” Eve Sedgwick critiques the epistemological framing of queer critiques which, according to her, presume too often that the process of demystification is the ultimate goal of social and ideological critique. The stasis that such a hermeneutics of exposure can result in obscures the more important question of what such a form of knowledge can perform—what does, to quote Sedgwick, such “knowledge do?” (124). According to Sedgwick, such readings are “paranoid” since they insist that “bad news be always already known” (130). Thus
paranoid readings are those that ultimately only confirm what is already known. The act of exposure then, becomes a theoretical end in itself without any consideration of alternative possibilities of thinking and organizing. As a result, paranoid readings, writes Sedgwick, “may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller” (124). In terms of methodology, paranoid reading practices result in critical tendencies that have rigid and tautological relations to questions of temporality. In other words, in insisting on anticipatory and retroactive forms of thinking, paranoid readings privilege what Sedgwick calls, “the notion of the inevitable” (147) and efface epistemological questions concerning the performativity of knowledge production—the fact that “knowledge does rather than simply is” (124). Thus Sedgwick writes: “for someone to have an unmystified view of systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences (127).

According to Sedgwick, the methodologies of queer theory, with their insistence on exposing hidden meanings and heteronormative sub-texts, are particularly characterized by paranoid critical practices. Since as a psychic defense mechanism, paranoia attempts to foreground a pre-emptive knowledge of a future violence, the successful exposure of that violence results ironically in a triumphalist grand narrative that basks in the process of unveiling. An attempt to re-think the rigid investment in exposure and the insistence on unveiling suggests the need for an epistemology that takes into consideration the specific material contexts and historical contingencies that enable and foreclose a more performative understanding of knowledge production. Such an epistemology is enabled
through a shift from paranoid reading practices to what Sedgwick defines as the reparative practice of reading and thinking.

Drawing on the psychoanalytical formulations of Melanie Klein and her insistence on the instability and flexibility of psychic positions, Sedgwick’s notion of “reparation” enables a shift from the hermeneutic of suspicion to a critical practice that allows for a critical re-assembling or a mapping that moves beyond the aporias of the paranoid faith in demystification. In a Kleinian framework, infants or adults constantly oscillate between the depressive position and the reparative position that promises pleasure seeking possibilities. According to Sedgwick, the depressive position is temporarily occupied by the infant or adult as an escape from the threat and violence of trauma so that the resulting anxiety can be contained by the ego. It is from this depressive position of anxiety that the adult or infant attempts “to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though . . . not necessarily like any preexisting whole” (128):

[T]o read from a position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader ties to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters and creates. (146)

As a result of the flexible movement among causes and effects, reparative practices operate through what systems theorists have called the principle of “recursivity”2—in other words, knowledge of effects could not only result in a re-thinking of the cause (so that consequently the effects may no longer seem axiomatic or inevitable), but more importantly, the flexible circularity implied in the reparative mode of thinking enables a move away from the reactive and anticipatory observational practices of paranoid
reading towards reading practices that Sedgwick defines as “additive and accretive” (129). Since reparative readings enable more mutable and less linear understandings of temporality, there is a recognition of historical contingency and the ways in which the present historical moment is recursively structured by the past and the future. As Sedgwick writes: “Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (146).

Thinking reparatively is thus crucial to this project’s pre-occupation with the performance of alternative knowledge productions. And yet, as I have pointed out earlier, the shift from paranoid to reparative thinking cannot come at the cost of ignoring what Judith Butler has called the “constitutive constraints”(xi) that regulate the production of knowledge. The attempts to offer reparative readings in this project are thus simultaneously imbricated in a narrative of what I term “pedagogical failure.” Thus I draw on the work of Judith Butler to offer a more performative understanding of failure as a pedagogical moment. While the notion of failure might seem antithetical to the logic of reparation, an analysis of failure need not necessarily lapse into the aporias of paranoid thinking. Instead, failure can offer pedagogical insight into the material conditions that are required for what J.L. Austin calls “the smooth or ‘happy’ functioning of a performative”. Even while Sedgwick points to the earlier work of Judith Butler as characteristic of the paranoid “faith in exposure,” (139) I wish to suggest that the performative understanding of power that Butler offers might usefully illustrate the value of “pedagogic failure.” Much of Judith Butler’s work in Bodies that Matter is concerned
with the idea that the symbolic constitutes itself through a process of foreclosure and abjection, i.e., by creating a domain of unintelligible bodies, “of excluded and delegitimated ‘sex’” (16). Consequently the possibilities of agency lie in the challenge that the excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony which could potentially result in a radical re-signification of the symbolic domain. Several critiques of Butler have rightly asked whether it is axiomatic or inevitable that this domain of unintelligible bodies poses a threat to the symbolic. Butler herself points this out in her analysis of *Paris is Burning*, where the killing of Venus Extravaganza is a killing that is “performed by the symbolic that would eradicate those phenomena that require an opening up of the possibilities for the resignification of sex” (*BTM*,131). In this sense, “the citing of the dominant norm does not . . . displace that norm” (*BTM*,133). Since the abject will only ultimately produce systemic changes within power relations depending on the existence of the appropriate material conditions, it might be useful to reparatively examine the moments of repetition *without* a difference in order to think of a more performative understanding of failure. Thus in mapping new conceptions of queer space and time, I often begin with such a moment of failure to think beyond the aporias of that moment (rather than anticipating failure as the end point of analysis). A more performative understanding of failure as a moment of pedagogy draws attention to the necessity of altering the conditions and circumstances on which performativity relies. In that sense, a performative understanding of failure becomes a moment of pedagogic failure—what Lauren Berlant calls a “national pedagogy of failed teaching” (245). In her analysis of diva citizenship in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Lauren Berlant uses the case of Anita Hill to foreground how Hill’s clash with the judicial
system, the state and ultimately the nation represents the “incommensurate experience of power where national and sexual affect meet” (245). For Berlant, Hill’s inability to alter the systemic relations of power is exemplary of a national failure, which, in refusing to protect the sexual dignity of Hill, inadvertently articulates the exclusions on which national and sexual citizenship is predicated—it is, according to Berlant a performing of “unfreedom” (246). In this sense, the case of Hill is an illustration of a body that fails to matter, or as Butler would have it, a body that fails to materialize—but it is precisely this failure that provides the “necessary outside . . . [-] the domain of abjected bodies” (BTM, 16) that calls for a radical resignification of symbolic norms.

Undoubtedly, a performative understanding of failure that “articulates” or “draws attention” to the exclusions on which the abject is predicated potentially lapses back into the very hermeneutics of exposure that I have attempted to complicate thus far. What then does such a moment of pedagogic failure do, or what effects can failure have in re-articulating the terms and conditions on which performativity relies? In other words, how precisely can one reconcile the idea of ‘failure’ with questions related to the performativity of knowledge production so that it becomes possible to imagine reparative responses to the pedagogy of failure? At one level, the insistence on failure seems to be almost inevitably imbricated in an anticipatory paranoid practice—the idea that there can be no bad surprises or that “bad news be always already known” (Sedgwick, 130). In this context, failure seems to operate as an unfortunate, but all too convenient aporia that dominates the epistemological field, precluding any alternative practices that might offer more reparative methodologies. What if, however, rather than positing failure as a theoretical end in itself or as a final proof for the necessity of paranoid thinking, it could
be theorized instead in relation to Sedgwick’s use of the Kleinian psychoanalytical framework?—i.e, the depressive position⁶ that is always gathering resources to “assemble” or “repair the murderous part-objects?” In keeping with Sedgwick’s attempt to think of non-dualistic frameworks for thinking and pedagogy, paranoid and reparative practices do not exist in opposition to one another, but are instead mutually implicated in one another. As Sedgwick points out: “the reparative motive of seeking pleasure, after all, arrives, by Klein’s account, only with the achievement of a depressive position” (138).

Consequently such an understanding of failure is productive or reparative since it does not insist on the fixity of the depressive position as an end point of analysis (the exposure of systemic oppressions or the exclusions on which sexual citizenship is predicated) but considers the various resources that enable pleasure-seeking possibilities. Sedgwick remarks: “Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissible in paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure . . . and because they are frankly ameliorative” (144). While the theoretical framework of failure draws attention to the necessity of altering the material conditions on which performativity relies, the reparative motives implicit in such a task of exposure can be made explicit through analyzing the production of effects (i.e. what knowledge does) that result from the failure of performative practices. If a performative act is defined as an utterance that produces that which it names, this production is predicated on a reiterated acting rather than a singular act that culminates in a set of fixed effects (Butler, 10). The reiterative nature of the performative act suggests that knowledge production (as distinct from a self-contained or fixed understanding of knowledge) cannot be subsumed within the matrix of fully
constituted relations or effects. In other words, if the effects of performatives are theorized in terms of what Butler calls “discursive productions” that “do not conclude at the terminus of a given statement or utterance” there is always the possibility of re-working failure in more reparative directions by identifying the “constraints on the past and the future” that “mark the limits of agency and its most enabling conditions” (BTM, 241). It is this mutual inscription of limitations with the enabling conditions of agency that marks the reparative and pedagogic potential of a performative understanding of failure.

**Madness behind the Method: Qualifying the “Scavenger” Archive**

Several recent works in queer studies have indirectly taken on Sedgwick’s challenge to articulate the more reparative motivations that are at work in contemporary queer culture. Works such as Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinities*, Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feelings* and Jose Munoz’s *Disidentifications*, for instance, do not merely stop short at exposing the queer eradicating impulses in everyday political and cultural life, but make explicit the innovative and inventive ways in which queer culture has imagined alternative ways of being that resist the normative codes of heteronormative existence. Halberstam’s *Female Masculinities*, for instance, looks at drag king sub-cultures to argue how the existence and proliferation of female masculinities works to deconstruct the symbolic and normative equation of masculinities with men. Jose Munoz examines the “disidentificatory” practices operating in the work of queer performance artists such as Marga Gomez, Vaginal Creme Davis, Carmelita Tropicana and Ela Troyano. He analyzes how the “recycling and rethinking [of] encoded meaning” in the work of these artists not only exposes the exclusionary mechanisms at work in mainstream culture, but also serves the more transformative purpose of
empowering minority identities and identifications (32). Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich’s work on feminist-dyke punk bands such as Tribe 8 and Le Tigre in *Archive of Feelings* looks at how these cultural productions create counterpublics that “form in and around trauma” (9). Cvetkovich is not only concerned with representations of trauma in these works, but also how these cultural performances enable “new practices and publics” (10).

The reparative contributions that the above works may lie partly in their ability to complicate the separation between theory and practice. In other words, these interventions resist a mechanical application of already existing queer theoretical models on to cultural texts, but instead articulate the ways in which theory is already at work in the everyday operations of these texts. The role of the critic in these theoretical interventions then, is to make explicit what is implicit in these cultural artifacts, and to draw attention to their performative potential. The recognition of the cultural sphere’s transformative potential has thus been a crucial contribution of the above mentioned theoretical texts in particular, and of queer studies in general.

And yet, without lapsing into a dismissal of the cultural (which is predictably accompanied with the privileging of the material), I wish to suggest that there is something politically and epistemologically limiting about the above theoretical works’ reliance on queer sub-cultures. My critique is not the familiar accusation of the critic’s ethnographic gaze or the charge of co-option—the power dynamic in the above works is *not* of the sophisticated Ivory tower theoretician offering intellectual insight into the work of marginal sub-cultural practices. (Judith Halberstam, for instance, is fully immersed in the drag king sub-cultures that she theorizes about). However, even while the performative effects of sub-cultural practice certainly plays an important role in
interrogating a hegemonic social order, I am often left wondering about the performative effects of these theoretical interventions themselves. Thus a larger meta-theoretical question that remains is whether the ultimate achievement of these theoretical works is one that remains at the level of the descriptive (as opposed to the performative). If Sedgwick’s critique of queer theory is its over-investment in paranoid readings—i.e., the overdetermined pre-occupation with exposing the “bad news of heteronormativity”—are these works imbricated in only exposing the “good news” of anti-heteronormative subversion? If so, then this is merely a structural reversal (in replacing “bad news” with “good news”) that ultimately still preserves the hermeneutics of exposure that subtends paranoid thinking. Thus my own interest in the performativity of knowledge production—i.e., in what (queer) knowledge can do—does not simply draw attention to or ‘expose’ the operations of queer space as it already exists or queer time as it has already taken place, or as it continues to take place. Returning then to my earlier assertion, I wish to reiterate that rather than foregrounding the pedagogical value of “queer” as it already exists, I am more interested in exploring the historical conditions that are conducive to the creation of queer possibilities that have yet to be imagined. Consequently, I am invested in mapping the specific pedagogical effects of queer performativity in order to see what it can itself perform or add to the discourse of knowledge production.

Even while the theoretical approach of this project differs significantly from the above mentioned works, in many ways it closely resembles what Judith Halberstam has called the “scavenger methodology” of queer theory—a method, which, according to her, “refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence”(13). I hope to
illustrate how my use of such a “scavenger methodology” is more than just a sophisticated theoretical euphemism for the lack of organization or even some hip gesture towards what has increasingly become the cliche of interdisciplinarity. The archive of my dissertation includes close readings of both literary and popular texts, movies as well as novels; by attending to the performative implications of queer theory within specifically “American” spheres, I simultaneously propose to resituate “America” itself—the idea and the ideology—within the postcolonial, economically imperialist, haphazardly queered, and irrefutably globalized world we all inhabit. Thus even while (or perhaps precisely because) I wish to closely attend to the formation of new spaces and different modes of temporality, this project’s own spatial and temporal framework does not confine itself to a specifically singular place or time in history. If, as Judith Halberstam has pointed out in “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies,” queerness is “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (1), the organizing method of this project attempts to reflect some of the strangeness, imagination, and eccentricity in which the logic of queerness is imbricated. For instance, beginning with a close look at pedagogical concerns within specific classroom and institutional contexts, I analyze the pedagogical reception of queer texts such as Sarah Schulman’s Girls, Visions and Everything and the film Boys Don’t Cry against the backdrop of the increasing corporatization of the University. The dissertation then follows queer theory as it moves through space and across national boundaries to analyze the pedagogical potential of queer theory in feminist political debates in postcolonial India. My final two chapters concern themselves with the pedagogical potential of queer temporality. I examine the
performative dimensions of texts as varied as Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* and the film *Monster’s Ball* in order to explore the possibilities of thinking of what Johannes Fabian calls a “politics of time.” While I begin this chapter by re-thinking the “end” narratives of American Studies, I end my dissertation by re-thinking the beginnings of the field. In my final chapter, I offer an alternative to the “end” narratives of the previous chapter through an analysis of Mark Merlis’ novel *American Studies*. Written in the 90s, the novel uses the historical context of the 50s and the life of F.O.Matthiessen as its fictional setting. I argue that *American Studies* re-conceives the field from which it takes its title by re-thinking the ideological framework of US literary history. Through its retrospective narrative—what I call “queer retrosexuality”—the novel offers a queer politics of time which is of theoretical and pedagogical importance to American Studies. I analyze how the novel “queers” the origins of the field and thus offers the possibility of creating a more queer affirmative field in the past and present. The motivating logic that drives the dissertation as a whole is thus a pre-occupation with how queer knowledge circulates within the field of American Studies. More importantly, in attending to the institutional constraints that inform the practice of the field, I map what such knowledge can actually do to the field.

In many ways, the “scavenger methodology” almost becomes a theoretical pre-requisite given this project’s concern with the production of queer possibilities that have yet to be imagined or performed. The bringing of varied sites into productive juxtaposition with one another enables pedagogical possibilities that remain unexplored when these sites are examined discretely. Simultaneously, however, these disparate spaces and “strange temporalities,” while eschewing any obvious connections and clear-
cut interrelations, cohere in important ways that are crucial to the conceptual focus of this project. For instance, the notion of “pedagogical failure” and the reparative possibilities that it enables recurs as a unifying logic throughout all my chapters. In my first chapter, I use the notion of “pedagogical failure” in a literal sense in order to talk about the reception of queer texts in the classroom. Pedagogical failure becomes apposite in this context because students claim to have “enjoyed” Boys Don’t Cry, while the response to Schulman’s Girls, Visions and Everything is reserved and, at times, blatantly negative. I attribute this “failed” pedagogical reception to the operations of a negative understanding of sexual citizenship—where students “sympathize” with or “tolerate” a tragic queer figure such as Brandon Teena in Boys Don’t Cry, but reject the more affirmative model of sexual citizenship that is represented in Girls, Visions and Everything. I inquire into the material relations both inside and outside the classroom that inform such a pedagogical reception with the ultimate aim of identifying the reparative conditions that might enable a more affirmative model of queer knowledge production. Similarly, in chapter two, I attempt to conceptualize a more affirmative model of sexual citizenship in the context of the post-colonial Indian nation state. I begin this chapter, however, with the failures of the Indian feminist movement in reconciling its critique of patriarchy with that of compulsory heterosexuality. I argue that the privileging of the ostensibly more serious “life and death issues” by Indian feminists comes with a foreclosure of the more affirmative dimensions of sexual citizenship in general and of same-sex desire in particular. My critique of the failures of Indian feminism is not motivated by a dismissal of its important achievements; instead, such a critique is informed by the reparative goal of imagining a more sophisticated model of gender rights in a postcolonial context that
includes a critique of compulsory heterosexuality as one of the numerous violent manifestations of institutionalized patriarchy.

Once again, I wish to emphasize that reparation is not something that inevitably or necessarily follows the failures that I explore. There are historical and material limits that inform the possibility of thinking reparatively—what Judith Butler calls the “constitutive constraints” and “regulatory norms” (BTM, 15-16) that shape the performative process. Thus in the following chapters, I pay more close attention to the limits that circumvent the possibilities of reparative thinking. And following Butler, I suggest that the understanding of limits and “productive constraints” might in fact enable pedagogic possibilities—i.e., it might be precisely through an understanding of limits, that we might be able to understand the “enabling conditions” for the production of queer possibilities. Thus in chapter three I examine the temporal relations that subtend what I call “pseudo-reparative responses” to institutionalized oppressions. Through an attention to what Johannes Fabian has termed the “politics of time,” I demonstrate how texts such as the film *Monster’s Ball* and Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours* struggle and ultimately fail to articulate reparative responses to hegemonic social norms. For instance, I examine the film *Monster’s Ball* in the context of the “end of racism” narratives that characterize post-affirmative action ideology. Rather than offering a reparative response to the operations of racism, I illustrate the ways in which the film reduces racism to an individual problem, thus offering privatized models of agency and ideal citizenship. In insisting “things can change in one moment” (the film’s selling slogan) I show how the film’s temporal abstraction of “one moment” performs an uncritically progressivist understanding of history—not dissimilar to the anti-affirmative action rhetoric
surrounding Jeb Bush’s One Florida Plan that posits racism as an “act” that has not only already taken place but whose effects are firmly fixed in the past.

In a different vein, I show how reparative thinking fails in Michael Cunningham’s The Hours; despite the novel’s elegiac recognition of the persistent presence and reiterative nature of institutionalized gender oppressions, it condemns its characters to what Butler has called “the theoretical gesture of pathos” (53) which disables a reparative re-working or rearticulation of symbolic norms. Thus I argue that even while the novel understands the performative power of discourse to produce that which it regulates and (unlike Monster’s Ball) successfully interrogates the temporal politics of amnesia that surrounds the AIDS crisis, the reader is only left with the melancholic recognition of the “terrible times” (6) that haunt the lives of its various characters. My critique of the novel is not motivated by an attempt to merely foreground an epistemological problem, but more importantly, to see how this problem itself constitutes the limits and enabling conditions of pedagogic possibilities.

My final chapter proposes more reparative alternatives to the failures discussed in the previous chapter. I explore the productive possibilities that emerge through a more reparatively conceived queer politics of time. Through an analysis of what I call “queer retro-sexuality,” I propose an alternative way of “doing” the history of homosexuality, which, I contend, has crucial implications on the practice of American Studies. I ground my argument in Mark Merlis’ 1994 novel American Studies which I examine as emblematic of the retro-sexual narrative. The novel while set in the 90s, returns to the 50s as its political backdrop and is based loosely on the life of F.O. Matthiessen, gay literary scholar and “founder” of American Studies. In making the 50s the primal scene
of American Studies, the novel resituates historiographic understandings of literature and politics in the 50s and its relationship with the present. In many ways, Mathiessen’s suicide has resulted in consolidating a tragic-queer narrative, similar to the pedagogical reception surrounding Brandon Teena in Boys Don’t Cry discussed in the first chapter. Matthiessen’s role in the formation of American Studies is often contained by a negative understanding of sexual citizenship and thus “fails” to matter; subsequently, much of the scholarship in American Studies has focused on the queer eradicating impulse in Matthiessen’s American Renaissance and his homophobic response to Whitman’s bodily “excess.” Through Merlis’ novel, I attempt to re-think the “pedagogic failures” that surround the critical reception of Matthiessen. I argue that such a re-thinking of the past through a retrospective temporal frame creates reparative historiographic possibilities for the practice of American Studies in the present.

Thus in many ways, the final chapter’s interest in what queer theory can do to the field of American Studies, shapes the larger conceptual logic of the entire dissertation. Through an examination of the performativity of queer knowledge productions, this project attempts to re-define the epistemological boundaries of American Studies as an intellectual and implicitly political enterprise. For instance, the most literal re-thinking of boundaries in the dissertation takes place in my analysis of Indian feminism and queer theory in chapter two. The inclusion of this chapter within the scope of a project that could be characterized as explicitly “New Americanist” is thus in keeping with the call for the end of an American Studies that places the United States at the center of critical discourse. In The Queen of America Goes to Washington City, Lauren Berlant points to
the importance of re-thinking the geographic and national boundaries of American Studies:

Transnational capital and global media produce subjects and publics that are no longer organized around the politics of representation within the confines of a single state, and states increasingly ally with transnational capital in organizing processes of production that transect their borders. In addition, the combination of migration and new technologies of travel and interpersonal communication have so changed and challenged the ways national life operates that the notion of a modal person who is a citizen with one pure national affiliation and loyalty to only the place she or he currently lives markedly underdescribes the experiences and political struggles of persons across the globe. (13)

Thus in a project that is pre-occupied with the pedagogy of knowledge production, it would naive to assume that such knowledge circulates only within the confines of national boundaries. The de-centering of nation and of American Studies that this project performs, ironically also reasserts the category of nation as a platform for analysis. As Berlant herself has pointed out: “It is precisely under transnational conditions that the nation becomes a more intense object of concern and struggle” (13). Thus even while transnational in scope, I do not resolve the reality of globalization and the mobility of transnational capital with a privileging of the diaspora. Even while global capital and information technology permeates across national boundaries, these boundaries are still very much a historical reality that make any easy celebration of fluidity extremely problematic. I negotiate the explicitly transnational and national scope of this project once again by returning to the notion of pedagogy that is implicit throughout the dissertation. In other words, I consider the complex ways in which national boundaries and the global movement of knowledge productions operate as productive constraints in the creation of queer pedagogies. Consequently, given the haphazard ways in which “queer” circulates around the globe, the spatial logic of knowledge circulation that this dissertation follows attempts to reflect the recursive and dialogic nature of pedagogical
exchange. Thus, for instance, in chapter two, I not only think of what feminism in India can learn from queer theory, but also how the mobilization of sexual citizenship in a different part of the globe might necessitate the ways in which sexual identity categories are theorized in the West.

In one sense, all the following chapters can be read as illustrations or pedagogical sites that test the performative usefulness of queer theory as an intervention. Even while critics like Rosemary Hennessey and Fredric Jameson have equated queer theory with the commodification of culture under the postmodern logic of late capitalism, this project runs counter to such a reductive narrative by insisting on the performativity of queer knowledge production—that queer knowledge does something not only for the field of American Studies, but also for the understanding of an “America” that grounds it.

Notes

1. For instance, the very first chapter in this project that deals with the difficulties of teaching queer texts within the context of the increasing corporatization of the University. Two years after I wrote this chapter, the constraints on any kind of radical pedagogy have, in addition to the increased and vigorous corporate interests of the University, also assumed an almost McCarthy-like character. In the beginning of 2005, Congressman Jim DeMint stated that gay and lesbian professors should not be allowed to influence young minds. A couple of months later, Republican senator Dennis Baxley proposed the ironically titled Academic Freedom Bill of Rights in the Florida Senate. The proposed bill would allow students to file law suits against professors who are supposedly “non-objective” in classroom spaces and in their “biased” ideological leanings. From Summer 2005, in accordance with a state-mandated law, every classroom at the University of Florida displays an American flag with specified size dimensions.

2. See Cary Wolfe’s analysis of second order cybernetics in Critical Environments. Wolfe draws attention to the contingency of observation in this model – “A causes B and B causes A” and thus it “is always possible to observe otherwise” (57). Wolfe draws on the idea of the “feedback loop” in systems theory to foreground the contingent possibilities that are enabled through the principle of recursivity. Sedgwick’s notion of reparation, with its insistence on mutability and the move away from linear directionality of paranoid reading practices, similarly enables “the contingent possibilities of thinking otherwise” (133).
3. Sedgwick herself acknowledges that in refusing the fixity and immutable linearity of the paranoid reading, reparative readings do not efface the histories that make paranoid practices politically and theoretically necessary. Thus Sedgwick points out, “to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression” (128).

4. In *How to do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin points that a performative is set to be happy when the utterance of the speech act leads to a set of purported set of effects that are predicated on the satisfaction of certain conditions and circumstances. Conversely, a performative is said to be “unhappy” if the action that results from the speech utterance is “vitiated by a flaw or hitch in the conduct of the ceremony” (17).

5. See Kim Emery, *The Lesbian Index*.

6. The term “position” in a Kleinian framework is defined by Sedgwick in opposition to “normatively ordered stages, stable structures or diagnostic personality types” (128). Implicit in Klein’s notion of “positions” is a non-fixity and oscillatory potential that gets precluded in the rigid narrative structure of paranoid practices.

7. In *Manushi*, a well-known women’s journal in India, editor Madhu Kishwar remarks: "Such issues (lesbian desire) are not as important in a third world context since Indians face more crucial, more economically basic life-and-death issues.” I offer a detailed analysis of Kiwshar’s comments in Chapter two.

8. I adapt this phrase from David Halperin’s *How to do the History of Homosexuality*. In my final chapter, I offer a mode of historiographic analysis that departs from Halperin’s theoretical framework.
CHAPTER 2
PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND THE REPARATIVE PERFORMANCE OF FAILURE, OR, “WHAT DOES [QUEER] KNOWLEDGE DO?”

What does knowledge do—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows? How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects? (124)

– Eve Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay Is About You”

Towards a Pedagogical Notion of "Failure"

As an instructor in the English Department at the University of Florida, I have been teaching various English Composition classes such as ENC 1145: Writing about Variable Topics, ENC 1102: Writing about Literature, and AML2410: Special Issues in American Literature and Culture. Under the aegis of these sections, I have taught classes entitled “Writing about Sexual Dissidence,” “Writing about LGBT Literature,” “Un-American Activities: Exploring the Intersections between Sexual and National Identity” and “Writing about the Ideology of the Normal.” While each class has set out to deal with specific questions concerning the politics of identity, generally speaking all the classes focus on 20th-century US literature and culture through the conceptual framework of queer and feminist theories. The classes analyze the rhetoric of heteronormativity and the ways in which narratives of heterosexism manifest themselves through larger national, social and cultural formations. Since the teaching of argumentative writing is the ultimate goal, students analyze arguments that foreground the workings of heteronormativity, identifying the interpretive and rhetorical strategies that make them
effective. In various writing assignments, students then attempt to practice these strategies, developing original arguments about the operations of various forms of institutionalized oppressions in sites and spaces that exist around them—the classroom, the University of Florida, the State and, most crucially, the Nation.

In this paper, I wish to think about the historical relations that limit and enable the practice of queer knowledge production with specific attention to the space of the classroom. While the rest of my dissertation will consider the notion of pedagogy in broader contexts that are not necessarily limited to the space of the classroom, it might be only appropriate to begin the dissertation with an attention to the operations of queer pedagogy in its most literal sense—i.e. pedagogy as a process of knowledge production that is performed in the classroom under the aegis of the University. I wish to think about the classroom through a theoretical and pedagogical notion of “failure”—or in other words, through what I wish to term a performative understanding of failure as a moment of pedagogy. I contextualize the analysis of pedagogical failure by situating it locally within the space of the classroom but also more generally as a re-thinking of knowledge production under the aegis of the University. I do not wish to think about my class as a space of radical social change where students are enlightened about the realities of queer existence or learn how to empathize with marginalized subject positions (which problematically assumes that the very act of knowing does something or is axiomatically performative in terms of the effects that supposedly ensue). My analysis of pedagogical failure will concern itself with the teaching of Sarah Schulman’s novel *Girls Visions and Everything* and the film *Boys Don’t Cry* in my Composition classes. The notion of pedagogical failure becomes apposite in this context because students claimed to have
“enjoyed” *Boys Don’t Cry*, while the response to Schulman’s novel was reserved and at times, blatantly negative. This seems especially significant, given that Lila, the protagonist of *Girls, Visions and Everything*, is in Schulman’s own words, the “general dyke about town” (3) while Brandon Teena, certainly the more gender queer of the two, is transgendered; biologically born a woman, Brandon passes as a man. The students’ responses are particularly notable since, historically speaking, even within ostensibly radical queer communities, transgendered and transsexual people have been doubly otherized, not only because they are seen as “gender outlaws,” to use Kate Bornstein’s term but also because they further complicate any neat hetero/homo division. For instance, in the film *Boys Don’t Cry*, is Brandon Teena read as a lesbian woman or a heterosexual man? (or in fact is he read as both or neither?) The difference in response to these two texts could of course be attributed to the form as well as the modes of production and distribution surrounding these two texts—*Boys Don’t Cry* an Oscar-winning film, distributed by Fox and starring a well-known Hollywood actress in the lead role, while *Girls, Visions and Everything* is a semi-underground novel published by Seal Press.

And yet, to explain the disparity in response to these two texts solely in terms of a pop culture/sub-culture divide effaces larger cultural and social formations that determine which bodies ultimately come to matter, which bodies “count as ‘life,’ lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving” (*BTM*, 16). While I do not wish to suggest that a more enthusiastic pedagogical response to *Girls, Visions and Everything* would contribute directly to the “protection” and betterment of lesbian lives, the response
to the text could serve as a cognitive map for identifying (in and out of the classroom) the conditions that limit and enable reparative pedagogic possibilities.

**The Reparative Promise of “Failure,” or what does “Failure” do?**

In the introductory chapter, I mapped a theoretical framework which suggested that the notion of “failure” might ironically be the starting point of reparative thinking. What would it mean then, to consider what I have theorized as “a more performatively understanding of failure as a moment of pedagogy” in the context of actual teaching practice? In her essay “Is there a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight,” Deborah P. Britzman has pointed to the ways in which thinking of queer theory as a method or a technique enables “an interest in studying the skeletons of learning and teaching that haunt one’s responses, anxieties and categorical imperatives” (155). Rather than thinking about how students think, the more useful task according to Britzman, is to think of “the study of limits . . . [the] problem of where thought stops” (156). By implication, rather than merely drawing attention to new, alternative or positive queer representations in the classroom, it might be more politically enabling to examine the psychic and social limits on which intelligibility and understanding depend. In terms of the differing responses to *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Girls, Visions and Everything*, the point is not to think of pedagogical strategies that enable a more enthusiastic or inclusive response to the latter—such a process would only lead to what Judith Butler has called “inclusive representability” that would “domesticate all signs of difference” (*BTM*, 53). The point, then, is to pedagogically negotiate the reception of Schulman’s text in a way that it inhabits the space of the outside where knowledge and understanding meet their limits, and yet to think of how the “violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome” (*BTM*, 53). The varying pedagogical response to the texts could serve as a
cognitive map for identifying (in and out of the classroom) the conditions that limit and enable what Michael Warner has called, “the promotion of queer culture” (*The Trouble with Normal*, 218). Thus, in attending to the (im)possibilities of knowledge production under the aegis of the classroom and the University, I will explore not only how an understanding of the various institutional constraints and increasing corporatization of the University shape performative interventions in the classroom, but also what effects the production of knowledge within the classroom potentially could have in creating a critical citizenship that is increasingly being precluded by an understanding of the University as an appropriately profit-driven enterprise and as a training ground for professionalization in the market economy.

**The Erotics of Ignorance, or the Performance of not Knowing**

My pedagogic intent in teaching *Girls, Visions and Everything* with *Boys Don’t Cry* was to draw attention to the institutionalized and everyday traumas that sexual and gender dissidents experienced through their various encounters with different manifestations of compulsory heterosexuality. I consequently felt that both texts could provide a useful platform to analyze everyday concepts, categories and classifications involved in structuring of gender and sexuality within particular material realities. I especially thought that *Girls, Visions and Everything* would offer a crucially different understanding of what constitutes ‘trauma;’ unlike *Boys Don’t Cry* “it does not produce what Ann Cvetkovich has called “dead bodies or even necessarily damaged ones,” (*An Archive of Feelings*, 3) but instead focuses on more insidious traumas that Lila experiences, for instance, through the gentrification of her neighborhood and through the lack of recognition for lesbian artists. I soon found, however, that my pedagogic intent in extending and re-thinking what constitutes the archive of trauma only lapsed into a rather
limited “compare and contrast” exercise that could not move beyond a whose-suffering-was-more-catastrophic pedagogic game. The following analysis then, does not set out to merely expose the heteronormative ideologies that structure student responses—such an approach would ultimately only serve to individualize problems that are more systemic and institutionalized. In other words, I do not wish to presume, what Judith Butler has called, a willful or voluntary subject who stands before the process of construction. The more useful task would be to inquire into the material and pedagogic conditions that sub tend the emergence and operation of the subject in the first place (BTM, 7).

In order to understand the conflicting receptions to the texts under consideration, it might be useful to look first at a student response to Boys Don’t Cry that serves to contextualize the ambiguous reception to Schulman’s text. Before I discuss any text in class, I prompt my students with questions via email, and they are required to respond on-line and discuss the reading amongst themselves. For this discussion, the students were urged to engage with the question of violence in the film and were asked to think of why Brandon’s body becomes the site of such intense violence. After initiating the discussion with a couple of questions, my interventions in this space are extremely limited, although I use the students’ comments on-line as a platform through which I direct the classroom discussions. I have reproduced the student’s exact words with his permission:

I really enjoyed Boys Don’t Cry. The film was a real eye-opener and like the rest of you, I was shocked with how it ended. To answer the question as to why the men were so violent, I think it was because Brandon deceived them. I don’t want to excuse what they did, but I think that if I was in Lana's place, and I was seeing someone, and got intimate with them, only to find out that it was a guy having a sexual identity crisis as a woman, I would be really pissed off. I would be violated. Personally, I’m straight. I have no interest in men, even if they do look like women. If I found out the hard way, no pun intended, I would be most displeased. I think the important part is that I would feel lied-to. Therefore I have no respect for Brandon at all. I don't really have the words to express how that would make me
feel. It's not that I'm homophobic, but it's in a sense taking control away from me, and I like being in control. Thinking it was a woman, and then finding out it was a man would just make me feel used, tricked, taken advantage of. Lana was mislead, and in a sense, taken advantage of. How was Brandon to know what her sexuality was, in advance? What if Lana totally freaked out, and was repulsed? I think it would've spoken a lot more for Brandon's character, if she had told her that she was a woman before they had sex. I mean, come on . . . Talk about common courtesy, man. So far as I, personally am concerned, I give as much courtesy as I am physically able. I'm completely in favor of full equality for these people. However, when it interferes with my right to choose a sexual partner, there are certain things I'd want to know about a person, going into a relationship.

While this response expresses concern at the brutal rape and killing of Brandon Teena, his sexual escapades with Lana throughout the film while passing as a man are seen as “deceitful.” What is particularly interesting is the process of self-marking (“I would feel violated,” “lied to”) that challenges the idea that dominant categories operate only through a process of invisibility or by benefiting from the privilege of occupying the unmarked body. In the above example, there is an ambiguous process of identification that foregrounds the fear of being “used” and “violated,” and yet paradoxically there is a desire to occupy the very body that is supposedly being used and violated. Significantly, a film that draws attention to the violence with which sexual and gender dissidents are eradicated from the symbolic and made abject turns into a discussion about the rights of heterosexuals and the potential and hypothetical threats that cross-dressing queers present to unsuspecting and inculpable straight men. The confessions of straightness and the denial of homophobia in the above comment all serve to create an identity politics reversal—straight men become the victimized subject position, threatened by the specter of the passing queer that traumatizes the heterosexual imagination. Brandon’s body is threatening not only because it passes unnoticed but also because it is a gender queer body that demands sexual pleasure. In the above quoted comments, the straight male
student occupies the subject position of Brandon’s girlfriend Lana, and talks about being “tricked,” “violated,” “taken advantage of.”

This characterization of Lana as a passive object who is being deceived not only denies her any form of agency in her relationship with Brandon, but also further reiterates the politics of compulsory heterosexuality by assuming that Lana’s sexual identity is fixed and heterosexual. Consequently, the insistence that Lana is ignorant of Brandon’s queerness represents an active, yet unconscious process of disavowal on the part of the student, even as it is this very process of disavowal that the film tries to complicate on numerous occasions. In various scenes, the film draws attention to Lana’s tenuous relation to the process of knowing and un-knowing. Thus, while for the student, Lana’s assumed ignorance becomes emblematic of Brandon’s deceitfulness, the film clearly points to the ways in which Lana eroticizes this not-knowing so that she can engage in the fantasy more fully. Lana clearly “sees” Brandon’s cleavage when making love to him, but it is this very seeing that is simultaneously foreclosed and fetishized when she recounts the sexual encounter to her friends. The very act of re-telling is infused with ambiguity and incoherence: “I feel like I’m in a trance . . . I can’t talk about it . . . it’s too intense.” Lana completes her recollection of the moment with a presumably fictive conclusion—“And then we took off our clothes and went swimming.”

In the “Privilege of Unknowing,” Eve Sedgwick points out that “if ignorance is not . . . a single Manichaean, aboriginal maw of darkness from which heroics of human cognition can occasionally wrestle facts, . . . perhaps there exists instead a plethora of ignorances, and we may begin to ask questions about the labor, erotics and economics of their human production and distribution” (Tendencies, 25). Lana’s ‘ignorance’ is one
among these “plethora of ignorances”; it is not established through an absence or a lack of knowledge but is in fact predicated on an active re-telling and an imaginative reconstruction that secures the liminalities of fantasy and pleasure. In other words, it is an ignorance that is performative. Lana’s claim that she and Brandon take their clothes off and go swimming can be seen as J.L. Austin’s example of a performative speech act—the issuing of the utterance entails a doing of an action. It is both a ‘happy’ as well as an infelicitous performative since the utterance “we took our clothes off and went swimming” might not be illocutionary and literally enact a performance of that very utterance, (Lana and Brandon in fact do not take their clothes off and go swimming), but it does enable Lana to maintain the phantasmic promise of her disavowal. In that sense, her utterance is more performative in Butler’s sense of the term or perlocutionary, since the subject does not bring into being that which she names at the moment of naming, but secures its permanence over time through the reiterative power of the performative. All throughout the film, Lana attempts to maintain the appropriate circumstances and conditions for a smooth or happy functioning of the performative. When Brandon is in the women’s prison and begins to tell Lana that (s)he has “girl parts and boy parts,” Lana must once again foreclose the illocutionary effects of Brandon’s confession: “That’s your business. I don’t care if you’re half money or half ape. I’m getting you out of here.” Thus the erotics of ignorance are secured through a series of repetitive acts and ritualized productions that enable Lana to secure what Butler calls “the constitutive constraints” of performativity—ultimately seen most painfully in the scene where Brandon’s killers pull his pants down in front of Lana. Faced with the anatomical “facticity,” Lana still refuses to accept the law of the real, established by her utterance to “leave him alone.” In
“Phantasmic Identification,” Butler points to the ritualized and repetitive aspect of performativity—it is, she writes, “a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production . . .” (BTM, 95). Even as Lana resists the threat of ostracism by repeatedly “arguing with the real,” Boys Don’t Cry ultimately attests to the violence of this threat that is performed through the killing of Brandon Teena.

Returning to the pedagogical reception of the film, the insistence on reading Lana’s agency as a result of her being “tricked” and “mislead” not only ignores the performative understanding of Lana’s “ignorance,” but also becomes a performative and pedagogical ignorance effect in itself—yet another manifestation of Sedgwick’s “plethora of ignorances.” Like Lana’s own active disavowal of biological “realness,” the assertion that Lana is deceived by Brandon becomes a necessary condition for the “enjoyment” of the film. In thinking through this student response as a moment of pedagogic ignorance or failure, the intention is not to foreground the student’s lack of sophistication in thinking or the political naivety of his response. Nor do I wish to pretend that this student was subsequently enlightened by my pedagogical interventions. Instead, it is a moment within the classroom that can be used to inquire into the terms on which queerness is understood and negotiated, or to put it in a performative theoretical framework, to think about the appropriate circumstances or conditions on which performativity relies. In her essay “Queering/Querying Pedagogy? Or, Pedagogy is a Pretty Queer Thing,” Susanne Luhman has suggested a shift in pedagogical practice from the transmission of
knowledge or the concern with what and how to teach to an understanding of “how we come to know” or how knowledge gets produced in the classroom:

The shift is one of pedagogic curiosity from what (and how) the author writes or the teacher teaches, to what the student understands, or what the reader reads. Accordingly, pedagogy shifts from transmission strategies to an inquiry into the conditions for understanding, or refusing knowledge . . . Where is the resistance to knowledge located? Where does a text stop making sense to a student? Where does the breakdown of meaning occur? (How) can the teacher work through the refusal to learning? What is there to learn from ignorance? (148)

The “inclusive representability” that the film ultimately achieves is confirmed by the student’s response, where, despite his expression of heterosexual anxieties, (the fear of being “used, tricked, taken advantage of”), he points to the fact that he “enjoyed” the film—a response shared by a majority of even those students who were not quite explicit in their expressions of violation at being “lied-to.” The response also articulates the contradictory ways in which anxiety and desire are fully embedded in one another, which in turn points to the symbolic homosociality that is at work here. The fear (desire?) of “being tricked” and penetrated by the malleable phallus that Brandon wields is articulated through a symbolic displacement of and identification with Lana (“if I were in Lana’s place,” “if I found out the hard way.”) Ultimately, it is this very experience of enjoyment that is mediated by a melancholic desire that requires the kind of violent abjection that Brandon meets at the end of the film. It is a violence that becomes necessary in order to circumvent the desire and the fear of homosociality, of finding out the “hard” way. In other words, since Brandon’s pursuit of sexual pleasure is explained through a narrative of “deceit,” his killing at the end of the film is justified as an almost inevitable and necessary effect of the attempt to escape the laws of subjectivation that are dictated by the symbolic.
This re-reading of Brandon’s killing as a consequence of his “deceit” is never clearly articulated by student responses, but what is clearly being constructed is a negative understanding of citizenship— the right for Brandon not to be raped and killed, but not the right for Brandon to experience sexual pleasure outside the prescribed norms of the symbolic order. In her essay “Sexual Rights,” Rosalind Petchesky points to the rhetoric of human rights that sustains this negative formulation of sexual citizenship:

Why is it so much easier to assert sexual freedom in a negative rather than an affirmative, emancipatory sense; to gain consensus for the right not to be abused, exploited, raped, trafficked, or mutilated in one’s body but not the right to fully enjoy one’s body? Aside from tactical positions and defenses against overt homophobia, is there a larger social, political and economic context, as well as a particular ideological baggage, that makes such an approach still quite elusive in this historical moment? (124)

Petchesky’s questions hint at the inadequacies of a sexual rights discourse, and by implication, a pedagogy that inadvertently limits itself to an ethics and politics of toleration by foregrounding only the need for a freedom against abuse and coercion. Consequently, the fact that the denial of pleasure cannot be conceived as a form of violence or coercion suggests the need for an epistemological leap that takes into account what Petchesky calls, a more “dialectical way in which the affirmative and negative dimensions of [sexual] rights are intertwined”(131). Thus in Boys Don’t Cry, the anxieties that are created by queer bodies demanding pleasure are circumvented through the narrative of inevitable and necessary abjection, so that Brandon cannot make any “troubling return” that opens up the possibility of radical resignification. I have argued thus far that it is precisely this eradication from the symbolic that unconsciously informs the “enjoyment” and engagement with this film. Since the queer body that demands pleasure could potentially perform the enabling disruption that Butler speaks of, this possibility needs to be immediately foreclosed.
This foreclosure is further performed by the film through the ways in which it ultimately contains the transgressive possibilities that result from Brandon’s refusal to accept the terms of the symbolic. At the very outset, Brandon performs a destabilization of both gender and sexuality through a refusal to engage with the very terms through which he is interpellated. In response to his cousin’s question: “Why don’t you just admit you’re a dyke?” Brandon simply responds: “Because I’m not a dyke.” The interpellative act of naming Brandon a “dyke,” while attempting to fix identity into the framework of a hetero/homo binary, is unable to fully consolidate its coherence since the symbolic’s attempt at securing the permanence of the name becomes the “enabling occasion” for Brandon to resist that very fixity. As Butler points out in “Capacity”: “[I]t will not work to say that because Brandon must do himself as a boy that this is a sign that Brandon is a lesbian. For boys surely do themselves as boys, and no anatomy enters gender without being ‘done’ in some way” (115). Throughout the film then, Brandon must “do himself as a boy” through various ritualized conventions in order to resist the process of normative interpellation. As pointed out earlier, it is the ritualized performance of gender and sexuality that costs Brandon his life—a killing that needs to be performed so that phallic control is restored to the laws of the symbolic. While the film clearly draws attention to the brutal violence of this restoration, it ultimately performs a violence of its own in attempting to secure Brandon’s identity into the very permanence of biology that Brandon resists at the beginning of the film. In a scene following Brandon’s rape, the camera zooms closely on to Brandon’s naked body for the first time—till this point, the film persistently creates what Judith Halberstam has called the “transgender gaze” through the eroticization of Lana’s body. The cinematic framing
of Lana’s nakedness is always mediated through point of view shots that construct Brandon as “bearer of the look” (Mulvey, 837). While this could also potentially serve to code Brandon as persuasively male, the first half of the film pre-empts such a construction through the various stylized rituals of gender that Brandon must performs that draw attention to his queerness. In many ways, this undercuts the scopophiliac male gaze of “to-be-looked-at-ness” that Laura Mulvey describes as characteristic of narrative film in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” However, when we see Brandon’s nakedness, the camera’s unmediated gaze returns Brandon to the status of woman, reinscribing the act of violent rape in the previous scene that is performed precisely in order to re-establish the “real” of the law—i.e., the insistence that Brandon’s production of masculinity can only be a “bad copy,” an unsuccessful performance of the “real” thing. The final love-making scene between Lana and Brandon also attests to the return of Brandon to the stable signifier of woman and/or lesbian when for the first time Lana asks Brandon to remove his clothes and let her make love to him.

It is also not without significance that even while Lana is supposedly “ignorant” of Brandon’s sexual and gender identity, viewers of the film are technically aware that Hillary Swank performs the role of Brandon Teena, possibly serving to contain the anxieties of gender destabilization that Brandon’s passing creates in the film. In the Epilogue to An Archive of Feelings, Ann Cvetkovich points to the ways in which the film was marketed by Swank among others as a love story with a universal (= straight) message. Consequently the media focused relentlessly on Swank’s brilliant performance, expressing great praise for how a straight actress could convincingly play a queer character. According to Cvetkovich, the film ultimately gets turned into “an acting tour
de force rather than an effort to call attention to the actual Teena or pressing social issues
. . . it suggests that when trauma arrives in the national public sphere, it leaves its queer
dimensions behind” (277). Thus it is precisely through the effacement of all that is
potentially queer and disruptive, that the film can be “enjoyed.”

It is not without significance that students claim to have “enjoyed” Boys Don’t Cry
and “felt sorry for” Brandon and Lana, since this enjoyment is achieved only through a
sympathetic reading of Brandon that is consistent with an ethic of toleration. The
reception of Boys Don’t Cry in the context of the classroom illustrates the way in which
reparative possibilities get foreclosed through a process of violent abjection that
ultimately fails to matter. In the above pedagogical instance, it is not so much
reparation—since the pedagogical moment ultimately disallows any form of ethical,
affective or political possibilities—but rather a precondition for violence that then poses
as its result or effect. Consequently, both the film and the pedagogical practices
surrounding its analysis are caught in a tautological bind—the exposing of injustice and
the unveiling of violence only serve to secure sympathetic responses that re-affirm a
politics of inclusive toleration, which in turn is rooted in the very injustice that performs
the killing of Brandon in the first place. If the above illustration of pedagogical failure
marks the limits of agency and the (im)possibilities of thinking reparatively, how then,
could a performative re-working of these limits or failures enable more reparative
understandings of sexual citizenship? In other words, since the production of knowledge
operates through “discursive productions” that are not fixed in terms of the effects that
are achieved, how might the reparative re-working of pedagogic failure operate in the
context of the classroom?
Failures that Matter

Before attempting to grapple with the above question in relation to the pedagogical reception of *Girls, Visions and Everything*, I wish to consider for a moment the various social contexts that inform pedagogical practices in the classroom. In other words, how are the material conditions that surround the classroom inextricably linked to the failures within the classroom? The intent here is not to reduce pedagogical practices to an unmediated consequence of larger superstructural formations which suggests that performative interventions in the classroom are impossible or inconceivable until more important work outside the classroom gets taken care of. Instead, I wish to suggest that the classroom shapes, but is also shaped by a variety of historical and material relations that operate as the constitutive constraints on pedagogical practice. At a fundamental level, the increasing privatization of the University circumscribes its potential in creating the conditions for a critical citizenship or a participatory democracy. The University while ostensibly representing a space for the construction of democratic or critical citizenship has, in a post-Reaganite U.S., become what Jeffrey J. Williams has called “a substantial banking franchise” (23) . . . a licensed storefront for name brand corporations” (15) concerned with the accumulation of private profit and the managerial training of students for the future of corporate America. In this sense, the University is the ultimate emblem of what Lauren Berlant terms the “intimate public sphere” (72) where the goal of radical democracy and public good is subsumed by individuating motives and “efficiency” models that are inextricably linked to hegemonic forms of social power. Consequently, Berlant points out that sexual identity poses no threat to America as long as it aspires to privacy protection within the intimate public sphere—in other words, as long as it aspires to “iconicity or deadness” (72). According to Berlant, the
nation is threatened by the perversity of “live sex acts” since these acts refuse to be ahistorical, frozen or contained within the privacy of the heterosexual bedroom. In the case of *Boys Don’t Cry*, the entry of Brandon Teena’s body into the symbolic is literally predicated on the requirements of dead citizenship. It is not without significance that the entry is re-cited and consolidated by the student reception of the film—a reiteration that takes place in the classroom under the aegis of the University.

The effacement of history that results from the insistence on dead citizenship in the intimate public sphere is articulated most clearly, for instance, in the attempt to end affirmative action that is ironically couched in the rhetoric of “fairness” or “excellence” in education. The idea that fundamental fairness in education is being compromised through affirmative action not only effaces the institutional biases that have historically created inequities in educational systems in the first place, but also constructs a temporal narrative that relegates racial inequities to a historical moment that has already passed. If the dissimulation of history is an essential requirement of dead citizenship within the University, Kenneth Saltman has pointed out how the rhetoric of excellence while ostensibly implying excellent working conditions or the creation of democratic social change only becomes a market metaphor that conflates democracy with private profit: “Excellence refers to an institutionalized notion of teaching deriving from the history of scientific management, a heavy reliance upon standards, and a curriculum oblivious to the knowledge of different groups”(15). At the University of Florida, for instance, narratives of excellence and skillful management were employed by UF’s Physical Plant Division to force all custodial workers (the majority of whom were African American women) to work the night shift, presumably because the effacement of labor would result
in greater levels of efficiency (supposedly for students, certainly not for the workers). The above logic is the very eradication from the symbolic that must be performed in *Boys Don’t Cry* so that Brandon’s body can remain “ontological” or “dead to history;” consequently, it is the very logic that is threatened by what Berlant calls “live sex acts”—represented by the figure of Lila in *Girls, Visions and Everything*—a figure who, as I will discuss in the next section, refuses to be contained by the national logic of privacy.

While the above material conditions undeniably shape performative engagements within the classroom in crucial ways, at an even more local level, the most obvious development that affected pedagogical practices in the Composition classroom was the creation of a new University Writing Program at the University of Florida that operated outside the aegis of the English Department. In June 2002, a year before the beginning of the Writing Program, an opinion piece entitled “Speaking Out: Writing department at UF? It’s already here” appeared in the *Gainesville Sun*. In a tone of heavy sarcasm, the writer remarks: “English Departments have long since discarded the foolish notion that reading good authors helps create good writers. Today, we know better: good writing comes from having students rap in class about subjects interesting to them. Not good books, but films, comic books, TV shows, politics, sex, and all the possibilities of popular culture are the means of helping students translate their thoughts into effective, clear, and precise models of prose statement.” The article goes on to attribute the invasion of politics into the Composition classroom to the training that graduate students receive under the aegis of the English Department—classes that no longer deal with the classical canons of literature, but explore subjects such as anti-capitalist feminism, queer theory and Transgender Liberation. (The author specifically quotes these areas of study from
course descriptions of English department faculty members). In the same year as the publication of this article, UF administration negotiated a deal with Follett Higher Education Group that handed over the everyday operations of the bookstore on campus to the company in response “to increased competition in the volatile nature of the textbook market.” The contract with Follett enabled UF to begin work on a new bookstore, the funds for which were generated through a direct capital investment from Follett in exchange for a lower commission rate; consequently, UF would receive a commission of 10.75 percent for the first 10 million units of merchandise sold at the new bookstore. The negotiations with Follett and the expansion of the bookstore on campus came a year after Business Services Administration initiated the “state-of-the-art” Textbook Adoption Policy whereby faculty were required to submit their textbook selections prior to the commencement of classes, so that students could supposedly learn about these selections in advance. In a Memo to Department Chairs and Faculty, President Charles Young remarked: “Any bookstore in Gainesville can access the database to see which texts are being adopted. They can use this information to order new texts and to buy used texts to compete fairly for business. Consequently, students have multiple venues at which to shop.”

Interestingly enough, the Provost couched the need for the new writing program in terms of academic excellence and the concern that students have been incapable of developing proficient writing skills under the current system. As pointed out earlier, the idea of “excellence” often operates as a rhetorical euphemism for the imposition of a technocratic and managerial pedagogy that serves corporate rather than democratic needs. Furthermore, the rhetoric that “students just cannot write” performs the ahistorical task of
effacing the larger social and ideological relations that surround the formation of the writing program. The Textbook Adoption Policy for instance, while ostensibly serving the interests of the students, also guarantees maximum profit to University Bookstores, liberal market assurances of “fair” competition and freedom of choice notwithstanding. Wild Iris, the local feminist bookstore where several graduate students order their textbooks, began facing a dramatic drop in text book sales with the commencement of the new writing program. Inevitably, new graduate students in the writing program were teaching from standardized text books on Rhetoric and Composition that were available at the new U.F. Bookstore.

Before the writing program was a fait accompli, several graduate students in the department who were concerned about the program’s implications on our own pedagogical practices attempted to articulate our concerns to the administration through the English Department. This essay’s focus on the pedagogy of failure perhaps becomes most apposite in this context. Those of us who were thinking of ways to articulate some form of opposition to what we perceived as a blatant homogenization of pedagogy were ultimately unable to move beyond ontogenic questions pertaining to the origins of the program—for instance, the above mentioned corporate-academic nexus, the privatization and consequent standardization of space of the University, the de-radicalization of the writing classroom and the nebulous “students can’t write” theory. In her essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” Eve Sedgwick recounts her conversation with activist scholar Cindy Patton regarding the origins and natural history of HIV. Sedgwick wonders for instance, about the validity of various forms of speculation regarding the virus’ spread—whether it was deliberately engineered as a national
conspiracy, whether it has its origins in a gay-genocidal nexus or perhaps a strategic military plan. Sedgwick quotes Patton’s response to her concerns: “. . . Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things—what would we know then that we don’t already know?” (124) What is enabling about Patton’s response to Sedgwick is ultimately the question that this paper has attempted to grapple with—how do the material constraints that subtend the moment of pedagogy under the aegis of the University in turn shape performative interventions in the classroom? And more importantly, do these “failures” result in performative effects that could be directed reparatively?

**Recursive Roads to Reparative Failure**

Although I am invested in thinking about the reparative potential of pedagogic failure, I should qualify the almost inevitable slippage into a paranoid mode of “unveiling” or “exposure” that this analysis has needed to take. A performative understanding of failure that “articulates” or “draws attention” to the exclusions on which pedagogical foreclosures are predicated, potentially lapses back into the very hermeneutics of exposure that Sedgwick warns against. There can be, however, no “great paradigm shift,” *(Epistemology of the Closet, 44)* to borrow Eve Sedgwick’s own term, between paranoid and reparative hermeneutic practices. Sedgwick herself has pointed out that reparative readings need not and perhaps cannot replace paranoid methodologies—instead, the idea is to draw attention to the ways in which reparative practices have always already existed at the margins of paranoid readings. It is in this light that Judith Bulter’s performative theory of subject formation might be useful since in many ways it is inadvertently pre-occupied with a performative notion of failure (in its concern with those bodies that are rendered abject or fail to matter) and also represents, in Sedgwick’s critique, an illustration of a paranoid reading that is characterized by a
“seeming faith in exposure” (124). While much of Butler’s work has attempted to critique epistemological certainties that are constructed by a metaphysics of substance, Sedgwick points to the ways in which Butler’s insistence on demystification and exposure inadvertently lapses back into the very categories of epistemological certainty that Butler sets out to critique. I would argue, however, that Butler could be read in a way that need not render deconstructive and reparative frameworks as incommensurable.

For Butler, the bodies that fail to matter constitute the “necessary outside” or “the domain of abjected bodies” that calls for a radical resignification of symbolic norms. The symbolic constitutes itself through a process of foreclosure and abjection, i.e., by creating a domain of unintelligible bodies, “of excluded and delegitimated ‘sex’” (16).

Consequently the possibilities of reparative practices lie in the challenge that the excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony which could potentially result in a radical re-signification of the symbolic domain.

It is this potential for radical re-signification, I wish to argue that *Girls, Visions and Everything* performs through its attention to the material and historical contexts on which performativity relies. And ultimately I will argue, it is not in spite of, but precisely because of the fact that students fail to “enjoy” the novel, that it creates the pedagogic conditions to articulate a more reparative notion of sexual citizenship that moves beyond the logic of toleration. In *Girls, Visions and Everything*, Lila embodies a character who is threatening since she is able to enter the symbolic on her own terms. This symbolic entrance is not made through “radical and inclusive representability” (16) but through a necessary refiguration of the symbolic itself. In the preface to the novel, Schulman points out:
I have tried to assert that a lesbian can be the emblematic American, the character through whom American life is measured and evaluated. In other words I have always believed and continue to believe that lesbian life can be seen as an organic part of American literature. By writing *Girls, Visions and Everything* in response to Jack Kerouac, I was insisting on the experience of community in the trajectory of popular American heroism and therefore asserting that fiction with primary lesbian content should be recognized as an integral part of American literature. If I could stretch to universalize to Jack Kerouac, then the dominant culture reader must be able to reciprocate by universalizing to me. (viii)

Like drag queens, who according to Schulman, “are the barometer of gay time,” (108) Lila becomes a measuring gauge for political change—a kind of social barometer of lesbian existence.

In the above quotation, Schulman sounds almost Butlerian in her awareness of the contingency of what is constructed as universal, and her refusal to acquiesce to that universal. Through Lila’s status as sexual and social outsider, she becomes an embodiment of the abject or the relative outside that is simultaneously internal to the system—but her inclusion within that system serves as the very platform for its disruption. In many ways, Lila is the system’s “nonthematizable necessity” that becomes “a threat to its own systematicity”(39). This is perhaps best embodied through Lila’s identification with Jack Kerouac. For Lila, “the trick was to identify with Jack Kerouac instead of the women he fucks along the way”(17). At the beginning of the novel, Jack is the embodiment of limitless possibility and the ability to act: “Everyone else just sits around, but Jack does it! No grass grows under his feet”(17). However, Lila simultaneously becomes aware of the narrative of selfish and masculine individualism that informs Jack’s “all-too-American dream of unfettered freedom”(Emery, 150). Thus it is precisely through her identification with Kerouac that Lila is able to perform a lesbian disidentification with Jack and the larger nation. To use Butler’s terminology, Lila is not Jack’s “poor copy;” instead, her performative mimesis ultimately enables her
to “displace that origin as an origin” (45). Similarly, Schulman’s assertion that Lila must be seen as the emblematic American calls attention to the ways in which “Americanness” is predicated on a heteronormative logic of citizenship. Thinking of Lila as the emblematic American thus draws attention to the ways in which Lila is “inside” America only “as its necessary outside,” calling into question America’s “systematic closure and its pretension to be self-grounding” (*BTM*, 45).

However, Lila’s disidentification with the nation and Jack Kerouac as well as her embodiment as the relative outside are not ends in themselves. At one point in the novel, Lila points out that “in the U.S. people are allowed to be political as long as they don’t actually have an effect on anything” (81). Lila does not offer any quick-fix solutions to the everyday problems of lesbian existence—instead, she recognizes the performative dimensions of social change, the fact that performative intervention is not an instant remedy, but a knowable *process*. Unlike Jack Kerouac or even Lila’s lover Muriel, who leaves for Madrid instead of performing at the Worst Performance Festival, Lila is “committed to here” (50). Thus while Lila shares Jack Kerouac’s lust for life and women, she recognizes that there “were still questions that Jack never touched on. Like, what do you do once you get to know them? He never stayed around long enough for that” (137). Lila’s question regarding the performative effects of “knowing” is similar to Sedgwick’s concern: “What does knowledge do? . . . How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?” (124) Since Lila is “committed to here,” and yet is the relative outside to “here,” she has a vantage point to move among causes and effects through what Cary Wolfe has called the “pragmatics of the outside” (57). As Schulman writes:
“Sometimes Lila just let herself look at a lot of ordinary things in a magnificent way”(51). In his analysis of systems theory and the “pragmatics of the outside,” Cary Wolfe uses second-order cybernetics to point to the principle of circular causality that is characterized by what he terms a paradoxical “recursivity”: “A causes B or B causes A; thus it is always possible to observe otherwise”(57). According to systems theory, there can be no absolute to the process of observation since such an absolute is predicated on a clear distinction “between inside and outside, system and environment, mind and nature”(57). Instead, systems theory proposes that observation is possible only through the principle of recursivity that is characterized by the “‘strange loop’ of paradoxical distinction”(59). Wolfe employs the image of the Mobius strip to illustrate the recursive nature of these loops that are continuous and dissolve into one another. The principle of recursivity with its insistence on the looping of categories, thus enables a move away from the linearity and “dogged, defensive narrative stiffness”(147) of paranoid thinking (A always and inevitably leads to B) to make way for the more mutable and less unidirectional practice of reparation.

In *Girls. Visions and Everything*, Lila’s recognition that the “the road is the only image of freedom that an American can understand”(164) and finally that maybe “it didn’t require a road at all”(137) suggests a pragmatic rejection of “narrative stiffness” and an attempt to map more recursive roads towards reparative possibilities. For instance, the novel enables reparative thinking in the manner in which it allows for a more recursive understanding of the dialectic between pleasure and violence and its effects on constructions of sexual citizenship. The novel provides a useful illustration of thinking about the “looping” of these categories, of theorizing pleasure and violence
through the strange loops of the Mobius strip. The recursivity in this case, however, is not strictly causal (in the sense that pleasure causes violence or vice versa—instead, the edges of these distinctions, as Wolfe points out, “dissolve because the forms themselves are continuous—they re-enter and loop around themselves”(58). Through this looping, Schulman is able to assert sexual freedom in an reparative sense and thus force a radical re-thinking of the very separability of pleasure and violence; instead these categories dissolve into one another through the “paradoxicality of distinction.” The scenes of love-making and passionate intimacy between Lila and Emily for instance, are always haunted by threats or memories of violence:

“‘Good-bye,” Emily kissed her. “Come see me.”

She kissed Lila again, smiling. “Call me even if you just want to talk.” They kissed surrounded by the late weekend throng. ‘Really darlin’, don’t lose touch with me.”

They kissed, they kissed and parted.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Lila heard a male voice sputter from the crowd as she ran towards her home. (93)

Don’t do that,” Emily would say, recoiling. “I don’t mean anything against you, but please don’t lick my face. When I was raped the first time he spit on my face.

It’s just not romantic for me, I’m sorry.”

It was through making love with Lila that Emily showed more and more of her scars. (124).

If in the above instance, Schulman foregrounds the ways in which the present, including the sexual and social possibilities it offers, is always threatened by the lurking presence of violence, she also draws attention to the ways in which the history of the past inevitably structures the materiality of the present.
In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich points to the ways in which the experience of trauma, often relegated to the realm of private affect or individualized emotion, has structured the formation and articulation of lesbian public cultures. Thinking of trauma in political and non-clinical terms enables “an inquiry into how affective experience that falls outside of institutionalized or stable forms of identity or politics can form the basis for public culture” (17). Consequently, Cvetkovich insists on an “everyday” understanding of trauma that does not only conceive the category in genocidal or catastrophic terms. Sometimes, writes Cvetkovich, trauma “doesn’t appear sufficiently catastrophic because it doesn’t produce dead bodies or even, necessarily damaged ones” (3). In *Girls, Visions and Everything*, Lila experiences trauma through the increasing gentrification of the city, the destruction of low-income housing and the insidious cruelties of Reaganite America. It is through Lila’s reparative and practically political understandings of performative intervention as a historical and knowable process that these limits to agency operate as a “potentially productive crisis”(10) through which Lila maps alternative roads to personal pleasure and political responsibility. Thus *Girls Visions and Everything* offers a more reparative model to think of the ways in which the denial of pleasure can be seen as a form of trauma, and where the reparative motive of seeking pleasure itself can be understood as social affect or need. With this framework, it might be possible to complicate the violence-pleasure dichotomy (i.e. Brandon has a right not to be killed but not the right to pursue pleasure) that informs the pedagogical response to *Boys Don’t Cry* by thinking of Brandon’s killing in *Boys Don’t Cry* as the perlocutionary effect of his right to sexual pleasure. In *Boys Don’t Cry*, Brandon’s tragedy is that in trying to “use” pleasure as a means of resisting sexual normalization, he
is destroyed by the symbolic that must foreclose any possibility of resignification. *Girls, Visions and Everything*, on the other hand, through the figure of Lila draws attention to “the body which fails to submit to the law or occupies the law in a mode contrary to its dictate”(139). In other words, the various abuses and the violations against the body cannot be interrogated as separate from the demands for sexual pleasure, but need to be seen as an index of those very demands. Thus while the critical engagement of *Boys Don’t Cry* is predicated on certain foreclosures, Sarah Schulman’s *Girls, Visions and Everything* complicates the possibility of such foreclosures, which result in the ambivalent responses to the text.

At the very outset of the novel, Schulman establishes Lila as a sexual outlaw—a promiscuous dyke who “perfected that combination of softness and electricity that let her pick out the women she wanted to sleep with and then enabled her to do so”(3). Interestingly, while Lila’s sexual promiscuity is met with apprehension by several students, what is seen as even more circumspect is Lila’s complication of the very understanding of the category “lesbian” when she sleeps with her male friend, Sal Paradise. Perhaps pre-empting this response, Lila asserts: “What the fuck. People want to sleep with each other at different times for different reasons. It’s no secret. It doesn’t have to poison everything”(9). Unlike *Boys Don’t Cry* where identity is ultimately contained into an epistemological grounding of certainty, the figure of Lila troubles identity categories. Ironically, however, Lila’s resistance to dominant culture often gets co-opted in a classroom context into the rhetoric of dynamic individualism—Lila’s damning attitude, her antagonistic outlook to the mundane banalities of work and, paradoxically, even her sexual encounters with Muriel and Emily enable textual
identifications that ultimately subsume Lila’s non-conformity into the very blithe rebel-without-a-cause mantra that Schulman in fact sets out to complicate. Lila might be a rebel, but certainly not without a cause and even if at the beginning of the novel she wants to be free but “couldn’t decide what that meant,”(3) the rest of the novel pays careful attention to the personal and political processes through which Lila must work in order to understand what freedom means. There exists, then, a seemingly self-contradictory response to the novel, where on the one hand Lila’s promiscuous escapades are the occasion for carping morality and yet on the other hand, her non-conformity gets abstracted from its specific material circumstances so that universalist identifications can be made. I wish to argue, however, that what Girls, Visions and Everything fails to “do” in the classroom might simultaneously mark what it enables. The paradoxical response to Girls, Visions and Everything renders any pedagogical strategy to make students ‘more receptive’ to Lila’s character seem futile and perhaps even counter-productive. The more crucial question for consideration, however, is how the text’s refusal of “inclusive representability” and the ambivalent student responses to this refusal operate pedagogically so that the text exists as more than merely a “sad necessity of signification,”(53) i.e. how the text comes to matter not despite, but precisely because of its rejection of inclusivity. In Bodies that Matter, Judith Butler points to the ways in which an understanding of gender construction as an imposition or an imprinting inadvertently reiterates a masculinist conception of the relation between nature and culture, where nature is ontologized as a fixed surface that passively awaits agency of the social. Such an understanding of nature as “the blank and lifeless page” that “awaits the penetrating act whereby meaning is endowed,” is not only tacitly masculinist, but also
leads to an obfuscation of historicity which gets labeled as pre-discursive or prior to language. (*BTM*, 4-5). Consequently, rather than thinking of construction as an act that “happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed,” (9) Butler proposes to re-define construction as a process of materialization that is more attentive to the contingencies of temporality. The theoretical shift that Butler enables in relation to the materiality of sex or the body is equally apposite in thinking through the pragmatics of the classroom and the teaching of *Girls, Visions and Everything*.

Butler’s critique of the understanding of construction as an imprinting or an imposition can be thought of pedagogically, not merely as a Freirian critique of the banking concept of education, but also in attempting to re-think pedagogy as a process rather than as a singular act—a pedagogy that, as Lila might have it, is not an instant remedy, but a knowable process. Just as in Butler’s framework where the social does not act unilaterally on the natural, the insistence on a monolithic knowledge transmission in the classroom where meaning is “imprinted” on to a student only results in an erasure of the history and materiality of the pedagogical process. The attempt to account for historicity, then, would require a shift in pedagogy from merely thinking of ways to make students identify or empathize with queer characters to a more self-reflexive inquiry into the conditions and terms on which such identifications are made. As Susanne Luhman points out, such an approach, “rather than assuming the student as ignorant or lacking knowledge, inquires into, for example, how textual positions are being taken up by the reading or learning subject”(149). Thus thinking through performative theory’s insistence on the temporality of construction, in turn allows for a re-thinking of pedagogy as a process instead of a magical formula for the construction of queer or feminist-friendly
allies. In the context of the classroom, the insistence on pedagogy as process could possibly enable the productive crisis where moments of resistance to certain forms of knowledge could be viewed as moments of pedagogic failure that enable inquiries into the limits of intelligibility both in and out of the classroom. This is partly a call for a self-reflexive pedagogy—i.e., a pedagogy that is informed by the limits of pedagogy or one that draws attention to the nexus between the corporatization of the University and a negative understanding of sexual citizenship. While such knowledge production is undoubtedly rooted in a paranoid impulse of exposure, it simultaneously enables a pedagogic context where, for instance, the “enjoyment” of certain queer representations (and the rejection of others) is not seen as separate from or secondary to the very material relations students inhabit or the various physical, intellectual and cultural encounters that condition their lives. It is such a pedagogic context of knowledge production that enables a more recursive relation between material conditions outside the classroom and the critical re-thinking of these conditions that takes place within the classroom. A notion of pedagogic failure thus does not only think of how the material conditions that are required for what J.L. Austin calls the “smooth or ‘happy’ functioning of a performative”(14) fail to be met or satisfied—even while this is a crucial pedagogical task that must inform any teaching practice that is invested in the process of critical engagement. Equally important, however, is an investment in the performativity of knowledge produced in the classroom on the social environments that subtend pedagogical practice. Thus if the pedagogic reception of Lila in Girls, Visions and Everything is mediated and constrained by the privatized logic that informs the “intimate public sphere,” it is precisely within these constraints that lie “the potentially productive
crisis” (10) that is performed by the moment of pedagogic failure—what would it mean
then to call Lila the “emblematic American”? If Lila can “stretch” to identify to Jack
Kerouac, why aren’t we able to universalize to Lila? If Lila inhabited the same material
contexts that we did, what would she say about them? What would she do about them?
What would Lila, for instance, say about the John’s Committee (a 1950's organization
responsible for the persecution of gay and lesbian students and professors across Florida
Universities)? What would Lila do about the decision by the University of Florida
administration that particular semester to force all custodial workers (predominantly
African-American women) to work a night shift in order to appear less “visible” and
more “efficient” to the campus community?—these are some of the questions that I
engage my class with in trying to perform pedagogic failure in more reparative directions.
Thus if the moment in the classroom where knowledge meets its limits inaugurates the
self-reflexive inquiry into terms of (un)intelligibility, it is precisely such a moment that
marks the reparative potential of pedagogic failure.

Notes

1 In How to do Things with Words, J.L. Austin makes the distinction between ‘false’
and ‘unhappy’ performatives in attempting to define “the doctrine of Infelicities”
(14). A performative is said to be “unhappy” if the action that results from the speech
utterance is “vitiated by a flaw or hitch in the conduct of the ceremony” (17).
Conversely, a performative is set to be happy when the utterance of the speech act
leads to a set of purported set of effects that are predicated on the satisfaction of
certain conditions and circumstances.

2 Austin further makes the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech
acts. An Illocutionary speech act is “an act done as conforming to a convention”
(105) – in terms of their temporal relation to the speech utterance, illocutionary
performatives result in an action at the moment of the utterance, whereas
perlocutionary performatives are less fixed, so that the “doing” need not take place at
the moment of utterance.

3 Mel New, “Speaking Out: Writing department at UF?”
4. “UF Hands Bookstore Operations over to Follett”
   http://www.alligator.org/edit/issues/00-summer/000516/b04bookstores16.htm

5. See Cary Wolfe *Critical Environments— Postmodern Theory and the Pragmatics of the “Outside”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 57. In his analysis of second order cybernetics Wolfe draws attention to the contingency of observation in this model: “A causes B and B causes A” and thus it “is always possible to observe otherwise” (57). Wolfe draws on the idea of the “feedback loop” in systems theory to foreground the contingent possibilities that are enabled through the principle of recursivity. Sedgwick’s notion of reparation, with its insistence on mutability and the move away from linear directionality of paranoid reading practices, similarly enables “the contingent possibilities of thinking otherwise” (133)
CHAPTER 3
THE PEDAGOGY OF QUEER THEORY IN A TRANSNATIONAL FRAME:
TOWARDS A REPARATIVE MODEL OF SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP IN INDIA

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the possibilities of articulating a reparative notion of sexual citizenship within the local context of the classroom. Thus my inquiry into the material relations both inside and outside the classroom that informed the reception of queer texts concerned itself with the notion of “pedagogy” in a very literal sense. In this chapter, I wish to shift my attention from the local to the global in order to consider the ways in which the specificities of national configurations and the global movement of knowledge production inform the spatial movement of “queer” across geographical and ideological boundaries. Subsequently, I also wish to move away from a literal understanding of pedagogy as an act that takes place under the aegis of the University to thinking about pedagogy as a process of knowledge production that is performed in contexts not necessarily restricted to the classroom. This chapter then, is an attempt to articulate the possibilities of constructing queer pedagogies under a historical context that is characterized by the global flow of capital across national boundaries and the transnational exchange of knowledge production. The emphasis on “exchange,” however, while productive in its connotations of the shareability of knowledge, could also, however, obscure the fundamentally unequal terms on which knowledge exchange circulates around the globe. I wish to suggest then, that the notion of “pedagogy” once again offers a more valuable category of analysis since it might do greater justice to
power relations that are embedded in any consideration of the transnational “exchange” of knowledge. Furthermore, I wish to suggest that the notion of pedagogy is capable of foregrounding the more dialogic aspects of knowledge production—i.e., not only how knowledge is transmitted from one point to another, but also how a more recursive circulation impacts its performative operations.

I wish to ground my analysis of queer pedagogies in a transnational framework by historically situating my arguments specifically in relation to the sexual economies of India—and even more specifically in relation to the theory and practice of feminism in India. I hope to illustrate how the dialogue between queer theory and feminism in India is a conversation that is ripe with pedagogic potential precisely because such a dialogue is necessarily back and forth in nature—i.e. the pedagogical value of such a transnational exchange does not flow in a linear direction only from global to local, or only from first world to third world. In other words, the attempt to think about the pedagogy of queer theory in a transnational frame in relation to the discourse of Indian feminism is not necessarily motivated only by the attempt to think of what queer theory can pedagogically offer to post-colonial feminism. I am also simultaneously interested in reversing such an epistemological frame in thinking of how the mobilization of sexual citizenship in a different part of the globe might necessitate a re-thinking of the ways in which sexual identity categories are theorized in the West.

Furthermore, in thinking about the pedagogy of queer theory, my ultimate aim in this chapter is not merely to insist on the theoretical value or usefulness of queer knowledge productions. Instead, in constructing a dialogue between feminism in India and queer theory, I am more interested in how the insights of queer theory can enable a
more reparative understanding of sexual citizenship in relation to the sexual economies of India. The institutional separation of feminism and women’s studies from queer theory or lesbian and gay studies in the US academy has produced important, if yet unresolved questions—for instance, does the insistence on a queer paradigm, axiomatically negate gender as a category? Conversely, does the man-woman binary of certain feminist theorizing inevitably lead to the establishment of a heterosexist hegemony? I do not wish to suggest that an examination of these questions in the Indian context neatly resolves these issues or provides simple answers, nor do I intend on using the political context of India to solve theoretical conundrums that might be germane only to a specific western context. Nevertheless, an attempt to re-think Indian feminisms’ relation to the forging of queer imaginaries might not only point to certain epistemological limits framing feminism and queer theory as it is practiced in the western academy, but more importantly, it might enable more productive ways of imagining an Indian feminism that includes a critique of compulsory heterosexuality as one of the numerous violent manifestations of institutionalized patriarchy. I will argue that one of the historical and institutional limits preventing the formation of a feminist praxis that is conducive to constructing a more reparative notion of sexual citizenship is a political and theoretical context that is informed by what I have analyzed in the previous chapter as a negative understanding of sexual citizenship—i.e. the ideological tendencies that make it easier to “assert sexual freedom in a negative rather than an affirmative, emancipatory sense; to gain consensus for the right not to be abused, exploited, raped, trafficked, or mutilated in one’s body but not the right to fully enjoy one’s body.” (Petchesky 124).
Before I go on to examine how this negative notion of sexual citizenship informs the discourse of feminism in India, I wish to critique some of the work under the aegis of postcolonial and queer theory that has attempted to offer the more reparative notion of sexual citizenship within postcolonial contexts, which is precisely what this chapter is calling for. Gayatri Gopinath’s ground-breaking work on queer diasporas represents a predominant trend in several strands of postcolonial theory in the late 90s that privileged the politics of the diasporic subject position as an important site of pedagogic resistance. I wish to argue that even while this work gestures towards a more reparative model of sexual citizenship it its investment in the political possibilities of queer diasporas, her work inadvertently ends up privileging political and epistemological positions of the West. The privileging of diasporic positionality could undoubtedly be attributed to a need for re-thinking of cultural and ideological locations in the context of rapid globalization as well as the transnational flow of labor and capital. For instance, according to Arjan Appadurai, the global flow of images and electronic transformations has enabled the Indian diasporic community in the United States to be actively involved in the politics of multiculturalism. The electronic mediation of community in the diasporic world creates, according to Appadurai, "a more complicated, disjunct, hybrid sense of local subjectivity" (197). In a different context, the work of Gayatri Gopinath’s essay “Local Sites/Global Contexts: The Transnational Trajectories of Deepa Mehta’s Fire” has pointed to the queer diasporic subject's dual location of inside/outside which destabilizes the nation's attempt to constitute a singular ideal of heteronormativity. Thus in the essay she claims that “fixed, essentialized concepts of national and diasporic identity are most fruitfully contested from a ‘queer diasporic’ positionality.”(150). In her
essay "Bombay, UK, Yuba City": Bhangra Music and the Engendering of Diaspora," Gopinath similarly looks at a version of "bhangra" music (a Punjabi folk form) that is hybridized by the South Asian diaspora through the idioms of reggae, techno and house music. Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of performativity, Gopinath points to the ways in which this chutnified pastiche turns any concept of "Indianness" into a site of "strategic provisionality." Bhangra functions then, as a diasporic phenomenon, because it is able to foreground "the impossibility of a coherent, stable, fixed identity" (312) and draws attention to its own construction and instability:

Bhangara can be read . . . as a parodic repetition that exposes the mechanics of the staging of experience-in-identity by performing identity or 'origin' while simultaneously allowing this origin to be revealed as the effect of performance...Bhangara's functioning as a diasporic phenomenon further exposes 'origin' as performance, through which India is radically displaced from its privileged position as mythic homeland. . . (312).

Gopinath's formulation is useful to the extent that her understanding of bhangara as a disruptive diasporic phenomenon is able to interrogate essentialist and monolithic understandings of "Indianness." She qualifies later on in the essay that the critique of bhangra "allows the nation to be written into the diaspora" (317). In other words, when the idea of an original nation of which the diaspora is a “bad copy,” or some kind of inauthentic bastard child has been displaced, the nation no longer can function as a normalizing and normative discourse.

Even while the above formulations suggest the ways in which the diasporic phenomenon is able to interrogate essentialist and monolithic understandings of the nation and nationalism, I am not fully convinced about the political possibilities that are enabled by the privileging of parodic repetition that informs diasporic locations. In the political context of India for instance, rather than undermining a parochial nationalism,
the diasporic subject position, precisely because of its location outside the national imaginary, has often asserted a compensatory authenticity that rivals the most chauvinistic and regressive forms of nationalism that characterize the rise of Hindutva\(^1\) in India in the nineties. It is well known that Hindu Nationalist Parties often rely on NRI (Non Resident Indian) organizations and diasporic networks for funds and monitory donations. Donations from these organizations is in even greater demand due to the higher wielding power of the dollar in comparison to the Indian rupee. In the conclusion of *Postmodernism—the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson points to the fact that although the rhetoric of fragmented subject positions might appear attractive, "it should always be completed by an insistence on the way in which subject-positions do not come into being in a void but are themselves the interpellated roles offered by this or that already existing group" (345). Consequently, the exaltation of the diasporic queer subject could also be related to the ability of global power to create management systems in which the production process itself can be fragmented and located in different countries or quickly moved from one country to another, depending on the potential productivity of investment. Since the decentering of capitalism has made it increasingly difficult to foreground any concrete region as the originary site of global capitalism, it becomes convenient for a dominant ideology to espouse notions of deterritorialization and hybridization that erase all traces of historicity and specific ways in which unequal power relations are constituted.

Undoubtedly, Gopinath does not have the global allies of Hindutva in mind when she refers to the political potentialities of the diaspora. She points to South Asian queer activist organizations like the New York-based SALGA as instances of “transnational
political mobilization” that are enabled by diasporic positionalities. Thus in “Local Sites/Global Contexts,” Gopinath remarks that “it is precisely from a queer diasporic positionality that some of the most powerful critiques of religious and state nationalisms are taking place” (159). What Gopinath’s analysis ignores, however, is how the reliance on the such diasporic energies on the part of NGOs in India often creates an asymmetrical power dynamic that very often privileges the interests of the former. Critiquing the ways in which US-funded NGOs often dictate the interests of political activism in the third world, Ashley Tellis rightly points out: “Globalization in the field of same-sex politics actually produces cultural categories and gendered identities dictated by the logics of global funding from the North more than any need on the ground.” Consequently, in the attempt to think through the relationship between national subjects and diasporic transnational subjectivities, there is often too much attention only to the latter, effacing the role of the nation state and the ways in which it regulates sexuality through ideological state apparatuses. More importantly, the privileging of diasporic performativity as resistance often ignores the specific responses and challenges to a state sponsored compulsory heterosexuality that gets articulated within the nation state. These responses of course could undeniably be shaped and supported by diasporic energies. In other words, I am not trying to make a case for ideological purity or insist that subject positions experience sexual identity in essentialist or monolithic ways by virtue of geographic location. But at the same time, it is possible that the post-modern end of nation rhetoric surrounding the language of globalization might have underestimated the role of the nation state as a forceful and complex determinant of ideological formations. Gopinath’s privileging of diasporic performativity as the only useful counteraction to
institutionalized heterosexism effaces the specific national configurations that enable and limit the formation of queer counterpublics in the context of the post-independence Indian nation state. As a result, there is no attempt to articulate the political possibilities of sexual citizenship within the historical and materially specific modalities of the nation. In this chapter then, rather than privileging a diasporic performativity as the only useful counteraction to globalization and institutionalized heterosexism, I wish to consider the specific national configurations that enable and limit the formation of queer pedagogies in the context of the post-independence Indian nation state. My intent is not to call for an indigenous theoretical model or to resort back to some kind of essentialist notion of “Indianness”; instead, I wish to articulate the political possibilities of sexual citizenship within the historical and materially specific modalities of the nation. It is through this move away from the privileging of the diaspora at the cost of an attention to national specificity that I wish to address the following questions: 1) What are the uses and limitations of queer theories and pedagogies in the context of postcolonial geographical contexts and/or cultures? 2) How might the performative effects that result from queer pedagogies enable a reparative critique of sexual citizenship in the post-colonial context of India? 3) Finally, how might the specificities of state policies and nationalist movements in a non-US context necessitate a reconfiguration of queer theory and pedagogy? In grappling with these questions, I will attempt to take into account national specificities in a way that does not essentialize national difference.

**What Counts as “Life and Death Issues”?**

It might be useful then, to clarify what I mean by the operations of a negative understanding of sexual citizenship in the context of the sexual economies of India.
While contemporary feminist scholarship in India has been successful in pointing to the symbolic deployment of women’s bodies by ideological state apparatuses, it is arguable as to whether these critiques have historically considered the heterosexist operations of these apparatuses. Thus there has been a glaring lack of attention to the ways in which the ideology of heterosexism operates in tandem with structures of patriarchy. The most obvious example of not only an exclusion, but a homophobic foreclosure of questions pertaining to sexual citizenship is the work of feminist critic Madhu Kishwar. In *Manushi*, one of the most prominent feminist journals in India (of which Kishwar is the editor), she adopts a watered down version of the familiar Leftist position that the concern with sexuality in the Indian context is a bourgeois and decadent matter, and comes with a certain kind of westernized class privilege. Kishwar remarks: “Such issues (lesbian desire) are not as important in a third world context since Indians face more crucial, more economically basic life-and-death issues.” It is precisely this mode of thinking, which, operating under the guise of Marxist-feminism, privatizes and depoliticizes desire. Consequently, in an essay entitled “Naive Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian: Deepa Metha’s *Fire,*” she labels *Fire* (a film depicting a lesbian relationship between two Indian housewives) “un-Indian”—a film that “does a big disservice to the cause of women . . . [it will] inhibit Indian women from expressing physical fondness for fear of being permanently branded as lesbians”(11). According to her, most relations between women in India are “ambiguous” and not explicitly sexual as in the West (12). Apart from the obvious homophobia of Kishwar’s statements, her conceptualization of “woman” and “nation” represent a static notion of the indigenous, resulting in an insular and majoritarian version of Indian tradition. By ignoring the
plurality of what constitutes “the national,” Kishwar tends to ignore those reform
movements that have been sensitive to changing identities and needs of the nation. It is
not insignificant that along with the rise of Hindutva in the early 90s, certain sections of
the Women’s movement in India saw the need to adopt traditional icons like Kali and
Shakti in order to assert an idea of authentic Indian womanhood. Consequently, it
became extremely convenient for parochial political parties like the BJP and the Shiv
Sena to co-opt this discourse of traditionalism and mobilize it for their parochial agendas.
Seeing themselves as empowered Shakti incarnates, the Mahila Aghadi (the women’s
wing of the Shiv Sena party) played a significant role in the communal riots that followed
the demolishing of the Babri Masjid. This communitarian logic was largely a result of a
nativist framework in which some women saw themselves primarily as community
upolders of tradition rather than as agents of change. These regressive forms of thinking
pushed women in the direction of a primordial past, even if they ostensibly expressed
liberal feminist slogans. The rioting of the Shiv Sena’s Mahila Aghadi for instance,
prompted the Censor Board of India to reconsider its decision to allow screenings of the
film Fire. A petition to the Censor Board contained a protest fearing that the “promotion”
of lesbianism would result in the apocalypse, indeed the end of the world as we know it:
“If women’s physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage
will collapse . . . reproduction of human beings will stop.”

It is not my intention here to place Kishwar in the same category as Hindu
fundamentalism and the dubious politics of the Shiv Sena. In fact, over the years,
Manushi, the journal edited by Kishwar, has become one of the most visible feminist
critiques of the Hindutva project and its parochial agendas. Nevertheless, it is crucial to
foreground the manner in which Kishwar’s inability to grasp the connections between patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality provides a framework for dominant discourse to appropriate the language of feminism and offer a watered-down version that is not only intensely homophobic, but also counter-productive to the formation of a more sophisticated feminist praxis. Kishwar’s logic inadvertently replicates the fundamental contradictions of a Hindu nativist discourse which on the one hand has no problems acritically reconciling itself to a culture of global productivities and western scientific knowledge, but on the other hand cannot incorporate same-sex relations into the matrix of authentic Indianness. For instance, the entry of Coke, McDonalds and various other multinational corporations has not only been welcomed in a post-globalization India but also masked in a we-are-local-but-global rhetoric. The Hindu fundamentalist party’s sponsoring of the Michael Jackson concert would also be an apposite example of the operation of this contradictory ideology. Global forces are quick to cash in on this schizophrenic split and legitimate themselves by making concessions to the local. In doing so, they recreate the local in their own image—concessions to the “ethnic” remain fixed within Orientalist parameters leading to a fossilization of identities. The “Indianization” of the McDonalds burger (McAloo) and the introduction of Hindi film songs on MTV are emblematic of this process. The same logic of assimilation however, can in no way be extended to same sex relations which need to be epistemologically fixed outside the national imaginary in order to preserve constructed ideas of authentic culture.

In spite of Kishwar’s static notion of what constitutes “Indianness,” I wish to return to the women’s movement for the purposes of my argument since the institutionalization of compulsory heterosexuality is, at a very fundamental level,
inextricably linked with the operations of patriarchy. Consequently, the women’s movement can serve as a useful cognitive map since even while it might not have historically extended its critiques of patriarchy to compulsory heterosexuality, it has been able to self-reflexively draw on western epistemologies, while simultaneously carving out a specific indigenous tradition that does not essentialize national difference. A closer look at various modes of resistance in Indian history points to the manner in which the selective employment of Enlightenment philosophies succeeded in drawing on and yet critiquing the potentially universalizing tendencies of western rationalist thought. Thus the manner in which the women’s movement has negotiated the conflict between the global and the local, serves as a useful historical precedent for negotiating local sexual formations in the context of transnational identity formations. For instance, in the 19th century, women were caught between Indian revivalists on the one hand, who re-asserted traditional “angel of the house” constructions of womanhood, and Indian Reformers on the other, who, as part of a Great Civilizing Mission were keen on recasting women in more “progressive” roles. Not surprisingly, the Indian Revivalists were attempting to hold on to pristine images of the chaste Hindu woman of the Shastras and Vedas. Conversely, the supposedly more broad-minded reformers like Dayanand Saraswati fought for Women’s education, albeit for rather dubious reasons. The rationale for women’s education was to make them fit companions and healthy mothers. The educated Brahmin wife and mother was the vehicle for racial purity; she was the procreator of a special breed of men—a healthy pure stock of Aryans. Thus in many ways, the patriarchal control over bodies and women’s sexuality was reinforced not only by revivalist Vedic sanction but also legitimized by social Reform. Although women
became the site for the testing and reasserting of tradition, it becomes interesting to see how women themselves were redploying and subverting these movements in their own way. Even while women were caught in the crossfire between the western mainstream Reform movement and the Revivalist patriarchal constraints, it was the larger spaces that the Reform Movement had made possible which gave them the support systems and education to fight against this oppression. These women were drawing on the philosophies of the Enlightenment, liberalism and western education to distance themselves not only from traditionalism and patriarchy, but also the paternalism and universalizing tendencies of these very philosophies.

**The Reparative Pedagogies of Performativity—Moving away from the “Specifically Female”**

Thus in ascribing a western otherness on to queer identities, Kishwar ignores the more complex genealogy of the women’s movement and the ways in which it has historically been able to complicate and move beyond east-west binaries. At the same time, I think that it might be myopic to merely dismiss her concern that “Indians face more crucial, more economically basic life-and-death issues” than compulsory heterosexuality. While I obviously have problems with such an assertion, I think it might hint at the larger ideological formations that sustain such narratives of sexual citizenship. Kishwar’s inability to conceptualize the denial of pleasure as a form of violence as well as her insistence on abstracting the violence of compulsory heterosexuality from more “life and death” issues hints at the operations of a negative understanding of sexual citizenship that needs to be contextualized in relation to the specificities of gender violence in India. Given the everyday occurrence of the most horrific forms of violence and sexual atrocities committed against women in India, it is not hard to see why a
reparative framework in relation to sexual citizenship still remains elusive. It is not without significance that during the Babri Masjid riots and even the most recent rioting in Gujarat, women’s bodies literally became the site of violence over which communal identities were asserted and consolidated. And the list unfortunately is endless—Apart from the well-known examples of sati and female infanticide, fundamentalist movements have also insisted that women should dress in a particular way to uphold the honor and sanctity of community. Hindutva activists in North India recently carried out campaigns against “western” modes of dressing that were “corrupting” women. In Kashmir, Muslim fundamentalist groups have threatened women with acid attacks if they failed to don the burkha.

Given this history, it is difficult to argue for a theoretical and political move away from an analysis of the sexed specificity of the female body and how this gendered specificity becomes the site through which patriarchal discourse inscribes its parochial agendas. And yet the insistence on fixing a notion of sexed specificity as the starting point of politics is imbricated within a negative discourse of sexual citizenship that forecloses any attention to questions of sexual citizenship. The question that needs to be asked, is whether the feminist struggle for the right not to be raped and killed must always come in place of the right to experience sexual pleasure outside the prescribed norms of the symbolic order. Consequently, such a negative understanding of sexual citizenship is also predicated on the assumption that questions of “pleasure” are inevitably removed from institutional and material violence. In the Introduction to An Archive of Feeling, Ann Cvetkovich has pointed out that “sometimes the impact of sexual trauma doesn’t measure up to that of collectively experienced historical events such as
war and genocide . . . (Consequently) sometimes it doesn’t appear sufficiently catastrophic because it doesn’t produce dead bodies or even, necessarily damaged ones.”

(3) While the violence of compulsory heterosexuality in India has surely produced its own share of dead and damaged bodies through suicides and forced marriages, rather than merely arguing for an inclusion of these bodies into the already fairly large archive of trauma, it might be more useful to self-reflexively engage with the ideological terms that go into the construction of this archive in the first place.

Re-thinking the negative understanding of sexual citizenship in India is especially pertinent in light of the rhetoric surrounding the state’s defense of Section 377 that criminalizes the act of sodomy (codified in 1860 under colonial rule). Following the petition filed by the NAZ foundation that called for a repeal of Section 377 (NAZ Foundation Petitioner vs. Govt. of NCT of Delhi), the High Court of Delhi responded by stating the following:

A perusal of cases decided under Section 377 IPC shows that it has only been applied on the complaint of a victim and there are no instances of its being used arbitrarily or being applied to situations its terms do not extend to. Section 377 has been applied to cases of assault where bodily harm is intended and/or caused and deletion of the said section can well open the flood gates of delinquent behavior and be misconstrued as providing unbridled license for the same. Sections like 377 are intended to apply to situations not covered by the other provisions of the Penal Code and there is neither occasion nor necessity for declaration of the said section unconstitutional.

The above High Court defense of the constitutionality of Section 377 in relation to “cases of assault where bodily harm is intended” obviously ignores those instances when Section 377 has been used against men who consent to have sex with one another. More significantly, however, since the laws under the Indian constitution define rape exclusively as penile-vaginal penetration, Section 377 is most often used as a recourse for instances of child sex abuse and coercive sodomy. The defining of rape as an exclusively
heterosexist and penetrative act inevitably excludes a range of possible sexual violations that are then ostensibly covered under the aegis of Section 377, consolidating its efficacy and validity, despite its problematic application usually against men engaged in homosexual acts. Rather than extending the jurisdiction and definitions of existing rape laws to protect citizens from different manifestations of sexual violence, the state protection from such violence not only subsumes questions pertaining to sexual citizenship, but also becomes the occasion through which the legal system justifies state-sponsored compulsory heterosexuality. Consequently, while the response to the petition states that Section 377 has only been applicable in cases where there has been a complaint by a victim, the court paradoxically foregrounds its lack of concern pertaining to questions of consent at a later point when it states:

If an act has a tendency to create a breach of peace or to offend public morals it is not in the power of any man to give effectual consent. And while the right to respect for private and family life is undisputed, interference by public authority in the interest of public safety and protection of health and morals is equally permissible.5

In the above statement, while neither party involved in the sexual act is a victim, the act of sodomy gets coded as a violation of public and national morality—in other words, it is the state that is conceptualized as a victim of dissident sexuality. Significantly, the homophobia that surrounds the implementation of Section 377 is justified through a rhetoric that “protects” citizens from violence and the “unbridled license” for “delinquent behavior;” consequently, the fairly large archive of violence against women that the state has historically neglected on a day to day basis, becomes the all too convenient rationale for the upholding of the constitutionality of Section 377. Thus the critique of violence that privileges “life and death” issues not only forecloses its relation with the violence of
compulsory heterosexuality but also inadvertently replicates the state’s dubious logic of “protection.”

How then, might it be possible to complicate a negative conceptualization of sexual citizenship while still accounting for the specifically gendered ways in which the Indian female body becomes a site of patriarchal inscription? One way of grappling with this problematic would be to return to Judith Butler’s question posed in the introduction to *Bodies that Matter*. She asks: “. . . what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as “life,” lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?”

(16) Butter’s question hints at the inadequacies of a feminist discourse that considers only “dead” or “damaged” bodies as those that matter. Consequently, the theoretical framework of performativity might offer a way of grappling with the above questions. The argument against making “the specifically female” the starting ground for feminism allows for a theoretical flexibility that refuses the separation of sexual citizenship from “life and death issues” and the privileging of the latter over the former. The deconstruction of sexed specificity for Butler might result in an “initial loss of certainty”(30), but such a loss might in fact lead to the formation of new political possibilities that have been hitherto foreclosed by grounding feminism in the specifically female. Thus Butler’s framework could enable Indian feminism to consider those affective possibilities that otherwise get subsumed by the more “urgent” or “primary” life and death issues. At first, Butter’s post-structuralist critique of discursive categories as well as her insistence on the instability of identities might appear politically disabling in the Indian context since the post-structuralist critique of identity positions can undoubtedly often lead to a potentially problematic argument that makes the categories of
"woman" or "lesbian" into fluid and open signifiers. This kind of deconstructive critique could potentially create another form of anxiety—the anxiety of being nothing at all. The celebration of silence, absence and non-identity is obviously not only fairly compatible with the workings of global capital, but it can also promote a stasis that works to reinforce the normal and normative. A closer analysis of Butler’s anti-foundational critique of identity politics, however, offers a theoretical framework through which one could avoid these traps of a watered down post-structuralism; instead, Butler is able to offer a theoretical vocabulary through which one can re-imagine the very nature of the basic categories through which the social whole is viewed and constituted. In her presentation at the “On Left Conservatism Conference,” Butler responded to the critique that a deconstructive politics necessarily lapses into political aporias:

To call into question the foundational status of such terms is not to claim that they are useless or that we ought not to speak that way . . . to call something into question, to call into question its foundational status, is the beginning of the reinvigoration of that term. What can such terms mean, given that there is no consensus on their meaning? How can they be mobilized, given that there is no way that they can be grounded or justified in any kind of permanent way . . . It seems to me that one is indeed inevitably contaminated by a language that is also invariably useful and invariably important. And then the question is: what is the strategic operation of such terms? How can they continue to be mobilized when they are no longer being supported by a foundationalist justification. (32)

If an anti-foundational critique need not axiomatically efface the formation of political possibilities, it might be useful to foreground the specific ways in which such critiques can be politically mobilized in the Indian context. Butler’s deconstructive theoretical logic enables a conceptual framework that interrogates negative formulations of sexual citizenship. I wish to argue that the move away from fixing the specifically female as the starting point of Indian feminism allows a theoretical flexibility that refuses the division between sexual citizenship and “life and death issues” and the privileging of the latter.
over the former. The fact that the “specifically female” cannot be “grounded or justified in any kind of permanent way” makes it possible to consider those affective possibilities that otherwise might get subsumed by the more “urgent” or “primary” life and death issues.

Several Indian feminist thinkers have pointed to the reasons as to why in the Indian context, giving up on the political signifier “woman” is a politically dangerous and problematic move. For example, Roshan Shahani and Shoba Ghosh argue that “without a standpoint and a forum, no sort of community, including a feminist community, can find a common ground upon which to stand.” (“In Search of New Critical Paradigms,” 18). Furthermore, several feminists have pointed to various moments in Indian history where “the sexed specificity of the female body” has become a site through which patriarchal discourse has inscribed its parochial agendas. Irene Gedalof has pointed out, for instance, that the “female body, and especially its capacity for birth plays an important symbolic and material role in the emergence of national or community identities” (Against Purity, 37). For instance, the invocation of Bharat-mata or the Mother-India syndrome by freedom fighters, as a proto-nationalist weapon during anti-colonial struggles reinscribed a traditionalist role on women, even while ostensibly espousing a counter-colonial agenda. This form of deification endorsed the traditional heterosexist role of women as productive land and men as seed ploughers, reinforcing women’s supposed dependence on men to be made fertile in order to bear children. In A Question of Silence—the Sexual Economies of Modern India, Mary John and Janaki Nair, point out how the valorization of celibacy in order to build a nation of patriotic heroes gradually culminated in the exaltation of the “chaste” Hindu widow whose abstinence from sex
became a symbolic rejection of colonial dominance. They point to how “it is not
virginity that is upheld as an ideal for women so much as the notion of the chaste wife, an
empowered figure in (Hindu) myth who functions as a means of taming or domesticating
the more fearful aspects of the woman’s sexual appetite”(17).

The specifically gendered ways in which the Indian female body becomes a site of
patriarchal inscription has made it difficult to argue for a theoretical framework like
Butler’s that seems to be interrogating coherent identities and arguing for a move away
from what Irene Gedalof calls the “specifically female.” Thus in her analysis of Indian
feminism, Irene Gedalof argues that Butler’s positions become untenable since in her
critique of Irigaray and her conceptualization of the lesbian phallus, the “female body
disappears.” What gets effaced with the disappearance of the female body is “the
possibility of feminist strategies of resistance that take a specifically female subject
position as the starting point for alternative models of self, self-other relations and
identity”(116). However, Gedalof’s critiques of Butler fail to take cognizance of the fact
that in the Indian context, the insistence on the “specifically female”—for instance in the
feminism of Kishwar—could lead to a fixity that anchors a politics of compulsory
heterosexuality and the privileging of drive over affect that sustains a negative
formulation of sexual citizenship. The desire for a fixity of signifiers only performs a
politics of further exclusion—Kishwar’s feminism illustrates the manner in which only
heterosexual models of “self,” “self-other relations” and “identity” are allowed to
emerge. In the introduction to Gender Trouble, Butler’s response to the demand for
lucidity in her writing, is equally apposite in relation to the demand for an ontologically
grounded female subject:
What travels under the sign of ‘clarity’... [?] Who devises the protocols of ‘clarity’ and whose interests do they serve? What is foreclosed by the insistence on parochial standards of transparency as requisite for all communication? What does transparency keep obscure? (xix).

Thus in the Indian context, what travels under “the sign of clarity” is the call for a fixed signified that supposedly grounds political action. What gets obscured in the process of this fixing is manner in which this signified almost inevitably establishes a normative sexuality that only serves to stabilize a heterosexual matrix. Butler’s attempt to problematize the notion of a coherent subject as an ontological given is thus not some hollow deconstructive (= destructive) desire to destabilize coherent identities. Instead, the attempt to problematize the existence of an already sexed subject prior to discourse prevents Butler’s feminism from lapsing into the very power relations that it sets out to critique. Thus Butler’s interrogation of a pre-social, “non-historical ‘before’” can provide a useful framework for a critique of Indian feminism that presumes an “I” behind discourse that is always already (hetero)sexed. The death of the subject then, need not be the death of feminism, but as Butler has suggested, could precisely be a way for Indian feminism to reinvigorate itself and become more self-reflexive about its totalizing and normative tendencies.

The question that immediately comes to mind in the Indian context then, (and one that Gedalof raises in her critique of Butler) is what happens to the sexed specificity of the female body. What becomes the ontology through which the female capacity for birth is used as a “productive” site of repression and regulation? The above questions could be answered in more useful ways through Butler’s understanding of sex not as a fixed, biological entity out of which gender is culturally encoded, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and
surface we call matter” (18). The crucial task at hand, then, is to look at how “matter is materialized,” how sex as a regulatory category enforces and inscribes reproductive roles on to the bodies of women. Thus, the very feminist question that demands a consideration of women’s sexed specificity or the biological capacity for birth, could reinstate the very biological determinism that it supposedly sets out to critique; this aporia can in fact be dislodged through an understanding of sex as a performative act that appears as if it were pre-discursive or prior to culture, when in fact it lacks any coherent metaphysics of substance. In her essay “Against Proper Objects,” Butler points out:

> If we consider those feminist questions not as who controls women’s reproductive capacities, but rather, as whether women may lay claim to sexual freedom outside the domain of reproduction, then the question of sexuality proves as central to the feminist project as the question of gender.

Thus the move away from the “domain of reproduction” is not an elision of material specificity—what Gedalof laments as “the disappearance of women” (20)—instead, it is the attempt to contest the process of reification that unwittingly re-inscribes a process of essentialism and fixity, counter-productive to the formation of a more reparative understanding of sexual citizenship. Butler’s attention to the manner in which sex is materialized does not entail an elision of women’s sexed specificity but in fact interrogates the manner in which this specificity becomes the site through which subjects get constituted as viable and docile. It is in this sense that Butler queers the body since she forces us to be self-reflexive about the very categories through which one “sees.”

While Butler’s anti-foundational critique provides a framework through which feminism in India can re-work some of its essentialist assumptions, it simultaneously allows for a performative re-working of the discursive sites through which women are produced and contained, so that “woman” as a political signifier is not made to
“disappear.” Instead, in keeping with a Foucauldian model of power, Butler foregrounds how these sites of production and containment can be complicated and re-worked in a way that enables rather than forecloses affective possibilities. This intervention becomes especially crucial in India, where feminist critiques have often been limited to an analysis of the objectification, exclusion and marginalization of women. This is an issue taken up in Ruth Vanita’s essay entitled “Thinking Beyond Gender in India” where she points out that the feminist energies in India have been too exclusively directed “towards prevention or redress of atrocities” (69). Consequently, Vanita points out how since the late 70s various women’s organizations and activist groups ended up operating as “marriage counselors, retrievers of dowries and legal aid providers” (70) since the institution of marriage was perceived as the most crucial site of women’s oppression. While the violence of marriage was an important lived historical reality for women in India, at no point was there any attempt by these women’s organizations to interrogate the inevitability of the institution. Thus Vanita remarks: “We were keeping heterosexual structures in repair by functioning as unpaid relief workers, even though this wasn’t quite what we had set out to do” (70). The above example illustrates the necessity of interrogating the theory of negative affect that structures paranoid thinking if one is to allow for more reparative possibilities. The exclusive focus on the “prevention of atrocities” operates as the preemption of bad news that characterizes paranoid thinking (which is not to say that the “bad news” is an imaginary construction or is not rooted in a historical or material reality). Consequently, the paranoid investment in preempting bad news effaces the manner in which violence against women need not operate only in terms of negative affect, i.e., through a process of silencing; violence can also take place
through modes of interpellation that initiate subjects into submission making it impossible for women to experience sexual rights outside the prescribed norms of the symbolic order.

**Recursive Pedagogies—Re-thinking the State versus Community Dichotomy**

In the above analysis, I have drawn on Judith Butler’s understanding of sex not as a fixed, biological entity out of which gender is culturally encoded, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (*BTM*, 9) in order to formulate a more reparative notion of sexual citizenship in the Indian context. In thinking of how queer performativity can offer pedagogically in a postcolonial context, I do not, however, wish to suggest the privileging of western epistemologies over postcolonial subjectivities. There cannot be any mechanical application of the epistemological framework of queer theory to the political context of India. Butler herself has pointed to the problems with using a performative framework in order to extract “a set of clarifying solutions.” (*Excitable Speech*, 20) In other words, as I have already pointed out, the pedagogical relation between Indian feminism and queer theory cannot operate through the privileging of the latter over the former. In keeping with Butler’s own contention that “theoretical positions are always appropriated and deployed in political contexts that expose something or the strategic value of such theories,” (*Excitable Speech*, 20) in the concluding section of this paper, I wish to reverse traditional epistemological and pedagogical frames in order to think of how a dialogue between feminism in India and queer theory as it is theorized and practiced in the US academy could force a re-thinking of the latter. To put it more
reductively, if Madhu Kiswhar can learn something from talking to Judith Butler, can Judith Butler learn anything from talking to feminists in India?

An affirmative response to this question informs the crux of my argument in this essay. Theoretical one-upmanship is not my goal here—rather, I wish to employ a transnational comparative framework to think of how the theoretical insights of feminism in India might usefully complicate the ways in which sexual identity categories are theorized in the West. I thus wish to turn to the often overlooked work of Indian feminist Kumkum Sangari, whose path-breaking essay “Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies” might provide a starting point from which one could begin to re-think some of the epistemological assumptions that subtend queer theoretical frameworks. Sangari’s essay on the politics of diversity is an intervention into the political impasse that has resulted in India between those who call for religion-based personal laws in order to acknowledge the ideology of cultural and religious difference and those who argue for a Uniform Civil Code. According to Sangari, the call for universalism has been so overdetermined by the communal and anti-Muslim politics of Hindu fundamentalism that the notion of legal pluralism and the right for communities to have their own laws has been posited as the only political alternative. The problem with the privileging of community as a bulwark against state majoritarianism is that it ultimately is unable to address questions of gender injustice that are enmeshed in both Hindu and Muslim religious communities. Thus Sangari remarks: “The argument is usually sought to be clinched by questioning the legitimacy of the state as a source of laws for women, that is, by pitting ‘the community’ against ‘the state’ in such a way that (even) though women remain the object of legislation for both, ‘community’ is
nevertheless presumed to be a more reliable or intimate legislative authority” (EPW, 3288). The arguments that “uphold the autonomy of personal law” concludes Sangari, “place the onus of reform on internal change within a minority community” and thus “rest on a thoroughly and dangerously ideological set of interrelated assumptions.” (3289). Sangari ultimately argues against the untenable distinction between community and ‘state’ “since there are structural, ideological, political and administrative linkages between the two”(3289). The Bharatiya Janta Party, i.e. the Hindu fundamentalist political party’s rise to power in India for instance can in no way be divorced from its inextricable connections with the notion of religious community that insists on re-conceiving the Indian nation state in terms of Hindutva ideology. Thus Sangari points out that the separation between state and civil society rests only on an analytical distinction that is ultimately problematic in terms of the material actualities of multiple patriarchies that operate at a structural level where “state structures can be replicated in family or community.” (3294). According to Sangari, the uncritical positioning of community as an alternative to oppressive structures by sub-altern studies critics such as Partha Chatterjee is politically myopic since it conceptualizes community “as a sign of an unhomogenized localism or as mark of the pre-capitalist still resistant to capitalism and its ideologies or as a sign of autonomy vis a vis the nation state.” For Sangari, “religious communities are neither local, nor precapitalist, nor have their ‘leaders’ made such claims”(3291).

My interest in Sangari’s critique for the purpose of this essay is not an attempt to conceptualize agency purely in terms of state intervention or a recourse to the judiciary system. The criminalization of male homosexuality under section 377 of the Indian
constitution is the most obvious example of state sanctioned heterosexism that disallows any illusion that the state is even theoretically committed to protecting the rights of sexual and gender dissidents. However, the arguments for personal laws and legal pluralism in India not only leaves the question of gender injustice unanswered, it also inadvertently reiterates the manichean divide between private and public spheres that has crucial implications on women’s lives and on sexual citizenship. Sangari points out that the “peculiar bracketing of laws related to marriage and family as ‘personal’ laws produces a gendered definition of religion that falls more heavily on women” (3297) as well as, I would argue, on those citizens whose sexual and gendered identities do not conform to prescribed heterosexual norms. Sangari has also rightly pointed out that the positing of religion in the realm of the private “serves to transpose the liberal rationale of the family as a private sanctuary ideally beyond state intervention . . . onto religious community and personal laws. It also shifts the onus of maintaining community identity onto women in marriage and women in familial relations” (3297). It is of course not the most startling insight to point to the ways in which the institutions of religion and the heterosexual nuclear family operate as primary ideological apparatuses that insist on compulsory heterosexuality. It would thus be dangerous to place such institutional violence outside the aegis of the Indian state’s jurisdiction under the pretext of cultural plurality or religious diversity.

Thus to privilege personal laws that are informed by the religious and patriarchal logic of community seems obviously detrimental in attempting to challenge the violence of gender injustice as well as compulsory heterosexuality. Sangari’s critique of the untenable distinction between state and community, I wish to suggest, has radical
implications on the epistemological privileging of the latter by several recent works produced under the aegis of queer studies. Consequently, Sangari’s deconstruction of the state versus community divide complicates what I wish to call an anti-statist political bias that informs much of the work within queer studies. In spite of Eve Sedgwick’s warning that “the historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity” (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 44), the need to disassociate a minority-based understanding of lesbian and gay theory with its supposedly simple agenda of political interest representation with a more thorough queer critique of the discursive regimes of normality has partially led to a theoretical and political binary between state intervention on the one hand (often dismissed as merely liberal) and those forms of queer activism that work outside the aegis of the state and favor non-juridical forms of opposition (often coded as more politically subversive or radical). Pointing to this distinction between a queer approach and the more “traditional” approach to gay and lesbian politics, Michael Warner remarks in *Publics and Counterpublics*: “Queer activism has never seemed traditional . . . because it scorns the traditional debate styles that form the self-understanding of the public sphere: patient, polite, rational-critical discussion”(210). Thus while it would be a mistake to make any generalizations about queer theory since the field is not a monolith, it would be accurate to say that its anti-statist tendencies stem from a larger suspicion of liberal humanism as well as the discourse of identity politics. Queer theory’s wariness of the state as the site for redress is rooted, of course, in the state’s dubious history in relation to sexual dissidents. It could be argued that the gay movement in the US originated precisely in a struggle against the state-federal vigilance of “deviants” was common place during the pre-Stonewall years
leading to the arrests of several queer people who were accused of being risks to national security. This violent history continued for instance in the Bowers versus Hardwick case in 1986 (when the state declared that consensual sex between two adult males was a criminal act in accordance to archaic sodomy laws) and even today when the state is on the verge of amending the constitution to keep queer people out of the institution of marriage. Consequently, the antagonistic relationship that queer politics shares with the state could be attributed to the essentially fixed and dichotomous understanding of gender that the law assumes as opposed to the radically fluid notion of gender expression and sexual object choice that queer desire has come to represent.

I wish to ground my claim regarding the anti-statist ideology of queer theory more specifically with reference to instances from the work of Judith Butler and Michael Warner—works, which, while not exhaustively encompassing the range and complexity of the field, are fairly representative of some of queer theory’s most important and dynamic interventions. One of the most trenchant arguments against the extension of state jurisdiction in the context of gay and lesbian politics can be found in Judith Butler’s *Excitable Speech* where she argues against those forms of opposition that make a case for state intervention and in their place posits those non-juridical forms of opposition that enable performative re-significations “in contexts that exceed those determined by the courts” (23). Using the framework of speech act theory in the context of hate speech, Butler contends that legal discourse is characterized by a conflation of speech into conduct that fails to realize the critical potential for resignification that exists in the gap between the utterance and the effects that the utterance performs. It is in this perlocutionary gap that Butler locates “the possibility of resignification as an alternative
reading of performativity and of politics” (69). Consequently, the recourse to state intervention in the context of hate speech according to Butler, not only forecloses the potential for performatively re-working or “misappropriating the force of injurious language counter to its injurious operations” (40), but also ends up reductively conflating political discourse with judicial discourse where “the meaning of political opposition runs the risk of being reduced to the act of prosecution” (50). Thus for Butler, the recourse to legal redress only strengthens the state’s jurisdiction and its capacity for state-sponsored censorship, which, historically has been instrumental in performing its own violences on queer people. Thus Butler warns: “One must be reminded that the prosecution of hate speech in a court runs the risk of giving that court the opportunity to impose a further violence of its own. And if the court begins to decide what is and is not violating speech, that decision runs the risk of constituting the most binding of violations” (65).

In a different context, another argument pointing to the limitations of state centered interventions can be discerned in Michael Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal*, where he warns about the dangers of making gay marriage the end all of queer politics. According to Warner, the drive for gay marriage “restores the constitutive role of state certification” and leads to the marginalization of queer culture that consists of “a welter of intimacies outside the framework of professions and institutions and ordinary social obligations” (116). Thus for Warner, the call for gay marriage gives in to the state regulation of sexuality; consequently, gay marriage is in keeping with the larger assimilationist trends within the mainstream gay movement that has forgotten the more radical insights of a Post-Stonewall generation. This generation of queer activism in the 70s, according to Warner, in conjunction with the insights of radical feminism “resisted
the notion that the state should be allowed to accord legitimacy to some kinds of consensual sex but not others, or to confer respectability on some people’s sexuality but not others”(88). Thus in Warner’s framework, to seek legal redress in the context of gay marriage not only reduces the politics of gay activism to a narrowly conceptualized monolithic goal, it also constitutes a collective amnesia regarding the more radically conceived agendas of an earlier political movement. Like Butler’s critique of the search for legal remedy in the context of hate speech that only results in the strengthening of the state’s jurisdiction, Warner predicts that the call for gay marriage will produce effects that are counter-productive to any formation of a queer counterpublic since the state is conferred with a greater authority to regulate those non-normative sexual practices that cannot be contained within the institution of marriage. He thus remarks:

As long as people marry, the state will continue to regulate the sexual lives of those who do not marry. It will continue to refuse to recognize our intimate relations—including cohabiting partnerships—as having the same rights or validity as a married couple. It will criminalize our consensual sex. It will stipulate at what age and in what kind of space we can have sex. It will send the police to harass sex workers and cruisers. It will restrict our access to sexually explicit materials. All this and more the state will justify because these sexual relations take place outside of marriage. (96)

Warner’s argument here is ultimately concerned with the performative effects that result when the demands of queer politics are limited to or aimed at state intervention or legal redress. Thus for Warner when marriage becomes the all-encompassing goal of queer politics, it forecloses the more urgent claims of queer activism such as HIV and health care, the repeal of sodomy laws, anti-gay violence and job discrimination (84). But Warner’s claim in the above passages (that the call for gay marriage performs the exclusion of more urgent demands) requires more careful unpacking, especially since it could be argued that one does not necessarily follow from the other, both theoretically
and historically. If, as Warner himself has famously pointed out in the introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet*, that one of the defining characteristics of queer politics is the ability to fight for a variety of issues at the same time “locally and piecemeal but always with consequences” (xiii)—is it not theoretically and politically possible to argue for the democratization of marriage and its extension to gay and lesbian couples and simultaneously problematize the cultural hegemony of marriage? As paradoxical as this might sound, it might be a more viable political strategy than expecting the state to keep out of the institution of marriage altogether. Wouldn’t the extension of marriage to queer couples be one step towards the deconstruction of the institution of marriage? It would undoubtedly be politically myopic to make gay marriage the end all of queer politics. There is something particularly un-queer about such an agenda, especially when the rhetoric from some gay activists is not just that queers should have the right to marry, but that marriage *is right*—that queers *should* zip it up and march down the aisle. However, relinquishing the gay marriage issue because of its potentially normalizing tendencies lets the state of the hook too easily and makes it less accountable to queer people. Rather than exonerating the state from this issue, it might, as Kumkum Sangari has suggested in the Indian context, be more politically pragmatic to make the state a more intense and forceful location of struggle. Such a project need not axiomatically preclude the critique of assimilation.

Consequently, even while Warner’s critique was written before the Lawrence versus Texas case (2003) which resulted in the repeal of sodomy laws in the US, it is worth noting that the contention that gay marriage forecloses queer struggles in different arenas proves to be historically inaccurate, given the outcome of that trial. Finally, even
while anti-gay violence does certainly seem to appear a more urgent violation than the denial of gay marriage, it could be argued that the state has historically been more receptive (only in theory of course) to “protecting” queer people from bashings and hate crimes since this conforms to the liberal and paternalistic ideology of the state as protector or guarantor of human rights which contrasts sharply to its non-willingness to provide civil rights and benefits to queer people which would involve a greater degree of accountability on the part of the state, both ideologically and economically. For instance, in the institution where I study and teach, the University administration was relatively more receptive to the demands made by the LGBT Concerns Committee with regards to including LGBT persons along with other minorities in its non-discrimination clause—what is proving to be more of a struggle is to secure domestic partnership rights that are enjoyed by married faculty who are heterosexual. While the former intervention required the University to make a gesture that could be regarded as protection from potential institutional violence, the latter seems to be a more affirmative demand that would require the University to create the infrastructural framework to provide material benefits that have been denied in the past. In other words, the call for gay marriage or domestic partnership rights need not necessarily be in line with Warner’s assimilationist narrative of the strengthening of state regulation, but in fact might be read as moving beyond negative formulations of sexual citizenship (the right not to be beaten, bashed or discriminated in the work place) to more affirmative models that force the state to be more accountable to queer citizens.

The critiques made by Butler and Warner regarding the dangers in focusing exclusively on the legal sphere as an intervention that somehow axiomatically leads to
the betterment of the lives of queer people have been important and timely interventions especially in the context of the mainstreaming of gay movement in the U.S. However, I wish to suggest that Kumkum Sangari’s warnings against removing the state from the map of contestation in the Indian context might be an apposite intervention in the above queer critiques. Following Sangari’s argument, it might be useful to remember that the positing of state and non-state centered interventions as discrete interventions might be a bit overdetermined, obscuring not only the fundamental connections between the two but also ultimately placing the onus of agency almost exclusively on a nebulously defined notion of community. Consequently, it seems ironic that queer theory and politics, which has been so successful in troubling political and epistemological discretions—between private and public, hetero and homo, acts and identities—should fall back on the simple binary between state and community. Sangari’s warning against romanticizing a notion of community as a mark of the “pre-capitalist,” is perhaps of especial significance in the context of queer theory’s tendency to privilege a notion of community that exists outside the state’s jurisdiction. Thus for instance, Warner’s critique in The Trouble with Normal, while prescient in its interrogation of assimilationist tendencies within the gay movement, tends to consistently fall back on a notion of queer culture that exists outside of state regulation. Although Warner’s argument against the normalizing of queer politics is insightful and convincing, his delineation of an idyllic queer community at times, hints of a globe-trotting and metropolitan bias. Warner tends to idealize, for instance, the circuit party scene as well as hedonistic sexual cultures in Sydney, Paris and Amsterdam. These supposed queer counterpublics, however, can be the very spaces that are often associated with white, male, upper class-privilege. In many ways, Warner’s
description is in line with what Judith Halberstam has critiqued in her recent analysis of queer space and time as the “metronormative narrative”(36) in U.S. theorizing about gay and lesbian lives. It would be a mistake, of course, to read Warner’s call for sexual autonomy as some kind of indulgence in “ludic”postmodern play. In Warner’s descriptions of queer sub-cultures where trannies chill with butch dykes, where fag hags mingle with flaming queens, where no hierarchies are set up between black drag queens and body building leather daddies, where one mingles with “bar friends’ tricks and tricks’ bar friends”(116) there is an attempt to embrace the stigma of shame that has been foreclosed within the more assimilationist strands of the gay movement. However, even while I agree with Warner’s critique of Andrew Sullivan whose championing of gay marriage has entailed a simultaneous dismissal of the queer movement as an “antiquated liberationism” (90), I am not convinced that queer kinships necessarily offer some kind of emancipatory ideal that is not, as Sangari would suggest, always already enmeshed within a domain of power relations or by the normative regulations of the state.

It would be wrong to suggest that there is no analytical distinction between the norms and regulations of the state on the one hand, and for instance the standards and practices of the queer communities and sub-cultures that Warner speaks of. But to posit the latter as a neat solution to the oppressions of the former is to reify the binary of state versus community that Sangari has complicated in her critique of the tendency to idealize community. In her essay, Sangari attempts to critique what she calls “multiple patriarchies”—since according to her, “patriarchies are relational, subject to a wider political economy, occupy different configurations and are re-formulated continuously”(3386). The ability of “multiple patriarchies” to assume different
configurations suggests that sub-cultural communities do not operate as autonomous sanctuaries that are exempt from state intervention—a fact that is in fact not lost to Warner in his discussion of the zoning and surveillance of sex sub-cultures. Thus when Butler locates agency in non-juridical forms of opposition that are invested in critically re-working injurious norms in contexts that exceed the juridical process (23), the historical contexts in which these non-juridical modes of agency perform interventions somehow escape the regulatory tendencies of the state. Thus the binary between juridical and non-juridical forms of opposition often effaces the ways in which the state could potentially circumvent or shape the nature of political discourse that takes place outside of the its jurisdiction; in other words, what is foreclosed is the manner in which the state could create what Butler herself would call the “constitutive constraints” that subtend any performative interventions. Just as in the Indian context where the arguments for personal laws leave the question of gender injustice unanswered, a failure to engage with the constitutive constraints that the state produces and within which it is enmeshed could result in the unbridled continuation of various forms of oppressions.

My argument in this essay is certainly not an attempt to make a case for the state as some kind of easy solution to institutionalized violence; nor is it a return to the discourse of human rights or a call for strategic essentialism. In a post-Foucauldian theoretical context, there can be no illusions about the state representing some emancipatory outside that promises complete liberation. However, I would argue that removing the state from the map of contestation is a luxury that queer people cannot afford—a valuable insight that queer politics could learn from feminist thought in India. To invoke and perhaps reductively summarize Sangari’s argument in this context, I would say that as a queer
person, I might not want the state, but I still need it. For example, gay men and women were forced to engage with the state during the AIDS crisis (and continue to do so) in order to demand better health care and to work against the privatization of drugs by pharmaceutical companies. In the Indian political context, relinquishing the state as a site of struggle leaves us with the rather dubious option of embracing personal laws. In the US context, the exclusion of the state as a site to wage political options might leave us with the equally dubious option of embracing the Church or the free market—options that historically have not been the most conducive for sexual and gender dissidents.

Notes

1. “Hindutva” refers to the project undertaken by Hindu Fundamentalists, who in order to construct a Hindu=India narrative, have relied on selective and regressive returns to the past that endorse monolithic constructions of Indian identity. The destruction of the Babri Masjid, (a mosque located in Ayodhya) by Hindu Fundamentalists was based on such an assertion, which claimed that Ayodhya was initially the birthplace of Ram, a Hindu mythological figure. The mosque according to this logic was the consequence of Muslim (= foreign) invasion that took place in the 17th century.

2. I use the term ‘feminism’ here in the context of Kishwar’s critique, well aware that Kishwar herself rejects the term ‘feminism’ since according to her it is a product of western epistemological categories. In an essay entitled “Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist” (Manushi, November/December, 1990) she remarks: “While I stand committed to pro-women politics, I resist the label of feminism because of its overly close association with the western women's movement”(2). Several useful critiques of Kishwar’s rejection of the term “feminism” come from Indian Feminism itself. For instance, in an insightful essay entitled “Feminism in India and the West: Recasting a Relationship,” Mary John has rightly pointed out that while it is important to recognize the imperialist tendencies within certain strands of Western Feminism, Kishwar’s logic too easily suggests that “being westernized comes across as the mark of a special contamination, a lure from which one can nonetheless free oneself” (53) by merely rejecting the category of “feminism.” According to John, such a position merely amounts to the dismissal of the “complex relationships between those most marginalised in our society and the emancipatory claims of western modernity” (54).


5. Ibid, 11.

6. Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics* published after *The Trouble with Normal* does acknowledge the split between state and non-state centered interventions in relation to the history of ACT UP’s interventions. Thus Warner points out: “What became visible . . . was a split between the style of action specific to ACT UP and queer culture, on the one hand, and a style of activism involving routine interaction with the state, on the other” (212). Warner goes on to recognize that queer politics “has not just replaced older modes of lesbian and gay politics; it has come to exist alongside those older modes, opening up new possibilities and problems whose relation to more familiar problems is not always clear” (213). Even while Warner is cognizant of the more complicated relation that queer politics shares with the state in the above quotations, there is no attempt in *Publics and Counterpublics* to qualify his positions on gay marriage in *The Trouble with Normal* in relation to these insights.
CHAPTER 4
THE POLITICS OF QUEER TIME: TOWARDS A REPARATIVE NOTION OF TEMPORALITY

Re-thinking the Relation between Reparation and Failure

In the previous two chapters, I have considered the ways in which the notion of “failure” enables pedagogical possibilities in varied institutional and national contexts— in the context of the classroom, I pointed to the ways in which the notion of “pedagogical failure” could operate as an index for a “promotion of queer culture” that allows for reparative possibilities. Subsequently, in chapter two, my critique of Indian feminism was motivated by an attempt to think of how an understanding of its failures could open the political terrain in a direction that is more conducive to a reparative notion of sexual citizenship. Thus through a performative understanding of what failure can do, I have thus far tried to forge an unlikely connection between the notion of failure with the promise of reparative thinking. But failures in a traditional sense, of course, do not always offer reparative possibilities and thus it would be myopic to suggest that reparation is something that inevitably or necessarily follows from the failures that this project explores. If the relationship between “reparation” and “failure” is one that cannot be determined in advance or understood apart from the material contexts that inform such failures, it becomes crucial to think of the historical conditions under which failures can and cannot offer pedagogical promise.

In order to further historicize the relationship between “reparation” and “failure,” the following two chapters are concerned with the temporal relations informing these
failures. I hope to illustrate how the notion of time can begin to offer an understanding into why certain failures offer the pedagogical and political promise of reparative thinking (and correspondingly, why certain failures remain imbricated in social and theoretical aporias). I wish to suggest that the attempt to shift from paranoid to reparative thinking is inextricably bound up with the need for a radically new conception of time. The notion of temporality is implicit throughout Sedgwick’s essay on paranoid and reparative thinking—for instance, paranoid reading practices, she points out, result in critical tendencies that are linear, rigid and tautological. In other words, in insisting on anticipatory and retroactive forms of thinking, paranoid readings privilege what Sedgwick calls, “the notion of the inevitable,”(147) which in turn privileges the question of truth value (“Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know?”) over questions concerning the performativity of knowledge production—the fact that “knowledge does rather than simply is.”(124) On the other hand, reparative reading practices complicate the anticipatory and methodological linearity of paranoid thinking through an insistence on the mutability of positions—i.e. through the back and forth movement from the depressive position to the more ameliorative process of re-building that informs reparation. Sedgwick’s essay points to the ways in which the scope of queer theory becomes particularly characterized by the paranoid critical impulse due to its epistemological concern with exposing the phobic structures of ideological apparatuses and in doing so pre-empting the “bad news” of heteronormativity. Thus Sedgwick points out that from being “a privileged object of anti-homophobic theory,” paranoid thinking became “its uniquely sanctioned methodology . . . Given that paranoia seems to have a peculiarly intimate relation to the phobic dynamics around homosexuality, then, it may
have been structurally inevitable that the reading practices that became most available and fruitful in anti-homophobic work would often in turn have been paranoid ones”(126). But if, as I wish to argue, that queer epistemologies enable a re-thinking of failure in more reparative directions, it might be necessary to articulate a radically new conception of queer time that enables rather than limits such pedagogical possibilities.

Thus while my first two chapters explored the politics of queer productions in spatial terms, in the following chapters, I wish to explore the possibilities of thinking of what Johannes Fabian calls “a Politics of Time” (x) in relation to queer theory and methodology. In *Time and the Other*, Fabian’s critique of the ways in which the discourse of anthropology constructs its object through the temporal fixing of the other in the historical past, he points out that “time belongs to a political economy of relations between individuals, classes and nations.” (x) In the following two chapters then, I wish to think of the pedagogical possibilities that might ensue from an understanding of these relations and more specifically, the implications of such an understanding on queer epistemology, both as a critical methodology and a political practice. In this chapter, I begin by considering the temporal relations that inform failed attempts to conceptualize reparative responses to hegemonic social norms. Unlike the previous two chapters, however, the failures that I discuss in chapter resist any reparative possibilities, which, I will argue, has something to do with dominant operations of time that inhabit these textual and cultural productions.

I will first focus on the “end of racism” narratives that perform what I wish to term as “pseudo-reparative” responses to social problems by offering privatized models of agency and citizenship. These narratives are witnessed for instance, in the recent
Hollywood film *Monster’s Ball* which appears to offer a reparative response to the operations of racism by assuring the viewer that “things can change in one moment.” Such an uncritically progressivist understanding of time and history can also be seen in the anti-affirmative action rhetoric surrounding Jeb Bush’s One Florida Plan, which attempts to construct unequal race relations in the U.S as a single moment that has taken place in the past. Analyzing the temporal logic of *Monster’s Ball* in relation to post-affirmative action ideology, I argue that even while the film appears to offer a reparative response to racism, it lapses back into a dominant understanding of time by insisting that racism can be overcome in “one moment.” By conceptualizing responses to systemic oppressions in terms of individual acts of kindness that construct multi-cultural mantras of unity amidst diversity, the film caters to the need for a kind of we-have-arrived epistemic break—the conditions that enable the “end of racism” rhetoric, or ideologies of fulfillment that fix “agency” in presentist conceits. I will argue that this temporal abstraction of “one moment” by posing as a moment of reparation, not only constructs a certain understanding of history, but also effaces the manner in which racism in the U.S operates as an institutional and systemic force that is informed by a history and a materiality.

In contrast to the pseudo-reparative ideology informing *Monster’s Ball* is Michael Cunningham’s 1998 novel *The Hours* that interrogates the temporal linearities that characterize a politics of fulfillment. The novel explores the failures that haunt the lives of three different women in different historical and temporal moments. I will illustrate how the novel’s complex vision of temporality as a historical process resists the condensation of ongoing performativity that subtends *Monster’s Ball*. I will ultimately
argue, however, that even while the novel performs the important task of critiquing an ideological condensation of time, its complicated understanding of time is characterized by a foreclosure of the reparative impulse, or what Sedgwick calls the fracturing experience of hope. I argue that the novel’s elegiac recognition of failure and the persistent and haunting presence of “terrible times” (6) condemns its characters to “the pathos of perpetual failure” which disables a critical re-working or rearticulation of symbolic norms. I will thus use the novel to illustrate the limitations that inform the attempt to re-think “failure” in more reparative directions. I will argue that in *The Hours*, failure does not enable any performative re-working of symbolic norms. Thus in order to conceptualize a “queer politics of time” I ultimately wish to locate a critical space between the ahistoricism that characterizes triumphalist narratives of progress on the one hand, and the foreclosure of reparative possibilities that might characterize the critique of such narratives on the other.

**Out of Time? The Temporal Politics of Performativity**

In critiquing the temporal structuring of *Monster’s Ball* and *The Hours*, I will draw on the critical framework of Judith Butler, who in re-thinking construction as a process of materialization points out that “construction not only takes place in time but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms” (10). By foregrounding the ideas of temporality and citationality to the framework of social construction, Butler points to the ways in which performativity always takes place through a reiteration of norms. The insistence on performative reiteration and the refusal to fix the temporal process in an act that “happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed” (*BTM*, 9) could potentially allow for the temporal flexibility that is crucial to the re-thinking of failure in more reparative directions. In “Critically Queer,” the concluding
chapter of *Bodies that Matter*, Butler significantly begins with a consideration of temporality in trying to address the reparative potentialities of performative practice—

“... the *temporality* of the term (“queer”) is precisely what concerns me here: how is it that a term that signaled degradation has been turned—“refunctioned” in the Brechtian sense—to signify a new and affirmative sense of meanings? ... If the term is now subject to a reappropriation, what are the conditions and limits of that significant reversal? ... Can the term overcome its constitutive history of injury? Does it present the discursive occasion for a powerful and compelling fantasy of historical *reparation*?” (223, italics mine).

The fact that Butler does not provide an affirmative or unequivocal response to the final question could be seen as the occasion for a number of important questions and critiques: Is it possible to conceptualize a framework that would prevent a co-option of subversive performative practices? How can one conceive of a politics of performativity that does not lapse into repetition without a difference, that does *not* make peace with normativity? One way of attending to these questions would be to return to the performative effects that the text itself makes available through its temporal deferrals and apparently unanswered questions. In the 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler points to the epistemological problems with thinking of agency as a monolithic program of action. “This text,” she points out in relation to *Gender Trouble*, “does not and cannot take the form of a prescription: ‘subvert gender in the way that I say, and life will be good.’” (xxi). The refusal to reduce the question of agency to a program or a magical formula enables a democratic plurality in the process of reading that is ultimately more in tune with the temporal contingencies that inform any understanding of social change. The
resistance, then, to the demand for a “solution” that is couched in terms of agency is a way of pointing to the fact that agency is not something that has already arrived or been achieved—such a formula ignores the temporal life of performative practice. Consequently, the insistence on the temporality of re-signification, even its possible reappropriation, is in keeping with the “flexible to and fro movement” (138) of reparative critical practices that resist the anticipatory and rigidly linear relations to temporality that characterize paranoid practices. Butler warns, for instance, that “subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening cliches through their repetition” (xxi), witnessed only too obviously in the (re?)re-appropriation of the term “queer” on television make-over shows where “queer” energies are devoted to the needs of heterosexual bliss through the transformation of supposedly deprived and frumpish straight men. Rather than pointing to “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” as final proof of the failure of performative re-signification or the death knell for the subversive potentialities of the term “queer,” the more reparative response might be to think of such failures as the productive constraints that shape the temporal life of social change. As Butler points out: “I am not interested in delivering judgments on what distinguishes the subversive from the unsubversive. Not only do I believe that such judgments cannot be made out of context, but they cannot be made in ways that endure through time (‘contexts’ are themselves posited unities that undergo temporal change and expose their essential disunity)” (xxi, italics added). In other words, to reduce the reparative process into a single moment of change not only contradicts the recursive circularities that are implicit within such a process, but also performs a freezing of time that obscures the conditions that enable reparative practices in the first place.
The attempt to formulate a reparative politics of time, then, must take into account the material and historical conditions that constitute the “productive constraints” that shape performative practices. As pointed out earlier, there can never exist any a priori or programmatic formula that prevents the co-option of seemingly subversive performative practices; consequently, such a co-option need not mark the final failure of political action (just as the co-option of feminist rhetoric that characterized the Bush administration’s concern for women in Afghanistan does not mark the failure of feminism); instead, it becomes an occasion to inquire into the conditions on which the co-option of subversive practices is predicated. This is not to suggest that the blunting of praxis is an inevitable or axiomatic process; the resistance to fixing agency in time, however, is crucial if one is to keep alive the contingent possibilities that allow for reparative exigencies. Rather than pre-empting the “bad news” of co-option, then, it might ultimately be more politically useful not only to identify the temporal conditions that enable a resistance to the logic of late capitalism, but also to examine those moments that attempt to “freeze” the reparative process in time, paradoxically contradicting the fundamentally mutable nature of the reparative impulse. What then, are the politics that subtend this freezing or emptying of time, and what are the performative effects that result when the reparative process is abstracted from the constitutive constraints that shape its production? In other words, in what ways does a hegemonic grammar of time ultimately foreclose the reparative imperative, precisely by constructing or allowing only for a pseudo-reparative response to institutionalized oppressions? Finally, how does the undoubtedly paranoid project of unveiling or exposing these moments of the “deadening” of time ultimately enable the more theoretically and politically enabling task of allowing
for more reparative responses that, as Sedgwick puts it, are “attune[d] . . . exquisitely to a heartbeat of contingency” (147). What follows is an attempt to propose an alternative to the hegemonic grammar of time through an analysis of various textual constructions of temporality—a shift from the “deadening” of time that marks the limits of agency to the enabling temporal conditions that allow for the affective experience of “Hope,” which precisely because of its sensitivity to history and contingency must necessarily be a “fracturing, even traumatic thing to experience.” It is through the “useful remains” of failure that “the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates”—and it is ultimately the reparative organization of these fragments that enable “the profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities” (146) that characterize a queer politics of time.

“Things Change in One Moment”—The Politics of Temporal Condensation

The pseudo-reparative responses to the hegemonic grammar of time can be most evidently discerned in the “end of racism” narratives that characterize post-affirmative action ideology. On November 9, 1999, Jeb Bush proposed the One Florida Initiative, an “equity in education” strategy that sought to eliminate affirmative action, proposing that race-based admissions to colleges and universities were unconstitutional. Ironically, (yet predictably) the initiative was couched in a rhetoric which claimed that the Initiative strengthened Florida’s commitment to diversity and a “system of accountability”:

Through contracting reforms, One Florida seeks for the first time in history to measure minority and women-owned business spending honestly and to shine a spotlight on spending decisions. And overall, One Florida represents responsible and accountable leadership by preparing the state to embrace diversity in the inevitable future without quotas, set-asides and price preferences. ("One Florida—The Next Step Forward")
Further in the statement, in a section entitled “The Indelible Imprint of History,” Bush goes on to point to the “tragic part of our national history” that for many is “too one-sided, too recent, and too traumatic to be anything other than a source of lasting pain and continuing pessimism.” The One Florida plan, however, Bush suggests, is emblematic of a more optimistic option that “embraces diversity, but does not compromise fundamental fairness.” Affirmative action is thus inadvertently coded as a program of reverse discrimination that threatens the fabric of diversity and accountability; it is an “artificially engineered” program that enforces diversity through the manufactured systems of set asides and quotas. The “indelible imprint of history,” then, is nothing but the dissimulation of history—reduced to “a fork in the road” of progress. While the One Florida Plan, according to Bush, is about “remembering the past but focusing on the future,” the past must in no way structure or shape the present or the future. Since affirmative action can be constructed as a program that artificially imposes diversity through “contract set asides and quotas,” the present moment is conceptualized through a prior naturalized ontology—what Fabian calls “the naturalization of Time” that offers the illusion of a “universal frame of reference able to accommodate all societies” when in actuality, “being based on the episteme of natural history . . . [it is] founded on distancing and separation” (26). Significantly, the rhetoric surrounding Bush’s proposed One Florida Plan no longer concerns itself with thinking of affirmative action as an equal opportunity measure; rather it is conceptualized as a less contrived way to ensure the cause of diversity, which, apparently progressive in its motivations, is ultimately only in keeping with the discourse of nation-building that employs the rhetoric of multiculturalism and globalness to assert the essential goodness and egalitarian nature of
the educational system. The supposedly separatist and divisive effects of affirmative action give way to the global village of Bush’s America, where “[t]hose who do not accept the eventual demise of traditional affirmative action are denying reality.” Those that refuse to participate in this global village or who cannot melt into the melting pot are paradoxically constructed as refuting the fundamentally temporal nature of change that has culminated into what Lauren Berlant calls the fetishization of the “New Face of America.” The compulsory assimilation demands, according to Berlant, “a melding of different faces with the sutures erased and proportions made perfect; she is a national fantasy from the present representing a posthistorical—that is, postwhite—future” (201). The temporal conditions that subtend the new face of America (where the demand for affirmative action marks the refutation of national citizenship) does not in its insistence on post-whiteness in actuality signal the undermining of symbolic whiteness and its hegemonic status—instead, the assignment of institutionalized racism in a past historical moment that has already taken place marks the ways in which dominant discourse consolidates its ideological status through the operation of a hegemonic notion of time.

In *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian has pointed to the performative dimensions of a universal hegemonic notion of time. He points out that time is not merely a “measure of human activity,” but more crucially a “dimension.” (24) Fabian’s critique of anthropology’s spatialization of temporality in order to construct its object of critique as the primitive other ultimately points to the exclusionary mechanisms through which a global universalized notion of time is constructed: “. . . it is not the dispersal of human cultures in space that leads anthropology to temporalize—it is naturalized spatialized Time which gives meaning to the distribution of humanity in space”(25). The dominant
Western conception of time operates through the spatialization of time that divides it into quantifiable units in order to produce a hegemonic grammar that results in what Fabian calls “allochronism” or the “denial of coevalness,” which, is the “systematic tendency to place the referents of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (31). Fabian points to the absent cause of temporality that the ideology of spatial otherness is predicated on, which, through positing its other in the primitive past, enables the performing of a spatial exclusion in the present. In many ways, the temporal relations that inform post-affirmative action America operate precisely through the allochronistic logic of time—i.e. in the placing institutionalized racism in a time other than the present. The allochronistic notion of time performs a disconnect between the ways in which the history of the past structures the materiality of the present. Consequently, this results in the pseudo-reparative end of racism narratives that uncritically celebrate the new face of America where diversity and multiculturalism are taken as axiomatic or endemic to the system.

If the allochronistic use of time that structures Bush’s proposed One Florida Plan secures its present by fixing racist oppressions in the past, the 2001 Hollywood film Monster’s Ball simulates the reparative impulse by performing a freezing of agency in the present; it is this freezing of time that prevents the film from offering a more systemic interrogation of institutionalized racism. Thus the film, while ostensibly appearing to interrogate racism, ends up offering a privatized and individualistic model of agency that only reiterates the dominant logic of whiteness. Monster’s Ball, released in 2001, was hailed by Hollywood and film reviewers as one of the most important films about race relations and the problem of racism in the U.S. The film is set in a small Georgia town
and the story begins on death row, with prison guard Hank (Billy Bob Thornton) getting ready for the execution of Lawrence (Sean Puffy Combs). At the beginning of the film, Hank is emblematic of the archetypal racist patriarch; early in the film, he fires a rifle into the air to scare two innocent black boys off the family property. Various events and circumstances bring Hank in contact with Lawrence’s widow, Leticia (Halle Berry), forcing him to interrogate his ideas about race, women. The film goes on to focus on Hank’s linear narrative of progress towards the gates of a race-free utopia, which begins after his son commits suicide and culminates in his passion for the messed up and economically impoverished Leticia, who is recovering from the execution of her husband and the death of her own son.

It might be useful then to examine the socio-historical conditions surrounding the film’s promotion, production, and reception in order to understand the condensation of history that is performed by the narrative logic of the film. The film’s selling slogan assures the viewer that “things change in one moment”—referring to Hank’s metamorphosis from racist monster to benevolent patriarch. In many ways, this caters to the need for a kind of we-have-arrived epistemic break that characterizes the celebration of the new face of America—the conditions that enable the “end of racism” rhetoric, or what Paul Gilroy has termed, “the politics of fulfillment” (12). This becomes especially significant given that the film was released a couple of months after September 11. The temporal abstraction of this “one moment” as origin performs an exclusion of the various “moments” leading up to 9/11—events and conditions that draw attention, for instance, to the U.S.’ role in the formation of the Taliban during the Cold War years, Osama bin Laden’s training in the CIA, and United States’ own terrorist activities in Nicaragua, the
Philippines, Haiti and El Salvador, just to name a few. For instance, there can be, as Judith Butler points out, “no relevant prehistory to the events of September 11th, since to begin to tell the story a different way, to ask how things came to this, is already to complicate the question of agency which, no doubt, leads to the fear of moral equivocation” (*Precarious Life*, 6). The compression of history into a single moment enables the freezing of time that not only creates the conditions for pseudo-reparative responses to the dominant logic of late capitalism, but in allowing only for such a limited response, also reiterates the logic of dominant time.

Thus in the context of *Monster’s Ball*, the idea that things “change in one moment,” not only performs a condensation of history, but also effaces the manner in which racism operates as an institutional and systemic force that is informed by a history and a materiality. Significantly, even while the film appears to offer a reparative response to the history of racism in the US, the critical reception of the film emphasized the manner in which *Monster’s Ball* was able to “sidestep” the problem of racism. Roger Ebert’s review of the film reiterates the very post-racist utopia that the character Hank thinks he has constructed at the end of the film. Praising the film, Ebert remarks: “. . . this is not a message movie about interracial relationships or race . . . there might be an overlay of racism in the story; . . . but the movie is not about redemption, not about how Hank overcomes his attitudes, but about how they fall away from him like a dead skin because his other feelings are so much more urgent. The movie then is not about overcoming prejudice, but sidestepping it because it comes to seem monstrously irrelevant.”

The problem of race becomes “monstrously irrelevant” in the film precisely because, frozen in time, it also gets reduced to the white man’s individual existential
angst. Thus while ostensibly threatening the unity of whiteness, *Monster’s Ball* only serves to guarantee its wholeness and permanence through a re-centering of white masculinity that defies and ultimately transcends or “sidesteps” the burdens of history through sentimental healing and heroic individualism. In his essay “Sentimentalizing Gay History,” critic Robert Corber points out that “[r]ather than affirmative action programs and anti-discrimination legislation, many Americans now believe that the nation’s deepening racial, class, and gender divisions require the ‘healing’ and ‘closure’ provided by mass witnessing” (118). This healing can only take place on terms of the dominant logic of temporality that performs a dissimulation of historicity by effacing the institutional constraints and material conditions of systemic problems. Like the racial logic surrounding the One Florida Plan—which suggests that Affirmative Action has lived out its use, since racism, while an indelible part of history, is “over”—the film performs a freezing of time through an ideology of fulfillment which asserts that things *have* changed in one moment. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler has pointed out that performativity always takes place through a reiteration of norms and the extent to which it appears as an act that is “over” or as an act that has already taken place, serves in fact to conceal its operations as a performative repetition (12). In the context of the One Florida Plan, the idea that “fundamental fairness” is being compromised through affirmative action not only conceals the institutional biases that have historically created inequities in educational systems, but also creates a reverse identity politics that constructs whiteness and masculinity as potentially wounded.

The reconfiguration of identity formation, from an assertion of masculinist domination to the embracing of an otherized subject position by that very dominant is
typical of the post-90’s Hollywood narrative. In “Techno-Muscularity and the Boy Eternal,” Lynda Boose points to post-Vietnam and Gulf war narratives in Hollywood cinema and the manner in which these narratives served as “self-mythologies” for the US national imaginary. For Boose, the exaggerated masculinity of films such as Terminator, Rocky and Rambo, operated not only as the disseminator of imperialistic ideology and as wish-fulfillments of Aryan domination over the Third World, but also as fables of post-Vietnam masculine domination that served to alleviate a sense of threatened masculinity and emasculation. While Boose’s argument is germane to a historical and cultural context where Hollywood depictions of masculinity needed to operate as “cultural isomorphs of the football game,” (311) it becomes imperative to look at the manner in which these aggressive reassertions of masculine domination give way in a post-90’s context to a foregrounding of masculinity in crisis, these “newer” constructions of masculinity, however, do not to undermine the hegemony of patriarchal power, but only in fact consolidate its supremacy. It is precisely through a performance of disembodiment that masculinity becomes fully embodied; the militarist discourse of techno-muscularity is replaced by a fetishizing of the wound. While Boose points to Carrie Fisher’s survey of Hollywood films to illustrate the lacunae in representations of women on screen, it is not without significance that the mid-90s witnessed a profusion of roles for women that foregrounded the disastrous, even dystopian consequences when women appropriate the aggressive techno-muscularity that can be reserved only for men—Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction, Sharon Stone in Basic Instinct and Demi Moore in Disclosure (significantly, Michael Douglas plays the lead role in all films) become emblematic of the female monsters whose respective transgressions—against the heterosexual nuclear family, the
discourse of law and order and finally the sexual dignity of men—disrupt all the sacred institutions of the nation. Like the logic that argues that racism is over and affirmative action only compromises fairness, these films suggest that not only has women’s fight for equality already been won, thus making feminism unnecessary, its excesses have wreaked havoc on the naturalness of male privilege. The success of Monster’s Ball must be seen in relation to the ways in which a perception of white masculinity in crisis is ultimately able to maintain dominance over the Other through the narrative of fulfillment embodied most appositely in the final scene of the film when Hank reassures Leticia that “things are going to be just fine.”

The politics of fulfillment through which Monster’s Ball performs its ideological containment can be seen as part of a larger temporal constitution of the subject that secures its permanence over time in order to, as Judith Butler would have it, stabilize the tenuousness of its operations. Citing the Lacanian notion of the name that confers this fixity and constitutes the identity of the subject, Butler remarks: “The name is the time of the object” (311). The name is thus performative in the sense that it operates as a process of interpellation, bringing the subject into being through the very process of naming. The temporal relations that subtend the interpellative act of naming work to secure the durability of this process in order to circumvent what Butler terms as “an improper or catachrestic use of the proper name” (153)—i.e. a use of the name in a way other than intended by the interpellator who initiates the subject into submission. Butler points out that the fixing of the name secures its “rigid designation” through a seemingly divine force, like the process of baptism, and “takes place at no time and place . . .” (213) The “no time” that shapes the process of naming is indicative of an emptying of time that is
crucial to the operations of dominant discourse. The emptying of time operates as a necessary pre-condition that prevents the process of naming differently or the process of catachresis, as Butler would have it. In *Monster’s Ball*, such an emptying of time takes place through the condensation of history into “one moment” of change. Consequently, the condensation of time, in its denial of historicity, forecloses the possibility of understanding and imagining an alternative to a present where racial inequities continue to structure the lives of disenfranchised citizens.

The dominant temporality through which the name is fixed in history takes place in *Monster’s Ball* at a crucial, but seemingly inconsequential point in the film, where we see Hank naming his newly acquired gas station after Leticia. This act of naming comes right after a scene of passionate love-making between Hank and Leticia where he tells her: “I want to take care of you.” and she replies “That’s good cos’ I really need to be taken care of.” If Hank’s authority to name is seen as a token of the symbolic order, or as Butler would have it, “an order of the social law . . . which legislates viable subjects through the institution of sexual difference and compulsory heterosexuality,” in *Monster’s Ball*, the act of naming re-baptizes Leticia into the hegemony of whiteness and patriarchy. The act of naming while never completely fixing the referent does operate to secure and consolidate the coherence of whiteness. This process of naming is performative in Austin’s sense of the term since like the speech utterance “I name this ship Queen Elizabeth” the act of naming the gas station “Leticia” is part of a “doing of an action.” That action is illocutionary in the sense that its conventional force literally names the gas station at the moment of naming but it is also perlocutionary in the sense that certain effects follow from rather than being synchronic with the speech act. The perlocutionary
effects of this naming take place in the film through the interpellating demand that serves to establish the symbolic constitution of Leticia’s identity within the domain of whiteness. It is not without significance that it is Hank’s gas station—a place of capitalist and commodity exchange—that becomes the site of naming. In her analysis of the patronym, Judith Butler has pointed out that “the patronymic operation secures its inflexibility and perpetuity precisely by requiring that women, in their roles as wives and daughters, relinquish their name and secure perpetuity and rigidity for some other patronym . . . The exchange of women is thus a prerequisite for the rigid designation of the patronym” (216). In Monster’s Ball, this relinquishing of name does not take place literally—Leticia at the beginning of the film is still Leticia after the gas station is named—but there is a symbolic exchange and transfer of power that continues to initiate Leticia into the lineage of authority, in spite of what the film tries to assure us.

Consequently, the exchange in Monster’s Ball does not take place from father to son, neither is it an actual exchange. In the beginning of the film Leticia is the victim of the state, represented by the prison system where Hank executes her husband (for a crime that the film does not care to contextualize or explain). At the end of the film, the transaction is completed when Hank rescues Leticia from the very system that he is a part of and sustains. Leticia has no agency in the film and for her, things do not really change in one moment; instead, she becomes the all-too-convenient site through which Hank begins to supposedly recognize his complicity with the system that oppresses her. The process of naming that interpellates Leticia and produces the kind of subject that is named is only one of the ways in which Hank ensures the smooth or happy functioning of performative norms. Austin’s condition that the “procedure must be executed by all
participants both correctly and completely” (13) is secured throughout the film. While Hank begins his journey, the very world that has experienced the implications of his hegemonic whiteness conveniently acquiesces and neatly falls into his quest for racial harmony. Hank begins by sending off his racist father to a nursing home; the problem of racism is thus reduced to an external factor, which once again can be erased in one moment. Consequently, he also provides business to the local black businessman and paternally bonds with his two sons (who he orders off his yard at the beginning of the film.) The film thus seems to suggest that reparation takes place miraculously—that dominant whiteness will inevitably fail and disappear with time.

In many ways, then, *Monster’s Ball* is a post-modern version of the plantation drama genre of film. In his analysis of *Mandingo*, Mark Reid points to the archetypal construction of black female subjectivity in this genre: “the black woman is cinematically framed as the all-encompassing womb of servitude to the carnal and economic needs of white patriarchy; she is the unwilling recipient of the southern planter’s seed” (25). Of course, in *Monster’s Ball*, the agency that is denied to black female subjectivity is couched ironically in a “feminist” narrative. This is epitomized in the scene where Hank literally eats the other, to borrow a phrase from bell hooks. While Hank goes down on Leticia, the camera zooms on to her face, foregrounding her orgasmic pleasure. While ostensibly defamiliarizing and reversing the phallocentric act of heterosexual penetrative sex by focusing on Leticia’s pleasure, her body literally becomes the site through which Hank can redeem and forget his racist past. He becomes both passionate lover and paternal caretaker, buying Leticia a car and providing her with his house when she is evicted by the state from her home. In The *Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler has
pointed out that the subject is never fully constituted in subjection: “it is repeatedly
constituted in subjection, and it is in the possibility of a repetition that repeats against its
origin that subjection might be understood to draw its inadvertently enabling power” (94). There is always the possibility of an Althusserian misrecognition or what Austin would call “misinvocation” where the “purported act is vitiated by a flaw or hitch in the
conduct of the ceremony” (17). Leticia has to show a readiness to be compelled and
interpellated—she needs to be taken care of. Consequently, the condensation of time into
a singular moment circumvents the reiterative possibilities of a more deviant conception
of time and makes possible the conditions for “the exclusion of catachresis” (214).

“Fallen out of Time”—Performativity and the Problem of Reparation

If the above narratives are informed by a reification of temporality and the
condensation of time, the very title of Michael Cunningham’s 1998 novel The Hours
seems to recognize the reiterative quality and temporal continuity that subtends Butler’s
definition of performativity. In its pre-occupation with the interconnectedness between
the lives of three women in differing spatial and temporal contexts, the novel explores the
ways in which these seemingly disparate lives negotiate the “ritualized repetitions” and
“productive constraints” that constitute the social production of gender. If Monster’s Ball
is informed by the problematic triumphant declaration of the end of racism, The Hours
seems to be pre-occupied with the notion of failure which haunts the lives of various
characters in the novel. The character of Virginia Woolf, for instance, experiences a
sense of claustrophobia at her failure to write; similarly, her 50's counterpart, Laura
Brown, grapples with domestic failures represented by her inability to bake the perfect
birthday cake for her husband. The Hours is thus concerned with the constraints and
failures through which bodies are materialized through “the repeated and violent
circumscription of cultural intelligibility” (xii). At one level, the novel’s understanding of temporality is structured through the weaving of various inter-textual elements that foreground the repetitions through which identities are materialized and regulated. For instance, *The Hours* draws various parallels between the claustrophobic suburban life of Laura Brown in the 1950's with the post-war milieu of Mrs. Dalloway—both experience “the clocks striking the hours in empty rooms” (83), both recognize that the emotional turmoils of everyday trauma need not be composed of “shrieks . . . wails [and] hallucinations;” instead, they understand that there is “another way, far quieter; a way that was numb and hopeless” (142). Consequently, just as Clarissa Dalloway recollects the moment of queer intimacy with Sally Seton—an experience that even while fleeting, captures in its transience what Woolf calls “the very heart of the moment”—Laura Brown, similarly, finds momentary solace from the banalities of suburban life in the erotic kiss she shares with her neighbor Kitty. The intertextual interweavings are extended to the contemporary 90s where the character of Richard, who is HIV positive, becomes emblematic of the post-modern Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran in Woolf’s novel who, like Richard, plunges to his death to escape the hauntings of history. Clarissa Vaughn, the modern Mrs. Dalloway, like her 1920's counterpart, prepares for a party on the day when Richard takes his own life.

The critical vision of *The Hours*, however, cannot merely be located in an intellectual game of recognizing various literary allusions or intertextual references. As mentioned at the outset, the novel reveals a temporal vision that resists the allochronistic notion of time characterizing the pseudo-reparative narratives discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Instead, at various occasions in the novel, the characters show an
awareness of the temporal contingencies that shape their lives as well as an understanding of themselves, not as willful agents who guide the course of construction (7), but as historically constituted subjects whose lives are constrained by the temporalized regulation of symbolic norms. Like the Big Ben in Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway that assumes the significance of an omniscient character reminding Septimus and Clarissa Dalloway of the passing of time, the Bergsonian notion of *duree* is painfully and acutely experienced by Richard in the following exchange with Clarissa, right before Richard ends his life:

‘I don’t know if I can face this. You know. The party and the ceremony, and then the hour after that, and the hour after that.’

‘You don’t have to go to the party. You don’t have to go to the ceremony. You don’t have to do anything at all.’

But there are still the hours, aren’t there? One and then another, and you get through that one and then, my god, there’s another. I’m so sick.” (198)

In the Foreword to *Tendencies*, Sedgwick offers a vision of what she defines as “the moment of Queer” (xii). Paradoxically, this “moment” is defined in a way that resists a freezing of time into an epistemic break or a single moment. Thus Sedgwick remarks, “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word ‘queer’ itself means *across*. . .” (xii). The emphasis on the *across* that marks queer formulations finds its most painful expression, according to Sedgwick, in “an identification that falls . . . across the ontological crack between the living and the dead” (257). In his awareness of the continuing performativity of time, of the hours after the hours, Richard is able to grasp the temporality of the “across” between life and death. In other words, since Richard has not benefited from the “miracle drugs” that supposedly make the AIDS crisis redundant, he continues to inhabit a space or the “ontological crack” between life and death. At one point in the novel, when Richard loses all sense of
chronology and confuses past, present and future, he remarks: “I seem to have fallen out of time” (62). Consequently, when Clarissa enters Richard’s apartment, “she feels as if she has passed through a dimensional warp—through the looking glass, as it were; as if the lobby, stairwell, and hallway exist in another realm altogether; another time” (56).

The fact that Richard seems to inhabit an alternative temporal universe hints at the ways in which this “dimensional warp” is at odds with a hegemonic grammar of time that operates through what I have referred to earlier as the “denial of coevalness” (Fabian, 25). Since the denial of coevalness is predicated on the existence of a naturalized spatialized time and is also characterized by the tendency to exclude certain subjects from a constructed notion of the present, Richard’s temporal abjection into a “dimensional warp” is in keeping with the exclusionary mechanisms that subtend the hegemonic grammar of time.

Richard’s phenomenological experience of feeling “out of time” finds an all too literal version in the banishment of AIDS from a temporal existence in the present as well as an erasure of urgency from national memory. In the introduction to Witnessing AIDS, Sarah Brophy has pointed out that the AIDS crisis “is declared increasingly to be ‘over’ because of the different ways in which it is rendered in public discourse as being over: ‘over’ through indifference, through its ‘Africanization,’ which includes the sense of its being ‘over’ here, in North America” (8). The spatial displacement of AIDS away from “home” and on to “another place” also, however, performs a temporal displacement that re-enacts the logic of primitivism. Thus the displacing of AIDS in another place, also involves its relegation to a different time. Consequently, this “different time” can never be incorporated into the dominant logic of the symbolic if it is to maintain the stability of
its dominance. In other words, the “AIDS is over” logic is informed by a triumphant “end” narrative that in dislodging the epidemic on to a national “elsewhere,” performs a melancholic foreclosure of the problem and thus circumvents the possibility of reparation. The temporal logic informing such a melancholic foreclosure is thus two-fold in the effects that it performs—it always already posits the ‘other place’ in a time that can never be in the present; consequently, this present must be naturalized in relation to a temporal grammar that insists on the illusion of immunity and the freezing of performativity into an “act-like status” (12) whose effects are firmly fixed in the present. The circumscription of performativity that marks the freezing of time initiates what Derrida has called “the so-called triumphant phase of mourning work”—a “manic, jubilatory, and incantatory” mourning that “holds to formulas, like any animistic magic” and is characterized by the mechanical “rhythm of a cadenced march” (Specters of Marx, 52).

Consequently, the triumphant narrative of mourning in the context of AIDS results in a particular version of history that inevitably reiterates the symbolic power of the dominant order. For instance, the “cadenced march” of progressive history obscures the material circumstances surrounding economic profits made by pharmaceutical companies through selling “miracle” drugs that are available only to a privileged few. The privatization of health care in the U.S, structured by the legacy of Reaganite economics with its federal cuts in the social service sector, has exonerated the state from accounting for basic health care benefits, let alone providing medical benefits to PLWAs.

Even while the creative vision of The Hours focuses on the inner life and individual experience of its characters, the novel reveals an acute awareness of the inseparability
between the private world of Richard’s sickness and the public realities surrounding AIDS. For instance, before entering into the “looking glass” of Richard’s universe, Clarissa wonders:

[how can she help resenting Evan and all the others who got the new drugs in time; all the fortunate (‘fortunate’ being, of course, a relative term) men and women whose minds had not yet been eaten into lace by the virus. How can she help feeling angry on behalf of Richard, whose muscles and organs have been revived by the new discoveries but whose mind seems to have passed beyond any sort of repair other than the conferring of good days among the bad. (55-56)]

In recognizing that “there are still the hours,” Cunningham avoids any simplistic closure or triumphant mourning. Thus there is no attempt to offer redemptive renewal that is not rooted in the material realities of queer existence and those living with HIV. In her analysis of AIDS testimonial writing, Sarah Brophy attempts to reconsider the performative potential of what she terms “unresolved grief. She asks: “Might there be a way of rethinking mourning and melancholia that could allow for a reading of the critical insights that a focus on unresolved grief may enable?” Brophy offers a useful critique of Douglas Crimp’s essay “Mourning and Militancy” where Crimp argues for a paradigm shift from the politics of remembrance and the mourning of loss to a more aggressive and militant position of anger and strength. In Crimp’s argument which contends that “when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again,” Brophy detects a lapsing back into the Freudian insistence on completion and closure. She thus remarks:

. . . [B]y hinging this position of strength and activism on a relatively narrow definition of what might constitute opposition, [Crimp] may risk inscribing a normative masculinity for gay men: what is being proposed seems to be a new mournful ‘warrior’ who must finish with grief before he can take up the torch of political action. (19-20)
The temptation to insist on an ideology of “finishing” is ultimately only in keeping with the politics of fulfillment that characterizes the pseudo-reparative response to the dominant order. Thus in its pre-occupation with the unfinished process of mourning that is shaped by the reiterative and regulatory nature of social discourse, *The Hours* shares its conceptual universe with the epistemological framework of performativity, which, it could be argued, occupies the center stage in queer theory. My concern here is not so much the application of a performative framework or of queer theory to the novel’s central thematic concerns, as it is to introduce a literary and hence social context to explore the temporal relations that shape the performative resignification and reparative re-working of social norms. *The Hours* might serve as a particularly apposite case study to examine the explanatory potential of performative frameworks, not only in terms of its thematic pre-occupation with the reiterative nature of social norms, but also in terms of the performative effects that the text itself attempts to enable. In many ways, the text is performative in that it enacts and produces what Butler has called the “unfinished process of grieving” (*PLP*, 131) that is foreclosed by the work of triumphant mourning. Thus in bringing into being that which is repudiated by the symbolic, the novel illustrates the manner in which the symbolic “is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection” (*BTM*, 3).

Consequently, the description that Cunningham uses to describe the alternative temporal universe that Richard inhabits could quite accurately describe the rhetorical strategies that Butler employs in *Bodies that Matter*. The discursive and formal quality of Butler’s work has been the focus of much critique and the cause of much frustration. Indeed, entering the world of *Bodies that Matter* could be to experience a “dimensional
warp,” “another realm . . . another time” (The Hours, 56). One response to this flouting of naturalized linguistic and syntactical convention is the familiar complaint of overly jargonistic erudition (to which Butler’s own critique of the ideological assumptions that “travel under the sign of clarity” has convincingly addressed). Grappling with the formal difficulties of Butler’s rhetoric, however, is also to discover an erotics of reading that arouses a masochistic pleasure in the thwarted attempts, as Butler herself might say, to fix the subject at hand. It is precisely this resistance to the process of fixing that literally forecloses any final reading of the text in that it invites (or perhaps forces?) the reader to return time and again, not only to discover new meaning each time (novelty in itself runs the risk becoming a “deadening cliché”) but to experience a de-narrativization of temporality resulting from ritualized repetitions of meaning that each reading potentially creates. In that sense, the practice of reading Bodies that Matter is not dissimilar to Laura Brown’s absorption into the textual world of Mrs. Dalloway which she describes as “gaining entry into a parallel world” (37). It is quite appropriate then, that Laura Brown returns to Woolf’s text, which, written through the de-narrativization of the stream-of-consciousness mode, enacts its own temporal instabilities. Consequently, the new meanings that are enabled with repeated readings of a text like Bodies that Matter do not displace one another in time rather than sedimenting into a “quasi-permanent structure” of meaning, the text performs repetitions that carry over their traces into one another so that every engagement with the text is to interact with previous encounters that will in turn shape and complicate future encounters as well. Like Laura Brown who “is trying to lose herself” (37) in the world of Mrs. Dalloway, the pleasures of a text like Bodies that Matter also lie precisely in "losing track of the subject" (BTM, ix), in thinking through
the worlds that the text produces beyond itself. For a text that is centrally pre-occupied with questions concerning the performative nature of language and discourse, it is perhaps apposite then that *Bodies that Matter*, in its inability to fix the subject at hand and its forcing of repeated returns to the text, constructs a poetics of reading that performs its own set of spatial and temporal relations. Thus in the Preface to *Bodies that Matter*, Butler remarks:

> I began writing this book by trying to consider the materiality of the body only to find that the thought of materiality invariably moved me into other domains. I tried to discipline myself to stay on the subject, but found that I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought. Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies ‘are.’ I kept losing track of the subject. I proved resistant to discipline. Inevitably, I began to consider that perhaps this resistance to fixing the subject was essential to the matter at hand. (ix)

The opening lines of the text clearly indicate the spatial and temporal excesses of the subject—a “movement beyond boundary” that cannot and ultimately must not be contained by the Logos of textual construction. Inevitably, the “subject” that Butler mentions in the above lines refers to much more than merely subject matter—the subject that cannot be contained is ultimately the domain of abjected bodies, the system’s “necessary outside” (45) that haunts its pretensions to the status of intelligibility. Consequently, in Butler’s framework of subject formation, it is the domain of disavowed abjection that “will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions of the sexed subject” (3) and reveal its claims to legitimacy.

While the exclusionary matrix that subtends the process of subject formation marks the reiterative and potentially democratic possibilities for Butler, it is the faith in exposure and revelation that marks the paranoid impulse of queer theoretical frameworks, according to Sedgwick. Thus in her critique of Butler, Sedgwick points out: “It’s strange
that a hermeneutics of suspicion would appear so trusting about the effects of exposure” (138) and goes on to quote the ways in which Butler’s faith in parodic repetition inadvertently lapses back into a project of demystification and exposure: “In the influential final pages of *Gender Trouble*. . . *Butler offers a programmatic argument in favor of demystification as ‘the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice* (124), with such claims as that ‘drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself’ (137); ‘we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of performance’(138) . . . parodic repetition of gender exposes . . . the illusion of gender identity’(141)” (139). Sedgwick’s critique of Butler hints at the ways in which a deconstructive project, in “arguing with the real” might end up replicating the structures of the very paradigm it has set out to critique. Thus for instance, much of Butler’s theory of performativity rests on exposing the ways in which the symbolic law appears as a “figure of ground” that is in fact not a ground, but “sedimented through time” (200). Such a hermeneutics of exposure, argues Sedgwick, rests on the assumption that the process of bringing systemic violence into visibility axiomatically translates into an undermining of that violence. Consequently, it also assumes that the violence that is to be exposed is always already hidden in the first place. The successful exposure is thus caught up in its own triumphant vindication, which, according to Sedgwick, ignores those “social formations in which visibility itself constitutes much of the violence” (140). The triumph of exposing “bad news” thus produces its own kind of temporal stasis that forecloses the mutability of more reparative responses to such “bad news.” The attempt to map a politics of queer time that is reparative in its scope is thus informed by a seemingly irresolvable theoretical problematic. On the one hand, the pseudo reparative narratives efface the very existence
of institutionalized violence; on the other hand, the recognition of such violence is often characterized by the “unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia” (130) that results in the linear temporalities of paranoid thinking. My concern here is how a more reparatively informed performative framework can, in the project of deconstructing the ahistoricism of triumphant grand narratives, move beyond a faith in paranoid demystification.

It is this very theoretical problematic that subtends the conceptual universe of *The Hours*. Even while the novel, as I have argued, understands the performative power of discourse to produce that which it regulates and successfully interrogates the temporal politics of amnesia that surrounds the AIDS crisis, the reader is left with the melancholic recognition of the “terrible times” (6) that haunt the lives of its various characters. The novel concludes, for instance, with the following passage:

We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep—it’s as simple and ordinary as that. A few jump out of windows or drown themselves or take pills; more die by accident; and most of us, the vast majority, are slowly devoured by some disease or, if we’re very fortunate, by time itself. There’s just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we’ve ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. (225)

Even though Clarissa Vaughn despises her daughter’s queer theorist friend Mary Krull (she is “too despotic in her . . . endless demonstration of cutting-edge, leather-jacketed righteousness” 23), the above lines reveal the novel’s shared world view with some of the central pre-occupations and problematics of queer theory—the insistence on the inevitability of “bad news,” the “fear of the future,” the awareness of hegemonic temporality. Consequently, in its simultaneous depictions of Richard the child who is “so delicate, so prone to fits of inexplicable remorse” (78) and Richard the adult who is being
“devoured by . . . disease,” the novel explores the transition between queer childhood and an adulthood that is marked by loss and stigma. Another central concern of the novel is the foreclosure of same-sex attachments. At various moments, the novel is punctuated by unfulfilled erotic moments—most obviously, for instance, the encounter between Laura Brown and her neighbor, Kitty—a moment that parallels the encounter that Woolf creates between Clarissa and Sally Seton in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Thus Cunningham’s meta-fictional re-construction of the moment when Woolf decides that “Clarissa Dalloway, in her first youth, will love another girl” is, in its very conception, thwarted by the recognition that she will eventually “come to her senses, as young women do, and marry a suitable man” (82). The intimate embrace that Laura Brown shares with Kitty thus brings into being that which is textually named by Woolf; and yet it is a repetition without any difference. Like Clarissa Dalloway’s encounter with Sally Seton that must ultimately give in to the inevitability of a heteronormative existence, the encounter between Laura and Kitty repeats the very foreclosures of Woolf’s fictional universe.

Furthermore, *The Hours* also shares queer theory’s intimate relation with the structures of paranoid thinking. From the character of Virginia Woolf, who fears Nelly the servant because she “knows secrets” (85) to Laura Brown, who fears that her son “must know” of her domestic failures and erotic transgressions, the novel shares queer theory’s anticipation that “no time could be too early for one’s having-already-known, for its having-already-been-inevitable, that something bad would happen” (131).

In the first half of this chapter I argued that the various “end of racism” narratives that characterize a post-affirmative action historical moment attempt to sidestep history through narratives of heroic individualism. In keeping with Butler’s argument that there
is no subject that exists prior to construction, *The Hours,* however, exposes the illusion and the impossibility of existing outside history. For instance, at one point in the novel, Laura Brown checks into a hotel room, precisely because it offers the promise of ahistoricity—its “immaculate non-smell, the brisk unemotional comings and goings” (147) rescues her from her banal existence “the way morphine rescues a cancer patient, not by eradicating the pain but simply by making the pain cease to matter” (149). Thus even while the “cool nowhere” of the hotel room offers momentary solace, Laura simultaneously recognizes that its comforts cannot eradicate the systemic violence that cause her pain in the first place. Consequently, even the numbing of the pain is haunted by the realities of time—removing herself from the “utter absence” of the room, she realizes that she “is later than she’d meant to be, but not seriously late; not so late as to need an explanation. It is almost six” (187). Similarly, at another moment in the novel, Clarissa Vaughn spots a small crowd gathered around a movie celebrity and “can’t help being drawn to the aura of fame—and more than fame, actual immortality” (50). Like Laura Brown’s attraction to the spatial and temporal nowhere of the hotel room, Clarissa’s fascination with the movie celebrity has more to do with the ahistorical timelessness that celebrity status entails rather than the fetishization of stardom. Thus Clarissa ponders over the idea that while the girls who flock around the movie star’s trailer will eventually “grow to middle and then old age, either wither or bloat, . . . the woman in the trailer, be she Meryl Streep or Vanessa Redgrave or even Susan Sarandon, will still be known” (51). However, even while Clarissa is enamored by the fact that the star will “exist in archives,” and “her recorded voice will be stored away among other precious and venerated objects,” (51) she is still “embarrassed by her own interest,” (50)
recognizing her attachment to an impossible and timeless world. Thus both Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughn recognize that their lives are always already implicated within a reiterative chain of power relations even as they wish for the emancipatory idealism that informs the logic of ahistoricism. Since there are always “still the hours,” there can be no absolute outside to temporality that is not already mediated by the historicity of power relations.

Ultimately, however, the recognition of historicity in *The Hours* is only replaced by the inevitability of “bad news.” The inability to escape the hegemonic logic of time leads to the embracing of death which is the only semblance of hope that the novel appears to offer. “It would be as simple,” Laura Brown thinks, “as checking into a hotel” (152). For Virginia Woolf and Richard, the only “reparative” response to the traumas of time comes through the transgressing of time that death entails. The timelessness of death is an attempt to empty time of its dominant operations—a return to an illusion of an outside to discourse. Thus there can be no performative re-working of failure since, as Butler has pointed out, the critical re-signification of norms can only take place within a chain of historicity that marks the limits and enabling conditions of agency (228). While death offers a release from the dominant grammar of time, it also represents what Butler has called the “violence of exclusion” that is characterized by the “theoretical gesture of pathos in which exclusions are simply affirmed as sad necessities of signification” (53). If the critique of a politics of fulfillment can only be conceptualized through an insistence on the continuity of failure, there can be no “troubling return” or any threat to the system’s intelligibility. The outside that death creates in *The Hours* allows its characters an immunity from the operations of dominant time, but it also represents what Butler
calls “the pathos of perpetual failure” (3) that precludes the contingent possibilities of a more reparative notion of time. If *The Hours* shares with queer theory its project of exposing the continuity of power relations as well as its nuanced understanding of ongoing performativity, it also perhaps shares its limits in the attempt to think reparatively which limits its pedagogical potential. In the next chapter then, I will attempt to think of ways to extend the critique of temporality in more reparative directions.
we can understand that a re-thinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not.

Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (11).

**“Bearing Witness” to the Fifties**

In undertaking to re-visit the primal scene of American Studies through the fictional account of discipline founder F.O. Matthiessen’s life, Mark Merlis’ novel *American Studies* (1994) performs a “re-thinking of reference” that resituates historiographic understandings of literature and politics in the 50s in relation to the present. Merlis’ novel falls familiarly within the historical and literary convention of queer texts such as Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours* and Sarah Schulman’s *Shimmer*, all of which, written in the 90s, use the claustrophobia and conservatism of McCarthyism that informed the political milieu of the 50s in America as a context to raise questions concerning the exclusions on which national identity is predicated. Given the racial tensions, rigidly defined social codes and normative expectations of the 50s, the setting of these texts becomes not just a backdrop, but also a political barometer to understand the ways in which the historicity of the present is structured by the institutional constraints of the past, and how the present in turn shapes and alters one’s understandings of the past. More specifically in relation to queer subjectivities, the 50s offer an insight into a pre-Stonewall generation, supposedly
on the threshold of change. By drawing attention to the historical disruptions as well as
the uneven continuities between the past and the present, however, these texts also re-
think the events of Stonewall as the singular epistemic moment of gay liberation.
Furthermore, critic Robert J. Corber has pointed out that the return to the 50s in
contemporary queer novels operates as a “traumatic flashback, bearing witness to an
earlier catastrophic event that could not be assimilated by gay men while it was
happening because there were no witnesses except themselves capable of testifying to its
occurrence” (120, “Sentimentalizing Gay History”). The attempt to “bear witness” to an
earlier historical moment then, necessitates an attention to the politics of time that
subtends the return to the 50s.

In the previous chapter, I problematized the temporal dimensions of texts as varied
as Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, Jeb Bush’s anti-affirmative action speech on the
One Florida Plan, and the film *Monster’s Ball*. Through an attention to the “politics of
time,” I demonstrated how these texts struggled—and ultimately failed—in different
ways to articulate reparative responses to institutionalized oppressions. If the temporal
relations that characterize the pseudo-reparative narratives of *Monster’s Ball* efface
historical constraints and if *The Hours* is imbricated in the paranoid project of exposing
power relations, in this chapter I will argue that in attempting to articulate a reparative
response to the traumas of history, *American Studies* resists the above mentioned
theoretical traps; consequently, I will argue that the novel offers insight into the
pedagogical potential of a queer politics of time. The chapter’s concern with the
pedagogical potential of queer knowledge productions takes this project back full circle
to the question posed at the beginning of chapter one—i.e. what can queer knowledge do?
In attempting to grapple with this question, I contend that *American Studies* re-conceives the field from which it takes its title by re-thinking the ideological framework of US literary history. In understanding the heteronormative exclusions on which the field of American Studies is predicated, the novel re-defines the boundaries of American Studies as a pedagogical and implicitly political enterprise. In illustrating what a politics of queer time would look like, *American Studies* provides a new understanding of “how to do the history of homosexuality.” I will argue that the novel’s narrative operates as queer historiography and ultimately represents the pedagogical uses of what queer historiography can do to American Studies. It is this intervention that marks the reparative potential of Merlis’ text—i.e. by returning to the 50s, Merlis not only exposes the heteronormative exclusions that informed the beginnings of American Studies, he also suggests how a radically different understanding of time could facilitate the affirmative production of queer spaces within the practice of American Studies.

It might be important to qualify that I am not so much interested in merely describing the pedagogical or political worth of *American Studies* as a moment that has already taken place in time (and the effects of which are fixed in the past)—a critical endeavor that amounts to what I have called in the Introduction “an exposing of the ‘good news’ of anti-heteronormative subversion.” Such a project, I have argued, only preserves the rigid structures of paranoid thinking in its investment in the project of exposure. The methodological scope of this chapter attempts to move beyond just pointing to Merlis’ retro-active return to the primal scene of American Studies and his re-writing of the split between the cultural and the political that informed the critical logic of the 50s. Instead, I wish to inquire into the performative and pedagogical effects of such a retroactive
temporality. Thus rather than describing the political worth of an already existing present
_in time_, (a moment that has already happened or already taken place) I am more
interested in articulating the pedagogical scope of _American Studies_ as a moment that
effects new possibilities for the present. Through the temporal logic of the novel—what I
term a “queer politics of time”—I will illustrate how such a moment does not merely
describe something that already exists, but imagines the possibilities of creating spaces
that do not exist or have yet to imagined. Throughout this chapter then, I posit the
novel’s understanding of a “queer politics of time” in opposition to various formulations
of time that, in general, work to preserve dominant historical relations. In different yet
inter-connected ways, the differing notions of dominant time analyzed in this chapter
conform to what Johannes Fabian has termed a “Western conception of time” (31) that
privileges linear grand narratives of progress over a temporal messiness and historical
contingency. Such a dominant western conception of time, however, is not a monolith
and does not operate in a singular or generic fashion; in this chapter alone, I thus analyze
different manifestations of dominant time—“global renaissance time” that is predicated
on a logic of allochronism, the “freezing” of time that constructs epistemic breaks
between past and present and the “emptying” or homogenization of time that performs a
dissimulation of historicity in its failure to recognize the “citable” nature of the past. In
contrast, I analyze how the retrospective narrative that subtends _American Studies_ resists
such dominant notions through its conceptualization of a queer politics of time.

Much of queer culture has realized the potential of re-thinking and queering space
in order to counteract compulsory heterosexuality—from Queer Nation’s queering of
straight spaces through mall kiss-ins to the Lesbian Avengers’ politicization of spaces
that are insidiously coded as neutral (= heterosexual). Consequently, several works in queer studies (*Queers in Space*, "Sex in Public" for instance) have explored the implications of re-thinking space as ideology by interrogating the heterosexism that informs the discourse of and division between private and public spaces. Until recently, there has not been a corresponding attention to the question of what a theory of “queer time” could offer, theoretically and politically. In her recent book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam posits that “there is such a thing as queer time,” arguing that it might be useful “to think of queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (1). Halberstam points to the radical alteration of time experienced by those gay communities living with HIV whose sense of futurity is inevitably informed by a “new emphasis on the here, the present, the now . . .” (2). Correspondingly, the very “threat of no future” that queer people experience in the context of the AIDS epidemic also becomes a temporal condition that is experienced by a repro-normative culture—what Lee Edelman calls the politics of “reproductive futurism”(100)—since queers are often posited as future-negating threats to temporal continuity. Thus the relationship between “queerness” and “temporality” is one that requires political and theoretical unpacking since, according to Halberstam, it enables an insight into both “academic and nonacademic considerations of life, location, and transformation” (4).

In keeping with Halberstam’s claim that a “‘queer’ adjustment in the way we think about time . . . produces new conceptions of space,” (6) I wish to suggest that the retrosexual temporality that subtends Merlis’ novel offers new possibilities for the practice of American Studies. While in Halberstam’s example, the AIDS epidemic alters
temporality in its emphasis on “the here, the present, the now,” Merlis’ text which is written during and in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, suggests how such an altered present has crucial implications on the past and the future as well. By returning to and re-thinking the primal scene of American Studies, I wish to suggest that it casts the discipline in a chain of historicity that re-structures its intellectual boundaries. The “strange temporalities” of the novel thus perform a queering of American Studies—a field that was, in its conception, founded upon a separation between the cultural and the political and mediated by a queer-eradicating impulse.

In the context of literary criticism, the most obvious example of the heteronormative exclusions on which the field of American Studies is predicated might be the life and scholarship of literary critic F.O. Mathiessen, whose work *American Renaissance* is considered to be one of the founding texts of American Studies. Published in 1941, and widely circulated in the following decades, *American Renaissance* received as much attention for the historical and biographical circumstances surrounding its production—namely, Mathiessen’s persecution by the McCarthy Committee, his subsequent suicide in 1950, and his “homosexual” relationship with painter Russell Cheney—as for its critical positions on 19th-century canonical writers. To separate *American Renaissance* from the historical relations surrounding its reception would be, however, to reiterate the very critical and political violence that results from the ideological separation between cultural and political realms that was performed by the liberal imagination in the 50s by critics such as Lionel Trilling. The more recent critical readings of Mathiessen’s work in the 1980s and 90s, such as Jonathan Arac’s “F.O. Matthiessen: Authorizing an American Renaissance” (1985) and Jay Grossman’s “The
Canon in the Closet: Matthiessen’s Whitman, Whitman’s Matthiessen” (1998), have insisted on reading the political and literary exclusions that *American Renaissance* performs not through an individualizing lens of personal critical whim, but through the political and cultural logic that made it necessary for Matthiessen to privilege, for instance, the work of Thoreau over Whitman and to pathologize the homosexual “passivity” of the latter. The point then, as Grossman puts it, is “to inquire not simply into the American literary history that Matthiessen made but into the institutional and cultural histories that made Matthiessen” (817). Both Arac and Grossman point to the different versions of Whitman that inform Matthiessen’s critical and personal vision—on the one hand there is the Matthiessen of *American Renaissance*, who disapproves of excessive erotic indulgence and the celebration of the “body electric” in *Leaves of Grass*; on the other hand, there is the Mathiessen who in his correspondence with his lover must mobilize Whitman to negotiate, if not reconcile, the split between public and private that he experiences. Thus the separation between the “pathological” Whitman and the Whitman that Matthiessen privately “carrie[s] . . . in [his] pocket” (qted in Grossman, 807) needed to be maintained in order to contain the critical and political possibilities of American Studies as a disciplinary practice, which in turn preserved the separation between the cultural and political sphere. As Jonathan Arac points out, “American Studies gained power by nationalistically appropriating Matthiessen” (99), and this appropriation was partly sustained by foreclosing the threat of a sexually dissident body (both Whitman’s and Matthiessen’s) that endangered the heteronormative logic of the Cold War imaginary.
American Studies and the Retrospective Re-imagining of History

It is this scene of repudiation characterizing American Studies that Mark Merlis returns to in his fictional account of the life and world of F.O. Matthiessen through the retrospective lens of the present. *American Studies* is recounted in the present by Reeve, a former student and lover of Professor Tom Slater (the character based loosely on F.O. Matthiessen). Reeve recalls his relationship with Slater from a hospital bed where he recovers from injuries he has suffered at the hands of a hustler during a one-night stand. Merlis intersperses the musings of Reeve and the everyday traumas he experiences as a gay man with the memories of his relationship with his mentor-professor, Slater, who was driven to suicide as a result of the persecution he faced during the McCarthy era for his homosexuality and his commitment to left-wing organizations. Merlis thus offers his reader a glimpse of fifty years of gay life through Reeve’s musings, making the character a historiographic narrator of sorts. As the sixty-two year old Reeve lies in his hospital bed, lusting after the hunky straight boy in the bed next to his, he recalls his first encounters with nameless tricks in rural small town America, his experiences of bar life in the 50s in the big city, and his failed attempts to study the classics of literature as a permanently ABD graduate student under the guidance of his mentor. Having, as Reeve himself puts it, “lived through eight redraftings” and “nine preseidentiads,” (29) he is able to offer the reader a historically situated perspective on the 50s and their relation to the present. As Reeve re-reads *The Invincible City*—Slater’s masterpiece of literary criticism on the American Renaissance—in his hospital bed, Merlis goes back and forth in time, moving from past to present. In the following passage, Reeve elaborates on the connections as well as the historical changes between past and present:
We were in terror for so long, not just in the dark time when Tom died but for years afterward. When I got to Washington in the late fifties it was still going on, the raids on the bars, the pickup who turned out to be a cop, the fear that you would never be promoted if you didn’t bring a date to the department picnic. (Sally, the phys ed teacher in the next apartment, used to rescue me on those occasions. She was credible, if perhaps a touch too formidable at softball.) most of that is gone now—at least here, at least for the time being. The new kids who get off the bus today have plenty to worry about, skinheads and preachers and microbes. But I think they will never feel, as we did, that they are fair game. (145)

Even while Reeve inhabits the supposedly liberated post-Stonewall context of the present, he continues to struggle with the hauntings of history. The mundane violences that he continues to experience on account of being queer complicate any linear narrative of historical progress between the pre-and post-Stonewall years. For instance, even before Reeve has fully recovered from his injuries, he faces eviction from Culp Management, his landlord, since his encounter with the hustler has endangered the other tenants. The shame that queer people experience does not merely transpire with time, suggests Merlis—as Reeve remarks “[we continue] carrying our Culps inside us” (144). Thus the novel interweaves past and present not in an attempt to contrast the 50’s closeted world of Slater with the post-Stonewall liberated context of Reeve, but in fact to foreground what Eve Sedgwick has called “the overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual definitional forces” (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 45) that subtend the shifting field of sexual categorization. Keeping this in mind, Merlis is careful not to merely reiterate or essentialize Reeve’s experiences as the monolithic grand narrative of gay history. Reeve’s own reflections on the world of Tom Slater offer a very different version of gay life in Pre-Stonewall years. Commenting on the radically different, but co-existing narratives of same-sex arrangements, Reeve remarks: “At an age when I was spreading my cheeks for every horny Canuck in Winslow, Tom was choking down sentiments, shivering at an arm thrown casually around his shoulder, averting his eyes in
changing rooms” (41). The novel goes on to document the world of Tom Slater—tinged by the temporal lens of Reeve in the present. Thus the novel is always conscious that it is not presenting Slater’s world “as it was” but instead, a mediated version of that world. Thus Tom Slater’s struggle to reconcile his commitment to the Popular Front with his sexual deviations, his relationship with, and ultimate betrayal at the hands of college boy Jimmy, his literary and political investment in the revolutionary potential of an as of yet to be named field called “American Studies,” as well as his persecution by the Public Instruction Committee which, ultimately leads to his suicide, are all presented to the reader through the perspective of Reeve in the present.

Although the novel is loosely based on the life of an actual historical figure, it is not so much about restoring an absent authenticity to the figure of Mathiessen or providing a more insightful account of his work through the supposedly privileged vantage point of “homosexuality as we conceive of it today” (Epistemology of the Closet, 45). Instead, the novel’s retroactive positioning performs the more useful task of re-thinking both past and present through a genealogical critique of the primal scene of American Studies. Thus the novel is emblematic of a model of historiographic analysis which does not merely privilege contemporary subject formations on to the past, but offers a different understanding of the present through a re-thinking of the past. The temporal framing of the novel as well as its fictional re-thinking of an “actual” historical and literary context inevitably raises questions regarding the text’s faithfulness to the figure of Mathiessen. At various moments in the novel, however, Merlis self-reflexively foregrounds the constructed nature of his own version of history through the narrative lens of Reeve who reflects on the inter-connectedness of his life and Slater’s. Reeve’s
musings on Slater’s political and erotic life perform what Judith Halberstam has called a “perversely presentist” mode of historical analysis in their “application of what we do not know in the present to what we cannot know about the past” (53). While Reeve contemplates his own place and history in relation to Pre-and post-Stonewall gay subjectivity, his reflections on his own present are always mediated by a speculative reading of Reeve’s past. Thus, for instance, Reeve wonders about Slater’s relationship with Jimmy, the boy who replaced him as Slater’s lover:

At almost sixty, almost my age now, after a life of missed connections and his chaste pajama parties with me, he had come out at the start of things and picked his way across the desert between beds. How did he ever utter yes, how did he ever hear the yes that was offered to him? And what in the world drew a yes out of Jimmy, the last of the Wheaties eaters? (73)

A couple of paragraphs later, Reeve goes on to answer his own questions, but his response is not a definitive recollection of facts; instead, his musings on Reeve’s relationship with Jimmy are tinged with a critical self-consciousness that informs the re-imagining of events:

Let it be in the fishing lodge at Hamilton Lake, Tom and Jimmy sitting by the fire in their khakis and flannels, drinking Tom’s whiskey . . . The boy knows he shouldn’t have come. How could he ever have thought that he could go on basking in Tom’s seriousness without ever facing him? And Tom is so sure that nothing will happen, he can almost persuade himself that he doesn’t want it. No, let there be only the sublime, a weekend of ice-cold water and chastity . . . The room disappears as it did when the boy attacked me the other night, leaving just two bodies facing each other in the dust. Until at last Jimmy—in a world pared down to whiskey and flannel against his chest and Tom’s eyes—mutters what the hell, Just to have it over with, break the stare.

So the night is easy enough to imagine: two men with a little whiskey in them crawling into the same rough bed. The morning is the hard part. Tom is up before the boy, getting things packed, certain they cannot stay another night. He knows they will not speak of it. Jimmy will get up and profess classic amnesia. They will have breakfast, then into the car and out of Eden forever. (72-73).
In an essay entitled “Sentimentalizing Gay History,” Robert Corber criticizes Merlis’ *American Studies* for reiterating a Pre versus Post-Stonewall dichotomy that informs gay identity through a privileging of Reeve’s critical point of view over that of Slater’s. Corber remarks: “If Reeve seems less ashamed of his homosexuality and immerses himself in the nascent bar culture of the fifties, that is because he defines himself in opposition to Slater, whose sexuality continues to be governed by the Victorian codes of his boyhood. Reeve’s descriptions of Slater’s repressed sexuality are condescending and position him as his sexual other” (124). However, Corber’s critique misses the critical distancing that Merlis creates between the novel’s point of view and Reeve’s. When in the above passage, Reeve declares: “. . . let there be only the sublime, a weekend of ice-cold water and chastity,” Merlis draws attention not only to the performative aspects of Reeve’s speech utterance, but also to the ways in which Reeve must position himself as the “author” or “originating will” of such an utterance. The performative “let there be only the sublime . . .” is thus akin to the biblical declaration “Let there be Light,” not only in its declarative framing, but also in the ideological effects that such a framing performs. In the introduction to *Bodies that Matter*, Butler has pointed out that in “the biblical rendition of the performative ‘Let there be light,’ it appears that it is by virtue of the power of a subject or its will that a phenomenon is named into being” (13). Following Derrida, Butler ultimately goes on to suggest that the subject often appears as willful author that exists prior to the discursive effects that it produces, when in fact the subject is produced through and constituted by these effects that emerge through the matrix of power relations. Thus in the context of the novel, Merlis seems to be aware of the fact that Reeve’s understanding of Slater’s sexuality as
“repressed” performs a historic mode of analysis that constructs Reeve as the speaking subject or as the “I” that stands before construction. Reeve’s representation of Slater’s intimate moment with Jimmy as “a weekend of ice-cold water and chastity” thus has a complicated relation to the “real”—it is never ontologized as historical veracity, and thus does not necessarily commit the novel’s historical framing to Reeve’s perspective or imaginative re-telling. In fact, in the very next moment, Reeve’s characterization of the interaction between Slater and Jimmy as non-sexual is undermined by the lapsing of the “sublime” into a moment of physical intimacy between the two men. It would be a mistake to merely dismiss Reeve as an unreliable narrator on account of this; however, the very fact that Merlis constructs Reeve as a narrator who is conditioned by his own historical context, and thus as a subject who performs a certain understanding of history, suggests that the novel is not unaware of the problem with simply projecting contemporary understanding of sexual identity back in time or privileging “homosexuality as we know it today” over erotic attachments that are consequently dismissed as antiquated or regressive. In fact, the novel seems to be pointing to, and in many ways providing an alternative to the very historiographic problem that Corber accuses American Studies of. Consequently, Corber’s objection to the novel’s conception of gay history stems from Merlis’ apparent misrepresentation of Matthiessen’s political alignments through the character of Tom Slater. “It is hard to be a leftist fairy” (101) remarks Merlis at one point in the novel, and the depiction of Slater as someone who believed and wishfully anticipated that “the withering of the state would be accompanied by the withering away of the fairy” (103) draws attention to the gaps within the classically Marxist understanding of sexual deviation as an impediment in the way of
revolutionary utopia. According to Corber, however, the real Matthiessen experienced no conflict between his leftist politics and his homosexuality; consequently, Corber sees in this narrative the gay movement’s aversion to leftist politics. Even while *American Studies* constructs, according to Corber, a nebulous relation to the “real” Matthiessen, the novel is not so much pre-occupied with an attempt to depict an accurate or a “truthful” representation of facts regarding Matthiessen the person, as much as it is invested in exploring the critical, political and cultural mythologies surrounding Matthiessen the figure, and as importantly, the field of American Studies, and the foreclosures on which it was predicated. Consequently, it can be argued that the attempt to fix a past context in time in the name of authenticity is a denial of the past’s citability—the attempt to reduce the past, to what Butler has termed a “static description” (2). Thus, in Butler’s framework, the fixing of the past in time entails a foreclosure of the “citatational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2). Merlis’s re-contextualization of the primal scene of American Studies, precisely because it departs from historical chronology and eschews any simple claim to fidelity (in the novel, Slater’s *Invincible City* is published in 1949 whereas Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* was published in 1941) opens up the possibility of re-thinking some of the foundational presumptions of American Studies.

In performatively re-constituting the “founding” scene of American Studies through a re-thinking of the historical past, the novel re-introduces the specter of queer politics into the primal scene of the discipline’s field imaginary. In many ways, Matthiessen’s personal and critical legacy has been constructed through what I analyze in the first chapter of this dissertation as the “tragic-queer” narrative that consolidates
negative understandings of sexual citizenship. In his essay “The Canon in the Closet,” Jay Grossman insightfully argues against the sympathetic accounts\(^1\) that surround Matthiessen’s suicide that ultimately ignore the structures of heteronormativity within which Matthiessen was enmeshed (802). This chapter’s focus on reparation is thus an attempt to counter those narratives that surround Matthiessen’s death which often read his suicide through an individualizing lens of tragic failure. Such narratives are also in-keeping with the critical reception of *American Renaissance* that have excessively focused on the split between the private and public contained in Matthiessen’s canonical work of criticism—i.e. the contradiction that exists between Matthiessen’s homosexuality and his homophobic castigation of Whitman’s “pathology.” Once again, this split is often read through a personalizing lens that places Matthiessen the critic and the individual at the center—he becomes what Butler would call the “presupposing agent” who enacts or performs the personal and critical failure. Rather than thinking of the ways in which Matthiessen becomes “subjected to” or “subjectivated by” a critical logic that insisted on a separation of the cultural sphere from the political, Matthiessen becomes the “speaking subject” who stands before such a construction (7). As a result, the narrative of individual failure that is reiterated by Matthiessen’s inability to reconcile personal with political supersedes any understanding of pedagogical failure—i.e. a knowledge of the historical conditions that creates Matthiessen as a “speaking subject” and that limits and enables the nature and the emergence of such a “speaking.”

It is precisely such an implicit understanding of “pedagogical failure” that informs Merlis’ novel. As I have argued previously in chapter one, a notion of pedagogic failure recognizes the necessity of altering the conditions and circumstances on which
performativity relies. And it is this insight into the historical conditions that performs the split between the “public” and “private” Matthiessen that enables Merlis to construct an alternative primal scene that “cite[s] the law to produce it differently” (15)—i.e. in citing the authoritative narrative of the discipline, the novel sustains the reparative possibility of constructing alternative narratives for both the present and future of American Studies—or in Butler’s terms, the novel offers reparative promise in the manner in which it reconfigures the constitutive outside of American Studies as the discursive occasion for a democratic futurity. The effort to re-think the primal scene of American Studies is not merely an attempt to include that which has been excluded or to merely put “‘homosexuality’ back into the American Renaissance” (801) as Jay Grossman warns against. Instead, since the reception and circulation of Matthiessen’s text was mediated by a critical logic that denied the cultural sphere’s performative potential to effect any kind of change within the public realm, American Studies foregrounds the ways in which the primal scene of the discipline was predicated on foreclosing everything that was potentially queer about the formation of the discipline. And even while drawing attention to the structures of compulsory heterosexuality that informed the primal scene of the field, the novel does not limit itself to this important intervention. Thus, in returning to the primal scene of the 50s that is marked by a queer eradicating impulse in both the literary and political context, American Studies moves beyond the mere exposing of heteronormative logic to actually constructing a primal scene that is more reparative in its historical scope.

**Changing Time—American Studies and the Denial of Coevalness**

Merlis performs this project of resignification not by effacing the material realities of queer existence in the 50s or by denying the existence of heteronormativity, but by
introducing a notion of queer temporality into the “story” of American Studies. In
*Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, Giorgio Agamben has
remarked that the “original task of a genuine revolution . . . is never merely to change the
world, but also—and first of all—to change time” (51-52). *American Studies* recognizes
the inextricable links between social change and the re-thinking of time not only in its
retrospective temporal positioning, but also in its implicit understanding of historicity as
a performative process, or as Butler would have it, as a “reiterative and citational
practice” (2) that repeats itself over time. For instance, at one point in the novel, Reeve’s
meditations on Slater’s suicide turn into a larger reflection on the politics of time, and
more specifically, on the ways in which a dominant grammar of time condenses the
performative process into a single act, “one which happens once and whose effects are
firmly fixed” (*BTM*, 9):

> The doctors said Tom didn’t feel a thing. But doctors always say that. As far as they’re concerned, anyone who doesn’t spend his final weeks in intensive care, undergoing torture and running up bills, dies instantaneously. I am sure it was quick enough. I had to go and look at him, identify that blasted head as his. There was so little of him there, I might have been a paleontologist, conjuring up an ancestor from a jawbone and a toe. No, he didn’t have time for lengthy ruminations.

> Still when I consider the millions of thoughts—*an appointment tomorrow, what is this guy’s name again, where the hell are my glasses*—that used to fly though my head in the instant before climax, the volumes I thought at the moment when the boy first struck me the other night, how can I suppose that Tom thought nothing at all? No matter how fast he went? (10-11).

> What immediately follows these lines is, ironically, or perhaps appropriately, a
> “lengthy rumination” on Slater’s final moments as the bullet travels through his body; in
> its hyperbolic technical tone and objective medicalized rhetoric, Merlis seems to mock
> the anesthetic view that Tom died “instantaneously”: 
The bullet passes through the brain, which feels nothing, then exits through the superficial nerves of the scalp. The impulses from the scalp, and maybe from the roof of his mouth, are traveling down to the spinal cord and back up again, while at the same moment the bullet is throwing great globs of gray matter out onto the floor. I don’t know which travel faster, nerve impulses or bullets. But with these distances there’s no point comparing, everything is virtually simultaneous. Even as his skull explodes, the message is coming back up his spinal chord: “Hey, something just made a big hole in the top of your head!” (11)

The slow-motion-like exaggerated temporality in the above lines (which proceed in the same vein for a couple of pages) acts as a counterpoint to the logic of conventional time, which insists that Tom’s death was instantaneous and that he “didn’t feel a thing.”

The conventional medical opinion is also symptomatic of the ways in which abjected bodies are denied a sense of historicity through the condensation of time. In other words, the idea that Tom’s death was instantaneous performs a temporal narrative that effaces the various material relations leading up to that moment. In relation to Matthiessen, the doctor’s words could represent the conventional critical logic, which, as I have pointed out earlier, reads Matthiessen’s death through the individualizing lens of suicide, effacing the heteronormative structures characterizing the political milieu that Matthiessen inhabited. Thus the dissimulation of historicity which informs the view that Tom died in an instant is also suggestive of the freezing of Matthiessen in time, and the fixing of American Studies in the context of a primal scene that sought to negate the discipline’s political potentialities.

In the introduction to American Renaissance Reconsidered, Donald Pease has pointed out that “the American Renaissance keeps what we could call global renaissance time—the sacred time a nation claims to renew when it claims its cultural place as a great nation existing within a world of great nations . . .”(vii). In other words, the designation of a particular historical moment as a moment of literary and cultural renaissance
functions performatively rather than merely descriptively. The term does not simply rehearse already existing cultural shifts and literary trends, but actually brings into being that which it names. As Johannes Fabian has pointed out, time is not merely a “measure of human activity,” but more crucially a “dimension”(24). Fabian points out that the dominant Western conception of time operates through the spatialization of time that divides it into quantifiable units. Such a dominant understanding of time produces a hegemonic grammar that results in what Fabian calls “allochronism” or the “denial of coevalness which is the “systematic tendency to place the referents of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse”(31). Fabian’s critique of anthropology’s spatialization of temporality in order to construct its object of critique as the primitive other points indirectly to the exclusionary mechanisms through which global renaissance time is constructed: “It is not the dispersal of human cultures in space that leads anthropology to temporalize—it is naturalized spatialized Time which gives meaning to the distribution of humanity in space” (25). In American Studies, Merlis hints at the allochronistic logic that informs global renaissance time when he likens Reeve to a paleontologist, “conjuring up an ancestor from a jawbone and a toe”(11). Reeve’s paleontological gaze at Slater’s body is thus illustrative of the denial of coevalness that characterizes dominant time—i.e. through the fossilization of Slater’s body in the past, there is a disavowal of its historical relevance in the present.

Thus at various moments in the novel Merlis alludes to the process of violence through which queer lives are rendered abject and forced out of the historical present through the denial of coevalness. Right after Reeve is attacked by the hustler who robs
him he remarks, “I was strangely calm, *just a body*” (13). At a later point in the novel, he describes the experience of being reduced to “just a body” in greater detail:

I think it is better to be alive than dead. But my tormentor lingered only a few minutes in the living room before departing. I felt for only a few minutes that I had lost my name and become *just a body* to be discovered in the morning. And even in those minutes I was nearly ready for it. If I had lived as Tom did, so many months bring stripped of his titles and his armor, *just a body*, I might eventually have said, Hurry finish it. (14, italics added.)

The experience of being “just a body,” (which both Reeve and Slater are forced to experience in different ways), of being stripped of any sense of historicity, is thus on the one hand the attempt to reduce these bodies to the homogenous vacuity of empty time. For instance, at various points in the novel, Reeve remarks on the ways in which he has “made it to the present day largely unrecorded” (39). He has no recollection of what he looked like as a child or teenager: “So many hours I spent in before the mirror in those years, and all I can picture of myself is what I looked like shaving the other morning” (39). Similarly, Reeve’s masturbatory fantasies of the various tricks he has had in the past are all replaced by the violent image of his attacker in the present. In making it to the present day “largely unrecorded,” Reeve hints not only at the failure of mainstream history to record queer lives, but also to the ways in which the present is constituted through the foreclosure of the past. Reeve’s failure to remember what he looked like, suggests the manner in which he is forced to internalize the collective amnesia that marks the foreclosure of historical memory. As opposed to Reeve, whose body remains abject from recorded history, Slater on the other hand has had “all of his life documented” (39)—supported by the existence of photos on mantels, dozens of albums and, of course, his critical legacy represented by *The Invincible City*. The persecution of Slater at the end of the novel is thus symbolic of the stripping away of historicity—the elimination of
various historical signifiers or the dissimulation of historicity so that ultimately Slater too, like Reeve, is forced to make it into the present, “largely unrecorded;” like Reeve, he must be reduced to “just a body.” Once again, the dissimulation of history also represents the reduction of Matthiessen’s critical legacy in the field of American Studies to the public/private trap in which he is imbricated. At one point in the novel, for instance, Reeve describes an intense pedagogic moment in “Tom’s overheated seminar room” in which Tom “had made a little country of his own”—a seminar that he had “the audacity to call American Studies” (244). In this one moment, Merlis reveals the political and pedagogical potentialities of Slater’s interventions, his conceptualization of American Studies, not merely as a field, but as a cognitive map for an alternative America. Thus Reeve remarks:

Even I felt, with Tom and his real students, like a conquistador, staking my claim on the imagined America that lived in that little room where it was so hot my glasses fogged up. (245)

It is perhaps precisely the threat that results in the imagining of a different America that necessitates the freezing of performativity into a “singular act” (12)—a dissimulation of citationality which ensures that such a re-thinking “acquires an act-like status” (12), thus circumventing its performative potential. Thus immediately after Merlis offers the reader the above image of pedagogic utopia, he points to the ways in which this utopic potential is contained:

There was a real exile, maybe, when they shut the door of that seminar room in his face, cast Tom out from the land that wasn’t just his birthright but to which he had given birth and a name. (245)

The historicity that is denied to those lives that are reduced to being “just bodies,” however, does not necessarily reduce Tom and Reeve to what Butler has called “sad necessities of signification.” (53). In _Undoing Gender_, Judith Butler theorizes the
political and affective experience of being “beside oneself”—a notion that calls into question any autonomous understanding of the materiality of the body. Butler points out: “In a sense, to be a body is to be given over to others even as a body is, emphatically, ‘one’s own,’ that over which we must claim rights of autonomy . . . The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine” (20-21). In many ways American Studies illustrates the ways in which the attempt to fix these bodies into the domain of unintelligibility is challenged by the ways in which the body is “given over” to others. In other words, following Butler’s logic, Reeve cannot exist without “drawing upon the sociality of norms that precede and exceed” him (32). If, as Judith Butler has pointed out, what unites gay and lesbian communities is the fact that we are “constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies” (Undoing Gender, 18), then the fact that Reeve and Slater are politically constituted by or “given over” to one another is indicative of a temporal logic that interrogates the denial of coevalness that characterizes the dominant grammar of time. Even while both Reeve and Slater are constituted as subjects through the vulnerability of their bodies, it is precisely the refusal to be just bodies that marks the reparative scope of the novel.

It is in this sense that the novel introduces a notion of queer temporality into the discipline of American Studies—i.e. in re-contextualizing the life and work of Mathiessen in relation to Post-Stonewall gay subjectivity, the novel resists the logic of allochronism that constructs Mattheissen as “ancestor”—and it is in this sense that the novel introduces a notion of queer temporality into the discipline of American Studies. Thus the retroactive return to the primal scene of American Studies on the part of Merlis
is an attempt to rescue both Matthiessen and American Studies from the freezing of time. Thus Merlis’ return to the 50s becomes an attempt to re-visit and re-think the denial of coevalness that marks global renaissance time, an occasion to inquire into the historical conditions that necessitated certain repudiations in order to maintain a dominant notion of time. In the introduction to *American Renaissance Reconsidered* Donald Pease has pointed out that “the ‘renaissance’ is an occasion occurring not so much within any specific historical time or place as a moment of *cultural achievement* that repeatedly provokes *rebirth*” (itals added vii). Thus in response to the cultural and historical anxieties of the nation, the term “renaissance” offers the promise of ideological renewal and regeneration through the repro-normative equation of “birth” with “cultural achievement.” The heterosexism implicit in the “rebirth” metaphor is especially meaningful in the context of the 50s literary imagination given the ways in which a normative notion of “Americanness” was consolidated during this period through a queer-eradicating impulse.

**Resisting the “Great Paradigm Shift”—Against a Progressivist Notion of Time**

The reasons as to why the 50s in U.S political history become the primal scene for Merlis’ text might seem all too obvious, given the ways in which sexual and gender dissidents are left out of the material and symbolic constructions of national citizenship. If the 1969 Stonewall rebellion is historically constructed (and at times overdetermined) as the epistemic moment of queer liberation in the U.S, the 50s have been historically framed as a period of repression and closetedness. As several gay and lesbian historians such as Jonathan Katz and Lillian Faderman have pointed out, this was a period in which homosexuals were seen as a national security risk since non-conformity in terms of gender and sexual preference was coded as a threat to the ideological image of a nation
fighting a Cold War. Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, published in 1948, gained wide circulation during this time period; its contention that homosexual activity was common amongst “normal” and not just effeminate men created a widespread homosexual panic that was informed by a contradictory logic: on the one hand, there was a desire to cleanse the national public sphere of any trace of queerness; on the other hand, the fear of deception that the passing homosexual caused demanded a logic of visibility. In other words, if queerness could be clearly marked, it could consequently be disciplined and eradicated in the name of national security. It is this very dominant construction of gender and sexuality in the 50s that Merlis points to in the perception of Tom Slater as a “traitor” to his time. Thus Reeve remarks:

> . . . Tom was a model of manliness and reason. The sort of chap who could order the bombing of Dresden or who could inspect the line of English poets as if reviewing his troops. I wonder sometimes if Tom’s enemies didn’t hit him all the harder—harder than the times demanded—because they felt deceived, because under that manly surface was something entirely different. Something that could also, by definition, have resided under their even less masculine armor. (9)

Thus his enemies hit “harder” not only because Tom “fools” them with his tough masculine exterior, but also because he draws attention to the foreclosures and ideological presumptions on which stable gender positions and sexual identities are predicated. The fear of deception that linked homosexuals to communists and which led to both groups’ persecution in the 50s finds its counterpoint in the novel when Slater is questioned and threatened by Van Leunen, the President of Yale who discovers Tom’s communist leanings as well as his homosexual relationship with Jimmy. “The point is,” Van Leunen remarks to Slater, “that we just happen to be at a time in history when it’s important to get things out in the open” (199). The historical demand for openness is
thus ironically carried out in the service of containing the anxiety produced by the deceptive queer who was perceived as a threat to national security.

A return to the 50s as primal scene for queer subjectivities in the literary and cultural sphere at the turn of this century marks an attempt, then, to foreground the temporal continuities and historical disruptions between past and present. The temporal structuring of such a retrospective narrative serves not only as a measuring gauge for political change, but also complicates triumphant grand narratives of progress that insist on foreclosing the reiterative nature of normative social regulations. *American Studies* illustrates how there can be no “great paradigm shift” (Sedgwick, 44) between the worlds of Reeve and Slater. The systemic violence of McCarthy nationalism that ultimately proves to be too overpowering for Slater continues to haunt the present and persists in the insidious traumas that Reeve must confront, for instance, when he faces eviction from his apartment after his encounter with a trick that turns violent. Drawing attention to the connectedness of his fate and the persecution of Tom, Reeve remarks:

> All a joke, as cruelly silly as history itself. Tom died searching for his fabulous city: he died because he was queer. As I nearly have. Except that my assailant didn’t, at the last, plunge in the knife. Tom’s did, that’s the only difference. (111)

Thus the traumas that both Tom and Reeve experience in their respective historical contexts, do not, in Ann Cvetkovich’s words “command the national and transnational publicity . . . that focus only on the most catastrophic and widely public events”(3). In *An Archive of Feelings*, points to the ways in which national memory selectively includes only those traumas that produce “dead and damaged bodies thus marginalizing the more insidious “everyday life of trauma” (3-4). Even though the “everyday life of queer trauma” in *American Studies* does produce both damaged and dead bodies in the case of Reeve as well as Tom, they still cannot be admitted into the national archive of trauma or
memory since both these are lives that ultimately do not count as life or as “lives worth grieving” (BTM, 14). Rather than an insistence on the epistemic shift between the pre- and post-Stonewall identities represented by Slater and Reeve, Merlis draws attention instead to the overlapping trajectories between these identities and the ways in which their lives are always inextricably implicated in one another. Thus the inextricability of Reeve’s fate with the Pre-Stonewall persecution of Tom becomes even more explicit, as for instance in the following passage:

I wouldn’t have believed it, even a week ago I didn’t live in a world where a kiss is the prelude to a skull fracture. But I have been in that world all along. Tom must have seen it, too: the revolution isn’t ever coming, the city of friends is beyond the margins of the map. All you can do is wait for the intervals when the guns are silent and grab whatever you can. (235).

The above passage is particularly emblematic of Merlis’ move away from a progressivist notion of time. Reeve’s disbelief that he lives “in a world where a kiss is the prelude to a skull fracture” suggests the investment in what Sedgwick has called a “commonsense, present-tense conceptualization of homosexuality” (EC, 46) that constructs a clear epistemic break between “homosexuality as we conceive of today” and homosexuality as it existed in the past. As Reeve, however, experiences the haunttings of history and understands the ways in which his body is “given over” to that of Tom’s, he subsequently recognizes that he “has been in that world all along.”

Thus Merlis complicates the construction of a neat epistemic break between pre- and post-Stonewall identities and consequently draws attention to the inter-connectedness between the institutionalized oppressions of Slater’s world with the supposedly liberated context that Reeve inhabits. Even while at the beginning of the novel, Reeve remarks about his relationship with Slater that “we could have taught each other, instead of just gliding futilely past,” (42) the rest of the novel explores the reparative possibilities of
pedagogic failure that informs their relationship. Furthermore, the temporal co-existence of these differing manifestations of same sex attachments prevents an essentialization of the past or a reification of the present. If, as pointed out earlier, the “denial of coevalness” is characterized by the tendency to posit certain subjects in a more ‘primitive’ past, the overlapping and mutual co-existence of conflicting erotic attachments is a move towards the construction of a temporal order that moves away from the monolithic universality of the dominant grammar of time. Consequently, even as critics like Robert Corber have described Reeve’s attitude as “condescending,” there are various points in the novel where Reeve, in retrospect, seems to hint at his own limited understanding of Tom’s sexual universe as well as the ways in which this universe is profoundly interconnected to Tom’s understanding of American Studies and its performative potential. Thus although the traditional critical view of American Renaissance has pointed to the text’s foreclosure of the political, Merlis re-writes this narrative in an exchange between Tom and Reeve when the literary, political and erotic worlds all become inextricably interfused:

“. . . Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, all of them except Whitman. Idealists slashing away at the beauty they can’t hold on to, wanting it dead or transcendent, anything but material, there in front of them but out of their reach. Emerson, do you really read Emerson? Always trying to get inside people and failing and then saying you’re an angel, you’re a penis, no wonder I couldn’t get inside you.”

I couldn’t recall this in Emerson. He was clutching my knee almost fiercely.

“What I’m after, what the book is about, is the revolution built on love and not bloodletting. A world where I can watch Billy Budd walk away and not want to obliterate him just because I can’t get inside his skin.”

He let go of my knee, sat back, and murmured the lines from Whitman that gave him his title (67).

Slater goes on to quote the “I dream’d in a dream . . .” lines from the Calamus poems to which Reeve responds by commenting: “This doesn’t sound very political”
It is not without significance that Whitman in the above lines becomes an exception to the trap of idealism that Emerson, Hawthorne and Melville are caught up in. In other words, Tom Slater is fully aware of the political dimensions that subtend “the quality of robust love” in the Calamus poems. The fact that Reeve does not “recall” the political character of the Calamus poems draws attention not merely to Reeve’s limited understanding of these literature, but more importantly to the depoliticization of American Studies that followed the publication of *American Renaissance*; the exchange further draws attention to the pedagogical nature of this moment—for Reeve as well as for modern practitioners of American Studies. Finally, the above passage also indicates the ways in which Merlis re-writes the traditional divide between Mathiessen the scholar who is uncomfortable with Whitman’s “excess” and Mathiessen the private citizen who relied on Whitman’s investment in the material body to validate the bond he shared with Russell Cheney. Through Tom Slater’s *The Invincible City*, Merlis offers a cognitive map for the practice of American Studies, which, in its pre-occupation with “the revolution built on love and not bloodletting,” enables a reparative re-thinking of the foreclosures that inform *American Renaissance*. Undeniably, Slater does embody some of the ideological contradictions of his time—the idea for instance that the revolution would remove these “tensions and dislocations” (103) resulting in sexual deviation. However, even while Tom Slater cannot quite reconcile his commitment to the Popular Front with his sexuality, his implicit faith in the utopia of the “invincible city” based on an ideology of revolutionary love suggests a politics of the body that, following Whitman, does not necessarily stand outside history or transcend temporality. Through the character of Tom Slater, then, Merlis re-thinks the field of American Studies by
recognizing the intrinsic connections between the literary and the political, between
Americanness and queerness.

**Paranoid Thinking and the Problem of the Performativity—Re-visiting Primal Scenes**

While the temporal return to the 50s as the primal scene of queer subjectivities enables a useful comparative historical lens that exposes the ideological parallels between the political logic informing the 50s and the post-90s, it could be argued that it is this very project of exposure that characterizes the paranoid impulse, and thus marks the limits of queer historiographies. The “periodizing of the 50s” (to appropriate Frederic Jameson’s phrase) could thus be seen as part of queer theory’s epistemological concern with exposing the phobic structures of ideological apparatuses and in doing so pre-empting the “bad news” of heteronormativity. In her critique of queer thinking’s intimate relation with paranoid structures of thought, Eve Sedgwick has pointed out that from being “a privileged object of anti-homophobic theory,” paranoid thinking became “its uniquely sanctioned methodology.” Furthermore, she points out: “Given that paranoia seems to have a peculiarly intimate relation to the phobic dynamics around homosexuality, then, it may have been structurally inevitable that the reading practices that became most available and fruitful in anti-homophobic work would often in turn have been paranoid ones” (126). If paranoid thought is characterized by what Sedgwick calls a “rigid relation to temporality,” (146) it seems curious that queer theory, with its pre-occupation with the deconstruction of binaries, its critique of essentialist thinking and most importantly, its Foucauldian and genealogical approach to questions of history and historiography, should be Sedgwick’s object of critique as a manifestation of paranoid critical practice. Could it be then, that despite their professed self-critical understanding
of “how to do the history of homosexuality,”3 queer critical practices inadvertently lapse back into the very “anticipatory and retroactive” (146) temporal relations and of paranoid thinking that have been their object of critique in the first place? In other words, if the project of exposure that subtends queer thinking’s return to the 50s is marked by a temporal rigidity, is such a return ultimately circumscribed by its paranoid impulse? Such a temporal rigidity would thus only replicate the structures of dominant time rather than offering an alternative to the temporal inflexibilities that I have discussed thus far.

I wish to suggest that Merlis’ *American Studies* begins to grapple with some of the above questions. In my analysis of *American Studies* thus far, I have suggested that the novel performs some of queer theory’s most valuable interventions and epistemological insights—for instance, its retroactive positioning is implicitly in tune with Halberstam’s “perversely presentist” mode of historical analysis; consequently, Merlis, like Sedgwick, complicates any simplistic “great paradigm shift” which privileges “homosexuality as we know it today” over past arrangements of same sex relations. Finally, the novel’s awareness of historicity as a performative process is in keeping with Butler’s re-thinking of construction as “a process of materialization that stabilizes over time . . .” (9). If the novel, however, shares some of queer theory’s most important methodological insights and conceptual pre-occupations, the question that inevitably arises is how *American Studies* negotiates the limits of queer theory’s interventions as well. At an obvious level, the novel’s return to the 50s as primal scene does seem to share with queer theory its paranoid investment in exposing the parallels between the operations of compulsory heterosexuality in the past and present. Is Merlis’ return to the 50s as the primal scene of queer thinking thus imbricated in the project of exposing the “scandalous secret” of
repetition? What are the reparative possibilities that sub tend this apparently paranoid return to the primal scene?

In order to answer these questions, it might be useful at this point to qualify my use of the term “primal scene” to describe the temporal narrative structuring of American Studies, among other post-90s queer texts that historically situate their world-view in relation to the 50s Cold War imaginary. The term “primal scene” of course has its roots in the Freudian psychoanalytical tradition used first in the Wolf-Man case history in the essay entitled “The Case of the Wolf-Man: From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” (1918). On reading Freud’s essay, the structural similarities to queer theory are striking. For instance, it is not without significance that Freud theorizes the Wolf-Man’s sexual history through the narrative of paranoia—the fear of bad news, the threat of castration and the possibility of being penetrated/eaten by the father/wolf all play a crucial role in defining the subject’s psychosis. Even while homosexuality is pathologized as the signifier of a neurotic symptom, in its investment in exposing bad news as a step towards diagnosis, Freud’s methodology clearly resonates with the structural tendencies of queer theory. Consequently, Freud’s often bizarrely fascinating interpretive logic and epistemological leaps are not dissimilar from the most perversely pleasurable reading practices of queer studies—what Eve Sedgwick calls the deliberate practice of “overreading” where meanings “don’t line up tidily” and instead are “mysterious, excessive or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available” (Tendencies, 3).

In spite of these similarities, psychoanalytic theory itself has had a vexed place in queer studies, to put it mildly—becoming at once the site of departure and occasion for re-interpretation. As Judith Butler has pointed out in Undoing Gender: “Even as
psychoanalysis has charted for us this path through the normalization of gender and sexuality, it has also insisted from the start that the “development” which is described is in no sense secure. As a result, psychoanalysis gives us, and perhaps enacts for us, something of this drama of sexual normalization as well as its inevitable deviations (153). The Wolf-Man case is no exception in the enacting of “drama” that informs psychoanalysis—alternatively normalizing in its pathologization of homosexual or “feminine” passiveness and arguably promising in its insistence that the original primal scene is always already a rhetorical construction. The case of the Wolf-Man documents and attempts to treat traumatic disturbances that result from the infantile neurosis of the subject—a project that takes place not while the child experiences his neuroses, but fifteen years after the fact. In his essay “The Case of the Wolf-Man: From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” Freud in fact points to the inadequacy of studying the child’s neuroses during infancy since it only reveals “the predominant part played in the formation of neuroses by those libidinal motive forces which are so eagerly disavowed,” but reveals nothing of the cultural forces that subtend such neuroses “of which the child still knows nothing, and which cannot therefore be of any significance for him” (155-156). In his very approach to treatment then, Freud insists on a narrative structuring that is necessarily retroactive in its construction of temporality.

Similarly, the reparative motive of “treatment” is precisely what motivates Merlis’ retroactive return to the 50s. As in Freud’s narrative where treatment can only take place in retrospect, after the traumatic event, Reeve can “bear witness” to his relationship with Slater in the Pre-Stonewall years only through the historicity of the present. Thus at various points in the novel, Reeve deliberately foregrounds the gaps in his understanding
of the past, drawing attention to his own inability to offer a grand narrative of this past; he thus wonders: “When exactly did he [Reeve] join the “study group,” as he insisted on calling it? Whose were the names he could not utter? What were they doing to him, at the end?” (32). Reeve’s questions are not merely emblematic of an absence or a lack of knowledge—instead, they are suggestive of the inevitable foreclosures that must be “eagerly disavowed,” in Freud’s terms, so that the traumatic moment can be assimilated or processed by the subject. It is only in retrospect that Reeve can respond to his own questions, enabling a historical perspective that was circumvented in that moment. He thus remarks: “Perhaps these essential data are missing because they aren’t part of his vita at all, but merely a part of the history of the age” (32). At a later moment in the novel, the reparative possibilities of such a performing of historicity become more explicit when Reeve remarks: “Our might-have-beens are not footnotes to the main text of how-it-was; they are the text” (86). The re-situating of context performed by Merlis’ narrative thus enables not just a filling in of the “essential data” that is missing; it is also a radical resignification of the primal scene that allows for the practice of alternative historiographic possibilities. If the abjected domain, as Butler has contended, “will threaten to expose the self-grounding presumptions” (3) of the symbolic, the “might-have-beens” that Merlis offers through Reeve’s narrative threaten to re-write the official history of the period as well as the dominant narrative of American Studies.

The problem of paranoid reading, however, still lingers in such an ostensibly reparative re-thinking. For instance, in the very above quote from Butler, the hermeneutics of exposure are central to the project of dismantling dominant narratives. Similarly, the aporias of paranoid reading are a significant sub-text to Freud’s...
narrative in the Wolf-man case history. In his pre-occupation with the therapeutic potential that informs the construction of the primal scene, one can make the argument that Freud is ultimately concerned with questions concerning the limits and enabling conditions of performativity—i.e. what are the reparative possibilities that are enabled in positing a hypothetical origin to the subject’s neuroses through the interpretation of dreams? Consequently, Freud must constantly grapple against the triumph of unveiling that potentially circumvents the therapeutic potential of his treatment.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that at various moments in the Wolf-man case history, Freud is at pains to point to the analytical distinction between recollection and construction—the primal scene, he points out, is not an ontological ground that is the cause of neurosis in the present, but has “to be divined—constructed—gradually and laboriously from an aggregate of indications” (194). In other words, the primal scene is not recollected by the subject, but is a hermeneutic reading of the past that is mediated by the present. The analytical distinction between construction and recollection is crucial if Freud is to preserve the hope for reparation. It is the insistence on the epistemological move away from recollection that marks the reparative promise in the Wolf-Man case history since the therapeutic method moves beyond the mere exposing of the earlier primal moment. As Sedgwick remarks of the reparative process: “Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.” (146). The privileging of construction over recollection in Freud’s narrative thus enables the reparative re-thinking of the past, precisely because this re-thinking allows for the
conception of a past that is different from the way that past is conventionally read in the present.

In insisting on the validity of construction over recollection, the Wolf-Man case history performs what Ned Lukacher has called “the uprooting of event from ontology” (21). In his analysis of the relationship of primal scenes with literature and philosophy, Lukacher goes on to suggest that the notion of the “primal scene” need not be restricted to a psychoanalytical framework, and instead could be extended to “signify an ontologically undecidable intertextual event that is situated in the differential space between historical memory and imaginative construction, between archival verification and interpretive free play” (24). It is in this space of liminality between memory and construction that Merlis locates his intervention into the discipline of American Studies. At one point in the novel, Reeve looks at Tom Slater’s photograph on the jacket of *The Invincible City* and notices a spot on the picture that has been airbrushed and retouched. As if metaphorically commenting on his own narrative through Reeve, Merlis writes: “I remember no blemish there. This photograph replaces memory” (8). The construction, in other words, replaces what otherwise sediments over time to appear as matter. The process of “retouching” suggests the essentially citable nature of the primal scene of American Studies and the reparative possibilities that emerge through the repetition of an authoritative set of practices. In other words, if the primal scene in the Freudian psychoanalytical framework is an interpretive construction (as opposed to a return to an ontologically grounded origin), it leaves open the possibility of constructing differently—i.e. the construction of a primal scene that is not primarily or exclusively marked by the paranoid fear of being devoured by wolves.
American Studies and the Promise of Reparation

*American Studies* thus offers an illustration of how a reparative return to the primal scene enables historiographic potentialities that have been otherwise foreclosed by paranoid practices. Through the very narrative framing of the novel, it is clear that Merlis is pre-occupied with the central role that memory plays in the constitution of historicity. Memory, however, does not merely occupy a mimetic relation to the “Real,” as the recollection of the primal scene is mediated by the interpretive process. It is not without significance that the novel’s epilogue begins with the following lines: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins”—taken from Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Benjamin’s historical materialist critique of progress in this essay offers one of the most trenchant assessments of time’s radical potential. In the essay, Benjamin urges a move away from bourgeois historicism that is characterized by what he calls “homogenous empty time.” Instead, he insists that the historian return to the past not as an act of nostalgia or mere recuperation but to “brush history against the grain.”(248). The past, according to Benjamin, “carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption;” hence this past must be “citable in all its moments”(245) if it is to move away from the politics of amnesia that informs the pseudo-reparative responses to history discussed in the previous chapter. Benjamin thus points to the reparative potential in returning to the past since it could contain alternative possibilities that have been effaced by dominant historical narratives. Benjamin indirectly hints at the “citability” of the past that informs a performative understanding of historicity. It is the citing of the law in Judith Butler’s framework that consolidates its efficacy, but which also, since it is a process that takes place in time,
produces the conditions for its disruption. Importantly, however, if the temporal process that subtends the citing of the law proceeds in accordance to “global renaissance time,” the law will only reproduce itself as the law, since it in turn proceeds by accumulating “the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices” (227). The dependence of the law on its own normativizing reiterations constructs a linear and tautological relation to history, what Benjamin calls the “empty time” of bourgeois historicism. It is against this homogenization of time that Benjamin puts forth the notion of *Jetzizeit* or the “presence of the now” that “flares up briefly”(248) and “blast[s] open the continuum of history”(254). Benjamin’s *Jetzizeit* operates then as the denaturalization of time that cuts itself loose from the conception of time as a linear continuum and posits in its place a more deviant understanding of time that, while taking into account the past as a “temporal index,” also recognizes, as Benjamin’s points out:

> . . . the sign of a Messanic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past . . . [The historical materialist] takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework.

Even while Merlis returns to the primal scene of Cold War nationalism through the recollections of Reeve, the point of *American Studies* is not only to expose the systemic violence that had become routine in the 50s but to fan “the spark of hope” by re-thinking and de-essentializing the relationship between this moment in history and the present. In other words, Merlis attempts to “brush history against the grain” by undertaking to re-write the primal scene of American Studies. I wish to suggest then, that Merlis’ re-thinking of the primal scene has important implications for the practice of American Studies. The Introduction to Donald Pease’s 1994 collection of essays entitled *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon* reveals the vexed history that
surrounds the attempt to establish the primal scene of American Studies. In this context, the primal scene refers not only to the body of canonical texts that constitute the appropriate object of literary criticism and to which the critic must return, but also to what Pease calls the “field imaginary” of American Studies (9). Thus along with literary and cultural boundaries as well as the methodological approach, it also refers to ideological impulse through which the practice of literary criticism establishes (or refuses to establish) a relation with the public realm. Thus for instance, Pease argues that the liberal critical tradition in American Studies represented by the likes of Lionel Trilling and Frederick Crews constructed and consolidated the primal scene through an ideological distinction between the cultural and the public sphere. He remarks: “Like the primal scene within an individual’s psyche, the scenario organizing the field-imaginary of American Studies depends upon the separation it enables from potentially traumatic material” (12). The liberal imagination thus returns to 19th century American Romance as its primal scene and insists on repudiating the inextricability between text and context. Thus in 1950, Lionel Trilling consolidates this separation when he insists that “American writers of genius have not turned their minds to society” (qted. in Pease, 24). The political milieu in which Trilling wrote _The Liberal Imagination_ demanded such a separation between the cultural and the political—the “potentially traumatic material” that constituted the writings of Melville and Hawthorne thus needed to be contained during a time period that has been traditionally defined by its intolerance of dissent. Consequently, in the constitution and naturalizing of an apoliticized 19th century American Romance genre as the primal scene, there is an attempt to mask its essentially constructed nature. It thus loses all trace of historicity, functioning as a pre-discursive
site that exists outside time. In opposition to the insistence on the non-ideological nature of American Studies (which is, of course, an ideological construction in and of itself), New Americanists insist on the interrelatedness between the literary text and the material relations within which it is enmeshed. As Pease remarks: “The political unconscious of the primal scene of their [New Americanists’] New Historicist readings embodies both the repressed relationship between the literary and the political and the disenfranchised groups previously unrepresentable in this relationship (31).

It is not without significance then that the primal scene of the queer literary imagination in general and of Merlis in particular becomes the 1950s—the very historical moment when the separation of the cultural from the political that marks the liberal imagination is consolidated. If the ideological separation that is performed by the 50s critical imagination is secured by constructing the American Romance as the primal scene of the discipline, it is precisely the re-thinking or resignification of such a construction that informs the temporal logic of the contemporary return to the 50s. The reclaiming of the 50s on the part of Merlis then becomes a kind of temporal performativity—a return to the scene of crime as it were. The return to the primal scene of the 50s is made explicit in American Studies by Merlis’ interventions into the critical dialogues surrounding the absence of the Calamus poems in American Renaissance.

Commenting on this significant absence in his essay, “The Canon in the Closet,” Jay Grossman remarks:

What would it have meant to include the title of this cluster of poems in 1941, or during the 1930s when Matthiessen was writing this important piece of scholarship? How shall we think through this absent word, which marks the absence in American Renaissance of any sustained discussion of Whitman’s most overtly homoerotic lyrics, especially when considered in light of another ‘fact’ we
know about Matthiessen, that he was himself ‘homosexual’ and shared more than twenty years of his life with another man, the painter Russell Cheney? (799)

Merlis’ *American Studies* offers a promising response to Grossman’s question of what it would mean to include the Calamus poems in the writing of *American Renaissance*. In the novel, Tom Slater’s book of literary scholarship on the nineteenth century entitled *The Invincible City* is an obvious reference to Whitman’s “Calamus” poems that contains the following line: “I dream’d in a dream, I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole rest of the earth.” (*Leaves of Grass*). It is not without significance that in the novel, *Invincible City* is published in 1949—almost a decade after the first edition of *American Renaissance* was published. The historical deviation on Merlis’ part historicizes Mathiessen’s vexed relation to Whitman within the context of a liberal critical milieu that distanced itself from the political and from anything perceived as “excessive” in order to preserve the perceived sanctity of the nation’s moral fabric. The fact that the Calamus poems are not only included in the novel’s version of *American Renaissance*, but become the very inspiration for Slater’s (/Matthiessen’s) title re-introduces the absent cause of what Butler would call the “constitutive outside” of American Studies—an outside that haunts the discipline’s boundaries “as the persistent possibility of . . . [its] disruption and rearticulation” (8). As I have pointed out earlier, the effort to re-think the primal scene of American Studies does not merely put homosexuality back into the American Renaissance. Rather than inclusive recuperation, Merlis constructs a primal scene that “cite[s] the law to produce it differently” (15) and thus creates a cognitive map for the practice of a different kind of American Studies. As Reeve peruses through *The Invincible City* in a hospital bed while recovering from his
injuries, he makes the following comment about the text that “founded” the discipline and modern practice of American Studies:

Oh, it was all stunningly new, forty years ago. But now, when everything in it is practically received wisdom: opening it is like sitting down to read Freud, someone else I never got very far in. Tom’s book is boring in the same way, because it seems to us now that he was merely repeating, not discovering, the things he had to say, so much a part of our world have they become. You feel that you’re listening to a moderately bright and deeply bored teacher reciting standard views about nineteenth-century America. You have to make yourself remember that he thought it was a book about the revolution. (34)

Given the psychoanalytical origin of the notion of the primal scene, the above comparison to Freud seems particularly apposite. Both construct primal scenes that are inextricably related to questions of performativity—the possibility of effecting therapeutic treatment in the case of Freud, and the practice of American Studies in the case of Matthiessen. Consequently, even as “it is practically received wisdom,” these very lines also suggest the ways in which The Invincible City was conceptualized as “a book about the revolution.” The fact that Tom Slater appeared to be “repeating” an already established literary canon on the one hand points to the ideological consolidation that his text performed in the context of literary studies; on the other hand, it could also point to the citational practice that Slater’s text was imbricated in—a failed attempt at the performative resignification of literary norms which could, in J.L. Austin’s terms, be attributed to the absence of appropriate circumstances required for “the smooth or ‘happy’ functioning of a performative” (14). The fact that Tom Slater’s “invincible city” cannot be reached in his life time, or lies, as Merlis puts it at one point, “beyond the margins of the map” (235) suggests the world Tom Slater inhabited pre-empted the possibility of a performative refunctioning of American Studies (or in temporal terms, Tom’s invincible city is denied a sense of coevalness with the present). Thus rather than
privileging Slater/Mathiessen as the subject prior to discourse, or as the “willful and instrumental subject” (x) who authored the American Renaissance and reiterated the exclusions on which it was predicated, American Studies points instead to the ways in which Slater’s text is implicated within a chain of historicity through time. The fact that The Invincible City travels to Reeve as “practically received wisdom” does not necessarily point to the text’s limited critical and political value or to the radical transformations in the field of American Studies that have rendered the text obsolete or archaic. Instead, it points to the reiteration of literary norms that materialize over time to foreclose any possibility of a “potentially productive crisis” (10) in the field of American Studies—a process of stabilization that only reiterates “standard views about nineteenth century America.”

I have argued, thus far, that by re-visiting the primal scene of American Studies, Merlis’ text offers a radically different “founding father” for the discipline—one who understood the revolutionary potential of his intervention. The alternative possibilities resulting from the “productive crisis” that American Studies enables thus marks the reparative potential of the novel’s historical framing. Ironically, just as Slater’s Invincible City appears to Reeve in the present as merely “reciting standard views about nineteenth-century America,” the novel itself seems to be interrogating the repetitive critical practices that rehearse “standard views” regarding Mathiessen. In many ways, Mathiessen’s suicide has resulted in consolidating a tragic-queer narrative, similar to the pedagogical reception surrounding Brandon Teena in Boys Don’t Cry discussed in the first chapter. The notion of “pedagogic failure” I proposed in that chapter, becomes equally appropriate in this context then—i.e., if the “productive crisis” that Mathiessen
potentially performed for the practice of American Studies could be contained through a negative understanding of sexual citizenship, then the performative effects of such a crisis could be allochronistically fixed in the past. By rescuing the figure of Matthiessen from “the pathos of perpetual failure” and offering instead a more performative understanding of “pedagogic failure,” Merlis sustains alternative possibilities for the practice of American Studies in the present.

Thus even while I locate this project in line with the work of New Americanists and their departure from the 50’s liberal imagination that insisted on the split between the political and cultural, the question still remains whether New Americanist/Historicist readings have succeeded in radically opening the field of American Studies to new and more politically dynamic possibilities. The hiring operations of the job market is an all too obvious example of a negative understandings of sexual citizenship—i.e. the ways in which dominant discourse conceptualizes sexual freedom as toleration as opposed to the more affirmative provision of rights or creation of alternative spaces. An internet search on the 2004 job list might illustrate my point quite appositely—if one keys in the term “sexuality” in the search, approximately 30 job listings show up. Out of these, only 3 schools explicitly advertise for queer theory/LGBT studies positions—the remaining listings show up due to the fact that these schools contain non-discrimination sexual orientation clauses. The lack of institutional scope for the practice of queer work is not merely a personal gripe against the current state of the job market that is gruelingly difficult for all graduate students, no matter what area of specialization. It is not without significance, however, that there exists an overwhelming discrepancy between the number of schools that have non-discrimination policies and those that advertise for
queer studies specialists—a situation that uncannily replicates the state’s ethic of
toleration in its relative willingness to protect queer people from hate crimes (only in
theory, of course) and its unwillingness to provide civil rights and benefits to queer
people or to sanction those unions that are not organized around the nuclear heterosexual
family unit. The glaring discrepancy between the existence of non-discrimination clauses
and the actual creation of new spaces that sustain queer possibilities is a different
manifestation of the liberal humanist logic that is only willing to sympathize with tragic
queer figures (like Mathiessen or Brandon Teena) for the violence that they experience;
such “sympathy,” however, will never be extended to the creation of alternative
conditions that are more desirable or conducive for bettering the lives of queer
individuals. The ethic of toleration not only serves to preserve existing conditions of
dominance but also ultimately obscures the more urgent reparative need to forge
alternative conditions for more democratic institutional practices. In this chapter I have
argued that the historical relations that circumvent the possibilities of “reparation”—i.e.
the creation of new spaces that affirm queer political possibilities—might have something
to do with a dominant grammar of time that is in need of urgent critique. By offering the
field of American Studies a genealogical lineage that insists on a more politically
affirmative narrative of sexual citizenship, Merlis’ text performs precisely such a
reparative temporal intervention, thus “fanning the spark of hope” in the past as well as
the present. Ultimately then, the possibility of forging new spaces within the practice of
American Studies might rest crucially on the existence of the “strange temporalities” that
a queer politics of time has to offer.
Notes

1. Grossman specifically refers to Leo Marx’s works on Matthiessen such as “‘Double Consciousness’ and the Cultural Politics of F.O. Matthiessen” as an illustration of the “sympathetic” attitudes towards the literary critic.

2. A case in point would be the work of David Halperin whose theoretical works such as Saint Foucault—Towards a Gay Hagiography and How to do the History of Homosexuality offer some of the most compelling, and yet ultimately limited readings of the political potentialities that subtend the Foucauldian paradigm. In attending to the productive nature of social power and drawing on the idea that language produces rather than merely describes reality, Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis attempts to draw attention to the essentially performative dimensions of technologies of power. Drawing specifically on the productive as opposed to the negative operations of the Foucauldian notion of power, Halperin is careful to move away from the reductively nihilistic reading of Foucault, who in his insistence on the all-encompassing nature of social power did not attempt to circumvent the possibilities of resistance but in fact pointed to the liberatory promise that is immanent to power relations. Halperin’s entire project in St. Foucault, then, is an attempt to theoretically account for the possibilities of action that ensue from a Foucauldian understanding of power and resistance, and more specifically, the implications of such an understanding on queer theory and politics. In response to the various critiques of Foucault for which the power-is-everywhere mantra is confirmation of the political aporias that inform the genealogical critique of disciplinary regimes, Halperin maps out the central “discursive counterpractices” that are enabled by Foucauldian historiography. He points out:

   If, as Foucault claims in The History of Sexuality, Volume I, power’s ‘success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms,’ then the careful mapping and exposure of those mechanisms may do something to frustrate its operations . . . One way to fight homophobia, accordingly, might be to expose . . . the operations of homophobic discourses, to reveal the strategies by which discourses of medicine, law, science, and religion deauthorize lesbians and gay men, to subject those discourses to a political critique, and thereby to attempt to find ways of frustrating the political strategies immanent in their deployment, of legitimating their claims to authority and dismantling their institutional base. (St. Foucault, 51-52).

While Halperin is rightly concerned with the attempt to salvage a Foucauldian critique of power from the charge of political nihilism, it is ultimately unclear in his account how the ‘exposing’ or ‘revealing’ of homophobic discourse necessarily results in the dismantling of its institutional base. While the charge of uncritical progressivism has often been made against traditional LGBT accounts of history by the more Foucauldian accounts of historiography, Halperin’s explication is perhaps as guilty of its own tautological narrative that places its faith in the powers of demystification. In her critique of the temporal progress that characterizes paranoid thinking, Eve Sedgwick has pointed out: “Why bother exposing the ruses of power in a country where, at any given moment, 40 percent of young black men are enmeshed in the penal system? In the United States and internationally, while there is plenty of hidden violence that requires
exposure there is also, and increasingly, an ethos where forms of violence that are hypervisible from the start may be offered as an exemplary spectacle rather than remain to be unveiled as a scandalous secret.” If Halperin’s account of Foucault is ultimately only able to make visible those manifestations of violence that are already hypervisible from the start, then, ultimately they can only affirm what is already known.

3. In the case history of the Wolf-Man, Freud constructs the primal scene through the subject’s dream, thus foregrounding the centrality of interpretation in tenuously fixing an ‘origin’ to the neuroses that is experienced by the Wolf-Man. On the eve of his fourth birthday (which coincides with Christmas eve, a detail which is of much eventual significance to Freud) the Wolf-Man dreams that a pack of wolves outside his window threaten to devour him—the images of this dream continue to inform the subject’s neurosis throughout his adult life. From the various details of the Wolf-Man’s dream, Freud weaves an elaborate narrative containing some of the familiar pre-occupations of Freudian psychoanalysis—sibling seduction, the traumatic threat of castration that results when the subject witnesses his parents in the act of intercourse, anxiety produced when the subject is punished for the act of masturbation by his caretaker—pre-occupations that constitute Freud’s interpretive exercise that lead to the construction of the primal scene.

4. For instance, the resonances with queer meaning can be further discerned in Freud’s pre-occupation with the Wolf-Man’s antagonistic relation to Christmas day. In the Wolf-Man’s dream, Christmas gifts which are hanging on his tree turn into the devouring wolves; consequently, in the Wolf-Man’s memory, Christmas Day is recollected as the time when he has his first fit of rage (which represents for Freud, a masochistic desire for punishment from the subject’s father) since he is devastated over the limited number of gifts that he receives. Freud insists that this recollected moment involves a combination of the truth and fabrication on the part of the Wolf-Man since his “naughtiness” begins much earlier. The Wolf-Man, however, in temporally marking his rage on the day of Christmas, “preserve[s] the essential connection between unsatisfied love, his rage, and Christmas” (180). In a section entitled “Christmas Effects” in her essay “Queer and Now,” Eve Sedgwick points to the ways in which queer people are estranged from and at odds with a cultural logic that performs an equation of Christmas with a notion of ‘family values’ that is always already coded as a nuclear heterosexual unit. She remarks: “...the pairing “families/Christmas” becomes increasingly tautological, as families more and more constitute themselves according to the schedule, and in the endlessly iterated image, of the holiday itself constituted in the image of “the” family” (6). It is not without significance then that the Wolf-Man’s fear of rejection combined with the memory of punishment for his “naughtiness” culminate in a fit of rage on Christmas day.

A closer look at the thematic concerns of the “History of an Infantile Neurosis” also draws attention to the intimate relationship between the Wolf-Man’s case history and a construction of queer subjectivity (even while this construction must present itself in Freud’s essay through the logic of sexual normalization via the pathologization of homosexuality that must be cured). Following the Wolf-Man’s dream of being devoured by wolves, Freud begins the interpretive task of constructing the primal scene. Two
important factors play a crucial role in the sexual development of the Wolf-Man—The first is the castration complex that results from the seduction by his sister and the second is his Nanny’s warnings against masturbation that result in his sexual life taking on, what Freud calls a “sadistic-anal character” (170). The sadistic phase of his sexual development ultimately takes on a masochistic character through his memories of being chastised and beaten, which, sets the stage for the most crucial moment of the primal scene—the witnessing of his parents in the act of sexual intercourse. The experiences with his sister and his Nanny force him, according to Freud, to assume a “feminine” passive role, making his mother the object of identification during the moment of traumatic witnessing. The fear of being eaten by the wolves in the dream represents, according to Freud, the Wolf-Man’s paranoid fear of being penetrated by his father. Paradoxically however, the masochistic inclinations of the subject’s sexual development results in the simultaneous desire to be sexually satisfied by his father. Much of the consequent elaborations in Freud’s essay focus on the role of anal eroticism in the subject’s sexual development which for Freud, becomes emblematic of the Wolf-Man’s “identification with women” and his “passive homosexual attitude to men” (220).

5. Significantly, in his essay on Mathiessen, Jonathan Arac points out that “the critic most suggestively rethinking literary history . . .” when Mathiessen was writing American Renaissance was Walter Benjamin.
CHAPTER 6
AFTERWORD: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES FAILURE MAKE?

A recurring commonality that unites the various illustrations in this dissertation has been a concern with opening up the field of American Studies to new and more democratic possibilities in relation to questions of sexual citizenship. Throughout the dissertation, I have asserted that a notion of “queer pedagogy” can compel American Studies to recognize how the most embodied experiences and private affects of sexuality are fundamentally inter-connected to the critical and disciplinary practices of the field. When I began researching and writing this dissertation, most of the theory that was written in the 90s was informed by—and in turn influenced—political movements such as ACT UP and Queer Nation. Queer theorizing at this moment, arguably represented some of the most cutting edge work within academia, often blurring the boundaries between theory and practice in exciting and innovative ways. As Eve Sedgwick put it in her Foreword to Tendencies, “It feels queer, and good” (xi). More than a decade later, however, Sedgwick’s introduction to Touching Feeling captures not only a sense of bathos, but also a more cautious take on queer theory’s chiasmic relation to politics—“[I]n many areas the moment maybe be past when theory was in a very productive relation to sexual activism”(13). In many ways, Sedgwick’s shift in thinking—from a sense of optimistic excitement at the “moment of Queer” (xii) to the more reserved critique of queer performativity—reflected my own relation to the writing of this project. While I began the dissertation with a somewhat naive excitement at working within an inter-disciplinary framework and eschewing organization based on traditional genre or
historical time frames, I soon began to realize that my insistence on “interdisciplinarity” could just as easily be construed as a lack of methodology. This was especially apparent in relation to my experience on the job market where the demand for work that neatly defines genre or a historical time period clearly outweighs the market for interdisciplinary work. The gap between interdisciplinary work that is produced and the institutional indifference to such work has especially significant implications for queer theorizing which often works within the intersections of various discursive methods and modes of inquiry including political theory, literary analysis, historical investigation and philosophical theorizing. As Judith Halberstam points out in the introduction to *Female Masculinity*: “While there has been plenty of discussion in the academy about the need for interdisciplinary work, there has been far less support for such work in the university at large. . . How do we forge queer methodologies while as scholars we reside in traditional departments?” (10).

Halberstam’s question is perhaps crucial to consider not only in relation to the difficulty of forging a queer methodology, but also in considering the institutional and disciplinary spaces through which queer work is taught or disseminated. Thus even while queer theory exists as an entity within academia (through the visibility of queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and Judith Butler, in publications, and conference papers at the MLA), it could be argued that unless there is a sustained attention to material contexts and institutional practices through which queer work is actually *practiced* and *promoted*, the visibility of queer theory will not axiomatically lead to the forging of alternative spaces that are conducive to the creation of queer counterpublics. In fact, there still exists what Eve Sedgwick calls the need “to smuggle
queer representation” (3) within departments in the humanities; while women’s studies programs and ethnic studies departments are more institutionalized (although certainly not adequately funded or recognized), queer studies is often couched under the aegis of Women’s Studies or English departments. In case of the latter, it is often exists as a secondary field, inevitably shaped by the methods and interests of literary studies. Queer theoretical frameworks are often employed in this context as a set of conceptual tools that are applied to literary texts in order to “queer” canonical literary texts. While English departments have been relatively more receptive to the production of queer readings, other disciplines in the humanities such as history not only still continue to largely ignore the implications of Foucauldian and queer historiography on traditional historical practices, but even refuse to think of sexuality as a subject that has a history. In “The Discipline Problem,” Lisa Duggan attributes the absence of historians of sexuality in history departments to the perception that sexuality is more about “psychology than history” as well as the notion that gay history is the documentation of a minoritized group of people as opposed to a larger historical process that regulates the “production and organization of sexualities” (195-196).

Perhaps the failure to “market” or institutionalize queer work in some sense is not a failure at all. “Failure,” as my dissertation has consistently insisted, might in fact be the point at which the work of reparation can begin. Thus for Sedgwick, the fact that theory and queer activism share a more nebulous relation now than a decade ago, is not an occasion for political or theoretical nihilism, but a reconsideration of queer performativity in terms of the shift between paranoid to reparative thinking. In a similar vein, this project has attempted to mobilize the notion of queer pedagogy in order to re-
think the field of American Studies as a social enterprise that affirms the creation of queer possibilities. The chapters in this dissertation have thus attempted to map the various material and historical conditions that enable queer knowledge productions in very particular institutional, cultural and political contexts. In order to move away from the hermeneutic of suspicion that characterizes queer theorizing, I have approached the matter of pedagogical performativity performatively. The dissertation’s focus on what queer pedagogy can do has been a deliberate conceptual move in order to bridge the gap between queer theory and its practice in specific material contexts.

In the Afterword to *The Lesbian Index*, Kim Emery remarks: “Until and unless the contexts of our performative engagements can be made to accommodate the more democratic arrangements necessary to sustain substantially subversive variation, ‘repetition with a difference’ won’t make much difference at all” (159). While I have attempted to pay attention to the contexts of performative engagements, I would argue that of equal importance in these chapters has been an attention to the contexts where repetition takes place without a difference. All too often, the fact of reappropriation by dominant culture becomes an end point of analysis. While critiques of the commodification and watering down of queer culture have been important in troubling the equation of visibility with progress in legal, political and cultural spheres, the proof of co-option can often preclude any sort of analysis of critical or reparative re-assembling. This project’s investment in the performativity of failure has been one way of moving beyond this critical impasse. The reparative promise that such an investment offers cannot, of course, be programmatic—I do not intend the re-thinking of failure to lapse into the blithe cliche of behind-every-failure-is-a-success-waiting-to-happen sort of
narrative. Instead, the pre-occupation with pedagogical failure has been one way of attending to the question of context in this project. In other words, the failure of certain pedagogical practices, of political movements, of institutional and disciplinary frameworks becomes the lens through which a reparative reading can begin to map the specific material and historical conditions that would allow for the more “democratic arrangements” shaping performative engagements.

In the introductory chapter, I qualified that the notion of “queer pedagogy” in this dissertation did not merely refer to pedagogy in its literal sense, but also to a process of knowledge production that can be performed in various other material contexts. But in concluding, it might be only appropriate to end with where the dissertation began—in the more literal pedagogical context of the classroom. While traditional wisdom within academia often dictates a linear and trickle down relation between one’s research and one’s teaching (in that we are often trained to teach our own research), it might be useful to reverse this relation by thinking about what pedagogical experience in the classroom can bring to one’s research (and indirectly to an understanding of the performativity of theory). Rather than re-visiteding the theoretical framework of pedagogical failure I set up in the introduction, I wish to conclude with an analysis of an actual pedagogical context involving the teaching of Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* in an undergraduate queer theory class this semester that I am currently teaching. Given the high level of erudition and familiarity with post-structuralist theory which the book presumes, it is not surprising that this text was received with an overwhelming resistance even from students who were fairly comfortable with theoretical material. The students’ arguments against the text ranged from its far removed relevance from the
“real” world to its elitist epistemological presumptions that make it impossible to grasp its meta-theoretical nuances. (“Why does any of this matter?”, “Is drag the solution?” “What’s her problem with Zizek?” were the more specific articulations in this context).

While one way of attempting to qualify and explain the rhetorical strategies of *Bodies that Matter* was an attempt to point (as Butler herself convincingly does in the 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble*) to the ideological problems with the demand for clarity and lucidity (“What does ‘transparency’ keep obscure?” (xix), writes Butler), what proved to be more pedagogically useful in this context was a discussion of the performative nature of the text itself. If there can never be any neat separation between form and content, could one argue that the failure to comprehend *Bodies that Matter* at the level of form is also a failure at the level of content? In some sense, the failure to understand Butler is a failure to make the epistemological leap that sex is not a matter of anatomical fixity but an effect of power—a “failure” that must be performed since as subjects we all share, what Butler calls, “a grammar which compels us to speak” (34) as if sex were prior to discourse. In this sense, could it be possible that the failure to understand is paradoxically a reiteration of the “success” of Butler’s argument? In other words, the inability to grasp that the materiality of sex is in fact a performative effect of a process of materialization that is secured over time, is only proof of the sedimentation of performativity, and its ability to secure the fixity and permanence of meaning.

In that sense, not understanding *Bodies that Matter* is an essential process of actually understanding *Bodies that Matter*. (I try to convince my students that ironically, any claim to “understand” Butler is profoundly un-Butlerian since it conjures the illusion of a subject who is outside the matrix of power relations and who stands
before discourse). It could be argued that *Bodies that Matter* is performative not only in that its insistence on the repetitive nature of the performative process in turn forces repeated readings (where each reading accrues different meaning and signification), but also in that the text’s apparent “failure” to “matter” (or to be understood) performs a de-centering of the subject that is an integral part of Butler’s critique. In one sense, it could be argued that the inability to understand the text dismantles the fantasy of the humanist subject whose sense of self is predicated on the illusion of the full mastery of knowledge. In Butler’s words, “where there is an ‘I’ who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that ‘I’ and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will” (225). I wish to argue that in this pedagogical context, *Bodies that Matter* acts as the discourse which precedes the formation of the subject in that the failure to fully “understand” the text forestalls the creation of an all-knowing subject who magically acquires knowledge through a pedagogical “imprinting or imposition” (4). Throughout this dissertation I have asserted that re-thinking American Studies through the framework of queer pedagogy necessitates a re-thinking of the idea and ideology of “America” itself. In her essay “Explanation and Exoneration, or what we can Hear,” Butler argues that in the context of the reception to the events of 9/11, “we have to shore up the first-person point of view, and preclude from the telling accounts that might involve a decentering of the narrative ‘I’ within the international political domain” (*Precarious Life*, 6-7). Thus an attempt to perform a re-thinking of “America” in a pedagogical context must, in part, effect a “de-centering” of the “I” which would enable a shift from “the narrative perspective of US unilateralism to a consideration of “the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of
others” (7). If part of the pedagogical process is to defamiliarize students with the everyday circumstances of their lives and to enable them to formulate critical engagements with the very spatial and ideological contexts which they might experience as a “given” on a daily basis, then moments of failure in the classroom can become the platform through which such a process of defamiliarization can begin to take place. Thus in the context of the classroom engaging with not only what texts mean, but also with what they actually do could be one way of enabling different narrative perspectives which move away from the centrality of first person perspectives. It is this process of engagement that I have tried to describe in this dissertation as “queer pedagogy”—a process that does not merely exist as an abstract methodology, but as a “live” inquiry and practice performed in various real-world material contexts.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nishant Shahani received his bachelor’s degree in English at St. Xavier’s College, Bombay, and his master’s degree in English at the University of Florida. He has taught several classes in the English Department including Queer Theory and Politics and Queer Retro-sexualities. He has also taught a class on Transnational Feminism in the Women’s Studies Department. He received the English Department Teaching Award in 2001 and 2003, and the Graduate Teaching Award in 2006. His work has been published in JAC and the Michigan Journal of Feminist Studies. After completion of his Pd.D. Nishant will be an assistant professor in the Women’s Studies Department at Washington State University.