

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

QUEER CORRESPONDENCE:  
EPISTOLARY FORM AND LGBTQ+ LIFE-WRITING

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2023



## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract	viii
List of Figures	xii
Introduction	1
Chapter One “that elegant sodom in the garden of England”: Emplacement, Displacement, and Biography	26
Chapter Two Others in Attendance: Queer End-of-Life Writing and Insurgent Documentation	70
Chapter Three Encountering Address: Assembly, Affinity, and Archives in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)	133
Postscript Insistence: Address without Response	174
Bibliography	178

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Above all else, this is a dissertation about the transformative and unforeseen potentiality of address – its creative, queer, acerbic, entertaining, and affirming force. The pages and epistolary scenes that follow were made possible by gestures of address and care, and by innumerable responses, offered by friends, comrades, and mentors. It is a joy to acknowledge just a few of these correspondents here.

As a young person growing up attending New Hampshire public schools, I was lucky to be met by educators who first helped me to believe I could formulate thoughts about the world around me and bring them into an expressible form. I remain deeply grateful to Mr. Mark Holding, Ms. Melissa Oliver, Mme. Annie Roy-Faucher, Ms. Jennifer Staub, and Mr. Michael J. Fox (the world-famous teacher, not the world-famous actor).

At the University of Chicago, I have found a center of gravity and unwavering support in my committee over the years of writing this dissertation – years that have coincided with the ever-shifting ground of the COVID-19 pandemic. My chair, Maud Ellmann, encouraged me to follow my intuitions about the “queer epistolary” from my very first days in Chicago; in the years since, she has approached my work with an abiding curiosity that has pushed me to think at once more speculatively and more clearly. At every stage of writing, Sianne Ngai has helped me to see where the project might go – how methods, sources, concepts, and scenes could be shaped up in funky and illuminating ways – and has challenged me to consider the relational and political stakes of literary scholarship. Since joining the committee in 2021, Deborah Nelson has been an energizing and generous reader and an exceptionally creative mentor, who not only helped me to get out of my own way as a writer, but to find a way forward in community.

Lauren Berlant’s mentorship shapes this project in many ways. I remain especially grateful for the way Lauren encouraged me to temper my own tendency toward patience in writing and scholarly work with a red-hot sense of urgency.

Numerous colleagues and fellow travelers in the Department of English helped to transform the isolating process of dissertation writing into a scene of collaboration. My dissertation writing group – Jordan Pruett, Dana Glaser, Joel Rhone, Rachel Willis, and Sophia Velfort – read the roughest of pages with patience and encouragement. My writing partner and friend, Zachary Hope, read pieces of this dissertation with infinite generosity and speculative curiosity and offered a most meaningful sense of solidarity. Other friends and colleagues in the Department brought excitement, silliness, inspiration, and much-needed distraction to the long road of writing. I remain especially grateful to my cohort mates – Rebeca Velasquez, Jordan Pruett, Kevin King, Madison Chapman, Jake Fournier, Rivky Mondal, and Kerry Boland – and to Bill Hutchison, Steven Maye, Upasana Dutta, Marissa Fenley, Jacqui Dragu, Noah Hansen, Julia Rossi, Charlotte Cary-Beckett, Zoë Cary-Beckett, Danielle Jones, Lee Jasperse, Cassandra Lerer, Yao Ong, Rachel Willis, and Angela Wachowich. I am also immensely grateful to faculty mentors in the Department whose teaching and feedback have informed this dissertation in important ways, especially Mark Miller, Loren Kruger, Adrienne Brown, Josephine McDonagh, Tina Post, Heather Keenleyside, Rachel DeWoskin, Jennifer Scappettone, and Meghan Lamb.

Since arriving at UChicago, I have found a scholarly and pedagogical home at the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality. I am thankful to have spent years in interdisciplinary collaboration and conversation with faculty and fellow graduate students at the CSGS and CSRPC, especially Rose Owen, Eva Pensis, Agatha Slupek, Emily Bock, Shirl Yang, Paula Martin, Kris Trujillo, and Kristen Schilt.

I am profoundly thankful for the numerous administrators and staff members who make every aspect of research, writing, and teaching at the University of Chicago possible: Renaissance McIntyre, Lex Nalley Drlica, Hannah Stark, Angeline Dimambro, Lucas Merchant, Tirtzah Harris, Katie Kahal, and Anna Dobrowolski, in the Department of English; and Bonnie Kanter, Tate Brazas, and Gina Olson, at the CSGS. At UChicago GRAD, I thank Courtney Wiersema for her support and extraordinary generosity.

This dissertation argues for an expanded consideration of marginalized and ephemeral life-writings and personal and activist ephemera; I owe a debt of gratitude to the archivists and librarians who steward the sources I visit in the following chapters. I thank Mary Holt and Susie Bock at the Glickman Library at the University of Southern Maine in Portland; Saskia Scheffer at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York; and Catherine Uecker at the Regenstein Library's Special Collections Research Center in Chicago.

Finally, I address my deepest and widest gratitude to the friends and loved ones who have buoyed me forward both while writing and long before I embarked on this dissertation. When our worlds realigned in March of 2020, Pooja Nayak and Kaushik Ramu were visiting Chicago; I am thankful to have faced the uncertainty of that time together, between co-“working,” mutual distraction, and delicious rice. Those most desperate days were brightened by the joy of movie nights with Sneha Annavarapu, who brought all sorts of musics into our pandemic pod. Sanjukta Poddar and I shared the most cathartic walks (whatever the weather) as these long days stretched on. Supurna Dasgupta shared dance moves and heads-thrown-back laughter on Zoom, in the park, and on the lakefront. And Shaunak Sastry, Zhuo Ban, Kalkin Ban, and Kabir Ban continue to hold open a home full of mischief and love in Cincinnati.

Jennifer Naylor Vigil, Justin Naylor, and Cortney Zack have walked alongside me for decades – since we were all in the woods of Southern New Hampshire – and I remain thankful for their steady support and profound faith that this project would see the light of day. Jehan Madhani, Elizabeth Alderman, Liz Webber-Bruya, and Sarah Innes-Gold have accompanied me through many waystations of change, and their friendship means the world to me. Margie Sherlock and Terry Sherlock have been mentors and friends throughout all of it, from the very first back in Brookline, and I am thankful. Sucharita Kanjilal has helped me to see confidence as an extraordinary gift – one that you can offer to a friend as well as try out for yourself. Arundhati Velamur reminds me that patience and urgency can (and should) exist in the same breath, and that it's possible to find and share both of these in community. Warmest thanks also to Sucheta

Kanjilal, Karan Bavishi, and Jeremy Levenson, and to Sarah Meehan for years of patience and care.

Rebeca Velasquez was the first person to make Chicago feel like home; it is a joy to have shared so much change with her – and to approach the finish line together (finally!). Liberty Salvio, Danielle Jones, and Kristina Williams bring glee from the dance floor and karaoke booth to everyday life. Angad Singh has the sharpest eye and keenest ear – and also the gentlest way of supporting friends. Akshara Ravishankar brings delight with every “provocation,” is the ultimate orchestrator of merry schemes, and still makes space to meet people exactly where they are. Vipin Krishna meets the world with a love and generosity that’s utterly his own.

My parents, Tim McDaniel and Judy McDaniel, offered support and love for every step I took on this distant path, and I am thankful for all of it. My brother, Patrick McDaniel, never flagged in his humor or in his good faith that the project would one day come to an end.

I owe my deepest gratitude to my partner Sharvari Sastry. Sharvari could see a project when I was at sea; she could hear a writerly voice when my ears were blocked (as they often are) and when my spirits were flagging. It is thanks to her patience, clarity, compassion, humor, and brilliance that this dissertation turned out to be one; she helped me, in every way, to find the words. Sharvari makes the world more beautiful by the way she moves through it – the way she addresses people, the friendships she forges, the jokes she cracks, the plants she brings back to life. I hope this dissertation might follow her example in the very smallest of ways.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is motivated by a simple provocation: there is something queer about letters. I argue that correspondence – the back-and-forth of letter-writing – enacts a queer relational configuration among its participants. Constitutively fragmentary, foundationally relational, and characterized above all by the contingency of interpersonal address and the incertitude of anticipation, correspondence offers an expressive paradigm at odds with the timelessness of monographic literary production.

*Queer Correspondence: Epistolary Form and LGBTQ+ Life-Writing* brings together a diverse array of literary, aesthetic, and cultural artifacts spanning the twentieth century under the rubric of “queer correspondence.” I use “queer correspondence” as an analytical framework that animates two axes of inquiry: on the one hand, it denotes a genre of literary forms characterized by intersubjective relation and address (such as letters, epistolary fiction, and diary); on the other hand, it offers an interpretive methodology, one that is uniquely attuned to the untidiness of interpersonal encounter – the peculiar way in which relational forms interpellate readers across time and space. The transhistorical intervention of *Queer Correspondence: Epistolary Form and LGBTQ+ Life-Writing* is twofold: the project argues that unfinishedness is a key parameter of queer correspondence and charts a range of critical approaches that grapple with this open-endedness.

Conceptually, *Queer Correspondence: Epistolary Form and LGBTQ+ Life-Writing* pursues two questions: How is correspondence queer? And how does correspondence make queers of us? Methodologically, the dissertation addresses these questions by assembling an archive of largely epistolary life-writings produced by North American and European LGBTQ+ artists and activists spanning the long twentieth century. Each chapter animates a set of parameters or features of queer correspondence in the context of a specific intimate relationship or lifeworld. Every chapter considers queer correspondent or epistolary materials legible as such – the published letters of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West; Sylvia Townsend Warner and

Valentine Ackland's private correspondences; faxes and open letters created by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). The project also attends to life-writing artifacts that may not be overtly "epistolary" in form but nevertheless engage conventional protocols of letter-writing, and thus may be theorized as surrogate letters, taking the form of published (indeed, bestselling) novels, diary entries, political demonstrations. These actual and surrogate letters may be intimate, private between two, and yet accessible (even addressed) to others; out of their epistolary life-writings, they are formed into archives, narratives, and gardens that will eventually meet with new interlocutors and addressees. In assembling these diverse materials under the rubric of queer correspondence, this dissertation seeks to unyoke the generic construction of correspondence from its expected forms, unspooling address from its conventional coordinates.

*Queer Correspondence: Epistolary Form and LGBTQ+ Life-Writing's* historical and formal point of departure comes after the rise of the epistolary novel, beginning instead in 1897 with the publication of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, the novella-length letter Wilde wrote while incarcerated for crimes of "gross indecency." The first half of the dissertation considers epistolary scenes that represent touchstones of canonical literary history. I begin, in the Introduction, by approaching *De Profundis* as an aperture into the fraught risks and inventive creativity of queer epistolary practice. Wilde's long and posthumously published letter offers an enabling point of departure for a dissertation on queer correspondence insofar as it narrates letters as evidence (a legalistic paradigm with stakes high enough to eventuate in Wilde's incarceration) and letters as a site of play.

In Chapter 1, "that elegant sodom in the garden of England': Emplacement, Displacement, and Biography," I examine an intimate epistolary field between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, treating Woolf's experimental novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) as an anchor for this field. In the chapter, I take seriously – and literally – Nigel Nicolson's often-quoted characterization of *Orlando*: that this satirical camping on biography represents "the longest and most charming love-letter in literature." I constellate the correspondent field in

which *Orlando* is situated; in order to do so, I visit Woolf and Sackville-West's epistolary correspondences together with other life-writing forms and autobiographical projects, notably Sackville-West's long poem *Sissinghurst* (1931), an ode to her garden that originated as a letter to Woolf. More foundationally, however, my intervention seeks to contest the rarefied, tragic way in which Woolf and Sackville-West are often read together – that is, to push against an interpretive tendency that would read them through a hegemonic couple form, retroactively push them both into the closet, and assert a tragic foreclosure of queer potential between the two of them. Instead, I ask how this epistolary field works against the grain of intimate life-writing to aim at broader political and social stakes.

The second half of the dissertation focuses upon action, address, and memorialization in noncanonical queer literary and cultural archives. In Chapter 2, "Others in Attendance: Queer End-of-Life Writing and Insurgent Documentation," I turn to two compilations of epistolary and diaristic materials: Sylvia Townsend Warner's *I'll Stand by You: The Collected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland* (1930-1968, pub. 1998) and Eric Michaels's *Unbecoming: An AIDS Diary* (1987-1988, pub. 1990). Both of these works undertake projects of memorialization: Warner compiles what she calls "an archive" in the wake of Ackland (her partner of nearly 40 years)'s death, and Michaels begins writing a journal as he faces his approaching death from AIDS-related causes. I argue that these two artifacts interweave the aesthetic infrastructure of address and the evidentiary potential of life-writing forms in order to fashion insurgent archives that demand posthumous encounter.

Chapter 3, "Encountering Address: Assembly, Affinity, and Archives in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)," carries forward the previous chapter's interest in address and the archive in turning to the grassroots direct-action collective ACT UP. The chapter engages with the structure and repertoire of ACT UP – a crucial but understudied leftist movement of the 1980s and 1990s – by considering three historical moments: the circumstances of its formation; the height of its public-facing activity; and the contemporary archival present. I

argue that, across these temporal locations, ACT UP operated through a methodology of critical address: that address, internally directed and oriented toward affinity, was crucial to organizational structure; that ACT UP's direct-action repertoire teaches us how external address is tantamount to action; and that address lives on in ACT UP's archival remains. Finally, the dissertation concludes with a brief postscript that considers how queer correspondence might offer tools for responding to contemporary anti-queer and anti-trans legislation in the United States – a strategy for mustering a collective response when address is refused to a community.

Beyond epistolary forms and stylistics, queer correspondences instantiate a field liable to be breached by an outside interloper: a third (or fourth) person who casts a shadow over the correspondents' *you* and *I*. Address, *Queer Correspondence: Epistolary Form and LGBTQ+ Life-Writing* maintains, is unfinished business, enduring beyond the specific historical present of its diegesis to hail new addressees across time. By exploring how each epistolary field of the dissertation alternately beckons, summons, assembles, and/or imagines in a tertiary reader, I argue for a renewed attention to address as a critical parameter of queer activism, cultural expression, and communal history and historiography.

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: “What’s life, we ask, leaning on the farmyard gate...”	68
Figure 2: <i>Silence=Death</i> (1987)	142
Figure 3: “OVER OUR DEAD BODIES”	170

## Introduction

Toward the outset of the long letter later published under the title of *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde addresses his lover Lord Alfred Douglas with an avowal of distance: “From the very first there was too wide a gap between us.”<sup>1</sup> Composed by Wilde over the course of three months in 1897, the final year of his imprisonment for crimes of “gross indecency,” *De Profundis* hails, heralds, and rails against Douglas (addressed by the affectionate nickname “Bosie”), before opening onto an absorptive and absolving forgiveness. Wilde levies myriad charges upon Bosie – financial opportunism and exploitation, capriciousness of affections, fatal distraction from Wilde’s work, aesthetic amateurism, prideful bullying – but those charges that most smart and injure, those that stand out as particularly and willfully cruel and that motivate Wilde’s present epistolary gesture, surround letters. The long duration of *De Profundis* seeks provisionally to sound out the “gap,” epistolary and relational, between them.

For Bosie has not been writing. “Every three months people write to me, or propose to write to me,” Wilde indicates. “Their letters and communications are kept. They will be handed to me when I go out of prison. I know that they are there. I know the names of the people who have written them... That is sufficient for me. I need to know no more. Your silence has been horrible” (97). And, while Bosie has not written to Wilde, he has yet proposed to *write* Wilde for publication in print (“an article ‘on the case of Mr Oscar Wilde’”) and has sought permission through an intermediary “to publish extracts and selections from” letters he received of Wilde from Holloway Prison during the earlier days of his sentence. It is to Wilde an inconceivable betrayal to contrive to publish these letters – “those letters,” he writes, “that should have been to you things sacred and secret beyond anything in the whole world!” – and a violation not wholly unfamiliar (85). The precipitous event leading to Wilde’s incarceration, after all, turns on the

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2013) 47. Subsequent citations of this volume will be made parenthetically.

circulation of a lovely letter to Bosie and the rumors that proliferate in the wake of its material and immaterial movements. “Look at the history of that letter!” cries Wilde.

It passes from you into the hands of a loathsome companion: from him to a gang of blackmailers: copies of it are sent about London to my friends, and to the manager of the theatre where my work is being performed: *every construction but the right one is put on it*: Society is thrilled with the absurd rumours that I have had to pay a huge sum of money for having written an infamous letter to you: this forms the basis of your father’s worst attack: I produce the original letter myself in Court to show what it really is: it is denounced by your father’s Counsel as a revolting and insidious attempt to corrupt Innocence: ultimately it forms part of a criminal charge: the Crown takes it up: the Judge sums up on it with little learning and much morality: I go to prison for it at last. *That is the result of writing you a charming letter* (68; emphasis added).

To narrate the “history” of this letter is to narrate the series of legal proceedings, to rehash the familial hostilities and injuries, to pan the societal surround, mediation, and appraisal of Wilde’s public and personal tumbling into infamy: Bosie’s father’s public delivery of a shaming calling card (“To Oscar Wilde posing [sic] Somdomite,” read the message he left at Wilde’s club), the libel suit brought against him by Wilde (pridefully, in the eyes of his friends and, later, himself), and the criminal charges of gross indecency brought by the Crown after the suit’s failure.<sup>2</sup> To narrate the history of this letter is equally to attend to the delicious prurience and apathetic cruelty burgeoning and billowing amongst a public in thrall of the notion of “an infamous letter” and keen to hoist “every construction” – wicked, wayward, corruptive, queer – “but the right one” upon it. It is also to narrate the history of a correspondence – and to mark its continuation, for Wilde is writing another letter.

Writing from a Louisiana prison in 1989, ninety-two years later, N. addresses a letter to *Gay Community News*, a Boston-based leftist gay and lesbian newspaper:

My lover and I are presently incarcerated. I will be leaving soon as I was given only a 10 year sentence. My lover, on the other hand, was given a life sentence. I am doing what I can from in here but I need outside help. Neither one of us has familial support due to our open gay life style. Is there anyone that can possibly assist us legally. I’m not asking for financial support. I need legal help.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987) 537.

<sup>3</sup> Lesbians in Prison Project, Box 84.01, Folder 13; Lesbian Herstory Archives. This letter is dated 7 June 1989.

Deploying one of the only expressive technologies available to her as an incarcerated person, N. draws upon the epistolary infrastructure *Gay Community News* (GCN) had forged since its inception in 1973 between incarcerated LGBTQ+ people “on the inside” and gay community resources on the outside. Faced with a scenario handed down in an absolute and unalterable legal idiom, N. enacts two gestures of address simultaneously. On one level, she writes to GCN as an abstract organizational entity in search of resources and solidarity – “legal help” that she and her partner are unable to access through any family members. On another level, she seeks to reach a human reader – any human reader – unfurling a gesture of direct epistolary address even as she does not know who will receive the letter on GCN’s behalf: “Stop and think about it, how would you feel to suddenly be separated from your lover of many years not knowing when or if you’ll ever see them again.”

In the space of this letter, with these two coinciding epistolary gestures, N. animates the complex circuitry of address subtending GCN’s Lesbians in Prison Project – for GCN both participates in and mediates correspondences with incarcerated LGBTQ+ individuals. Journalist Mike Riegle, the chief organizer of the newspaper’s anti-carceral projects, maintains numerous close correspondences with folks on the inside, many of whom first initiated contact by reaching out to GCN seeking a subscription.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, GCN operates as a kind of correspondent waystation, facilitating forms of exchange that would otherwise be unlikely or impossible: gathering information about the conditions inside institutions and about incarcerated folks’ informational and material needs; disseminating resources (particularly related to HIV/AIDS and

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<sup>4</sup> As Amy Hoffman observes, Riegle “expanded the paper’s policy of providing free penpal ads for prisoners into a unique program that provided lesbians and gay men behind bars with information packets on subjects ranging from safer sex and living with AIDS, to legal issues, to exercises that can be done in a jail cell; advocated for prisoners who were being harassed, denied medical treatment, or isolated; and regularly published writing by and about prisoners in GCN.” See Amy Hoffman and Michael Bronski, “Michael Riegle [obituary],” *Gay Community News* 19-25 January 1992, p. 6; and Amy Hoffman, *Hospital Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) for more.

sexual health) that address an incarcerated LGBTQ+ readership in affirming and dignified terms; soliciting critical and creative writing projects for inclusion in weekly and special issues; and connecting folks on the inside with penpals on the outside and at other institutions. The coordinates of address in the epistolary field between incarcerated community members and LGBTQ+ correspondents on the outside are roving, supple, and queerly triangulated, as the latter case of penpal connections exemplifies. From the inside, incarcerated correspondents send classified ads to *GCN*; *GCN* runs these ads in its weekly “Prisoners Seeking Friends” column; finally, subscribers on the outside respond to the classifieds by addressing letters directly to the incarcerated correspondents.

In addressing *GCN* in June of 1989, N. writes into the void. She writes, that is, knowing that it is unlikely that her letter will eventuate in any corporeal transformation: that any legal aid or remediation will alter the situation she and her lover face, or that any response she receives will deliver a solution. And yet she writes it nonetheless, anticipating that it will find a reader. Now housed among many such letters in the Lesbians in Prison Project collection at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, N’s letter registers a gesture of resistance: a moment’s refusal of resignation to a sentence vulgarly absolute.

In this dissertation, I pursue a simple provocation: there is something queer about letters. I argue that correspondence – the back-and-forth of letter-writing – enacts a queer relational configuration among its participants. Constitutively fragmentary, foundationally relational, and characterized above all by the contingency of interpersonal address and the incertitude of anticipation, correspondence engages an expressive paradigm queerly at odds with the timelessness of monographic literary production. Concomitantly, I argue that correspondence offers a powerful framework for theorizing queerness beyond a neoliberal model of pluralism and inclusion. Thinking queerness *through* correspondence – a fundamentally incomplete literary form – enables an approach to the study of gender and sexuality that is attentive to the

emergence of new affinities and expressions rather than wedded to preexisting identities already recognizable as such.

This dissertation proposes “queer correspondence” as an analytical framework that animates two axes of inquiry: on the one hand, it denotes a genre of literary forms characterized by intersubjective relation and address, such as letters, epistolary fiction, and diary; on the other hand, it offers an interpretive methodology that is uniquely attuned to the untidiness of interpersonal encounter – the peculiar way in which relational forms interpellate readers across time and space. I bring these two approaches – queer correspondence as an inchoate genre category and as a speculative heuristic – to bear on a diverse set of epistolary scenes that anchor the dissertation’s chapters. Together, these multifoliate aspects of queer correspondence hail contemporaneous and contemporary readers with unexpected urgency, as with the two opening examples I consider above.

Both Wilde and N. write from a position of profound social negation, incarcerated within punitive institutions that disappear criminalized individuals from “public” view and made to contend with a violent foreshortening of expressive and relational possibilities. Wilde begins the letter that will become *De Profundis* only after a change in prison governance lifts a nineteen-month embargo on contact with Douglas – and even then, “what he wrote” on a given day was to be “removed each evening.”<sup>5</sup> N. drafts her letter from within the modern American carceral system with absolutely no network of outside support. The ambit of address between their two letters significantly differs: over three months, Wilde crafts a long gesture of direct personal address to Douglas, whereas N. issues an open and urgent gesture simultaneously impersonal (addressing the abstract entity of *GCN*) and personal (hailing a human reader). Both letters meet with indeterminate responses subsequent to their sending. Douglas never encounters the contents of Wilde’s letter, burning the copy Wilde sends upon his release in May of 1897 without

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<sup>5</sup> Colm Toibín, “Introduction,” in Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Prison Writings*, xxv.

reading it. Years later, when the letter is read out at court during a 1913 libel suit, Douglas exits the court so as not to hear it – in spite of the fact that he was in the witness box at the time.<sup>6</sup> While N. likely received a response to her letter from *GCN*, the trail runs dry from her letter of June 1989 onward. And, as we have already seen, these two letters have divergent afterlives: Wilde’s letter is transformed into a published copy, plunging into citational availability in 1905 when first published in an abridged form; N’s letter remains in manuscript in an archival site. Within these and other epistolary scenes, queer correspondence thus simultaneously materializes as a formal and relational phenomenon, a metadiscursive and thematic concern, and the site of historiographical, interpretive, and ethical questions.

In the chapters that follow, queer correspondents will write from a wide array of social positions – as land-owning aristocrats, like Vita Sackville-West in Chapter 1, and as seropositive scholars and artists united in a coalitional direct-action movement against HIV/AIDS, like Eric Michaels in Chapter 2 and Ray Navarro in Chapter 3. The queer correspondents of this dissertation write against numerous structures, forces, and patterns that constrain expressive and relational possibilities for queer people and for queer collectivity. Like Wilde and N. above, who write against the negation in which incarceration consists, they write letters and craft correspondences that contest some of their worlds’ anti-queer constraints – from hegemonic representational forms and relational structures, to the despoiling of queer history and memory, to a broad (and still extant) cultural tolerance of queer death at a massive scale. Over the following four sections, I exfoliate several of the concepts and methodological commitments that animate this dissertation’s approach to the study of queerness and correspondence. I begin with its two most wide-ranging ideas – queer epistolarity and queer correspondence – and the two correlative concepts that activate them: address and response, respectively.

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<sup>6</sup> See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 712-713, and “Manuscript of *De Profundis*,” British Library, [bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-de-profundis-by-oscar-wilde](http://bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-de-profundis-by-oscar-wilde).

## Queer epistolarity and address

In this dissertation, I use the term “queer epistolarity” to refer to the stylistic of address that emerges out of epistolary forms. In other words, I assert that it is address that activates epistolarity. Building upon Janet Altman’s pathbreaking intervention entitled *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982), I decouple epistolarity from artifacts that exclusively take the form of letters.<sup>7</sup> As the nominalization of “epistolary” – the adjectival modifier that specifies that a particular object is shaped by letters (e.g. “epistolary fiction”) – epistolarity literally takes the stylistics and features of letters out of specific genre containers. Epistolarity materializes in faxes, letters, and epistolary novels, to be sure; in what follows, I show how it also surfaces in unlikelier objects, such as biographies, diaries, and gardens. Epistolary stylistics encompass the metadata that make something into an artifact of transmission, the physical supports subtending that communication, and a more implicit characteristic of interpersonal address. Fictitious or real, epistolary metadata register the respective coordinates of sender and receiver – the addressee’s name, the addressor’s signature, their locations, and the date of sending – and often seep into the body of an artifact as part and parcel of the message itself. Metadata often figure on the supports used to construct the artifact, which can range from physical materials (i.e. ink, envelopes, typewriters) to transmissive apparatuses both analog (i.e. post and mail boxes, books, anthologies, telephones) and digital (i.e. servers, computers, web-based email portals, mobile apps). But epistolarity’s most modular feature, and the one that interests me most keenly in the dissertation, is its stylistic of address: its explicit or implicit heralding of a reader, viewer, or listener who will encounter the artifact.

Epistolary address evokes two principal Western literary traditions: first, the epistolary novel (which has its apex in the eighteenth century); and second, the ancient and modern lyric. Address is an explicit parameter of early epistolary fiction, which stages in the space of the novel

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<sup>7</sup> Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982).

an expansive and complex field of exchange between characters. Numerous circuits of address – discrete correspondences between different pairs of letter-writing characters – run across this field, which Janet Altman elegantly refers to as the “epistolary mosaic.”<sup>8</sup> The reader who encounters this field and beholds this mosaic – a narrative totality made possible by the clever “editing” together of letters from different exchanges – thus wades into the midst of numerous gestures of address even though she herself is not hailed by them.<sup>9</sup> In the context of lyric poetry, address is a more vexed parameter – at times bursting out of the surface of a poem in a bravura gesture of apostrophe or direct address, and at other times barely registering as a filmy residue upon the surface. Jonathan Culler’s important account of the lyric offers a crisp encapsulation of this tension. On the one hand, a “simple *I-thou* model” imagines a fictional speaker (“I”), who, with her feet on the ground of a fictional world, issues utterances to some second-person other (“thou”) – other subjects she hails or objects she apostrophizes. This model, Culler observes, “leaves out of account the fact that a poem is a verbal composition which will be read by an audience.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Culler proposes a view of “triangulated address,” which attends to the “characteristic indirection” of much lyric address: a model which works to “addr[ess] the audience of readers by addressing or pretending to address someone or something else, a lover, a god, natural forces, or personified abstractions.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See *Ibid.*, 167-184.

<sup>9</sup> For more on early epistolary fiction, see Thomas O. Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe: 1500-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Godfrey Frank Singer, *The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963). For important accounts of epistolarity and “fictions of letters” in the Romantic and Victorian periods, see, respectively, Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Kate Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Finally, for three accounts of modern and contemporary fictions that engage with epistolarity through both digital and analog modes, see Sunka Simon, *Mail-Orders: The Fiction of Letters in Postmodern Culture* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2002), Linda S. Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), and Rachel Bower, *Epistolarity and World Literature, 1980-2010* (Leeds: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Apostrophe,” in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) 141.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) 8.

In both of these contexts, triangulation, dissimulation, indirection, and redirection are important ways in which address is animated beyond the directness of the second-person “you.” Moreover, as an attention to each of these literary traditions illuminates, address operates as an enlivening force across diverse forms, bubbling up into portable devices – such as apostrophe, interpellation, or even performance – that operate beyond the dictates of any particular genre. The epistolary novel and the lyric both lead us to consider audiencing – the production of a third-person positionality – as a constitutive component of the literary enactment of address. I return to this tertiary dimension of address in the below section on queer correspondence and response. In the meantime, I consider how address operates queerly *from within* epistolary artifacts: how those anchored in the metadata fields of sender and receiver activate address in practice when facing their other.

Address, in my usage, is a metonym for encounter: an object becomes epistolary when address aims it elsewhere, sending it out of its own orbit by imagining a particular interlocutor who will encounter it. Address is thus ambitious; it specifies the aspirational mutual facings, the aiming at or propelling toward one another, that bring addressor and addressee into their peculiarly intimate – though constitutively distant – relational configuration. As an action, address can sound agentive: *I address you* or *my correspondent addressed me* – either formulation imputes agency to the person doing the looking or making proffer of the utterance. Yet address also has a queer way of dislocating us, not only from the others whom we are addressing, but from ourselves and from the stable identities or identity categories through which we forge a self-identification: writer/reader, lover/loved (agent/object), empowered subject-in-language/de-meaning linguistic avatar. When I write a letter and aim it at you, I make you up and I invent myself, also; opening onto this task as an agentive *I*, I watch myself loosen my grip on

what I've prepared as you remake me into your own *you*. (There's something in this of T. S. Eliot's "prepar[ing] a face to meet the faces that you meet."<sup>12</sup>)

Address is thus set in motion by the addressor's longing, but usually doesn't land in the way that she anticipates or desires. In a memorable turn of phrase, deconstructionist Jacques Derrida underscores address's aleatory aspect, telling us that "a letter can always not arrive at its destination, and... therefore it never arrives."<sup>13</sup> With this remark, Derrida speaks equally to literary signification, interpersonal encounter, and epistolary address, showing how the intention that sets any of these three operations into motion is ultimately overruled by the sheer arbitrariness of material circumstance and the unknowability of other subjects. Derrida's claim emerges in the middle of a psychoanalytic and deconstructionist conversation about address that represents an important conceptual touchstone for this dissertation. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan provided the earlier occasion for Derrida's avowal of *never ever* ("a letter can always not arrive... and therefore it never arrives") when he polemically concluded a seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter" with the following: "Thus it is that what the 'purloined letter,' nay, the 'letter in sufferance,' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination." Lacan's turn of phrase makes it sound as though address always succeeds in realizing the addressor's intention – an interpretation he coyly invites that Derrida riffs on, equally coyly. But in writing of the letter's eternal arrival, Lacan is pointing to the inevitable recursion a letter-writer encounters in addressing her other, the way in which "the sender... receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form."<sup>14</sup> The deconstructionist literary critic Barbara Johnson clarifies Lacan's conclusion by underscoring the extent to which the *letter*,

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<sup>12</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962 [1930]) 4.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) 33.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) 52-53.

and neither its sender nor its receiver, has agency. The reader, she writes, does not possess the letter “but... is possessed by it,” and so: “The letter’s destination is thus *wherever it is read*: the place it assigns to its reader as his own partiality. Its destination is not a place, decided a priori by the sender...”<sup>15</sup> Slavoj Žižek underscores the aleatory outcome of address with the following “paraphrase” of Johnson: “A letter always arrives at its destination since its destination is where it arrives.”<sup>16</sup> Much as Lacan’s conclusion gets torqued by each theorist who takes up his gambit, address bears the fingerprint of intention and yet isn’t a synonym for it. Animated by a gesture of address, an epistolary artifact promises to arrive and *might*; if it does, there’s no telling what the reader will encounter in it, even if she is its named addressee.

Address may be fallible, but it also bespeaks care and commitment – not just structural stickiness between intention and the aleatory. Optimally, epistolary address enables a shared view of the plane of encounter between addressor and addressee. Perhaps radically different in each correspondent’s mind’s eye, and inevitably the site of misunderstanding and communicative impasse as much as fruitful exchange, this plane represents the union of multiple sectors of address: what I refer to in this dissertation as a shared epistolary field. Moreover, as scholars of public-sphere theory, speech-act theory, and rhetoric teach us, address is also a powerful tool for the forging of publics and counterpublics, to borrow the title of Michael Warner’s important 2002 monograph. As Warner asserts, “[p]ublics do not exist apart from the discourses that address them.”<sup>17</sup> Address, both in Warner’s usage and in this dissertation, is a bitwise operation: something that occurs directly between one entity and another but that can be routed through an entire population “bit by bit,” with the addressor hailing one addressee, then another and another and another, until the operation of address has constellated a public through

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference,” in *The Barbara Johnson Reader: The Surprise of Otherness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014) 94.

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Why does a Letter always arrive at its Destination?” *The Symptom* 16 (Summer 2013): [www.lacan.com/symptom16/why.html](http://www.lacan.com/symptom16/why.html).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002) 72.

innumerable individual gestures.<sup>18</sup> Dina Al-Kassim reminds us that what she refers to as the “politics of address” can take wing from unexpected, “eccentric,” and “derisory” sites; novel (counter)publics, that is, can be forged through the address of “discordant tones and dissonant notes.”<sup>19</sup> As Ellen Rooney shows, address and its tropes, like apostrophe, invite frictive *and* enabling affiliation by “open[ing] a space for... response”: in her case, for a specifically coded feminist response. Similarly, in this dissertation, it is precisely such an invitation – or demand – for response that differentiates queer epistolarity from queer correspondence, as we shall presently see.<sup>20</sup>

### Queer correspondence and response

Response – the outcome targeted by address as well as its constitutive counterpart – is what sets correspondence in motion. It is response that makes correspondents shift: from addressor to addressee, writer to reader, sender to receiver, and back again. Deriving from the medieval Latin *correspondere*, to respond together or to each other, correspondence names the relation of mutual response. Because response always bespeaks an antecedent gesture of address, correspondent relation orients itself relative to a futural horizon that is continuously and indefinitely deferred. Correspondents wait: to encounter their other in the form of a response; to swap roles, from reader back to writer, in issuing their own response; and once more to receive a letter from their other that may never have been sent and may never arrive – but *might*. For, as we have seen, address aspires to response but cannot take it for granted.

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<sup>18</sup> For further context on bitwise operations in computing, see “Bitwise manipulation,” *Isaac Computer Center*, n.d., isaacomputerscience.org/concepts/data\_numbases\_bitwise\_manipulation.

<sup>19</sup> Dina Al-Kassim, *On Pain of Speech: Fantasies of the First Order and the Literary Rant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010) 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen Rooney, “What’s the Story? Feminist Theory, Narrative, Address,” *differences* 8.1 (1996): 7. See also Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” in *The Barbara Johnson Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 217-234.

Thinking correspondence conjures materials of epistolary encounter – analog and digital artifacts that resemble the material supports of epistolarity we saw above, such as letters, email threads, envelopes, pens, keyboards, letter-openers, cursors, and the synthetic chimes of aural notifications. Situated in an ongoing field of correspondent relation, these materials themselves blur the boundary between object and encounter. A letter arrives as an object in its own right and simultaneously represents a waystation embedded in a larger exchange. The expressive apparatus of an email – a mobile application or a web-based email portal – is also the highway of exchange through which the correspondent transmits and receives messages *and* the archive in which previous missives are stored. A notification announces that something has arrived: does this open a new encounter, or does it continue an ongoing one? More foundationally, is the encounter happening in me or between us? Correspondence, as we see, opens onto an expanse of untidy, indeterminate, and serial encounters between correspondents. In this dissertation, I contend that correspondence is queered precisely by the unenclosed and expansive aspect of this field of encounter.

Whereas literary genres canonically associated with epistolarity gesture toward a realistic fictionality – to the mediating hand of a fictitious “editor” who arrays an epistolary novel’s constitutive letters into a mosaic, or to the poet *cum* engineer who launches a lyric speaker into a world different from her own – published literary genres of correspondence tilt toward nonfiction. Indeed, nonfictionality is an important parameter of volumes that capture actual epistolary correspondences, which usually take the form of selected or complete “letters.” Whether gathered into curated volumes of “excellent letters” meant to entertain readers with impressive epistles of the past, like the 1945 volume *English Letter Writers*,<sup>21</sup> or assembled into a

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<sup>21</sup> C. E. Vulliamy, *English Letter Writers* (London: Collins, 1945). Part of a series entitled “Britain in Pictures: The British People in Pictures,” this volume brings together illustrated biographical accounts of famous English letter-writers and extracts from their letters. Both in its commitment to shoring up some of the “greats” – iconic practitioners of a particular life-writing genre – and its practical approach that threads biographical narratives with primary-source snippets, *English Letter Writers* represents a similar project to that pursued by Arthur Ponsonby in *British Diarists*

vast corpus of epistolary materials that serves as the basis for a scholarly history of epistolary print cultures, it matters significantly that these artifacts are original and unaltered specimens.<sup>22</sup> Formally and conceptually, however, differentiating between fictionality and nonfictionality proves slippery in the context of epistolary and correspondent materials. For one thing, fictionality rhymes with narrative. While the author of an epistolary fiction can first construct a teleological narrative and then pursue it through the epistolary building blocks of fictitious letters, the editor of an actual correspondence often confronts a long exchange unmotivated by plot. Consequently, many nonfictive compilations of correspondences that take the form of “Selected” rather than “Complete” letters actually construct a narrative in the process of sampling from a larger mass. This narrative is constructed with a third-person reader in view. When this reader encounters an actual correspondence that has been filtered through a teleological lens, she engages with an emplotted narrative that is at once factually “true” and engineered by an editor. On the other side, epistolary fiction derives its titillating aspect of suspense and secret voyeurism from the extent to which it apes the stylistics of actual letters – allowing its readers to delight in the pleasure of sneakily engaging with “the real thing” (i.e. the actual letters of other people).

This fantasy of published letters as “the real thing” illumines a larger cultural fantasy about the unique (and uniquely intimate) evidentiary potential of correspondent materials: a

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(London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1930). This latter volume concludes with an illuminating entitled chapter: “The Best Diarists.”

<sup>22</sup> As an illustrative sample of scholarship on English print cultures from the early modern era through the nineteenth century, see Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), Diana G. Barnes, *Epistolary Community in Print, 1580-1664* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1600-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986). For historical studies of letter-writing and women’s expression and agency, see James Daybell and Andrew Gordon, eds., *Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture, 1450-1690* (New York: Routledge, 2016) and Melanie Bigold, *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation, and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

widespread belief that letters are singularly capable of conveying unmediated truth or capturing intimacy. This belief hastens a literary critical tendency of “going to the letters” in order to decode an aesthetic artifact through the purportedly nonfictive lens of an author’s life-writings. It also fuels a feverish tendency toward collection and totalization: the pursuit of the impossible goal of collecting “all of the letters.” More broadly, this belief animates a wide range of projects that seek to exploit epistolary artifacts’ “evidentiary” richness. These range from curatorial projects, like the collections of “great letters” considered above; to public assertions of factuality, as with testimonials vouching for slave narratives as “true”;<sup>23</sup> to endeavors of settler colonial boosterism facilitated by published “emigrant letters.”<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, across incredibly diverse historical and geographical contexts and aesthetic forms, published letters from epistolary correspondences are often met with empiricist-minded reading practices that mine letters for portable data. As we will see across the chapters of this dissertation, while some queer correspondences are considerably distorted by such interpretive expectations (as with the correspondence of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West in Chapter 1), others exploit and actually invite them (as with Sylvia Townsend Warner in Chapter 2 and ACT UP in Chapter 3).

Against this paradigm of evidentiary airtightness, in this dissertation, I insist upon queer correspondence as a site of multitudinous uncertainty and contingency. What’s queer about correspondence in general, I maintain, lies in the way it inscribes its participants into a field of ongoing encounter. Constantly repositioned as the “other” of their other, buffeted by aspirational but unreliable gestures of address, correspondents are constantly faced with their own lack of agentive capacities. Neither individual can provide this relation with its center of

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<sup>23</sup> For a helpful exploration of the slave narrative “as autobiography and as literature,” and its dual narrative and nonfictive functions, see James Olney, “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature,” *Callaloo* 20 (Winter 1984): pp. 46-73.

<sup>24</sup> I thank Jo McDonagh for bringing this settler colonial form to my attention. For more, see Josephine McDonagh, *Literature in a Time of Migration: British Fiction and the Movement of People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 241-242 and 241n47.

gravity; both individuals remain in suspension, waiting to receive – and themselves produce – a response.

But what differentiates the ordinary queerness of all correspondence from this dissertation's account of "queer correspondence" arises from the way that these suspensive contingencies ramify equally for the third-person reader who arrives into the fold of a correspondence belatedly. This interloper, to whom I refer throughout the dissertation as a "tertiary reader," occupies a position of both epistemological insecurity and interpellative proneness. On the one hand, having arrived after what I call the "diegesis" of the correspondence – its synchronic unfolding "in real time" between the original correspondents – she must constantly look back, toggling between individual epistolary materials and their embeddedness in a larger series of responses. On the other hand, queer correspondences break the metaphorical "fourth wall" of second-person address to hail the tertiary reader at unexpected moments and in unforeseen ways. As we will encounter in the three chapters that follow, queer correspondences alternately beckon, invite, assemble, and/or imagine a tertiary reader into their epistolary field. She is suddenly cast into the queer position of the original correspondents: addressed a gesture, she is now expected to respond. By reanimating response not only as a material of the past but as a demand issued to future interlopers, queer correspondents tune in to an important third parameter of the relational form: its unendingness and incompleteness.

### **Unfinishedness**

Phenomenologically, correspondence consists in anticipatory longing, as we have seen: for an arrival from one's correspondent (a response signaling the success of one's previous gesture of address); for roles once more to switch, from addressor to addressee. The epistolary field is thus a plane of anticipation; to rework Roland Barthes, the correspondent is "the one

who waits.”<sup>25</sup> The correspondent’s longing looks and sounds amorous, moreover, not only because her position rhymes with Barthes’s famous figuration of the lover – “Am I in love? Yes, since I’m waiting”<sup>26</sup> – but because she is always longing “to reach you,” her correspondent other.<sup>27</sup> And not only is she longing to reach on a single discrete occasion; further, she is longing to long; longing for arrival, delivery, so as to effect the continuation of the circuit of address that positions her close to and far from her correspondent other in the first place.

Poised between arrival and ongoingness, between ultimate *telos* and repetition, the correspondent inhabits a queer temporal position, one that is constitutively and recursively anticipatory. For her, time is out of joint. She straddles her current place in time and the dreaded/desired future of the correspondence’s next arrival; “now” is always also the “not-yet” of delivery. The correspondent’s temporal disjoint resonates to Lee Edelman’s account of queerness as a disorganizing force – a force that disturbs rather than affirms identity, as he asserts: “We’re never at one with our queerness; neither its time nor its subject is ours.”<sup>28</sup> The correspondent’s timescale diverges from that of the world around her, in a way that recalls Mark Rifkin’s intervention against the temporal hegemony of “settler time.”<sup>29</sup> The queer temporality of correspondent anticipation does not proceed toward completion. Even though the correspondent faces a promising horizon every time she launches a missive in the direction of her other, she never inches closer to it.

Put differently, the timeline of correspondence doesn’t add up to a particular outcome or totality in the way that a “chrononormative” temporal order – to borrow Elizabeth Freeman’s

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<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010 [1977]) 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Browning, *I’m Trying to Reach You* (Columbus: Two Dollar Radio, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Qtd. in Elizabeth Freeman et al, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ* 13.2/3 (2007) 189. See also Lee Edelman, “Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That’s Out of Joint,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62.2 (Summer 2011): pp. 148-169.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

coinage – does.<sup>30</sup> Chrononormativity – or “straight time” – marries the normative timelines of heterosexual reproduction and capitalist accumulation into a progressive trajectory that moves an individual through canonical stations of nuclear kinship (e.g. birth, a monogamous heterosexual relationship, reproduction) and capital (e.g. progressing through normative educational institutions, renting a home, buying a house, saving for retirement, producing an inheritance for offspring).<sup>31</sup> Unlike the progressive timelines of straight time, and unlike a teleological narrative that arrives at a consolidatory ending, correspondence does not add up to anything in particular; instead, it merely *continues*, holding steady a queer orientation to the passage of time while the metronome of calendar time ticks on. Some scholars of queerness and time designate as “queer time” any deviations a queered subject makes from a normative timeline, rhythm, or style of inhabiting time. In these accounts, “queer time” names a swerve, an aberration, or a refusal, recalling Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s 1993 theorization of “queer” as a tangent-pursuing, time-halting interruption of normative reproductive circuitry; etymologically as well as politically, Sedgwick writes, *queer* names a “continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*.”<sup>32</sup> Building upon this important account of queerness as a temporally interruptive category, some scholars locate queer and trans identities precisely through their optative departures from heteronormative timelines. Jack Halberstam, for instance, points out queers as those who, faced with the reproductive expectations of chrononormative trajectories, assert: “[T]his is not my timeline.”<sup>33</sup> Queer time, in this paradigm, is the site of a refusal: of an insistence upon *not that*.

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” *Social Text* 23.3/4 (Fall/Winter 2005): pp. 57-68.

<sup>31</sup> For two excellent accounts of “straight time” in relation to interruptive queer temporalities, see Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005) 4-7, and Jaclyn I. Pryor, *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017) 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) xii.

<sup>33</sup> Qtd. in Freeman et al, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” 182.

This dissertation's account of queer correspondence as a relation characterized by anticipation and incompleteness offers a new view of queerness as the site of ontological or optative suspension. Although often positioned opposite one another in rehearsals of scholarly debates, both Lee Edelman and José Esteban Muñoz theorize queerness as a site of suspension. For Muñoz, queerness "is not yet here," but beckons with palpable promise: "We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality."<sup>34</sup> For Edelman, queerness draws attention to the artifice of political life and identity, "expos[ing] the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality" and laying bare the foundationally "*promissory*" nature of identity.<sup>35</sup> The correspondent likewise occupies a fundamentally promissory position, startled as each arrival delivers an ecstatic sense that "*This is it!*" (it has come!) only to find herself soon after once more in wait. Joining with important interventions by Emily Bock and Hilary Malatino, this dissertation offers another figuration of queer time through the figure of "the one who waits."<sup>36</sup>

As a parameter of correspondence, unfinishedness does not only ramify through the correspondent's phenomenological experience of unending anticipation; it also shows up in the incompleteness and fragmentation of the epistolary object, which is always multiple. For, when a tertiary reader encounters a correspondence – for instance, a contemporary scholar reading *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* – she is hailed into an inherently incomplete artifact. Woolf's published letters, after all, encompass six volumes, cover dozens of Woolf's epistolary exchanges, and yet convey only one side of those conversations. Moreover, these published letters are marked by

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<sup>34</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 1.

<sup>35</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 6; 8.

<sup>36</sup> See Hilary Malatino, "The Waiting Room: Ontological Homelessness, Sexual Synecdoche, and Queer Becoming," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 34 (2013): pp. 241-244, Emily Bock, "...waiting..." in *Queer Nightlife*, eds., Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, Ramón H. Rivera-Servera (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), pp. 42-52, and Bock, *Ordinary Queens: The Ball, the Streets, and the Beyond of Survival*, 2021, University of Chicago, PhD dissertation.

omissions – “of words or sentences which might cause pain to people still alive,” the editors indicate – which do not touch upon the untold number of letters entirely omitted from publication.<sup>37</sup> Whatever totalization a particular volume offers of Woolf’s correspondences is partial. The tertiary reader is thus compelled to approach the correspondence through a kind of will to completion, which often resembles Jacques Derrida’s account of “archive fever.”<sup>38</sup> In this scenario, the correspondence either becomes an overdetermined site of archival plenitude – an infinitely mineable resource, as we saw in the previous section – or inaugurates an obsessive treasure hunt for missing letters. But, as we have already learned from the interminability of response and the palpable never-endingness of correspondent relation, no particular letter or set of letters could ever “recover” or “restore” a correspondence in its entirety.<sup>39</sup> Across the dissertation, I pay particular attention to how each correspondence I consider exploits the fact of its own incompleteness, inviting tertiary readers into specific kinds of “transhistorical touch,” contact, and encounter.<sup>40</sup>

### **Form and/as relation**

Queer correspondence thus requires us to toggle continuously between form and relation: to adopt a critical view of form *as* relation. Epistolary and correspondent forms, as we will see, simultaneously represent the result of relational contact, a record of relation, and the site

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<sup>37</sup> Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1929-1931* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) xi.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” trans. Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics* 25.2 (Summer 1995): pp. 9-63.

<sup>39</sup> See Christina Hanhardt in Anjali Arondekar et al, “Queering Archives: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Radical History Review* 122 (May 2015): 230; and Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> For more on transhistorical touch and transtemporal encounter, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), Nishant Shahani, *Queer Retrosexualities: The Politics of Reparative Return* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2012), Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), and Jaclyn Pryor, *Timeslips*.

of a collaborative practice – much as *De Profundis* at once arrives out of a correspondence, narrates the history of that correspondence, and actively continues the correspondence in practice. Put differently, in this dissertation, I approach form as an expressive medium for interpersonal relation, a series of concatenated encounters, and a practice in its own right. By centering epistolary artifacts, correspondent archives, and fields of interpersonal address, I move away from an account of form that takes monographic production and aesthetic wholeness for granted. Instead, I propose a view of form that is not single-authored and does not orient itself toward any prescribed or imposed endpoint, but that instead insists upon the continuousness of relational practice.

In proposing (epistolary) form as (unfinished) relation, I draw principally upon three interpretive and theoretical traditions: psychoanalysis, as I indicated above; autobiography and life-writing studies, which I explore at length in Chapters 1 and 2; and attunements to “social forms” and the social affordances of form drawn from literary studies scholarship in English. These latter interventions consider the mutual imbrication of aesthetic form, interpersonal relation, and social and political history in diverse ways. In a way that resonates to this dissertation’s attention to specifically *epistolary* forms, some of these accounts put pressure on particular historical constructions of genre – exemplarily the novel and the lyric – to speculate on how forms are shaped by social worlds and how they, in turn, alter (geo)political imaginaries.<sup>41</sup> Other accounts, like Caroline Levine’s important monograph *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), propose new taxonomies of – and new recombinatorial possibilities for – formal structures and configurations that rove aesthetic, political, and social domains.<sup>42</sup> Levine’s

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<sup>41</sup> For four illustrative examples, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), Dorothy Hale, *Social Formalism: The Novel in Theory from Henry James to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Walt Hunter, *Forms of a World: Contemporary Poetry and the Making of Globalization* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), and Anahid Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: On Poetry and Social Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

intervention offers an enabling approach to form not as an aesthetic construct with fixed contents or features, but as a patterning – something that striates an object, scene, or political order in a particular way. Anna Kornbluh’s recent monograph *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (2019) investigates what such socially and aesthetically expansive forms *build*: how what she terms a “political formalism” might furnish new ideas “about making, about making relations, about making spaces and orders deliberately and justly.”<sup>43</sup> I follow Levine and Kornbluh’s pliable orientation to what constitutes a form – and what forms can unexpectedly be made to constitute – in my own attention to the aesthetic expansiveness and interpersonal infrastructure of epistolary form. Other important interlocutors for this project offer a view of how forms – and, in one case, styles – attempt to mediate crises, not only *representing* crisis at a reflective remove but actively and immediately *responding* to it. In her account of the “calamity form,” Anahid Nersessian describes how form attempts to respond to and cooperate with, to mediate and understand, a “traumatic historical event”; as she puts it, the calamity form seeks to “match up this thing in the world with a performance, habit, or style.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in his recent monograph, Michael Dango conceptualizes four “styles of repair” that attempt to surround and cauterize crises of recognition and control.<sup>45</sup>

I draw upon these interventions from literary studies for their rich ways of exfoliating form’s situatedness in interpersonal circuits and social and political worlds. This dissertation, however, begins from a different point of departure. Whereas the above accounts, in mutually distinct ways, begin with a threshold notion of form that is then made relational when yoked to a specific social or interpersonal context, I propose a conception of form that is run through with relation from the outset. For a queer correspondence not only functions as a figure for (and

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<sup>43</sup> Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019) 4.

<sup>44</sup> Nersessian, *The Calamity Form*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Dango, *Crisis Style: The Aesthetics of Repair* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

microcosm of) a social world, and not only offers an instrument for worlding; foundationally, it always and already bespeaks – indeed, is constituted by – a field of interpersonal relation.

## Chapters

Each chapter of this dissertation explores a different twentieth-century correspondence. I assemble a wide epistolary field around each of these correspondences, which emerge out of queer relationships, lifeworlds, and movements of the twentieth century and bring us alternately to London, Kent, Dorchester, Brisbane, New York City, and Chicago. I bring together a diverse assemblage of artifacts in constellating these epistolary fields: both specifically epistolary materials (including letters, faxes, mailing lists, protest slogans) and other aesthetic and cultural objects that bear no explicit markers of address (including biographies, gardens, diaries). I conclude each chapter with a coda in which I explore how the tertiary reader is arrives into the chapter's particular epistolary field, speculating on how the queer correspondents she encounters inscribe her into the unfinished business of their address.

In Chapter 1, “‘that elegant sodom in the garden of England’: Emplacement, Displacement, and Biography,” I examine an intimate epistolary field between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, using Woolf's experimental novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) as a prism through which to approach their correspondence. In the chapter, I take seriously – and literally – Nigel Nicolson's often-quoted characterization of *Orlando*: that this campy satire of Victorian biography represents “the longest and most charming love-letter in literature.” Beginning with Woolf's first conception of the project, I sketch an expansive plane of correspondent exchange and collaboration between Sackville-West and Woolf that extends beyond their lifespans, constellating the epistolary field in which the novel/biography/letter *Orlando* is situated. I bring together the pair's epistolary correspondences, two of their published monographic projects (*Orlando* and Sackville-West's long poem *Sissinghurst* [1931]), and numerous of their other life-writings. I show that approaching the two writers primarily as correspondents – and positioning

their public-facing published works within that correspondence – illumines profound political and artistic differences between them. These differences, I show, have significant implications for the study of a specifically queer paradigm of correspondence and life-writing. My intervention also seeks to contest the rarefied, tragedified way in which Woolf and Sackville-West are read together – that is, to push against an interpretive tendency that would read them through a hegemonic couple form, retroactively push them both into the closet, and assert a tragic foreclosure of queer potential.

In Chapter 2, “Others in Attendance: Queer End-of-Life Writing and Insurgent Documentation,” I turn to two compilations of epistolary and diaristic materials: Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *I’ll Stand by You: The Collected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland* (1930-1968, pub. 1998) and Eric Michaels’s *Unbecoming: An AIDS Diary* (1987-1988, pub. 1990). Both of these works undertake projects of memorialization: Warner compiles what she calls “an archive” in the wake of Ackland (her partner of nearly 40 years)’s death, and Michaels begins writing a journal as he faces his approaching death from AIDS-related causes. I argue that these two artifacts interweave the aesthetic infrastructure of address and the evidentiary potential of life-writing forms in order to fashion insurgent archives that demand posthumous encounter. While Warner sets out expressly to ensure that she and Ackland will be “remembered together,” Michaels reluctantly begins diary-keeping as a way to contest and register his resistance to the prevailing homophobia of Australian state bureaucracy and public discourse. Importantly, both Warner and Michaels fix their writerly and editorial eyes to an unknowable posterity; as a result, Warner addresses a bundle of her correspondences with Ackland to queer readers yet to come and Michaels transmogrifies his rageful diary into a letter – an artifact that will hail readers when published after his death.

Chapter 3, “Encountering Address: Assembly, Affinity, and Archives in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP),” carries forward the previous chapter’s interest in address and the archive in turning to the grassroots direct-action collective ACT UP. The

chapter engages with both the organizational structure and embodied repertoire of ACT UP – a crucial but understudied leftist movement of the 1980s and 1990s responsive to the ongoing crisis of HIV/AIDS. I consider ACT UP at three distinct historical moments: in the circumstances preceding its formation in Manhattan (“Before,” c. 1987); at the height of its public-facing activity (“During,” c. 1987-1993); and from the contemporary archival present (“After,” c. 2023). I argue that, across these temporal locations, address represented a crucial activist technology for the collective in bidirectional ways: that address, internally directed and oriented toward affinity, was crucial to organizational structure; that ACT UP’s direct-action repertoire teaches us how external address is tantamount to action; and that address lives on in ACT UP’s archival remains.

Finally, the dissertation concludes with a brief postscript that considers how queer correspondence might offer tools for responding to contemporary anti-queer and anti-trans legislation (gathered under the banner of “Don’t Say Gay” bills) in the United States. In conversation with Jules Gill-Peterson’s pathbreaking work on trans childhood, I ask whether queer correspondence can aid in mustering a collective response when address is refused to a community.

## Chapter One

‘that elegant sodom in the garden of England’: Emplacement, Displacement, and Biography

*isn't it time  
to say the garden  
is wasted*

*on us?*

– Maureen McLane, “Late Hour”<sup>1</sup>

In a letter dated 9 October 1927, Virginia Woolf describes to Vita Sackville-West the sudden genesis of a new writing project – an idea that springs forth, “as if automatically,” from the depths of writerly “despair”: “I couldn’t screw a word from me; and at last dropped my head in my hands: dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: *Orlando: A Biography*. No sooner had I done this than my body was flooded with rapture and my brain with ideas. I wrote rapidly till 12.”<sup>2</sup> From the very first, Woolf conceives of this project as an ironic and diverting romp – a work of fiction “to be written as I write letters at the top of my speed,” she determines in her diary, intended to evoke a sense of the fantastical: of “satire & wildness.”<sup>3</sup> (“Sapphism,” moreover, “is to be suggested.”) But in spite of its fanciful inclinations, the project will also have about it what Woolf calls “the kind of shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to my people,” and it is for this reason that she addresses Sackville-West the present letter:

But listen; suppose *Orlando* turns out to be Vita; and its all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind (heart you have none, who go gallivanting down the lanes with Campbell) – suppose there’s the kind of shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to my people, as the lustre on an oyster shell (and that recalls another Mary) suppose, I say, that Sibyl next October says “Theres Virginia gone and written a book about Vita” and Ozzie chaws with his great chaps and Byard guffaws, Shall you mind? Say yes, or No:...<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen McLane, “Late Hour,” *This Blue* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014) 10.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1923-1928* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977) 428; Letter #1820, dated 9 October 1927.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Olivier Bell, ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1925-1930* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 131; this entry is dated 14 March 1927.

<sup>4</sup> *Letters III* 428-429.

Sackville-West responds to Woolf's ebullient and teasing missive with enthusiastic assent, granting her "full permission" for the project to proceed and expressing herself to be "thrilled and terrified" at "the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando." She adds just one caveat: "Only I think that having drawn and quartered me, unwound and retwisted me, or whatever it is that you intend to do, you ought to dedicate it to your victim."<sup>5</sup> Woolf's famously campy novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), now a canonical work of queer modernist fiction, thus begins through correspondence. Already the site of a conversation in October 1927, it will prove to be an endeavor of collaboration – an exemplary artifact of the decades-long field of exchange between the two writers.

In this chapter, I explore the multifoliate expansiveness of queer correspondence by turning to one of the most iconic letter-writers and novelists of the first half of the twentieth century – Virginia Woolf – and considering one of her most famous (and most widely mythologized) correspondences: with aristocrat and fellow writer Vita Sackville-West. I offer a speculative approach to their correspondence, charting a diverse and capacious map of the expansive epistolary field between them. In so doing, I treat this field as a plane of epistolary and literary collaboration: one in which Woolf and Sackville-West discussed shared concerns about works-in-progress and the publishing marketplace (especially as these pertained to the operations of the Hogarth Press, which Woolf ran together with her husband Leonard, and for which Sackville-West produced numerous important "best-sellers"<sup>6</sup>); and one that importantly shaped their respective creative projects. Although characterized by profound literary and interpersonal intimacy between the two, their correspondence remains a plane of profound differences – artistic, characterological, and especially political. I approach Woolf and Sackville-West's

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<sup>5</sup> Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell Leaska, eds., *The Letters of Vita Sackville West and Virginia Woolf* (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc., 1984) 238; dated 11 October 1927.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent account of Sackville-West's impact on the Hogarth Press as a business, see Stephen Barkway, "'Oh Lord what it is to publish a best seller': The Woolfs' Professional Relationship with Vita-Sackville-West," in *Leonard and Virginia Woolf, the Hogarth Press and the Networks of Modernism*, ed. Helen Southworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 45.

correspondence, and constellate the multimodal epistolary field between them, through the prism of *Orlando*, which Nigel Nicolson (Sackville-West's son) once memorably referred to as "the longest and most charming love-letter in literature."<sup>7</sup> I take this characterization seriously – indeed, literally: situating the novel in the context of the larger correspondence, considering various "responses" with which it meets, and reflecting on this campy "biography" of Orlando/Sackville-West as an endeavor preoccupied with collaboration.

In probing the epistolary field between Sackville-West and Woolf in this chapter, I show how peculiarly expansive a queer correspondence can be: how formally diverse, how widely situated in space, and how remarkably extended in time (indeed, in this case beyond the lifespans of its two participants). This queer correspondence, I will demonstrate, encompasses letters, fiction, poetry, and gardens. Moreover, it is animated by considerable differences between its correspondents, particularly around the terms of publicity and privacy as they relate to life-writing and political life. As we shall see, these twinned considerations surface in important and divergent ways in the two texts that ground the chapter: Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* and Sackville-West's long poem *Sissinghurst*.

When the idea for *Orlando* spontaneously burst into Woolf's imagination in October of 1927, it arrived, as she puts it to Sackville-West in her earlier letter, as a project that would "revolutionise biography."<sup>8</sup> Against a version of canonical late-Victorian biography that sets its subjects apart from their others in order to produce accounts of their lives as sovereign individuals, Woolf works toward a vision of biography transformed by the interpersonally rich attunements of life-writing. As I show through a close engagement with "A Sketch of the Past," her unpublished essayistic exploration of the memoir from 1939, for Woolf, life-writing centrally involves tuning in to interdependencies with others. I situate this account of Woolfian life-writing in comparison to the late-Victorian institution of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-

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<sup>7</sup> Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage* (New York: Atheneum, 1973) 186.

<sup>8</sup> *Letters III*, 429.

1900), a project pioneered by Woolf's father Leslie Stephen. Whereas the *Dictionary of National Biography* produces an entry for each of its innumerable subjects as autonomous individuals, Woolf's vision of life-writing centers upon the dynamism and fluidity of subjectivity and the crucial importance of other people to individual experience. I then turn to *Orlando* as a work that operates in several registers simultaneously: as a novel, a biography, a work of life-writing, and a letter. I first emphasize the importance of Sackville-West's collaboration to the production of the text – from her proffer of resources from Knole, the Kentish country home of the Sackvilles, to her participation in photo shoots. Sackville-West's involvement further blurs the line between fiction and nonfiction – a site of cloudiness activated by the work's fundamentally hybrid genre: a biography in name (as its subtitle indicates), and a novel in form. I finally offer a close reading of *Orlando* that explores it as a work about coming into writing – with the poet Orlando a close correlate for Sackville-West – whose climax arrives with its subject's sudden realization of “the need for other people”: readers.

I next turn to *Sissinghurst* (1931), a poem written by Sackville-West that originates as a letter to Woolf. I show how this not-very-epistolary epistolary poem (originally entitled “Sissinghurst Thursday”) stages an encounter with place – specifically, with the estate of overgrown gardens and crumbling brick edifices at Sissinghurst Castle that Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicolson had purchased in May of 1930. *Sissinghurst* serves at once to transmit a dynamic image of this site to Woolf – Sackville-West's original addressee – and to dramatize the estranging sense of otherness that an encounter with an opaque and unfamiliar environment can entail. The speaker of *Sissinghurst*, we will see, is strangely undone by the experience of moving through the grounds, simultaneously fascinated and alienated by the palpable sense of its premodern past. One result of the poem's attunement to its speaker's sense of alienation resonates directly to Woolfian life-writing: dislocated in space and time, she sets “*this I*” – her present avatar – aside. At the same time, however, *Sissinghurst* works toward a countervailing project, invoking the literary genre of the seventeenth-century country house

poem to rove the coordinates of a newly parceled estate. In this way, this enigmatic poem about the limits of the subject to apprehend the indeterminacy of place also works toward the very concrete project of reifying an entitlement to private property. For, as we shall see, Sackville-West and Nicolson bought Sissinghurst Castle after having been ousted from Knole, Sackville-West's childhood home, owing to laws of primogeniture. For Sackville-West, who would fly the flag of the Sackvilles over her new home from 1930 on, Sissinghurst represented a new ancestral estate – an invented site of heritage and inheritance. Viewed through this lens, *Sissinghurst* seeks to prop up a very specific “I” – that of a legal person capable of making a specific legal claim – and unfolds as an insidious romance of private property, staging a poesis not of place but of a birthright.

This chapter is thus buoyed by a tension at once artistic and political between the two writers – one that might be crudely encapsulated as a quibble between a radical openness of aesthetic and relational form and a committed re-entrenchment of private property. Woolf, I argue, seeks to offer a socially and interpersonally open approach to life-writing, one that shifts the coordinates of auto/biographical expression from the personal, private, and stable to the relational, public-facing, and dynamic. Sackville-West, on the other hand, continually shifts toward private property, turning away from public literary pursuits and toward the crafting of individual inheritance. Whereas Woolf aerates the “I” of a life-writing project, Sackville-West reifies its domain; whereas Woolf seeks to explode the “I” and send it beyond the wrapper of its “body-envelope,” Sackville-West seeks to make a legal claim by and through it.<sup>9</sup>

I close by considering two scenes of remediation and revisitation that encounter Woolf and Sackville-West's correspondence through new angles of approach. The first, a poem that Sackville-West distills from a prose passage in *Orlando*, offers a public-private tribute to Woolf in 1945, four years after her death. The second scene, a diary entry written by the gay filmmaker

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<sup>9</sup> Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) 126-127.

and artist Derek Jarman, records a part-imaginary, part-real visit to Sissinghurst in September of 1988, twenty-six years after Sackville-West's death. Jarman juxtaposes a speculative view of Sissinghurst's queer past over its contemporaneous form as a hugely popular tourist destination, thereby reanimating a now-public site with a figuration of its private past. Together, these remixes of – and new approaches to – scenes from Woolf and Sackville-West's correspondence serve to complicate the interpersonal coordinates of their respective and collective approaches to life-writing by opening them to new addressees.

In positioning Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf together as correspondents, this chapter seeks to work against a commonplace in Modernist Studies – and in LGBTQ+ history – of viewing the two exclusively through the hegemonic lens of the contemporary couple form. It is in part for this reason that I refer to them throughout by their surnames rather than through the Bloomsbury-insider shorthand of “Vita and Virginia.”<sup>10</sup> This dominant interpretive approach, which retrospectively entwines the two writers in a lesbian coupledness tragically foreclosed by the homophobic circumstances of their daily lives, has the insidious effect of silently projecting contemporary understandings of sexuality and contemporary relational templates onto the past. This tendency obtains equally in vernacular and scholarly accounts of Woolf and Sackville-West. In a 1984 edition of letters between the two,<sup>11</sup> Mitchell Leaska and Louise DeSalvo approach their friendship through a profoundly teleological frame – one that translates it into a passionate love affair abruptly curtailed, rather than treating it as a close, decades-long relationship that took different forms at different times. On a more informal register, a 2014 “listicle” from the lesbian and queer web magazine *Autostraddle* positions Woolf and Sackville-West's correspondence as #6

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<sup>10</sup> “Vita and Virginia” is also the title of a 2019 feature film. See *Vita and Virginia*, directed by Chanya Button, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> See Leaska and DeSalvo, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*. This volume was originally published under the slightly modified title *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf* and emphasized Sackville-West's side of the correspondence. Accordingly, subsequent versions issued under the updated title include excerpts from Woolf's letters to Sackville-West, almost always in excerpted form.

in their ranking of “15 Ladies Who Were Writing Sexy Lesbian Love Letters Before You Got Born” – an appreciative and wry wink at the currents of “sapphism” between them that would be unproblematical if not for its conservative relational accounting.<sup>12</sup> (Like many rehearsals of Woolf and Sackville-West’s relationship, this article asserts that the two slept together “only... twice” – a tabulation dubious not only for its specious accuracy but further because of the heterosexist sexual imaginary subtending it.<sup>13</sup>) Most recently, a 2021 edition of selected correspondence, edited by the lesbian artist and memoirist Alison Bechdel and published under the title *Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West: Love Letters*, again approaches their letters through the singular waystation of the couple form. The resulting volume produces a teleological narrative that has eyes only for a projected love affair, as Bechdel’s introduction indicates: “Although their early letters contain sparks of flirtation, it takes a while for things to heat up.”<sup>14</sup>

An interpretive approach of this kind distorts Sackville-West and Woolf’s friendship and correspondence in profound ways. Transposed onto a tragic narrative template, their relationship is recast as a great queer love despoiled by the unenlightened times of the past – a narrative that represents a considerable factual distortion of their respective lives. For one, Woolf, like other members of the Bloomsbury Group, was no stranger to experimental or queer relational

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<sup>12</sup> Comically, Sackville-West’s correspondence with a previous lover, Violet Trefusis, comes in hotter on this ranking, at #5. See Ryan Yates, “15 Ladies Who Were Writing Sexy Lesbian Love Letters Before You Got Born,” *Autostraddle*, 15 January 2014, [autostraddle.com/sexy-lesbian-love-letters-1896-to-1934-209681](http://autostraddle.com/sexy-lesbian-love-letters-1896-to-1934-209681). For more on Sackville-West and Trefusis’s relationship, see Sackville-West’s novel about the affair (published only in the United States, three years after Sackville-West wrote it and pulled its British printing) *Challenge* (New York: Doran, 1923), Mitchell Leaska and John Phillips, eds., *Violet to Vita: The Letters of Violet Trefusis to Vita Sackville-West* (New York: Penguin, 1991), and Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of V. Sackville-West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983) 91-112; 130.

<sup>13</sup> An August 1926 letter from Sackville-West to Harold Nicolson – in which Sackville-West writes that she “*ha[s]* gone to bed with [Woolf] (twice), but that’s all” – appears to be the basis for this often-quoted figure. Of course, this figure might not be accurate for any number of reasons: Sackville-West may not be truthful; she and Woolf may have had encounters subsequent to this letter; and, as indicated above, what constitutes an “encounter” is entirely subjective. See Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973) 188-189; the cited letter is dated 17 August 1926.

<sup>14</sup> See Alison Bechdel, “Introduction,” in *Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West: Love Letters* (New York: Random House, 2021) 4.

configurations – or to emerging understandings of sexuality, desire, and symptomatic self-expressions shaped by psychoanalysis.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson maintained an open relationship over the forty-nine years of their marriage, with both spouses having short- and long-term affairs (usually with partners of the same gender) before and during the marriage.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as we saw with the *Autostraddle* feature above, a studious commitment to “factuality” can produce considerable distortions when undertaken through a presentist or other normative lens. Regardless of the political aims motivating such “fact”-finding, accounts that rush to offer a contemporarily legible valuation of intimacy – reporting, for instance, that Woolf and Sackville-West went to bed together twice or “slept together... a dozen times” – recapitulate conservative rubrics of intimate relation in so doing.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most dangerously, exclusively ends-minded and couple-grounded accounts of Sackville-West and Woolf run the risk of ossifying, essentializing, and “finishing” forms that are foundationally experimental and incomplete. In reading for the story of a love affair, we route a multitudinous correspondence through the singular and terminal station of the couple form.<sup>18</sup> Letters get recombined into “love letters” as joking flirtations are solidified into declarations of love and boring letters of business talk are tabled and omitted from view. As the shape of a love story emerges and its narrative progression gathers momentum, other meanings through which Woolf or Sackville-West might have understood their relationship become

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<sup>15</sup> For an important collection probing the queer sexual, relational, aesthetic, and political currents animating the Bloomsbury Group, see Brenda Helt and Madelyn Detloff, eds., *Queer Bloomsbury* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016). For a more amorously-minded account of the entanglement of erotic connections and intellectual and artistic practice, see Amy License, *Living in Squares, Loving in Triangles: The Lives and Loves of Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Amberley, 2015). For two views of the influence of psychoanalytic theory on the Bloomsbury Group, see David Seelow’s monograph *Radical Modernism and Sexuality: Freud/Reich/D. H. Lawrence and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and James and Alix Strachey’s correspondences, *Bloomsbury/Freud: The Letters of James and Alix Strachey, 1924-1925* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

<sup>16</sup> For an extended account of Sackville-West and Nicolson’s relationship, see Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*.

<sup>17</sup> Nigel Nicolson, “Introduction,” in *Letters III*, xxi.

<sup>18</sup> I thank Kiki Lerer for helping me to articulate this formulation.

inaccessible. Their correspondence ceases to be a dynamic site of ongoing response – a plane of address and collaboration with no preestablished destination – as individual letters are made to become serviceable to the unique horizon of coupledness. Such a blinding interpretive protocol is fundamentally at odds with this dissertation’s approach to both queerness and correspondence.

In this chapter, I position Woolf and Sackville-West as correspondents for two reasons: first, in order to adopt a speculative orientation in exploring what kinds of objects may be taken to comprise a queer correspondence; and second, in order to keep difference and distance intact between the two writers. In a sense, I seek to heed an exhortation that Orlando herself offers in Woolf’s experimental biography: not to harden the affiliative intimacy between the correspondents into a static, proto-matrimonial form. (At the center of the novel, as her biographer reports, “the cry that rises” to Orlando’s lips is “‘Life! A Lover!’ not ‘Life! A Husband!’”<sup>19</sup>) For, although their differences in approach were manifold, Woolf and Sackville-West were each passionately engaged throughout their careers with two overlapping questions: how a life with others might be written, and how life might be written *to* others. In what follows, I attend to several of the forms they proposed in response.

### ***Orlando and the Dilation of Biography***

*How to “revolutionise biography in a night”*

In her earlier-cited letter of October 1927, Woolf expresses to Sackville-West her broadest artistic and intellectual ambition for *Orlando*: “...it sprung upon me,” she writes, “how I could revolutionise biography in a night.”<sup>20</sup> In this section, I consider what Woolf’s vision for biographical “revolution” entailed and investigate how it obtains in the production, form, and narrative of *Orlando: A Biography*. I begin by turning to Woolf’s reflections on memoir and the

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<sup>19</sup> See Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1984 [1928]) 178.

<sup>20</sup> *Letters III*, 429.

writing of life and memory. As we shall see, for Woolf, the memoiristic mode could not be encapsulated in a particular cluster of literary genres – nor even statically located in the domain of nonfiction or fiction. Instead, memoir more precisely functioned as a nested site of occasions and “moments,” exemplified by numerous instances of overlap, divergence, and contact: between the memory-writer and past and future versions of herself; between avatars of the memoir’s subject and others she encounters in the course of an episode; and between the memoirist and the audience to whom she addresses her account. I examine this dynamic approach to “life-writing” – to the literary representation of a “Life” recognizable as such – as a purposeful (and at times irreverent) intervention into the late-Victorian biographical tradition canonized by Woolf’s father Leslie Stephen.

Woolfian “life-writing,” I suggest, names a mode of representation that might equally operate in a work of fiction or nonfiction and is not tied to a specific literary genre or set of formal features. Life-writing specifies, rather, an approach to representation grounded in a peculiar attunement to others and to otherness. Woolf practices this literary mode across a wide range of genres, radiating it through virtuosic works of fiction (exemplified by the 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*) and using it to animate nonfictional autobiographical accounts, as with the 1907 “Reminiscences” (which takes the form of a long letter to her as-yet unborn nephew Julian Bell). Woolf’s passing use of the expression “life-writing” in the 1939 essay “A Sketch of the Past” is sometimes cited as the term’s initial coinage – its first proper usage as a new nominalization rather than as an adjective-qualified noun (e.g. “life-writing” as a compound construction rather than “*life*-writing” as a subset of “writing”).<sup>21</sup> In this essay, Woolf attempts to fashion an account of experience that attends to “the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life.” These other presences might scarcely appear in the account of a “Life,” and yet, “it is

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Robert Fraser, “The Fish and the Stream: Publishing, Genre, and Life-Writing’s Crisis of Form,” in *Contemporary Publishing and the Culture of Books*, eds. Alison Baverstock, Richard Bradford, Madelena Gonzalez (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020).

they that keep him [the subject of the 'Life'] in position.” When they are absent on the page, “how futile life writing becomes,” Woolf reflects: “I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.”<sup>22</sup> Other people and interpersonal relationships, she maintains, are the very capillaries that nourish, sustain, and subtend the subject; in representing that subject as a sovereign, the writer produces an impossible picture: of a fish without water or a human being without oxygenated air. As we shall see in greater detail in Chapter 2, this newly relational orientation toward life narrative activates an important feminist intervention into auto/biography, both as a site of artistic practice and interpretive theory. In the space of “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf points to her mother, Julia Prinsep Stephen, as an exemplary such “invisible presence.”

In emphasizing the importance of interpersonal relation to individual experience, Woolf does not merely point out “invisible presences” as aides or helpmates to the subject; instead, far more radically, she posits these other people and relationships as absolutely formative of the subject. Underscoring this site of intersubjective enmeshment – this interpenetrative dimension of individual existence – within a work of auto/biographical writing represents a robust resistance to the conventions of Victorian biography, as Woolf herself reflects:

This influence, by which I mean the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people say and think; all those magnets which attract us this way to be like that, or repel us the other and make us different from that; has never been analysed in any of those Lives which I so much enjoy reading, or very superficially.<sup>23</sup>

These “imping[ements]” can originate from massive structures or formidable forces, but tend to be granular in scale when encountered by the subject. They generally operate either beneath the threshold of conscious awareness (which makes disavowing their influence easy, if not inevitable) or at the baseline level of ordinary interpersonal noise, which Lauren Berlant has invited us to

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<sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 80.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

think of as the quotidian “inconvenience of other people.” For Berlant, “inconvenience” designates “the force that makes one shift a little while processing the world,” manifesting “in micro-incidents” that register alternately as small-scale pressures, irritations, and sensorial shifts – or that do not quite register at all. Berlant lists out a smattering of such occasions of contact, each of which resonates to the “moments” that Woolf captures in “A Sketch of the Past”: “a caught glance, a brush on the flesh, the tack of a sound or smell that hits you, an undertone, *a semiconscious sense of bodies copresent on the sidewalk*, in the world, or on the sidewalk of the world, where many locales may converge in you at once materially and affectively.”<sup>24</sup> For Woolf, apprehending and registering micro-incidents of this kind represents an important principle of life-writing – and, moreover, a powerful strategy for contesting an auto/biographical mode that places the sovereign subject at a premium. Sounding out one-off brushes with others and abiding but “invisible” relationships might enable the writer to show the lie to this view of the individual. Accordingly, in one analogy, Woolf likens humans to hermetically sealed “vessels” – only to underscore those constructions as utterly provisional: “...we are sealed vessels afloat on what it is convenient to call reality; and at some moments, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality...”<sup>25</sup> This metaphor aptly animates the ethic and sensibility of Woolfian life-writing; equally, we can take it as a suggestive figuration of its difference from Victorian biography.<sup>26</sup>

For, when Woolf set out in the direction of relational life-writing, she indeed had “her father’s stentorian voice literally ringing in her ears,” in the words of George Piggford.<sup>27</sup> Woolf’s

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<sup>24</sup> Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022) 2.

<sup>25</sup> Woolf, “Sketch of the Past,” 122.

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, in their attention to intersubjective contact and enmeshment – for Woolf, in the context of life-writing, and for Berlant, in the context of an “inconvenience drive” that theorizes inconvenience *as* attachment – Woolf and Berlant illumine a convergence between Victorian and neoliberal accounts of subjectivity, both of which are predicated upon sovereignty. See Berlant, 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> George Piggford, “Camp Sites: Forster and the Biographies of Queer Bloomsbury,” in *Queer Bloomsbury*, eds. Brenda Helt and Madelyn Detloff (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) 74.

father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was the original editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB), the still-extant biographical reference work (now known as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*) that sought, in the words of Keith Thomas, to create “national unity out of disparate ingredients.”<sup>28</sup> Like any work of “national biography,” the *DNB* assembled a pantheon of the nation’s “great men” and constructed, from short biographical narratives of their “Lives,” a robust and patriotic view of the country’s “heroic past,” “literary canon,” and national character.<sup>29</sup> Stephen assumed editorship for the project in 1882 and continued on through 1891, producing 378 entries himself and coordinating with over 650 contributors, as Hermione Lee details.<sup>30</sup> The first edition of the *DNB* was substantial, with 63 volumes released between 1885 and 1900, “contain[ing] the lives of over 29,000 people.”<sup>31</sup> From the perspective of material conditions and labor, this endeavor exacted a considerable toll on Stephen’s physical and mental health and required the unseen support of numerous of the “invisible presences” Woolf mentioned above. As Woolf rather acidly registers in “A Sketch of the Past,” her father’s “health” was her mother’s “fetish”: whereas *she* “died of overwork easily at forty-nine,” *he* “found it very difficult to die of cancer at seventy-two.”<sup>32</sup>

The unwieldy volumes of Stephen’s *DNB* realize a complicated, and multidimensional, project. The *DNB* operates simultaneously as a tool of imperialist governance, a scholarly “reference work,” and an idiosyncratic and entertaining collection of portraits. On a broad level, the project was launched in order to address what H. S. Ashbee referred to in 1883 as “the stigma of not possessing a national biographical dictionary” – an absence that differentiated Britain from other Western European nations in the late nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> On a more

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<sup>28</sup> Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography: The Oxford DNB in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 16.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas, *Changing Conceptions*, 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) 98-99.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas, *Changing Conceptions*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Woolf, “Sketch of the Past,” 114.

<sup>33</sup> Qtd. in Thomas, *Changing Conceptions*, 14. See H. S. Ashbee, *The Athenaeum* 2880 (6 January 1883) 17.

concrete level, the first edition of the *DNB* took great care to address historical and contemporaneous colonial anxieties – in Ireland, as Keith Thomas observes, as in India.<sup>34</sup> As a reference work, Stephen’s *DNB* aspires toward a liberalist expansionism, seeking to invite a relatively wider array of individuals into the tent of national biography than some earlier endeavors had allowed.<sup>35</sup> Whereas many previous works considerably favored famous “men of letters,” the first edition of the *DNB* contains entries for individuals famous (or infamous) for accomplishments and identities unrelated to literary pursuits. The “interest” these individuals provoke is often rather problematically linked to a spectacular form of embodiment, as indicated by Thomas’s list of “quirky” subjects who appeared in the first volumes: “brothel-keepers, contortionists, gamblers, transvestites and centenarians.”<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps one of the most surprising aspects of the *DNB*, however, lies in its commitment to idiosyncrasy – put differently, Stephen’s express desire for it be entertaining, indeed “one of the most amusing books in the [English] language.”<sup>37</sup> As Thomas points out, the *DNB* drew upon and in turn further entrenched the sentiment that Britain “had more ‘characters’ and ‘originals’ than other nations because of its exceptional tolerance and freedom.”<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, this eventuated in a reference work that sometimes surprises with “eccentricity” and speculative richness. The five-page entry on Arthur, “real or fabulous king of England,” for instance, engagingly straddles the testimonies of ancient and modern historians (vetted scholarly

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<sup>34</sup> For more on Stephen’s careful attention to Ireland, see Thomas, *Changing Conceptions*, 16. For an illustrative example of the *DNB*’s valuation of colonial ministers – and its management of imperialist anxieties – see the five-page entry on Charles Canning, who was governor-general of India during the Great Uprising of 1857. *The Dictionary of National Biography: Volume VIII*, ed. Leslie Stephen (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1886) 414-418.

<sup>35</sup> See Thomas, *Changing Conceptions*, 22-23.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, *Changing Conceptions*, 23. Approaching Stephen’s *DNB* as a democratizing force proves to be a limited project for a few reasons. For one, as described above, incorporating an almost caricatural array of “unlettered” individuals does not serve to reimagine the biographical field; it merely includes the established field and its inverse. Moreover, because the *DNB* “drew most of its names” from earlier collections “heavily biased toward literary figures,” the inclusion of other figures is, at times, notional.

<sup>37</sup> Qtd. in Thomas, *Changing Conceptions*, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, *Changing Conceptions*, 22.

accounts) and unfounded popular fables and beliefs (vernacular mythologies).<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the *DNB*'s commitment to representing eccentricity points back to its imperialist utility – to the project of shoring up a national identity founded on “extreme individuality.”<sup>40</sup> But beyond its specific uses as a reference tool and an instrument of empire, the *DNB* offers a necessarily limited form of biographical representation. Entries stage individuals alone – indeed, to the sometimes absurd extent that the dictionary's great men and women (who comprised approximately four percent of the first edition's entries) “frequently had no mothers,” as Thomas observes.<sup>41</sup> This late-Victorian vision of biography thus routed life exclusively through the apparatus of the individual – and, what is more, through the *late career* of the individual, as entries would be written only after their subjects' deaths. In putting forward a practice of “life-writing,” and in constructing a biography of Orlando/Sackville-West, an individual still very much alive, Woolf writes against this isolating, no-longer-animate biographical mode.

*Orlando* announces itself emphatically as a biography; its subtitle leaves little ambiguity as to how its readers should approach it. The text's performance of the single-subject biographical genre, however, is run through by the currents of Woolfian life-writing. Consequently, as we shall see, *Orlando: A Biography* comes to its subject (Orlando) and comes into its project (“revolution[ising] biography”) in several interpersonally rich ways: taking shape as a published artifact through active collaboration; satirizing, on the level of form, the limits of monographical and individual-oriented biography; and narrativizing the centrality of relationships to its singular subject's life.

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<sup>39</sup> *The Dictionary of National Biography: Volume I*, ed. Leslie Stephen (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1885) 598.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas, *Changing Conceptions*, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas writes: “But in the old *DNB*, that so-called pallocentric monument, the subjects frequently had no mothers; and wives, if mentioned, normally appeared only at the end of the article. In the early Supplements the subjects were children of a father *by* a mother. Only from 1950 were they children of a father *and* a mother.” See *Changing Conceptions*, 45.

*“Human beings had become necessary”*

*Orlando: A Biography* takes its subtitled genre marker very seriously from the outset – indeed to the point of camp.<sup>42</sup> The text opens with five pieces of frontmatter that ape the conventions of a work of nonfiction: a captioned frontispiece image, a dedication, a preface, a table of contents, and a list of illustrations. Woolf makes use of conventional typographical distinctions to distinguish frontmatter and endmatter (*Orlando* closes with an Index) from the body of the “biography,” rendering the former materials in italics – from captions on illustrations to the acknowledgments contained in the “PREFACE” to the titles of items listed in the “CONTENTS” and “ILLUSTRATIONS.”<sup>43</sup> Woolf’s very observance of such customary components of biography is comically earnest and overly deliberate, such that it quickly opens onto satire and fantasy. *Orlando*’s preface, for example, stages a comical contradiction between humility and hubris in capturing the voice of the dedicated “biographer”:

*Many friends have helped me in writing this book. Some are dead and so illustrious that I scarcely dare name them, yet no one can read or write without being perpetually in the debt of Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Macaulay, Emily Brontë, De Quincey, and Walter Pater, — to name the first that come to mind. Others are alive, and though perhaps as illustrious in their own way, are less formidable for that very reason.*<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, since *Orlando* will famously narrate a change in its subject’s gender about halfway through – when Orlando, who had moved through the world as a man from childhood, wakes up to find herself a “woman” – even the straightforward caption to the text’s frontispiece image cracks a joke: “*Orlando as a boy*.”<sup>45</sup> Instead of deploying a vernacular expression that has recourse to an age-oriented timeline in referring back to childhood, “*Orlando as a boy*” harks back to an earlier point on the much more fantastical narrative axis of the novel. In this and other ways, the

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<sup>42</sup> See Piggford, “Camp Sites.” For more on *Orlando* and/as camp, see Piggford, “‘Who’s That Girl?’ Annie Lennox, Woolf’s *Orlando*, and Female Camp Androgyny,” *Mosaic* 30.3 (September 1991): 39-58, and Madelyn Detloff, “Camp Orlando (or) *Orlando*,” *Modernism/modernity* 23.1 (January 2016): 18-22.

<sup>43</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, 1-6; 243-245.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, i.

biographer of *Orlando* often performs a slapstick-like will to literalism – to observing convention to the letter, even past the point of logic or intelligibility. This surfaces in an exemplary way when he<sup>46</sup> attempts to perform scholarly due diligence on available facts, as on the following occasion, when faced with the impossibility of recapturing a lost conversation:

...hence the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down. For which reasons we leave a great blank here, which must be taken to indicate that the space is filled to repletion.

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Committed to the serious terms of Victorian biography, this biographer literally leaves “a great blank” of many lines to avoid erring either by misreporting the exchange – or by omitting it.

*Orlando* thus makes it clear from the outset precisely what sort of representational tradition it seeks to satirize: the biographical narrative of a great “Life.” Yet at the same time that the novel’s genre classification is satirically overdetermined – at least on the surface level of the artifact – Woolf adopts a slyly supple approach to the narrative that unfolds across its pages. Even in the earliest stages of work toward *Orlando*, Woolf invents furtive ways of threading this burlesque, over-the-top enactment of canonical biography with the filaments of life-writing. In producing *Orlando*, she breaks with several fundamental premises of normative biography by soliciting the full collaboration of its still-living subject. For Vita Sackville-West did not only sign on to the project notionally; rather, she committed to actively participating in its production. As a friend, a collaborator, and a correspondent, Sackville-West assists in crafting *Orlando* in numerous ways: leading Woolf through the archives and portrait halls of Knole to help shore up Orlando’s fictitious genealogy;<sup>48</sup> providing translations into French of conversations between

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<sup>46</sup> Because *Orlando: A Biography* is unambiguous about the particular genre of biography it satirizes, I refer to Orlando’s biographer using he/him pronouns – as it is equally apparent that Woolf sets out to mock a Victorian *gentleman* biographer alongside her satirizing of Victorian biographical form.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 253. Subsequent citations to this volume will be made parenthetically.

<sup>48</sup> See *Letters III*, 433, Letter #1825 (dated 23 October 1927) and *Diary III*, 124-125 (entry dated 23 January 1927).

Orlando and a lover;<sup>49</sup> addressing numerous questions about her previous love affairs and her own mannerisms;<sup>50</sup> taking photographs of family portraits;<sup>51</sup> and posing for several new photographs outfitted as Orlando.<sup>52</sup> As critics have observed, Woolf had long been fascinated by Sackville-West's genealogy<sup>53</sup> – her descent from a long line of English nobility, and her proudly claimed Spanish and Romani heritage.<sup>54</sup> (The parents of Sackville-West's mother were Lionel Sackville-West, the Second Baron Sackville, and Pepita de Oliva, a Spanish dancer; the two never married.<sup>55</sup>) Woolf jokingly avers her curiosity to Sackville-West in so many words when describing the idea for *Orlando*: “Your excellence as a subject arises largely from your noble birth. (But what's 400 years of nobility, all the same?) and the opportunity thus given for florid descriptive passages in great abundance.”<sup>56</sup> Knole, as Woolf hints here, will come into play in a big way in the project as a readymade setting that's already extravagant and over the top – bristling with “florid” features without any need for authorial exaggeration.

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<sup>49</sup> See *Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*, 244 (dated 17 November 1927); 268 (dated 26 April 1928); and *Letters III*, 487-488, Letter #1886 (dated 27 April 1928).

<sup>50</sup> For example, on 13 October 1927, Woolf writes Sackville-West: “Tomorrow I begin the chapter which describes Violet and you meeting on the ice. The whole thing has to be gone into thoroughly. I am swarming with ideas. Do give me some inkling what sort of quarrels you had. Also, for what particular quality did she first choose you?” See *Letters III*, 430, Letter #1821; see also Letter #1825 (23 October 1927) in *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>51</sup> See *Letters III*, 434, Letter #1826 (dated 30 October 1927); 484, Letter #1883 (dated 17 April 1928).

<sup>52</sup> See *Letters III*, 434-435, Letter #1828 (dated 6 November 1927); 442, Letter #1840 (dated 5 December 1927). See also Julie Vandivere, “The Bastard's Contention: Race, Property, and Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*,” *Modernism/modernity* 28.1 (January 2021): 107.

<sup>53</sup> See Alison Bechdel, “As a body hers is perfection,” *The Guardian* (1 February 2021): [theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/01/as-a-body-hers-is-perfection-alison-bechdel-on-the-love-letters-of-virginia-woolf-and-vita-sackville-west](https://theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/01/as-a-body-hers-is-perfection-alison-bechdel-on-the-love-letters-of-virginia-woolf-and-vita-sackville-west).

<sup>54</sup> As we will see in greater detail below, Sackville-West was fascinated by her own heritage, writing a nonfiction work about Knole (which Woolf read with great interest) in 1922 and a biography of her grandmother (published by the Woolfs' Hogarth Press) in 1937. See Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles* (London: Heinemann, 1922), and *Pepita* (London: Hogarth Press, 1937).

<sup>55</sup> Glendinning, *Vita*, 2-3. That Sackville-West's maternal grandparents were unmarried proves legally consequential, as we will see below.

<sup>56</sup> *Letters III*, 429.

The narrative of *Orlando*, moreover, pushes the conventions of individualist Victorian biography to a breaking point. In the offhand remark we have just seen, Woolf jokes about the “400 years of nobility” that culminate in Sackville-West; over the course of the novel, she pours all four hundred of these years into the person of Orlando, who roves the centuries that lead up to Sackville-West’s lifetime. Born sometime before the year 1600, Orlando is still living at the narrative’s culminating moment in October 1928. Across these years, Orlando traverses the European continent – from England to Russia to Turkey and back again – and wears many different avatars, famously changing gender about halfway through the novel. While Orlando has many brushes with literary greats (among them Pope and Addison), witnesses several century-defining meteorological and environmental occurrences (including the Great Frost of 1608), and bears witness to the invention of numerous technologies of modernity (the steam engine not least among them), not terribly much happens in *Orlando*. That is to say, Orlando’s life is not replete with the kinds of personal achievements that would make his/her life legible as a great literary “Life.”<sup>57</sup> Even Orlando’s gender transformation, which represents a significant event, proves profoundly anticlimactic. The biographer sets up a fantastical scene in narrating the change: mystical “Ladies” of feminine virtue surround the sleeping Orlando, trumpeters flood the bedroom with horns blazing, and to their chorus of “THE TRUTH!” Orlando wakes: “He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpeters pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman” (102). For all the fanfare leading up to the reveal of this “Truth,” the narration of its contents proves tepid. Woolf does delight, however, in making her pedantic biographer studiously adjust his nomenclature: “His [Orlando’s]

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<sup>57</sup> I observe two conventions related to personal pronouns when referring to Orlando. When citing from *Orlando*, and when describing Orlando at a particular moment in the novel, I use the third-person singular gendered pronouns (e.g. he/him or she/her) that correspond with Orlando’s presentation and identification at that time in the diegetic present of the text. When referring to Orlando broadly as a character – and not at a specific point in *Orlando*’s narrative – I use a chiasmatic construct of third-person singular pronouns (e.g. s/he, him/hers). I make use of these at times unwieldy conventions because bald play with binary gender performances is a crucial dimension of the text.

memory – but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’ – her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacles” (103). As for what follows in Orlando’s life “as a woman”: she continues to move about the continent and across the centuries, now with the slight difference of constantly attracting the gazes of enterprising suitors.

The narrative of Orlando’s life centers upon two things – more precisely, upon two kinds of relationships: first, romantic and sexual relationships with a panoply of men and women; and second, Orlando’s own relationship with writing. Orlando cycles through numerous affairs with partners who are, in many cases, charismatic, aloof, and flighty. Most of these partners have fabulous names and titles, as with the Princess Marousha Stanilovska Dagmar Natasha Iliana Romanovitch (“the Russian Princess”), the Archduchess Harriet Griselda, and the Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire. These fictitious noblepersons have close correlates in Sackville-West’s own personal life. Some of these matches are shaped by explicit allusions to their real-life antecedents, as with the Marmaduke Shelmerdine, who stands in for Sackville-West’s husband Harold Nicolson. By a clever inversion on Woolf’s part, Orlando refers to the Marmaduke alternately as Shel, Bonthrop, and *Mar* – the third of which was actually Nicolson’s pet name for Sackville-West.<sup>58</sup> Among Orlando’s lovers, the Marmaduke is exceptional; unlike the Princess (a stand-in for Violet Trefusis) and the Archduchess, who demand Orlando’s attention in exacting ways only to drop him/her capriciously, he is an abiding and patient partner. With the Marmaduke, there is, for the first time, space and distance between Orlando and her/his lover; there are even other people (195). The two converse as if in a transparent language, such that “talking” is synonymous with “understanding” (189). At the same time, they happily leave one another to the pursuit of their respective passions: sailing, for the Marmaduke (who promptly

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<sup>58</sup> “*Mar*” was also the name of Harold Nicolson’s yacht. See Glendinning, *Vita*, 301, and *Orlando* 188.

sets off for Cape Horn); and writing, for Orlando. For Orlando's relationship with writing precedes any other depicted in the novel.

In spite of the many specific allusions to Sackville-West's life, family,<sup>59</sup> and person<sup>60</sup> that *Orlando* contains, perhaps the most profound likeness between Orlando and Sackville-West lies in their shared commitment to poetry. Both desire above all else to be a poet – to do justice to the beauty they behold in the natural world and in their lovers. Orlando comes to writing “as a boy” after fleeing from the industry and society of his family's country home (a thinly veiled Knole) for a moment of solitude “at the foot of the oak tree”:

He loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth's spine beneath him; for such he took the hard root of the oak tree to be; or, for image followed image, it was the back of a great horse that he was riding; or the deck of a tumbling ship — it was anything indeed, so long as it was hard, for he felt the need of something which he could attach his floating heart to; the heart that tugged at his side; the heart that seemed filled with spiced and amorous gales every evening about this time when he walked out. To the oak tree he tied it and as he lay there, gradually the flutter in and about him stilled itself; the little leaves hung; the deer stopped; the pale summer clouds stayed; his limbs grew heavy on the ground; and he lay so still that by degrees the deer stepped nearer and the rooks wheeled round him and the swallows dipped and circled and the dragonflies shot past, as if all the fertility and amorous activity of a summer's evening were woven web-like about his body (15).

This magnificent moment of communion with the oak tree activates Orlando's imagination as a poet. Through the biographer's focalization, that is, we look on as Orlando becomes a poet.

Literally and physically grounded, with “the earth's spine beneath him” in the form of “the hard root of the oak tree” (the first metaphor the young poet will forge), his mind is flooded with a cascade of images and comparisons: first a “spine,” the tree then becomes “the back of a great horse that he was riding,” next “the deck of a tumbling ship.” Orlando records these impressions in the register of his mind, drafting a composition cued to the physical sensation of his body

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<sup>59</sup> For instance, one of Orlando's lovers whispers in his ear the motto of the Sackvilles: “*Jour de me vie!*” (The biographer coyly notes: “It was their signal” [43].)

<sup>60</sup> *Orlando* is replete with jokes (I count at least nine) about its subject's fine legs – much as Woolf endlessly enjoyed joking about Sackville-West's legs. To cite just one illustrative example: “'Twas a thousand pities, that amorous lady sighed, that such a pair of legs should leave the country” (87).

against the tree. This deeply felt but as-yet unwritten work moves associatively rather than narratively, a lyric rather than a story. Producing this poem has a profound effect on Orlando, inculcating him with a romantic lyric sensibility – a way of moving about the world in search of “something which he could attach his floating heart to.” “To the oak tree he tied it,” the biographer narrates, and indeed, from this moment onward, Orlando carries forward a poetic project rooted to his own “heart.”

Through his/her life, Orlando loses him/herself in pursuit of this poem, seeking to match up literary form with his earlier experience of the natural world. (For, as he learns to keen disappointment after a first attempt at writing, “[g]reen in nature is one thing, green in literature another” [14].) On a concrete level, while engaged in the writing of “The Oak Tree, A Poem,” Orlando loses touch with the passage of time – at one moment literally missing the invention of the steam engine while engrossed in an interval of writing (200-201). In one sense, Orlando’s temporal oversight as a poet functions as a wry jab at the arbitrariness of literary tastes and trends – a way for Woolf to register her impatience with a literary marketplace shaped by the subjective “spirit of the age” and to offer some solidarity to Sackville-West, whose poetic corpus never entirely coincided with its dictates (178).<sup>61</sup> In another way, Orlando’s oblivious engrossment operates as a narrative device that moves him/her across the centuries as s/he works to complete the poem. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, Orlando holds back his manuscript of “The Oak Tree” from a “great conflagration” of his juvenile “poetical works” (71). In the seventeenth century, he steals away from banquets “when the feasting was at its height and his guests were at their revels” in order to write, although he often “scratched out as many lines as he wrote in,” such that his annual progress more nearly resembled subtraction than addition: “as if in the process of writing the poem would be completely unwritten” (82). After the dawning of the eighteenth century, having awakened as “a woman,” Orlando takes care to

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<sup>61</sup> Victoria Glendinning describes Sackville-West’s “poetry-writing life” of the early 1920s, for instance, as taking a “traditional, anti-modernist mode.” See *Vita*, 117.

“hid[e] her manuscripts” when interrupted by swaggering men (137). Only after meeting and coupling up with the Marmaduke could Orlando write again “as a woman,” and “write she did,” the biographer observes: “She wrote. She wrote. She wrote” (196). Her writing proceeds apace across a slew of years until, one day, she “push[es] away her chair, stretch[es] her arms, drop[s] her pen, [comes] to the window, and exclaim[s], ‘Done!’” (200).

In working toward “The Oak Tree,” Orlando has sought solitude above all else. One of the ways in which she questions the legitimacy of her marriage – whether it “counts” as a proper instance of the matrimonial form in its contemporaneous declension, when it brings her and her spouse the Marmaduke so much pleasure and independence – centers precisely on the solitary pursuit of poetry: “And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage?” (195). Solitude facilitates the completion of the poem; once it is completed, however, Orlando’s orientation to the work and to the larger world suddenly changes. She feels the manuscript “shuffling and beating as if it were a living thing” conveying a message: “It wanted to be read. It must be read. It would die in her bosom if it were not read” (200). Suddenly, Orlando has reason to eschew the solitude she associates with the natural world:

For the first time in her life she turned with violence against nature. Elk hounds and rose bushes were about her in profusion. But elk hounds and rose bushes can none of them read. It is a lamentable oversight on the part of Providence which had never struck her before. Human beings alone have this power. Human beings had become necessary (200-201).

After completing “The Oak Tree” – which will be published, printed, and sold in bookstores on 11 October 1928, a date that coincides with the publication of *Orlando: A Biography* – Orlando realizes his/her first accomplishment that would be legible in the eyes of a biographical institution such as the *DNB*. Within the space of *Orlando*, however, this moment doesn’t represent the realization of a personal accomplishment on Orlando’s part as much as it instigates a startling realization: she needs other people, readers, “invisible” and visible presences who can encounter the poem.

Finally, then, this book-length “biography” turns out to be a narrative about the critical importance of other subjects. Orlando needs a reader for “The Oak Tree”; *Orlando* finds form through its subject’s interactions with an elegantly ragtag team of others; the writer of *Orlando: A Biography*, moreover, needs another person to help in its construction. By pressurizing the conventions of Victorian biography to the point of satire and imbuing the narrative thrust of the novel with the intersubjectively playful threads of memoir, Woolf activates a fictionalized biography, a biographical novel, and a wild exemplar of life-writing that is also, simultaneously, a letter. For Woolf’s dedication page – the second piece of frontmatter to appear in the text – reads as an epistolary header: “*To V. Sackville-West*” (3).

### **Gardens, Enclosed: *Sissinghurst***

#### *From Knole to Sissinghurst*

Vita Sackville-West, in a word, adored *Orlando*. Woolf sent her an early copy on 11 October 1928 – as we have just seen, publication day for the novel, and the same day on which the narrative of *Orlando* leaves off. In a breathless letter, Sackville-West registers the “dazzled, bewitched, enchanted” emotional response she has upon first reading the text. Professing herself to be “in no fit state to write to you,” and by no means capable of offering a “cold and considered opinio[n],” she tells Woolf: “You will get letters, very reasoned and illuminating, from many people; I cannot write you that sort of letter now, I can only tell you that I am really shaken, which may seem to you useless and silly, but which is really a greater tribute than pages of calm appreciation...” Touched by the dual gestures of public and private address that animate *Orlando*, Sackville-West “can only thank [Woolf] for pouring out such riches.”<sup>62</sup>

For *Orlando*, as we have seen, unfurls a wide range of intimately addressed and publicly legible messages across its pages. Orlando’s biographer slyly incorporates numerous private

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<sup>62</sup> Appendix, *Letters III*, 573-575; this letter is dated 11 October 1928.

nicknames and allusions shared by Sackville-West and Woolf (or by Sackville-West and others, including Harold Nicolson) into his prose. For most readers, these register as affectionate improvisations (such as “donkey” and “Mar,” respectively Woolf’s and Nicolson’s private nicknames for Sackville-West) or idiosyncratic but opaque turns of phrase (exemplified by the image of “a porpoise in a fishmonger’s shop,” one of Woolf’s favorite figurations of Sackville-West, which ripples through their private correspondence).<sup>63</sup> Woolf recapitulates these private gestures of address by giving Sackville-West “the manuscript of *Orlando*, beautifully bound,” as a gift; as Sackville-West writes in her diary, this token takes “an immediate place among my most treasured possessions.”<sup>64</sup> (Indeed, years later, in anticipation of invasion or attack by Germany in 1940, Sackville-West sends the manuscript “to safe-keeping in Devonshire” along with just two other critical possessions: Nicolson’s diaries and her own will.<sup>65</sup>) No reader, however, can miss the novel’s dedication, that explicit epistolary heralding of Sackville-West, nor would most contemporaries fail to recognize her person in three of the photographs that appear in the volume. Unfortunately, one of these readers was Sackville-West’s mother, Victoria Sackville-West, who hated *Orlando* and developed an intense loathing for its writer.<sup>66</sup> She eventually went as far as to bombard numerous critics and publishers by mail, beseeching them “not to mention the book” in their writings and “to stop the book being reviewed” in their papers.<sup>67</sup> But Vita Sackville-West’s inscription into *Orlando*/*Orlando* also enabled a different kind of public recognition, of a sort that held great personal meaning for her, as Harold Nicolson observes in a

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<sup>63</sup> See Woolf, *Orlando*, 139; 188; 223. Woolf invokes this figuration – inspired the sight of Sackville-West’s commanding presence at the counter of a fishmonger’s shop – frequently in their correspondence for well over a decade, from at least 1927 through the late 1930s.

<sup>64</sup> Glendinning, *Vita*, 207; in the latter citation, Glendinning quotes from Sackville-West’s diary.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>66</sup> Victoria Sackville-West even pasted a photograph of Woolf onto the jacket of her copy, with the caption: “The awful face of a mad woman whose successful mad desire is to separate people who care for each other. I loathe this woman for having changed my Vita and taken her away from me.” See Glendinning, *Vita*, 206.

<sup>67</sup> For more on Victoria Sackville-West’s mail campaign, and for a fuller view of her addressees (in addition to Alan Parsons of the *Morning Post* and J. L. Garvin of the *Observer*, above), see *Ibid.*, 206.

letter: Woolf had produced “a book in which you and Knole are identified for ever, a book which will perpetuate that identity into years when both you and I are dead.”<sup>68</sup> Their son Nigel Nicolson would later offer a second characterization of *Orlando* that encapsulates this identificatory intervention; in his words, the novel represents on the one hand a “love-letter,” and on the other “a memorial mass” that transmits Knole “to Vita for ever.”<sup>69</sup>

Upon the death of her father Lionel Sackville-West, the 3rd Baron Sackville, in January of 1928, Vita Sackville-West was officially ousted from Knole, prized possession of the Sackvilles since Queen Elizabeth I had granted it to Thomas Sackville in the sixteenth century.<sup>70</sup> Sackville-West had spent her childhood at Knole, which her parents narrowly retained the right to inhabit after a tendentious family battle over inheritances in 1910.<sup>71</sup> Owing to primogeniture, however, Sackville-West “did not stand to inherit it”;<sup>72</sup> instead, her cousin Edward (Eddy) Sackville-West (himself a famously queer artist and writer) took possession of Knole from 1928 onward.<sup>73</sup> Although Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson had purchased and resided at another Kentish country house – Long Barn – since 1915, Sackville-West experienced the loss of Knole in 1928 as irrevocable. When she brought Woolf to visit Knole in 1927, ahead of *Orlando*’s publication, things had not yet changed.<sup>74</sup> But at the moment of writing to Woolf after reading

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<sup>68</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>69</sup> Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*, 193.

<sup>70</sup> See Sackville-West, *Knole and the Sackvilles*, ix; 28-47.

<sup>71</sup> In brief, because Sackville-West’s mother Victoria and her siblings – the offspring of Lionel Sackville (the second Lord Sackville) and Josefa “Pepita” – were born to unmarried parents, they did not represent “legitimate” heirs to Knole. But because Victoria Sackville-West married a cousin who *was* the next legitimate heir (Lionel Sackville, the *third* Lord Sackville), she and her daughter were secure as the “rightful inhabitants” of Knole. This came under threat when Victoria Sackville-West’s brother Henry sued, claiming that their parents had been married. Consequently, the lawsuit came down to one sibling’s claim that he was born to married parents – and another sibling’s claim that she was not. This meant that part of Victoria Sackville-West’s case lay in proving herself to have been born out of wedlock. Ultimately, the case went in her favor. See Glendinning, *Vita*, 30-31; 35, and Robert Sackville-West, *Inheritance: The Story of Knole and the Sackvilles* (New York: Walker & Company, 2010) 193-197; 203-206.

<sup>72</sup> Michael H. Whitworth, “Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and the country house,” *Oxford University Press Blog*, 11 December 2014, [blog.oup.com/2014/12/virginia-woolf-orlando-country-house](http://blog.oup.com/2014/12/virginia-woolf-orlando-country-house).

<sup>73</sup> See Michael De-la-Noy, *Eddy: The Life of Edward Sackville-West* (London: Arcadia Books, 1999).

<sup>74</sup> *Diary III*, 124-125; this entry is dated 23 January 1927.

*Orlando* in 1928, Sackville-West could no longer claim Knole as “hers.” Her letter of “shaken” response to the novel is shaped by this raw sense of loss, which she acknowledges by name in her postscript: “You made me cry with your passages about Knole, you wretch.”<sup>75</sup> Two years later, with *Sissinghurst*, Sackville-West addresses Woolf a kind of reply, introducing her to her new home on the grounds of Sissinghurst Castle.

*From Sissinghurst to Sissinghurst*

In November of 1930, Sackville-West composes a poem entitled “Sissinghurst Thursday” and posts it to Woolf. The poem itself originates as a letter. When published by the Hogarth Press eight months later<sup>76</sup> (one of the final three publications that Virginia and Leonard Woolf would print by hand themselves),<sup>77</sup> the now-retitled *Sissinghurst* retains several of its initial epistolary markers – the sender’s address, the letter’s date of sending, and the name of its addressee – on its first page:

*Sissinghurst,  
Thursday. To V. W.*

Not unlike *Orlando*, *Sissinghurst* opens onto a site of formal hybridity, as the poem sutures the notionally nonfictive metadata of a letter to the imaginative form of the lyric that follows. Yet even though *Sissinghurst* begins markedly as a letter, it isn’t a particularly epistolary poem. Indeed, across its seven stanzas and (in the original printing) five pages, the speaker offers no gestures of interpersonal or apostrophic address. At no moment, that is, does she face, encounter, or call out to any entity through the pronoun “you.” Much like the protagonist of Lydia Davis’s short story “The Letter” reflects about a similar epistle she receives in the post: “the poem is the letter”;<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Letters III*, 575.

<sup>76</sup> “Books Received,” *The Manchester Guardian*, 18 July 1931, p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> See Barkway, ““Oh Lord what it is to publish a best seller,”” 45.

<sup>78</sup> See Lydia Davis, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (New York: Picador, 2009) 44. The protagonist of this story has received a letter that takes the form of a copied-over poem: “The date, her name, comma, then the poem, then his name, period. So the poem is the letter.”

Sackville-West begins with a salutation of direct epistolary address before launching into a poem that does not operate by this same interpellative protocol. The speaker instead fixes her eye – and her pronominal “I” – to the environment that surrounds her.

Through movements alternately narrative and associative, *Sissinghurst* animates its speaker’s encounter with an unfamiliar landscape. She arrives there as a traveler from another place and time, as the poem’s opening lines stage:

A tired swimmer in the waves of time  
I throw my hands up: let the surface close:  
Sink down through centuries to another clime,  
And buried find the castle and the rose.<sup>79</sup>

Whatever the speaker’s point of departure, this other “clime” is at a distant remove both spatially and historically: located topographically *beneath* her starting point in “the waves of time,” and situated several “centuries” *earlier* than the moment at which she “throw[s] her hands up.” This opening figuration of the speaker as “a tired swimmer” invokes two metaphors that will shape the entire poem. The first is the metaphor of water. A “tired swimmer” buffeted by the “waves of time,” the speaker literally “[s]ink[s] down through centuries” to a newfound world below the water. The second, that of sleep, operates concurrently: this “*tired* swimmer” gives up her stroke to “let the surface close” and allow herself to “[s]ink down” as if into sleep. Buoyed by these two figurations of transporting discovery, the speaker never quite lands with her feet on the ground. Instead, she begins to move as if underwater or as through a dream, her maneuvers limber given that ordinary gravitational forces do not apply.

Simultaneously, however, the first stanza of the poem points very concretely to Sissinghurst: first, to “the castle and the rose,” and subsequently to the “stagnant moat,” “decaying halls,” and “brick gable and... springing tower” that Sackville-West and Nicolson found upon encountering the gone-to-seed country home in the spring of 1930 (1-2).

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<sup>79</sup> Vita Sackville-West, *Sissinghurst* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931) 1. Subsequent citations to this volume are made parenthetically.

Sissinghurst, at that time, was a sixteenth-century deer-hunting retreat in ruins. It was this very aspect of ruination, moreover, that attracted Sackville-West: the encroachment of the natural world upon a once-great country house, the sense of solitude produced by its empty and crumbling edifices, and its palpable feeling of historicity – of lineage, pedigree, and greatness forgotten by time. As Nigel Nicolson once wrote of his mother: “She must be surrounded by evidence of time.”<sup>80</sup> The particular markers of time that draw the attention of Sackville-West (and of the speaker of *Sissinghurst*) index human interactions, human labor, and a changing built environment. Even “the rose” – a would-be exemplar of unpredictable Nature – represents one such marker of human interventions; for on the grounds of Sissinghurst, Sackville-West would eventually encounter a varietal of rose believed by horticulturalists to have survived from the time of its last cultivation a century earlier.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, the poem will later point beyond the architectural enclosures of Sissinghurst toward a broader environment shaped by labor: to the fertile and fallow “fields” that would have fed the inhabitants of this home, and to the “lane” that leads to the larger world (3).

In the dream-like, underwater world of the poem, the speaker feels for a foothold in attempting to apprehend her environment. Like “Invading Nature,” who “crawls / With ivied fingers over rosy walls,” threading a trackwork of fauna onto the collapsed architecture of the built environment, she herself is “[s]earching the crevices, / Clasp[ing] the mullion, riveting the crack” – “grop[ing]” for any “interstices” that might enable her to get a purchase on this place

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<sup>80</sup> Qtd. in Adam Nicolson, *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History* (London: HarperPress, 2008) 233.

<sup>81</sup> On an early visit to Sissinghurst, Sackville-West found “an unknown *Rosa gallica* growing... on the edge of the ramshackle orchard, among the weeds and brambles” – a variety that subsequently proved impossible to prevent from growing wherever it wished. Believed to be one of the only surviving remnants of the long-since-inactive Elizabethan gardens of Sissinghurst, this exceptionally hardy rose would come to be called “Sissinghurst Castle.” See Nicolson, *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History*, 158; Jane Brown, *Sissinghurst: Portrait of a Garden* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990) 110; “*Rosa* ‘Sissinghurst Castle’ (G),” *Royal Horticultural Society*, 2021, [rhs.org.uk/plants/43210/i-rosa-i-sissinghurst-castle-\(g\)/details](https://rhs.org.uk/plants/43210/i-rosa-i-sissinghurst-castle-(g)/details); and “The history of Sissinghurst’s roses,” *Country Life*, 28 June 2014, [countrylife.co.uk/gardens/country-gardens-and-gardening-tips/the-history-of-sissinghursts-roses-58258](https://countrylife.co.uk/gardens/country-gardens-and-gardening-tips/the-history-of-sissinghursts-roses-58258).

(2). Although the speaker doesn't address any subject, object, or other entity as "*you*" in the space of the poem, she frequently invokes deictic words – especially "here" and "there," and "now" and "then" – almost as walking sticks or ladder rungs in marking her movements. "Here," for example, functions as a gestural speech act, drawing the reader's attention to a particular feature of the environment in a rhetorical maneuver that nearly lands as direct address: "*Here*, tall and damask as a summer flower, / Rise the brick gable and the springing tower..."; or later: "For *here*, where days and years have lost their number, / I let a plummet down in lieu of date, / And lose myself within a slumber / Submerged, elate" (1-2; emphasis added). For the speaker, space and time exist in a chiasmatic relationship: time, as we have already seen, is spatialized in the form of water, and spatial features are intensely time-rich – bearing innumerable human and environmental fingerprints as a kind of crust. This mashup of space and time resonates to Sackville-West's own affinity for "the evidence of time" in the exemplary form of ruins; it also makes it difficult for the speaker to gain a foothold in this world. At sea in mixing metaphors and mutually confused dimensions of experience, she attempts to animate the place, invoking another deictic – "*now*" – in so doing:

For *now* the apple ripens, *now* the hop,  
And *now* the clover, *now* the barley-crop;  
Spokes upon a wheel forever turning,  
Wherewith I turn, no present manner learning... (3, emphasis added).

By the metronome of "*now*," the speaker attempts to recapitulate the rhythm of the environment on its own particular terms. With each "*now*," that is, she imagines ruined, static, and stubbornly silent features as they once might have been.

The speaker's desire to animate this world instigates *Sissinghurst's* central tension. On the one hand, the poem literally takes shape through oblique constructions that delay representing the subject – or that delay the delivery of the subject's actions. This is operative even in the first stanza, which begins with a qualifying clause before arriving at the subject's pronoun: "A tired swimmer in the waves of time / *I* throw my hands up..." Similarly, in an inversion of

grammatical convention, other verses present the object impacted by the subject's actions before those actions are named in a verb: "...and *to the world above the waters* / Wave my incognisance" (2, emphasis added). By delaying the arrival of the agentive subject ("I") and her chosen maneuvers, the poem offers on the level of its grammar an enactment of one of its earliest images – that of the speaker who moves through the water without disturbing it: "...and not a ripple, not a quiver, / Shakes the reflection though the waters shiver..." (1). Because the speaker wants to understand her environment on its own alien and estranging terms, she seeks to mark no disturbance within it. Eventually, this causes her to look askance at her own "I," her own subjectivity, as a mere object, just another artifact shifting within this mysterious place: "This husbandry, this castle, and *this I* / Moving within the deeps..." (3; emphasis added). On the other hand, each of the speaker's attempts to understand her environment come through the prism of her pronominal "I." While she might earnestly endeavor to defer to the terms of the place – to hold herself back and imagine its features taking control – all her imaginative reanimations are in fact produced by her. From this perspective, the poem's vocabulary of representation and myth, which suffuses each stanza, takes on a different valence. Mythological and aesthetic grandeur do not so much emerge out of the place as they hint at the speaker's attempts to capture it: in an "image, water-drowned," an "illusion," a "myth," a "trance," a "spell."

Put differently, because the speaker's "*P*" is the prism through which she encounters Sissinghurst, all that follows in the poem is hers: her projection (as with a dream, for which the sleeping subject furnishes all materials), her figuration, her representation, and, finally, her property. The poem's shortest stanza hints at a bridge between the exploratory maneuvers of a dream and the concrete entailments of property:

Beauty, and use, and beauty once again  
Link up my scattered heart, and shape a scheme  
Commensurate with a frustrated dream (4).

The “dream” here might point to the speaker’s visit to an incomprehensible place. In light of the speaker’s “scattered heart,” however, it might also point to Sackville-West’s “frustrated dream” of inhabiting Knole. The “scheme” – emerging out of the vision of “[b]eauty, and use, and beauty once again” – more plainly connects to the project of renovation and reinvention that Sackville-West and Nicolson will pursue at Sissinghurst.

*The Poesis of Property*

In a 1930 letter to Nicolson, Sackville-West identifies one elegant “scheme” they might pursue at Sissinghurst: “We could make a poem of this place.”<sup>82</sup> *Sissinghurst* stages one such poem. Over the ensuing decades, Sackville-West will turn to a second aesthetic practice – gardening – in order to craft another, eventually creating on the grounds of Sissinghurst the famous gardens now in the care of the National Trust. But beyond the poesis of place, *Sissinghurst* and other of Sackville-West’s interventions into and around its referent enact a poesis of property. In writing the poem and in transforming the grounds and ruins, Sackville-West not only invents a new home, but fashions a new site of inheritance after Knole. For one keen and peculiar appeal of the property arose through the matrimonial arithmetic by which the two homes were linked: Cecily, the daughter of Sir John Baker, 1533 purchaser of Sissinghurst, married Thomas Sackville of Knole in 1555. This made it possible for Sackville-West to claim Baker as ancestor and Sissinghurst as a kind of ancestral home.<sup>83</sup> *Sissinghurst* hints at this newly forged “heritage”:

And here, *by birthright far from present fashion,*  
As no disturber of the mirrored trance  
I move, and to the world above the waters  
Wave my incognisance (2; emphasis added).

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<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Sarah Raven, *Sissinghurst: Vita Sackville-West and the Creation of a Garden* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2014) 31.

<sup>83</sup> Nicolson, *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History*, 173.

Much like the gesture of flying the flag of the Sackvilles over Sissinghurst – a gesture both sardonic and serious – this invented “*birthright*” (“far” in its form “from present fashion”) at once riffs on and reifies the legal principles of entitlement that prevented Sackville-West from possessing Knole in the first place. The gardener and writer Sarah Raven (spouse of Sackville-West’s grandson Adam Nicolson) treats Vita Sackville-West’s retroactive reclamation of inheritance as a kind of feminist intervention: “Lineage was one of Vita’s obsessions, so Sissinghurst seemed the perfect compensation for her loss of Knole. [...] There was no doubt this was *her place* – it was her estate, the acres around which she could stride like any Sackville squire from the previous five or six centuries, woman or not.”<sup>84</sup> I take issue with this romantic account of private property for numerous reasons: for its pretense that gender-based discrimination, and not the re-entrenchment of land ownership along the lines of social class and nuclear families, represents the primary problem with primogeniture; and for the concomitant notion that Sackville-West, *because* of her class position and family of origin, consequently has a more proper entitlement to land ownership than would her non-aristocratic contemporaries. In the remaining space of this section, I consider how this re-entrenchment of the entitlements of nobility ramifies as a political and an aesthetic problem in the context of Sissinghurst. More specifically, I explore how its impact authorizes an ossification of place fundamentally at odds with the apparent commitments both of *Sissinghurst’s* speaker and Sackville-West and Nicolson’s relational practice.

As we have seen, *Sissinghurst* represents an epistolary poem that isn’t particularly epistolary in its form – or, alternatively, a letter that contains a poem which doesn’t much speak to its stated addressee. Concurrently, the poem enacts an interesting swerve on another genre: the seventeenth-century country house poem.<sup>85</sup> Prevalent from the start of the century until

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<sup>84</sup> Raven, *Sissinghurst: Creation of a Garden*, 31; emphasis added.

<sup>85</sup> See G. R. Hibbard, “The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19.1/2 (January-June 1956): 169. I thank Sianne Ngai for drawing my attention to this genre.

around 1660, this adulatory genre serves to “praise” both “the English country house and... the whole way of life of which the country house was the centre.”<sup>86</sup> Crucial to the country house poem is a sense of the house’s aliveness – its vitality as an environment in itself and as the center of a larger social, economic, and political ecosystem. As G. R. Hibbard observes, the genre fades precisely because “the way of life that it reflects, and out of which it grows, was on the decline” after midcentury. *Sissinghurst* offers a considerably different vision of the country house. In approaching Sissinghurst, the speaker encounters ruins and remnants, not a grand house still standing. Yet even though there is no “house” as such at the center of the poem, at one time – as the speaker’s speculations make apparent – there clearly *was*. Sackville-West’s uptake of the seventeenth-century genre is distinguished by another important difference. In the form’s original enactments, not only was the country house already constituted, but the poet arrived as “an honoured friend and guest,” recruited by a “patron” to make the society of the country house “aware of itself.” In contradistinction, the speaker of *Sissinghurst* – and, in real life, Sackville-West – arrived at once as the poet, the steward, and the owner of the estate. By approaching Sissinghurst through the lyric fabric of the poem, the speaker/poet not only animates the place, but creates it, pouring it into an aesthetically resonant and economically legible container.

In Sackville-West and Nicolson’s renovation of the ruins into a proper Place, certain aspects of the history of the house, estate, and surrounding villages find favor over others. The mathematics of marriage circa 1755 earlier mentioned, for instance, becomes an important piece of Sissinghurst’s history, whereas its years of use as a prison – between 1756 and 1763 – do not. When Sir John Baker (father of Cecily, Sackville-West’s adopted-by-marriage ancestor) was faced with considerable Parliamentary fines in 1756, his solicitors let out Sissinghurst to the government “to house French naval prisoners during the Seven Years War.”<sup>87</sup> In its ensuing

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 159. All subsequent citations to this article refer to this page.

<sup>87</sup> Raven, *Sissinghurst: Creation of a Garden*, 11.

years as a prison, the country estate housed an untold many prisoners at any given point in time (between one and three thousand, Sarah Raven estimates) and was the site of both spectacular and unreported violence: abominable overcrowding and cruelly indifferent neglect; the abuse of imprisoned French soldiers; and, in 1761, the murder of three recaptured escapees by English militiamen.<sup>88</sup> For his own part, John Baker, known by the sobriquet Bloody Baker, was infamous in the nearby villages for his sadistic streak and his insatiable appetite for sexual violence.<sup>89</sup>

At the same time that Sackville-West and Nicolson rehabilitated Sissinghurst into a respectable country estate, they inhabited it in a queer configuration. In their years at Sissinghurst, Sackville-West, Nicolson, and their sons remained far flung from one another, never occupying bedrooms, for example, under the same roof. They proceeded to cross gardens and grounds on multiple occasions daily: Sackville-West and Nicolson to their respective bedrooms in the South Cottage, Ben and Nigel Nicolson to theirs in the brewhouse; all four to the Priest's House to find the kitchen; and Sackville-West to her writing room in the "springing tower" (a building no one other than her would regularly enter).<sup>90</sup> All four had distant rooms for their own pursuits, and Sissinghurst had no guestroom.<sup>91</sup> Yet in spite of this decoupling of the reproductive family unit from a single edifice (at least with respect to residential quarters) – and the similar decoupling of the once-grand serviced estate from the staffing system that would have maintained it – Sackville-West and Nicolson's inhabitation of Sissinghurst recapitulates the shape of their marriage in spatial and architectural terms. From the outside, they enact what appears to be a perfect declension of the hegemonic relational form and possess what appears to be a canonically aristocratic country house. Neither of these is false; the two do enjoy a loving marriage sanctioned by their social milieux, and they do own a home that similarly befits their

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<sup>88</sup> Nicolson, *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History*, 6-7.

<sup>89</sup> Sir John Baker remained legendary in family and local lore for generations throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, remembered for his torturous cruelty to Protestants and several incidents of sexual assault. See *Ibid.*, 152-153; 199.

<sup>90</sup> Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*, 1.

<sup>91</sup> See Leaska and DeSalvo's note in *Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*, 357.

noble stature in the eyes of their world. From within these two structures, it is also true that they do as they wish with the forms: taking other lovers, giving over a considerable portion of their money and energy to plants, pursuing intellectual and aesthetic projects at odds with the prevailing tastes of the times. The irreducible element that subtends their riffing on these consolidatory structures of relation, family, and property is, of course, class. Sackville-West and Nicolson can pursue what they wish because of the material capital in their possession and the liberties accorded to their social positions.

The limits of locating a queer politics – let alone a transformative or resistant queer politics – in Sackville-West and Nicolson’s practices are laid bare when the reproducibility of their class position comes under threat. When, at the age of eighteen, their son Ben expresses himself to be a homosexual, both parents write to him supportively – *and* encourage him to find and marry a wife. As Sackville-West writes in a letter from the United States:

I *don't* mind [about your homosexuality]. I should mind very much if I thought it meant that you thought you would necessarily miss what you call, and rightly, ‘the whole happiness and joy of marriage’. [...] [Y]ou see, I do really believe that marriage of the kind that Daddy and I have been able to achieve, enriched by children like you and [Nigel], is the happiest thing one can aim for on this earth... One gets such a lesson in this country [America]: one realizes how much one longs, humanly, for *roots*; and the deepest roots of all are those one finds in one’s own home, among one’s own belongings. Which is a thing one can achieve only by happy marriage, – or at least, that’s my idea of it.<sup>92</sup>

In this remarkable letter, Sackville-West unfolds a series of linked assertions: that personal fulfillment is achieved by having a sense of one’s “roots”; that a sense of rootedness comes from possessing “one’s own home” and being surrounded by “one’s own belongings”; and that “happy marriage” is the only conduit through which any of this might be realized. Ben Nicolson, like his brother Nigel, eventually marries; both have children, many of whom become writers and publish on the subject of their family.<sup>93</sup> After Sissinghurst passed into the conservatorship of the

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<sup>92</sup> Qtd. in Glendinning, *Vita*, 258.

<sup>93</sup> In addition to Adam Nicolson, *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History*, Robert Sackville-West, *Inheritance*, and Sarah Raven, *Sissinghurst: Vita Sackville-West and the Creation of a Garden*, see, for instance, Nigel Nicolson, *Sissinghurst Castle: An Illustrated History* (London: National Trust, 1964),

National Trust in 1967, Nigel Nicolson, his spouse, and his children would become the site's first "donor family"; years later, Adam Nicolson and his family would become the second.

Ironically, the installation of a "donor family" at Sissinghurst leads the conservative form of private property to reclaim its conversative contents, in spite of the queer angles Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson may have sought to inhabit there. A structural component of many sites in the care of the National Trust, the "donor family" represents a nuclear family unit directly descended from the "donors" who, upon bequeathing their estate to the Trust, were guaranteed for posterity the right to maintain residence there.<sup>94</sup> Adam Nicolson, Sarah Raven, and their children shift into a farmhouse on the property, taking up residence in a true "single-family home." Looking at his "ancestral home" as presently stewarded by the National Trust – and as visited annually by hundreds of thousands of tourists – Nicolson raises a familiar lament, bemoaning the dilution of Sissinghurst's true "essence":

I walked a lot around Sissinghurst, its woods and fields. Sometimes it filled me with despair. It seemed as if the country was over. *It had become a bogus version of itself: thin city, tied together by cars. Get up in the morning at Sissinghurst and you heard the pulse of rural England: not wonderful, variegated birdsong; but traffic – the seamless, unitonal, flat and flattening noise of tyres on tarmac.*<sup>95</sup>

Nicolson's language of despoilment – the way in which Sissinghurst has "become a bogus version of itself" – recalls the ethos of the country house poem as a genre. Nicolson points to a vision of Sissinghurst and of life in "rural England" that he perceives to no longer exist; in mourning them, he unwittingly illumines the process by which Sissinghurst was domesticated into a static and selfsame place. As we have seen, the original appeal of the estate for Sackville-West emerged out of the "evidence of time" palpable on its grounds – traces that bespoke many

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Juliet Nicolson, *A House Full of Daughters: A Memoir of Seven Generations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), Robert Sackville-West, *The Disinherited: A Story of Family, Love and Betrayal* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), and Vanessa Nicolson, *Have You Been Good?* (London: Granta Books, 2015).

<sup>94</sup> See Nicolson, *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History*, 39-40, and National Trust, "Land Ownership Map," [nationaltrust.org.uk/features/follow-the-history-of-our-places-with-land-map](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/features/follow-the-history-of-our-places-with-land-map), 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Adam Nicolson, *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History* (London: HarperPress, 2008) 29; emphasis added.

“versions” of the place that existed in distant pasts. But over time, Sissinghurst was made into something static: a fixed possession actualized into a site of familial inheritance. This is what gives Adam Nicolson’s remarks their condition of possibility: the singular and enclosed private home has been opened up and adulterated by public institutions, public visitors, and modern technologies.

Upon first reading “Sissinghurst Thursday,” Virginia Woolf writes back to Sackville-West that “that is a nice good poem.” She “like[s] it”: “its suavity and ease; and its calm; and its timelessness and shade; and its air of rings widening widening till they imperceptibly touch the bank.” Woolf also registers, in subtle terms, the poem’s nonaerated aspect – the way in which it doesn’t address or welcome an interlocutor: “And the sense that you have shed all the meretricious horrors of life and have taken to the waters; fishlike, absolved. Oh so much better than bothering about human relations...”<sup>96</sup> As Woolf hints, both *Sissinghurst* and Sissinghurst represent a retreat from collective life and “human relations”: from “the world above the waters,” for the poem’s speaker; and from a world beyond the particular enclosure of the property, for Sackville-West. (Sissinghurst, as we saw above, didn’t have a guestroom.)

Sackville-West offers a resonant articulation of the privacy of property in her 1931 novel *All Passion Spent*. The protagonist, an eighty-eight-year-old woman, recently widowed, called Lady Slane, meets the caretaker of a house she would like to let. Struck by the caretaker’s terseness and indifference, she remarks to herself on “[h]ow wrongly caretakers were named: they took so little care.” But, she reflects, that’s fair enough; as servants rather than owners, to them “the care of a house... was at best a job and at worst a nuisance”:

One could not demand of them that they should give the care which comes from the heart... Nor could one expect them to feel how strange a thing a house was, especially an empty house; not merely a systematic piling-up of brick on brick, regulated in the building by plumb-line and spirit-level, pierced at intervals by doors and casements, but an entity with a life of its own, as though some unifying breath were blown into the air confined within this square brick box, there to remain until the prisoning walls should

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<sup>96</sup> *Letters IV*, 256; Letter #2279, dated 16 November 1930.

fall away, exposing it to a general publicity. It was a very private thing, a house; private with a privacy irrespective of bolts and bars.<sup>97</sup>

With *Sissinghurst*, Sackville-West thus addresses her correspondent “a very private” kind of note: the blueprint of a dream, the first draft of a map to an estate, and a property deed that will be transmitted down a very particular line of inheritance. The poetic, aesthetic, and (later) botanical project of *Sissinghurst*/Sissinghurst indeed activates something remarkable, making a multitudinous place into a site of singularity and “root[edness]” for a particular family “line.” But unlike the terms in which Woolf conceived of *Orlando*, this intervention ultimately serves to domesticate rather than proliferate “wildness” – to encircle, enclose, and conserve a place rather than contest its limits.

### **Coda: Remediations**

In this chapter, I have argued that correspondence represents an expansive plane of collaboration, exchange, and – importantly – difference. As we have seen between Woolf and Sackville-West, correspondence neither requires nor produces accord between its participants. In spite of the couple-oriented accounts that seek to “marry” the two writers in perfect complementarity, their correspondent collaboration does not entail agreement – nor does the intimacy between them bespeak sameness. Instead, as we have seen, their correspondence frequently opens onto considerable divergence.

In the years following the publication of *Sissinghurst* in 1931 and leading up to Woolf’s death in 1941, both closeness and difference would continue between the correspondents, as the circumstances of the Second World War exemplified. Sackville-West, both of whose sons were in the army, was far more committed than Woolf to a patriotic politics and practiced, as she playfully puts it, ““Keeping the brave British smile,”” borrowing a coinage from “the Daily

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<sup>97</sup> Vita Sackville-West, *All Passions Spent* (Garden City, NY: Virago, 1983 [1931]) 89-90.

Sketch.”<sup>98</sup> Woolf, whose nephew Julian Bell was killed in the Spanish Civil War after voluntarily enlisting in support of the anti-fascist cause, balked at any nationalist politics: “Yes, I sit in a dumb rage, being fought for by these children whom one wants to see making love to each other.”<sup>99</sup> Yet, as both writers would express in elegant and abbreviated letters to one another throughout the war, their friendship – and their correspondence itself – held an inarticulable comfort as a zone of contact and familiarity. As Woolf puts it in a letter of August 1939:

...[I]ndeed, my dearest creature, whatever rung I’m on, the ladder is a great comfort in this kind of intolerable suspension of all reality – something real. But isn’t it odd? – one can’t fold it in any words.<sup>100</sup>

Invoking the metaphor of “the ladder” – a figure she and Sackville-West use in their letters for their friendship – Woolf treats the correspondence as something real in the midst of circumstances that are all too unreal. In another letter written one year later, she describes the “strange” surrealness of toggling between the ordinariness of a phone call they have just shared and the unreality of the Blitz: “I’ve just stopped talking to you. It seems so strange. Its perfectly peaceful here [in Lewes, East Sussex] – theyre playing bowls – I’d just put flowers in your room. And there [in London] you sit with the bombs falling round you.”<sup>101</sup>

Throughout this chapter, I have approached Sackville-West and Woolf’s correspondence as the site of immense formal and temporal expansiveness within their shared lifetimes. I close by returning to their correspondence as an unfinished project – a field of address prone to engagement and response by tertiary readers after the “real time” of their exchange. To this end, I explore two scenes of revisitation and remediation, each of which functions to annotate their queer correspondence in a new way, remixing public and private gestures of address and realizing unforeseen forms of memorialization.

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<sup>98</sup> *Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*, 427 (dated 1 September 1939); see also Leaska and DeSalvo’s note to the letters of 1939 in *Ibid.*, 419.

<sup>99</sup> Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI: 1936-1941* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), Letter #3549, dated 2 September 1939.

<sup>100</sup> *Letters VI*, 354-355, Letter #3548, dated 29 August 1939.

<sup>101</sup> *Letters VI*, 425, Letter #3638, dated 30 August 1940.

In 1945, four years after Woolf's death, Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson publish *Another World Than This*. . . , an anthology of their own literary annotations. This volume brings together an assemblage of "passages which particularly pleased them," culled from a wide array of literary works that originate in nine languages. More particularly, *Another World Than This* anthologizes Sackville-West's and Nicolson's "underlinings": the physical annotations they each marked in the pages of their respective books.<sup>102</sup> As one contemporary reviewer observes, the resulting volume doesn't represent "a pedant's anthology, a solemn lying-in-state," but "[r]ather... the book of two voyagers who have trawled all their lives in a luminous sea and drawn into their mesh the graces of China and Italy and France and of classic Greece and Rome, besides a silver-shining haul from the poets, philosophers, and essayists of Britain."<sup>103</sup> At the center of this anthology appears a "poem" by Virginia Woolf – a passage "lineated," in Mitchell Leaska's apt phrase, from *Orlando*:

Let us go, then, exploring  
 This summer morning,  
 When all are adoring  
 The plum-blossom and the bee.  
 And humming and hawing  
 Let us ask of the starling  
 What he may think  
 On the brink  
 Of the dust-bin whence he picks  
 Among the sticks  
 Combings of scullion's hair.  
 What's life, we ask;  
 Life, Life, Life! cries the bird  
 As if he had heard. . . .

Virginia Woolf [1882-1941]<sup>104</sup>

Excepting two clauses that are elided here, the words of this poem appear in precisely the same language in the corresponding prose passage in *Orlando*.<sup>105</sup> Orlando, at this instant, is writing;

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<sup>102</sup> Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, *Another World Than This*. . . (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1945) 5.

<sup>103</sup> J. C. Trewin, "Lute and Cypress," *The Observer* 16 December 1945, p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> Sackville-West and Nicolson, *Another World*, 131.

<sup>105</sup> The full prose passage reads: "Let us go, then, exploring, this summer morning, when all are adoring the plum blossom and the bee. And humming and hawing, let us ask of the starling (*who*

moments later, she looks up having completed her poem – “Done!” – to find the nineteenth century finished and the twentieth begun.

Mitchell Leaska proposes a “valedictory” interpretation of this untitled poem, approaching it as an instance of direct address from Woolf to Sackville-West that hinges upon translation. As he observes, “Life, Life, Life!” translates into Latin as “Vita, Vita, Vita!”<sup>106</sup> This, of course, is not untrue. But by this consolidatory gesture – “Life” = “Vita” – Leaska treats the poem exclusively as Sackville-West’s realization of a latent private message in *Orlando*. This conclusion belies a myopic approach to the novel as a closeted text concealing its author’s affinity with its subject; moreover, it overlooks the ways in which the passage explicitly refers to Sackville-West. (A photograph of Sackville-West – the biography’s eighth figure, reproduced below – illustrates one of the two clauses omitted in the poem: “What’s life, we ask, *leaning on the farmyard gate*; Life, Life, Life!”<sup>107</sup>) What I find more interesting about the “poem” Sackville-West ascribes to Woolf is how its lineation functions to torque both public and private address toward an unexpected conclusion. On one level, Sackville-West’s lineation makes public a moment of private address in *Orlando*; simultaneously, she mediates the public project of *Orlando* through her private annotations. The poem operates recursively: Sackville-West creates a tribute to Woolf via Woolf’s own tribute to her. Most surprisingly, however, the poem ends on the terms Woolf originally envisioned for *Orlando: A Biography*: in ellipsis, or, as she puts it in her diary: “with three dots . . . so.”<sup>108</sup> By closing Woolf’s “poem” in ellipsis, Sackville-West stewards the wishes of her correspondent and collaborator forward. In so doing, she emphatically insists upon unfinishedness: of Woolf’s project, of their friendship, and of their queer correspondence.

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*is a more sociable bird than the lark*) what he may think on the brink of the dust bin, whence he picks among the sticks combings of scullion's hair. What's life, we ask, *leaning on the farmyard gate*; Life, Life, Life! cries the bird, as if he had heard. . .” (199; emphasis added).

<sup>106</sup> Mitchell Leaska, “Introduction,” *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*, eds. Leaska and DeSalvo, 46.

<sup>107</sup> This illustration appears in Woolf, *Orlando*, 234.

<sup>108</sup> *Diary III*, 131; this entry is dated 14 March 1927.



Figure 1: “What’s life, we ask, leaning on the farmyard gate...”<sup>109</sup>

In September 1988, twenty-six years after Sackville-West’s death and twenty-one years after Sissinghurst passes into the stewardship of the National Trust, the filmmaker Derek Jarman records a visit to its now-famous gardens. In the intervening years, he writes, the place has changed:

Sissinghurst, that elegant sodom in the garden of England, is ‘heritized’ in the institutional hands of the National Trust. Its magic has fled in the vacant eyes of tourists. If two boys kissed in the silver garden now, you can be sure they’d be shown the door. The shades of the Sackville-Wests pursuing naked guardsmen through the herbaceous borders return long after the last curious coachload has departed, the tea shoppe closed, and the general public has returned home to pore over the salacious Sundays, ferreting out another middle-aged victim driven into the not so secret arms of a boy starved of attention and affection who has spilt the beans for the illusory security of cash.<sup>110</sup>

As a “public” attraction – a “public” garden – Sissinghurst has a new range of addressees: an audience of middle-class, middle-aged, and heterosexual visitors. This target public also has its others – queers – who, were they to break heterosexual protocol (like the “two boys kiss[ing] in

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<sup>109</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, 234.

<sup>110</sup> Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1994) 15.

the silver garden”), would surely “be shown the door.” This new normative regime prevails in spite of Sissinghurst’s queer history – a history that Jarman helps us to see. For the entry, as we can quickly discern, limns the boundary between reality and imagination, remapping the Sissinghurst’s current regime through the coordinates of its gay pasts. Through this speculative gesture of spatial annotation, Jarman recasts Sissinghurst through Sackville-West and Nicolson’s queerer angles. Even Jarman’s way of pointing at the couple’s spectral presence – “[t]he shades of the Sackville-Wests” – represents a campy inversion of the unit as which they moved through their contemporaneous diplomatic and aristocratic worlds: The Honorable Mr. and Mrs. Harold Nicolson.

The problem with Sissinghurst, the reason its “magic has fled,” doesn’t lie in the presence of the public as such – the middle-class visitors who arrive with “vacant eyes” much to the chagrin of the late Vita Sackville-West. Instead, the issue lies in the way that a certain form of wildness gets tamped down, policed, and punished. For this particular public, the garden must be a garden: an exquisite illusion of botanical spontaneity kept in check, in reality, by careful design, studious attention, and weed-plucking hands. But as Jarman shows us, “the herbaceous borders” of Sissinghurst do not only enclose a museum-quality botanical masterpiece; they equally enclose a cruising ground in which innumerable forms of unforeseen contact might occur.

## Chapter Two:

### Others in Attendance: Queer End-of-Life Writing and Insurgent Documentation

*No, here we can write  
no postcards, can't even  
get out of the car.*

– W. G. Sebald, “Dark Night Sallies Forth”<sup>1</sup>

From Dorset in April 1970, five months following the death of her partner of thirty-nine years, Sylvia Townsend Warner begins assembling the letters and drafting the “Narratives” that will comprise *I’ll Stand by You* (1930-1968, pub. 1998). From Brisbane in September 1988, facing the sudden foreshortening of his own lifespan due to AIDS-related opportunistic infections, Eric Michaels begins crafting the diary entries that will comprise *Unbecoming* (1987-1988, pub. 1990). While Warner works in the wake of partner Valentine Ackland’s death, Michaels initiates his project in anticipation of his own. Warner begins by culling letters from her extensive correspondence with Ackland; Michaels begins by studying diary as a form, trying out different diaristic voices, and experimenting with his entries as drafts – as malleable sketches subject to revision. The temporal and formal differences of their work notwithstanding, Warner and Michaels pursue a common project: to forge a genre of life-writing that refutes the absoluteness of death as an ending. Operating by creative and queer practices of compilation, gestures of insurgent address, and insistent claims to memorialization, *I’ll Stand by You* and *Unbecoming* seek at once to make record and to invite futural remediation of that record. As we shall see, these two historically and geographically disparate individuals – Warner, the leftist lesbian English writer and activist, and Michaels, the leftist gay American anthropologist living and working in Eastern Australia – turn to life-writing forms in order to contravene a will to silence around queer life and death. By exploiting the evidentiary potential of forms such as epistolary correspondence

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<sup>1</sup> W. G. Sebald, *After Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 2003) 109.

and diary, and by imbuing these forms with sidelong gestures of address aimed at (queer) readers yet to come, they craft archival objects that offer more than “proof” – they demand encounter.

This chapter brings together Warner and Michaels to investigate endings and ongoingness as twinned problems for queer correspondence. I approach these two concepts together, in spite of their seemingly oppositional valences, in order to illumine how the tension between termination and continuity animates all correspondences. For, as we have seen, correspondence is a form of relation whose various enactments are predicated upon response, mutuality, and ongoingness. As a relation of mutual response, of back-and-forth exchange, correspondence thus finds its form in deferral. The correspondent waits: to encounter her other; to swap roles, from writer back to reader; to receive a letter that may never have been sent and may never arrive – but *might*. Endings, then, seem to represent a peculiar problem for correspondence, insofar as this relational form takes shape through durational practice and aspires to no proper endpoint. Yet, as we shall see, ending is as much a parameter of correspondence as is ongoingness. Just as we theorize correspondence as a relation of ongoing wait – one interval of deferral seating another, and another, and another – we can equally approach it as a sequence of endings: a string of serial arrivals concatenated together. Whichever term we favor – ongoingness or ending – the receipt of any given letter does and does not relieve the correspondent from her anticipatory post. A discrete letter satisfies one occasion of waiting, and at the same time, it never inaugurates an era of utter satisfaction or heralds the completion of the correspondence as such. One wait ends; another begins anew. Ongoingness (the ever-deferred horizon of completion) and endings (serial but never redemptive) come to sound like synonyms; together, they shine a light on a correspondence’s constitutive slant: its resolute refusal of teleology.

I turn in this chapter to two works (*I’ll Stand by You* and *Unbecoming*) that retool nonteleological life-writing forms to avowedly teleological projects. Warner and Michaels craft their memorializing projects largely through epistolary correspondence and diary, life-writing

genres that I refer to in this chapter as durational forms. As we have already seen in the specific case of correspondence, durational forms are animated by ongoingness, continuation, and extension rather than riveted to an aspirational endpoint. By adopting durational forms for their intensely ends-minded endeavors, Warner and Michaels take on an enterprise that sounds like a contradiction in terms: occasional *and* durational life-writing. On the one hand, they each attempt to construct a narrative whole oriented around a particular *telos* – in Warner’s case, Ackland’s death, and in Michaels’s case, his own death. On the other hand, they draw upon fragmentary, laterally expansive durational forms in the service of constructing that would-be whole. This chapter asks why Warner and Michaels opt to work at such an ironic intersection – to thread the needle of teleological narrative with life-writing filaments that do not comprise a singular yarn – and considers what their composite life-writing accounts accomplish.

In what follows, I exfoliate the strategies of compilation, cataloguing, and address by which Warner and Michaels construct *I’ll Stand by You* and *Unbecoming* – documentary narrative objects I treat as dynamic archives. The chapter begins by examining *I’ll Stand by You* in the terms Warner initially proposed when conceiving of the project: as “an archive.”<sup>2</sup> After providing a sense of this volume’s alternately narrative-epistolary texture, I explicate the archival ethic that subtends it – a paradigm articulated by Valentine Ackland in a letter at the volume’s chronological center but activated by Warner in the process of crafting it. This is the doubled paradigm of the “record”: at once an archival whole recognizable as such and a portable media form to be transmitted to, and remediated by, posterity. I next swap literary forms and geopolitical contexts to consider *Unbecoming*. In this section, I investigate the text that Eric Michaels referred to as his “AIDS diary” as an artifact of posthumous address. I begin by delineating the ways Michaels studies, explores, and exploits the affordances of diaristic form in

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<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell, *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell, 1938-1978* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001) 221. Warner’s letter is dated 13 April 1970.

launching this diary of occasion – a notion that cuts across the grain of durational diaristic practice. I go on to consider how these practices of formal experimentation fill out the palette of strategies of address Michaels deploys throughout *Unbecoming*. Bringing together the styles of encounter that Warner and Michaels seek – from Warner’s implicit call for queer witnesses to queer lives to Michaels’s explicit exhortations addressed to his posthumous readers – I conclude by speculating on how queer correspondences demand archival encounters, and the obverse: how queer archival narratives operate simultaneously as queer correspondences addressed to tertiary interlocutors.

### **‘Remembered together’: *I’ll Stand by You***

First transcribed and edited by Susanna Pinney in 1970, and published for the first time in 1998, *I’ll Stand by You: The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland* promises letters but opens with “Narrative”:

#### *Narrative 1*

The course of our future life was determined by an unamiable farmer.

As Theodore Powys would not stir out of the landscape of his novels, his London admirers had to go to the remote village of Chaldon in Dorset if they wished to meet him. I was such an early admirer that I counted as a friend and from the mid-twenties onward I used from time to time to stay with him and his wife, Violet, at Beth Car – a small red brick house on a grassy hillside. It was from Violet that I first heard of Valentine.<sup>3</sup>

This narrative, like the thirteen other such prose interludes to appear in the volume, was penned by Sylvia Townsend Warner in the wake of Valentine Ackland’s death. As we can see, the “Narrative” begins by proffering of a proleptic view of Warner and Ackland’s life together – the way in which “[t]he course of [their] future life” was to be “determined by an unamiable farmer.” Yet by the end of even this short excerpt, we find tense, temporality, and narrative perspective transformed when Warner initiates a linear narrative diegesis of her first encounter with Ackland,

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<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Townsend Warner, *I’ll Stand by You: The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner & Valentine Ackland* (London: Pimlico, 1998), 5.

the single young woman who “was believed to write poetry but never spoke of it.” At the same time that Warner establishes what is to come between her and Ackland, she draws the two of them into the diegetic present of her narrative. As we shall see, this strategy of constellating and embracing multiple (at times contradictory) temporalities is paradigmatic of the project Warner pursues in *I’ll Stand by You*. This is an endeavor at once narrative and archival, one that requires a new and hybrid genre of life-writing.

Warner, as Melanie Micir has observed, conceived of *I’ll Stand by You* as an archival endeavor from the very first, as she put it to William Maxwell when describing her new project in a letter: “No, not a story, not a novel, and nothing for now. An archive. I found that Valentine had kept quantities of my letters, as I had kept quantities of hers. Reading through them, and putting them into sequence, I realised that it is a notable correspondence and the sort of thing that should be put away in a tin box for posterity.”<sup>4</sup> While Warner here refers to the project that will become *I’ll Stand by You* as an endeavor rooted in preservation – in tucking their letters “away in a tin box” – she simultaneously activates a larger intervention into the work of memory and memorialization. For Warner is constructing an archive not only of their letters, but of their life together; indeed, it isn’t only the epistolary material she wishes to transmit to “posterity.” In the immediate aftermath of Ackland’s death, Warner is gripped by an intense sense of co-presence, the sensation of being “‘not so much haunted as possessed,’ guided and watched over,” by her late partner.<sup>5</sup> Through vivid dreams and daydreams, the rereading of her own journals from decades earlier, and passionate “‘assignment[s],” in her phrase, with their correspondences, Warner carried Ackland’s presence into the daily life of her newly posthumous present. And although it was certainly true, as Frances Bingham writes, that “the inner landscape she inhabited with Valentine was more vividly alive than the outer world,” it is perhaps more

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<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Melanie Micir, “‘Living in Two Tenses’: On the Intimate Archives of Sylvia Townsend Warner,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 36.1 (Fall 2012): p. 119; emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015) 197. Harman quotes from Warner’s journals.

precise to describe Warner's new "outer world" as radiantly run through by a version of Ackland uniquely perceptible to herself.<sup>6</sup> To paraphrase the title of a poem of mourning by Tess Gallagher, Warner emerges from Ackland's death with a felt sense that "now [she] is never alone."<sup>7</sup> Warner thus inhabits a position of profound temporal dislocation, a condition of simultaneous absence and haunting that Micir elegantly describes as "living in two tenses": a constant toggling between "her solitary present" and "the various pasts in which they had been together."<sup>8</sup> Yet at the same time that she is buoyed by a sense of Ackland's nearness, Warner faces a very real sort of precariousness: the reality that this co-presence is internal to her and that she is now the unique steward of their lives together. While the couple's letters, by their very voluminousness, may represent the most easily available materials for Warner's project of memorialization, they also possess two unique affordances: first, an immediate way of accessing Ackland's voice in spite of her absence (something that Warner accomplishes in other ways as well, as we shall see); and second, an uncanny ability to foster a similar sensation of temporal disjoint amongst their contemporary readers.

*I'll Stand by You* largely comprises two literary forms: short autobiographical sketches, which Warner labels as "Narratives," and letters. Narratives, as we've seen above, were crafted retrospectively by Warner and oscillate between proleptic future, historical past, and diegetic present. The letters, by contrast, present as primary historical artifacts, organized chronologically and reproduced with numerous epistolary metadata (such as authorship, date and place of sending, and addressee) at their head, as with the very first to appear in the volume:

1: VA

Chaldon, 13 October 1930

I meant to give you this today – anyhow it is obviously yours because your hands are so

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<sup>6</sup> Frances Bingham, *Valentine Ackland: A Transgressive Life* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2021) 268.

<sup>7</sup> See Tess Gallagher, "Now That I Am Never Alone," in *Moon Crossing Bridge* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1992), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Micir, "Living in Two Tenses," 119.

beautiful. But a mourning ring is not suitable to our state.<sup>9</sup>

This letter, like the one hundred seventy others to follow, simultaneously indexes a specific historical moment (Ackland addressing Warner from the village of Chaldon after the latter has departed to London) and constellates the progression of linear time within the volume. Whereas the Warner of the volume's interludes writes with editorial retrospection, the Ackland of this initial letter writes as a relational participant addressing her intimate other in real time. Yet even as the letters are starkly different from the narratives in the immediacy of their epistolary address, they likewise bristle with what has already passed between Warner and Ackland and ponder about what is to come. That this first letter opens without a salutation is telling: not only has Ackland written Warner before, but further and far more intimately, Ackland can address Warner a letter without addressing her at all! The intimacy of Ackland's nameless address bespeaks an extratextual interpersonal field with a longer a history – one that precedes the letter's specific historical present and *I'll Stand by You's* own point of departure. And more, Ackland makes clear in this same letter, is yet to come: "I am awaiting your word. I shall tell you nothing, except that I have not yet started to tell you how I love you." Between flirtatious gestures of demand and demurral, Ackland gestures toward at least two figurations of a shared future: first, to the arrival of Warner's response to her present letter, imminently expected; and second, to an anticipated interval of ongoing intimacy and contact over the course of which Warner will come to understand how she feels. Prolepsis and retrospection, Ackland's first letter makes clear, were also sites of play for the couple in non-instrumentalizing ways over the course of their correspondences.

In bringing the couple's letters and her own autobiographical prose together into a single manuscript, Warner crafts a hybrid whole that proceeds through the *longue durée* of their relationship – spanning numerous creative projects, personal and geopolitical crises, relocations,

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<sup>9</sup> Warner, *I'll Stand by You*, 17. This letter, the first to appear in the volume, was written by Valentine Ackland (VA) and addressed to Sylvia Townsend Warner (STW).

and new pets – between 1930 and 1968. Importantly, in stitching these formally diverse materials into a single fabric, Warner undertakes this project of memorialization in a robustly polyvocal way. Even in the space of her prose interludes (the fourteen “Narratives” that punctuate the volume), Warner does not work alone. Rather than functioning as fourth-wall-breaking excursions into contextualization or explanation, these interludes represent compilations in their own right. Into the midst of her own prose, Warner assembles extracts from Ackland’s poetry, diaries, and letters, and from other published and unpublished materials, usually without citation or clarification. The first page of Narrative 1, for example, breaks into an uncited poem:

This is the world exactly as Adam had it –  
Spring now, and willows flowering, and I alone  
In an ash-wood, with the birds around me  
Clamouring and flying, the small birds like leaves’ shadows  
Threading through the hedge.<sup>10</sup>

With this spontaneous flight into lyric poetry, Warner imports an unpublished poem written by Ackland into the opening page of *I’ll Stand by You*, thereby imbuing the volume with her partner’s voice – and with her imagining of “[t]his,” “the world” exactly as it was at the start of their relationship. In silently quoting from Ackland’s poetic corpus, Warner reactivates an earlier experiment in intimate co-authorship and authorial anonymity;<sup>11</sup> more poignantly, she introduces

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<sup>10</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 5. Valentine Ackland’s untitled poem can be found in typewritten form among the Louis Untermeyer papers. See Box 1, Folder 1, Louis Untermeyer papers, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware.

<sup>11</sup> In 1933, Warner and Ackland published a combined collection of their poems, entitled *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (New York: Viking). The book was to be an experiment in anonymous publishing, and interwove the two poets’ work without citation. As its “Note to the Reader” describes: “Of the poems in this book fifty-four are by one writer, fifty-five by the other. [...] The authors believe that by issuing their separate work under one cover the element of contrast thus obtained will add to the pleasure of the reader; by withholding individual attributions they hope that the freshness of anonymity will be preserved” (i). The publication was interpersonally difficult for Ackland and Warner, as many reviewers attributed the most effective poems to Warner. In response, the UK edition (London: Chatto & Windus, 1934) was published with a key at the back indicating attributions – a supplement, of course, totally at odds with the book’s stated project! Worst of all, their UK publisher subordinated Ackland to Warner in print, as Warner explains: “Ackland, Valentine – see Warner, S. T.” (*I’ll Stand by You*, 114).

Ackland to the readers of the volume on the terms most significant to her in life: as a poet.<sup>12</sup> The effect – Warner’s prose interwoven with Ackland’s verse – is at once dazzling and beguiling, attaining an intricate formal effect whereby either writer might be speaking. Although it is by Warner’s hand that this interlude comes to constitute a commonplace book-style assemblage, she temporarily yields the survivor’s primacy of place and decisiveness of voice.<sup>13</sup> In so doing, she crafts “a prose that’s never quite not the poetry,” to borrow from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s reflections on the hybrid poetic form of the haibun, and activates a voice that resounds simultaneously from two directions.<sup>14</sup>

In fusing letters and interludes (and, within the interludes, her own prose and extracts from Ackland’s writing), Warner fashions a single fabric, a new life-writing form that she spins into a singular object. This point, I maintain, has significant importance: although the subtitle of *I’ll Stand by You* suggests that the text is first and finally a collection of correspondences (*The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland*), the volume refuses such a straightforward evidentiary structure. For one, Warner and Ackland’s letters do not represent the volume’s unique “primary sources”; Warner’s carefully crafted – and scintillatingly polyvocal –

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<sup>12</sup> Although later a prodigious political organizer, antiques restorer, and merchant, Ackland found her first and truest vocation in poetry. While Ackland published many poems in periodicals, she never published a book of her own poetry (besides the contentious *Whether a Dove or Seagull*) during her lifetime. Warner, also an accomplished poet, largely ceased to publish her own poems out of sensitivity to Ackland. After her partner’s death, Warner published two collections of Ackland’s poems: *The Nature of the Moment* (Chattus & Windus, 1973) and *Later Poems of Valentine Ackland* (private printing, 1970). See Bingham, *Valentine Ackland*, 272-273.

<sup>13</sup> In describing *I’ll Stand by You* as an artifact that riffs on the form of the commonplace book, I refer to the nineteenth-century genre of compilation. My thinking about “commonplacing” is deeply informed by Kelly Wisecup’s work on Indigenous compilations, which frequently inscribe unexpected materials, meanings, and uses into colonial media. See Wisecup, *Assembled for Use: Indigenous Compilation and the Archives of Early Native American Literatures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021) 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Of the haibun, the poetic form of “prose interspersed with haiku,” Sedgwick writes: “Spangled with haiku is more what it feels like, his [James Merrill’s] very sentences fraying into implosions of starlike density or radiance, then out into a prose that’s never quite not the poetry.” See Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) 194.

“Narratives” are equally robust and important life-writing materials. More foundationally, the prose interludes are not subordinated to the letters. The interludes do not contextualize, decode, or explain the letters; indeed, as we have already seen, these short pieces of prose instigate no small amount of speculation as they open onto evocative but unaccounted-for materials. Far even from laying out a single-authored account (let alone decoding arcane archival materials), the “Narratives” actively stage opacity, at least for a reader hungry for evidence. In so doing, however, they contribute profoundly to Warner’s attempt in *I’ll Stand by You* to evoke the shifting ground of her relationship with Ackland – what Janine Utell would refer to as the “coupled world” of their shared creative life.<sup>15</sup>

This polyvocal artifact, stippled with the markers of different temporalities, represents a way for Warner to carry forward the autoarchival work she and Ackland had begun before the latter’s death. As Melanie Micir has extensively documented, Warner and Ackland “were consumed by their end-of-life preparations” throughout the 1960s, busily “remaking wills, appointing literary executors, leaving instructions for themselves and others about how to order their posthumous lives and works, ordering correspondence, compiling personal archives, and, in general, preparing ways in which to leave a mark on the world once departed from it.”<sup>16</sup> (Needless to say, Warner’s coy intimation of discovery in her earlier letter to William Maxwell – that she “*found* that Valentine had kept quantities of her letters” – could hardly have been a surprise.) As Micir’s description indicates, Warner and Ackland’s autoarchival work was fundamentally creative. In assembling what Micir refers to as an “intimate archive,” the two tried out myriad speculative gestures, not able to know in advance what would stick for “posterity” or

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<sup>15</sup> Qtd. in Janine Utell, *Literary Couples and 20th-Century Life Writing* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) 5. Utell takes up the concept of the “coupled world” from Diane Enns in *Love in the Dark: Philosophy by Another Name* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Melanie Micir, *The Passion Projects: Modernist Women, Intimate Archives, Unfinished Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 36. With the term “intimate archive,” Micir does not specify a particular archival form, but instead “refers to the accumulation and organization of material about the life of a partner without immediate plans to publish, or otherwise make public, this material.”

represent a discernable “mark on the world” to those who would follow them. Moreover, the sheer expansiveness of their burgeoning archive – its diversity and multiplicity of materials, and their affective richness and “polymorphous discursivity,” to borrow another term from Janine Utell – baffle available publishing forms.<sup>17</sup> Containers sufficient to the contents and commitments of their archive, in other words, would have to be invented. Consequently, the work of archiving their lives is not merely a matter of preservation – nor is it a matter of mapping out a narrative. Instead, Warner and Ackland’s archival work critically involves creative representation, evocation, and performance – a speculative approach to archiving to which Ackland gives voice and which Warner realizes practically in *I’ll Stand by You*.

In a letter at the center of *I’ll Stand by You*, Ackland addresses Warner a love note meant to cauterize a rupture. Writing on the occasion of Valentine’s Day in 1941, she attempts to bring a moment of relational crisis to a close by recasting it as temporary:

I want to write to you what I have just thought of: That I am so very glad to be free to love you again as *completely* as I had loved you for eight years, and more, before this almost-fatal interruption happened. I have talked so much of that, too much, and there is nothing new to be said about it, and I know the break may be there for a long time, even for always if we are lucky enough to have an always: but it will never now be worse than a scratch on the surface of the record, and I hope (and dare really to hope) that because the record is so lovely and so well-completed we shall not notice the scratch more than as a most brief trouble.<sup>18</sup>

In this letter of (annual)<sup>19</sup> ceremony and (ultimately unfulfilled)<sup>20</sup> promise, Ackland gestures toward an archival paradigm important to the couple’s autoarchival practice. Across these breathless sentences, Ackland practices familiar strategies of retrospection and prolepsis, positioning the “almost-fatal interruption” of her love affair with the American writer Elizabeth

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<sup>17</sup> Utell, *Literary Couples*, 98. Utell uses “polymorphous discursivity” as a way of specifying the diversity of literary forms that populate the couple’s archive (“an assemblage of multiple textualities taking multiple forms”) and the differential perspectives and positions they convey between Warner and Ackland as individuals (“some ‘fitting always closer and closer to each other,’ as Ackland puts it, some resisting and rupturing what the couple has made”).

<sup>18</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 192 (Letter #75, 14 February 1941).

<sup>19</sup> Ackland and Warner annually marked a handful of occasions – including Valentine’s Day, Christmas, and their “marriage night” – by exchanging letters and poems.

<sup>20</sup> As we shall see, Ackland and White’s relationship would continue until after 1949.

Wade White squarely in the past and projecting a futural perspective from which the interruption will appear insignificant. While it may never fade from view (it will be there “even for always if we are lucky enough to have an always,” she writes in a phrase both optimistic and superstitious), one day it will appear as a mere “scratch” on the surface of a magnificent whole: “the record.” With this metaphor – “a scratch on the surface of the record” – Ackland inaugurates a doubled paradigm of the record, which here retains two distinct resonances. On the one hand, “the record” refers to an archival record, a comprehensive file collating the material of Warner and Ackland’s lives together, within which the “scratch” of Ackland’s relationship with White might register as a demerit. On the other hand, “the record” points toward sonic media, to a vinyl record with a barely perceptible scratch on its surface. This figuration of the record thus pulls in two directions: whereas the archival record would compile everything into a single place, producing a catalogue of (at least notional) evidence, the vinyl record conveys nothing intelligibly without the intermediary of the gramophone. Whereas the archival record comprehends and totalizes, the vinyl record reproduces and repeats. And whereas the documentary heft of the archival record notionally *presents* the thing itself, a whole in its entirety, the vinyl record is activated by spectatorial remediation and produces a phenomenologically resonant (if nonencyclopedic) *representation*. Far from merely conserving sacrosanct materials, this doubled paradigm of archival practice intently fixes its view to readers, auditors, viewers, and researchers yet to come – envisaging archives as sites of future encounter rather than ahistorical repositories of information.

In her earlier letter to Maxwell, Warner had written that her new project – “an archive” – was something to be transmitted to “posterity”; moreover, it represented “nothing *for now*.” In the remaining space of this section, I ask who might populate the category of “posterity,” and the temporality not of “now,” but “later,” in Warner and Ackland’s archival praxis. As I will show, Warner and Ackland considered many mechanisms, frames, and figurations for their documentary and preservatory work; in so doing, they imagined myriad “others” who might

encounter their work and lives. Some of these others were proximate to them – indeed, on the cusp of knowable; other of their imagined others were not quite conceivable, being distantly situated across lines of geographical and temporal alterity. In this section, I treat *I'll Stand by You* as an exemplary touchstone as I explore some of the different frames that Ackland and Warner, and later Warner alone, tried out. Each of these frames is a figuration of “the record” – the private archive, the historical record, and the concert – and each complicates the implication of evidentiary airtightness attendant upon the term in its most conservative usage. As we shall see, Warner and Ackland’s letters and autobiographical writings evince a keen attention to audience, interloper, and nondiegetic addressee – to an imagined third-person positionality, situated outside their intimate relational world, that I refer to in this dissertation as the tertiary reader. Their very attention to the tertiary reader, I suggest, blurs the boundary between empirical and representational knowledge formation and, moreover, between data collection and creative intervention.

By tracking Warner and Ackland’s attunements to others and to future temporalities, I rove two timescapes – what I refer to as the “diegesis” of their correspondence as they practiced it in the “real time” of their life together, and the projective “later” of future memory (their own) and discovery (by others). Simultaneously, I approach their “coupled world” through two apertures: from within and from beyond the two of them. *I'll Stand by You*, as we will come to see, is characterized by a porosity with respect to both its temporal and relational landscapes. It isn’t the case, that is, that the tertiary reader brings the timescape of “later” to the artifact, or that Warner and Ackland tacked “later” on to their autoarchival work toward the end of their lives – nor that the notion of “posterity” is an idea only initiated by middle age. Instead, the two faced multiple “laters” and imagined myriad “others” throughout the entirety of their relationship. As I toggle through these various figurations of the record, I reckon with the way each site of record-keeping opens onto a zone of encounter – how different others from different times form a critical parameter of this collaborative project of memory. Put differently, I track the ways that

Warner and Ackland do things with their life-writings and most of all with their letters: how they transform them variously into archive, exhibit, and performance, and how these several transmogrifications enable unexpected forms of memory.

*“The two of them”*

In an early letter to Ackland, Warner offers an elegant turn of phrase that encapsulates the nature of their early letter-writing: “Darling, among the other good uses of our love, we shall teach poetry to the Post-Office.”<sup>21</sup> While the initial prose interlude of *I’ll Stand by You* begins just prior to Warner and Ackland’s first meeting, the letters open immediately after the two have come together as a couple in October 1930 – three years after they first met in the village of Chaldon and two weeks after they took a house there together.<sup>22</sup> As Janine Utell has observed, Warner and Ackland’s first romantic encounter – when Warner went to Ackland’s bedroom on the evening of 11 October 1930 and “found love there” – represents a kind of navel in their life-writings: a point of origin they write about and return to on innumerable occasions, and which shows up across the pages of *I’ll Stand by You* many times.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, as Utell points out, this

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<sup>21</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 50 (Letter #18, 24 January 1931).

<sup>22</sup> Warner and Ackland came to inhabit “Miss Green’s cottage” through a spate of coincidences. After noticing Warner in low spirits, Ackland offered her the use of her flat in Chaldon so that she might have a place to stay outside of London. Warner, although grateful, declined. When Ackland’s landlord found out about the offer, however, he “threw her out.” Upon hearing that the cottage was listed for sale, Warner jumped at the opportunity to offer something to the displaced Ackland. She bought the cottage in June of 1931, and the two moved in in October. See Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 65-70.

<sup>23</sup> Warner and Ackland narrativize this encounter on many occasions across their life-writings. Following an eventful day of advocacy (the two uniting in rage to protest the treatment of young girls in residence at a local vicarage), Warner and Ackland continue their conversation from their respective beds on either side of a room-separating wall. When Ackland expresses that she feels herself to be “utterly unloved” (or “utterly loveless,” depending on the account), Warner rushes to her side: “There I stayed, till I got into her bed, and found love there.” Qtd. in Utell, *Literary Couples*, 91. See also Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 15; Ackland, *For Sylvia: An Honest Account* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985 [1949]) 123-124; and Warner, *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994) 69-70. For a discussion of how Warner and Ackland fashion and refashion this moment over the ensuing decades, see Utell, *Literary Couples*, 90-94.

narrative kernel functions not so much as an ultimate *telos* as an opening.<sup>24</sup> In other words, even as Warner and Ackland frequently renarrativize this moment as a transformative juncture in their lives – “[m]y last day, and our first,” Warner writes of this night in her diary – they treat it as a point of departure for what’s to come rather than as a point of culmination.<sup>25</sup> Coupledness doesn’t complete them as individuals, nor does it bring them into an enclosed world. Instead, as Warner’s early letter shows, this revision in relational circuitry initiates a new form of poesis: a way of making something together across lines of distance and difference.

Throughout their letters of the early 1930s, Ackland and Warner treat their correspondence and their relationship as co-constitutive sites of incipient intimacy. Separations are painful – and pleasurable. As we saw with the first letter to appear in the volume, in which Ackland tells Warner that she “await[s] your word” and “[has] not yet started to tell you how I love you” – departures and distances provide an occasion to put words to feelings, flirtations, and memories. The couple’s early letters record far more intervals of separation than do their correspondences of the 1940s and beyond, as Warner and Ackland regularly travel from Chaldon to dispatch business affairs in London or to care for their elderly mothers (in Devon and Norfolk, respectively). While these separations produce a profusion of correspondence – as Susanna Pinney indicates, Warner and Ackland frequently wrote one another multiple times in a single day when apart – the pair also wrote regularly when together.<sup>26</sup> Letters, thus, weren’t exclusively a communicative instrument to be relied upon in the event of absence; rather, they provided a unique medium for the forging of a new relationship. In a sense, Ackland and Warner’s correspondences represent both a register of their relational experiences *and* the space of their relationship itself. This bifurcated view of correspondence resonates to Utell’s

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<sup>24</sup> For Utell, although couplehood itself obtains as a notional *telos* within couple biographies and life-writings (two individuals becoming one couple), *I’ll Stand by You* offers an exemplary study in couplehood as nonteleological becoming: “states playing out over time, ‘contingent manifestations’ of becoming.” See Utell, *Literary Couples*, 12-13.

<sup>25</sup> Qtd. in Utell, *Literary Couples*, 91.

<sup>26</sup> Susanna Pinney, “Editor’s Note,” *I’ll Stand by You*, vii.

conception of intimate relational life-writings, which, in her account, “not only tell a story about intimate life but *make intimacy itself*.”<sup>27</sup> When Warner and Ackland write to one another that they “live by” each other’s letters or remark on how their letters have become “apparently very vital,” we might take them, to a certain extent, at their word.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, the commonplace correspondent flirtation of articulating longing in embodied or corporeal terms is at play in these turns of phrase. Simultaneously, however, putting these words down represents a primary act of intimacy in its own right.

Eventually – and in fact early on, as well – Warner and Ackland start to think of their letters as possessing documentary and affective importance for the history of their relationship. Warner quips about the “point of view” of an imagined “collector” of their letters – a joke about perceptions of literary and cultural importance that illumines their shared perception of letters as creative artifacts... and hints at their long-since-established practice of saving rather than discarding letters.<sup>29</sup> In a self-consciously flirtatious early letter, Warner muses about how someone might one day write a letter about her and Ackland – “I hope one day some one will be writing in a letter about us, only they will never be able to say that you have a faithful back, believing back, I mean. For your lovely straight back and proud shoulder speak your truth and integrity.”<sup>30</sup> This epistolary envisioning of futural epistolary representation winks simultaneously at what Warner and Ackland will create together (the presences they will bring to bear in the world) and a time subsequent to their lives. Moreover, as a representational apparatus that stages each letter-writer apart from her other, correspondence has a way of concretizing – even objectifying – Warner and Ackland in relation to one another. When Warner’s mother offers the sardonic gift of a “China pomade pot” with a picture of “two ladies out walking” on its lid,

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<sup>27</sup> Utell, 5; emphasis in original

<sup>28</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 160 (Letter #71, 6 October 1937, Warner to Ackland); *Ibid.*, 151 (Letter #68, 24 November 1936, Ackland to Warner).

<sup>29</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 45 (Letter #15, 6 January 1931, Warner to Ackland).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 87 (Letter #37, 21 August 1931, Warner to Ackland).

telling her daughter that she “found this and thought that you and Miss Ackland might like it,” Warner and Ackland each discern in the gesture a comparison to their own relationship.<sup>31</sup> (Warner takes this – the comparison between the picture on the lid and her partnership with Ackland – as a wry compliment; Ackland perceives it as a deprecating slight.<sup>32</sup>) The ongoing practice of letter-writing – of restaging and reaffirming the circuitry of their relationship, of reiterating through epistolary address their relations to one another – enacts an analogous kind of visibility. Their letters, in other words, in addition to possessing world-historical importance in their intimate life, might yet make them present in the larger world.

The notion that their personal papers – and their correspondences in particular – might carry (geo)political documentary utility would have been familiar to Warner and Ackland, who were grassroots activists as much as amateur archivists. For one, the two were well aware of the ways in which the world-historical crisis of the Second World War imbued banal materials with sudden significance: how an observation of village life could spontaneously acquire political salience owing to contemporaneous events unfolding elsewhere. Moreover, Warner and Ackland’s correspondences *did* meet with a remarkable scale of attention from intelligence officers beginning in January 1935, when they joined the Communist Party prior to the outset of the Spanish Civil War. Stepping into new – and newly cosmopolitan – political identities as Party members and international workers, Warner and Ackland joked about the hypothetical government agents who might be parsing their correspondences for codes and information. (“It entertains me to think that perhaps they are being cunning and, having prized open this letter they are copying bits out, to compare with all the known and suspected codes,” writes Ackland. “But then again, it may be that you and I are not yet well-known enough, and our letters are only

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 106 (Letter #46, 19 September 1932, Warner to Ackland).

<sup>32</sup> In the above-cited letter, Warner wrote that she was “much pleased” with her mother “for this spirited and affable little dig in our ribs,” but as Frances Bingham indicates, Ackland likely “doubted the gesture’s goodwill.” See Bingham, *Valentine Ackland*, 90.

opened when they go to Tom. Still – I hope.”<sup>33</sup>) In fact, MI5 started a file on Warner and Ackland in January of 1935; when it was unsealed in 2006, as Frances Bingham documents, it was revealed to contain numerous copies of their letters along with dutiful reports from local policemen on their activities and domestic life.<sup>34</sup> Although their file remained active until at least 1955, reports on Warner and Ackland’s movements registered them, on the whole, as innocuous.<sup>35</sup>

Geopolitical crises at midcentury thus recast the archival potential of their correspondences by adjusting the historical and political scale at which they were situated. Whereas Warner and Ackland’s lovely letters had a kind of “world historical” importance for the history of their relationship – representing both a conduit for and a project of intimacy – these same epistolary materials were suddenly imbued with testimonial utility of an impersonal sort. Newly re-rendered as reports from the front lines of Party action and the defensive Home Front, their letters straddled worlds, simultaneously operating as records of intimacy and as intimate records of global historical events.

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<sup>33</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 133 (Letter #57, Ackland to Warner, 30 July 1935).

<sup>34</sup> As Bingham describes, after Ackland “wrote to the Communist Party HQ, offering the use of her ‘small racing car’ to the cause, for two days a month with herself as driver,” MI5 “picked up on these new Party members immediately”; the Director of MI5 initiated an investigation into this “Mr. Valentine Ackland” within a week. Surveillance of Ackland and Warner’s correspondences (by MI5) and movements (by local police constables deputized by MI5) continued through the 1950s – indeed, even after they formally gave up their Party membership in 1953. See Bingham, *Valentine Ackland*, 105-107; 208. The complete MI5 files on Warner and Ackland are available at the National Archives; see The National Archives of the UK Website: Discovery: Security Service, Personal (PF) Files, Sylvia Townsend-Warner, KV2/2337, 1 January 1935-31 December 1936, available at <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C11287944> (accessed 1 May 2023), and KV2/2338, 1 January 1937-31 December 1955, available at <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C11287945> (accessed 1 May 2023). Security Service, Personal (PF) Files, KV 2/2337 and KV 2/2338.

<sup>35</sup> While Ackland and Warner were apparently undisturbed by MI5’s surveillance (never noticing it), it remains the case that the two faced scrutiny not only because of their Party involvement and their frequent procurement and dissemination of leftist reading materials, but because of gender variance in Ackland’s presentation. That she kept her hair short and regularly wore men’s clothes meant that Ackland (and by implication, Ackland and Warner as a unit) did not conform to the available templates for single women – something that represented an additional site of possible subversion. See Bingham, *Valentine Ackland*, 207; 278-279.

*“The rest of us”*

As we have seen, over the early years of their relationship, Warner and Ackland sought to improvise a “coupled world” in the space of their letters – an improvisation that took full stock of (not to mention, pleasure in) their situatedness in a larger world. Yet for an actual tertiary reader arriving into their correspondences from outside, the experience of navigating the letters proves alternately promising and stultifying. As snapshots of the couple’s intimate life, the letters reproduced in *I’ll Stand by You* initiate a familiar recursive circuit of archival expectation: they tantalize the tertiary reader with the promise of revelation and disclosure, but ultimately function as sites of emptied and absented *enclosure*.<sup>36</sup> At times, these enclosures are concrete and quite conspicuous in their absence, as with Ackland’s opening sentence in the volume’s first letter, which begins: “I meant to give you *this today*” (emphasis added). Although the referent of Ackland’s “*this*” (a mourning ring) becomes clear in Warner’s reply – “The ring is on my finger,” she writes – the second letter proceeds to point out other material specificities rendered invisible within the pages of *I’ll Stand by You*. The tertiary reader of the reproduced letters does not encounter, for example, Ackland’s seal upon the envelope – what Warner registers in her response as “your falcon sealing it.”<sup>17</sup> The letters are replete with other such material intricacies and enclosures: marks, drawings, gifts, newspaper clippings, and letters forwarded from others. The reader glimpses the absented presence of these artifacts only through oblique verbal allusions in the bodies of their letters – for only textual content survives the transformation from manuscripts into a portable and citable published volume.

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<sup>36</sup> For pathbreaking interventions into the paradigm of archival promise as a colonial ruse, see Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009) and Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). For more recent treatments of “promise” as a parameter for archival research, see Link, Shelton, and Spero, eds., *Indigenous Languages and the Promise of Archives* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021) and the special issue on “The Promise and Possibility of Black Archival Practice,” eds. Tonia Sutherland and Zakiya Collier, *The Black Scholar* 52 (2022).

More foundationally, however, the letters pulse with pointers to a diegetic world that prove impossible to chase: referential pronouns, deictic expressions, and other gestural indicators of time and place. Ackland's opening letter – as freighted with ambiguity as her mentions of “*this*” and “*today*” render it – is comparatively straightforward to gloss, insofar as it is immediately followed by Warner's response. Elsewhere in *I'll Stand by You*, the reader encounters innumerable allusions to “here,” “there,” “today,” “yesterday,” “this,” in the absence of any antecedent or responsive letter that would clarify their referents. These deictic words clearly hold meaning and urgency in the diegetic world of the correspondence, but for the tertiary reader who arrives later and cannot penetrate its spatiotemporal threshold, they are empty signifiers. These unable-to-be-tracked pointers stage the tertiary reader's outsidership, in the context of the correspondence, in an emphatic way.

This experience of the tertiary reader – who encounters her own alterity when approaching a correspondence that is not her own – stages correspondence's constitutive precipitate of alienation. Those beyond the Imaginary bounds of a “you” and “I,” who are not the stated addressees of a particular correspondence, that is, arrive as alien presences within its fold. Yet separation and otherness represent important parameters of Warner and Ackland's relationship more broadly, figuring in their letters as cherished (if not always painless) distance between the two of them. Against a contemporary popular cultural paradigm of the lesbian “urge to merge” – which situates romantic relationships between queer women on a trajectory of ever-increasing similarity and ever-decreasing distance – Warner and Ackland maintain a studied sense of mutual difference in optative as well as unchosen ways.<sup>37</sup> This separateness was important for their creative work as artists, as well as for their interior lives as individuals. Its centrality to their

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<sup>37</sup> For two academic treatments of the lesbian “urge to merge,” see Alys Einion, “The Urge to Merge and the Marriage Imperative,” in *After the Happily Ever After*, ed. Linda Rose Ennis (Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2017), pp. 43-58, and Alice T. Friedman, “F the U-Haul: Janet Flanner's Paris and the varieties of lesbian domesticity,” in *Sexuality and Gender at Home: Experience, Politics, Transgression*, eds. Brent Pilkey et al (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 88-104.

relationship helps to further elucidate the importance that letters held for Warner and Ackland; not only were they instruments for connection, but also tools for maintaining a sense of mutual separation. Often functioning as private sites of reflection (even if written in the next room), letters allowed one correspondent to compose herself in a considered way and to address her other from a singular, rather than a communal, position.

Over the four decades of their relationship, Ackland would make shocking revelations about herself on several occasions, often turning to letters to help in enunciating a disclosure – or to soften its blow. In July of 1949, for example, Ackland emerges from what Warner took to be an insignificant appointment with the surgeon “trembling with the shock of relief.” Only then – after finding out that “an enlargement of her right breast” was mastitis and not cancer – does she reveal to Warner the concerns she had been silently carrying about her own health.<sup>38</sup>

Somewhat stricken by Warner’s apparent shock, Ackland resolves to share another secret, “something,” Warner writes, “which at the onset of our love she had resolved to keep from me: that even then she was a drinker.”<sup>39</sup> By her own account, Ackland had “begun by drinking for reassurance” as a young person, had come to rely upon alcohol to cope with the alienating strain of her short marriage to Richard Turpin in 1925,<sup>40</sup> and, over the ensuing two decades, had attempted numerous (often expensive) “cures” for dependency to no avail. Finally, just two years earlier (in October of 1947), she quit drinking once and for all after going to bed intoxicated and hopeless.<sup>41</sup> Warner, needless to say, was startled by these disclosures – “dizzied,” in her words,

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<sup>38</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 228-229.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>40</sup> Ackland (then “Molly Turpin”) and Turpin, both partially in flight from their own same-gender-loving tendencies, married on something of a whim in July of 1925. After rather disastrous attempts to consummate the marriage, Ackland went into hospital to have her hymen removed. Following the operation, she fled her marriage and gave herself a new (and androgynous) name: Valentine. See Bingham, *Valentine Ackland*, 12-21.

<sup>41</sup> In her search for relief from alcohol dependency, Ackland privately sought counsel from numerous physicians, one of whom told her “that no one could cure it but oneself,” not by a curative but by “will-power and the intention not to drink.” Later, on 8 October 1947, Ackland “stumbled” to bed, “scarcely sensible except of sickness and despair,” when she “knelt down and – with this vertiginous black Eternity surrounding [her] – addressed Emptiness like this: ‘Is God

“by the shock of knowing I had not known...”<sup>42</sup> In part to assuage Warner’s stupefied feelings of isolation, and in part to bring her own feelings into greater clarity, Ackland wrote a long letter *cum* autobiography in which she offered a fuller, if nonlinear, account of her guilt-laden struggle with various vices – drink exemplary among them.<sup>43</sup>

A far more devastating disclosure comes in 1955, when Ackland announces to Warner, “without any portentousness of ‘breaking the news,’” her “intention” to return to the Catholic Church.<sup>44</sup> Generally, upon experiencing these startling disclosures, Warner expresses (or affects) admiration for Ackland’s courage – astonishment at her ability, preference, or felt sense of obligation to shoulder her suffering independently. (How seriously we ought to take Warner’s words, and her avowed surprise at Ackland’s concealed concerns – particularly her secret dependency on alcohol – is another matter.) But Ackland’s return to Catholicism is the single exception to Warner’s steady support; this Warner experiences as a singular and biting betrayal: a way of facing the world utterly at odds with the lives they have created together.<sup>45</sup> Again, seeking a means of self-expression, Ackland writes a letter. Warner narrates its delivery in Narrative 14: “She gave me the letter and went away. She allowed time for me to read it, returned, and stood silent behind me. At the revelation of her unhappiness, her forlorn grief about her poetry, my

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there?” Hearing nothing in response, “know[ing] that there is nothing that can save [her],” Ackland swears to an impersonal “You” that she “will never drink again.” She wakes with a “tranquillity” and “perfect confidence,” never to drink again. For Ackland’s nonlinear narrative of her drinking, see Ackland, *For Sylvia*, especially 33-35. See also Bingham, *Valentine Ackland*, 168-169.

<sup>42</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 229.

<sup>43</sup> Later published as *For Sylvia: An Honest Account*, Ackland raced to prepare this epistolary “apologia-autobiography” prior to Warner’s departure to Yeovil, discussed below (Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 169).

<sup>44</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 327.

<sup>45</sup> Warner writes that she “recognised the ‘Once a Catholic’ appendage to the dogma of Infallibility,” in Ackland’s return to the Church after three decades, “but that she should believe it was an affront to all the years we had lived together.” She regards this disclosure as a “trauma” and describes the singular and unique distance it places between Ackland and herself: “...it is difficult to recover from a trauma, and from having inflicted it. During those two months while she saw what she knew was vital to her seeming mortal to me and I stared at a door closing between us, the sense of proximity had almost drained out of our lives. We had never been so near being apart.” See *Ibid.*, 327-329.

brooded-on grievance snapped like dead twigs. It was for her own sorrow I turned to her to be comforted.” The letter itself follows: “My dear Love, / This is the only way I can hope to talk to you just now, and I am so troubled in my heart that I really must, against all my acquired wisdom which says never invade anyone else’s grief —”<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, Warner and Ackland never can quite align their grief and grievances with respect to the Church. For Ackland, Catholicism holds aesthetic wonder and spiritual promise, and represents an appropriate (and equivalent) substitute for the poetry now absent in her creative life. For Warner, Ackland’s return to Catholicism represents, on the one hand, a return to her annulled marriage and a potential repudiation of their shared erotic and domestic life; and, on the other, a kitschy and unthinking flavor of superstition.<sup>47</sup>

Maintaining their separateness also meant that Warner and Ackland each inhabited relational circuitry that wasn’t shared. Some of these circuits were professional; Warner, notably, maintained far more professional contacts than did Ackland, and several of Warner’s friends and colleagues remember Ackland as a shy figure on the periphery of their conversations with Warner. As Warner’s longtime friend Bea Howe writes: “On and on we talked till, suddenly, I felt, we were not alone. Another was present. Glancing up, I saw Valentine, who... was standing in the shadowy archway of the door opening into a passage. She stood there, silent but watchful. The theatrical image of someone waiting in the wings to make an entrance on stage flashed before me.”<sup>48</sup> Other relational circuitry was rooted in erotic connections. While neither Warner nor Ackland theorized or espoused a particular relational practice for their domestic and erotic life, they observed 11 January 1931 as their “marriage night” (an occasion to which we will return below) and viewed one another as lifelong partners; at the same time, Ackland had occasional

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 329-331. Ackland’s letter, #136, is dated 23 April 1956.

<sup>47</sup> Warner, understandably, worried that Ackland’s decree of annulment, issued in 1927, would be null and void in the eyes of the Church, writing: “I knew she would not go back to her husband but I did not know what else might not be extorted from her. She might have to leave me” (*I’ll Stand by You*, 328).

<sup>48</sup> Bea Howe, Foreword, in Ackland, *For Sylvia: An Honest Account*, 6.

sexual encounters with other women. This largely seems to have represented a source of enjoyment for Ackland and Warner alike, as both partners admired and celebrated Ackland's storied career as a lover after fleeing from her marriage in 1925.<sup>49</sup> Different from these encounters, however, was Ackland's relationship with Elizabeth Wade White.

In Narrative 8, Warner describes the start of this relationship as an unexpected flare stirred up in the midst of their daily lives: "We had been in our new house for little more than a year when a new love exploded in it."<sup>50</sup> To a certain extent, Warner begins narrating the twelve-year-long relationship between White and Ackland – a complex affair that was painful for all four involved, including Warner and White's American partner Evelyn Holahan – by taking responsibility for it. For it was to Warner that the young American writer introduced herself at a party in New York in 1929, and it was likewise by her proffered mentorship and invitation that White came to stay with Warner and Ackland at their new home in Frome Vauchurch in the fall of 1938. White had traveled to Europe "to do some publicity work" for the Quakers on the front lines in Spain; however, upon reaching Paris, she wrote to say "that her courage had failed her."<sup>51</sup> Warner and Ackland invited her to stay with them in Dorset. By November, Claire Harman writes, White and Ackland were lovers; by December, Warner recounts, she "removed herself to the spare-room's single bed," leaving White to stay with Ackland in their shared bedroom.<sup>52</sup> By the new year, it became clear that this relationship wouldn't be a temporary affair

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<sup>49</sup> As Warner writes in Narrative 8, Ackland "was so skilled in love that I never expected her to forego love-adventures. Each while it lasted (they were brief) was vehement and sincere. They left me unharmed and her unembarrassed" (163). Warner more directly encourages Ackland in an earlier letter: "It makes me so happy that you don't doubt my truth when I say to you, Be happy, gather your roses. I am, indeed, most true in this: at any rate, in the present instance. My truth compels me to admit that I might not always be the same" (159; Letter #70, 30 September 1937). For a fuller treatment of Ackland's prowess and career as a lover, see Bingham, *Valentine Ackland*, 26-27, 36-38, and 111-112.

<sup>50</sup> Warner, *I'll Stand by You*, 163.

<sup>51</sup> Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 120; Warner, *I'll Stand by You*, 163.

<sup>52</sup> Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 120; Warner, *I'll Stand by You*, 164.

– a presentiment that was borne out emphatically when the three journeyed together to America in May of 1939.

Elizabeth Wade White's presence in *I'll Stand by You* is curiously vexed. Warner, when she begins to tell the story of White and Ackland's relationship, writes that she "cannot trust [her]self to write a true account of the twelvemonth that followed." This owes both to her own emotional pain and to a paucity of testimonial sources, as she indicates: "There are no letters, no diaries; a few sharply impressed incidents and the witness of poems (hers and mine) written during that year is all I dare be sure of."<sup>53</sup> Warner, that is, possesses no records (nor even private life-writings) that can assist her in narrating what follows; her two available sources are memory (only her own) and "the witness of poems (hers and mine)." The subsequent Narrative incorporates several of Warner's and Ackland's lyrics from this year, each of which dilates upon the emergence of a new love and the endurance of their old love. Juxtaposed beside one another in the middle of Warner's retrospective prose, these poems constellate not one but several correspondences as the lyric addressee shifts between White, Ackland, and Warner from one excerpt to the next. The first poem – Ackland's – addresses White:

Like whose kiss upon your hand  
the draught from door or window as you stand,  
so tall, so very white,  
tall and alone in the naked night?<sup>54</sup>

Another – written by Warner and given to Ackland "in the customary book of small poems which went into her Christmas stockings" – expresses what its author overheard:

As the south wind  
Woos with the same note  
A wood in Dorset  
Or a wood in Kent,  
So yesterday  
I heard your grieving  
Love-note beguile her  
As though she were I;

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<sup>53</sup> Warner, *I'll Stand by You*, 163.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

And heard such tones as mine reply.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, a later poem – written and left by Ackland on Warner’s pillow on the occasion of 11 January, their “marriage-night” – intones remembrance and mild reassurance:

I do not forget,  
My Love, this is the bed  
In which we two were wed,  
So long ago, so long without regret.<sup>56</sup>

These poems represent an epistolary practice of a piece with what Ackland offered above: a way for Warner and Ackland to continue to address one another on their particular terms, notwithstanding the considerable reconfiguration of their everyday lives. Moreover, this moment in *I’ll Stand by You* takes shape around the absented form of Elizabeth Wade White, who appears only figurally. Warner will carry this representational strategy forward; the tertiary reader never encounters White’s voice in the volume – not in Warner’s prose interludes, and not in any letter she (White) herself wrote. Plainly, however, her presence shapes Warner’s and Ackland’s lives – and the form of *I’ll Stand by You* – in profound ways.

In May of 1939, Warner, Ackland, and White sailed for America on a trip fated for personal and geopolitical disaster. In between professional commitments (attending a Writers Congress provided the notional purpose for Warner and Ackland’s international travel), visits to White’s family, tours of New York and New England, and a catastrophic group stay at a house in Connecticut, the triangulated group recapitulated its earlier form: Ackland and White in one bedroom, Warner in another. The earlier strain produced by the arrangement realized a new crescendo as White attempted to extract a promise from Ackland – the first great love in her life – to stay. The onset of the Second World War abruptly foreshortened the trip (and postponed any decisions about relational arrangements), as Warner and Ackland sought passage back to England in September. In a desperate maneuver that considerably backfired, White attempted to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 166.

convince Ackland to remain in America and become a citizen – “Safer as an American citizen,” she claimed.<sup>57</sup> Ackland and Warner, unsurprisingly, received this exhortation as such a fundamental violation of their politics that it expedited their departure. On the journey back, Ackland declared the worst to be over – a commitment she reaffirmed, as we have seen, in her Valentine’s Day letter of 1941 when she declared herself “free to love you again as *completely* as [she] had loved you for eight years, and more...”

To a certain extent, Ackland and Warner’s trip to the United States *did* represent the beginning of the end of the affair. As Claire Harman observes, White’s relationship with Ackland was her “first profound experience of falling in love, and seemed to call for a special degree of commitment.” But “[u]nfortunately, it was latter of which she reminded Valentine most frequently.”<sup>58</sup> While White experienced the relationship as a great love possessing a unique quality of connection, this sense of singularity translated into reminders of an unpayable debt – “like an annuity,” Warner quips angrily.<sup>59</sup> Although the trip elucidated this irresolvable impasse in emphatic ways, many years – and letters – remained before White and Ackland would finally part. Over these years, White’s correspondences with Ackland come to surround Ackland’s daily life and correspondences with Warner. Instances when the wires cross between these correspondent circuits are some of the most painful occasions represented in *I’ll Stand by You*. For example, when Warner answers the telephone to a telegram operator one day in April of 1940, she finds herself in the middle of the communicative relay between her partner and her partner’s lover. The telegram operator reads back Ackland’s telegram to White; Warner listens helplessly. Deeply ashamed, Ackland writes Warner a note of apology the following day, deeply regretful that she encountered “WORDS LIKE THAT” – which she “must use sometimes” in her communications with White.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, at moments when Ackland and Warner feel

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>58</sup> Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 121.

<sup>59</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 176.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 181.

themselves to be resuming the familiar and desired rhythm of their life together, White's letters land as dreadful bombardments. Warner recalls one such occasion in 1949, in Narrative 10: "We stayed so long that summer dusk was turning to darkness when, a few miles from home, she abruptly halted the car. I asked why. 'Dread,' she answered. 'I dread going home. We have been so happy. And when I get back there will be another letter from Elizabeth.'"<sup>61</sup> Eventually, White follows up on her letters by coming once more, against Ackland's wishes, to Dorset.

After a passionate reunion at a nearby inn, Ackland returns home and expresses a decision, described by Warner in Narrative 10: "She told me she entirely loved Elizabeth, that Elizabeth needed her, that it had been settled between them that Elizabeth would return and that from then on they would live together." Warner first interprets this to mean that she and Ackland would separate; when she realizes that Ackland intends for the three to live together in the same house – "a joint household" in which Warner is a tertiary companion to Ackland – she is outraged and refuses.<sup>62</sup> Ackland and Warner improvise an alternative: they will prepare their home for a new resident, keeping away the intimate objects of their coupled life; White will come to stay for a month; and Warner will depart to an inn for the duration. In spite of their agreement not to "meet or write to each other, except in necessity," Warner and Ackland exchange numerous letters over this painful and pleasurable time.<sup>63</sup> In a sense, the very fact that they continue to write one another restages the impasse between White's and Ackland's conceptions of their relationship. White wants Ackland for herself; Ackland receives exquisite joy from her erotic connection with White. Ackland, in Warner's words, "loved in the present"; White's "love," on the other hand, "was pinned to a future conditional, to an amended Valentine she could safely call her own."<sup>64</sup> Neither Warner nor Ackland would agree to remove herself from her other's life – nor to release her other from her own internal world – regardless of the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 227-231.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 231. Seventeen letters from this interval appear in *I'll Stand by You* (#95-111).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 171.

material specificities of their relationship (or even whether they lived together). Ultimately, White rejected these terms and returned to Evelyn Holahan, her partner in the United States with whom she lived until Holahan's death in 1985. Warner would consider the tumult of the affair – and White's perhaps distinctly American brand of possessiveness, which imposed the terms of private property on the aesthetic matter of pleasure – as “a lyric turning into a nuisance.”<sup>65</sup>

Early in her account, Warner wrote that it would be difficult to recount the relationship between Ackland and White – not only because of emotional strife, but because of the challenge of arraying sufficient sources. This resonates to a broader challenge Warner faces in *I'll Stand by You*: how to create a record that remembers her relationship with Ackland not only in their togetherness, but in their separateness – one that remembers not only the two of “them,” but the two as individuals. In the epistolary field of Chapter One, Vita Sackville-West once wryly teased Virginia Woolf by accusing her of addressing multiple others, writing in a parenthetical phrase: “(I suspect you of dozens of correspondents.)”<sup>66</sup> As we have seen, Warner and Ackland sought to forge a relationship that could accommodate their respective multiplicities of “correspondents.” In a sense, the “two of them” was always also the *more-than-two* of them, being inextricably bound up in “the rest of us.” In another sense, the ways in which each of the two was known by other was partial. That is, in this configuration of optative but unenclosed intimacy, of profound closeness riven by irreducible separateness, Warner and Ackland each encountered irreducible otherness in one another. As partners, they maintained their correspondence in the concrete sense of a continuing epistolary practice; moreover, they faced one another as correspondents in a more abstract sense, addressor facing addressee, sounding out the “gap” (to recall Oscar Wilde's turn of phrase from the Introduction) between them.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 183 (Letter #74, April 1940, Warner to Ackland).

<sup>66</sup> Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell Leaska, eds., *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf* (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc., 1984) 76; dated 8 December 1925.

*The ensemble*

On the evening of 11 January 1931, Warner and Ackland go to London to attend a concert “at the Queen’s Hall.” That night, Artur Schnabel plays “three concertos,” Warner relays: “the Schumann, a Mozart, and the Emperor.” Surrounded by rapt listeners, buoyed by a return to music (her first love) while seated beside Ackland, Warner feels something change:

In the taxi going back to 113 [Warner’s London flat] we spoke of acquaintances we had recognised, and I said that looking round on all those known and unknown listeners I knew that I wanted none of them and only wanted her. The spell of Schnabel’s playing and the spell-bound concurrence of his hearers, perhaps, or perhaps my remark, for I made it as a simple statement of fact, annulled her lurking mistrust that I might not be wholly hers, that I might not stay. [...] That night, our love-making had a new depth and serenity. When we woke she said it had been a marriage night.<sup>67</sup>

Curiously, in this recollection of the evening that Warner and Ackland go on to observe for the rest of their lives as their “marriage night,” it is neither the music itself nor the fact of sharing it together that changes Warner’s feelings about their relationship. It is instead the ambient presence of other people – “known and unknown listeners” joined in “the spell-bound concurrence” of their audition. Considered in the light of their leftist politics, and the different relationships each of them will inhabit in the years to come, the concert strikes a familiar chord: Warner describes a moment that does not exist ‘only for them,’ in the idiom of narcissistic sentimentality, but rather a moment of collective communion. Amongst all these others, Warner seems to say, there are Ackland and herself facing the world in tandem.

When Warner began the project that would become *I’ll Stand by You*, she set out to construct an archive in epistolary form, working to fashion a “record” in the first sense of Ackland’s earlier usage that would enable the two of them to be “remembered together.”<sup>68</sup>

Along the way, as we have seen, this project transformed considerably: Warner drafted connecting “Narratives,” punctuated with contemporaneous writings (Ackland’s and her own),

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<sup>67</sup> Warner, *I’ll Stand by You*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> Frances Bingham, “The Bequest of Books: A Hidden Biography,” *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 19.1/2 (2020): p. 54.

and stitched them into her selections of letters. The resulting artifact – a polyvocal, transhistorical collage shaped by a narrative trajectory, teeming with archival digressions, and pockmarked by relational opacity – comes closer to Ackland’s second sense of “record”: an aesthetic object (sonic in her original metaphor) that invites speculation. Warner and Ackland, in their voluminous, self-stewarded archives (which encompass more than seventy archival boxes), created one particular kind of “record.” Warner, in constructing *I’ll Stand by You*, offered a mediation of that record in order to inscribe Ackland and herself together once more in print.

Seeking to resist a paradigm of archival “rescue” – in which contemporary researchers “make sense out of nonsense,” “build a cohesive story out of forgotten fragments,” and reanimate lost ghosts of the historical past – Melanie Micir raises an important question: “What if the ghosts had us in mind all along?”<sup>69</sup> In constructing *I’ll Stand by You*, in writing Ackland and herself together even as she stewards their separateness, Warner fixes an eye to the readers of posterity. Assembling the text after Ackland’s death required Warner to remember; in submitting the text to unknowable readers yet to come, Warner wills Ackland and herself to *be* remembered.

### **‘It’s come to this’: *Unbecoming***

The anthropologist Eric Michaels opens *Unbecoming*, his journal of the years 1987 and 1988, with the apprehension of an ending:

I watched these spots on my legs announce themselves over a period of weeks, taking them as some sort of morphemes, arising out of the strange uncertainties of the past few years to declare, finally, a scenario. As if these quite harmless-looking cancers might, when strung together, form sentences which would give a narrative trajectory, a plot outline, at last to a disease and a scenario that had been all too vague. Rather like when I was busted for speed and works with Horace and David, and thrown in that awful prison in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1968. A moment’s relief: it’s come to this. The narrative, clear and insistent. Automatic pilot.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Micir, *The Passion Projects*, 18-19.

<sup>70</sup> Eric Michaels, *Unbecoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) 3.

Although the first entry to appear in what Michaels will come to refer to as his “AIDS diary,” these opening lines do not mention HIV, AIDS, or any of the latter’s attendant opportunistic infections by name; instead, they operate by accreted layers of implication.<sup>71</sup> In narrating the appearance of Kaposi’s Sarcoma (KS) lesions – “these quite harmless-looking cancers,” he writes with irony – on his legs, Michaels begins by registering the end toward which his diary will proceed. For “these spots” signify not only descriptively but teleologically. The appearance of KS lesions, one of the most common opportunistic infections to present among same-sex-loving HIV-positive men in the 1980s and 1990s, indicates a new stage of virological progression and immune suppression. Furthermore, it makes intelligible a new clinical diagnosis: AIDS.<sup>72</sup> Out of “the strange uncertainties of the past few years” – the first decade of the HIV/AIDS pandemic as a recognized public health crisis, a period during which Michaels implicitly understands himself to have seroconverted – “finally, a scenario”: a clinically irrefutable diagnosis and a “clear and insistent” “narrative” mapped out to a particular end.<sup>73</sup> In Michaels’s phrase, “it’s come to this.” With no viable treatment options available at the time of his writing (September 1987), the KS conveys a vulgar implication; it means “that he will die of this.”<sup>74</sup> *Unbecoming* thus begins not only as a diaristic mediation of Michaels’s everyday life; it orients itself toward the prescribed endpoint, the ultimate telos, of his death.

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<sup>71</sup> The first edition of *Unbecoming*, published in Australia in 1990, has the subtitle “An AIDS Diary”; this is omitted in the 1997 American edition published by Duke University Press. See Michaels, *Unbecoming* (Rose Bay, NSW: Empress Publishing, 1990).

<sup>72</sup> Clinically and diagnostically as well as culturally and aesthetically, Kaposi’s Sarcoma signifies “AIDS,” which, as an immune-deficiency syndrome, itself represents an umbrella of illnesses, opportunistic infections, and symptoms that result from immunosuppression triggered by the retrovirus HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). ARC, AIDS-Related Complex, now largely obsolete as a clinical term, referred to HIV-positive patients presenting with comparatively “mild” symptoms, such as low-grade fever and swollen glands. ARC was positioned as a clinical presentation preceding “full-blown AIDS.”

<sup>73</sup> Seroconversion refers to a change in an individual’s “sero-status,” as indicated by the presence of antibodies for a virus or retrovirus in the bloodstream. In discourses of HIV/AIDS, seroconversion describes a transition from a “seronegative” (HIV-negative) to “seropositive” (HIV-positive) status.

<sup>74</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 209.

*Unbecoming* is not only a diary of occasion, but a diary of ultimate occasion. Unlike a travelogue or project journal, it proceeds toward an inviolable endpoint. Michaels, that is, will never emerge from the interval of writing that he inhabits in crafting *Unbecoming*; instead, he pursues an autothanatographical project: a work of life-writing in which the author attempts to narrate her own death.<sup>75</sup> As we shall see, the labor of autothanatography exceeds description, documentation, and testimony, three parameters foundational to life-writing genres that focus on illness, which some scholars designate as *autopathography*.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, across the sixty-one entries of *Unbecoming*, Michaels maintains an adamant resistance to the privileged place of the first-person subject within Western literary and cultural forms – to the “I” that would testify. As he writes toward the unbecoming he apprehends on the diary’s first page, he questions the ideological apparatuses subtending that sovereign “I”: the psychologism, egotism, and exceptionalism he associates with an American mythologization of the individual. Similarly, in his resolutely *anti*-ethnographic work with Warlpiri Aboriginal communities in Central Australia, as in his personal politics, Michaels assiduously opposed any account of communal life developed through the viewfinder of sovereign individuality. Not only would such an account, in Michaels’s view, be utterly at odds with the possibility of solidarity; further, it would inevitably distort a complex field of relational interplay across time and space by running it through the reductive prism of an individual. As Michaels wrote of a colleague: “F. never could see the community in light of its contemporary situation; she seemed always to see things through the blinders of her peculiar ethnographic present” (119-120). Yet even as Michaels seeks to erode the sacrosanct individuality of the first-person singular – both in anthropological field research and personal

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<sup>75</sup> I discuss autothanatography as a conceptual term in the third subsection below. For a gloss of autothanatography as a generic category within life-writing studies, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 188.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, G. Thomas Couser, “Autopathography: Women, Illness, and Lifewriting,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 6.1 (1991): pp. 65-75, and Tamar Tembeck, *Performing Autopathographies: Self-Representations of Physical Illness in Contemporary Art*, 2009, McGill U, PhD dissertation.

life-writing – he inhabits it in the space of the diary, puffing up an “I” he doesn’t believe in as it inches closer to the ultimate occasion of mortal loss.

In this section, I ask why, in crafting *Unbecoming*, Michaels chooses to wear an avatar he considered ineffectual (indeed, abhorrent), and to practice a form of life-writing emblematic of the individualizing “psychologism” he so profoundly resisted throughout his adult life. I examine how Michaels torques the first-person diaristic subject position throughout the text, refusing to treat the diary as a space of sacrosanct documentary truth. Instead, as I’ll show, *Unbecoming* as a diary is deliberately and avowedly *mediated*. Far from an unabridged, unmediated treasure trove of psychic experience, the diary is smudged with the fingerprints of its author, whose touch as much manipulates as it records. As we shall see, Michaels edits, trims, and juxtaposes his entries; studies the craft of diary and attempts to critique it through his own practice; and embeds into its fabric acerbic gestures of interpersonal address that, inert in manuscript, will be activated upon publication. I argue that these editorial maneuvers evince the critical place that the posthumous reader occupies in Michaels’s diaristic project, illuminating the extent to which his diaristic “I” writes not to reify its own sovereignty, but instead to address unknowable others. If, earlier in this chapter, Sylvia Townsend Warner reworked letters alternately into narrative, archival record (a smudge-free one, at that), and musical performance, I argue in this section that Michaels is turning a diary *into* a letter.

In mediating his own diary entries, Michaels might seem to violate the implicit compact of diary – to break the rules that grant this life-writing form a notionally nonfictive status. If autobiographical life narrative is differentiated from fiction by “[t]he convergence of authorial signature and narrator”<sup>77</sup> – a convergence secured by what Philippe Lejeune has referred to as “the autobiographical pact,” sealed by “the proper name”<sup>78</sup> – diary as a life-writing form is

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<sup>77</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 8. For a seminal account of the “pact” that secures autobiography, see Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” in *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 3-30.

animated by a more nebulous notion of archival rawness: not so much the premise of diaristic truth or even authenticity as the pretense of proto-archaeological discovery of materials undisturbed since their initial production.<sup>79</sup> Yet I suggest that such concerns about factuality and verisimilitude have limited importance for the project Michaels pursues. Rather than seeking to write an “authentic” or unmediated autobiography or diary, Michaels works much to the opposite purpose: toward an explicitly mediated form of diary, and toward subjective unmooring. Instead of loosely envisioning hypothetical readers who might encounter his entries, Michaels speaks directly and deliberately to them. Instead of seeking to write (or to write *from*) an ironclad subjectivity, he attempts to register the very undoing of that subject position, shifting from the *P*s making to its unbecoming, from autobiographical to autothanatographical representation. In treating *Unbecoming* as an autothanatographical endeavor, I attend squarely to the artifice of Michaels’s diaristic *I*, exploring its unsteadiness on two registers. First, I consider the range of mutations it undergoes not only in tandem with changes to Michaels’s health, but with the drafting and revision of his entries. Second, I engage with theorists of autothanatography and autobiography, and critics of late style, to explore how Michaels’s *I* tries out new styles of address when in the room with the looming reality of mortal loss. As his diaristic “I” becomes an other – as he becomes different from himself, beside his self, in the ecstatic bafflement of late style – he inaugurates new relations with and proximities to other subjects. In this way, *Unbecoming* recovers an important parameter of autothanatography that significantly differentiates it from autobiography: its more open orientation to others, to otherness, and to address. As a project always already slated for posthumous publication,

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<sup>79</sup> For two academic treatments of diaristic truth, see Kylie Cardell, *Dear World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), and Joan Bobbitt, “Truth and Artistry in the ‘Diary of Anaïs Nin,’” *Journal of Modern Literature* 9.2 (May 1982): 267-276. For an artistic exploration of diary as an aesthetic (and not a documentary) form, see Sarah Manguso, *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), and “Remembering to Forget with Sarah Manguso,” *Between the Covers*, by David Naimon, Tin House Press, 1 April 2015.

Michaels's diary represents a space of impossible address: he writes to readers he will never encounter, and who will never know him beyond the *I* that shapes the diary.

*Against Authority and Authenticity*

From the very first, Michaels conceives of his diary as a space in which to register resistance. After returning from the “curiously and deceptively named ‘Wattlebrae’” – the ward for infectious disease at Royal Brisbane Hospital – he describes in his first entry the dehumanizing regard through which he is viewed when understood as an “AIDS patient”:

When I went in for tests on Wednesday evening, I should have realized, but didn't, that they would put me in such a place. Mama, you wouldn't believe how people treat you there! It's not the rubber gloves or face masks, or bizarre plastic wrapping on everything. *It's the way people address you*, by gesture, by eye, by mouth. And yet, done with the tests, I walk out on the street, go to work, and assume a comparatively normal interactive stance and distance (4; emphasis mine).

In the diary, Michaels speculates, he might contest the terms upon which hegemonic medical, bureaucratic, and popular discourses address him. Against the distortions wrought by a homophobic moral discourse – which positions him as an AIDS “carrier” or “victim,” a culpable agent of infection who threatens the so-called “general public”<sup>80</sup> – Michaels might initiate an insurgent protocol of address:

I imagine that diary-keeping might serve to keep another set of definitions going against the quite barbaric ones that were inflicted in these last few days, through the rubber gloves, face masks, goggles, and an inventory of tropes assumed lately by medical practice to deal not so much with disease (which, after all, is imaginable in some sense as well), but more evidently, no less, with sin and retribution (5).

In “keep[ing] another set of definitions going,” in recording experiences at odds with the prevailing images and narratives, Michaels might use the diary as an instrument to combat a wanton homophobia that suffuses not only the terms of interpersonal address, but domestic and international policy at the highest levels. From the outset, he thus enters into his diaristic practice

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<sup>80</sup> For an important early discussion of “general public” and “general population” as two euphemisms used to isolate HIV-vulnerable populations, see Jan Zita Grover, “AIDS: Keywords,” in *October* 43 (Winter 1987): pp. 17-30, especially 23-34.

with an eye attuned to its transformative political potential: how his “diary-keeping” might enable an intervention far more ambitious in scale than the scope of his own catharsis.

Michaels, moreover, does not exclusively target homophobic institutions and actors with his insurgent diary-keeping; simultaneously, he addresses gay and queer communities, seeking to muss up what he sees as the tidy narratives of HIV/AIDS they have produced. As he indicates in a late entry, the diary that will come to be known as *Unbecoming* represents a parallel intervention into popular gay discourses of mourning: “At least one reason for publishing this journal is to counter the sentimentalized narratives that seem to be all that San Francisco has been able to produce about this sequence...” (97). These sentimental narratives of loss emphasize the foreclosure of normative lifespans, the foreshortening of productive careers and fruitful relationships; as Michaels puts it, these are narratives of “great potential nipped in the bud” and “[t]he tragedy of what he could have been. . . .” Michaels finds this genre of AIDS literature politically and aesthetically repugnant for a few reasons, all of which derive from its affective and narrative conservatism. On the one hand, these works represent emphatically teleological narratives – a “sequence,” in Michaels’s word, indeed – plotting out a normative life trajectory through its “proper” waystations of relational intimacy and capitalist productivity; their sorrowful affective payoff arises from the extent to which these trajectories go unfulfilled in a subject’s life. On the other hand, this corpus indexes a political horizon shaped by mourning rather than direct action intervention – an activist cleavage to which we will return in Chapter Three – *and recapitulates it*, precluding other forms of response from taking shape. Furthermore, these narratives index a specific sociopolitical and geographical location (gay neighborhoods in North American cities) – and a specific set of demographic identity categories (white, gay, cisgender, middle-to-upper-class, men) – while at the same time standing in for all gay and queer experiences of HIV/AIDS. Not for nothing does Michaels position San Francisco as the point of origin for this body of literature; “San Francisco” is an apt metonym for the hegemonic American bi-coastal race, class, gender, and national positionality he contests throughout the

diary. As Michaels writes in furious response to a talk by Vito Russo: “Was gayness really invented only once, in New York circa 1969, so everything else is diffused from there?” (63).<sup>81</sup>

For Michaels, making an intervention against these hegemonic cultural forms – heterosexist and homophobic, on the one hand, and gay normative or “homonormative,” on the other – is intellectually, politically, and ethically pressing.<sup>82</sup> Michaels isn’t merely quibbling with the chosen terms or stylistics of these forms; instead, he seeks to interrupt what we might call, after José Esteban Muñoz, “dominant imprints”: forms or paradigms with such primacy of place that they preclude other expressive possibilities from taking shape. Whether rooted, as in Muñoz’s case, in a set of body types occupying a privileged place “in the erotic imagination of mainstream [gay male] homosexuality,” or in a mainstream view of a marginalized minority, a normative view of subcultural authenticity, or a canonical enactment of a representational form or genre, a dominant imprint installs itself as *the* imaginary.<sup>83</sup> Its effect, thus, is to lodge an arbitrary likeness into place – silently – as the inarguable standard and to foreclose the formation of other imaginaries. Muñoz’s metaphor of the imprint, which takes wing in his usage from popular queer cinema of the 1990s, finds an important resonance in Michaels’s anthropological work, which focused on televisual mediation in Aboriginal communities.

Between 1982 and 1985, Michaels studied Warlpiri engagements with video and television at the Warlpiri community of Yuendumu in central Australia. Funded by the Australian

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<sup>81</sup> Vito Russo’s talk was part of a weeklong programming series at the 1988 Mardi Gras festival in Sydney. Michaels took issue not only with Russo’s conceptual apparatus (“How can anybody live in New York and be so dumb about the problematics and politics of representation?”), but with his North American-centered approach – which smarted with particular intensity given the distinctiveness of Mardi Gras as a gay festival in the Sydney context. As Michaels wrote: “Can’t Sydney gay life extricate itself from U.S. cultural domination/definition?” (Ibid.).

<sup>82</sup> See Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 175-194.

<sup>83</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 57; see also Muñoz, “Dead White: Notes on the Whiteness of the Queer Screen” *GLQ* 4.1 (January 1998): 127-138.

Institute of Aboriginal Studies,<sup>84</sup> this research was subsequently published in the monograph *The Aboriginal Invention of Television* in 1986. The project began in circumstances of considerable urgency, as the impending expansion of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) loomed over Aboriginal communities. Following the launch of AUSSAT, Australia's first national satellite, in 1985, the ABC presented its imminent expansion to all parts of the country through a Western paradigm of a "right to the free press," that is, in liberal terms of increased media access.<sup>85</sup> For many Aboriginal communities, however, the ABC's expansion represented a continuing colonial invasion and further threat to Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination – this time radiating along the axis of information. Across numerous articles and essays, Michaels documents the multidirectional threats posed by this unrefusable "right" to national television access, studiously and furiously explicating the Australian state's insidious euphemism: its stated commitment to "redress[ing] the 'media disadvantage' and assur[ing] communicational equity ('equalisation of services') for all Australians, *like it or not*."<sup>86</sup> For, in reality, it was the Australian settler state that would benefit from expanded access to Aboriginal communities and cultures – and that, Michaels maintains, would exploit Aboriginal "content" in deleterious, indeed "culturcidal," ways.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the imposition of the so-called "free press," he asserts, fundamentally contravenes Warlpiri and other Aboriginal ways of organizing communal life:

Oral societies are a kind of 'information society' in which access to knowledge is of particular social and economic consequence, and typically highly regulated. [...] To the extent that new technologies alter traditional means of access and control of information, and to the extent that novel information (content) devalues traditional knowledge and the authority of its purveyors, the integrity of the society as a whole is at risk. For example,

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<sup>84</sup> The Institute is now called the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

<sup>85</sup> Eric Michaels, "Social Organisation of an Aboriginal Video Workplace," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1984): 10.

<sup>86</sup> Eric Michaels, "Hundreds Shot at Aboriginal Community: ABC Makes TV Documentary At Yuendumu," *Media Information Australia* 45.1 (August 1987): 9, emphasis added.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 7; see also Michaels, "Aboriginal Content: Who's got it? – who needs it?" *Visual Anthropology* 4.3/4 (January 1991): 277-300.

mass distribution of media through satellite alters access to information, making cultural knowledge, once highly valued and restricted, apparently ‘free.’<sup>88</sup>

In his collaborative work with Warlpiri community members, Michaels sought to initiate Aboriginal “experiments” in video production prior to the arrival of national satellite broadcasting.<sup>89</sup> In effect, this intervention decoupled the mass mediating effect of television from the form of videorecording, as Warlpiri leaders and artists came to use video for a variety of culturally meaningful projects, from the preservation of privileged cultural information, performances, and stories to the conveying of messages to near and distant communities – all of which relied upon “narrow-casting” models of limited circulation and screening rather than a broadcasting paradigm. Whereas broadcasting, national satellite, and ethnographic research methods (as we shall see shortly) functioned analogically as dominant imprints in the context of Michaels’s anthropological work, narrow-casting and “non-mass media” offered, “in [their] very limitations,” some potentially viable pathways for individual and collective Aboriginal life.<sup>90</sup>

In forging a protocol of resistant counter-address in *Unbecoming*, Michaels writes back to numerous dominant imprints that similarly constrain expressive and relational possibilities for gay life. Without conflating the differential power structures that shape – and the forms of violence that emerge out of – homophobic and homonormative dominant imprints, he shows how addressing a Person with AIDS (PWA) as constitutively guilty, inscribing New York City as the authentic locus of gay life, and constructing a narrative of AIDS that hinges upon normative kinship structures and teleological timelines all serve to further isolate and marginalize queer people. In the space of the diary, Michaels attempts to write against, or at least around, these templates. Yet herein lies a crucial animating tension of *Unbecoming*: at the same time that it is to be an intervention, a willful talking-back to dominant cultural imprints, it begins in the lion’s den

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<sup>88</sup> Eric Michaels, “New Technologies in the Outback and Their Implications,” *Media Information Australia* 38.1 (November 1985): 69.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-72.

<sup>90</sup> Michaels, *Unbecoming*, 103.

of authenticity and authority that is diary. This tension seats an important question: How can Michaels write, document, “keep another set of definitions going” against the prevailing ones, in his turn of phrase, without imposing the singularity of his experience as a new archetype? Addressing this question returns us to Michaels’s anthropological work.

In an early entry to *Unbecoming*, Michaels describes his first encounters with social scientific critique as transformative – not only to his career, but to his life, and specifically to his understanding of himself as a person “capable of homosexual expression” (7). As a child growing up in Philadelphia in the 1950s, at a time when, in his account, “America was inventing ‘gifted children’ who could be bred to compete with the Russians and recover from the shame of Sputnik,” he incurred “rather a gutful of psychologizing,” which introduced him to “a bewildering universe of praise and blame, obligation and independence” and inculcated “an extreme and alienating sense of [his] personal uniqueness” (6). Encountering “culturalogical explanation” as an undergraduate in the mid-1960s, Michaels writes, was “a revelation, a discovery embraced longingly,” precisely insofar as it “seemed to argue against psychologism” – the notion that each subject is “an atomistic product of individual will.” The scale of “culturalogical” analysis (and, for Michaels, of anthropological research specifically) unyoked the individual from the pressures of self-cultivation, fantasmatic notions of agency, and essentializing accounts of intrinsic goodness, badness, and substance. Instead, Michaels derived pleasure and relief from reconceptualizing the self as something that takes shape in patterned ways between structures – as “a social/cultural collaborative construct” forged between societal matrices (6). Yet ethnography as a method, in Michaels’s account, countervailed such a dynamic and complex view of individual and collective life. By relying upon the singularity of the ethnographer’s interpretive frame – by installing her vantage point as primary and, from there, extracting putative ‘information’ about those upon whom she gazes – ethnographic method freezes individuals into ahistorical cultural caricatures. For Michaels, ethnography reinscribed a noxious individualism in two ways: first, by imposing a single individual’s frame as standard; and second,

by reducing the ethnographer's interlocutors to distillations of a culture – rather than approaching them as distinct subjects negotiating complex collective matrices.

As a result, Michaels took a vociferously anti-ethnographic stance in his own research, memorably writing in a review of a 1986 ethnography (Fred Myers's *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*) that he hoped it would be “the *last* of the holistic participant observation ethnographies.”<sup>91</sup> In his work at Yuendumu, Michaels adopted a collaborative approach whereby, as a European<sup>92</sup> researcher, he initiated conversations with community leaders about videography and offered resources and technical support, but did not set the terms for community members' engagements with video. (Indeed, Michaels observed and participated in the community's videographic projects only when invited by his Warlpiri interlocutors.) This vision of collaboration meant that Michaels attempted to maintain a somewhat impossible stance: to offer information and resources without imposing a paradigm upon his collaborators or drawing upon a perhaps deeply foundational (and long-since internalized) interpretive frame. For example, Michaels observes that, in work by Warlpiri video artists, “[t]here is... somewhat more footage devoted to landscape than to actor/action.” But where “Europeans would perceive a semantically empty shot” (glossing it as perhaps the “result of the inexperience of the cameraperson”), these videorecordings of landscapes “turn out to be highly intentional, picking out significant features, both historical and mnemonic.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, even ostensibly ‘technical’ advice that a European researcher may not perceive to have any explicit ideological underpinning – such as using a zoom-in function to differentiate between foreground and background – might derive from her specific cultural location. Michaels maintained no idealistic faith that he as a

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<sup>91</sup> See Gillian Cowlishaw, “Tunnel Vision: Part Two – Explaining Australian Anthropology's Conservatism,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 29 (2018): 41, and Michaels, “If ‘All Anthropologists Are Liars...,’” *Canberra Anthropology* 101 (1987): 47; emphasis added.

<sup>92</sup> I follow the usage of Michaels and his interlocutors in referring to white and settler Australians (and Australian residents) as European.

<sup>93</sup> Eric Michaels, “Social Organisation of an Aboriginal Video Workplace,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1984): 28.

researcher could sidestep the imperialist entanglements through which he arrived at Yuendumu – nor that his collaborations with Warlpiri artists could forestall the arrival of national satellite, nor even that his collaborators shared his sense of the importance of a truly Aboriginal videography or television.<sup>94</sup> But Michaels did remain committed throughout his career to a dynamic approach to Aboriginal Media Studies and anthropology: a fundamentally reflexive relational approach that shapes *Unbecoming* in profound ways.

Against the hegemony of dominant imprints, against the authority of privileged viewpoints and the authenticity of particular materials, Michaels attempts a responsive and reflexive diaristic practice in *Unbecoming*. Deeply uncomfortable with the singularity of the diarist’s perspective and reluctant to set himself utterly apart from others, he never ceases to turn his authorial “I” about its own axis in search of a reader – as we shall presently see.

#### *Reflexivity and Address*

True to Michaels’s status as a reluctant diarist, *Unbecoming* takes shape through moments of interpersonal contact – conversations and letters exemplary among them – which both punctuate the fabric of the diary and inform its direction. The diary’s opening pages, for instance, are pockmarked by absented exchanges: extratextual conversations that shape the text without being captured by it. In these earliest entries, Michaels faces the “pathological” choice of “who to tell, and how,” sharing his medical prognosis with two friends in unreported exchanges by the end of his second entry. More foundationally, *Unbecoming* has its origins as a posthumous publishing project in conversation with Paul Foss, Michaels’s friend and the diary’s eventual editor: “Paul was intrigued with the drafts of this diary, and suggested ways that the form could

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<sup>94</sup> Michaels regularly faced questions from his interlocutors and from other researchers about the relative urgency of interventions into television. As one respondent remarked after a presentation: “...there are a lot of groups around Yuendumu... who haven’t got really basic human facilities like water and transport and communications and I really find it hard to understand the priorities of setting up a television station...” See Michaels, “Aboriginal ‘Air Rights,’” *Media Information Australia* 34.1 (1984): 59.

provide a framework for a lot of diverse material, a prospect I find very exciting, even as this stretches the designation ‘diary,’ even memoir, rather far” (19). Together, the two “map out a writing/editing program” for the journal, with Foss going so far as to “set out a reading program” of other diaries, spanning the work of Joe Orton, Daniel Defoe, André Gide, and (owing to the limitations of Royal Brisbane Hospital’s gift shop) Anne Frank (19). Michaels eventually makes his way through several of these diaries, together with an assemblage of life-writings and biographies of iconic queer figures of the Euro-American world – Jean Cocteau (25), Edie Sedgwick (81), Christopher Isherwood (87), and Anaïs Nin (120) among them.

Yet Michaels does not adapt much in the way of a formal or narrative template from any of these deceased interlocutors; indeed, his initial readerly incursions into the craft of diary represent much more in the way of rejection than inspiration. What he does adapt into his practice from this informal course of study, however, is the very act of critical recursion: to consider (and to muse aloud about) the limitations of his form even while he practices it. In a sense, Michaels fixates so intensely on the presence of a reader – and the impact that his narratological maneuvers will effect for her – that he often runs out of steam before getting much material on the page, in spite of his best intentions. (In a moment of self-reflection, he remarks: “I am also warned [by Paul Foss] against too much explicit reflexivity, a principle that I agree to, even as I sit here violating it” [19].) The resulting text proves, at times, resistant and opaque when Michaels cannot hold himself back from thinking aloud about what he is writing before he writes it. As he eventually admits: “I leave nothing generic for the reader to hang on to” (34).

Michaels’s compulsive “reflexivity” manifests in a sometimes obsessive rehashing of convention – “the rules” to which he is bound (that is to say, to which he is committing himself) in keeping the diary:

And what would be the rules governing the inscriptive practice here? May I revise or not? Must I write every day, lest the precious residue of my thoughts be lost? . . . Or, how ever could one inflict such obligations on friends or readers, without requiring them to regard

one as indulgent, foolish, perhaps bribing interest by inducement to trace in the prose deteriorations of judgment or style as a consequence of the deteriorating corpus? To elicit a truly grotty sympathy? (4).

Michaels doesn't declare a decision about "the rules governing inscriptive practice" anywhere in the space of the diary (nor does he rule upon licitness of "elicit[ing] a truly grotty sympathy," to which I return below), although it quickly becomes clear that he does "revise" as he writes. Upon receiving a flurry of correspondence from concerned friends, replete with clippings about "the benefits of macrobiotics for PWAs" and advice to "eat vegetables and quit smoking," Michaels begins to rally a critique of the ideologies of wellness – but abruptly curtails that critique with ellipsis and a parenthetical note: "Inasmuch as several weeks later I found it necessary to severely restrict my diet along essentially macrobiotic lines, it seems silly to try and reconstruct this argument in reviewing/editing here" (8). Michaels drafts a similar editorial note to the entries immediately following: "It would be nearly a month before I got off my back, out of the hospital, and into my new flat. I insert these facts *while editing*. Obviously, I wasn't doing much writing at the time. And although I did bring the laptop into the hospital in a couple of weeks, these following entries are mostly undated" (9; emphasis added). Although these explicit markers of revision fade from view later on, to some extent supplanted by explanatory notes and editorial interpolations incorporated by Foss, they offer some response to Michaels's initial uncertainty about the authorial mediation of diary.<sup>95</sup>

Michaels leaves unaddressed, however, the knottier question of whether it is permissible to allow the symptoms of his illnesses to enter into the body of the diary. To write "every day" and leave "unedited" thoughts that his readers might encounter as "indulgent" or "foolish," he fears, is to run the risk of eliciting an utterly – in fact, *literally* – symptomatic reading. In other words, if he does not preserve an unwavering, selfsame style across the diary's pages, his readers

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<sup>95</sup> While the 1997 (Duke University Press) and 1990 (Empress Publishing) editions do not differ significantly, the Duke edition incorporates italicized editorial labels whenever non-diaristic materials (for example, the letter from the Queensland Department of Immigration, discussed below) appear, whereas the Empress edition does not.

might read into it, taking his faltering voice as a symptom of his progressing illnesses. And Michaels is loath to, in his words, “[bribe] interest by inducement to trace in the prose deteriorations of judgment or style as a consequence of the deteriorating corpus.” As this impenetrable turn of phrase (which shrouds the prospect of his physical incapacitation in the euphemism of “the deteriorating corpus”) indicates, Michaels is queasy at the prospect of eliciting a moribund “sympathy” of this kind. He does not want his “friends or readers” to approach the text with his illnesses in hand as a kind of secret decoder ring that will grant unmediated access to his raw experience; indeed, such affective “truth” is precisely the stuff of sentimentalizing narratives of HIV/AIDS and of Western ethnographic method that he seeks to resist. On one level, Michaels wants to avoid exploiting graphic material circumstances for a cathartic emotional payoff; on another, he seeks to forestall readerly identification with him as an individual – to refuse a perspective of his situation that fails to take structural forces into account. Michaels would prefer to produce an effect of estrangement and alienation, rather than intimate or familiar emotional response, amongst his readers. That is, he would prefer them to view his situation through the “culturalogical” lens of collective institutions rather than through the privileged lens of his own body. Although clearly irritated at the limitations of diary for pursuing a proto-Brechtian project of this sort, Michaels signs on to it nonetheless.<sup>96</sup>

What the reader is left with, then, is a cocktail of ambivalence and reflexivity: a diarist who points to others rather than records. But in refusing to position a positively present “I” as his center of gravity, Michaels makes room for more complex interpersonal circuitry in the diary. Rather than inching closer to their subject’s experience, *Unbecoming*’s entries instead fan out

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<sup>96</sup> I suggest that Michaels seeks to effect something akin to Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (the “distancing” or “alienation” effect) amongst his readers. Brecht described *Verfremdungseffekt* as the constitutive difference between “dramatic theatre” and “epic theatre,” referring to it as the “alienation that is necessary to all understanding.” Instead of identifying with the experience of the actor (or, in this case, the diarist), the spectator would encounter it with shock and curiosity. See Brecht, “Old versus New Theatre,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015 [1964]) 110; 112.

laterally into sites of interpersonal address as they come not only to indicate extratextual conversations, but to encompass letters. As we shall see, these letters belong to different generic categories and – importantly for Michaels – play distinct roles in “rituals” of solidarity, friendship, mourning, and memory. They surround Michaels in the space of the diary, positioning him differently depending on whether he is addressor or addressee, and serve a wide range of representational and expressive purposes. Sampling and importing letters into his diary entries, I will show, allows Michaels a protocol of life-writing that, while not symptomatically “about” him, draws upon the interpersonal circuitry that *surrounds* him.

Two letters with important concrete particulars provide a backbone to *Unbecoming*; both arrive from the Queensland Department of Immigration. At the end of his fellowship term at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Michaels accepted a position as Lecturer at Griffith University in Brisbane in 1987, which required him to seek a new visa. In applying for Resident Status, Michaels encountered immigration policies that were flagrantly discriminatory toward People with AIDS – policies of a piece with notoriously discriminatory practices in the United States, whereby HIV-positive Haitian refugees were interned at Guantánamo Bay, and elsewhere in the Global North.<sup>97</sup> Michaels’s first missive from the Department of Immigration appears only gesturally in the diary. He writes of its arrival in office: “The dreaded letter from the Immigration Department was in my box, and I called ‘my’ lawyer, who didn’t seem to have a clue” (30). Whether motivated by principle, pride, rage, or superstition, Michaels is reluctant to linger over this source of “dread” in his early entries, once indicating in a furious parenthetical phrase: “(I will not take up diary space with the shameful details of the politics and strategies which engross

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<sup>97</sup> For more on the detainment of HIV-positive Haitian refugees by the U.S. government at Guantánamo Bay, see Karma R. Chávez, “ACT UP, Haitian Migrants, and Alternative Memories of HIV/AIDS,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98.1 (February 2012): pp. 63-68. For an excellent recent collection on the unequal distribution of “crises” provoked by HIV/AIDS, see *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, eds. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

me in trying to respond to the immigration people and which have consumed my time as well)” – a vow upon which he pretty immediately reneges, as we shall see (67).

In his early entries, however, Michaels dispenses with – and simply *dispatches* – letters rapidly, relying upon them as a communicative medium of keen importance. He rallies colleagues and friends to write in support of his immigration case, registering in the diary: “Letters should start pouring in on Monday (even Yuendumu has a fax now!)” (67). But these and other instrumentally useful letters – letters targeting specific outcomes, posted as means to particular ends – realize other effects as well. He describes the experience of handing over doctor’s notes in quotidian bureaucratic contexts:

Dr. K. [Dr. Richard Kemp] has had to write all these letters describing my health for various bureaucratic audiences (immigration, parking permits, etc.). These are very tragic documents: they describe me as having terminal cancer, anaemia, TB, or whatever will be most convincing to the recipient. And I do have all these things, though only one per letter. I feel odd, but not disinterested, handing these over the counter and watching people read them. They get very polite. I suppose I would, too. I cannot quite grasp what it must seem to people to see me around in the usual places and the usual way, but know I am more intimate with death than is permitted. But am I? It’s all gotten very abstract again (79).<sup>98</sup>

In delivering these form letters from Dr. Kemp, Michaels occupies a curious kind of relay position. He delivers an epistle from one correspondent (Dr. Kemp) to another (a bureaucratic agency or institution), while he himself has nothing in particular to convey; indeed, although the “subject” of the letter’s purpose, he is objectified by it. And although Dr. Kemp addresses numerous agencies on Michaels’s behalf in seeking one or another intercession, the specific people behind the counter who stand in for those entities aren’t the letters’ proper addressees. These letters inscribe those who receive them into something unexpected, frequently activating poignant emotional encounters (generally one-sided, as Michaels indicates here) enroute.

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<sup>98</sup> Michaels’s physician, Dr. Richard John Kemp, was an important clinician and infectious disease specialist who helped spearhead Australia’s response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. He treated numerous patients – compassionately – prior to his own death of AIDS-related causes in 1995. See “Kemp, Richard John (1945-1995),” *Australian Dictionary of Autobiography*, volume 19 (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021).

Although Michaels expresses considerable skepticism about the political potentiality of individual feeling, these epistolary encounters produce an emotional residue that he cannot quite set aside. We will return to this dimension of epistolary address – as a queer activist technology – in Chapter Three.

In time, as Michaels continues the long process of notifying friends and colleagues about his health from a distance, the letters that surround him prove to be sites of meaning for him as well as for their authors. He begins to receive “remarkable letters” of support and solidarity; “[t]hey’re wonderful and they’re scary,” he writes, “wonderful in what they say, scary in that they seem to represent some sort of genre/ritual – a little like looking up from your bed and discovering a priest giving final rites” (53). He registers the arrival of two such letters in February of 1988: “Got letters from Dennis and Calvin in reply to my recent announcement to them. These, Dennis’s especially, may be American variants of that genre.” Often touched by what his correspondents express in their letters, Michaels is fascinated, moreover, by the cleavage they stage between genre and ritual. Although curious about the formal nuances of these clusters of letters – the way they can be understood to constitute a “genre” – Michaels is particularly interested in the ritualistic uses to which his correspondents put them. This interpretive question is, of course, familiar: a line of inquiry shaped by his work at Yuendumu and his training in anthropology and media studies, and consistent with his broader skepticism about “textuality” in the abstract as an object of study.<sup>99</sup> In this case, however, it is Michaels’s terminal medical condition that initiates the “ritual” use of the epistolary genre in question. In encountering these letters, he again occupies a discomfiting position, finding himself at the center of a ritual rather than participating in it, situated precariously amongst the living as though, “looking up from [his] bed” he might discover “a priest giving final rites.”

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<sup>99</sup> For example, Michaels takes issue with *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* – the important special issue of *October* published in 1987 – for overemphasis of “textuality” and critique for its own sake, citing his impatience “not merely with deconstruction and discourse analysis, but textuality as a subject/metaphor in general.” See *Unbecoming*, 106-107.

Lying in hospital about two months later, in June, Michaels recalls an epistolary ritual he witnessed in the wake of his mother's death: "[W]e received letters which recounted a specific anecdote or two of an episode the writer had shared with Mom. These were very touching, *and I realized they represented a genre*, but one I'd been completely unaware of (most examples came from our mostly Anglo friends; I don't think it's a Yiddisher thing)" (99; emphasis added).

Encountering letters of this kind now – "quite different from the lovely but more general support letters of several months ago that people sent when they first found out [he] was ill" – Michaels has "this odd sense of being at [his] own funeral." Unlike those earlier letters of "more general support," with their incantatory gestures of positive wishes, these enact a different ritualistic function: memorializing – a style of speech whose distinctly posthumous aspect is exacerbated for Michaels by the "shitload of... spectacular (and expensive) flower arrangements wired in from all over the place" surrounding his bed. Although these letters are addressed to him, they simultaneously position Michaels in his mother's shoes. Michaels is thereby addressed a letter memorializing himself, which produces an alienating sense of untimeliness: he is either early to his own memorial service or belated to his own death. These letters thus illumine a profound distance between Michaels and his correspondents. Michaels receives their notes from a dreadful temporal plane – held in thrall by illnesses from which he will never recover while stuck yet in life – whereas his correspondents write from a world that is ongoing.

When the second letter from the Queensland Department of Immigration arrives in July of 1988, it conveys dreaded news. In a diary entry, Michaels records: "Letter from Immigration (via my lawyer) rejecting my visa application and, by implication, sending me home – wherever that might be" (116). Reproduced in full in *Unbecoming*, the letter addresses an unembellished conclusion to Linda Anderson, Michaels's attorney: "I refer to Dr Michael's application for Resident Status on the basis that he fulfilled the conditions of sub-section 6A(1)(d) or 6A(1)(e) of the Migration Act 1958 and must inform you that it has been refused" (110). Appended to the letter is a detailed report on Michaels's case, which weighs his "PERSONAL PARTICULARS,"

“IMMEDIATE FAMILY COMPOSITION/DISPOSITION” (three immediate family members abroad, “nil” in Australia), “IMMIGRATION HISTORY,” medical condition, and contributions “to Australia and the Aboriginal Community.” Both the letter and the report treat Michaels only in the third person; together, these documents function as an immigration hearing at a distance – indeed, by mail – in which the judge considering the case never addresses Michaels directly. After acknowledging his scholarly contributions to the study of Australian and Aboriginal societies (and his fiscal contributions to the state as a taxpayer), the immigration judge goes on to position Michaels apart from “general” society: “On balance though I do not see that the factors weighing in favour of approval outweigh the possible health risks *for the general community* and the considerable public health costs which will accrue from the treatment given to Dr Michaels” (115; emphasis added). This “dreadful and insulting” document issues a resounding reminder: that, in Michaels’s words, “we (gays, IV drug users, hemophiliacs) are not members of the ‘general public’” (123). Overwriting the material facts of his participation in collective life – among them his status as a taxpayer who provided funds toward the “public health” services the judge suggests he would improperly burden in receiving care – Michaels is positioned outside the most modest conception of “community.”

The letter to Michaels’s lawyer concludes with a tepid note that the Department of Immigration will not immediately move toward deportation proceedings. In a turn of phrase at once euphemistic, would-be merciful, and threatening, the State Director writes: “I should add that it is not proposed to seek the departure of Dr Michaels from Australia while he remains medically unfit for travel” (111). Not long after, however, this letter is followed by inquiries into his condition, as he registers in the diary’s final entry on 10 August 1988: “They’ve contacted Richard [Kemp] asking for a report of my condition and whether I’m ready to travel” (126). Michaels is forced into an unthinkable position: cast out, but not into another location; sent “home – wherever that might be”; and immobilized, as traveling domestically could be taken as readiness to travel internationally – that is, as fitness for deportation. He will never relocate, as he

had hoped to do, to Sydney, nor can he travel to Alice Springs to be near friends (116, 125). “They really insist on hounding me to death,” Michaels writes; most insidiously of all, the Department of Immigration will continue to surveil him while sick, with the promise in place that if he does get better, his circumstances will get worse. As Michaels writes: “...[I]f I leave Australia, not only do I die, but I do so in some horrible, confused, totally alienated public welfare environment, with no friends, no confirmation of my life and work – just hysteria, rather than any possible satisfaction, fulfilment which anyone, any human, I think, is entitled to at death’s door” (126).

Thus cornered, Michaels is writing into the void. Much as there is no scope for recovery – he has, at most, a few weeks remaining, “at best (or worst)” – there is no scope for redress or for his material circumstances to change (94). If one shoe dropped at the start of the diary when the KS lesions materialized to “declare, finally, a scenario,” now a second shoe has landed. Faced with these circumstances, Michaels continues to write: to address furious letters into that void, knowing full well they won’t land during his lifetime. After the Department of Immigration’s inquiry into his condition, he writes in his final entry: “Can you believe this? I was up all night drafting imaginary letters to everybody possible” (126). As we shall see, these gestures of furious address not only anchor and punctuate *Unbecoming* but form a kind of envelope around it. By determinedly and resignedly, reluctantly and angrily, continuing to manufacture doomed letters – responses to individuals and institutions that will never be received in his lifetime – Michaels turns his diary into a posthumous letter.

*“Stage-managing my own posthumosity”: Autothanatographical address*

About eight months earlier, in a similar moment of isolation (stuck alone in Brisbane between the Christmas and New Year’s holidays), Michaels begins drafting imaginary letters: “What I do mostly is lie in bed and compose letters of complaint and revenge, intended to repay the shits who are trying to kill me” (34). As Michaels’s hyperbolic-but-also-serious characterization might

suggest, these fantasy letters represent virtuosic feats of eloquent rage, reveling in his rightness, his articulateness, and his ability to make fun. Some of these verbal displays of bravura are wickedly mean and hilarious; one of the three Michaels records in this diary entry begins:

Dear Turbo Steam Electronic Carpet Cleaning Company

We all make mistakes: it's no crime to admit it. For example, I made a mistake responding to the circular you left in my mailbox, and calling you in to clean my carpets. But \$30 seemed so reasonable a rate (36).

Another, addressed to "Scot," his former landlord, begins by seizing the upper hand from the realtor and campily projecting an imaginary scenario: "I'm sorry to hear your real estate business is going broke. That, at least, is the only possible interpretation I can give to your recent theft of my security deposit for the Pixley Street flat" (34). A third letter, which opens with the salutation "Gary, you asshole, M—," upbraids a colleague for myriad forms of unprofessional behavior: for hoarding resources, shirking any sense of collective responsibility to Aboriginal communities, wearing "ghastly bourgeois colognes," and making inappropriate, embarrassing, and "horribly insulting infantile" sexual overtures – "(if that's what they were supposed to be)" (35-36). This roundly angry letter finally opens, however, onto an acknowledgment that Michaels will never personally deliver it:

Don't ever talk to me, and, more to the point, stay far, far out of my way. Of course, I will not send you this letter. But I shall include it in my diaries and hope that my editors include it in the posthumous publication so that you will be inscribed forever in shame and political disgrace (36).

Michaels doesn't draft these letters in order to send them to their named addressees; instead, he drafts them in order to register resistance on a record that will circulate later – to "inscrib[e]" some arbitrary addressees into a scenario he cannot change. After all, none of those addressed in these or other unsent letters in the diary represent the proper targets for Michaels's rage. For one thing, they are not the authors of his circumstances. Moreover, none of these letters can solve the large- or small-scale problems Michaels faces: not only are they unable to guarantee him freedom of movement or stable housing; they can't even repair his torn carpet. But they do allow Michaels to register his subjective resistance on record – to muster a response when no response

is to be expected or recognized – and to sustain a fantasy of acknowledgment, if not repair, and catharsis, if not vengeance.<sup>100</sup>

Michaels enters two other letters into *Unbecoming* that index different coordinates of fantasy: not those of vengeance or virtuosic rage, but of transformation. The first letter, which he later reveals himself never to have sent, addresses a friend called Gavin and lays out specifications for the flat Michaels would like to inhabit in Sydney. (At the time of writing – 25 May 1988 – Michaels was hoping to move to Sydney, a city far more metropolitan and queer than Brisbane, three months after attending the annual Mardi Gras celebrations for which it remains famous.<sup>101</sup>) This letter dreams of a flat that will never be found; accordingly, Michaels lays out his “criteria” in expansive imaginary terms: “There are surely elements of fantasy as well as unrealistic expectations in my thinking about all this. Admitting this, allow me to elaborate the main criteria, not as a set of determinate rules, but so as to let you in on that fantasy...” (90). As he goes on to describe in detail his preferences for “AESTHETICS,” “PRIVACY,” “SIZE,” “FURNISHINGS,” and “LOCATION,” he produces a “wishlist” of a piece with twenty-first-century reality series about luxury real estate – a vision incommensurate with his stated budget of “\$300-\$350 per week.” He’d love for his location, for instance, to make it possible to walk “to shops, transport, easily,” but wants to avoid “noisy suburbs” as well as the “claustrophobic flats” of quieter suburbs – but then there’s the prospect of “an ocean view . . .” (91). This letter preserves concentric fantasies as if in amber: the flat will never be found, Michaels will never make the trip, and Gavin will never receive the letter. But Michaels comes to think of the letter as an apt point of conclusion for the diary. About a week later, when he finds himself in

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<sup>100</sup> Michaels’s many unsent letters enact a kind of “obsessive defense,” which Michael Dango has theorized as a strategy for coping with irreparability whereby a subject displaces “the anxiety of performing the great labor of reparation” onto successive smaller objects “that are easier to repair.” See Michael Dango, *Crisis Style: The Aesthetics of Repair* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022) 32.

<sup>101</sup> See Michaels’s essay on the 1988 festival, originally published in *New Theatre Australia*, in *Unbecoming*, 69-77. For more on the queer history of Sydney, see Garry Wotherspoon, *City of the Plain: History of a Gay Sub-Culture* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1991).

considerable pain and certain that he is about to die, he remembers it: “I would try to get Athol to print out the journal and get it to Paul. The letter to Gavin would be a good place to duck out, even” (94).

Michaels, of course, doesn’t “duck out” at just this moment; as he writes on 15 June 1988: “But you don’t die, at least right away. This is AIDS, the disease of a thousand rehearsals” (94). He goes on to write Gavin another letter – one he probably sent and then copied into the diary. This letter, he makes clear from the outset, is a missive Gavin would not have expected to receive: “Dear Gavin / What a lovely, and brave letter. Thanks so for it. I hope this reply doesn’t seem too macabre. Obviously, you weren’t expecting one. But I thought I’d let you know I’m hanging on yet” (95). While Michaels doesn’t reproduce the text of Gavin’s letter, we can imagine it was one of the “remarkable letters,” “wonderful” and “scary,” that addressed Michaels in the specific light of his foreshortened lifespan – his anticipated lateness. But it turns out that Michaels had imagined his own letter to Gavin as a kind of last word:

I had planned to end them [his journals] with a letter I wrote you but never sent (days before I returned to hospital), describing a fantasy of an apartment (and a life) I wanted to live in Sydney which you so generously had offered to help me find. I thought the letter offered a poignant fake closure to the journal, but now I suppose it must be superseded by the somewhat less symmetrical facts of the last few weeks (96).

As explicitly as he indicates throughout *Unbecoming* that he hates the stuff of closure – its sentimentalizing stylistics and the affective, narrative, and political conservatism undergirding it – Michaels has considered making proffer of it here: of transmogrifying his unsent fantasy letter into a final, unfulfilled utterance. But he hasn’t implemented this editorial possibility, not only because he didn’t want to, but because it didn’t work; the anticipated full stop of his death didn’t come to pass. At this moment, Michaels confronts his approaching death and the termination of his diary project as co-constitutive eventualities. Moreover, through the interminability of his illness, he faces an important impasse foundational to end-of-life writing as well as correspondence: the impossibility of fixing a proper point of completion. At the height of his pain a week earlier, he had addressed his doctor, “It’s getting nasty now. Can you get me out of

this?” only to “recover” – that is, to continue living (94). On the other hand, in the space of the diary, Michaels wants to refuse a certain kind of emotional or meaning-laden payoff, but faces the inevitability of ending *somewhere*, with the attendant inevitability that that “somewhere” will be retroactively imbued with profundity – with “poignant fake closure.” In a sense, he inhabits both the stuckness of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable* – “I can’t go on. I’ll go on” – and its inversion: “I can’t stop; I’ll stop.”<sup>102</sup> Situated between representational limit and material reality, between symbolic scaffolding and aleatory circumstances, Michaels’s position is helpless; what is worse, it grants a full view of the inefficacy of the expressive and representational instruments available to him.

This position of being at once stuck in the world and obsolete to it returns us to what I earlier referred to as “the ecstatic bafflement of late style”: Michaels’s sense of being beside himself. As we seen across the letters and entries of *Unbecoming*, Michaels has remained in life while not inhabiting a continuous or ongoing temporal plane, something that produced distance between him and his friends and correspondents. Such temporal dislocation also places Michaels beside himself as he regards his own person through the filter of approaching lateness. As we have seen, this disjuncture instigates myriad crises – notably, the “trouble with ‘I-ness” he experiences “at every moment” of writing (6). It also renders him at once a ghastly subject, haunting a world and a diary he is about to leave while unable to thwart that foregone conclusion, and at once an object, a patient, body, voice, and self cornered into an unchangeable essence by virtue of having run out of time. It is this sense of seeing oneself outside of oneself, encountering oneself as an other – “finding yourself upon the ceiling,” as Michaels writes – that animates the ecstatic aspect of lateness as it figures in *Unbecoming* (124). And it is this ecstasy – this propulsion of Michaels beyond the pronominal fold of his own subjectivity – I argue, that transforms the text from diary to letter.

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<sup>102</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 2009 [1958]) 407.

Formally, we have seen how *Unbecoming* isn't so much about Michaels as it is a text that unfolds around him. The diary's diegesis is a narrative of extratextual conversations and encounters – an interpersonal hodgepodge that permeates the form of the entries themselves as they open onto (or turn into) letters. Moreover, Michaels's provisional and paranoid "I" – fixated on the performance of its own "reflexivity" – does not provide a center of gravity for the diary; indeed, it never stops spinning. Such subjective looseness is critical to conceptions of late style and autothanatography – both of which have important implications for queer writing responsive to HIV/AIDS generally and for *Unbecoming* in particular.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has elegantly theorized, one critical dimension of the HIV/AIDS crisis as it impacted LGBTQ+ communities was temporal.<sup>103</sup> generations were suddenly reconfigured as people of all ages faced a sudden foreshortening of their lifespans – a traumatic legacy with which contemporary queer and trans writers continue to grapple through the problematized paradigm of "lost generations."<sup>104</sup> Queer representations of HIV/AIDS of

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<sup>103</sup> Sedgwick writes: "I'm thinking... of three very queer friendships I have. One of my friends is sixty; the other two are both thirty, and I, at forty-five, am exactly in the middle. [...] In a 'normal' generational narrative, our identifications with each other would be aligned with an expectation that in another fifteen years, I'd be situated comparably to where my sixty-year-old friend is, while my thirty-year-old friends would be situated comparably to where I am... But we are all aware that the grounds of such friendships today are likely to differ from that model. [...] Specifically, living with advanced breast cancer, I have little chance of ever being the age my older friend is now. My friends who are thirty years old are similarly unlikely ever to experience my present middle age: one is living with an advanced cancer caused by a massive environmental trauma...; the other is living with HIV. The friend who is a very healthy sixty is the likeliest of us to be living fifteen years from now." See Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) 147-148.

<sup>104</sup> Broadly construed, the (largely North American) paradigm of "lost generations" narrativizes the ongoing crisis of HIV/AIDS as a catastrophe that eventuated in the loss of a generation of gay men and trans women between the late 1970s and the onset of the twenty-first century. Some scholars and artists take issue with this account for its potential to simplify the considerably differential impact HIV/AIDS had (and continues to have) on particular communities – and, in so doing, to occlude numerous vulnerable groups (including rural queer men, Black and brown people, trans people, women of color, and IV drug users). Others dispute the factuality of this account or take issue with it on the basis of oversimplification (for, indeed, many people survived). For three interventions that seek to think through this problematic paradigm, see Torrey Peters, *Detransition, Baby* (New York: One World, 2020), Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *The Freezer Door* (Cambridge, MA: semiotext(e), 2020), and Sycamore, ed., *Between Certain Death and a Possible Future: Queer Writing on Growing Up with the AIDS Crisis* (Vancouver:

1980s and 1990s are suffused with a sense of this looming lateness, which often registers through the same sort of ecstatic propulsion that Michaels described above. Tilda Swinton, in an open letter to her late friend, the filmmaker Derek Jarman, refers to his end-of-life work as epiphanic, naming it: “the epiphany – I can call it nothing less – of your illness.”<sup>105</sup> The unnamed narrator at the center of Susan Sontag’s short story “The Way We Live Now” describes his experience of impending loss as ecstatic, epiphanic, and even euphoric: “Calamity is an amazing high, too. Sometimes I feel *so* well, so powerful, it’s as if I could jump out of my skin. Am I going crazy, or what? I know it sounds crazy but sometimes I think this is a *fantastic* experience...”<sup>106</sup> In Swinton’s and Sontag’s hands, lateness affords a clear-sighted perspective and an exceptionally animate orientation to the world. Instead of being extinguished by her proximity to the end, the soon-to-be-late subject is buoyed by a perspicacious awareness of her surroundings – an account that resonates with Edward Said’s sense of lateness: “being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present.”<sup>107</sup>

While these accounts of late style launch the subject into a more supple and yawning “I” relative to the world around her, theories of autothanatography underscore the subject’s loss of a center of gravity. In so doing, these accounts point to the unexpected relational possibilities an “I” encounters on the cusp of her own unbecoming. Etymologically and analytically, autothanatography names the death of the writing subject. As a formal or narrative category, autothanatography specifies a cluster of life-writing genres – a subset of *autopathography*, the category conceived in 1991 by G. Thomas Couser for autobiographical representations of illness

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Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021). For several exemplary treatments of these debates, see S. Armstrong, “The Lost Generation,” *WorldAIDS* 26 (March 1993): pp. 5-8; Jules Gill-Peterson, “Haunting the Queer Spaces of AIDS: Remembering ACT UP/New York and an Ethics for an Endemic,” *GLQ* 19.3 (2013): pp. 279-300; Molly M. Pearson, “No, We Didn’t ‘Lose an Entire Generation’ to AIDS,” *The Body: The HIV/AIDS Resource*, 13 December 2021, [thebody.com/article/we-didnt-lose-an-entire-generation-to-aids](http://thebody.com/article/we-didnt-lose-an-entire-generation-to-aids); and the work of *The Generations Project* ([thegenerationsproject.org](http://thegenerationsproject.org)).

<sup>105</sup> Tilda Swinton, “In the Spirit of Derek Jarman,” *Vertigo* 2.4 (Spring 2003).

<sup>106</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Way We Live Now,” *The New Yorker* 62.40 (24 November 1986): 50.

<sup>107</sup> Edward Said, *On Late Style* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006) 14.

– while the term carries other resonances for auto/biographical theory and deconstruction.<sup>108</sup> Originally coined by Jacques Derrida as a correlate – or, more precisely, as a precipitate or residue – of autobiography, autothanatography animates deconstructionist concerns about representation as “defacement”: the impossibility of properly representing a subject, and the inevitable besmirching representation enacts upon the subject’s ostensibly “proper” name.<sup>109</sup> For Derrida, Paul de Man, and other deconstructionists, this defacement figures as a death of the subject; every attempt to represent her, that is, enacts a cleaving of presence that renders meaning-making and identity formation impossible. In life-writing and auto/biographical studies, the crucial thrust and utility of autothanatography derives not from its impact upon the subject (the “one”) but from its critical repositioning of the other. For, as autobiographical theorists have demonstrated over the past several decades, autobiography wants an other. Even when a heroic autobiography would seek to disavow relation and intersubjective enmeshment in favor of an account of sovereign individualism, “I” needs others: both in the form of a narrative addressee (the reader-recipient who will encounter an autobiographical text) and as the opaque space of “otherness” (the indeterminate mass of difference, of “not-I”) against which the “one” is determined as a unique subject.<sup>110</sup> Autothanatography, as Nancy Miller has proposed, offers a

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<sup>108</sup> See G. Thomas Couser, “Autopathography: Women, Illness, and Lifewriting,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 6.1 (1991): pp. 65-75.

<sup>109</sup> Derrida proposes “autothanatography” as one of several possible terms – he also considers “heterobiograph[y],” “thanatograph[y],” “heterography,” and “auto-bio-thanato-hetero-graphy” – to specify the force of alterity, otherness, and *thanatos* operative in autobiography (333; 377). Of the autothanatographical, he writes: “...the proper is produced here as autothanatography, and sufficiently separates itself from itself in this ‘relation,’ this ‘report,’ this ‘narration,’ so that we no longer know just what we are saying when we say proper...” See Derrida, *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 393. For an important account of auto/biography as defacement, see Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 67-81.

<sup>110</sup> For more on the place of the other in autobiography – and the recursive operations of othering autothanatography activates – see E. S. Burt, *Regard for the Other: Autothanatography in Rousseau, De Quincey, Baudelaire, and Wilde* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

way of reapproaching autobiography through relation – as “precisely the genre (or cultural practice) in which the self *necessarily* perform[s] its relation to the other.”<sup>111</sup>

Autothanatography, then, inaugurates a new set of conditions for the writing of self and other – a representational field whose center of gravity is not secured by a stable or sacrosanct subject, but is rather unmoored through the subject’s untidy improvisations with otherness.<sup>112</sup> Autothanatography, in other words, offers something other than an entrenchment of subjective sovereignty; instead, it offers an acknowledgment of subjective limits and representational impossibility, an avowal of self-otherness, and an opportunity for the “I” to carve out new ways of relating to its others.<sup>113</sup> For Michaels, autothanatographical writing provides a sense of relief in the first instance (he needn’t succeed in his impossible project), affirmation in the second (he can stick it to “I”-ness, after all!), and possibility in the third (he might yet address another person). *Unbecoming*, after all, comes out as an autothanatographical text from Michaels’s very first entry, with its avowal of inevitable ending.

Up until this point, I have approached *Unbecoming* through the conventional critical apparatus of the literary present. I have presented Michaels writing – that is, I have presented Michaels as *still* writing, as continuing to undertake the process of writing in what Paul Saint-Amour has referred to as “the timeless present of interpretation.”<sup>114</sup> *Unbecoming*, however, is foundationally a posthumous text, with Michaels’s death representing the precondition for its publication. The interpretive convention of the literary present to some extent obscures this critical fact. As Saint-Amour writes: “But here in the literary present, the immediacy and

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<sup>111</sup> Nancy Miller, “Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography,” *differences* 6.1 (1994): pp. 5-6; see also p. 10.

<sup>112</sup> My thinking about the other’s unmooring of the subject’s center of “gravity” is profoundly shaped by Marissa Fenley’s work on puppetry and “mechanical personhood.” See Fenley, *Puppet Theory: The Mechanical Infrastructure of Personhood*, 2022, U of Chicago, PhD dissertation.

<sup>113</sup> In the words of E. S. Burt: “Autothanatographical writing allows the other to return with all its good fortunes and misfortunes, and... enables the I, in its life-oriented direction, to explore and exploit them.” See Burt, *Regard for the Other*, 27.

<sup>114</sup> Paul Saint-Amour, “The Literary Present,” *ELH* 85.2 (Summer 2018): 387.

presence of the voice had been given a home outside the ephemerality of the body. Out of reverence for the author or for writing's capacity to outlive the moment of its creation and survive in fresh readerly presents, we have decoupled utterance from death."<sup>115</sup> Tautological as it might sound, *Unbecoming's* publication changes the diary: from a fraught site of discursive resistance to a narrative artifact with a fixed beginning, middle, and end; from a collaborative political endeavor to the work of a single deceased gay man; and, most importantly, from a diary to a letter.

While Michaels may not have constructed *Unbecoming* "by himself," as we have seen, he does send it alone. Upon its publication, the book will bear uniquely his name and will stand in for him. He and it will pass under the gaze of readers; in contradistinction to many LGBTQ+ narratives of HIV/AIDS and loss, he is the both the author and the object – the writer and the scene, the steward and the patient.<sup>116</sup> Inhabiting this autothanatographical project on the cusp of his death, Michaels faces his own impermanence, imagines his readers, and encounters an infuriating contradiction: he is talking to someone who cannot answer him back. His penultimate entry addresses her exasperatedly: "In fact, I'm becoming resentful of this diary, Paul for making me write it, and the reader, assuming there is any willing to plough through all this, for requiring

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>116</sup> I refer here to the vast and diverse body of literary work that straddles the representational functions of narrativizing caregiving and eulogizing a deceased friend, partner, colleague, chosen family member, or biological relative. Although formally, politically, affectively, and demographically diverse, these works often recapitulate the depictions of caregiving that they narrativize on a rhetorical level – frequently with the effect, I suggest, of inscribing a temporality of pure loss that separates the writer/caregiver from their lost other. Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1988) represents an iconic example, significantly diverging from Michaels's project in *Unbecoming: An AIDS Diary* in spite of the two volumes' shared historical-generic subtitled tags. Other exemplary works of nonfiction include Amy Hoffman, *Hospital Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), Mark Doty, *Heaven's Coast* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), and Jamaica Kincaid, *My Brother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997). One recent queer memoir that cuts across the grain of lateness in HIV/AIDS-related memoir is Paul Lisicky's *Later: My Life at the Edge of the World* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2020); notably, *Later* does not center upon a particular individual dying or lost to HIV/AIDS-related causes. Finally, one unusual work that emerges out of caregiving but resists inscribing loss into the narrative it animates is Paula Vogel's 1992 play *Baltimore Waltz* (in *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays* [New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1996]).

additional text. Why bother . . . ? Any of us? What's worth writing about?" (124-125). Michaels is as close to his others as he ever could be, and yet a cellophane-fine curtain prevents him from truly speaking to them. Once they (we) hear him, he will have gone. A necessarily posthumous voice addresses them (us).

Yet it is the commitment to publishing the diary that positions Michaels as a correspondent, regardless of his availability to receive a response. Publication activates the gestures of address latent across the entries, produced as Michaels wrote into the void. Publication also represents, as I have suggested, an emphatic act of self-objectification; like any autothanatographer, and like any correspondent, Michaels submitted himself to his others, to his addressee. Abhorrent as he may have found the "I"-wrapper of diary to be, Michaels has used it to send something to someone: a minor gesture offered on unchosen terms in the hopes that it might stir up circuits of response elsewhere.

### **Others in Attendance**

Setting out in vastly different historical and personal circumstances, with different apprehensions and anticipations of loss in mind and diverse aesthetic forms in hand, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Eric Michaels each turn toward letters. In their hands, archival materials transform: Warner transfigures letters into narrative and finally into a record that resounds in two distinct ways; Michaels transmogrifies a private diary of sketches and rants – which, in manuscript, yells into the void – into a letter that brusquely hails its readers upon its posthumous publication. In his pathbreaking essay "Ephemera as Evidence," José Esteban Muñoz offers a theorization of queerness in the archive as ephemera: as "traces," "fleeting moments," "innuendo," gestures, and other evanescent forms that sidestep ironclad templates of "visible

evidence.”<sup>117</sup> These queer resonances<sup>118</sup> have been insistently and covertly carried forward into posterity, often against the grain of an archive’s stated epistemological and political ambitions. Performance, Muñoz suggests, might enable the contemporary artist or scholar to reanimate these remnants in our particular “here and now.”<sup>119</sup> As we have seen in this chapter, Warner and Michaels each turn to address as just such a tool for archival animation: a force that might contest the very ordinariness of queer loss, both in the sense of increased incidences of mortality and in the sense of despoiled cultural memory.

To a certain extent, Warner and Michaels write against – write “back to,” as the expression goes – endings, seeking to resist the oblivion, erasure, and silence that might follow the full stop of mortal loss (especially when it involves queerly nonnormative content). But simultaneously, and further, they exploit endings as narratological occasions. Both projects begin with their ultimate *telos* not only in view, but already activated: Ackland’s death has occasioned Warner’s editorial work, and the very publication of *Unbecoming* bespeaks its author’s death. By adopting their respective endings as narrative frames, *I’ll Stand by You* and *Unbecoming* tilt their cards to show the teleological hands they’ve been dealt. By relying upon nonteleological forms – epistolary and diaristic – to inch closer to their endings, these texts produce a space of encounter around, approaching, and following wrenching loss. Neither text can alter the eventualities that set them in motion, but both call readers in to witness their unfurling. It is this invitation to future mediation, I contend, that makes these texts queer correspondences. The piecemeal parts of *I’ll Stand by You* and *Unbecoming* surround particular teleological frames, but they are not reducible to those frames. Their parts don’t add up to a teleological whole; instead, they fan out, assembling a readerly witness into a narrative that moves toward – and survives – ending.

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<sup>117</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8.2 (1996): 6.

<sup>118</sup> See Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, “Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive,” *GLQ* 20.3 (2014): 297-318.

<sup>119</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 1.

### Chapter Three

#### Encountering Address:

#### Assembly, Affinity, and Archives in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)

*I'm talking about facing death. The only reaction we can really have is a banal one because death is the last experience of life. It's not like love. There is no retrospect. The challenge is to turn it from an overwhelming personal void into a group effort, to try to help others avoid the same fate. But this kind of extraordinary response means agitating against the grain of the habit of human reaction.'*

– Sarah Schulman, *People in Trouble*<sup>1</sup>

In the first entry of *Unbecoming*, Eric Michaels raises a series of questions at once rhetorical and pragmatic: “For whom do I write? And, worse yet, from what position?”<sup>2</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, diary proves for Michaels to be a space of self-contestation – one in which he fashions an “I” not in order to realize (or memorialize) its essence, but for its instrumental use. Diary, that is, enables Michaels to forge a provisional “position” from which he “write[s]” and to activate a posthumous form of interpersonal address. In this chapter, I shift from the first-person singular of Michaels’s diaristic practice to consider the activation of address at a different set of interpersonal coordinates: the construction of an activist collective and its pronominal correlate “we.” Through this process, I illustrate how, within the activist context of ACT UP, address comes to be nearly wholly decoupled from the conventional epistolary forms we have encountered in the previous two chapters.

On 30 June 1986, fourteen months before Michaels begins *Unbecoming*, the Warren Burger Supreme Court issues a 5-4 ruling in the case of *Bowers v. Hardwick*. Upholding a Georgia anti-sodomy statute and specifying its scope of application in ringingly anti-queer terms, the *Bowers* decision stages an exemplary instance of queer people being refused the right of direct address. For, while the Georgia law broadly “criminalized consensual sodomy” between adults, the Court’s decision hailed gay men, lesbians, and other queers specifically, as the opinion,

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Schulman, *People in Trouble* (London: Vintage, 2019 [1990]) 175-176.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Michaels, *Unbecoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) 4. This entry is dated 9 September 1987.

written by Justice Byron White, indicates in blunt terms: “The Constitution does not confer a fundamental right upon homosexuals to engage in sodomy.”<sup>3</sup> As legal scholar Kendall Thomas has observed, the Burger Supreme Court approached *Bowers v. Hardwick* as a case fundamentally concerned with the constitutionality of nonnormative sexualities.<sup>4</sup> In soldering together “sodomy” and “homosexual,” the opinion inscribes sexual *identities*, rather than sexual *acts*, into the category of the sodomitic.<sup>5</sup> By implication, any sexual acts between presumptively heterosexual opposite-gender partners sidestep the ambit of the Georgia statute, whereas all sexual acts between same-gender partners constitute “sodomy” and thereby fall into the law’s scope of application. With this new delimitation of the contours of “sodomy,” the Court issues a resounding message to LGBTQ people – an interpellative gesture of address that is concomitantly a gesture of *non*-address, a way of talking over the heads of queer people.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, the *Bowers* decision inscribes a particular sexuality into the category of the citizen, thereby granting heterosexuals the rights – important among them a right to privacy – accorded to the nation’s citizenry. On the other hand, *Bowers* positions sexualities that deviate from the heterosexual standard outside of the citizenry. This condemnation reverberates with particularly willful force given the continuing crisis of the HIV/AIDS pandemic as it was impacting queer communities and individuals in 1986. At a historical moment when President Ronald Reagan continued to maintain a public silence on AIDS – not publicly acknowledging the crisis until April of 1987, six years after it was first pronounced an epidemic, and after thousands of deaths had been reported to the Centers for Disease Control – the Supreme Court of the United States decries sodomy

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<sup>3</sup> *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186, 190-192 (1986).

<sup>4</sup> As legal scholar Kendall Thomas writes: “The Court took the view that the only question properly before it in *Hardwick* concerned the constitutionality of the Georgia law as applied to private sexual practices between consenting adults of the same sex, which the Court denominated ‘homosexual sodomy’” (34-35). See Thomas, “Corpus Juris (Hetero)Sexualis: Doctrine, Discourse, and Desire in *Bowers v. Hardwick*,” *GLQ* 1 (1993): pp. 33-51.

<sup>5</sup> The Georgia statute (§16-6-2 [1984]) describes sodomy as “any sexual act involving the sex organs of one person and the mouth or anus of another.” See *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 188n1.

<sup>6</sup> I thank Yao Ong and Debbie Nelson for suggesting this approach to (and metaphor for) the structure of (non-)address activated in the *Bowers* decision.

and homosexuality, the two now metonyms for the same unconstitutional “outside” of citizenship.<sup>7</sup> While studiously addressed to citizens, the *Bowers* decision targets queers precisely by refusing them to address them directly.

In this chapter, I argue that address emerged as a crucial technology for queer activists responding to HIV/AIDS in the mid-1980s. In attending to the formation, organizational structure, and activist repertoire of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), I contend that address furnished a new range of direct-action protocols for activists – protocols that seize upon and exploit the circuitry of stigmatizing (non-)address while revising its terms. The *Bowers* decision exemplifies the refusal of address with which queer people met during the first decade of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in North America, a period of time during which hegemonic governmental, bureaucratic, and medical institutions either refused to directly acknowledge the impact of the crisis on LGBTQ+ people and other so-called “high-risk groups,” or did so in highly stigmatizing ways. In either instance, those most prominently associated with HIV/AIDS in mainstream media discourses – queer people (especially gay and bisexual men), injection drug users, Haitians and people of Haitian descent, and sex workers – were positioned outside of the normative “general public,” held up as culpable vectors of infection rather than approached as vulnerable groups to whom resources should be offered.<sup>8</sup> In this chapter, I argue that such refusals of address had a profound impact both on the history and the form of queer direct-action activism. Not only did the refusal of address to LGBTQ+ people inaugurate a peculiarly

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald Reagan would not publicly mention AIDS by name before referring to it as “public health enemy no. 1” in an April 1987 speech – in the context of calling for abstinence. The CDC first identified HIV (then a virus that had yet to be isolated and named) as an epidemic in June 1981. See Gerald M. Boyd, “Reagan Urges Abstinence for Young to Avoid AIDS,” *New York Times* 2 April 1987, and “*Pneumocystis Pneumonia* --- Los Angeles,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 30.21 (5 June 1981): pp. 1-3.

<sup>8</sup> Of the so-called “4 Hs” – “homosexuals, heroin users, hemophiliacs, and Haitians”: four demographic categories identified early in the pandemic as particularly vulnerable to or impacted by HIV – all but one were regularly stigmatized and blamed as scapegoats. For more on the concept of “risk groups,” see Jan Zita Grover, “AIDS: Keywords,” in *October* 43 (Winter 1987): pp. 17-30, especially 23-24.

challenging set of conditions for activists to contend with; further, I maintain, it reanimated address as a primary activist strategy and technology. Being refused address, in other words, meant that queer activists had to invent an insurgent – and uninvited – mode of response to what Lauren Berlant has theorized as “crisis ordinariness.”<sup>9</sup> Initially, address is precisely what was refused to these activists; ultimately, as we shall see, it is what they wielded as a creative and confrontational force in their practice.

In what follows, I explore ACT UP as a collective animated by a bifurcated practice of activist address. As an instrument of encounter imbued with confrontational force and an unrelenting sense of urgency, address enabled ACT UP to work toward different organizing goals simultaneously. Directed internally, address facilitated the formation of a collective – a community of activists united in solidarity and affinity. Deployed externally, address operated as a powerful tool for targeting others – institutions and their agents, as well as anonymous individuals gathered under the mantle of the “general public.”<sup>10</sup> These two protocols of address are complementary but distinct: the first entails forging a first-person plural *we* capable of sending a message or orchestrating an action; the second involves addressing that message or action to some particular *you*: a target or addressee. As we shall see in this chapter, these two protocols are asymmetrical – that is, they do not represent opposite sides of the same coin. Making *we* isn’t reducible to addressing *you*; indeed, in the context of ACT UP, making *we* involves a lot of internal *you*-addressing. Moreover, neither *we* nor *you* is interpersonally static, as many individuals will be called into these pronominal folds over the life of the collective and across its actions. Likewise, neither *we* nor *you* is stable or self-same across time. Both of these protocols of address, however, conjure the personally interpellative force of the letter: hailing an other, articulating a demand, and inscribing a new auditor, reader, or witness into a shared plane of address.

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<sup>9</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) 10.

<sup>10</sup> See Grover, “AIDS: Keywords,” 23-25.

Put simply, I claim that address not only facilitated ACT UP's work, but represented an activist intervention in its own right. Whether through fax and mail campaigns, confrontational pickets outside the Chicago Department of Public Health, campy demonstrations outside St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan, or the weekly performance of general members' meetings, ACT UP worked by an ethic, a dramaturgy, and myriad representational forms of the open letter. Prior to the formation of ACT UP in Manhattan in 1987, queer activists drew upon the publicity-seeking, shame-gathering potential of the published open letter to a limited extent.<sup>11</sup> In proposing the open letter as an aperture through which to conceptualize ACT UP's praxis of address, however, I am less interested in the affective circuitry of shame inherited in the form and more interested in the collective's deliberate attunement to its interpersonal expansiveness and transhistorical endurance. Interpersonally, ACT UP's bifurcated strategies of address served to inscribe ever more individuals into an intervention. Conceptualized through the metaphor of the open letter, an intervention sought simultaneously to add signatories to ACT UP's cause (for example, to reach more potential allies who might join in a protest slogan after passing a march on the street) *and* to identify more addressees who ought to be taken to task for their action or inaction. Temporally and historically, ACT UP's activist gestures of address do not expire. The individual who witnesses a gesture of address or who encounters an open letter – whether contemporaneously in the street or decades later in an archive – is personally hailed by it. On one level, this has the effect of extending the lifespan of an act of resistance beyond the life of any discrete individuals; on another level, this has the effect of urgently eliciting a response even years after a demand is first articulated.

In what follows, I approach ACT UP through a diverse variety of materials, sources, and sites, collating oral histories, first-person autobiographical accounts, internal correspondences

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<sup>11</sup> See Kramer, "1,112 and Counting," in *Reports from the Holocaust: The Making of an AIDS Activist* (New York: Penguin, 1989): 33-51; Kramer, "2,339 and Counting," in *Ibid.*, 68-73; and Kramer, *Faggots* (New York: Plume, 1987).

and records, ephemera from demonstrations, film and video, and popular and gay periodicals. I focus upon the first twelve years of ACT UP's activity – between March 1987 and the turn of the millennium – and draw principally upon materials emerging out of metropolitan chapters of ACT UP based in New York and Chicago. In synthesizing these disparate sources into a single corpus, I ask how our understanding of ACT UP – and of queer direct-action activism, more broadly – might be transformed by an attention to address.

The remaining space of the chapter visits ACT UP at three distinct historical junctures: on the cusp of its formation in 1986 and 1987; at the height of its activity in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and in the contemporary archival present of the 2020s. I explore how activist address operates bidirectionally within each of these historical frames, functioning at once to shape a collective vision (and the vision of a collective) and to insistently call ever more others into a confrontation, a conversation, and a queer kind of correspondence. As we shall see, across these historical moments, the collective remains not only an agent of contestation as it activates interventions in scenes of normative public life, but also a site of contestation in its own right. ACT UP, that is, continually addresses itself revised versions of Michaels's earlier questions: "As whom do we address the world? And from what position?" Maintaining such a practice of internally-oriented address enables ACT UP to cultivate and sustain a commitment to organizational openness, suppleness, and self-reflexivity – a radical practice of ongoing self-transformation exemplified in its structuring principles of assembly and affinity. It is this same commitment to critical reflection and transformation that makes it so difficult to narrate a history or to do the historiography of ACT UP, as the true hallmarks of the collective lie not in its discrete accomplishments but in its commitment to process, practice, and performance. For one of ACT UP's most profound interventions is precisely the unyoking of an activist project from specific actors and from a specific timeline or lifespan – an approach that insists upon response and transformation at all costs, beyond the constraints of the world as it is constituted at any given moment. This approach insists upon address as unfinished business and encounter

as a process rather than a discrete, one-off occasion – two features important to this dissertation’s account of queer correspondence. Accordingly, in what follows, I treat this chapter’s corpus of activist address as a ramp to future interventions: what we might conceptualize, after Diana Taylor, as a repertoire of live acts and gestures that can be reactivated in performance – a living rather than a static record.

## **Before**

ACT UP/New York, the first of more than 40 chapters of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power that would emerge across the Americas, Europe, and Australia in the coming decade, began to materialize quite literally in the streets of Manhattan in February 1987 under a familiar sign. Many accounts of ACT UP/New York locate a precise point of origin for the collective in a contentious March 1987 event at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center – the occasion of a confrontational talk by firebrand activist and writer Larry Kramer, which I return to below. I approach the collective’s formation, however, at an earlier and more nebulous stage, when a group of six gay men took to the streets in search of solidarity, community, and a collective form of address.

Approximately six months earlier, in August of 1986, the Silence=Death Collective began planning a political poster that would come to be iconically associated with ACT UP. The six men in the collective – Avram Finkelstein, Jorge Socarrás, Oliver Johnston, Chris Lione, Charles Krelloff, and Brian Howard – had formed a gay consciousness-raising group in the preceding months, regularly convening to process personal experiences of loss and widespread public hostility toward queer people. The Silence=Death Collective began meeting at a time of transformative activist ferment – in the wake of *Bowers v. Hardwick* and not long after conservative commentator William F. Buckley, Jr. opined in the *New York Times* that People with AIDS ought to be tattooed “in the forearm, to protect common-needle users, and on the

buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.”<sup>12</sup> From the outset, the group fostered a space for open and angry discussion of HIV/AIDS. After years of “euphemisms,” coded speech, and “secrecy” within gay communities,<sup>13</sup> and against a prevailing “orthodoxy of political restraint,” the Silence=Death Collective was shaped by an emerging desire for confrontation and for a renovated gay counterpublic rooted in rage – mirroring a larger transformation in gay and lesbian emotional and political responses following *Bowers*, as Deborah Gould has argued.<sup>14</sup> The poster was to be a tool for reaching – and orchestrating – a larger collective than that of the six who created it.

Crafted in the glossy visual idiom of advertising, the poster – *Silence=Death* – invented an iconography for the emerging direct-action AIDS movement (Figure 2). Against a taut black background, the poster imported (and inverted) the homosexual icon of the pink triangle from the Third Reich and proclaimed, in two words and one symbol rendered in bold white text, a slogan: “SILENCE = DEATH.” Two small lines of text – faint enough to be legible only to a pedestrian who would stop and gaze closely on the print – appeared at the bottom of the poster, raising a series of questions and issuing a set of imperatives: “Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the [*sic*] Center for Disease Control, the [*sic*] Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican? / Gays and lesbians are not expendable... Use your power... Vote... Boycott... Defend yourselves... Turn anger, fear, grief into action.”<sup>15</sup> The posters went up overnight in February 1987, wheatpasted by a squad of “snipers” onto exterior building walls, utility poles, and construction scaffolding in a smattering of neighborhoods “frequented,” Avram

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<sup>12</sup> William F. Buckley, “Crucial Steps in Combating the AIDS Epidemic: Identify All the Carriers,” *New York Times* 18 March 1986, p. A27.

<sup>13</sup> Avram Finkelstein, *After Silence: A History of AIDS Through Its Images* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018) 33-35.

<sup>14</sup> Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 173.

<sup>15</sup> See Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo/Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990) 30.

Finkelstein recalls, by gay men and “people in publishing.”<sup>16</sup> *Silence=Death* would become an iconic work of AIDS protest art, a metonym for ACT UP, and a multimodal tool for activists in the collective in a matter of months. As Charles Hovland recalls, black t-shirts emblazoned with the poster’s white text and inverted pink triangle would represent a substantially important fundraising apparatus for ACT UP – with shirt sales at one Gay Pride rally topping \$30,000.<sup>17</sup> The sleek design of *Silence=Death* would also impart a kind of visual cohesion to the collective from its inception, as Michael Nesline remembers: “...what the media was impressed by was the uniformity of our presentation. I mean, all of the posters are black posters with big pink triangles. It looked really organized.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Targeted neighborhoods included the East Village, Lower Broadway, SoHo, the West Village, Chelsea, Hell’s Kitchen, and parts of the Upper West Side. See Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Hovland, interview by Sarah Schulman, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 135, 5 June 2012, p. 23. Because Schulman conducted all of the AUOHP interviews I consider in the chapter, I omit her name from subsequent footnotes.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Nesline, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 14, 24 March 2003, p. 15.

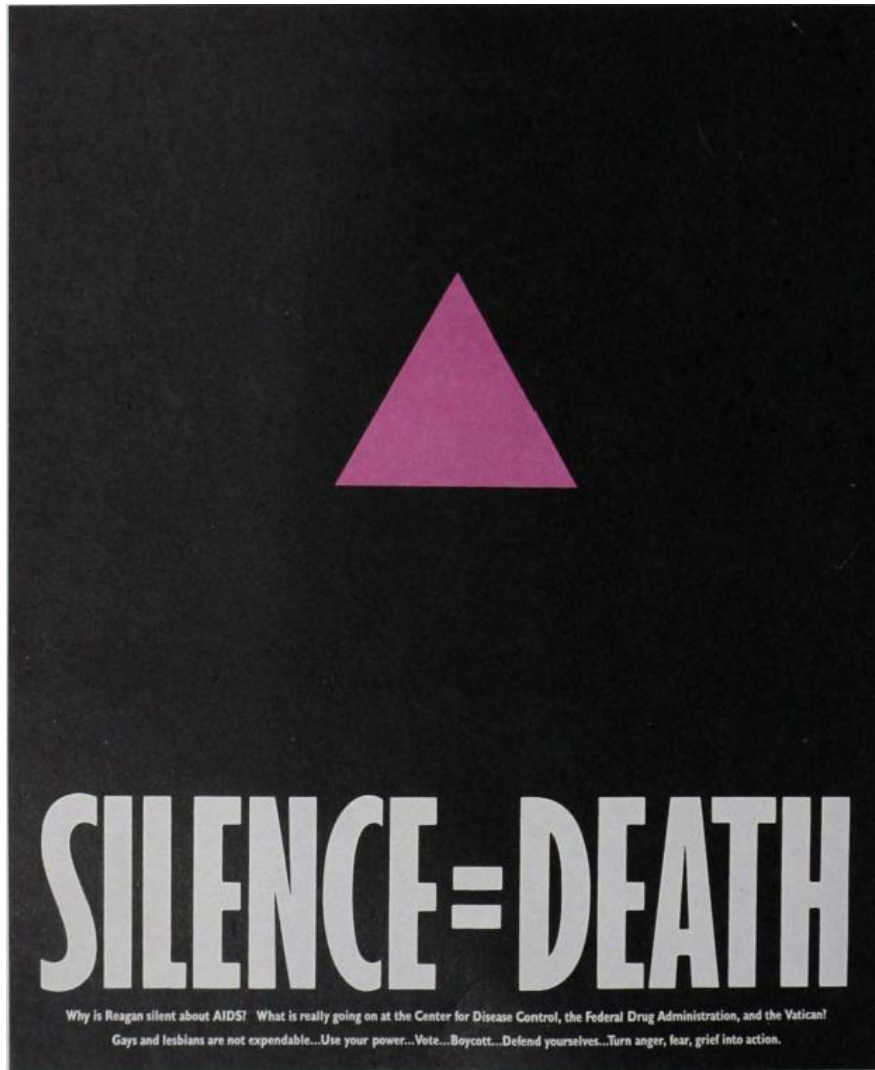


Figure 2: *Silence=Death* (1987)<sup>19</sup>

But before *Silence=Death* found new forms of mobilization through ACT UP, it articulated a demand for encounter. Although tightly designed, confident, and confrontational in its visual language, the poster was also enigmatic and open-ended. The text at the bottom of the poster shrewdly straddles the rhetorical functions of announcing protest and seeking affiliation – shifting from suspiciously-intoned questions (“What is really going on...?”) to assertions (“Gays and lesbians are not expendable...”) and exhortations (“Use your power...”), and toggling from an interrogative third-person perspective to a second-person imperative. Yet even as *Silence=Death* insistently calls for a response, it does not prescribe a particular form of response –

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<sup>19</sup> Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 26.

neither exhorting passers-by to take a particular action nor even to attend a specific event. Instead, as Finkelstein remembers, the poster “was meant as a conversation starter, the first in a series calling for escalating political responses.”<sup>20</sup> Foundational to any collective response was the formation of a collective; beginning to imagine and address such a collective was the goal of *Silence=Death*, as Finkelstein writes: “The poster needed to simultaneously address two distinctly different audiences, with a bifurcated goal: to stimulate political organizing in the lesbian and gay community, and to simultaneously imply to anyone outside the community that we were already fully mobilized.”<sup>21</sup> In addressing these “two distinctly different audiences” – one within and one beyond the LGBTQ+ community – *Silence=Death* functioned as an open letter. Manifesting an implied “we” – whose voice rings through the poster’s text, raising its questions and issuing its imperatives – it asserts the presence of an organized movement while concurrently interpellating queer passers-by into that movement as if gathering their signatures. Just as the poster “needed to give the impression of ubiquity, and to create its own literacy,” “to insinuate itself into being” through the honed craft of its visual language, so too did it seek to insist into existence an organized and “fully mobilized” queer activist collective.<sup>22</sup> Arriving on the scene with the insistence that conversation already had begun, that a first-person plural collective already was in formation, *Silence=Death* ushered new parties into its gesture of address.

This anticipated mode of collective address – nascent and still latent when *Silence=Death* first went up – would be activated in practice a few weeks later at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Manhattan’s West Village. Many accounts of ACT UP/New York trace its origins to an apocryphal talk by Nora Ephron, scheduled to be held at the Center on 10 March 1987. Ephron, ill with the flu, canceled; increasingly notorious writer and activist Larry Kramer, ousted from the service provision organization Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) in

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<sup>20</sup> Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

1983, was invited to speak in her stead.<sup>23</sup> At the climax of his highly (self-)mythologized speech, Kramer asked half of the attendees in the crowded space to stand and addressed them with an angry certitude: “You’re all going to be dead in six months, now what are we going to do about it?”<sup>24</sup> Kramer’s question was not rhetorical. Out of the reactions and responses of the attendees emerged a plan to meet two days later, on 12 March 1987, in the Center; members and alumni of ACT UP/New York regard this latter occasion as the collective’s first meeting.

Although Kramer’s fiery speech has been taken, at times, as *the* seminal moment in the formation and mobilization of the direct-action AIDS movement – the singular gesture by which he himself founded ACT UP in a single night – this account is complicated by the very responsiveness brought to bear by those gathered before him.<sup>25</sup> As Michael Warner reminds us, “[p]ublics do not exist apart from the discourses that address them.”<sup>26</sup> And, assembled in the space of the Center, there existed a queer public for him to address, one that had been hailed prior to the events of 10 March 1987 and was primed for action and response. “And, he finished his speech, and... I was all ready to say something, you know?” recalls Michael Petrelis. “Some of the people in the audience were silent or stunned or scared. I’m like, ‘Hello, I’ve got

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<sup>23</sup> Accounts vary as to whether Ephron was sick with a cold or the flu, although Ephron later clarified in an interview with *The Advocate*: “...as it turns out, one of the most important things I did was having a cold and ear infection one night and having to cancel a speech that Larry Kramer gave instead. Thrilled as I am that I get credit for Larry’s having started ACT UP because of that speech, I do think it’s ironic that one of my major historic contributions was just staying in bed.” See Brandon Voss, “Nora Ephron: Stirring the Pot,” *The Advocate* (August 2009), and Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> See Herb Spiers, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 90, 2 July 2008, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> This narrative has currency in the academic, popular, and gay press. Scholar Michael Schiavi describes Kramer’s speech as the occasion on which “[c]ommunity outrage had finally found a voice,” which *The New York Times* retrospectively glossed as a moment of deserved vindication: “His [Kramer’s] fury did little to galvanize people behind him. Instead, it got him removed from the board of Gay Men’s Health Crisis, an AIDS services agency he’d co-founded in 1982, and frozen out of gay society. But it wasn’t long before more people were ready to listen to him...” *The Advocate* describes the speech as Kramer’s “no-famous *jihad*, exhorting the city’s gay community to rise out of its apathy.” See Schiavi, *Celluloid Activist: The Life and Times of Vito Russo* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011) 253; David France, “The Activists,” *New York Times Magazine* (13 April 2013); and Maer Roshan, “ACT UP,” *The Advocate* (November 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002) 72.

something to say – when are we going to get out there and shut down the streets?’ – or whatever crazy idea I was proposing – just like: action, action, action. I don’t want to hear no more speeches. Let’s get out there. And then of course other people were standing up, with their own ideas about actions that we should take and how we should organize.”<sup>27</sup> Finkelstein reflects, “If [Kramer] believed there was little urgency around AIDS, this audience certainly contradicted it, and it was clear we weren’t the only ones ready for action. [...] Audience members were shouting out as if they knew one another, or at least they were very comfortable there, and they immediately began flinging ideas across the room.”<sup>28</sup> Sarah Schulman’s narration of ACT UP’s founding offers a crisp characterization of the talk’s importance: the collective, she writes, “was founded in March 1987 *after* a lecture at the Lesbian and Gay Center by writer Larry Kramer,” not *by* Kramer at said talk.<sup>29</sup>

I emphasize ACT UP’s dialogical origins for two reasons: first, in order to contravene a protagonist-driven “heroic narrative” of the collective (to borrow a term from Deborah Gould);<sup>30</sup> and second, to underscore its formation as an act of assembly, a coming-together through affinity, and a scene of mutual witnessing. On one level, an individualizing or heroic account of the evening of 10 March recapitulates a familiar gesture in the historiography of gay social movements in North America – one that segments gay, lesbian, and queer political movements into progressive stages sutured together by “coming-out” moments of transformation on the level of consciousness and culture. Such tidy and teleological narratives run the risk of retrospectively closeting and isolating queers of the past by purporting to speak from an enlightened or post-liberation present. Guided by an intense presentism, progressive accounts of this kind project a normative view of “progress” and “liberation,” and, in so doing,

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Petrelis, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 20, 21 April 2003, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021) xiv; emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> See Gould, *Moving Politics*, 56-57.

elide innumerable subcultures, interventions, and expressive strategies that do not align with the normative timeline. As a result, liberatory movements appear on the scene always as a surprise, as if springing overnight into formation – a narrativization exemplified by accounts of the emergence of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) following riots at the Stonewall Inn in June of 1969.<sup>31</sup> These political organizations, as John D’Emilio has importantly demonstrated, were constructed upon the preexisting networks, groups, and relational and community infrastructure of the so-called “pre-Stonewall” homophile movement.<sup>32</sup> Yet normative accounts of gay liberation posit a binary on either side of Stonewall: prior to the riots, queers were isolated, repressed, and self-hating; following the six-day-long standoff, queers had come out as liberated subjects.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, by recasting queer activism responsive to HIV/AIDS between two poles – the time *before* Kramer incited uncertain individuals into an organized structure, and the time *after* that intervention – we run the risk of reducing a dynamic movement into an undifferentiated mass.

On another level, emphasizing the dialogical is crucial for understanding both how ACT UP emerged and how it came into its particular organizational structure and commitments. For all of Kramer’s directorial rhetoric and dramaturgical self-consciousness, the meeting on 10 March did not represent the orchestration of a new movement as much as an occasion of mutual and simultaneous witnessing: “a moment,” as José Esteban Muñoz writes of a vigil-turned-demonstration eleven years later following the murder of Matthew Shepard, “when queer people, frustrated and sick of all the violence they had endured, saw our masses.”<sup>34</sup> In facing one another, addressing one another, “shouting out as if they knew one another” and “flinging ideas

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<sup>31</sup> See Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993), and Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (New York: Avon Books, 1971).

<sup>32</sup> See John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) 64.

across the room” on that evening in March 1987, the assembled individuals witnessed their totality as a mass. This encounter enabled them to “*assume* a collective,” in the dual and paradoxical senses of that verb, which Gayle Salamon has called to our attention. The emergent and experienced activists asserted “a ‘felt sense’” of themselves as a collective and would shortly go about the process of “delimit[ing] the contours of this body whose felt sense is usually unquestioned.”<sup>35</sup> In the words of artist and activist Gregg Bordowitz, on this evening, they began to “picture a coalition”: an imperative and a site of labor that would come to define ACT UP.<sup>36</sup>

Whereas isolation is a boon to the hegemonic status quo, solidarity is a threat, as José Esteban Muñoz reminds us: “The state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses. It is ready, at the drop of the proverbial dime, to transform public transportation into policing machines, to call out thousands of cops to match thousands of activists, to wield clubs and fists.”<sup>37</sup> As we have seen, *Bowers* addressed gay, lesbian, and bisexual people collectively, but sought at all costs to prevent queers from speaking as a collective. ACT UP’s formation activated visionary possibilities for address precisely by making the idea of a collective into a visible and palpable reality. To revise Eric Michaels once more: a range of individuals came into a new sense of as whom they might speak, and from where.

## **During**

Assuming that body – constructing that activist “mass” in the form of a collective – took place through embodied practice. Accordingly, understanding ACT UP’s organizational structure entails tracing, collating, and envisioning vestiges of embodied practice. I have suggested that the interventions and labor of address activated by ACT UP do not have a proper endpoint – or, by implication, a tidy beginning, middle, and end. For purposes of this chapter, the historical frame

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<sup>35</sup> Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010) 2.

<sup>36</sup> Gregg Bordowitz, “Picture a Coalition,” *October* 43 (Winter 1987): p. 184.

<sup>37</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 64.

of “During” refers to the period of ACT UP’s earliest embodied practice: a span of time during which acts of assembly and affinity, initiated by an assemblage of individual activists, started to shape the collective’s organizational structures and its multi-sited, simultaneous approach to direct-action activism. I attempt to reanimate this formative moment through two crucial structures: “the floor” comprised of the collective’s general membership, and affinity groups.

*Against Essence: Membership by Assembly*

In the archival records of ACT UP/Chicago, a letter, dated 6 September 1991, seeking information and affiliation. “Dear ACT UP,” it begins:

I’m a gay male 26 years old and I’ve just [*sic*] resently came out. I would like any info about ACT UP you could offer. I want to offer my time and help to my fellow brothers and sisters. I live in the suburbs and I feel I could do more to help, if I get involved. I feel isolated living out here, there is no gay community so to speak as there is in the city. But I’m not using that as an excuse. So please send some info.<sup>38</sup>

Acknowledging the geographical and cultural dispersedness that places him (writing from a small southwestern suburb of Chicago) at a distance from any chapter of ACT UP – or from any “gay community” recognizable as such – the sender seeks to work in spite of that distance, to act not only in solidarity but in concert and collaboration with those who arrive weekly on the floor of ACT UP/Chicago. He “feels isolated,” but forges a commitment from that felt sense of dispersion: to offer “time and help” to his “fellow brothers and sisters.” In shoring up the coordinates of his own experience and location, he asks for something (“information”), but hedges his request with a careful defensiveness: “I’m not using that as an excuse.” Signing with his name and return address, the sender marks an arrival of the kind available to him, representing his own willing presence as an accomplice and seeking a doubly queer sort of activist affiliation: correspondence membership in ACT UP, and a distanced (even distantiated) entrance onto the meeting floor.

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<sup>38</sup> ACT UP Chicago Records [Box 1, Folder 11], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

The “floor” of general members – the totality of people in attendance at a weekly meeting – constituted the “supreme governing body” of each chapter of ACT UP.<sup>39</sup> Everyone made the floor, in both senses of the expression: the shifting assemblage of individuals present at a meeting produced it, and each individual in turn accessed it as a member. The floor operated as the collective’s singular and sacrosanct decision-making body, as a revision of ACT UP/New York’s original “Working Document” emphasizes: “There is only one body of authority in ACT UP – supreme and unappealable – and that is the general floor at the weekly Monday night meetings. It is the sole and legitimating and financial authority. The floor can, by majority vote, decide whatever it wishes.”<sup>40</sup> Activist-attendees found their way to the floor through strikingly different pathways and by responding to different gestures of address. Some members, like the twenty-six-year-old letter-writer above, arrived at a distance. Some, like Avram Finkelstein, Michael Petrelis, and Herb Spiers, came from communities of gay men with organizing experience, attending the first meeting of ACT UP/New York after hearing Kramer’s speech in March 1987. Some, like Peter Staley, were gay men newly politicized and called into queer community for the first time after passing through an ACT UP demonstration, finding themselves interpellated, and wanting to join their names, bodies, resources, and labor to the work of the collective.<sup>41</sup> Some people came in solidarity from other queer communities and queer social movements, like Maxine Wolfe, Sarah Schulman, and Jamie Bauer, bringing a diverse range of leftist feminist analyses and organizing experiences to the AIDS movement. Some came from outside of queer communities in committed allyship, proffering specialized resources and expertise, like scholar-performer Debra Levine and nucleoside researcher (and self-described “Queens housewife”) Iris Long.<sup>42</sup> Some came to the floor as biological family

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<sup>39</sup> ACT UP/NY, “New Members Packet,” N.d., [actupny.org/documents/newmem.html](http://actupny.org/documents/newmem.html).

<sup>40</sup> ACT UP/NY, “The ACT UP Working Document 2003,” 2003, [actupny.org/documents/workdoc.html](http://actupny.org/documents/workdoc.html).

<sup>41</sup> See Peter Staley, *Never Silent: ACT UP and My Life in Activism* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2022).

<sup>42</sup> Jim Eigo, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 47, 5 March 2004, p.19.

members of loved ones lost to AIDS, as did Patricia Navarro (who organized alongside her son Ray before his death), Gerri Wells, and Alexis Danzig.

Everyone who arrived on the floor was hailed as a new member. Orientation materials from ACT UP/New York and ACT UP/Chicago illuminate the deliberateness with which these new attendees were addressed. One typewritten orientation guide from the Chicago chapter, probably produced late in 1990, opens as a letter and addresses new arrivals by an epistolary salutation: “Dear New Members.” The guide goes on to introduce the collective through a first-person plural *we*: “Welcome to ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. We are a diverse, non partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis. We meet with government and health officials; we research and distribute the latest medical information. We protest and demonstrate; we are not silent.”<sup>43</sup> A later version of the guide stages this “welcome” differently, sidestepping the earlier version’s evocative *we* to interpellate the new member in a sustained gesture of direct second-person address: “You are a member of ACT UP. You became a member by showing up at an ACT UP general meeting, committee meeting, or an action. We welcome you to participate in discussions at any meeting and encourage you to be part of the actions and demonstrations organized by ACT UP.”<sup>44</sup> These two sets of materials, which offer pronominal variations on a theme, illumine the ethic and structure of membership by assembly that formed the body of each chapter of ACT UP. By showing up in one of several ways – attending a meeting, passing through an action, or even taking notice of the collective’s presence in the community – every newly-arrived member was called into the open “*us*” of ACT UP. After being addressed apart (“*You*”) from the voice of the collective (“*We*”), she was assembled into it in short order.

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<sup>43</sup> ACT UP Chicago Records [Box 1, Folder 12], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

<sup>44</sup> ACT UP Chicago Records [Box 2, Folder 1], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

The floor, consequently, was a site of plurality. As we have seen, ACT UP members carried with them distinct personal histories, lived identities, and political and ethical commitments; moreover, they found their way to the floor because of the varied ways in which their singular experiences interacted with the collective's literally massive gestures of address. As the cornerstone structure and principle of ACT UP, the floor drew together a diversity of experiences, self-understandings, and transformative aspirations; crucially, every weekly meeting sought to sustain this abundance of difference and friction – not to dissolve differences in favor of a group “identity,” but to foster heterogeneity within the very fabric of the collective. Furthermore, membership by assembly meant that the collective reinvented itself at every weekly meeting, as the makeup of the floor inevitably changed.

Every general meeting of ACT UP, held weekly on Monday evenings in New York and Tuesday evenings in Chicago, opened with the same first-person plural phrase of collective identification that we saw above: “Welcome to ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. We are a diverse, non partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.” Convened and orchestrated by a group of facilitators elected by the floor, these meetings followed a set order of proceedings but always began with this call of and for assembly – a call at once performative and declarative. New York facilitator David Robinson recalls this weekly refrain as both a “welcome” and a way of “explain[ing]” ACT UP;<sup>45</sup> his frequent co-facilitator Maria Maggenti describes it as an offering that “introduce[s] everyone to the group.”<sup>46</sup> A second call emphasized the stakes of – and very real risks attendant upon – the act of gathering. “At the beginning of each meeting,” an ACT UP/New York newcomers’ packet explains, “a facilitator will ask all members of the Police Department, the FBI, the CIA, and any other law enforcement or information gathering organization to identify themselves to the membership. Legally, all such agents must identify themselves to the organization and ACT

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<sup>45</sup> David Robinson, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 82, 16 July 2007, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> Maria Maggenti, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 10, 20 January 2003, p. 21.

UP wants them to know we are aware of their presence.”<sup>47</sup> Robinson reflects: “No one ever did [speak up]. And actually, I don’t even know that that was true, they were required by law to do that. But we said it, and then we would say, of course, just because they don’t say they’re here doesn’t mean they’re not here, so keep that in mind.”<sup>48</sup> The regular silence that followed this ritual call – which demanded but did not on the whole *expect* response from representatives of law-enforcement entities – reminded everyone in the room of the myriad legal and extralegal hazards that accompanied, historically and contemporaneously, openly queer self-identification, sociality, and organizing.<sup>49</sup> The floor of members thus re-formed at every meeting at the interstices of urgency and risk, two crucial dimensions of ACT UP’s praxis that impacted members – particularly nonwhite and PWA members – in unequally distributed ways, as we shall shortly see.

What subsequently took place on the floor during weekly meetings was not so much an observance of established protocols – nor the maintenance of an equilibrium – as a dynamic and affectively complex process. Facilitators held responsibility for stewarding meetings; members of the floor were uniquely empowered to carry them forward. Before the start of a meeting, facilitators decided the order of the agenda, which generally comprised reports from standing committees (for example, the Fundraising Committee, Media Committee, and Treatment and Data Committee), updates on planned actions, and any other items or topics specific members or groups put forward for discussion. As David Robinson recalls, facilitators in ACT UP/New York made use of a “loose version” of Robert’s Rules of Order, campily referred to as “Roberta’s Rules of Order,” as a tool for shaping members’ participation. Frequently, however, they departed from strict observance of the Rules’ protocols in order to make engagement more

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<sup>47</sup> ACT UP/NY, “New Members Packet,” N.d., [actupny.org/documents/newmem.html](http://actupny.org/documents/newmem.html).

<sup>48</sup> Robinson, *AUOHP*, 27.

<sup>49</sup> For more on federal surveillance of ACT UP/New York – which most likely occurred through member-informants of the collective rather than through infiltration by agents, see Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, Appendix 1: “ACT UP and the FBI,” 647-649.

accessible for those not fluent in their usage.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, bypassing the protocols of Robert's Rules was often important to stewarding a weekly meeting *as a process* rather than a means to an end. As Robinson reflects, ACT UP meetings were not oriented toward consensus. Indeed, the labor of facilitation often involved slowing a discussion down or inventing a "process" whereby "people who felt differently were encouraged to speak," particularly in response to a hot-button issue.<sup>51</sup> Avoiding a hasty consensus was critical; frequently, this led facilitators – perhaps counterintuitively – to seek ways to allow a contested item to remain contested:

Sometimes we'd actually say, we need a three-minute break for the facilitators to confer, and to actually *just stop and figure out a process to make whatever it was happ[en]*. So sometimes it was dividing two issues; sometimes it was saying, okay, look; we can take 10 more minutes on this. And since it's so hot, we'll have, we'll switch off. Positive, negative, positive, negative. [...] And you would offer to the group some process alternatives, and have them vote.<sup>52</sup>

Facilitators were stewards of process rather than outcomes, attuned to means rather than ends. As Robinson and Maggenti indicate, their work was not to produce accord or arrive at a conclusion; instead, when a discussion turned contentious, it became all the more critical for them to protect the space of contestation that was the floor, resisting the "codification" of consensus.<sup>53</sup>

As we have seen, weekly meetings of ACT UP chapters didn't work toward the least common denominator amongst members; instead, facilitators actively sought strategies for avoiding "groupthink" and overly-rushed unanimity.<sup>54</sup> Rather than conserving some essential thing *as* ACT UP from one week to the next, meetings sought to maintain the crucial place of

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<sup>50</sup> As a written and vernacular manual of meeting procedure, Robert's Rules of Order continues to be widely used in organizational, activist, and local governmental contexts in the United States, both because of its perceived procedural clarity and 'democratizing' accessibility. Naturally, however, its supposed/idealized fairness prevails only to the extent that meeting attendees are fluent in the Rules' usage, as David Robinson points out: "it's only totally fair if everyone in the room is a master of Robert's Rules of Order. Otherwise the people who know it well totally dominate." See Robinson, *AUOHP*, 27-28.

<sup>51</sup> Robinson, *AUOHP*, 29; 25.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 29; emphasis mine.

<sup>53</sup> Alexis Danzig, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 117, 1 May 2010, p. 42.

<sup>54</sup> Robinson, *AUOHP* transcript, 25.

the floor as a plane of difference – to preserve “enough space” for members “to imagine whatever it is,” in Debra Levine’s phrase.<sup>55</sup> Membership by assembly meant that ACT UP was ever-self-reconstituting: meetings functioning as potentially transformative occasions of dynamic address that put forward weekly, as Sarah Schulman describes it, “a facsimile of what could be.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Belonging by Affinity*

Some of ACT UP’s most contemporarily visible accomplishments, interventions, and feats were orchestrated by different chapters’ committees and caucuses – two organizational structures that enabled much of the day-to-day and big-picture organizing work foundational to long-term projects and large-scale actions. Committees were formally structured groups “of 2 or more ACT UP members with a specified interest,” devoted to a particular dimension of the chapter’s service provision, administrative, direct-action, or policy-shaping operations. Each committee – from Fundraising, Media, and Actions to Outreach, Housing, and Treatment and Data – balanced internal support functions with outward-facing interventions and, having been formed by a vote of the floor, was required to be “open to all members.”<sup>57</sup> Caucuses, in contradistinction, were organized around particular minoritized lived and embodied identities, centering upon race and ethnicity (the “Majority Action” and Latino caucuses in New York and “People of Color/Out of Newtown” caucus in Chicago), serostatus (Persons with Immune Systems Disorders [PISD] caucuses in both chapters), gender and sexuality (the Lesbian Caucus and Women’s Action group in New York and the Women’s Caucus in Chicago), and lived experience (the Addicts’ Rights caucus in New York).<sup>58</sup> Both committees and caucuses initiated

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<sup>55</sup> Debra Levine, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 128, 21 December 2010, p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>57</sup> ACT UP/NY, “New Members Packet,” N.d., [actupny.org/documents/newmem.html](http://actupny.org/documents/newmem.html).

<sup>58</sup> See ACT UP Chicago Records [Box 2, Folder 1], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library and ACT UP/NY, “New Members Packet,” N.d., [actupny.org/documents/newmem.html](http://actupny.org/documents/newmem.html).

chapter-wide and autonomous actions, which eventuated in a remarkable array of still-standing accomplishments and resources of different scales.

The Women’s Action group of ACT UP/New York, for example, led successful campaigns to include women in NIH clinical drug trials (for the first time in history) and to change the CDC’s definition of AIDS to include opportunistic infections that impact women – which allowed countless HIV-positive people of all genders to access resources earmarked for “AIDS patients” and led to the publication of *Women, AIDS, and Activism* in 1990.<sup>59</sup> This same caucus also infiltrated the Upper East Side home of psychiatrist Robert Gould, who authored an article in the January 1988 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine in which he made the case that women were unlikely to contract HIV from penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse with a cisgender man. This more informal action eventually led to a retraction from *Cosmopolitan* and the production of *Doctors, Liars, and Women*, an important activist video project.<sup>60</sup> Other groups within ACT UP/New York also worked toward projects rooted in media interventions and “information activism” (to borrow Cait McKinney’s apt phrase)<sup>61</sup> and “the artistic life of resistance” (to borrow an elegant formulation from Sarah Schulman).<sup>62</sup> These included educational and artistic video projects produced by DIVA-TV (Damned Interfering Video Activists Television) and the Testing the Limits Collective, which helped inaugurate a new era of activist videography, and successful interruptions and takeovers of primetime news broadcasts on CBS and PBS led by the Media Committee. The Treatment and Data (T&D) Committee (later TAG, Treatment Action Group) made incredible interventions in treatment activism – not the least of which was the

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<sup>59</sup> The ACT UP/New York Women and Aids Book Group, *Women, AIDS, and Activism* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

<sup>60</sup> *Doctors, Liars, and Women: AIDS Activists Say No to Cosmo*, directed by Jean Carlomusto and Maria Maggenti, 1988. For the article that ran in *Cosmopolitan*, see Robert Gould, “Reassuring News About AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why You May Not Be at Risk,” *Cosmopolitan* (January 1988): pp. 119-146.

<sup>61</sup> See Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>62</sup> See Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 317.

implementation of compassionate use protocols in drug trials, a considerable victory made the more possible by T&D's close working relationship with an ambitious and charismatic Anthony Fauci at the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID).<sup>63</sup> (Eventually, frictions between TAG's singular focus on treatment activism – an endeavor undertaken in collaboration with members of the medical establishment – and ACT UP's long-since-established practice of “simultaneity of action without consensus” would lead to a fracturing split in the collective.)

In arguing that we should attend to ACT UP as a movement animated by bidirectional address, I have claimed that we ought to attend to the collective not just as the sender of a gloriously loud letter, but as a lifeworld internally animated by frictive and improvisatory exchanges. While the collective's gobsmacking victories certainly evince considerable (and considerably creative) collaboration, they inevitably draw our attention to outcomes over process – to what Avram Finkelstein has called “the ‘objectness’ of the things we have to show for our efforts.”<sup>64</sup> Such “objectness” – objectives realized, demands met – risks obscuring ACT UP's own understanding of the work of organizing, as Finkelstein observes:

To see the ebb and flow of agency and affect as an articulation of successes and failures is to accept the framing of political engagement as an accomplishment rather than as an ongoing project that is more useful when it continues than when it is measured, and to view political change as a discrete “thing,” rather than a process that needs no endpoint to express efficacy. It frames the resistance to power structures in the same terms as that which it is intended to resist, as capital, as the acquisition of an object or, in this case, an objective. The goal of capitalism might be the acquisition of things, but I believe resistance is more accurately described as a project. By its nature it cannot be acquired; it can only be activated.<sup>65</sup>

Rather than approach ACT UP through the “terms of discrete accomplishments,” Finkelstein calls for us to “make room for alternative narratives, ones that suggest political engagement might be closer to a series of gestures than to objects, gestures that are the antithesis of

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<sup>63</sup> See *Ibid.*, 59-95.

<sup>64</sup> Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 154.

<sup>65</sup> Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 154.

ownership.” Affinity, I suggest, names one such “series of gestures,” designating an ethic, structure, and tool for stewarding process and “agency” in unforeseen ways.

A third organizational structure that brought members to the floor into smaller and more intimate “cells,” affinity groups represented a central site of belonging and engagement for many – although not all – members of ACT UP.<sup>66</sup> Affinity groups were originally formed as members of the collective underwent civil disobedience (CD) trainings prior to actions and demonstrations. Adapted from the civil rights movement, affinity groups were designed to foster personal safety, tactical self-awareness, and a greater sense of solidarity at large-scale actions, as Maxine Wolfe of ACT UP/New York recalls: “...[T]he whole idea was that when you get training to do civil disobedience... you break the group down into smaller groups, so that you sort of know everybody, and everybody knows you, and you can support each other, in a very specific kind of way, and you make sure that you’re all together when you get arrested, so that you sort of know who the other person is, and you know their life and that kind of stuff.”<sup>67</sup> Jamie Bauer, who led over one thousand New York members in CD trainings, adds: “But the most important thing about affinity groups is the support structure around affinity groups, so that someone – in theory, at least – knows who you are, what you’re wearing, where you were arrested, who to contact if anything happens. They know that you were in – went into police custody, and they know when you came out of police custody, so you don’t lose anybody, and everybody is tracked. And that is really important – so, if anyone gets injured, or if there’s any brutality.”<sup>68</sup> For activists who were PWAs, being arrested with members of their affinity group – who would be familiar with their physical limitations and medical needs – was crucial for their own safety. Moreover, for all activists, participating in a demonstration as part of an affinity group recalibrated their sense of stakes, safety, and purpose, producing a differently scaled

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<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, Sarah Schulman’s account of her own participation in ACT UP in *Let the Record Show*, xiv-xv.

<sup>67</sup> Wolfe, *AUOHP*, 102-103.

<sup>68</sup> Jamie Bauer, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 48, 7 March 2004, p. 31; 33.

experience of the action. Those demonstrating alongside their affinity groups might feel, as Bauer puts it, a “much stronger” sense of solidarity, “because you have much more connection to the people there” – rather than experiencing the event as “one large mass of people doing the same thing at the same time.”

CD trainings were designed, as Debra Levine, also of ACT UP/New York, observes, to effect precisely such an emotional and embodied recalibration of the experience of transgression: “[W]hat comes up in those sessions, and what is felt by its participants during these rehearsals, is one’s own fear of transgression. Specifically, in civil disobedience trainings, the fear is attached to transgressing the law. [...] Addressing that fear of transgressing boundaries is the purpose of the affinity group. The small nucleus of people exists only to witness one another’s desire to act politically and serve as the support function to that need.”<sup>69</sup> Approaching CD trainings – and, subsequently, chapter-wide actions – through the structure of the affinity group enabled individual activists to expand their personal felt limits of possibility, enabling them, as Levine puts it, to “imagine acting in such a manner that no one could ever accomplish alone.” Affinity groups thus functioned as microcosms or microcollectives of address in their own right, as individual members dedicated themselves to facing a small group of their co-conspirators for the duration.

Affinity groups also functioned as autonomous bodies of and for political action. As one ACT UP/New York orientation packet explains: “A good affinity group is a source of support for activists in the often taxing arena of AIDS activism. Some affinity groups have taken on a life of their own, and plan and carry out smaller scale actions and zaps when dissemination of plans to the general membership could jeopardize the success of the action.”<sup>70</sup> Affinity groups, in other words, were empowered to orchestrate and lead actions without consulting – and without

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<sup>69</sup> Debra Levine, *Demonstrating ACT UP: The Ethics, Politics, and Performances of Affinity*, 2012, New York University, PhD dissertation, 6.

<sup>70</sup> ACT UP/NY, “New Members Packet,” N.d., [actupny.org/documents/newmem.html](http://actupny.org/documents/newmem.html).

consensus from – the larger body of a chapter. As Sarah Schulman indicates, the corollary to ACT UP’s non-consensus orientation was “simultaneity of action,” “a kind of radical democracy” that “never demanded full agreement for an action or campaign to be taken up.”<sup>71</sup> While affinity groups have been likened to a “cellular structure”<sup>72</sup> – in part as a way of drawing a lineage to organizing practices of earlier gay social movements, including those of the Mattachine Society (which modeled itself on the Communist Party from its inception in 1950) – they might more properly be conceived of as independent ecosystems or organisms emerging out of the larger body of a chapter.<sup>73</sup> Actions, interventions, and performances launched by particular affinity groups – such as the Costas, the Marys, and Gran Fury<sup>74</sup> – frequently had unique stylistic signatures, ranging from campy to straight-laced, slapstick to sentimental, slipshod to professional. Emily Nahmanson, a member of the Costas (named for Costa Pappas, a member of ACT UP/New York who had died), remembers several of the group’s actions as cheeky (and cleverly crafted) performances in public venues. Once, while in Washington, D.C., she recalls, the Costas “made this giant banner that said: ‘Louis Sullivan [then-Secretary of Health and Human Services], your immigration policies stink!’ And we attached helium balloons to it, and then we got all this stinky, smelly stuff, and we let it loose in the Metro system...”<sup>75</sup> Other public actions led by affinity groups – such as the political funerals planned by the Marys, which I consider below – centered upon honoring the wishes of terminally ill members.

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<sup>71</sup> Schulman illustrates the principle of “simultaneity of action, not consensus” in the following way: “For example, if I wanted to participate in an illegal needle exchange on the Lower East Side in order to get arrested and wage a test case trial, and you didn’t want to, you wouldn’t stop me from doing it; you just wouldn’t do it.” See Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 28.

<sup>72</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*, 190.

<sup>73</sup> Affinity groups within ACT UP did not represent “cells” to which specific functions of the larger organization had been delegated; indeed, affinity groups did not service the larger collective, but were empowered to determine their own – at times centrifugal – operations. For more on the Mattachine Society and gay and lesbian leftist organizing in the homophile movement, see John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*.

<sup>74</sup> The arts collective Gran Fury operated as a closed affinity group within ACT UP/New York. For a full portfolio of Gran Fury’s work, see [granfury.org/about](http://granfury.org/about).

<sup>75</sup> Nahmanson, *AUOHP*, 9.

Further, beyond public-facing and externally visible actions, affinity groups operated as sites of caregiving for PWA members. In a way, the structure and ethic of affinity represented an alternative to filial relationships, which, as innumerable queer people experienced in the context of HIV/AIDS, frequently offered much more in the way of rejection and alienation than care.<sup>76</sup> Affinity groups thus fused activist labor and interpersonal intimacy to enact, as Avram Finkelstein puts it, “a gesture that directly linked political collectivity to caregiving”<sup>77</sup> – what Debra Levine formulates as “the event of political affinity as a technology of care.”<sup>78</sup> In addition to the act of care constitutive of affinity groups on the specific scene of large demonstrations, several of these microcollectives operated as extended caregiving communities or families, as with Wave 3. When Wave 3 member Brian Damage was hospitalized with mycobacterium avium-intracellulare (MAI), other individuals in the group began coming to the hospital in shifts, both to visit with Brian and to speak to doctors. In surrounding their fellow member in this way, Wave 3 provided material care and advocacy, on the one hand, and a meaningful sense of community in circumstances of profound dislocation, on the other.

Affinity represented an animating praxis of ACT UP apart from the specific interpersonal structure of affinity groups. Much like the collective’s ethic of membership by assembly, affinity is optative rather than essential – the site of a commitment rather than a shared identity, something chosen over and over again each time members opt to act in concert with one another. Because ACT UP did not operate by an essentializing paradigm of membership – did not, that is, presume sameness of experience or identity amongst its members – affinity named a commitment to facing one another across lines of difference, as Debra Levine explains: “Because there were no presumed similarities between any members, each had to articulate to the others her or his particular vulnerabilities. The agreement to care for the other *according to the*

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<sup>76</sup> See, for an exemplary instance emerging out of ACT UP/New York, Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 30.

<sup>77</sup> Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 156.

<sup>78</sup> Levine, *Demonstrating ACT UP*, 11.

*specificity of their differences* then became the common good shared among members. Affinities had to be enacted or performed in order for them to exist.”<sup>79</sup> In Levine’s account, affinity points to an embodied practice of solidarity grounded in the valuation – even the *observance* – of difference. Affinity thus animated what Levine called “the ‘as-if’” at the heart of ACT UP: a commitment each member made “to speak ‘as if’ he or she were a PWA,” not in order to speak on behalf of People with AIDS, but “to align ourselves with those in the most vulnerable social position... and [make] this the locus of our politics, regardless of our own HIV status.”<sup>80</sup> This practice of affinity – a commitment to aligning oneself with those most vulnerable – is not an obfuscation or appropriation of difference. Instead, it represents an ongoing attempt to act in community without obliterating difference, in observance of both the Denver Principles and ACT UP’s own structure of membership by assembly.<sup>81</sup> On a rhetorical register, affinity made it possible to approach AIDS as a collective *and* unequally distributed crisis, casting a new light on the term “Person Living with AIDS” (PLWA), a term some HIV-positive people preferred to PWA. As Deborah Gould reflects on the diversity of ACT UP/Chicago’s membership: “It was clear that some ACT UP members were struggling immediately and directly with AIDS-related illnesses, while others were not. Participants acknowledged that difference but simultaneously bridged it rhetorically by asserting that we were *all* living with AIDS: we were collectively experiencing the ravages of the epidemic, confronting a world that seemed to accept the deaths of gay people, living through and battling the attacks on our community.”<sup>82</sup>

Concretely, aligning oneself in affinity with PWAs sometimes entailed taking cues from extremely ill colleagues about their posthumous wishes – not only specifications for memorials, funerals, and burials, but about the desire for their deaths to be used by the collective. Led by

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<sup>79</sup> Levine, *Demonstrating*, 8; emphasis added.

<sup>80</sup> Levine, *Demonstrating*, 10.

<sup>81</sup> The Denver Principles were articulated to assert the rights of people with AIDS to self-determination in treatment. See ACT UP Chicago Records [Box 1, Folder 12], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

<sup>82</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*, 333.

The Marys, political funerals represented one such affinity-rooted intervention, which sought to steward the wishes and respect the agency of deceased PWA members of ACT UP. These processions were informed by – and, to some extent, actualized – a thought experiment offered by the artist David Wojnarowicz prior to his own death in 1992:

I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers or neighbors would take the dead body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles an hour to Washington D.C. and blast through the gates of the White House and come to a screeching halt before the entrance and dump their lifeless form on the front steps.<sup>83</sup>

In a manifesto entitled “Bury Me Furiously,” ACT UP/New York member Mark Lowe Fisher described his own desire for a political funeral, writing: “I want to show the reality of my death, to display my body in public; I want the public to bear witness. [...] I want my own funeral to be fierce and defiant, to make the public statement that my death from AIDS is a form of political assassination.”<sup>84</sup> Other members of the collective stewarded Fisher’s wishes. Joy Episalla remembers going to the funeral home to “[get] Mark” and practicing walking “with the casket up on our shoulders” in Judson Memorial Church in the West Village before beginning the procession: “...[W]e did this procession down Sixth Avenue, all the way to Bush’s headquarters on 45<sup>th</sup> street. [...] Once we got to Bush’s headquarters we put the casket down...”<sup>85</sup> Russell Pritchard adds: “We didn’t try to get into the office. It was just sort of presenting to these people who were not doing anything. Here is a loved member of our family who has died; we want to show you. This is his body – and you killed him.”<sup>86</sup>

Political funerals – and ACT UP/New York’s Ashes Action, which took place one month prior to Mark Fisher’s procession – were complex rituals: performances that encompassed private grief, community care, and furious public intervention.<sup>87</sup> Myriad circuits of

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<sup>83</sup> Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 46.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Lowe Fisher, “Bury Me Furiously,” n.d., [actupny.org/diva/polfunsyn.html](http://actupny.org/diva/polfunsyn.html).

<sup>85</sup> Joy Episalla, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 36, 6 December 2003, pp. 40-41.

<sup>86</sup> Russell Pritchard, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 21, 23 April 2003, p. 34.

<sup>87</sup> For a complete account of the Ashes Action, see Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 606-610.

address overlapped over the course of these processions – address internal to particular affinity groups and internal to the larger collective, private address between individuals, and “furious” address to the larger world. The Marys’ political funerals also illuminate just how difficult it is to fix ACT UP’s “lifetime” in a particular interval, as the labor of the collective was intensely shaped by innumerable losses. As we shall see, the work of memory – the insistence upon granting lost comrades an afterlife in and through the collective – undergirded ACT UP’s practice over the decades.

### **Coda: After**

#### *Archive, Repertoire, and Resonance*

Novelist, playwright, and ACT UP/New York alumna Sarah Schulman locates the ACT UP Oral History Project’s genesis in a 2001 radio broadcast marking the “twentieth anniversary of AIDS.” Listening to NPR while driving, Schulman hears a “banalized, homogenized” account of the years immediately following 1981, when HIV/AIDS was pronounced an epidemic and came into a new degree of public visibility: “At first America had trouble with People with AIDS. But then, they came around.” In two smooth sentences, the journalist presenting the feature steamrolls over all vestiges of HIV/AIDS activism and the lived experiences of PWAs and seropositive people spanning the past three decades. “I almost crash the car,” Schulman writes. “*This?* I realize the way one realizes that the oncoming train is unavoidable and I’m stuck on the track. *This is going to be the official history of AIDS?*”<sup>88</sup>

The ACT UP Oral History Project (AUOHP) emerged as an intervention against this “official history of AIDS.” A dialogical work of memory, the AUOHP comprises 187 long-form interviews between Schulman and current and former members of ACT UP/New York.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012) 9.

<sup>89</sup> All but two of the AUOHP’s interviews were conducted by Schulman; these were conducted by Jim Hubbard.

Launched by Schulman and filmmaker and fellow alumnus Jim Hubbard in 2002, the AUOHP makes interview materials – full transcripts and recordings – freely and openly available on the web.<sup>90</sup> These conversations seek to draw the collective out in dynamic ways – not only to revisit ACT UP’s most famous events (demonstrations such as Stop the Church, Seize Control of the FDA, and Days of Desperation) and celebrated accomplishments, but to remember and reanimate its interpersonal texture. Accordingly, across the many oral historical interviews, Schulman takes a dialogical approach, dynamically engaging each interviewee through specific follow-up questions and promptings for elaboration, and frequently supplying names and dates to fill in gaps in interviewees’ memories. As a result, the interviews represent intimate and probing occasions of bidirectional address; as Debra Levine observes, interviewer and interviewee are “situated in a shared discursive space,” once again accomplices for the duration of their conversation, such that “[w]hat we see as outsiders is the intimacy of their address.”<sup>91</sup>

In this chapter, I have argued that ACT UP worked by a bidirectional technology of activist address, ushering new addressors (activist accomplices) and addressees (targets) into the fold upon each interpellative gesture. In this final section, I consider a third site of address: that which the reader or researcher encounters in approaching ACT UP in the contemporary archival present. I treat this as a “tertiary performance” of address – a moment at which a contemporary interlocutor finds herself inscribed into an ongoing or reactivated gesture years after it was first initiated. Handling flyers, buttons, and signs from demonstrations, reading drafts of open letters destined for the *Tribune* or the *Windy City Times*, or running her eyes over a sheet of transcribed protest slogans and songs, this interlocutor finds herself hailed as what Roger Hallas might call a “witness in the archive.”<sup>92</sup> Sometimes, this tendency toward address is an artifact of the archival

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<sup>90</sup> Transcripts of all ACT UP Oral History Project interviews are accessible on the project’s website: [actuporalhistory.org](http://actuporalhistory.org). Video and audio recordings can be accessed through Harvard University libraries: [aeod.library.harvard.edu/act-up](http://aeod.library.harvard.edu/act-up).

<sup>91</sup> Levine, *Demonstrating ACT UP*, 324.

<sup>92</sup> Roger Hallas, “The Witness in the Archive,” *Public Sentiments* 2.1 (Summer 2003): [sfonline.barnard.edu/ps/hallas.htm](http://sfonline.barnard.edu/ps/hallas.htm).

material's form, inevitably arising, for example, from its use of the second person. On other occasions, this interpellation is expressly willed by the material's creator or creators, as we saw with Sylvia Townsend Warner's and Eric Michaels's recombination of archival materials in Chapter 2, and as we have just seen in Mark Fisher's and David Wojnarowicz's calls for political funerals. What I wish to underscore, in each case, is that address is made to happen anew – is reperformed – in the archival present.

For address does not expire. As master tacticians and technologists of address, ACT UP's archivists were well aware of the peculiar sort of endurance attendant upon the second person: "always," to rework a turn of phrase from Jacques Derrida, "it addresses us in the present."<sup>93</sup> In this section, I ask how the tertiary performance of address – which gets newly reactivated, newly embodied, and reperformed in the archival encounter – might shed some light on what ACT UP members understood to be the fullest lifespan and scope of their work. ACT UP/New York, for example, didn't "end" after the Treatment Action Group left the collective in the fractious split of January 1992; nor did it cease operations after the attainment of specific objectives, nor after the deaths of innumerable of its members.<sup>94</sup> ACT UP/New York, in fact, continues to meet. Moreover, many aspects of the collective's most ambitious activist vision remain unfulfilled – among them, universal health care and secure housing, an HIV curative, and a discursive shift away from HIV as a "chronic manageable condition" in favor of envisioning a world without HIV/AIDS.<sup>95</sup> How, I ask further, might we respond to the experience of being

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<sup>93</sup> "But I write you tomorrow, always I say it in the present." See Derrida, *The Post Card* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987) 11.

<sup>94</sup> ACT UP/New York still meets. For a full account of TAG's split from the collective, see Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 580-589.

<sup>95</sup> In his AUOHP interview, Avram Finkelstein describes HIV's transformation into a "chronic manageable condition" as disastrous for an intersectional political movement seeking to eradicate HIV/AIDS globally: "The day I heard that phrase, I knew we were in for it... Because my mother, the cancer researcher, I once asked her many, many, many years ago, 'So could there ever be a cure for cancer, Mom?' A million times over that there's too much money in it [treatment]... There's no money in curatives. There's money in medications for people who are sick. So the second that people agreed to the idea that it would be okay to continue to be sick, I

interpellated into the orbit of the collective's address – of being called into new iterations and continuations of unfinished gestures?

As we saw in the previous chapter, José Esteban Muñoz has suggested that queerness shows up “covertly” in the archive, through fleeting and ephemeral “traces.”<sup>96</sup> Archival sites and records of ACT UP may not be quite so “covert” – indeed, quite a few are militantly confrontational! – but an overwhelming volume of these archival materials fall into the category of “ephemera,” whether they take the form of protest signs or newsletter mailing lists. These ephemera represent the traces of live events and embodied actions. They do not represent recordings or comprehensive registers of those live, embodied occurrences; instead, as Muñoz suggests, they must be reanimated in order for the archival witness to envision the event as it was performed. In what follows, I approach ACT UP's archival remains through the framework of the “repertoire,” a category theorized by Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor for “so-called ephemeral” forms of “embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual).”<sup>97</sup> In contradistinction to the “archive,” which collates materials “supposedly resistant to change” (such as hard data and fixed masterpieces), the repertoire, Taylor writes, “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”<sup>98</sup> Approaching the memory of – and the memory-work practiced within – ACT UP through the lens of the repertoire enables us to view the collective otherwise than through the “terms of discrete accomplishments,” as Avram Finkelstein earlier put it. For the repertoire can encompass anything that might not fit into an archival register or tidy narrative of the collective: from the sound of the floor during weekly meetings to the gestures by which activists resisted arrest, from

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realized that the entire dynamic had changed, the entire dialogue was changed...” See Finkelstein, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 108, 23 January 2010, p. 67.

<sup>96</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” *Women & Performance* 8.2 (1996): 6.

<sup>97</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 19.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

the ways members physically greeted one another (with a kiss on the lips, in ACT UP/New York) to a panoply of choreographic strategies members deployed at demonstrations: die-ins, kiss-ins, marches.

In considering “After,” a time that I claim has not yet properly arrived, I ask how activist address in the archive engages us in a kind of embodied performance – and, correlatively, how embodied approaches to archival remainders might activate a new vision of ACT UP. The remaining space of this chapter takes shape through three protest songs. Taking a cue from Muñoz and Taylor, I reanimate these refrains by speculating on the circumstances in which they resounded and tuning in to the long lifespan of activist address that they intone. Making sense of many of the materials in ACT UP’s archive and repertoire, I suggest, requires us to get our hands dirty – that is, to approach ephemera from decades past not at an antiseptic archival distance (an interpretive arm’s length), but through tactile experimentation. In this way, we will find ourselves sounding out chants, slogans, and songs in an aural register, attempting to reactivate rhythms captured in written traces – like those patiently written out by “CHANT DIVA” of ACT UP/New York Ron Goldberg:

...As to the last chant, that’s a fabrication of the author (*or, to be fair, maybe they chanted that in California*). I mean, it doesn’t really have a workable rhythm, does it? Hmm, well, not to meddle with someone’s copyright, but I’d suggest adapting it to a rhythm of one of our more popular (and fun) chants and run through it twice instead of three times to the following rhythm:

**1 2 123** (beat) **12 123** - - WE! ARE! EV-ry WHERE! (beat) WE ARE ev-ry WHERE. *It’s sort of a conga rhythm.*<sup>99</sup>

*“The whole world is watching”*: Making record

When ACT UP members, gathered in large-scale or small-scale demonstrations outside governmental, medical, corporate, religious, or media institutions, chanted, “*The whole world is watching*,” they spoke at once truthfully and prevaricatingly – threateningly and hopefully. For the purpose of demonstrating, after all, was to *make* the world watch; often, that was equally to say

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<sup>99</sup> ACT UP/NY, “New Members Packet,” n.d., [actupny.org/documents/newmem.html](http://actupny.org/documents/newmem.html).

that the world was not yet watching, or that the institutional actors being targeted had yet to be held accountable or captured on the record. This protest refrain thus operated both constatively and performatively: as the enunciation of a wish not quite yet realized; and as a collective act of repetition that enacted the protestors' wish in the "real time" of the demonstration. In this way, the chant animates the doubled approach that ACT UP's activist documentarians took to the process of making record: throughout the life of the collective, they at once sought to make it into "the record" and at once to construct insurgent counter-records.

Video and media activists in ACT UP/New York worked at these two sites of record-keeping – one hegemonic and normative, the other resistant and subcultural – simultaneously. From its inception, members of the collective saw self-documentation as a crucial dimension of their activist praxis, both as an aid to memory and future organizers and as a tool for resisting erasure of the kind Sarah Schulman confronted above in 2001. Filmmaker, scholar, and alumna Alexandra Juhasz remembers ACT UP's constant auto-documentary practice as a source of great felt power: "And I think, you know – ACT UP, this is still a demonstration of ACT UP's power, that it can archive itself, you know."<sup>100</sup> "You know ACT UP," artist and fellow alumna Zoe Leonard quips to Sarah Schulman during her AUOHP interview. "We recorded everything. Everything had to be recorded, which is great."<sup>101</sup> In documenting the collective in this deliberate and processual way, ACT UP's archivists simultaneously staked a bold and empowering claim to future existence – imagining a "witness" who might encounter this "archive," as Juhasz indicates – and registered the profound vulnerability activists faced in the form of state violence, as Leonard notes: "[A] big part of having people photograph... was about creating record, but it was also about safety. You always wanted cameras."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Alexandra Juhasz, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 8, 16 January 2003, p. 33.

<sup>101</sup> Zoe Leonard, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 106, 13 January 2010, p. 33; emphasis added.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

Activist record-keeping also meant interrupting the mainstream media as it was presently constituted. Members of ACT UP's Media Committee targeted these outlets – and the normative records they produced in the form of daily issues and primetime broadcasts – strategically. Media activists from the Committee did not aim to take over these outlets – or to transform them utterly overnight – but instead sought to register interruptions and glitches in mainstream channels. Sometimes, perhaps surprisingly, this entailed collaborating with actors from those channels. Michaelangelo Signorile recalls one such collaboration with a sympathetic journalist at the local New York City CBS station – a young and ambitious reporter named Brian Williams: “And I remember, we were doing a protest at City Hall, and it was a die-in... and he asked us if we could time the die-[in] for exactly six o'clock, for when he went live, so that he would have great television.”<sup>103</sup> Williams was emphatic in expressing to Signorile his support for “the cause,” and his request for a delayed start (at “6:07”) was beneficial to his own career and to ACT UP. At other times, interventions into mainstream media more closely resembled sting operations, as with ACT UP's successful infiltrations of primetime national news broadcasts at PBS and CBS. Alumna Ann Northrop, a former senior producer for CBS, was instrumental in planning activists' interruption of the *Evening News with Dan Rather* at that network. This operation culminated with activists disguised in business suits “ripp[ing] off their clothes, having their ACT UP t-shirts underneath,” and “popp[ing] up in front of the camera, yelling, ‘Money for AIDS, Not for War!’” before the *Evening News* cut to black.<sup>104</sup>

Whether aspiring to produce a veracious counter-archive or to force an interruption in the midst of a mainstream broadcast, ACT UP's documentary and media interventions approached records as complex highways of address. It was important for records to be

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<sup>103</sup> See Michaelangelo Signorile, *ACT UP Oral History Project*, no. 29, 20 September 2003, pp. 15-16.

<sup>104</sup> Northrop, *AUOHP*, 21-22.

constructed and corrected, respectively; however, it was equally important for those records to be made available to posterity. Northrop reflects:

You have two audiences when you do an action – one is the audience of people immediate[ly] there, wherever you’re targeting, and the other is the public in general. And one of my lines is, you’re not talking to the media, you’re talking through the media. The news media are a vehicle to talk to a larger audience – meaning, the general public or people in power who are watching, or whoever.<sup>105</sup>

Much like Finkelstein earlier wrote of *Silence=Death*, and much as Sarah Schulman’s oral historical interviews illuminate in practice, ACT UP/New York’s dynamic records seek not only to shore up an account for “an audience of people immediately there” in a particular historical present, but to make proffer of that account to those who will come later. For them, third-person refrains that echoed hopefully and vengefully in the street might finally have been realized: the *whole world* might finally have started to *watch*.

*“We will not rest in peace” / “Over our dead bodies”:* Reaching ‘later’



Figure 3: “OVER OUR DEAD BODIES”<sup>106</sup>

When ACT UP members marched under a banner marked *OVER OUR DEAD BODIES* or took up the slogan “*We will not rest in peace*” as they moved through the streets, they gestured toward “later” – to a time that would succeed their own lifespans. These two refrains offer a frank yet resolutely engaged acknowledgment of the limited political and mortal horizons of these activists’ particular present. Many of those who took up these slogans, especially those already sick, would not live to “see the world at scale as [they] would like” – would not, that is to

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<sup>105</sup> Northrop, *AUOHP*, 23.

<sup>106</sup> ACT UP/NY, “Steve Michael Political Funeral,” n.d., [actupny.org/reports/SteveMichael.html](http://actupny.org/reports/SteveMichael.html).

say, survive into a future in which transformation might take place.<sup>107</sup> These two turns of phrase acknowledge this reality almost literally, as it would be over and after the lifetimes of countless deceased comrades, and in their names, that the movement would continue. Together, *OVER OUR DEAD BODIES* and “*We will not rest in peace*” activate a queer kind of generational multiplicity: the work of ACT UP would be carried forward by the living *later*.

Jim Hubbard’s 2012 documentary film *United in Anger* forges a pathway between the specific moment of ACT UP/New York’s presence in the streets and “*later*.”<sup>108</sup> The documentary proceeds chronologically, constructing a linear timeline of key organizational developments and chapter-wide actions. The film takes care to anchor each of these scenes concretely in a historical trajectory by specifying names, dates, and descriptions in intertitles. Between these frames, *United in Anger* interweaves interview testimony from the ACT UP Oral History Project and archival footage from meetings and actions into a single fabric. The segments from interviews offer the explanatory clarity of retrospection, as alumni of the collective provide background about actions, explain the rationale behind organizational structures, and reflect on the effectiveness of particular interventions. The archival footage, on the other hand, offers a texturally rich glimpse into the collective itself; often dazzlingly beautiful, these clips rove the floor of general meetings, follow activists into demonstrations, and record the voices, gestures, and comportments of many members who did not survive. The film’s juxtaposition of footage produces a haunting sense of lateness; those interviewed as part of the AUOHP survived, whereas many activists centered in the archival footage have not.

*United in Anger* represents not only an intervention in popular memory – and an explicit teaching tool for students and activists – but also an experiment in collaboration.<sup>109</sup> How,

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<sup>107</sup> @chrisjudetaylor, “I’ve made peace with the fact that I’ll never see the world at scale as I would like. We don’t get to choose our worlds. That’s okay – up until armed state agents are given powers of lethal world enforcement,” *Twitter*, 14 September 2020, 1:20 a.m.

<sup>108</sup> *United in Anger*, directed by Jim Hubbard, 2012.

<sup>109</sup> Hubbard and Schulman make *United in Anger* freely available to educators along with “guides” for specifically designed for activists and for secondary school and undergraduate students.

Hubbard seems to ask, might we construct a record or narrate a history of ACT UP without relying exclusively on the testimony of survivors? By its cross-historical visual language, the film offers one vision of a coalition between *later* and *now*.

*“You could get it, too”: ‘You,’ ‘now’*

When ACT UP members addressed passers-by the chant “*You could get it, too*” – the final slogan I will consider – they inscribed anonymous members of various “publics” into the sphere of vulnerability activated by the HIV/AIDS crisis. In some ways, this phrase is the most abstract – and, on the level of content, the least explicitly confrontational – of the three assembled here. It doesn’t mention HIV or AIDS specifically, nor does it nominate a particular target, articulate a particular threat, or announce the name of the collective. But once the antecedent of “*it*” – HIV/AIDS – comes into view for the auditor, the slogan suddenly enacts an interpellative force that lands as intimate and threatening. By what Jules Gill-Peterson calls its “weaponlike compression,”<sup>110</sup> it dissolves several artificial boundaries that have been used to construct HIV/AIDS as a “community” disease: boundaries between PWAs and seronegative people, between so-called “risk groups” and the “general public,” between sexual and racial minorities and the hegemonic white heteropatriarchy, between the Global South and the Global North. Moreover, in the contemporary archival present, I suggest, “*You could get it, too*” dissolves the border between “then” and “now” – between the third-person “*them*” of a collective rooted in the past and the first-person “*P*” or “*us*” of those in the archive. When we are made to wear the second-person avatar of “*you*” in encountering the slogan, we meet ACT UP in a new temporal frame – in what Gill-Peterson refers to as “endemic time,” rather than “epidemic time.” Citing Foucault, Gill-Peterson explicates the distinction: “Death [is] no longer something that suddenly

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<sup>110</sup> Jules Gill-Peterson, “Haunting the Queer Spaces of AIDS: Remember ACT UP/New York and an Ethics for an Endemic,” *GLQ* 19.3 (2013): 285.

swoop[s] down on life – as in an epidemic. Death [is] now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it.”<sup>111</sup>

“*You could get it, too,*” of course, doesn’t escape the trap of group-based stigmatization it seeks to deconstruct. After all, the force of the chant hinges upon the notion of surprise – that those who move through the world unmarked by the signifiers of “risk” are also vulnerable. An implied qualifier (“*Even*”) thus precedes the refrain: “*Even you*” – i.e., a wealthy heterosexual white person – “*could get it.*” I conclude by considering this refrain not because it sidesteps the logic of stigmatization that continues to shape the HIV/AIDS pandemic, nor because it offers a map to a shared landscape or truly communal experience of the world – it cannot do either of these things. Instead, this confrontational refrain lays bare the ways in which address functions as a powerful instrument for cutting across – and momentarily puncturing – ossified arbitrary boundaries. Activist address doesn’t produce a universal community or dissolve difference. What members of ACT UP have shown us, however, is its capacity for instigating unlikely encounters, unforeseen solidarities, and unexpectedly supple orientations to obdurate structures. In a sense, activist address, by demanding some form of response, writes against the finality of social reproduction.

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<sup>111</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 279.

## Postscript:

### Insistence: Address Without Response

At the center of Jules Gill-Peterson's recent monograph *Histories of the Transgender Child* (2018) lies an epistolary corpus: a body of letters written by trans children and sent to prominent endocrinologists between 1968 and 1971, following the emergence of "transsexual medicine" as a field and the opening of numerous "gender clinics" across the United States. Seeking treatments, referrals, and other informational and material resources, these young letter-writers demonstrate an impressive understanding of the field and its emerging treatment protocols – often reaching out after reading Christine Jorgensen's famous memoir (1968) or endocrinologist Harry Benjamin's textbook *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966).<sup>1</sup> (Benjamin is one of the endocrinologists addressed in Gill-Peterson's archive.) Most of these letters open, as Gill-Peterson observes, with the trans child "stress[ing] first and foremost that they knew what transsexuality was and that the term accurately described them."<sup>2</sup> Writing both as minors under the age of medical consent and as individuals of trans experience and self-understanding, these correspondents went to great lengths to articulate a fit with the "diagnostic model" of transsexuality in the hopes of accessing care.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, most of these letters would meet with one of several "standard and repetitive" responses in which the endocrinologist would refer their trans correspondent back to a teleological model of development. In brief, the doctor would tell the trans child who addressed them to wait: to "give yourself a chance to mature," and see if life "may look differently to you" a few years later – once the correspondent was above eighteen

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<sup>1</sup> See Christine Jorgensen, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Biography* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, Inc., 1967) and Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York: Julian Press, 1966). For more on the complicated place of Christine Jorgensen, famously positioned as the first trans person to undergo gender confirmation surgery in the United States, in transgender history, see Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008) 47-49, and C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) 145-175.

<sup>2</sup> Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018) 151.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

years old, had passed the age of medical consent, had entered into and proceeded through puberty.<sup>4</sup>

As Gill-Peterson indicates, these letters do not – and constitutively *cannot* – represent sites of actual agency for trans children, whose expressions of experience were not engaged with any seriousness and who were, as we saw with the *Bowers* decision in Chapter 3, to a large extent refused a right to address.<sup>5</sup> At the same time that the racialized “plasticity” of children was a necessary material for the experimental articulation of transsexual medicine as a field – a larger claim Gill-Peterson pursues in the monograph – minors were not allowed to dictate any of the terms of their treatment or experience. Even so, a small number of trans children with “access to a writerly voice” did write.<sup>6</sup> Their epistolary gestures did not lead them to reach what they were seeking – nor did they eventuate in transformation in the medical field or at the smaller scale of a particular endocrinologist’s practice. But still, as Gill-Peterson shows, these letters register children’s desires for other ways of being: “Forms of growth not quite (binary) gendered yet not teleological gathered in these letters, suggesting some of the ways in which trans children engaged their own lives on terms not wholly captured by medicine, however fragile and short-lived.”<sup>7</sup>

Gill-Peterson’s account of epistolary address and (non)response in the context of trans medicine in the 1960s comes into newfound urgency in the current global social and political climate. At the time of this writing, in May of 2023, an anti-queer, anti-trans conservative movement across the United States is in the midst of an attempt to silence, disavow, and disappear queer and trans people – and especially queer and trans children – from public life. In

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<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>5</sup> Gill-Peterson asserts that, as a principle: “There is no scene of resistance in the writing of trans children.” See *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>6</sup> Crucially, as Gill-Peterson asserts throughout the monograph, those trans children who show up in the epistolary archives of gender clinics largely come from middle-class white families. Trans of color and, particularly, Black trans children disproportionately appear instead in the archives of state, medical, and punitive institutions. See *Ibid.*, 159-161.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

the past fifteen months, this movement has brought to various state legislatures more than three hundred bills targeting (inclusive) education about sexuality and gender in public schools, forcing the “outing” of LGBTQ+ students to their guardians by educators, and eroding the legality of gender-affirming treatment for trans children. I argue that these bills and laws – which are gathered under the broad vernacular banner of “Don’t Say Gay” legislation – operate through a mechanism of refusal of address and disavowal of response similar to what Gill-Peterson examines above. On the one hand, so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bills grant queer and trans children no standing from which to address legislators a proper gesture of resistance; on the other hand, the sponsors of these bills disavow the responses they do receive in a refusal to engage with queer and trans people on their own terms of existence. An exemplary strategy through which this body of legislation realizes this effect of despoiling address lies in the gambit of so-called “parents’ rights.” With few exceptions, most “Don’t Say Gay” legislation purports not to issue a ban (e.g. on specific curricular materials), but instead to *expand* parental rights in public schools. Florida’s HB 1557 – one of the first bills to bear the “Don’t Say Gay” moniker – makes this strategy unambiguous from its opening line: “An act relating to parental rights in education.”<sup>8</sup> In reality, of course, “parents’ rights” functions as a smokescreen for the puncturing of children’s rights and personhood. Instead of rerouting care through the apparatus of the parent, such legislation enacts an ironic and cruel gesture: purporting to protect children by limiting the sphere of their existence. On a more foundational level, “Don’t Say Gay” legislation not only functions to refuse address and deny response, but further, strives toward the brutal ultimate *telos* of extricating queer and trans existence altogether. In a sense, these bills attempt to “nip” LGBTQ+ life “in the bud” by preventing difference along the lines of sexuality and gender identity and expression from ever taking shape. This not only entails denying the presence of

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<sup>8</sup> HB 1557 was signed into law by Governor Ron DeSantis on 28 March 2022. See Florida House of Representatives, HB 1557, Parental Rights in Education Act, 2022, [flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText/er/PDF, 1](https://flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText/er/PDF, 1).

currently existing queer and trans people – and queer and trans children among them; it also seeks to prevent future transness and queerness from existing.

By way of conclusion, I propose queer correspondence as an oppositional force for annotating and contesting this treacherous landscape. As we have seen throughout the dissertation, queer correspondence is animated by the parameters of address and response and characterized by unfinishedness. It resists teleology and closure – resists, that is to say, the sedimentation of expressive, relational, and political forms into fixed essences. Instead of arriving at consolidation or sameness, queer correspondence shores up difference. In this way, queer correspondence affords a powerful means for registering ways of being that are phenomenologically and relationally at odds with prevailing social and political orders: ways of being both with one's self and with others.

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