

ARE WE BEING HOMOSEXUAL YET?

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The question that my title raises is implied, I think, in Michel Foucault's later writings and his interviews on homosexuality. The scandal concerning the Homosexual that, according to Foucault, nineteenth-century science invented is that he cannot escape his sexuality. It pervades, defines, and freezes his very being. "Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere with him." His homosexuality "was consubstantial with him."¹ Homosexuality becomes a secret that, try as he may, the homosexual cannot hide because it is now manifest in his gestures, his choice of clothes, and his facial expressions. In this scenario, to be a homosexual is to recast one's own particular relation to the problem of being within the generic protocols of homosexual desire and enjoyment, so that within these protocols one can discover the truth of being. In contrast, Foucault argues, to be gay is explicitly and purposively "not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual," not to be trapped in a game of recognition in which to be a homosexual is to let sexuality define the very truth of one's being, either through identification or through the logic of repression. But if we are working not to be homosexual in one way, it seems that we are not quite homosexual in another. "We have to work at becoming homosexuals," Foucault explains, "and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are." To be gay is not *to be*, but *to become*, to invent, define, and develop a "way of life." Instead of following the progressions for individual and social development established and rendered meaningful by heterosexual rituals, gays "face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them towards each other. [We] have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless."²

Of course, this is not at all to suggest that straights — singles and couples, men and women — have easy or untroubled relations to the rituals and cultures of heterosexuality. Nor is it to suggest that some straights might not have a great deal invested in ways of being outside these rituals and cultures. In many ways, to characterize homosexuality

in opposition to heterosexuality too narrowly limits the general problem of sexuality and desire against which Foucault positions his works. But Foucault's statements suggest that one of the things that distinguishes gays from straights is the peculiar relation that homosexuality assumes to knowledge and practice. Because the nineteenth-century invention of the generic homosexual is accompanied by a general prohibition of practical knowledge about how to be a homosexual, this invention introduces a syncope in the field of sexed being. Instead of attempting to express the essence of homosexuality (which is impossible to know how to do even if one gives over to the demand to be a homosexual), gay practice as Foucault envisions it paradoxically seizes this syncope in order to turn against that essence. It is here that psychoanalysis has most productively taken up the Foucauldian problematic, for this relation to knowledge suggests that the homosexual lifestyle engages the unconscious outside a logic of prohibition. As Leo Bersani argues, whereas male heterosexuality is a "traumatic privileging of difference" as sexual difference, male homosexuality privileges a "sameness" that "has already detraumatized sexual difference." "[S]ame-sex desire," Bersani proposes, "while it excludes the other sex as its object, presupposes a desiring subject for whom the antagonism between the different and the same no longer exists."³ Rather, in the detraumatizing of sexual difference, what is not known is not prohibited but emerges in a version of practice that, in turning against its own particular determination, engages the unknown as non-connectedness and non-relationality. For Bersani, this non-relationality is the means by which to transfigure generic homosexuality into new modes of sociality. As he and Ulysse Dutoit so precisely put it, "homosexual desire is a reaching out toward an *other sameness*. Homosexuality *expresses* a homoness that vastly exceeds it but that it nonetheless has the privilege, and the responsibility, of making visible."⁴

But, at least following Foucault, this reaching out towards another sameness has less to do with a supposed sameness between sexual subject and object and more to do with homosexuality's relation to history. Because gay practice is grounded on a syncope, in the task of invention, what gays face *in a particular way and as a particular kind of group* is the otherness of history as immanent possibility. "Homosexuality," writes Foucault, "is a historic occasion to re-open affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the 'slantwise' position of the latter, as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light." There is, of course, nothing permanent about homosexuality's relation with this immanent possibility. Foucault insists that whatever is significant about homosexuality is so because homosexuality has an occasional — and not enduring — relation to historical alterity. Even so, Foucault insists, this relation to the otherness of history is what makes homosexuality so disturbing and so interesting: not just that two or more men are having sex, but more specifically that as a life practice these two or more men offer "new alliances" and "unforeseen," "improbable" modes of being.⁵

I suggest that what sustains this relation to historical alterity is the aesthetic. This is not to privilege the aesthetic as such, but to privilege its relation to mediation. It is specifically through the aesthetic's capacity for mediating the nonconceptual that homosexuality can empty itself of its pseudo-scientific and psychological significance and express "an other sameness" as a non-necessary but not impossible future sociality. In what follows, I shall begin with a discussion of how in the 1990s queer theory used the performative to suggest and to occlude relations between homosexuality and historical alterity; I shall then go on to explore some ways in which a psycho-analytic ethics in conjunction with Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* may help to elaborate the kinds of relations between homosexuality and historical alterity that Foucault suggests.

In contemporary queer studies, historical alterity has been among the most under-theorized of all the various forms of otherness now under consideration. Queer studies has tended to transform what for Foucault is an historical relation to the otherness of history into a kind of essential being, so that to be a homosexual is to be granted the immediacy of political subversion. In this way, a turn from the figure of the homosexual whose *sexuality* is consubstantial with him has led to identification with the figure of the homosexual whose *politics* is consubstantial with him. What has permitted this argument for political immediacy is, I think, the pervasiveness of the performative as a heuristic for characterizing the particularly complex relations of sexuality to communication. Inasmuch as it does not emphasize mediation, the performative can turn into a kind of discursive realism in which, as J. L. Austin puts it, saying makes it so.⁶ Of course, this need not be so. Early on in queer studies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick used the performative to highlight the relationship between Foucauldian ethics and history. But when the performative became, especially with Judith Butler's work, a means of theorizing political being, it also became the means for expressing homosexual enjoyment as politically forceful in itself.

Sedgwick uses the performative to elaborate queer as a rhetorical practice. In *Tendencies*, she places the term "queer" in opposition to the unity of meaning produced by the social equivalents that conspire to solidify social identity and social time. The social, as Sedgwick presents it, is comprised of a fractured set of semi-autonomous spheres that tends to line up as almost irresistible analogies, especially when it comes to endowing sexual identity with meaning. Education, family, religion, the medical establishment, government, and entertainment all conspire to consolidate heterosexual masculinity and femininity and to endow each with value and significance. Queer, Sedgwick proposes, unjoins and disengages these seemingly irresistible analogies which support that unity of meaning. To this extent, she argues, queer "can never only denote." Unlimited by its content, queer has the formal effect of disarticulation in its show of representational force. Sedgwick suggests that queer "seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and

filiation”; queer performativity “dramatizes locutionary position itself,” the position implied by what Austin calls the locutionary act — the act, that is, of saying something.⁷ As well as a rhetorical practice, queer performativity engages a certain ethical practice in which one stylizes oneself through a mode of address that aims to unhinge social equivalents.

To explain what I mean, let me contrast Sedgwick’s use of the performative with Austin’s. As is well known, Austin defines the performative as a statement that does something as it is said. What distinguishes the performative from statements that report or describe something is that it is judged felicitous or infelicitous, and not true or false, in reference to a set of protocols that the performative assumes (for example, that there exist a set of conventions by which the statement can be judged, that the persons and circumstances are appropriate for the attempted actions, that all participants act according to the assumed conventions, and so on).⁸ For the performative statement “I do” to work, it must be uttered in the officially sanctioned conventions of the marriage ceremony, with all relevant participants acting in accord with these conventions during the ceremony and after. Austin is primarily interested in what he calls illocutionary acts, “performance[s] of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance[s] of an act *of* saying something.”⁹ As he argues, illocutionary acts are utterly conventional; they work precisely to the degree that they conform to an assumed though unarticulated set of social protocols. One might say in a more Lacanian vein that illocutionary acts are addresses to the Other that find their satisfaction in the satisfaction of the Other. Moreover, as Shoshana Felman has demonstrated, the illocutionary act produces a referential excess — “the force of utterance” — upon which the performative is grounded; this is a force that the conventions by which the performative is judged do not and cannot grasp. Instead, the performative is caught in the temporality of repetition and failure.¹⁰ For Sedgwick, queer stands several degrees apart from this mode of address. Her emphasis on queer performativity assumes illocutionary acts that dramatize the locutionary position precisely to the degree that they fail to conform to an assumed, unarticulated set of social protocols. In her use of the performative, Sedgwick argues for a mode of address that aims to produce disjunction in the Other, and the disjunction that this address produces becomes the ground for “experimental self-perception and filiation,” new and unexpected relations to oneself and to others.¹¹ Although Sedgwick herself does not make this argument, her analysis implies that what enables queer performativity to function as an ethical practice is the way in which, as a rhetorical mode of address, it attempts to get the subject out of the time of the Other. Aiming precisely at “junctures” where “meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other,” queer performativity attempts to engage a temporality outside an insistent repetition that Sedgwick perhaps best characterizes in the title of her chapter I have been discussing: “Queer and Now.”¹²

The “now” that Sedgwick demands is not grounded in the display of the ego but in a fundamental re-orientation of knowledge. What kept queer from being the 1990s version of the 1970s

free play of *différance*, and what still lets the term remain open for critical recuperation today, is its trenchantly historical relation to homosexuality, a relation that is rendered critically necessary by the legitimating efforts of the modern age. As Freud, Klaus Theweleit, and others have argued, homosexuality serves a double-duty in the modern age. As Sedgwick puts it, on the one hand, same-sex bonding is “heightened in its visibility, in its perceived problemativeness, and not least importantly in its investments with a charge specifically of ‘sexuality’ and of sexual representativeness and of sexual knowledge.”¹³ On the other hand, she continues, the modern regime maintains an intense separation between this heightened visibility, as both homosexuality and homosociality, and anything that would allow the charges of deviant sexuality to be legitimately inhabited with any sense of emotional and ethical complexity. In other words, queer makes the assumption that the modern age is predicated upon a homophobic prohibition, a kind of learned ignorance, which positivizes the unknowing of homosexual desire. This learned ignorance lets the modern age exclude an understanding of its operant principles from the modes of knowledge that these principles tend to produce, thereby making homosexual practice — in lifestyle, sexual acts, and both aesthetic and critical production — into a strange allegory for modernity’s lack of self-knowing. Situating this historical thesis in the context of Sedgwick’s discussion of the performative, it becomes clear that as a representational practice, queer has the force of disarticulation *only to the extent* that it grounds itself upon that unknowing, neither to reinstate homophobic prohibition nor to cathect homosexual identity in an effort to re-instate liberal self-understanding, but to navigate a third way which attempts to challenge the modern age in its reliance on a backdoor metaphysics of sexuality.

While I do not mean to suggest that Sedgwick pulls together the various threads that I have been discussing, especially when considered against the obviously Foucauldian backdrop of her work, she does imply a crucial question concerning homosexuality and historical alterity: How might queer, as a rhetorical and ethical practice, help to produce gay culture outside the epochal logic of western modernity? How, that is, might queer help to produce a minor culture whose relation to historical alterity — past, present, and future — asserts the now over and against the modern?

This line of questioning is more or less what Judith Butler’s use of the performative tends to foreclose. With Butler, the performative casts queer as a reified category of being. In *Gender Trouble*, she proposes that far from being an *a priori* essence, sex is an effect of repeated self-stylization. Sex, she argues, is not before the symbolic; it is an effect of repetition within the symbolic.¹⁴ Worrying over how her earlier, anti-essentialist analysis got misinterpreted to mean that one can freely create one’s own sexuality, that one could in fact control this repetition, Butler returns to the performative in *Bodies that Matter* to argue that it splits the subject between psychological and political being. In part, she argues that the performative assumes a social

psychology of repudiation. Inasmuch as the performative posits identity through the reiteration of norms by which that identity is rendered legible or illegible, licit or illicit, performativity presupposes fantasmatic figures that are at the same time prohibited. For heterosexual bourgeois culture, organized as it is around the nuclear family, these figures tend to be those of abjected homosexuality. As Butler puts it, “[t]he binarism of feminized male homosexuality, on the one hand, and masculinized female homosexuality, on the other, is itself produced as the restrictive specter that constitutes the defining limits of symbolic exchange. Importantly, these are specters produced *by* that symbolic as its threatening outside to safeguard its constituting hegemony.”¹⁵ That is, as gender is articulated through the norm of heterosexuality, it also produces homosexuality as a confusing, spectral limit. I would like to leave to one side the clunky generality of this formulation — the way in which the logical formulation Butler locates seeps into and determines the content of the symbolic, as if social fantasy were on the same level of generality as symbolic forms — and point out instead its bizarre political claim: because of this logic of repudiation, to be gay or lesbian is already to do political work. If “the heterosexual presumption of the symbolic domain is that apparently inverted identifications will effectively and exclusively signal abjection *rather than* pleasure, or signal abjection without at once signaling the possibility of a pleasurable insurrection against the law or an erotic turning of the law against itself,” then, Butler reasons, “the resignification of gay and lesbian sexuality through and against abjection is itself an unanticipated reformulation and proliferation of the symbolic itself.”¹⁶ The political imperative here is, simply, *Enjoy your homosexuality!* The performative assumes a politics of subversion. As Butler argues, “[i]f the figures of homosexualized abjection *must* be repudiated for sexed positions to be assumed, then the return of those figures as sites of erotic cathexis will refigure the domain of contested positionalities within the symbolic,” as “a subversive rearticulation of the symbolic.”¹⁷ In her political commitments, Butler reifies the mediation of a prohibition on homosexuality into politicized being. In her argument, consciousness of a homophobic prohibition implies the mediation of that prohibition in such a way that proffers homosexual enjoyment not in its quiddity but in its radical otherness. Butler’s political recasting of performativity claims this otherness as the basis for identity in a deeply solipsistic effort to break through the mediation of alterity to the incarnation of Difference itself.

While the utopian hope of Butler’s argument is for homosexuality as a political form of being that can, in its being, magically divest the social of its repressive force, the net effect of her use of performativity is the reification of queer in relation to a totalized version of the social. More than likely, any articulation of identity through the performative gravitates towards this possibility, insofar as the performative constitutively reproduces alienated identity as a means for satisfying social value — the felicity or infelicity of the performative utterance evaluated in relation to abstract and, in most accounts, generally unlocated social norms. What makes the performative so susceptible to such a debasement, is that it cannot grasp representational force as an historical

form. Austin will propose that illocutionary force is a matter of convention, “an act done as conforming to a convention,” but he offers no strong way of grasping that force as the expression of a historically specific authority.¹⁸ In general, this may not be such a problem, but for queer theory it is, especially since instead of achieving some radical force, in the 1990s queer has attained an exhibition value that has simply commodified queer and endowed it with exchange value in the marketplaces of the academia and of youth culture. We will go further, I think, if with Foucault we conceive of homosexuality as a practice that produces a knowledge that it cannot entirely grasp. In a certain sense, this is only to suggest that queer must maintain a more materialist version of mediation, one that grasps homosexuality in relation to a horizon of understanding. In another sense, it is also to suggest that it is by way of this queer knowledge that contemporary homosexuality maintains a relation with the historical alterity that Foucault locates. But this will mean taking much more seriously the unconscious and its relation to history.

There is a knowledge which is not known, a knowledge of enjoyment about which the speaking being wants to know nothing at all. Proposing this as a definition of the unconscious, Lacan argues that “[t]he subject,” at least the psychoanalytic subject, “results from the fact that this knowledge must be learned.” Is Lacan suggesting that we must find in enjoyment the truth of our being? Is this metaphysical quest the project of psychoanalysis? Far from it. Ever interested in rendering dynamic the structural reference points that he adduces, Lacan goes on to argue that such an effort would be impossible. If the knowledge that must be learned is “*in the Other*,” it is not something that the Other can communicate as information. “The hitch,” as Lacan puts it, “is that the Other, as locus, knows nothing.”¹⁹ The point of Lacan’s seemingly contradictory statements is that, while the effort to discover in enjoyment the truth of our being is an inadequate way to grasp the unknown knowledge of enjoyment that burdens the subject, it is not enough simply to stop asking the question. Rather, we must also understand the work that the question attempts to accomplish. The problem, Lacan argues, is that the effort to find in enjoyment the truth of our being obscures and covers up the Other’s fundamental incompleteness. To stop doing this, we must also begin to elaborate new ways for relating to and understanding the incompleteness of the Other. Let’s return to Foucault’s sentences that I quoted earlier. In turning from the homosexual whose sexuality is consubstantial with him, gays “face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them towards each other. [We] have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless.”²⁰ Here, where the Other does not know, where meaning, ritual, and social customs fail, we must invent more than just new ways of talking about relationships. We must invent new languages and new ways of relating to one another and to meaning.

Meaning is, of course, a tricky thing. As a general rule, Lacan proposes, every subject constituted in the field of meaning will have encountered the problem of desire in meaning's constitutive capacity to go awry. "A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. In the intervals of the discourse of the Other, there emerges...something that is radically mappable, namely, *He is saying this to me, but what does he want?*"²¹ In the intervals of the discourse of the Other, the subject encounters the incompleteness of the Other's knowledge. However, in an attempt to make these intervals mean, the subject goes on to impute to the Other some knowledge about the subject that would supposedly complete it. For an epoch such as ours, in which the question of how to find in sexuality the truth of one's being is so insistently central, the subject specifically imputes to the Other knowledge of his or her particular relation to sexual enjoyment. Such an investment in the Other amounts to granting the Other the capacity to define the being of the subject as "what would have been if you had understood what I ordered you to do," as Lacan puts it.²² Taking on this demand leads to a series of difficult questions concerning sexuality: What do I do as a man? What do I do as a woman? What does my homosexuality mean? But such questions are simply red herrings that trap the subject increasingly in the domain of the Other, as formulations that quite neatly serve to organize subjective alienation. Taking on these questions will simply locate and focus the temporal conundrum which is this demand's fundamental ruse. To any effort to be a good man, woman, homosexual, or whatever, the Other can respond by proposing an alternative past — "what would have been if you had understood what I told you to do" — that serves to measure the inadequacy of your comprehension. For contemporary gays, this dynamic can become quite serious. Think, for example, of the increasing popularity of conversion parties, in which so-called "seekers" have unsafe sex with "gift givers," HIV positive men, so that the former can become infected with AIDS. These parties amount to submitting homosexual being to the Other's demands for authenticity in order to short-circuit those demands' temporal conundrum with the implacable finitude seemingly afforded by a terminal disease while also claiming the infinite enjoyment seemingly afforded by unprotected sex. The assumption of these parties is that the authentic truth of homosexual being turns out to have been AIDS after all, and to acknowledge this truth is to recover that most authentic of expressions of gay male enjoyment: bareback sex.

With a psychoanalytic ethics, the speaking being must learn how to divest the Other of this ersatz omniscience by coming to understand that, in its address to the Other, the subject engages a more radical otherness that neither the subject nor the Other comprehends. In response to the question, *He is saying this to me, but what does he want?*, Lacan proposes two reference points: the generalized Other that stands in as the locus of meaning from which the subject is constitutively alienated, and the particularized *objet a* that marks an alterity accessible neither to the subject nor to the generalized Other. And he goes on to argue for the separation of these two as the basis for psychoanalytic practice. Instead of hearing in this question a demand to *be*,

the psychoanalytic subject (the Lacanian subject, at least) must confront the fact that the Other does not know. Although it is nearly impossible to avoid punctuating the intervals one encounters in the discourse of the Other with a question mark, Lacan suggests the importance of formalizing the question itself in order to shift the problem from one of meaning — how in practice do I answer the question of desire as it seemingly issues from the Other? — to one of being — in what ways has this question inadequately formulated particular relations between the subject, the Other, and a more radical alterity? That is, in formalizing the question of desire, one can begin to see that question’s inadequacy in organizing and determining the being of the subject. Formalization does not, of course, render being more meaningful. Rather, in this formalization, the *objet a*, which marks this alterity, becomes “an absolute point with no knowledge” — no knowledge for the subject and no knowledge for the Other.²³ As such, it is the point that marks the possibility of loosening the Other’s stranglehold on being by translating the seeming inevitability of submitting to the Other in order to gain self-understanding into a more radical understanding of the contingency of knowledge and enjoyment.

Recently, Tim Dean has proposed that this separation of radical alterity from a generalized Other is at issue in certain relations between male homosexuality and art. Acting as if the generalized Other knows something about the subject’s particularized relation to otherness amounts to a secondary process of personification, as Dean terms it, in which the subject attempts to allay his or her self-perceived strangeness by acting as if the Other held the keys to the correct forms of being.²⁴ In this act of personification, the subject defends against alterity as if it were a radical threat. And, of course, in some senses it is a radical threat, since the alterity in question threatens to divest the subject of its comfortably alienated relation to meaning and self-understanding. Instead of understanding sexuality as the expression and communication of deeply personal feelings, Dean, following Bersani, argues that we must recognize the extent to which sexuality engages a fundamental non-connectedness and non-relationality that short-circuit recognition and meaning. This non-connectedness, Dean argues, is what gay sexuality is already about: “While arguments extolling the democratic utopianism of queer public sex totally mystify what actually goes on in the sex clubs and outdoor venues where men gather for sex, nevertheless the sexual activity in these places has the virtue of emphasizing connections with body parts rather than with persons. Gay public sex is often thoroughly impersonal in a way that throws into relief how relationality involves other persons contingently. Men having sex through a gloryhole reveal that sexual relationality is as much about the Other and the *objet a* as it is about interpersonal connectedness.”²⁵ Crucial here for Dean is not sexual enjoyment in itself but the relation to alterity that gay public sex formulates. These practices of more or less anonymous sex suggest that sexuality fundamentally is much more about impersonal personification and alterity than it is about self-expression.

Moreover, Dean argues, the creative potential of the gay lifestyle lies not simply in the proliferation of sexual pleasures but more significantly in the expansion of ways for expressing and navigating radical otherness through aesthetics. Noting specifically that AIDS has entered the contemporary symbolic order to such an extent that on the level of social fantasy “each of us is living with AIDS,” Dean proposes that it has become extraordinarily urgent to show how that statement concerning existence does not comprehensively define homosexual being.²⁶ Contemporary homosexuality needs an understanding of the aesthetic that explores and expands the capaciousness of homosexual being and homosexual enjoyment outside the domain of sexual practice. Dean argues that, instead of giving oneself over to the Other and attempting to personify the homosexual to find the truth of our being, we must sublimate homosexuality’s fundamental relation to alterity into a variety of aesthetic manifestations, of which he proposes sexual experiences may be a subset. The aesthetic does not transcend sexuality; it subsumes and clarifies it. Dean writes:

The high estimation of male beauty that is so common among certain men should be understood as a subset of a more general aesthetic commitment to beauty, rather than as a specific sexual preference.... Not only would it be narrow-minded to treat aesthetic passion as either superior or inferior to sexual passion, but there exists ample historical grounds for claiming that homosexual investments in art precede our current definition of gayness in primarily erotic terms. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the leather queen’s admiration of bodies at the gym is just as much a sublimation as the opera queen’s passion for arias.²⁷

Following Lacan, Dean proposes that accessing the alterity that art affords would involve separating the particular alterity around which each subject is constituted from the generalized Other, a separation that would render sexuality fundamentally impersonal, non-proprietary.

Psychoanalytic engagements with Foucauldian ethics have had the extremely useful effect of forcing psychoanalytic thought to shake off its creeping homophobia and heterosexism. Nevertheless, when it comes to aesthetics, especially the relation of aesthetics to alterity, both psychoanalysis and queer studies might find a stronger ally in Adorno than in Foucault. Foucault’s understanding of aesthetics is, I suspect, too strongly attached to self-fashioning. Even as he proposes a relation between aesthetics and the radically exterior unthought, Foucault does so through *askesis* as an “activity of oneself in the exercise of thought.”²⁸ With Foucault, the problematic of the self tends to return, even in that self’s repeated divestiture. Adorno’s aesthetic theory does, in some ways, address the problem of art in a way analogous to the Foucauldian problematic of the homosexual. Adorno proposes that the truth of art is not to be found in Art but in particular artworks. Like the Foucauldian ethics of the homosexual lifestyle that is based on a turn from the homosexual as an ossification of being, in Adorno’s account modern artworks turn against Art Itself as a reified, bourgeois concept. The modern artwork begins to answer the

question *What is Art?* by taking on the task of becoming something other than what Art has been up to now. Only, Adorno will assume that the product of such an inquiry is unhinged from its producer. The artwork may or may not reflect the artist's intentions, political aspirations, fantasies, and so on. This is not, for Adorno, what is significant. What is significant is how, as product, the artwork disengages conceptualization as it submits to a particular dialectic between alterity and its mediation. In its commitment to becoming, an artwork aims at radical alterity. In this way, art attempts to "complete knowledge with what is excluded from knowledge,"²⁹ but since art is a material thing, it aims at completing what is excluded from knowledge in technologically and socially limited forms of mediation. Thus, artworks always only offer the opportunity of "perceiving mediately" this excluded knowledge.³⁰ Artworks that aim at alterity do not produce it as such, but reproduce it in particularly mediated ways that encrypt what is radical about alterity in particular sensual forms. Reading Dean's focus on the aesthetic through Adorno's dialectic of mediation and alterity, we might say that what makes art queer is neither how it represents or expresses the truth of the self, nor how it nuances or adds meaning to our understanding of sexualities, but how it engages the general Other of meaning in order to presentify nonconceptuality in material form. In this way, almost all art is open to queer analysis. By the same token, what makes *queer art*, I propose, is how works of art — quite broadly conceived — cathect precisely this dialectic. I do not suggest that queer art simply participates in the proliferation of ambiguity or of nonsense. Rather, I suggest that queer art cathects incomplete mediation of alterity in its seemingly infinite and often baroque variability. If homosexual desire is "reaching out toward an other sameness," as Bersani and Dutoit contend,³¹ then queer art is not the representation of that other sameness but the sensual enjoyment of this reaching out.

For Adorno, this alterity is always historically situated. The artwork that addresses the question *What is Art?* by working to make art something other than what it has been also displays its own dynamic incompleteness as an uncanny historical phenomenon. Even as the artwork reproduces alterity as nonconceptuality — as an absolute point with no knowledge, as Lacan puts it — that absolute point is available as a particularly strange form of historical understanding. In artworks, what is excluded from knowledge emerges as excluded, certainly not reified as philosophical or theological truth, but as the "unconscious writing of history."³² This does not mean that art writes history by revealing deeply embedded archetypes and other symbols from a society's mythic past. Rather, artworks write history by splitting the contemporary moment from a society's self-understanding of it. In Adorno's writing, the artwork is something like Benjamin's "dialectical image." "Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions," Benjamin writes, "there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought."³³ Benjamin understands the dialectical image as a temporal dislocation, a "differential of time," that, dissatisfied with its own present, awaits a future that can "blast open the continuum of

history.”³⁴ As Benjamin is careful to point out, this “blast” does not occur in a strong messianic fulfillment that assuages the dissatisfaction of the past by endowing the now with an absolute significance that breaks with the past. It occurs in the weak messianism of historical materialism whose emphasis on repetition renders that “differential” legible as a kind of hieroglyph. He explains: “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural.”³⁵ A work of art will orient itself towards the now not just in topical references difficult for future generations to understand, but also through unspecified, because contemporary, protocols of fashion, sensibility, and social form.³⁶ Insofar as they take up anew the question *What is Art?*, artworks aim at the limits of these protocols to refashion them. At issue, as Adorno explains it, is evaluation. Artworks committed to a praxis of becoming solicit — self-consciously or not — an aesthetic response that is itself grounded in “progressive consciousness,” the awareness of “antagonisms on the horizon of their possible reconciliation.”³⁷ In taking up a praxis of becoming that aims at alterity through protocols of fashion, sensibility, and social form, art reproduces the very horizon of the contemporary as aesthetic shudder, what Adorno calls the “irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness.”³⁸ In this marvelously erotic image, aesthetic shudder translates the historicity of art into an experience that divests the self of its most progressive relation to meaning. While this divestiture may be the basis for elaborating a variety of ethical attitudes towards the world, to take this shudder as revelatory in itself would be, I think, to reinscribe art within the domain of theology. Or, in Lacanian terms, enjoyment in such a divestiture amounts to claiming jouissance at the splitting of the Other in order to defend against that very splitting. But, Adorno continues, the very dynamic that produces the shudder, an artwork’s orientation towards newness and progressiveness, is also what makes it so quickly dated. Each artwork in its own particularity sediments the progressive consciousness it solicits into its form, as an outdated, historical mode of apprehension. In this way, artworks are “the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch.”³⁹ Attempting to overstep the particular limits of the contemporary, artworks unwittingly ossify the progressive consciousness that they solicit into modes of progressive consciousness that trace out radical alterity in its historical particularity. Even as artworks promise jouissance, as time passes they drain its substance so that it locates — as the past of a possible future — the historical alterity towards which the work of art pointed.

If a psychoanalytic ethics involves the separation of the general Other of meaning from a more particular version of alterity, then, following Adorno, we might say that the aesthetic raises this separation to the level of history. Artworks enact the separation of past historical significance from a more radical sense of historical alterity. However, even as artworks translate history into

aesthetic experience, they only ever offer history in its effects. What Adorno's "progressive consciousness" misses, even as it traces it out, is the historical alterity towards which the artwork has aimed. For this reason, if there is a sense of non-relationality or non-connectedness that the aesthetic produces, it is fundamentally a severance from history that utterly vitiates the notion of ethical practice as a form of direct political practice.

Such a conclusion may make Adorno's aesthetic theory seem extremely unproductive for queer theory, especially for versions of queer theory that want to see political being as consubstantial with homosexuality. But, in a certain way, it gets at what is most radical in the gay lifestyle. I began this essay by proposing that in the turn from homosexual being to gay lifestyles, gays face the otherness of history as immanent possibility. I would like to conclude by suggesting that it is precisely this turn from homosexual being to gay lifestyles that commits gay lifestyles to some version of the aesthetic. If the particular historical problem of homosexuality is the prohibition of knowledge that accompanies the invention of the homosexual, then it is the aesthetic that takes over this prohibition and makes it produce modes of being that, although at present "still formless," as Foucault puts it, at some point will have been. Following Foucault, we can say that contemporary homosexuality stands between the poles of ongoing aesthetic practice and incomplete social formation. While doubtless the latter determines the former, the former oversteps the latter in reproducing out of incompleteness what Foucault calls visible virtualities. But, following Adorno, I want to add that these virtualities appear in a very particular way. They are not visible as such; rather, as the gay lifestyle turns from and in practice attempts to negate homosexual being, it will tend — like the work of art — to solicit a kind of progressive consciousness in order to deflate it. I mean this not as a general capacity but as a particular phenomenon: because of the way it is constituted as a practice that negates its own determination, to any and every effort to reconcile antagonisms between homosexual being and incomplete gay social formation, the gay lifestyle can respond by showing that this reconciliation is not it. These virtualities emerge from the future — a future grounded in the deflation and sedimentation of the forms of progressive consciousness that the gay lifestyle solicits.

So, are we being homosexual yet? Perhaps the best response is to say that in its engagements with radical alterity, homosexuality repeatedly harkens a collective subject, another sameness yet to be realized, that watches over this lifestyle from the vantage point of a futureless future, awaiting its own deflation.

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 43.
2. Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," trans. John Johnston, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 138, 136.
3. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 39, 59-60.
4. Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio* (London: BFI, 1999), 80.
5. Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 138, 136, 137.
6. J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6-7.
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 6, 9. See also Austin, 95.
8. Austin, 14-15.
9. *Ibid.*, 99-100.
10. Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 79-80, 96.
11. Sedgwick, 9.
12. *Ibid.*, 6.
13. *Ibid.*, 49.
14. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 136, 140.
15. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 104.
16. *Ibid.*, 110.
17. *Ibid.*, 109.
18. Austin, 105.
19. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 96-98, italics added.
20. Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 136.
21. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 214.
22. Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 31.
23. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 253.
24. Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 253.
25. *Ibid.*, 274. Dean explores relations of homosexuality to alterity more extensively in "Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness," *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 120-143.
26. Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, 96.
27. *Ibid.*, 277-278.
28. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1985), 9. See also my discussion of Foucault in *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Bacon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 13-21.
29. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 54.
30. *Ibid.*, 58.

31. Bersani and Dutoit, 80.
32. Adorno, 192.
33. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), N10a, 3.
34. Ibid., N1,2; Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 262.
35. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N3, 1.
36. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), 183.
37. Adorno, 191.
38. Ibid., 245.
39. Ibid., 182.

