

QUEERS READ THIS!

LGBTQ Literature Now

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Introduction

Is there such a thing as LGBTQ literature anymore? Clearly, the Lambda Literary Foundation thinks so, since it recognizes and awards emergent and established LGBTQ authors annually. Even the prodigious scholarship of queer theorists is now celebrated by the organization at its yearly award ceremony, alongside work in fiction, poetry, autobiography, comics, and graphic novels. Yet, as the lesbian author and cultural critic Sarah Schulman (2012: 146–47) compellingly points out in *The Gentrification of the Mind*, the mainstream literary world rarely spotlights the work of out LGBTQ writers who develop substantive fiction, poetry, and drama about equally out and actively sexual characters. If in 1973 gay and straight Americans alike made a lesbian novel such as Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* a national best seller, and if James Baldwin could spend his entire career writing and speaking about the intersections between race, masculinity, and homosexuality throughout the second half of the twentieth century, in 2017 no book by an out LGBTQ writer can claim such widespread appeal outside a few recent notable exceptions like Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) or now-canonical works such as Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America* (1991–93) and Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* (1982). In 1991, at the apogee of the AIDS epidemic, members of the emergent activist group Queer Nation could garner the attention of potential LGBTQ audiences with a searing polemic titled “QUEERS READ THIS!” This command was meant to hail politically radicalized or “militant” queers as well as the most woefully conformist or disengaged members of the LGBTQ community. The polemic’s exclamatory title not only issued a directive at so-called queers to read the content of the manifesto but also evoked an affective hope that the very act of reading might incite a transformative encounter with queer rage against both

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heterosexism and widespread LGBT complacency in the face of homophobia, the AIDS epidemic, and rampant violence against sexual and gender dissidents. “How can I tell you,” the manifesto opens, “How can I convince you, brother, sister that your life is in danger: That everyday you wake up alive, relatively happy, and a functioning human being, you are committing a rebellious act. You as an alive and functioning queer are a revolutionary.” By bringing together a kaleidoscope of queer voices in its overlapping, polemical entries, the manifesto sought to “convince” its readers of the necessity of embracing a revolutionary view of queer existence; as its first lines underscore, such a view was not posed as a question or possibility but as a declaration of fact indelibly marked in print.

What does the injunction “Queers Read This!” refer to now, more than two decades later? Would Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Cherríe Moraga’s foundational women of color anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981)—a transformational text for many queers and feminists of color, as well as white queers and feminists—have been published and read in today’s market? Would a distinctly queer of color or trans-inspired version of “The Queer Nation Manifesto” carry equal force and political currency? What exactly *should* queers read now? How are we reading and writing queer texts? This special issue of *GLQ* seeks to animate a dialogue about the place, function, form, and intellectual and political possibilities of LGBTQ literature now. The “now” we invoke is an incitement or imperative to our contributors to think about how the history of queer literary production must necessarily be rewritten, reconsidered, and returned to in light of the dramatic historical and scholarly transformations that have shaped queer public and private life since the late 1980s.

At that key historical moment, queer literary production was under severe pressure from the violent and life-negating experience of HIV/AIDS. Perhaps counterintuitively, the mass deaths and subsequent cultural erasure of queer men’s lives that took place as a result of the epidemic also created the conditions for an intellectual and creative counterassault in the form of AIDS cultural theory, the frantic yet impassioned outpouring of art, fiction, poetry, film, and performance by AIDS activists and artists, and the institutional emergence of queer theory as a field of knowledge focused intently on reading and interpreting the world from the position of sexual and gender dissidents. From one perspective, HIV/AIDS could be seen as the flashpoint that both consolidated and dispersed queer reading and writing into activism and the academy, and inadvertently away from the mainstream of popular reading, writing, and publishing. Since then, queer life-ways, politics, and culture have been dramatically shaken by innumerable historical transformations that overdetermine any attempt to map LGBTQ literature

by the traditional coordinates of gay shame, the closet, and narratives of gay liberation, along with HIV/AIDS. LGBTQ literary production and history have been undoubtedly shaped, revised, and reorganized by each of these crucial historical frames, but also by 9/11, the advent of the digital era, mass incarceration, prison privatization, a more intimate relation with state power through the push for hate crimes legislation, the protracted struggle over gay marriage, gays in the military, and the ascendancy of transgender identity and rights in queer politics. We name these historical markers to indicate the new conditions under which queer literary production, and queer reading, takes place today.

Few terms carry as much weight and meaning in queer culture than that of *reading*. Far from a simple reference to textual literacy, for queers, the phrase *to read* (or better yet, *to do a reading*) indexes a range of creative and intellectual capacities, including but not limited to the ability to deconstruct the gendered and sexual performances of one's peers; to formulate an interpretation of, or wring queer meaning from, a cultural phenomenon with no explicit reference to same-sex or alternative sexualities; to negotiate, or "read," a situation of danger for those who do not comport with heterosexual norms; to note, notice, or "clock" queer and trans figures in the first place by "reading" another person through "gaydar"; or to call out, poke fun, challenge, "shade," or performatively "slay" a fellow queer. As has been well documented, when queers read—whether their sights are set on a traditional literary text, a particular performance, or an entire cultural scene—they do so as a form of survival just as much as a way to gain pleasure, develop knowledge and skill, and make a mark on the world. It would not be an understatement to suggest that the question of reading—how, why, when, who, and in what manner queers and all kinds of sexual and gender dissidents read—has been one of the longest-running concerns motivating the production of queer theory. After all, queer theory itself is an extended scholarly project to read what queers write, say, and do, both in the most literal sense of simply taking time to engage and comprehend the writing and cultural production of LGBTQ people and in the conceptual sense of interpreting or making meaning out of that production. Yet queer theory is also one of the most potent and sustained projects in reading or interpreting the world from *the perspective of sexual and gender dissidents*; one of the field's most ambitious projects has been to reveal the distinct perspective of LGBTQ subjectivity as potentially relevant for making sense of all forms of cultural production, even those texts, objects, and performances that do not appear to have any immediate relation to nonnormative sexuality or desire. This tension between the actual attention we pay to the specificity of LGBTQ writing and culture and the production of a more capacious queer theory capable of identifying the sexual and gendered logics

of a vast range of institutions, performances, and cultural productions provides one of the originating conditions of queer literary studies.

In 1996 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick edited a groundbreaking issue of the journal *Studies in the Novel* titled “Queerer Than Fiction” that laid the foundation for a generation of queer literary interpretation. Arguably one of the first of its kind, this issue identified literature as one powerful site where reparative reading practices take shape. She and others in the volume argued that the act of interpretation itself was a practice through which readers do something ameliorative with texts, making them functional for the flourishing of queer life. In her introduction, Sedgwick (1996: 279) movingly wrote, “The desire of a reparative impulse . . . is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.” This additive or accretive impulse, Sedgwick suggested, was modeled by the writers in her edited volume through a form of queer reading or interpretive practice that sought to tease out the presence of queer desire, pleasure, possibility, and sociality even in literary objects that seemed to wholly obscure them. While the many contributors to Sedgwick’s edited collection conducted exceptionally fine-grained readings of both classic literary texts from Henry James to Toni Morrison and less canonical writing like that of Piri Thomas and William Gibson, all aspired to work through texts from a queer lens in the interest of expanding the scope and explanatory power of queer theory for *all* culture. This was the case even as they practiced a “reparative impulse” oriented toward nurturing LGBTQ writers, readers, and critics. After all, to annex literature and literary studies, a highly disciplinary field formation often dedicated to policing canons and defending the primacy of close reading, was a move of extraordinary ambition that sought to firmly ensconce queer sexuality, desire, pleasure, and lifeways at the center of humanistic inquiry. In her introduction, Sedgwick (*ibid.*: 278) claimed that a focus on modes of reparative reading could bring greater attention to the specificity of queer reading practices, consequently expanding what we can know and understand about the ways LGBTQ people engage with, take up, and do something with texts; as Marilee Lindemann (2000: 763) has pointed out, however, this focus on the specificity of LGBT reading practices was often downplayed or lost in the more ambitious desire to expand the coordinates of “queer,” to make any book, any cultural text or phenomenon, subject to queer analytics. Despite its seeming novelty, “Queerer Than Fiction” can be understood as only one critical node in a much larger network of queer literary touchstones in the late twentieth century.

Directly preceding Sedgwick and other theorists of the 1990s queer theory academic boom were foundational queer and straight black feminist and women of color texts that dealt with the lives, deaths, and intersectional realities of people of color and racialized minorities in the United States and beyond. Writers such as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, Anzaldúa, Moraga, and others influenced an entire generation of queer writers and writing, yet they are not often afforded the nomenclature “theorist” and are certainly not centered as “queer theorists” even as their writing in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s radically engaged race, gender, sex, sexuality, and politics. Thirteen years before Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) teased out the clarifying language of intersectionality, the Combahee River Collective enunciated the significance and reality of the need for black feminist—and by extension black queer feminist—politics. In its famous 1977 statement, the collective made these connections apparent:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. . . . As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (Combahee River Collective 1977: 1)

Sidestepping a critical theoretical debate on what work “paranoid” or “reparative” readings do, these black feminist writers—novelists, essayists, theorists, polemicists—centralized the realities of their life experiences and their social position as black women as their critical and creative lens. Their ability to “read” the material and historical realities that worked to dominate and kill made it possible for them to see and thoroughly theorize as queer not only the condition of the queer but the conditions and possibilities of the black, woman, queer, feminist working class. The violences they faced were not simply a cause for depression but a facilitation of an explosion of organizing, writing, community-building, and world making. As subjects who are often left behind or overlooked inside canonical queer theory and queer literary history, we take the time to note how these writings function inside white mainstream queer and academic circles as adjacent or additives, but are actually central theoretical modalities.

In his field-defining book *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson (2003: 4) reminds us of the genealogy and indebted-

ness that queer of color critique owes to women of color feminism, arguing that “women of color feminism names a crucial component of [queer of color critique’s] genealogy as women of color theorists have historically theorized intersections as the basis of social formation. Queer of color analysis extends women of color feminism by investigating how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital.” Ferguson’s interdisciplinary queer of color critique text weaves together the history of American sociology, canonical African American literary texts like *Native Son* (1940), *Invisible Man* (1952), and *Sula* (1973), and queer (of color) theory, to make plain the *longue durée* of simultaneous pathology and erasure placed on black sexual and gender expressions. That is to say, we understand the whiteness of queer theory and queer studies and seek not to reproduce its normativity by turning a blind eye toward it or reifying the bonds between “white” and “theorist.” Rather, we point out how queer theory, in part, is informed by, and developed on the backs of, black bodies whose existence and behavior have historically stood for deviancy. Ferguson’s work, like Siobhan Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (2000), Anzaldúa and Moraga’s *This Bridge Called My Back*, and José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), builds on authors like Smith, Alexis De Veaux, and Cheryl Clarke, as well as Cathy Cohen’s foundational queer black intersectional essay, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” (1997). These texts aid us in connecting the relationship between cultural history, queer theory, gender, LGBTQ literature, and the racial politics of the United States. These present texts (and many absent ones) are here to remind us of the heterogeneity of queer and trans literary writings, readings, and genealogies. As Matt Richardson (2013: 6–7) reminds us when discussing the invisibility of black lesbian and black trans documentation in academe, black lesbian “renarration of the past explores . . . the realities of queer experience that are central to Black cultural life. . . . These tensions are worked out through queer vernacular epistemologies, or forms of expression, that comment on and resist the oppression of queer sexualities and genders, as well as create queer kinship networks, communities, and alternatives to diasporic displacement.” Richardson’s keen and much-needed work centering black lesbian and trans literature reminds us of the vital work that black sexualities and genders and their literatures do to illuminate and elucidate the truism that “epistemology is a politically relevant practice” and that “Black queer literature represents . . . a shift in knowledge” (ibid.: 15). The ways we read, who we read, and how *we* are read are a part of our wider queer collective practices, but even so, we recognize

how the queer practices of any place are steeped in the hegemony of that very same locale.

Since the introduction of Sedgwick's model of paranoid and reparative interpretation in the mid-1990s, one initially grounded in the seeming local, intimate act of reading, the methodological ambitions of queer studies have expanded to include the vast institutional structures of neoliberal capital, the war on terror, the carceral system, American racial formation, global diaspora, and more. Even as literary and cultural texts remain central to much of queer theory, providing invaluable case studies that anchor the claims of a given author, the actual close analysis of those objects has often (though not always) become an alibi for forwarding a much wider claim about the operating logics of large-scale social and political phenomenon. It would appear, then, that analyzing the specificities of a work of literature, what it demands from a reader, who is reading it and why, and how it produces particular affects often appears simply too local, specific, or lacking in scale to seem adequate to the aims of a queer critique that wants to address the contemporary geopolitical world order.¹

The contributors to this volume think otherwise, and they carefully consider how a return to actual LGBTQ literary and cultural texts (and to a focus on the specificities of distinct experiences among all who live within or claim those categories) allows us to capture the lived heterogeneity of queer existence at a time of extraordinary danger *and* expanded possibility for gender and sexual outlaws of all stripes. This special issue asked potential contributors to reconsider the place of reading, and literary production more broadly, in queer studies now. If the urgency of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, demanded the rapid-fire production of new forms of writing, both creative and theoretical, to account for the extraordinary cultural impact of the disease, as well as the invention of innovative ways to read and interpret that same impact, we asked writers to consider how the many historical transformations of the immediate period surrounding the millennium have similarly required novel approaches to comprehending LGBTQ literary and cultural production. Some of the impetus for pursuing what might seem like an outdated, traditional, or "old school" return to literary production emerged out of our professional trajectories: both of us are interdisciplinary scholars (one holding a PhD in performance studies and the other American studies) who work on nontraditional cultural objects (hip-hop cultural production, media studies, and black critical theory, on the one hand, and comics, queer visual culture, and fantasy literature, on the other). Yet both of us work in English departments where classical literature and literary production remains highly valued alongside an expanding range of cultural products, as well as theories and practices of rhet-

oric and composition. In these environments, we often work closely with queer-identified students, students of color, and gender-nonconforming students. In our classroom practices, we have found that the mere introduction of LGBTQ literary texts to our students—from Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) to Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), from Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City* (1978) to Janet Mock’s *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love, and So Much More* (2014)—has an extraordinary impact on their sense of the possibilities for queer flourishing. Even as our students have access to countless queer cultural products through digital media, film, television, and music, the traditional literary text still holds a powerful place in their imagination as the location where queers are still simply *not represented*. Or when presented, queers and trans figures are rendered as incomplete, depleted, or destined for death and misery. When they see LGBTQ people writing and written about, living lives worth reading, in classroom spaces designated for the study of “Literature,” they are seemingly constantly awestruck and inspired. Further, students express a desire to understand genealogies and trajectories of queer and trans belonging that are not simply “new” but also historically significant. For instance, historical figures they may know such as Carson McCullers, Lorraine Hansberry, Baldwin, and others have been straight-washed in their precollege educations. We have found that teaching such authors in the specific context of LGBTQ history and culture, not merely queer reading practices but actual texts by self-avowed or explicitly LGBTQ people, has a visceral impact on students that seems to override wide-reaching feelings of cynicism, political despair, and catastrophe, even if only for the duration of a class session.

Invariably when we do teach these texts, our students ask us, “What other LGBTQ books should we read?” Despite our own deep commitments to an expansive understanding of queerness as exceeding the limits of a specific sexual identity, then, our everyday pedagogical experiences have underscored the value of specificity, of the representational visibility of particular kinds of LGBTQ lives, and of knowing where to look for such stories. In a sense, we have seen in our students another expression of the plea that Smith (1978: 27) once dazzlingly articulated at the conclusion of her groundbreaking essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”: “I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life. One book based in Black feminist and Black lesbian experience, fiction or nonfiction, just one work to reflect the reality that I and the Black women whom I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream.” Far from

diminishing or undermining queerness, introducing our students to books that index the *specificity* of varied experiences of LGBTQ life appears to give texture to, foment debate about, and encourage generous exchanges about what constitutes community, collectivity, and alliance among LGBTQ people variously construed. Of course, in our own everyday lives, circulating something “radically” queer to read between our friends, colleagues, and family, through social media posts, blogs, and links, and in photocopies, e-mail attachments, and yes, often actual printed books, is our daily life-blood. In our current political moment, the coeditors of this special issue intuitively sense how necessary reading and circulating queer texts is to the sustenance of LGBTQ life, hope, and resistance. We read for many reasons: to cope, to figure out what to do next, to distract ourselves, to become informed, to develop our own voice, to gain a deeper understanding of the world in which we live or in which we aspire to live. We do it so frequently it becomes easily forgotten that despite all the ways we have traveled far afield from the so-called literary object as the common coordinate of textual analysis, we queers still read, frantically, vitally, critically, lovingly. We solicited these essays in hopes of learning more about how to teach this generation of students, how better to scale the distance between the specificity of LGBTQ living and reading and aspirations for a culturally queer world, and perhaps simply find out what else *we* should be reading, but have not quite yet. In doing so, our aim has been to offer signposts, trajectories, and mappings of unexpected or lesser-recognized LGBTQ literary histories and contemporary queer theory as they overlap and inform one another.²

The essays in this volume range widely in terms of periodization, objects of analysis, method, and theoretical influences; they move between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries, across poetry, novels, short stories, comics, autobiography, and film, and through contemporary interventions in affect theory, disability studies, queer of color critique, feminist theory, and queer Marxism. Taken together, the essays do not constitute a coherent or singular queer literary history, though they all address themselves to both the particular exigencies of LGBTQ writing and publishing, and deeply contextualize their chosen texts in LGBTQ culture and history; they also do not claim to offer a comprehensive mapping of the vast range of identities, embodiments, orientations, affects, and desires that constitute an ever-expanding queer and trans culture (whether in North America or globally). In fact, we concede that there are both representational and conceptual gaps that follow an academic call for papers. We selected the very best of the submissions and realize that no one volume can sufficiently do the work of reading queer literature. We invite responses, more volumes, criticism, and of course, more writ-

ing and reading both on what we present here in this volume and on explorations of the digital in circulating queer writing, LGBTQ fan communities and ethnographies of queer reading practices, trans literary production, popular gay writing and self-help literature, and queer publishing and writing from the global South, among many other key areas of inquiry. Collectively, however, the essays organized here accomplish four important conceptual projects that we believe might offer critical starting points for a queer literary study that can respond to the urgencies of our present moment.

First, each essay concerns itself with the question of *repair*, or how queer literary texts do the work of caring for and attending to the wounds inflicted on queer subjects by homo-antagonism, trans-antagonism, racism, ableism, and patriarchy. These essays conceive of repair not as one pole of a binary between “paranoid” and “reparative” interpretative practices but as an orientation the literary text itself takes that seeks to recognize the lived pain and struggle of its potential readers. This approach also offers tools for sitting with, exploring, reorganizing, or making use of that pain in idiosyncratic yet generative ways. For our authors, repair is a multifaceted project, taken up in a vast range of ways by distinct literary and cultural objects, and producing unpredictable affective, social, and political consequences. The essays are highly self-aware of their own production and circulation during a period of intensified fear, anxiety, and suffering for queer people under the crushing weight of global right-wing and white supremacist movements; consequently, each of our authors conceives of the return to the literary text, and its capacity for repair, not as a solipsistic or insular movement back toward an object of individual pleasure or aesthetic purity but as a way to generate another kind of social relation that queers have with the world through their engagement with material texts and objects. Second, these essays are centrally concerned with identifying, unpacking, and doing justice to a far wider range of queer reading affects, contexts, modalities, and approaches than have previously been described by existing models of queer literary studies. Our writers seek to make good on Sedgwick’s (1996: 278) demand that queer theorists account for “ways of reading . . . that are actually being practiced,” but not within her original terms or according to models of literary analysis now entrenched in queer studies. These writers invent new concepts, use heterogeneous sources and forms of historical or textual evidence, and ask different questions than the frameworks of paranoid or reparative reading, identity politics, antinormativity, or anti-antinormativity allow for. While we, along with our contributors, are deeply informed by all these theoretical modalities, we seek to wrestle with queer textuality in ways that do not simply affirm long-standing allegiances. This is perhaps why so many of our

contributors carefully engage with recent interventions in affect studies, disability studies, and queer Marxism: fields that have demanded an expansion of the kinds of evidence we use to make analytic claims about the production and reception of culture, which includes visceral or gut-level responses to the world, gesture and cognitive and physical capacity, and the variety of ways that desire becomes reified in neoliberal capital. Third, all our authors centralize the importance of literary *form* to the specificities of nonnormative or queer sexualities and genders. Rather than simply “queerly reading” literary texts, our authors view the actual formal composition of a given text as an indicator of varied material histories of sexuality; in other words, for our authors, *form*—whether understood as the syntactical structure of a specific sentence, techniques and devices used to give shape to narratives, or the actual visual organization of words on a page—can be understood as a kind of evidence of how queerness is being lived and inhabited by different kinds of LGBTQ people at distinct historical moments. Finally, these essays collectively embrace the personal, political, and cultural power that ordinary or quotidian reading practices and objects can have even when they do not aspire to, or appear to, offer an imminent critique of institutional power structures. Without ever ignoring or turning away from the realities of such structures, our authors aim to take seriously the fact that many queer people negotiate or respond to the complexities of our contemporary world through micro-level engagements with literary texts whose effects can be monumental for any single given life. In so doing, they attend to queer literature and culture as everyday equipment for living.

In “Bad Reading: The Affective Relations of Queer Experimental Literature after AIDS,” Tyler Bradway identifies queer experimental literature as a key site where writers innovate unexpected narrative or literary techniques that might respond to the immediate affective needs of LGBTQ readers at distinct historical moments. Bradway compellingly argues that more traditionally academic modes of queer literary interpretation, including Sedgwick’s now tacitly embraced framework of paranoid and reparative reading, often unintentionally obscure the vast range of sensory responses that LGBTQ readers have to literary texts by trying to codify reading experiences within a limited range of concepts or terms. Turning to Samuel Delany’s AIDS writing, particularly his experimental “pornotopic” novel *The Mad Man* (1994), Bradway explores how Delany attempted to counter the homophobic logics of the epidemic by developing narrative techniques that actively shift what readers could think and feel about queer eroticism (especially in its gay male expressions). For instance, by producing a novel in which every written sentence—not merely the content but also the syntactical and narrative structure of the words on each page—invokes the intimacy, intensity, and viscosity of gay

male sexual cultures, Delany captured the genuine fear and anxiety that attended the loss of that culture in the face of HIV/AIDS while also drawing his readers into the pleasures of queer eroticism at a moment when such pleasures were exceptionally stigmatized. Neither the fear and anxiety Delany acknowledges nor the broad range of pleasures he activates can be easily accounted for within a binary model of paranoid and reparative interpretation. In one sense, then, Bradway seeks to dethrone the queer theorist or literary critic as the central arbiter of interpretation, who applies academic concepts to literary texts in order to confer meaning on them; rather, he demands that the queer theorist pay attention to the “wider social fields from which [queer hermeneutic practices] emerge,” including the variety of ways that a given writer uses experimental forms to activate new sensations and affects within a reader while honoring those that are present as a lived response to the material conditions of LGBTQ life.

In “Witches, Terrorists, and the Biopolitics of Camp,” Cynthia Barounis develops a new and timely approach to one of the most potent, long-standing, and contentious modes of queer reading in existence: camp. Barounis begins by citing the recent election of Donald Trump (and the catastrophic consequences of his ascendancy to power for LGBTQ people and their allies) as an event that requires us to reevaluate what camp can do for queers now as a mode of interpretation that bites back against the dominant social order through fabulous performances of queer exuberance. What are the uses of camp, Barounis queries, at a moment when all our attempts to laugh off or performatively poke fun at the horrors of this political moment fail? What happens, in other words, when our queer exuberance cannot cut through our genuine despair, despondency, and devastation in the face of genuine homophobia, transphobia, patriarchy, and racism? Barounis argues for a return to camp that downshifts its use as a form of masquerade or performance, and recenters its function as a coping mechanism in the face of intense rejection and denigration that values and embraces all that is thrown away and diminished by normative culture. To do so, Barounis argues for an approach to camp that acknowledges the biopolitical and crip possibilities inherent within this long-standing queer sensibility, namely, its tendency to attribute life and vitality to objects commonly deemed worthless or disposable, or else associated with lack of capacity or immaturity. Barounis performs this very logic through her choice of texts, focusing on cultural objects like *Hothead Paisan* (1999), Diane DiMassa’s apocalyptic radical lesbian feminist comic strip, and *The Witch* (2016), the director Robert Eggers’s contemporary Puritan horror thriller, both of which explore the affective experiences of putatively “crazed” or “psychotic” queer women. Barounis argues that these texts honestly register the pain, confusion, anxiety, and depres-

sion that attends the experience of late twentieth-century queer femininity, but do so in such hyperbolic ways that they invoke the “psychotic lesbian” or “witch” as an object to be embraced, taken seriously, and engaged. According to Barounis, texts like these train us to read, and value, our own painful affective and psychic responses to a horrifying world, thereby providing a reparative reading of our most paranoid, and perhaps accurate, visceral responses to our conditions of existence.

Samuel Solomon’s “Offsetting Queer Literary Labor” unpacks the dense relationship between three key elements of late twentieth-century queer literary history: the shifting conditions of US print technology in the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of an increasingly feminized and racialized typesetting workforce, and the rise of small presses dedicated to publishing work by LGBTQ writers and writers of color. Solomon explores these interlocking histories through a potent contextualized reading of the poetry of Karen Brodine. Brodine was a white lesbian feminist typesetter, writer, and labor activist who, beginning in the 1960s, produced a rich body of poetic work that explicitly addressed the labor conditions of contemporary typesetting factories; the erotic, social, and political intimacies developed between women in these spaces; and the conflicts over fair labor practices and racism in the printing and publishing industries. Rather than provide a traditional “queer reading” of Brodine’s work—that is, to unpack how her poetry indexes same-sex desire or thwarts heterosexual norms—Solomon approaches her poetry as a textual index of the material conditions under which contemporary LGBTQ literature was forged. Solomon places Brodine’s poetry within a vast network of archival materials, including her nonfiction prose, her rich biography as a queer and communist labor activist and typesetter, legal documentation of her many political activities, and oral histories of feminist, queer, and antiracist publishing houses. Solomon’s approach reveals that literary texts like Brodine’s poetry do not simply register resistance to oppressive structures of power, whether industrial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, or racism; they can also provide a map of how LGBTQ intimacy and desire have been forged and negotiated in and through the material conditions of late capital. As Solomon deftly shows, Brodine’s understanding of her identity as a white, working-class lesbian within an increasingly racialized workforce, as well as her erotic and political commitments to other women, took place within the compromised conditions of contemporary typesetting factories—these were spaces of both constraint and possibility for countless women across sexual and racial lines, and Solomon shows how both aspects are registered in Brodine’s meticulous organization of poetic lines on the printed page.

In “Beside Women: Charles Dickens, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Reparative Lesbian Literary History,” Natalie Prizel thinks through one hundred

years of lesbian erotics and writing practices traced from the Victorian writers Dickens and Swinburne to Patricia Highsmith and Elizabeth Bishop, to argue for the usefulness of queer—lesbian, specifically—repair. Following Sedgwick’s reparative reading and Muñoz’s utopian futurity, Prizel puts Victorian authors to work “to think about how the period queered itself, offering what I am calling a reparative lesbian literary tradition.” Prizel’s return to lesbianism hinges on the “woman-centeredness” of the term, as she eschews the lack of specificity that *queer* often engenders, and the way *queer* cannot always read lesbian textual norms, even if the term works to instantiate forms of coalitional politics. The author implicitly notes the danger of insisting on a queerness without homosexuality, as this too can erase forms of love between women that may be considered too identity based for some queer readings. In this essay, Prizel takes on textual and social structures often associated with loss and sexlessness such as “lesbian bed death,” “the urge to merge,” and “possession.” Prizel suggests that these structures, which appear across Swinburne’s Sapphic erotics in *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866) and Dickens’s work on women’s romantic friendships in *Bleak House* (1853), as well as in Bishop’s writing and Highsmith’s *Price of Salt* (1952), afford readers the opportunity to reevaluate the risks and rewards of lesbian enmeshment, as that formation offers insight into the ethics of lesbian reparative reading practices. This transhistorical reading of lesbian repair does not seek a linear emergence of lesbian literary history but works to note the nodal points of literary “lesbian” desire grounded in the Victorian era and surging forward into the future.

Jenny James is also concerned with historical lesbianism in her essay, “Maternal Failures, Queer Futures: Reading *The Price of Salt* (1952) and *Carol* (2015) against Their Grain,” in which she looks to Highsmith’s midcentury novel and Todd Haynes’s recent cinematic adaptation. In reading these texts alongside and through each other, James “argue[s] against a critical approach to queer parenthood that understands it as metonymic of class assimilation and neoliberal ascendancy for a twenty-first-century white queer elite, asking the question, how might stories of queer maternity work to resist, rather than reconfirm, the forces of white privilege that currently define queer family and community within homonormative, exclusionary frames?” James’s essay pressures notions of white queer families by first regarding the seeming incommensurability of lesbian motherhood and lesbian desire in pre-Stonewall representations. James focuses on how the mother-daughter relationship is eroticized and allegorized in *The Price of Salt* and *Carol*. While Highsmith’s rendition satirizes (and dismisses) the mother-daughter erotics, James argues Haynes’s adaptation invites audiences to wrestle with the complexities of *Carol* as a mother to her own daughter, the tension of the eroticized rela-

tion to her younger lover, and the emotional palimpsest between mother, daughter, and lover in 1950s suburban New Jersey. Fundamentally, this essay argues for an against-the-grain reading that sees LGBTQ families as potential sites of radicalism, queer kinship formation, and powerful family bonds, rather than only an acquiescence to neoliberal, conservative, and regressive sociopolitical ideas of familial relationality.

Martin Joseph Ponce picks up on the critical considerations of race, gender, queer literary history, and memory in “Queers Read What Now?” In a seemingly direct response to our call for papers, Ponce’s “essay reflects critically on commonsense reading practices in order to clear intellectual and institutional space for a comparative queer of color studies that renders racial and colonial domination and subordination constitutive of queer literary and social history.” With Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Craig Womack’s (Muscogee-Creek and Cherokee) novel *Drowning in Fire* (2001), and Mock’s memoir *Redefining Realness*, he works through both the institutional and other types of erasure queer and trans authors face, as well as the possibilities and limits of comparative queer and trans of color literary histories. Ponce points to reading practices as important for the formation of gay and lesbian identities, yet notes how the lesbian and gay (bisexual and transgender) reading canon cannot account for racial and literary genealogical differences. Simultaneously, Ponce worries that the intense self-identification of queer racial texts may preclude fertile work on comparative racialization. Using *Zami*, queer of color critique, and contemporary theories of comparative racialization, Ponce argues that Lorde’s black feminist ethics of vulnerability and self-transformation can serve as a theoretical template for building a robust comparative queer and trans of color literary history.

Finally, in “The Black Ecstatic” Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman develops a new aesthetic and affective concept for describing exuberant, life-affirming, and vital responses to the catastrophic conditions of queer black life in the post-civil rights era, what she calls “the black ecstatic.” Abdur-Rahman begins by questioning the tendency of African American literary theory and political thought to seek solace in “the heroism of black pasts *and* the promise of liberated black futures” as a response to the failure of the full realization of civil rights-era goals. She asks instead how black cultural producers of the post-civil rights period have alternatively developed a mode of expression that revels in the epic failures of the American democratic promise for black people, consequently dramatizing and magnifying the immediate embodied pleasures black Americans can wrest from the present. For Abdur-Rahman, “the black ecstatic is an aesthetic performance of embrace, the sanctuary of the unuttered and unutterable, and a mode of pleasur-

able reckoning with everyday ruin in contemporary black lives under the strain of perpetual chaos and continued diminishment.” Abdur-Rahman suggests that the black ecstatic functions as an abstract aesthetic, one that is interested less in so-called realistic, or historically accurate, accounts of contemporary black life (ones that are necessary but often merely remind us of the social and political plight of black populations) than in conceptually, visually, and affectively focusing on moments of deep pleasure, reverie, and joy experienced through black communal practices. In a magisterial reading of the recent black queer cinematic triumph *Moonlight* (2016), Abdur-Rahman shows how the film maps the life trajectory of a young black boy named Chiron against the violent histories of black incarceration, drug addiction, and poverty without either reducing his life to those histories or promising a narrative of uplift and social reform. Rather, the film visually revels in moments when Chiron experiences intense embodied pleasures, including his first swim, his first erotic experience with another man, and his intimately charged reunion with his boyhood friend. Abdur-Rahman places *Moonlight* within a longer genealogy of texts that model the black ecstatic by unpacking the long-form poem “Heavy Breathing” by Essex Hemphill, a text that responds to the particular catastrophe of AIDS for black gay men in the late 1980s by textually invoking the erotic and carnal pleasures shared between them as a form of communion that transcends even material death. In the concept of the black ecstatic, Abdur-Rahman joins many of the writers in this collection by helping expand the range of affects, reading and interpretative practices, and approaches to LGBTQ literature that can be conceived, studied, and taken up now.

A final note: our cover features a vivid image of the gender nonbinary sorcerer Gaylord Phoenix, the lead character of Edie Fake’s eponymously titled, award-winning 2009 graphic novel. *Gaylord Phoenix* visually narrates the psychic, erotic, and embodied adventures of its title character, a creature with extraordinary powers of transformation. Early in the narrative, Gaylord is attacked and wounded by a mystical creature named “Crystal Claw,” who seems to infect Gaylord with overwhelming desires, lusts, and attachments (the hallmarks of sexuality itself). The story chronicles Gaylord’s epic journey of self-discovery as they grapple with their burgeoning desires; develop, betray, and repair a range of erotic relationships; and mutate into a variety of bodily forms. In the scene we selected to adorn the cover of this issue, Gaylord uses a knife provided by a lover to reopen a wound associated with their earliest trauma, the scar left over from Crystal Claw’s attack. Rather than irrevocably damaging themselves or merely reliving past suffering, Gaylord’s willful cut releases unexpected, magical energies into the world that appear as a cloud of imaginative figures, shapes, and forms hovering above

them like a thought bubble. In the following pages, this cloud becomes an extraordinary tidal wave, an ocean of personified shapes bearing eyes and mouths that envelop Gaylord and transport them to a wholly new realm. Echoing the iconic image of a child reading under a tree (perhaps most vividly associated with *The Giving Tree* [1964], Shel Silverstein's melancholic children's tale), this drawing evokes how queer pain, trauma, and violation can also be the source of our greatest imaginings. Even as the stump Gaylord sits on tells of a once-thriving tree cut in its prime, and even as their own body registers the pain of prior woundedness (as well as the difficulty associated with seemingly endless bodily transformation), such "cuts" open out into seemingly endless possibility in a text that attempts to represent the many forms of transgender, or gender-nonbinary, existence. In many ways, this image captures the imaginative work of queer reading and writing itself as a project of giving shape or form to lives that exceed the limits and constraints of heterosexual norms; moreover, it appears in a work of queer and trans* graphic storytelling, one of the recent sites where queer forms of embodiment and existence are being most richly rendered in contemporary LGBTQ literature. Like Gaylord Phoenix, the essays in our collection (and the texts they explore) reopen some of LGBTQ culture's most painful wounds to illuminate how those struggles provide us with ways to expand what we can feel, imagine, and hope for as we aspire to a world that supports queer flourishing.

Notes

1. We make this claim more as an overarching observation of general trends in queer theory rather than a critical judgment or categorical statement about the field's current foci. Works that centralize large-scale or geopolitical concerns as the object of queer theoretical analysis might include Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), and David Eng's *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (2010). While these authors are all exceptional close readers of literary and media texts, their monographs focus on the capacity of queer theory to illuminate something about the operating logics of globe-spanning phenomena like neoliberal capital, counterterrorism, the liberal state, and even the very meaning of concepts like time and space. These texts and others like them might be understood to begin with the primacy of larger institutional or geopolitical structures, turning to literary and media texts to underscore the cultural, political, and social work of such structures as they manifest in material production. Alternatively, books like Robert McRuer's *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Gay and Lesbian Identities* (1997),

Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2009), and Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010) tend to focus on the literary itself as the primary site where questions of larger significance are worked out imaginatively through aesthetic innovation and textual production. These books begin with the formal intricacies of particular works of literature, turning toward larger questions of subjectivity, affect, abjection, racialization, and queer history to underscore how specific texts open us up to such queries. Undoubtedly both sets of texts, or potential lineages, named here address themselves to large-scale issues of institutional and even existential significance (from the global "war on terror" to the status of the human) *as well as* offering fine-grained readings of literary and media texts; however, we suggest that the difference between them might be framed as one of emphasis on either side of the equation. The essays in this volume tend to fall more toward the latter mode, focusing on the specificity of texts and the imaginative work they accomplish in articulating the affective experience of queer existence in its many forms.

2. We are thrilled at the final essays we chose. The daring, care, and intellectual depth was stunning and pleasurable to behold. Simultaneously, during our various discussions over the eighteen months or so it took us to produce this volume, we realized some of the critical and genealogical differences between the two editors. Rather than attempt to sugarcoat or obfuscate the fact, we engaged in the practice of scholarly disagreement. We hope some of that dialogue and its tensions are reflected here in this introductory essay. What was most compelling about our vigorous discussions and disagreements was the fact that we have very differing perceptions and experiences of queer studies, queer literary history, and queer theory. Specifically, we noted some of the ways queer theory or queer studies does not quite capture queer work being done specifically in relation to race, especially work that has emerged in the last twenty years. Cohen pointed us to the conundrum of queer theory's racial blind spots in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." Significantly, in the last few years, conferences, special issues, and symposia have been organized around not just Cohen and her work but other black feminist theorists such as Hortense Spillers, Sadiya Hartman, and Sylvia Wynter. Though these three are not "queer" theorists in any strict disciplinary sense, their work on the black body, trauma, theories of the human and of the flesh, and the concomitant relationship of white supremacy and theories of gender and sexuality have made them foundational for many black and other queer theorists. For some recent work that engages black critical thought in order to think about queer theory, blackly, see Omise'ke Natasha Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage" (2008); Kalia Adia Story's "(Re)Presenting Shug Avery and Afrekete: The Search for Black, Queer, and Feminist Pleasure Praxis" (2015); Savannah Shange's "A King Named Nicki: Strategic Queerness and the Black Femcee" (2014); and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's "Sense of Things" (2016).

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