




5-2018

How Queer Came to Be: Deconstructing White Queerness in Melville's "Bartleby," Ginsberg's Howl, and Morrison's A Mercy

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HOW QUEER CAME TO BE: DECONSTRUCTING WHITE QUEERNESS IN MELVILLE'S
"BARTLEBY," GINSBERG'S *HOWL*, AND MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty
Of the
College of Arts and Sciences
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the
Requirements for the Degree
Of
Master of Arts
In English
Winthrop University

May, 2018

By

Sara Elizabeth Parnell Wilcox

Abstract

In American LGBTQ+ communities, questions continually arise about what it means to live in a post-gay marriage world. Is there still a need for a division between LGBTQ+ and heteronormative spaces, such as nightclubs or parades? What purpose does the ideological signification of a queer identity serve if, ostensibly, queer communities are now equal with their heteronormative counterparts? Rather than accepting the homonormative, post-gay marriage premise that underlies frequent, current representations of “queerness” in terms of white, male, gay bodies, I plan to explore the convergence of aesthetics and politics as a method of freeing queer theory from some of its temporal binds and fears of anachronism and presentism. In doing so, I hope to illustrate how the formation of a future for queer theory and queer identity must also address the violent, racist background of identity in America, and specifically, queer theorists must address how literature served to codify the queercoding of racialized spaces that became the underlying foundation of the confining white closet from which the majority of queer theory has emerged. I will return to the American literary past and re-interpret Herman Melville, Allen Ginsberg, and Toni Morrison in new ways that demonstrate how the intersections of language, queer identity, and space both uphold and dismantle patriarchal and racist hierarchies.

This thesis is dedicated to my Mom, who taught me how to love myself and the world around me.

Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank the Winthrop University Department of English for their endless support and guidance. I especially want to express my gratitude for the superb mentoring and never-ending patience from my thesis director, Dr. Leslie Bickford. I truly would not be the scholar I am today without your support and leadership. Also, to my two readers, Dr. Dustin M. Hoffman and Dr. Casey Cothran, thank you for your patience and for reading every draft with such thoughtfulness and care.

To all of my colleagues in the Office of Diversity and Student Engagement and surrounding offices: thank you for giving me a place to laugh and to grow as I finished my journey as a Winthrop student. To my boss, Kinyata Brown: this thesis would not have happened without your encouragement and positivity. Without you and without the village, this thesis would never have come to fruition.

To all of my cohort friends: y'all, we made it. Thanks for getting me this far and for always making me laugh.

To my Aunt Alicia, my Nana, and my cousin Spencer: you three have always been a rock in the endless storm that has been my scholarly career, and I could not have made it through all of the waves of the past two years without you.

To Jess: thank you for never letting me give up or give in.

To Andrew: thank you for always being the sunshine I need to grow and thrive.

To my Aunt Lisa: you inspire me to never settle for anything except the best.

To my Uncle Michael: thank you for loving me, supporting me, and guiding me, even when you didn't know what to say. Your steadfast presence and love has been essential to the success I've achieved both academically and personally.

To my (Grand)Dad: there will never be enough words to thank you for all of the wisdom, guidance, and love you've given me. I love you to the moon and back, and I hope to make half the impact on the world that you've made on me.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: “The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom”: Bartleby’s Hermitage, Language Anxiety, and Racializing Queer Suffering	11
Chapter 2: Allen Ginsberg’s <i>Howl</i> and the Problem of Big Queer Lonely Lyrics	29
Chapter 3: To Imagine or Not to Imagine: Toni Morrison’s Deconstruction of Queercoding Racialized Spaces in <i>A Mercy</i>	48
Conclusion	60
Bibliography	63

Introduction

In American LGBTQ+ communities, questions continually arise about what it means to live in a post-gay marriage world. Is there still a need for a division between LGBTQ+ and heteronormative spaces, such as nightclubs or parades? What purpose does the ideological signification of a queer identity serve if, ostensibly, queer communities are now equal with their heteronormative counterparts? Rather than accepting the homonormative, post-gay marriage premise that underlies frequent, current representations of “queerness” in terms of white, male, gay bodies, I plan to explore the convergence of aesthetics and politics as a method of freeing queer theory from some of its temporal binds and fears of anachronism and presentism. In doing so, I hope to illustrate how the formation of a future for queer theory and queer identity must also address the violent, racist background of identity in America, and specifically, queer theorists must address how literature served to codify the queercoding of racialized spaces that became the underlying foundation of the confining white closet from which the majority of queer theory has emerged. I will return to the American literary past and re-interpret Herman Melville, Allen Ginsberg, and Toni Morrison in new ways that demonstrate how the intersections of language, queer identity, and space both uphold and dismantle patriarchal and racist hierarchies.

Queer is a word that often makes people confused, uncomfortable, and suspicious. Well-meaning friends and family hear the self-description and ask queer folks to define what they really mean; others, particularly in the older generation, think of “queer” as a pejorative and cringe when the word is used to describe a person’s sexual identity. Within the LGBTQ+ community, even though the Q is clearly in the acronym, “queer” is frequently met with suspicion due to pervasive biphobia. It is common for gay and lesbian members of the community to encompass queer folks within the biphobic lens, and typically, their attitude stems from a misplaced fear of the ambiguity of

“queer.” Recently, queer theorists themselves have been wrangling with “queer” and its meanings and misnomers. In *After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory*, editors Janet E. Halley and Andrew Parker crafted a collection of essays that attempts to decipher what queer theory’s future looks like, and in their introduction, the question of what it means to be “queer” or to practice queer theory becomes enclosed within a wider discourse of temporality. In *After Sex?*, Parker and Halley note the entanglement of temporality with queer theory, stating:

...[a] complex sensibility about time runs through [this] collection of essays of/about queer theory...[because] the very relationship between two books--volumes 1 and 2 of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*--planted the temporal question in the center of the courtyard...[and] imbricated the question “What is sexuality?” with “When is it?”--and this ensured that no simple answer to either will satisfy anyone who has a taste for queer. (4-5)

After Sex?, then, compiles essays from some of the most prominent queer theorists of the past three decades, and their responses to “what is after queer theory” demonstrate how queer theory is stuck in a temporal bind stemming from an anxiety about both queer theory’s past and future. Of all Parker and Halley’s poignant questions contextualizing *After Sex?*, the most central seems to be, “what is it like to be doing queer theory still, to be working today in a tradition that has managed somehow to have acquired a past?” (6). However, this temporal framework informing the collection as a whole remains incomplete because it fails to ask two vital questions: what does queer theory’s past consist of, and with what means was this past built? In examining key developments within queer theory as well as more current theoretical considerations of queerness and temporality, the whitewashing and racism inherent to queer theory’s identity becomes clear.

In *After Sex?*, Jeff Nunokawa “offers a particularly poignant reminiscence of the queer street, the delicate encounter of activist with theoretical energies, back in the legendary day of Queer Nation and ACT UP” (9), and his sentiments, echoed by theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, point to the

damaging and blinding nostalgia with which (white) queer theory views itself.¹ Nostalgia, particularly within political or politically-motivated fields, is a dangerous emotion because, as Wendy Brown explains in her analysis of “Left Melancholy”: “left melancholy is a form of nostalgia for an expired past--a way of clinging to a broken and outdated dream of class revolution” (Love 148). In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather K. Love uses Brown’s definition of “left melancholy” to inform her own interpretation of how queer theory responds to its traumatic past and draws on Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history” to discuss the intersections of trauma and political change. Love claims:

At the heart of the ambivalence about the angel of history is a key paradox of political life. Although historical losses instill in us a desire for change, they also can unfit us for the activity of making change. If we look back, we may not be able to pull ourselves away from the spectacle of Sodom in flames. (149)

With regards to the past, queer theorists are often tempted to reference or acknowledge the history of being queer without fully delving into the pain and suffering inherent to its traumatic past. Love’s image of the “spectacle of Sodom in flames” represents the fear of being stuck in the traumatic queer past, such as during the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 80s and 90s or in the days of widespread sodomy laws. Her argument focuses on the necessity of a queer theory model that accounts for and dwells in these sites of injury and trauma connected to the queer past without becoming subsumed by them.

Returning to *After Sex?*, Parker and Halley contextualize their exploration of “queer,” stating that “[queer] theory, dependent as it is on [Foucault and Freud], will hence be less the story of the slow-but-steady emergence of an identity over time than an acknowledgement of a temporal predicament” (5). *After Sex?*, then, tries to answer “what is after queer theory?,” and the varying responses demonstrate how queer theory’s consideration of temporality is inevitably tied to

¹ In Alison Reed’s “The Whiter the Bread, the Quicker You’re Dead: Spectacular Absence and Post-Racialized Blackness in (White) Queer Theory,” she uses parentheses to indicate the underlying whiteness in queer theory that is often assumed and silent.

discussions of queer identity and the identity of queer theory itself. Several theorists, in an effort to release queer theory from its sexual connotations, locate the “after” in a turn towards the nonsexual. Michael Cobb, for example, “proposes bravely to leave sex behind altogether so that he can inquire queerly into the politics and affects of singleness” (6), while Elizabeth A. Povinelli seeks to locate the ontological implications of “affiliat[ing] with sexual and nonsexual identities” (6). However, several critics, such as Sharon Marcus and Elizabeth Freeman, argue against distancing queer theory from its sexual origins; Marcus notes that “queer has been the victim of its own popularity, proliferating to the point of uselessness as a neologism for the transgression of any norm” and that “reducing the term’s pejorative sting by universalizing the meaning of queer also depletes its explanatory power” (7). Heather K. Love, in her essay “Queer This,” concretizes Marcus and Freeman’s fears: “It’s just that it’s hard for me to imagine a form of queerness that does not maintain its ties to a specific experience. Behind my work on affect, historiography, and the social, there is a lesbian lying in bed crying” (181). This small sample of queer theorists and their attitudes towards “queer” demonstrates the vast differences between how different sects of the field are attempting to approach queer theory in the post-gay marriage world.

After Sex? has locked onto a significant divide amongst queer theorists, which is the question of universalization versus specification. Both schools of thought focus on “political and psychic dysphoria” (9), which is readily apparent in the “identity-inflected or intersectional work,” by authors such as Richard Thompson Ford, who views “‘queer’ as a way to loosen the lockups of race-equality talk” (8). Parker and Halley claim these works illustrate the implicit viewpoint that “a queer impulse was indispensable and directly productive, both of desire and of...different kinds of queerness [that] don’t map neatly onto each other” (8). However, this “queer impulse” and “different kinds of queerness” become academically trapped in the categorization of “identity-inflected or intersectional work.” Categorizing “identity-inflected or intersectional work” as separate from “mainstream” queer

theory implies a willful ignorance of the intersections of sexuality with other elements, such as race and gender. Thus, queer theorists need to dissolve any nostalgic view of the queer past or present and come face-to-face with the realities of racism inherent to queer identity in America.

“Queer futurity” has almost overshadowed questions of the queer past within contemporary queer scholarship; in *After Sex?*, Kate Thomas takes issue with the “anti-temporality” stance epitomized in Lee Edelman’s *No Future*:

Lee Edelman’s 2004 polemic *No Future* is a caustic refusal of the manic drive to futurity...the queerest mode, he argues, is an intransitive one, one that ‘insists the future stop here’...[but what is] the muscular, epistemic stretch it takes to imagine a queer future? What if that lurching reach forward--that proleptic urge--feels good? (92)

Thomas identifies the anxiety about futurity in queer theory, specifically anxiety about the idea of a queer future that *feels good* in spite of the traumatic roots of queer theory; however, Thomas, Edelman, and Love all seem to approach questions of temporality and queer theory from a point-of-view that places whiteness as the norm. Edelman suggests that temporality shapes all modern sexualities and argues that no politics, no matter how radical, exists without sustaining the hopes of a “reproductive future”; thus, the queerest temporal mode is the “intransitive present,” where the focus of queer life is in the here and now rather than trying to create an ambiguous future. Alison Reed in her essay “The Whiter the Bread, the Quicker You’re Dead: Spectacular Absence and Post-Racialized Blackness in (White) Queer Theory” claims that Edelman’s book exemplifies “...the cult of negation in queer theory, which takes as its motto ‘fuck the future’ and embraces a politics of negativity that sees any vision of collectivity as sentimental fantasy...[and] Edelman’s rant against the promise of the future depends on whiteness as an unmarked, apolitical category” (58). Reed’s critique of Edelman’s manifesto against “reproductive temporality” is situated within her larger critique of the inherent whiteness of queer theory. Reed’s intervention into the whiteness of queer theory goes

beyond her initial claims of “interrogat[ing] the uncritical use of racialized bodies as spectacular markers of queerness” (49) and ventures into offering a model for how “sensuality” may be used to begin dismantling queer theory’s internal hierarchies.

Reed uses James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* to ground her analysis and to position sensuality as the key to off-setting the consequences of whiteness as an identity:

To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread. It will be a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again, instead of the blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber that we have substituted for it. (Reed 61)

For Baldwin, white bread is the “tasteless foam rubber” that constitutes whiteness, and Reed meditates on Baldwin’s emphasis on sensuality to ground her eloquent attempt to divest queerness and queer theory from whiteness. Reed makes clear the necessity of reformulating the way race and racism are discussed within both queer life and queer theory. Reed’s essay closes with a call to invest in “cosubject seduction,” which she claims is an approach to research that privileges subject over object and “[evokes] both the dangers and pleasures of how our research can transform us...” (61). This “seduction” ultimately leads to scholarship that cannot remain within the sterilized world of academia, and thus, allows scholars to construct “alternative archives that refuse to separate theory and literature, understanding literature *as* theory” (61). Reed’s effort to change how queer theory both views itself in the present moment and how the field will construct its identity going forward strikes a distinctly political chord. To view “literature *as* theory” in and of itself suggests that literature carries an epistemic power to change how the world operates and sees itself, just as theory often changes the way scholars operate and interpret texts.

What, exactly, is the quality that gives literature the ability to influence structures of inequality, such as racism or homophobia? According to French political philosopher Jacques

Rancière, “literarity” is the quality in literature that is present “in the contradictions that arise from the political project of speaking the egalitarian axiom of the modern age” (Deranty 22). Without obvious intention, Reed’s invocation of “literature *as* theory” echoes Rancière’s concepts of “literature as politics” and “literarity.” He claims that “literature ‘does’ politics as literature--there is a specific link between politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing” (21). Since literature, in the modern era, has an “excess of words,” where words have multiple and unfixed meaning, literature is able to affect a “partage du sensible,” or a redistribution of the sensible. However, Rancière’s “literarity” becomes problematic when viewed through the lens of American literature; how can literature that has been shaped, willingly or not, by slavery and institutionalized racism speak the “egalitarian axiom” if it refuses to acknowledge the pervasiveness of racism within America? Both Baldwin and Rancière have picked up on the importance of the senses within our understanding of how identity is constructed, deconstructed, and perceived. Reed’s examination of queer theory in light of Baldwin’s theory of whiteness as “white bread” invites us to engage with how “literarity” engages the senses and how being sensual has become integral to the way literature creates, destroys, and portrays identity. To ground Reed and Rancière within a specifically American literary context, I plan to explore Herman Melville’s “Bartleby,” Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, and Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* and find the moments when language, queer identity, and space coincide and both build and deconstruct the normalization of white, gay male identity.

First, I will deconstruct the relationship between Bartleby’s “hermitage,” his infamous “I’d prefer not to,” and his death. The spatial configuration of Bartleby’s “hermitage,” as the attorney calls it, is a desk hidden behind a folding screen, facing a wall, that is enclosed within a larger office space. In terms of room construction, his “hermitage” more accurately resembles a homemade closet. Situating “Bartleby” two decades before the formal 1870 definition of homosexuality sheds light on the importance of the temporal moment and the space of the office in understanding both Bartleby’s

utterance and the lawyer's inability to understand Bartleby. The inability to accurately express himself and to be stuck in a cycle of approximations leads to constant misunderstandings and misrecognition, both of which contribute to the lawyer's good-intentioned but ill-planned abandonment of Bartleby and his subsequent death at the Tombs. Finally, looking at the language in the final pages of the story illustrates how the eruption of "literarity" within the text often leads to death for the subject disrupting the sensible. When the lawyer sets Bartleby's suffering against a racial background, he renders a prescient picture of the complicated topographies of otherness developing in nineteenth-century America.

In chapter two, I move the conversation into the twentieth century and consider how the intersections of post-WWII America and developing movements and ideologies regarding queer life and identity influenced Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Ginsberg pronounces the right and desire of queer persons for humane recognition of their existence, their suffering at the hands of an inherently homophobic social structure, and their constant resistance to these oppressive structures. The epic poem is broken into three parts and a footnote. Each part bleeds into the next, tracing the current state of existence for many marginalized peoples, including LGBTQ+ folks, through the suffering of these peoples at the hands of the state (named in the poem as Leviticus's child-eating demon, Moloch), and into a melancholic lament to Carl Solomon, a gay man institutionalized at the same time as Ginsberg, at his horrific treatment in a mental asylum. From the large stars of the universe in the opening lines of the poem to the individual experience of a man inside a straightjacket, Ginsberg demonstrates how the implosion of American identity in the post-World War II moment creates a vacuum perfectly crafted for the rise of visibility for the marginalized masses, specifically LGBTQ+ individuals. Inside this vacuum, however, Ginsberg locates the queer body within the pre-existing language of the racial body and demonstrates how types of otherness, particularly queerness, will often be set against a racial background and use the black body/black images as a yardstick for suffering. As the Beat

movement pushes for a “redistribution of the sensible” that makes visible queer identity within America, Ginsberg’s four-part poem builds its *Howl* on racial imagery in the first part of the poem before abandoning the racial aspects after their purpose (establishing the depth of queer suffering) has been served. Ultimately, Ginsberg’s *Howl* is a testament to how white queer authors in America position queer identity as synonymous with being white and male.

Finally, I examine Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, a twenty-first century text set in seventeenth century colonial America. Published in 2008, Morrison’s novel is the most revolutionary of the texts considered within this thesis because of its postmodern approach to pre-modern America. Morrison’s narrative centers around Florens, a young slave girl, whose point of view shapes how we see the novel and its other characters. At the end of the novel, we learn that Florens has been inscribing her story all along with a nail on the walls and wood of her dead master’s house. Throughout *A Mercy*, the inchoate forms of racial and sexual hierarchies run parallel to one another; similarly, Morrison parallels Florens’ rebellious writing with the imaginings of Willard and Scully, two overtly homosexual characters, whose hopeful rendering of a future in America that includes homosexuality contains shades of the formation of white privilege. Although Florens herself is presumably straight, given her interactions with the freed African blacksmith, reading her writing process in light of the two homosexual characters in the text illuminates how the nebulous formations of racial and sexual hierarchies interacted in colonial America before their solidification into our contemporary understanding of them. Willard and Scully’s willingness to let Mistress Vaark mistreat Sorrow, Lina, and Florens after Jacob Vaark’s death signifies how white, male homosexuality has always been tied up in the binds of white supremacy and white privilege. At the same time, Morrison’s construction of the two male characters and their interactions with the other characters in the novel, specifically the women, makes possible a metatextual reading of Morrison’s novel, putting her work in conversation

with discourse surrounding modern queer life: gay marriage, the AIDS epidemic, and the ability for same-sex couples to adopt.

If we consider Willard and Scully's presence as connected to modern conversations, then Florens' should be considered as well. I argue that Scully's ability to "imagine a future" (Morrison 156) with Willard stems from a privileged position as a white male that predicts the flawed and privileged position of dismissing or ignoring the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality; on the other hand, Florens is aware of the impermanence of her story and her place in the world, and her inscription of her own story over the walls of her dead master's house signifies how marginalized communities must change space with their own language rather than relying on the language and structures of their oppressors.

“The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom”: Bartleby’s Hermitage,
Language Anxiety, and Racializing Queer Suffering

Turkey, one of the clerks in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall-street,” threatens to physically harm Bartleby mid-way through the story when Bartleby announces his “preference” to not do any work: “I think I’ll [Turkey] just step behind this screen, and black his eyes for him!” (10). Bartleby’s “hermitage,” as the lawyer calls it, seems to be a space created to separate Bartleby from his coworkers. The spatial configuration of the office post-Bartleby’s arrival ultimately affects how the lawyer perceives and understands the microcosmic hierarchy existing within the office itself. Bartleby’s “hermitage” is a desk hidden behind a folding screen, facing a wall, that is enclosed within a larger office space--more specifically, the lawyer’s office. The other two clerks, Turkey and Nippers, are situated in an adjacent room at their own desks; in terms of modern architecture, Bartleby’s “hermitage” is akin to a DIY closet. In *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick outlines the tremendous epistemological implications of the closet and argues that “any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” (1). She posits that once secrecy and disclosure became “not contingently but integrally infused with one particular object of cognition...[which was] the homosexual topic” (74), then the homo/heterosexual definition created a double enclosure, or the “closet.” Homosexuality, then, was rendered visible through its radical enclosure within and disclosure through the closet. However, “Bartleby” was published in 1853, which was almost two decades before the moment of homosexual definition.² Thus, examining the implications of

² In 1870, Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal, a German psychiatrist, delineated the lines of homosexuality as an *identity* rather than as a series of sodomitic acts. Michel Foucault, French philosopher and literary critic, uses Westphal’s 1870 definition of “contrary sexual sensations” (43) as the moment that formed the “psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality...[and when] the homosexual [became] a species” (43). Foucault asserts that our conception of Victorian sexuality as “repressed” is limiting; instead, society ought to view the history of sexuality, particularly in the Victorian era, as “generative” rather than “repressed,” since the “discourse of sex” was “subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement [which has resulted in the] dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities” (12).

Bartleby's "closet" on his relationship with the lawyer must be filtered through a historical lens that accounts for the lack of sexuality-specific language. In this chapter, I contend that turning to a text written before the definition of homosexuality and heterosexuality helps uncover how American writers used racial imagery and the cultural understanding of the atrocities of slavery and institutionalized racism to express internalized anxiety about other forms of "otherness," such as queerness. As the lawyer reconstructs Bartleby's life, his anxiety regarding the developing yet unclear sexuality-specific language becomes clear in two manners: his increasingly violent reactions to Bartleby's presence and his "I'd prefer not to," and his reliance on black and African imagery at the end of the story to articulate queer suffering.

Melville's narrative construction offers a strange parallel to the temporal anxieties plaguing modern queer theory. Bartleby's death is not kept a secret from the reader; however, the circumstances surrounding Bartleby's demise and the lawyer's role in his death remain concealed until the end of the story. As readers, we depend on the lawyer to feed us the "few passages in the life of Bartleby" (13) that the lawyer claims were worth more than "the biographies of all other scribes" (13). In this temporal bind, the reader continues towards Bartleby's certain death without knowing the posthumous reconstruction stems from the man responsible for Bartleby's death. Queer theory, too, is stuck in a bind, immobilizing it in the present, watching the "past" unfold as it progresses towards a "future" that is unknowable yet inevitably shaped by the current moment. However, re-reading through the narrative with this posthumous lens in mind allows the reader to decipher the lawyer's reconstruction and track the epistemological shifts Bartleby represents. Michael D. Snediker in "Queer Philology and Chronic Pain" posits that within the story, "...the answer to *what is going on here?* is somewhere between *I don't know* and *nothing*" (15). A first, superficial reading makes this "somewhere" in-between seem impossible to locate; however, the connections between the lawyer's sensory perceptions and his narrative recapitulation of Bartleby's life reveal how

Bartleby's refusal to fit within a circumscribed set of rules and epistemologies forces the lawyer's perception of the world to shift, resulting in the self-justified violence against Bartleby.

Keeping the posthumous lens in mind, examining the opening paragraph of the narrative illuminates the lawyer's reliance on sense perception to craft his memory of Bartleby: "...of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby, nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature" (13). Situating Bartleby's life and biography as "literature" signals to the reader that this narrative is constructed and put together, which allows for the lawyer to acknowledge the incomplete aspects of Bartleby's life that he can never claim to know. Bartleby, according to the lawyer, was "one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources" (13), and the lawyer saw little with "[his] own astonished eyes...[and] that is all [he knows] of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel" (13). Returning to Reed's claim of "literature as theory" and Ranciere's conception of "literarity" helps unpack the importance of Melville's narrative choices in the opening paragraph. Bartleby's life was discernible only in its "original sources" and through what the lawyer saw or heard (13), and the emphasis on senses creates a temporal gap through which the reader enters the "present" moment of perception with the lawyer (the moment of the "partage du sensible"). Each text examined in this thesis has a similar moment that creates this temporal gap, but in Melville and Ginsberg, the "redistribution" fails to either (1) engage the past, (2) look towards the future, or (3) both. As the text progresses and the lawyer's sense perceptions give way to violent and disturbing actions, Melville's temporal constraints deprive him of the language to describe Bartleby's suffering and death in a concrete way that moves beyond disconcerting "otherness"; thus, the narrative enclosure of Bartleby's life becomes explicitly rendered in racialized terms at the end of the story to make clear the extent of Bartleby's pain.

In *Passive Constitutions, or, 7 ½ Times Bartleby*, Branka Arsić explores Bartleby's enigmatic character and resistance to traditional literary discourse and offers radical new readings stemming from both an ontological and ethical point of view. In her chapter entitled "Bartleby or the Celibatory Machine (Bachelor's Hall)," Arsić reads Bartleby as "the bachelor of all bachelors" because of his near-constant presence within the office space. According to Arsić, writers seldom marry because marriage makes writing impossible (118); thus, Bartleby's apparent connection to the office space replaces the bonds of the nineteenth-century marriage economy with a faithful commitment to being a scrivener. However, I argue that Bartleby's invasion of the office space is not sufficient grounds to "wed" him to his writing; rather, Bartleby begins to mimic those around him when he "ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light...He wrote on silently, palely, mechanically" (Melville 19-20). However, the lawyer's decision to physically separate Bartleby from the other scribes and subsequent attempt to integrate him results in the proto-Sedgwickian closet. In her discussion of race in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Siobhan B. Somerville posits that Sedgwick avoids using/addressing race and sexuality because "[Sedgwick claims that] 'ethnic/cultural/religious oppressions such as anti-Semitism are more analogous' to homophobia because 'the stigmatized individual has at least some discretion...over other people's knowledge'" (198). Sedgwick's argument seems innocuous, but ignoring how racial oppression has flourished in America, almost beyond that of ethnic or cultural oppression, erases the damage literature does when authors use racial injustice as a metaphor to circumscribe queer suffering. In the same vein that artificial norms of Victorian sexuality made "the image of the imperial prude...emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality," the failure to engage with how (white) queer authors and texts have used racialized bodies and images has resulted in the proliferation and acceptance of the (white) queer man as representative of the endless nuances of race, gender, and sexuality.

Bartleby's entrance into the office space prompts the lawyer to create a physical double enclosure around the young scrivener that mimics a closet space.³ The lawyer's passive description of Bartleby as a "motionless young man" of a "singularly sedate" aspect who "might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers" (19) indicates a desire to encompass Bartleby within the pre-existing structure of the office. Prior to Bartleby's arrival, the lawyer's recapitulation of his own personality and that of Turkey and Nipper's seems to illustrate a community of ill-tempered men who should not be terribly bothered by an uncooperative scrivener. However, the lawyer notes that Turkey was useful and hardworking prior to noon, and Nippers was useless in the morning and a good clerk in the afternoon (17-18). Therefore, their "eccentricities" become part of a well-oiled machine that the lawyer considers "a good natural arrangement under the circumstances" (18). Melville's use of the word "eccentricities" to describe Turkey and Nipper's dispositions seems innocuous, but to be eccentric has long been a euphemism for same-sex desire. Literally, "eccentric" means "not concentric with another circle" or of being "not centrally placed" ("eccentric, adj. and n."); however, as Christopher Castiglia argues in *The Practices of Hope: Literary Criticism in Disenchanted Times*, eccentricity was "literally a position outside the center [that] challenged the cultural conformity of the 1950s affirmative rubric [and thus] often served as a euphemism for homosexuality" (124). It is unclear whether or not Melville intends for the word to be used in this manner, but throughout the lawyer's description of Turkey and Nipper's "eccentricities," the lawyer refers to these behaviors as derived from "nature herself" (18). For Turkey and Nippers, then, to balance each other in a regulated fashion that maintained a "good natural arrangement *under the circumstances*" (18, emphasis added) signals (1) an awareness on the lawyer's part that these

³ Critic Graham Thompson engages with the space of the office and asserts that the office "as a specific spatial site with the power to organize and structure personal and social relationships...has not yet been considered at all in the literary field in relation to male sexuality" (397). Thompson's approach to "Bartleby" is ambitious and our methods seem similar, but he fails to consider the temporal limitations of reading Sedgwickian binaries into the text. Thompson gives attention to the spatiality of the office but doesn't engage with the underlying power structures in ways that are both temporally appropriate and significant to a queer reading of the text.

“eccentricities” were both natural and uncommon and (2) were acceptable as long as they did not disrupt the overall hierarchy of the office. As discussed earlier, the hierarchy of the office space exists in place of the heterosexual marriage economy that dominates the domestic space. Thus, Bartleby’s “eccentricities” (which is the word the lawyer uses again later in the narrative) are acceptable within a certain context, but when Bartleby opts out of the marriage economy *and* refuses to do copying work, the lawyer is presented with a new “otherness” outside of his comprehension and language.

Before Bartleby’s “I’d prefer not to” is uttered for the first time, the lawyer enjoys a brief period of productivity from the young scrivener after situating him within the office space. Moving Bartleby into his office allows the lawyer to express his desire to subsume Bartleby so that “this quiet man [was] within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done” (6). However, the lawyer visually isolates Bartleby by “procur[ing] a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not [remove] him from my voice. And thus, in a manner, privacy and society were joined” (6). At this moment, Bartleby is enclosed within a double enclosure that resembles Sedgwick’s closet. Sedgwick describes the closet as a space in which homosexuality was relegated after its definition once secrecy and disclosure become “not contingently but integrally infused with one particular object of cognition...the homosexual topic” (Sedgwick 74). In this case, privacy and society are substitutes for secrecy and disclosure, and therefore, Bartleby’s being becomes the object of cognition that is made visible by its enclosure. The division that the lawyer creates is a physical manifestation of the desire to situate Bartleby within his world (keeping him within easy call) without being affected by Bartleby’s presence. Here, Melville’s emphasis on voice demonstrates how the lawyer uses language to maintain control and order his world; thus, Bartleby’s utterance will create a vocal and linguistic aporia, preventing the lawyer from both understanding Bartleby during his lifetime and re-constructing a portrait of Bartleby after his death.

Ironically, the lawyer creates the necessary conditions for the emergence of Bartleby's utterance. Given the important relationship of space to language in "Bartleby" and in queer theory, it seems that Bartleby's utterance could be a precursor Sedgwick's "closeted" speech acts; while it is inaccurate to call "I'd prefer not to" a true "closeted" speech act, it is also irresponsible to dismiss the similarities between Sedgwick's concept and Bartleby's speech. The lawyer's observation that Bartleby "did an extraordinary quantity of writing" at first, as if he was "long famishing for something to copy [and] seemed to gorge himself on [those] documents" is unexplainable at first. Bartleby, who has been relegated to this space of simultaneous visibility and erasure, is doing the lawyer's work and participating in the office hierarchy without hesitation. However, the lawyer's description that Bartleby "wrote on silently, palely, mechanically" indicates that this is simply a facsimile of hierarchical participation. In truth, Bartleby's silence is similar to "closeted-ness," which Sedgwick describes as "a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence--not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (3). Whereas critic Daniel D. Couch reads Bartleby's silence and "the interstitial moments in the story in which a 'perfect silence' might emerge...[as generating] a syntax of silence in which Bartleby's passive existence emerges" (169), I position Bartleby's silence as a performance of a type of "closeted-ness" that helps illustrate how Bartleby's silence, as well as his utterance, are in fact part of an active resistance to the structures of power around him. Bartleby is separated, physically, from the lawyer and the other clerks; however, he is still within earshot and connected to the lawyer's voice. Bartleby's work within the closet, then, is a type of silence that exists as part of the understanding that he is separate and *different* because of his place within the closet. Perhaps, Bartleby would have continued in this closet silence had he been left in the lawyer's double enclosure. However, shortly after Bartleby's arrival, he is asked to leave the

closet to help re-read and verify reports. At this moment, the infamous “I’d prefer not to” is constructed, and this silent “closeted” speech act is materialized.

Once Bartleby has exited the “hermitage,” he cannot go back into it and resume the same work, but he has no alternative route to turn to because a space and language for queerness does not exist: those definitions have not been formally rendered yet. Given the myriad of disruptions caused by Bartleby’s utterance, I posit that it is a representation of “literarity.” Melville shows how the eruption of “literarity” within the text often leads to death for the subject disrupting the sensible. When the lawyer sets Bartleby’s suffering against a racial background, he renders a prescient picture of the complicated topographies of otherness developing in nineteenth-century America.

After Bartleby’s original “I’d prefer not to,” the lawyer does not know what to make of the situation, and he oscillates between outright ignoring Bartleby and subconsciously recognizing the threat of “I’d prefer not to.” He makes note of Bartleby’s calmness and remarks that “had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner, in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises” (21). The lawyer’s categorization of Bartleby as not “ordinarily human” reveals that from the moment Bartleby utters “I’d prefer not to,” he becomes a lesser form of life in the lawyer’s eyes. At first glance, the lawyer’s response seems kind, as he does not “violently [dismiss Bartleby]” from the office; however, when the lawyer equates Bartleby with a bust of Cicero, he equates the young scrivener with an object: “I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out doors...” (7). When the lawyer regards Bartleby as an object, he is able to dehumanize Bartleby and disregard the reasons *why* he prefers not to. However, there may be a deeper connection between Bartleby and Cicero that reveals the lawyer’s awareness, conscious or unconscious, of the importance of Bartleby’s linguistic choices. One of Cicero’s legacies is his enormous contribution to the Latin language and its subsequent effects on European literature. This is significant in regards to

both Bartleby and the lawyer's narrative choices. The lawyer makes a metonymic connection between the bust of Cicero and Bartleby in an effort to categorize and make legible the undefinable. However, it is not a connection readily digested by the reader, and therefore, this confusing metonym underscores both the lawyer's desire to configure Bartleby within his preconceived perceptions and his inability to do so. Bartleby, a figure using language to disrupt an established hierarchy, could be considered as a Cicero figure for "closeted" language. As stated before, "I'd prefer not to" enacts a type of "particular silence" inherent to closeted speech acts. While Sedgwick's notion of these speech acts as silence can be taken literally, I contend that reading "I'd prefer not to" as a silence reveals the significance of "I'd prefer not to" as representative of "literarity" and helps establish a lineage for queer language outside of a heteronormative framework. If this is the case, then Bartleby's repetition of the phrase becomes even more significant and helps explain why the lawyer's reactions become increasingly violent over the course of the story.

When Bartleby's "I'd prefer not to" appears next, it is uttered to the whole group rather than just the lawyer, and the blatant disrespect to the office hierarchy frustrates the lawyer. The lawyer calls his clerks in to go over four copies of a document, placing "the four copies in the hands of [his] four clerks, while [he] should read from the original. Accordingly, Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut had taken their seats in a row, each with his document in hand, when [he] called Bartleby to join..." (8). The lawyer assumes the head role as he "read[s] from the original," and thus, the clerks all have copies. Each document, then, is a metonymic representation of how the lawyer and the clerks fit into the hierarchy, as even though the lawyer has the "original," it is still a transcription of an oral conversation. Thus, even the "original" document is a copy of another form, such as the hierarchy within the office mimics the heteronormative function in the domestic world. Once again, the lawyer forces Bartleby to leave his "closet" and tries to assimilate him into the office hierarchy. The lawyer invites him to look at the quadruplicates, and Bartley predictably responds, "I'd prefer not to" before

he “gently disappeared behind the screen” (8). Bartleby’s re-entrance into the closet spaces draws the lawyer’s attention, and his reaction to Bartleby’s “hermitage” sheds light on the lawyer’s growing struggle to define Bartleby and his feelings towards the dissentive scrivener

After Bartleby returns to his closet, the lawyer stares and feels that “for a few moments, I was turned into a pillar of salt” (8). The lawyer’s remark is an obvious reference to Lot’s wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back at Sodom and Gomorrah. God condemned Sodom and Gomorrah for its extreme depravity, which included incest, gambling, prostitution, and same-sex relations. Lot’s family were the only righteous people in the town, and so God granted them permission to leave as an act of mercy. When Lot’s wife looks back, God punished her by turning her into a pillar of salt. This allusion is easy to skim over and dismiss, but the reference to Lot’s wife holds the key to understanding how Melville uses Bartleby to simultaneously represent a desire for a queer past and anxiety regarding a queer future. In “Sex Panics, Sex Public, Sex Memories,” Christopher Castiglia discusses the impact of individual and collective community. While retrospection is powerful, Castiglia notes that “To look back is, after all, to refuse the imperative laid down at the destruction of Sodom” (114). The lawyer is looking *back* at a space that he has inhabited before (returning him to the past) and, for the moment, turning away from the indefinable future that exists in the wake of Bartleby’s utterance and the evolving sexuality-specific language.

Before the lawyer’s actions turn violent, he attempts to reconcile with Bartleby’s “eccentricities.” The lawyer remarks that “nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance [...] Poor fellow! Thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary” (10). As stated earlier, to be “eccentric” is often associated with same-sex desire, and once again, the lawyer categorizes these “eccentricities” as involuntary. One of the biggest arguments made against homosexuality, particularly from a Judeo-Christian perspective, is that homosexuality is a sin because it is a *choice*

for a man to lie with another man, or a woman with another woman. However, the lawyer perceives Bartleby to exhibit these eccentricities as if they are innate to him. If this is the case, then Bartleby's "eccentricities" seem to appear only in comparison to the others; his "I'd prefer not to" is the phrase that delineates him as separate from Turkey or Nippers, just as the screen keeps him separate from his co-workers. If the lawyer is aware of these differences, then, why does he choose to keep Bartleby around? On the surface, it seems that the lawyer finds Bartleby useful, in some way, and he says "I can get along with him. If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve" (10). Melville's foreshadowing is palpable. Bartleby eventually dies from starvation in the Tombs, and the lawyer is responsible for sending him there because Bartleby refuses to vacate the office building. As time progresses, the lawyer will become the "less indulgent employer," and his treatment of Bartleby will reveal his own selfish desires, both societal and personal, that end up killing Bartleby.

Shortly after Turkey's initial threat of violence, Melville illustrates the lawyer's fear of his desire for Bartleby is the true root of his anger. The lawyer comments that "I could not, for the very soul of me, avoid falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him" (12). Bartleby disrupts the neurotic function and the root of reason within the office. When Bartleby is silent, the lawyer's fear dissipates. What, then, are we to make of "spasmodic passions"? Characterizing his "passions" with Bartleby using a term indicating violent, sudden movement hints that the lawyer briefly gives into Bartleby's disruptive presence. I am not suggesting that the phrase "falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him" means that the lawyer and Bartleby were engaged in any type of sexual relationship. While that is a possibility, I argue that it is more likely that "with," in this case, is being used as a function word to indicate an object of attention, such as "I was angry with him." Reading the phrase this way, the lawyer's actions through the rest of the paragraph as well as the rest of the story take on a new meaning. The lawyer makes it clear that Bartleby's "I'd prefer not to" brings on

these “spasmodic passions,” and it follows that the lawyer’s anger explodes when he is confronted with “I’d prefer not to”-- a phrase linked with queer potentiality that he cannot, or will not, engage in.

Therefore, his desire transforms into anger every time that Bartleby rejects reason, and therefore, rejects him. The lawyer asks how could he “refrain from bitterly exclaiming upon such perverseness--such unreasonableness” (12). The hyphenated connection between “perverseness” and “unreasonableness” is the most concrete example of the connection between queerness and “literarity.” The lawyer perceives the world in a way that makes *reasonable* sense to him, such as accepting heterosexual marriage as the norm; thus, categorizing Bartleby’s “I’d prefer not to” as an unreasonable claim makes it “perverse,” and in this case, that means it can also be read as queer. The connection between perverseness and non-reason continues to unfold and unravel the tenuous relationship between the lawyer and Bartleby. After continuing to try and alter Bartleby’s behavior, the lawyer asks him directly to start examining papers: ““Say now you will help to examine papers to-morrow or next day: in short, say now that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable:--say so, Bartleby” (16). Bartleby gives a short but important response, saying, “At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable” (16). The lawyer’s appeal to reasonability is the closest language we will get to an appeal for homonormativity. As such, when Bartleby begins using this word as well, it shows that he has a specific thing that he “would prefer not to”--he would prefer not to be reasonable, or, normative. While Bartleby never states what it is that he would prefer, we might infer from his “I would prefer not to be a little reasonable” as a roundabout of saying “I’d prefer the opposite of reason,” which in my analysis is equal to queerness. While I am not interested in putting words in Bartleby’s, or Melville’s, mouth, I think it falls within the scope of my argument and this paper to think about what Bartleby is saying through his repeated, obfuscating utterance. The language that Bartleby uses seems to have an effect on the entire office, and the lawyer’s increasing irritation at Turkey and Nippers’ use of “prefer,” and even at his own use of the word (16), suggests

that language is a key component to how the office hierarchy is upheld. Taking the importance of language into account, the lawyer's violent actions towards Bartleby can be traced through his attempts to continually silence Bartleby, and perhaps, the entire story should be considered as a form of silencing, due to the lawyer's continual attempts to make Bartleby's life understandable and legible according to his own reasoning.

However, it is not Bartleby, *per se*, that is a threat; rather, it is the perception of the lawyer's *relationship* to Bartleby that becomes a threat. As the lawyer goes on to elaborate, he would have allowed Bartleby, for "sweet charity's sake" (21), to stay "harmless and noiselessly as any of these old chairs," but there were "unsolicited and uncharitable remarks obtruded upon me by my professional friends who visited the rooms" (22). From the standpoint of a theological reading, the lawyer's reaction encapsulates the failures of a type of vain Christianity built on pseudo-altruistic charity rather than true "love for another." However, going further with my own queer lens, I see the "unsolicited and uncharitable remarks" as one of the main catalysts for the lawyer's violence. The lawyer, it seems, has no problem with Bartleby staying around, and it is possible that this is because the lawyer desires the same kind of queerness that Bartleby supposedly does. However, the lawyer cannot abide by Bartleby's open expression of such a desire, even if his "expression" of it is through a refusal to participate and silence. As such, the lawyer goes so far as to remove himself from the office and find a new abode (23), and as he is having the office emptied, he watches Bartleby: "...he remained standing behind the screen, which I directed to be removed the last thing. It was withdrawn; and being folded up like a huge folio left him the motionless occupant of a naked room" (23). The lawyer's removal of the screen attempts to return the lawyer and Bartleby to their original standing, where Bartleby is the "motionless" young man coming to fulfill the lawyer's advertisement. However, while the physical construction can be removed, the epistemological effects that are to become the foundation of Sedgwick's closet remain present. Bartleby and the lawyer only know how

to understand and know each other through the presence of that screen, and the lawyer “stood in the entry watching him a moment, while something from within me upbraided me. I re-entered with my hand in my pack--and--and my heart in my mouth” (23-24). This moment of watching, “upbraiding,” and emotion speaks to the lawyer’s own feelings towards Bartleby. He says a paltry goodbye, leaves, and for the rest of the story, the lawyer re-iterates over and over how he is *not* responsible for Bartleby. If this is the case, then, why does he continually appear in Bartleby’s life and why does he narrate Bartleby’s story?

When several upset building inhabitants confront the lawyer about Bartleby, who is still “haunting” the building after the lawyer has moved offices, the lawyer agrees to come speak to him. He is clear with Bartleby about how he must leave because “either you must do something, or something must be done to you” (25). This line may be the most specific reference to the lengths that individuals will go to in order to maintain their perceived order of the world. The lawyer presents Bartleby with several options--a clerkship, being a bartender, becoming a travel companion--but none of them satisfy Bartleby. At the last moment, the lawyer makes a new offer to Bartleby that he has thought about before: “Bartleby...will you go home with me now--not to my office, but to my dwelling--and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away” (26). Bartleby responds, “No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all” (26). Bartleby’s answer is the clear cut rejection of the homonormative life that the lawyer has offered him. While the offer seems innocuous or only slightly romantically colored, looking at the syntactical arrangement of “you” and “my” against “we,” “our,” and “us” demonstrates how the proposed move of Bartleby into the lawyer’s home would merge the two as one, replicating the heterosexual marriage economy in a *much* more overt way than the office itself. After the lawyer makes the offer, directly after “to *my* dwelling,” the language shifts so that the lawyer considers Bartleby as his own, as the “you” becomes “we” and “our.” Bartleby’s rejection,

then, can be understood as a rejection of the homonormative constraints of the lawyer's desire, as even this most blatant offer comes with a caveat: "some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure" (26). The arrangement will affect Bartleby, the *you*, but the collective "our" will make the decision, suggesting that the lawyer perceives, even if only subconsciously, that no homosexual partnership could survive in the realm of the domestic for any length of time, as it will eventually come under the scrutiny of the heterosexual marriage economy, just as Bartleby's presence in the office eventually came under scrutiny of other lawyers.

The ending, then, suggests that Bartleby's arrest is the inevitable end for the queer person whose language and presence are both seen as perverse and pervasive. The lawyer's attempts to care for Bartleby in the prison seem to be too little, too late, as Bartleby comments that "I want nothing to say to you" (27) when the lawyer visits him. In this final statement, the reader is given Bartleby's first use of "want"; prior to this exclamation, all of Bartleby's preferences or non-preferences have been filtered through negations ("I'd prefer not to" or "I would rather not"). Bartleby has been pushed into a corner and forced to "want," even if his "want" equates to "nothing." Re-considering Bartleby's "I want nothing to say to you," then, in light of the lawyer's continual attempts to restructure Bartleby within the narrative itself, I see a double-meaning in the word "want." First, there is the traditional take of "want" as "desire," which indicates that Bartleby may have something to say to the lawyer but wishes to not express it; and the second interpretation, that of "want" as "lacking or deficient," implies that Bartleby has plenty to say to the lawyer but perhaps no means of expression. Both readings are similar, but the subtle difference between "desiring" to say nothing and lacking the ability to express what one thinks coincides with the fact that we are viewing Bartleby through the posthumous lens of his own killer. Bartleby, in this moment, recognizes that the lawyer has left him with no means of expression, and it is that inaccessibility to language that finally kills Bartleby.

In the last moment that the lawyer visits Bartleby, his interaction with and reaction to Bartleby indicate a desire to subsume Bartleby's life and subjectivity within the larger discourse of humanity that still has no linguistic means of accounting for a subject like Bartleby. When the lawyer comes to visit Bartleby for the last time, his description of the Tombs and Bartleby invokes Egyptian imagery:

The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed dropped by birds, had sprung. Strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones, I saw the wasted Bartleby. But nothing stirred. (28-29).

In his astute reading of Melville's "The Bell-Tower," Ivy G. Wilson articulates how Melville's "sentiments about 'working' and 'slaving,' [...] ultimately divulge how racialized slavery could not but permeate his consciousness" (30). These allusions, Wilson contends, demonstrate how "The Bell-Tower" makes clear the connections between the shifting face of American nationalism in the then-emerging antebellum America. "The Bell-Tower" accompanies "Bartleby" in *The Piazza Tales*, so it is not illogical to view Melville's Egyptian imagery as an allusion to Africa more generally, and perhaps, the status of those encased within the "Egyptian character" of both America's social and judicial systems, represented first in the office and finally in the Tombs. Colin Dayan argues that Bartleby is aware of his place in the Tombs, and his spatial awareness indicates that "he knows what it means to have lost the right to have rights" (13). She concludes that Bartleby illustrates the growing similarities between the poor civil subject and the slave in nineteenth-century America, stating that "those who do not order, ordain, or own are not only excluded, but also incapable of exercising the

rights attached to persons” (13). Both Wilson and Dayan highlight the underlying structure of slavery and its inequities, which have inevitably influenced Melville’s writing, particularly in his rendering of *Bartleby*. As such, Melville’s use of Egyptian imagery to elucidate on the ongoing conditions of enslavement, and particularly *Bartleby*’s imprisonment, indicates that Melville’s awareness of the racial topography of America might intersect with his awareness of the different topographies of otherness in America. In regards to *Bartleby*, I read that otherness as queerness.

The last time that the lawyer visits *Bartleby*, he is curled up and seems to be sleeping, except his eyes are open and staring (29), and the lawyer remarks that “something prompted me to touch him. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet” (29). This moment seems to be the only physical contact between the two in the story, and this moment of humanity, where *Bartleby*’s suffering is palpable, is too much for the lawyer to handle. He leaves the prison and never returns, but his final remark sheds some light on how Melville’s use of Egyptian imagery plays out in *Bartleby*’s dying moment. As he turns away from *Bartleby*, the prison cook asks him whether or not *Bartleby* will eat tonight: “His dinner is ready. Won’t he dine to-day, either? Or does he live without dining?’ ‘Lives without dining,’ said I, and closed his eyes. ‘Eh!--He’s asleep, ain’t he?’ ‘With kings and counselors,’ murmured I” (29). The allusion to “kings and counselors” as well as the earlier pyramid imagery illustrates how the lawyer is relying on metaphor and allusion to shift the blame of *Bartleby*’s death onto the larger systems of inequality without acknowledging his own problematic role within that system. When the lawyer claims that “imagination will readily provide the meager recital of poor *Bartleby*’s interment” (29), he demonstrates his unwillingness to engage with the details of *Bartleby*’s death, which points to the lawyer’s desire to distance himself from his own culpability. His final exclamation, then, attempts to subsume *Bartleby* into the larger discourse the rest of humanity. “Ah *Bartleby*! Ah humanity!” simultaneously separates and joins *Bartleby* with the larger discourses of what it meant to be “human” in nineteenth-century America.

When read as syntactically separate, the exclamation indicates how separate Bartleby's objectification and oppression, of which the lawyer is a part, has left him as outside of being "human"; however, when read as a syllogism, Bartleby becomes subsumed into the larger narrative of humanity that refuses to acknowledge the individual's (the lawyer's) role in Bartleby's death.

"Bartleby" demonstrates how the closet comes into being, how it functions, and how its visibility through radical enclosure makes it possible for people, such as the lawyer, to construct narratives around the lives of queer people, and other marginalized persons, without engaging with or revealing the true nature of those lives. Melville's works, specifically, seem to be fertile ground for exploring how these story-tellers, such as the lawyer and Ishmael, may be constructing stories in problematic and erasing ways. Melville engaged, directly or indirectly, with queer narratives and characters, even if he does not realize it; however, his use of Egyptian/African imagery suggests that Melville has internalized the damaging racial hierarchy in America, so it is not a far jump to think that he recognized the beginnings of the heterosexist hierarchy, as well. As that hierarchy is borne and grows, however, literary descendants of Melville, particularly Allen Ginsberg, seem to forget or ignore the inherent racism of American society, which leads to a problematic incorporation of black bodies as symbols, both negative and positive, that fails to account for the real intersections of race and sexuality.

Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and the Problem of Big Queer Lonely Lyrics

Just as the topography of slavery and racism in pre-Civil War America informed Melville's conceptions of "otherness" in America, the shifting social landscape in the Northern United States, specifically in the New York area, influenced Allen Ginsberg and his conception of what it means to be "other" in America. Richard Eberhart, in his 1957 review of *Howl* for *The New York Times Book Review*, notes that "[*Howl*] is based on destructive violence. It is profoundly Jewish in temper" (25). Max Gartenberg elucidates on the "profound" Jewishness of Ginsberg and *Howl* in an article for *The Reconstructionist*, a journal for contemporary, progressive Jewish thought. In his article, Gartenberg suggests that Ginsberg represents "the mid-Twentieth century existential Jew," (9) and *Howl* is a lament for a "Jewishness which has undergone violence, cruelty, madness and has been twisted by the experience" (9). He makes this claim in direct response to Charles Marowitz, who argues that Ginsberg should be associated with those Jews who "[seek] debasement of character...by passing for white and white Protestant' such as 'most of the noncreative "moral" critics as have poured out of Columbia [Ginsberg's alma mater]'" (Gartenberg 9). Gartenberg refutes that Ginsberg's writing tries to "pass" for "white and white Protestant," arguing instead that *Howl* demonstrates how, for Ginsberg, "hate is [mingled with] an overwelling of love and mingled with shame belonging to an excluded minority...[this is a] revulsion so extreme that it takes the form of identification with the antithesis of the majority, the Negro" (9). What all three critics--Eberhart, Gartenberg, and Marowitz--miss or ignore is that Ginsberg's howl stems from "belonging to an excluded minority" outside of ethnicity or race: Ginsberg's poem, in his own words, is filled with "big queer lonely lyrics about Whitman & Moloch in whom I sit lonely cocksucking" (Ginsberg 79) meant to present readers with a seemingly insensible account of queer life in America in order to force readers to re-order their perception of queerness.

Throughout *Howl*, Ginsberg does make several references to his Jewish heritage as a way to incorporate ethnic oppression within his critique of sexual oppression; however, the first part of the four-part poem uses racial imagery, specifically, to make the “form of identification” before gradually abandoning the racial images and metaphors. Ginsberg’s *Howl* demonstrates how types of otherness, particularly queerness, will often be set against a racial background and use the black body/black images as a yardstick for suffering. As the Beat movement pushes for a “redistribution of the sensible” that makes visible queer identity within America, Ginsberg’s four-part poem builds its *Howl* on racial imagery in the first part of the poem before abandoning the racial aspects after their purpose (establishing the depth of queer suffering) has been served. Ultimately, Ginsberg’s *Howl* is a testament to how white queer authors in American position queer identity as synonymous with being white and male. Gartenberg’s claim that Ginsberg uses “the Negro” to explore his own “shame” and “revulsion” is accurate (9), and so, employing Ranciere’s concept of “literarity” allows us to examine how attempts to “redistribute” the “sensible perception” of political subjectivity in American literature that fail to reckon with the legacy of slavery are ultimately violent acts that reify America’s false decree that as a *demos*, we are all free and equal. Within *Howl*, examining the “literarity” of the text exposes the racist underpinnings of seeking “equality” upon which Ginsberg’s howl is built.

While Allen Ginsberg writes from a place of authentic suffering, his appropriation of black jazz aesthetics and use of black imagery is incredibly problematic. Marianne Moore notes in a letter to Ginsberg’s father, Louis, William Carlos Williams was a substantial influence during Ginsberg’s early writing career; he wrote the introduction to Ginsberg’s first collection, *Empty Mirrors*, in which he praises Ginsberg’s stylistic innovations and compares him to Dante Alighieri and Geoffrey Chaucer. Williams asserts that Ginsberg’s poetry “[excavates] the rhythms of the past [that are] like an old field left unploughed and fallen into disuse” (17). Under the guise of this “old rhythm,” Ginsberg discusses the world around him and its daily trials and triumphs. What Moore laments as a

predisposition to “degradation and unhope” is in fact a hyper-awareness of the oppressive structures defining America, and Moore fails to see that it is impossible to “transcend” that oppression without acknowledging its existence. In *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg explores the postmodern condition of identity in order to reject and subvert confining structures, such as heterosexism. In an interview with Jack Foley, Ginsberg speaks against the “notion of a single, fixed identity” and asserts that it is “just a limiting thing to say you’ve only got one identity when you’ve got fifty. And your ultimate identity is totally open space” (172). Ginsberg, unconsciously or consciously, identifies the violent nature of the closet that is built on a binary of hetero/homosexuality; the enclosing, claustrophobic space that persists on the concept of difference as danger. *Howl*, then, attempts to deal with the limitations of a “single, fixed identity” through a conglomeration of formal and informal aesthetic choices, both in style and content. However, when examined through the lens of “literarity,” *Howl* illustrates how Ginsberg uses jazz aesthetics, which he calls “spontaneous bop prosody,” and black imagery to metaphorize queer suffering. In doing so, Ginsberg maintains distance between racial and sexual “otherness,” eliminating a chance to sympathize or empathize *with* communities of color, and instead, using the specters of racial othering to say, “I am not them; why do you treat me like them?” Ta-Nehisi Coates, in the introduction to Toni Morrison’s *The Origins of Other*, makes the deft observation that “the danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming the stranger” (Morrison xii).

Ginsberg outlines the connection between Jazz aesthetics and the queerness of the poem in a response to John Hollander’s 1957 review of *Howl*. Hollander panned *Howl* because of its “utter lack of decorum of any kind...[and proclamation] that nothing seems to be worth saying save in a hopped-up and improvised tone” (Hollander 26-7). If the poem is truly as lackluster as Hollander implies in his 1957 review, then why was there such an uproar over the obscenity and writing style in

both the academic community and the local San Francisco area? Ginsberg notes in his reply to Hollander's review that academics, specifically at *Culture* magazine and *Columbia* magazine, have...

...[ignored] big queer lonely lyrics about Whitman & Moloch in whom I sit lonely
 cocksucking...[in] this hoarde of half educated deathly academics [...] Not *one* yet, not ONE
 in all the colleges, magazines, book pages has said anything real, has got the point, either of
 spirit or prosody... (Ginsberg 79)

Perhaps, academia and California obscenity lawyers did not ignore the "big queer lonely lyrics" or miss the point of the poem, but rather, they were faced with an "insensible" form of queerness that they did not know how to understand and decided to attack the poem based on its refusal to conform to poetic conventions, both in style and content. Ginsberg states in the same letter to Hollander that he even left a "clue," so to speak, for readers to help them better understand his style: "I put [a reference to Jack Kerouac's 'spontaneous bop prosody'] as a tip, a helpful hint to criticism, a kindly gesture...[and Podhertz] proceeds to attack it instead of trying to figure out what i mean" (79).

However, Ginsberg's pursuit of an identity that is a "totally open space" through his "big queer lonely lyrics" and "spontaneous bop prosody" is problematic because it leads to a subsuming of other marginalized identities, such as black and female. Michael Hrebniak in his chapter "Jazz and the Beat Generation" claims that

the impact of jazz on Beat writing far transcends the issue of aspiration fetishism [...and] the Beat convergence with jazz thus transcends literary homage [and] Beat writers use bebop not merely as metaphor but as mediated access to an all-encompassing euphoria that dissolves subject and environment.

Hrebniak astutely identifies Ginsberg's desire to pursue an "ultimate identity" that is "totally open space," but to say that the Beats, and Ginsberg specifically, "transcend the issue of aspiration fetishism" is to ignore the problematic subsumption of black and female bodies in the text under the

monolithic construction of white, gay male identity. Using black music as an aesthetic technique to “mediate” the access to this “totally open space” without addressing the specific relationship between blackness, gender, and identity in America is colorblindness in literature at its worst, in my opinion. Additionally, his specific attack of Norman Podhertz and his review of *Howl* in *New Republic* reveals how Ginsberg’s roots in the literary academy inevitably ground his own rebellious *Howl*.

Podhertz’s review was an unequivocal condemnation of *Howl* and Beat poetry, more generally. Podhertz claims the Beats believe that “any form of rebellion against American culture...is admirable, and they seem to regard homosexuality, jazz, dope-addiction, and vagrancy as outstanding examples of such rebellion” (34), and Podhertz vehemently disagrees with this inclination to rebellion. In the very next sentence, Podhertz critiques the Beats’ use of “bop-language, [despite the fact that] they are all highly sophisticated, they fancy themselves in close touch with the primitive and the rugged” (34). Perhaps unconsciously, Podhertz identifies that underlying connection between the poem’s rebellious, or dissentive, nature and the language Ginsberg uses. However, in describing “bop-language” as one used to get “in close touch with the primitive and the rugged,” Podhertz reveals how the whiteness of academia, and of America, has defined any innovation of black culture as below the “high brow” world of literature. In an interview for the *Georgia Review*, self-proclaimed jazz poet Yusef Komunyakaa states that “jazz shaped the Beat aesthetic, but that movement seemed a privilege only whites could afford. Blacks, fighting for inclusion, didn’t have to ostracize themselves voluntarily” (653-54). So, in using the “spontaneous bop prosody” style to diminish the lines between “high” and “low” art, Ginsberg has unwittingly reified the same racist notions. Ginsberg attempts to surpass identity into “open space,” but his purported use of bop-prosody, his transmogrification of black life and suffering into two-dimensional figures and metaphors, his specific appeal to America and the American literary academy, both in the poem and in his personal commentaries on the poem, reveal a desire to craft a queer identity inherently connected to the political subjectivity of American

citizenship without questioning or contesting the white supremacist underpinnings of that citizenship in any meaningful way. To use black Jazz aesthetics as the aesthetic form for the rhythm and tone of the poem appropriates the legacy of black subjectivity in America and privileges the voice and experience of the white, gay male over the lived experiences of other marginalized communities at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.

The opening of *Howl* encapsulates the poem's expansive, specific, and sometimes problematic rendering of human suffering at the hands of the heterosexual binary:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by / madness, starving hysterical
naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn / looking for an
angry fix, / angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry
dynamo in the machin- / ery of night" (ll. 1-7, part one).

Positioning the "I" as viewing the suffering masses, Ginsberg begins the poem with some distance between the speaker and the "best minds" referred to in the repetitive "who" clauses. Madness and wandering are both prevalent themes throughout the poem, as is the use of black, African, or even Egyptian imagery as descriptive or embedded within the world of Ginsberg's poem. In the first twenty lines, Ginsberg uses phrases like "negro streets" and "supernatural darkness," which demonstrate his own internalized view of blackness as a background or backdrop for his own voice. As he evolves into mentioning specific places, he refers to places like "Paradise Alley," a predominantly black part of New York City. Using the term "negro" to describe the streets, a place that seems to be a place for wandering, lost souls, suggests that there is a conflation of "negro," or black, with the status of outsider. Both Ginsberg and Melville make use of black/African/Egyptian imagery, which suggests a consumption of black bodies/imagery into the white supremacist matrix, and that at the subconscious level, even those who are protesting systems of oppression are or can be

complicit in the oppression of others. The emphasis was on liberating gay, white males with little thought to how others, who exist at the various intersections of race and sexuality, would be affected.

However, it is a quick reference to Blake that illuminates how Ginsberg situates his own protest within the specific walls of academia, even as he finds himself on the outside of them. He speaks to the relationship between queer communities and academia, specifically in the study of literature when describing the “best minds” as those “who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes / hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy / among the scholars of war” (ll. 15-17). While there is no inherent relationship between queerness and being a literary scholar, Ginsberg speaks directly to his own connection between sexuality and Blake. In an interview with Jack Foley, Ginsberg relates the after effects of hallucinating Blake’s voice during masturbation, saying “...desire wasn’t quelled, because there still is a need for somebody there. The erotic impulse needs somebody *there*, even if you gotta imagine somebody. Not that I had a sex fantasy about Blake. But, afterward, it was like I wanted some contact with some human” (168). This desire for the physical presence of another speaks to the human urge to affirm our own humanity through another’s body. Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, gives a succinct description of this urge as it relates to the erotic:

I grew up not in a home but in a kind of free fall of anger and violence that led to a life of constant movement, of leaving and falling. It was why at one point I couldn’t stop drinking and fucking. Why I needed people to touch me all the time. It had less to do with sex than location. When you press against me, or put yourself inside me. When you hold me down or lift me up, when you lie on top of me and I can feel your weight, I exist. I am here.

Even though Ensler is writing more than half a century after Ginsberg, her description of using others’ bodies as a way to confirm her own humanity is central to understanding how Ginsberg’s construction of queer identity is grounded in using black bodies and black art. Even as Ginsberg lists the various ways the “who” try to find a place for their “self,” he ignores or is ignorant of the white

perception of the danger of black male sexuality, regardless of sexual orientation. Thus, his litany of escapist methods centered around both internal and external violence becomes unconsciously white:

...[they] purgatoried their / torsos night after night / with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, al- / cohol and cock and endless balls, / incomparable blind; streets of shuddering cloud and / lightning in the mind leaping towards poles of / Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the mo- / tionless world of Time between... (ll. 27-34)

Using others' bodies and drugs to escape from the realities of being excluded and placeless allows for the "who" to imagine themselves elsewhere, but this imagining, in and of itself, is useless. If Ginsberg stopped the poem where the semi-colon is placed, then the message and the poem would be stuck in lamenting the suffering of the "who," but instead, he chooses to move on where he could have stopped. After the semicolon, Ginsberg immediately returns to street imagery, but this time he juxtaposes specific geographical places, "poles of / Canada & Paterson," with the abstract image of "the mo- / tionless world of Time between," which suggests that the struggle to find belonging is rooted in being confined to a nebulous outside, in the "motionless Time." To recall, the first time the lawyer meets Bartleby, he describes him as a "motionless" young man; thus, "motionless" can be read as an indicator of both exclusion and refusal. When caught in "motionless Time" at the hands of the system, it is an element of exclusion; but, when refusing to yield, to move, or to *stop*, such as with Ginsberg's semicolon or Bartleby's refusal to move out of the office, there is dissent within this "motionless" quality. Even the title of the poem suggests a sense of protest rather than sadness, as "howling" and "crying" are close in definition yet not in connotation.

Returning to Ginsberg's claim of using "spontaneous bop prosody," the fact that the final product was put through several revisions makes clear that even though the poem seems to devolve in its "repetitive grammatical build up" (Eberhart), the intentional use of jazz aesthetics and black images to contextualize and make sensible queer suffering is a front. Any claims to extemporaneity

within the poem are undermined when examining the [facsimile edition], an oversized book filled with the final draft of *Howl* as well as its many draft forms, author notes on what was moved where and why, the formal elements and reasoning behind the editing, and extensive notes explaining references throughout the poem. The existence of this book alone demonstrates how *Howl* continues to maintain the notion that “poetry...[is] associated with the elite, the leisure class, with ‘high’ culture of Europe,” as it becomes clear that in order to fully comprehend the poem you have either have to (1) be one of Ginsberg’s close friends, (2) have an intimate and deep knowledge of the history of mostly European poetry and art, or (3) both. Admittedly, most of Ginsberg’s readers would have fallen into these categories; however, this contradiction between the style Ginsberg claims to use and the actual writing process illustrates the problematic appropriation of black art by white artists. Komunyakaa states that “the African-American poet of the 1920’s was still in almost the same dilemma as Phillis Wheatley when her work was defined by Thomas Jefferson as beneath a critical response. That is, well into this century the black poet was still aspiring to acceptance by whites, still biding for their approval and recognition as mere human beings” (653). Within this gap created by the racist structures of both America at large and the academy in particular, Ginsberg tries to use jazz aesthetics and black imagery to ask for approval and recognition as more than a human being; Ginsberg is demanding the recognition of queer identity as one encompassed in the protections and affirmations of American political subjectivity. However, in a country that still fails to recognize African-Americans as “mere human beings” and still views black art as “low culture,” the scope of “queer identity” is limited to gay, white men.

Ultimately, *Howl* exemplifies “the psychological work of Othering,” which Ta-Nehisi Coates defines as “convincing oneself that there is some sort of natural and divine delineation between the enslaver and the enslaved” (Morrison xi). In *Howl*, the way that Ginsberg understands and employs this delineation develops over the course of the poem; but at the end of part one, the use of the specter

of both slavery and traumatized black body as a space for “reincarnated” suffering is made clear as the who

...rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn / shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America’s / naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani [Why, why, oh God, have you forsaken me?] / saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio / with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their / own bodies good to eat a thousand years. (ll. 230-235)

While this “reincarnation,” on the surface, seems to position the “who” as alongside of and the same as those who wore “the ghostly clothes of jazz,” it is instead a substitution meant to highlight the differences between the owners of those “ghostly clothes” and the ones now using their tools [the “saxophone cry”] to utter their own suffering. It is Ginsberg appropriating the position of the enslaved to make an appeal to the enslaver, asking in divine terminology, why has God forsaken him [a white, gay man] like he did those ghosts?

Ginsberg’s use of noise instead of voice illustrates the inability of the “who” to speak on its own behalf, which leads to an inability to affect practical action or change. Throughout lines fifty through sixty-five, vocality is channeled through moaning/groaning/grunting, until the cacophony of sounds begins to run together: “Yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts / and memories and anecdotes and /and shocks of hospitals and wars” (ll. 57-60). The litany of sounds followed by the types of stories being told suggests that Ginsberg means to highlight the voices of those who may be lost in the larger narrative. With so much going on in the postmodern era, it is entirely possible for the voices of the marginalized, specifically the queer community, to be lost amongst the voices of post-World War II. Furthermore, Ginsberg highlights isolation, which is both a condition of the system and a rejection of the system, as the “who” are already excluded through the hetero/homosexual binary and rejecting it only leads to further isolation: “[they] lounged hungry and

lonesome through Houston / seeking jazz or sex or soup, and followed the / brilliant Spaniard to converse about America / and Eternity a hopeless task, and so took ship / to Africa” (ll. 69-90). This passage illustrates several key elements of how Ginsberg’s “who” suffer and how they deal with that suffering. First, isolation and loneliness that stems from not belonging or refusing to conform leads to the wandering “around and around,” and the use of train imagery reflects the transitory and displaced nature of the “who.” Moreover, Ginsberg takes the trope of the lone traveler, a trope seen in other Beat writing such as Kerouac’s *On the Road*, and inverts its idealized status to reveal the “lonesome” nature inherent to being excluded. As the “who” begin moving through specific places, such as Houston, there is a return to the escapism in “seeking jazz or sex.” However, the escapism moves beyond acts and into specific peoples and places, such as a “Spaniard” or leaving on a “ship / to Africa.” Both uses of the exotic other to escape the realities of American oppression are examples of the black/othered imagery that Ginsberg uses to support the liberation of the presumably gay, white male subject. Most troubling is the use of the ship imagery in conjunction with Africa, as the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade haunts the American literary imagination, a fact that Toni Morrison herself deals with in her groundbreaking theoretical text *Playing in the Dark*, and more directly, in our third text, *A Mercy*. Returning to Ginsberg, it is unsurprising that he invokes such images, as his privileged status as both white and male surfaces throughout the poem. However, the “who” make a return to America, and it is in this return that Ginsberg shifts from escapism to actual protest and rage.

The middle of part one illustrates how Ginsberg uses the “visibility” of queer writing to make visible the queer body and identity against the background of sexualized blackness:

...reappeared on the West Coast investigating the FBI in beards / and shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their dark skin .../ [...] / who howled on their knees in the subway and were / dragged off the roof waving genitals and manu- / scripts, / who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly / motorcyclists and screamed with joy” (ll. 95-116).

The use of “sexy in their dark skin” as a descriptor for the “who” who has left America, possibly to Africa or Mexico, and then returned, speaks to both the troubling white, American impulse to go to “foreign” or “exotic” countries to “find” themselves and the similar move white, closeted men make towards queer people of color. In going out and then returning “sexy in their dark skin,” the “who” become complicit in the fetishistic practice of seeking out non-white partners because of their “exotic” or “foreign” quality but not actually seeing them as human beings beyond the extent of their own pleasure. Ginsberg supplies anecdotal evidence in his explanation of when the “who” seek out “the caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love” (l. 95), saying that this was drawn from the knowledge of Hart Crane’s habit of trolling Harlem to find gay lovers. The “who howled” clause directly relates writing and the sexual body and suggests that both, especially when enjoined, are suppressed because they are perceived as a threat; thus, the very act of sex, as follows in the next line “who let themselves...,” is a protest against the heteronormative boundaries. The juxtaposition of “who howled” and “who screamed” indicates the anguish in oppression and the joy in freedom that can be accomplished through dissent; however, the next one hundred and fifty lines devolve into both a demonization of the feminine and a flurry of self-harm images.

In a transcription of the 1974 interview called the “Gay Sunshine Interview” in *College English*, Ginsberg speaks to antifeminist sentiments in Beatnik writing:

You can bring up the spectre of Greek love and its antifeminist concomitant and point out aspects of that in behavior of the beatniks--a fear of women, at least with me. But you would also have to see it as a real, heartfelt, native development, out of the fear and restrictiveness of the situation that we were brought up with: distrust, hatred, paranoia, and competition between men rather than cooperation; and the same also between men and women. (395-96)

Ginsberg's "real, heartfelt, native...distrust, hatred, and paranoia" is rooted in the damaging restrictions of the heteronormative marriage economy. As Ginsberg points out, this creates tension between men and other men and men and women; Ginsberg's poetry, and the work of the beatniks more generally, is written in opposition to this tension, which establishes *Howl* and its existence as dissentive. However, within this dissentive howl comes the marginalization of both persons of color and women. Ginsberg writes of the "who" again, lamenting the loss felt at the hands of the heteronormative marriage structure: "[those] who lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate / the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar / the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb / and the one eyed shrew that does not but / sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden / threads of the craftsman's loom" (ll. ?). Here, the repetition of "shrew" indicates the demonization of the feminine that is often identified as being "antifeminist," but in light of Ginsberg's own statement on antifeminist sentiments in beatnik literature, I read the repetition of "shrew" as representative of the heterosexual marriage economy. The woman becomes the most obvious scapegoat, but "the heterosexual dollar" and the "shrew that winks out of the womb" point to the large systems of a capitalist-driven marriage economy that demands copulative matrimony. However, the explanations for Ginsberg's writings do not excuse the anti-feminine nature of these lines, or the fact that he follows this demonization of the female with explicitly self-violent imagery. Throughout the rest of part one, Ginsberg does not specifically address women, but there are several stanzas that indicate a frustration with or even hatred of heterosexuality and women's roles within it. Lines 116 through 122 describe the "who" as a specific "Adonis of Denver" with an "innumerable lay of girls / in empty lots & diner backyards" who also had "secret gas- / station solipsisms of johns, & hometown alleys, too." Here, the picture of the "straight" man using numerous sexual liaisons with women to eclipse his homosexual relations forces women into the backdrop of "empty lots" and "diner backyards," pitting them as the "necessary evil" the closeted man endures for the brief escape into his own

homosexuality. A few stanzas down, the “who” are again situated in New York, “[weeping] at the romance of the streets with their pushcarts full of / onions and bad music” (ll. 136-37), and this sad description paints the picture of the lost queer subject, longing for a space that allows his romantic desire to be permitted in public spaces. As the poem devolves into more and more violent images and a cacophony of sound, the violence alternates between self-harm and hurting others. Most disturbing is the use of black bodies as either the receivers of that outward violence or as hollow metaphors for Ginsberg’s own suffering.

Tracing the language in part one in relation to the language in part two reveals how *Howl* seeks to expose the criminalization of and violence against queer populations, but Ginsberg’s metaphorization of the prison system compared to his realistic depiction mental institutions makes the very real oppression of predominantly black populations in the prison industrial complex into a flat metaphor for (white and male) queer suffering. While Michael Hrebniak claims that the Beats, specifically Kerouac and Ginsberg, “[transcend] the issue of aspiration fetishism” (156), the recurring images of prisons, landscapes, and sexuality that are conflated with blackness illustrate how Ginsberg’s consumption of jazz and jazz aesthetics could only produce what amounts to an appropriative minstrelsy.

Part two mimics the traditional call-and-response rhetoric of protest; the first stanza asks, “What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open / their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?” (ll. 1-3). Ginsberg repeats the answer over and over, “Moloch!,” who is a demon from Leviticus known for eating children; Moloch is repeated and followed with appositives, adjectival subject complements, and nominative subject complements, which emphasizes the fact that oppressive systems, such as heteronormativity, can be disguised or called by many names and have the same effects. As demonstrated in my analysis of “Bartleby,” a system of oppression does not need a name to make its victims suffer. Ginsberg begins “Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness!” (ll. 4). The

three descriptors here indicate the various ways in which systems of inequality alienate and punish those who fail or refuse to fit into their confines. Solitude repeats throughout the poem, highlighting the violent aspect of isolation that occurs as a result of the exclusionary practices of the law. Filth and ugliness go hand-in-hand, as non-procreative, non-heterosexual acts are often portrayed as dirty or wrong, the binary opposition to the clean and holy nature of matrimonial copulation. As the poem progresses, Ginsberg incorporates sexual imagery, often explicit and almost grotesque, alongside exclamations of holiness, such as in the footnote; this juxtaposition destroys the binary marking sex as either good or bad, clean or unclean, and instead, exclaims that the “world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! / The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand / and asshole holy!” (footnote, ll. 3-5). Both part two and the footnote make use of repeated exclamation points, which suggests that the footnote section might be read in direct response to the condemning nature of part two through its assertion of the transcendental nature of the sexual body. Part two, then, is the establishment of “Moloch” as the metaphor and image of the oppressive system that punishes queer populations; the repetitive “who” clause in part one and the “I’m with you in Rockland / where...” clause in part three become representations of the masses and the individual, respectively, and illuminate how suffering occurs at the systemic and individual level.

Ginsberg’s use of simile, specifically of blazon, to describe Moloch is an attempt to make the abstract conception of heteronormativity and oppression tangible.

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the / crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress
of / sorrows!...Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! / Moloch whose blood is running
money! Moloch whose fingers / are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a canni- / bal
dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking / tomb! (ll?)

Ginsberg concretizes the abstract demon Moloch with prison imagery, and the immediate use of “Congress” following “prison” and “soulless jailhouse” suggests that Ginsberg viewed the United

States government, and more specifically, antiquated sodomy laws and an implicit heterosexual marriage economy, as the structure confining and punishing the LGBTQ+ population. In using appositives, such as “the incomprehensible prison” and subject complements like “pure machinery” and “running money,” Ginsberg is renaming his own metaphor, and thus, giving it personified qualities. However, the prison or police imagery throughout part one is often associated with blackness or black life, such as in the lines a “hot-rod Golgotha jail-solitude watch or Birmingham jazz / incarnation” (ll. 171-72) or “investigating the FBI...sexy in their dark skin” (ll. 76-77). Prison imagery, especially the invocation of Birmingham’s jail, must bring with it a reminder of how the prison and legal system have shaped race relations in America. In *The Origin of Others*, Morrison notes the relationship between race-related laws and the formation of race relations in America, as evidenced in its literature:

[Although Jim Crow laws] are archaic...[and] no longer enforced or enforceable, they have laid the carpet on which many writers have danced to great effect. The cultural mechanics of becoming American are clearly understood...[A European immigrant may] keep much or some of the language and customs of her home country. But if she wishes to be American—to be known as such and to actually belong—she must become a thing unimaginable in her home country: she must become white...Africans and their descendants never had that choice, as so much literature illustrates. (9)

Although not an immigrant or a child of immigrants, Ginsberg grew up in a Jewish family near New York, where thousands of European immigrants, Jewish and non-Jewish, immigrated every year. He watched this process of “becoming American” first hand, and so, it makes sense that he would unconsciously absorb it. How one relates to blackness in America becomes the “carpet” that he stands on, using it as a platform for advocating for a certain kind of queer life.

Consequently, his description of Moloch's "mind...blood...fingers...breast...[and] ear" all function like a blazon; Moloch is not the typical female subject of a yearning lover, but Ginsberg is addressing the metaphor's constituent parts, breaking it down into a recognizable body, and even, objectifying Moloch's "body" through the consideration of its separate body parts, much like the queer body is objectified and abused in heteronormative society. Considering Moloch the metaphor as a concretized "body," then, it makes sense to read the description of Moloch's "body" against the bodies of the "who" figures in part one. What is most compelling when comparing this stanza from part two to part one is the use of the words "machinery" and "dynamo," which are two keywords in one of the most famous lines in the poem, from part one, which reads, "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly / connection to the starry dynamo in the machin- / ery of night" (ll. 5-7). Moloch, then, stands in direct opposition to this "ancient heavenly connection" that drives the "hipsters" that Ginsberg refers to. "Dynamo" and "machinery" appear in part one, but re-reading part one in light of part two shows how Ginsberg uses repetition to illuminate the power imbalance between oppressive systems (Moloch) and its victims (the unnamed masses of the repetitive "who" clauses). If Moloch's mind is "pure machinery," then the search for the "ancient heavenly connection...in the machin- / ery of night" suggests that Moloch is omnipotent; his power and presence are as vast as the night sky. But what are we supposed to make of the juxtaposition of "starry dynamo" in part one and "cannibal dynamo" in part two? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, dynamo has both a literal and figurative meaning: literally, it is "a machine for converting energy in the form of mechanical power into energy in the form of electric currents," (oed), and figuratively, it is often used as a metaphor for the "converting" power of one's brain (oed). Both definitions focus on the "conversion" quality of dynamo, and "conversion" has specific significance for the LGBTQ+ community, as the use of conversion/aversion therapy has been a continual nightmare for queer and trans individuals.

Consequently, reading “dynamo” in light of its definition and possible relationship to conversion therapy complicates Ginsberg’s repeated use of it in part one and part two. Professor of law at the University of California Law School, David B. Cruz traces the roots and justifications of conversion/aversion therapy from the early twentieth century and into the late twentieth century, arguing that

Attempts to ‘cure’ people of same-sex erotic desires have a long history in the practices of medicine...[and] despite the dismissal of ‘homosexuality’ as a mental illness by professional organizations [in the 1970s], conversion efforts did not disappear from the scene...and are even enjoying a current resurgence in national attention. (1300)

While Cruz comes to some startling conclusions, such as suggesting that “reorientation” therapy is not inherently bad, his nearly one hundred page article illustrates the gruesome methods used throughout the twentieth century to try to cure homosexuality, such as forced lobotomies and genital mutilation (1304). These techniques would have been familiar and terrifying to Ginsberg and are even referenced in *Howl* in the third part of the poem, when Ginsberg focuses on Carl Solomon’s experience in an asylum. In this part, Ginsberg repeats the phrase “I’m with you in Rockland” continually, followed by a “where” phrase: “...where you scream in a straightjacket that you’re losing the / game of the actual pingpong of the abyss / ... / where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its / body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void “ (ll. 299 - 307). Considering Ginsberg’s rendering of the horrors of conversion therapy, then, suggests his use of the word “dynamo,” a word that implies the conversion of energy from one form to another, is more than coincidental. Thus, the juxtaposition of the ‘starry dynamo’ and ‘cannibal dynamo’ is Ginsberg fighting the oppressive process of conversion within the heterosexual matrix with one that is both generative and inclusive. The “cannibal dynamo,” Moloch, chooses which victims to take, chew up, and spit out, whether as “converted” LGBTQ+ persons or as dead bodies.

However, in this compelling and horrifying third section, Ginsberg drops the references to racialized spaces or black imagery in order to focus on his own localized suffering, and his use and subsequent abandoning of these images reveals how Ginsberg is using black bodies and lives as props and metaphors rather than representing the diverse queer community. In part three, he projects an image of himself and Carl Solomon:

I'm with you in Rockland / where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets /
 the United States that coughs all night and won't let us sleep / ... / in my dreams you walk
 dripping from a sea-journey on the / highway across America in tears to the door of my
 cottage / in the Western night. (ll. 318-331)

Howl relies on the tension between demanding recognition and being punished for it, and placing the American public within the bedsheets with himself and Carl Solomon allows Ginsberg to disrupt the perception of the American public and government as being separated from the intimate lives of queer folks. In these moments of the poem, Ginsberg places an emphasis on place and imagines the space of “where” that Solomon inhabits; unlike the “where” imagery in the first section that relies heavily on black imagery and black bodies, Ginsberg’s singular focus on Solomon reveals his single-minded attitude toward queer identity. In his conception of rejecting American heteronormativity, the beneficiaries of that rejection are men like himself and Solomon, while queer men and women of color serve as no more than backdrops to their struggles.

To Imagine or Not to Imagine: Toni Morrison's Deconstruction of Queercoding Racialized Spaces in

A Mercy

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* might be considered an outlier within the Morrison canon. Morrison claims that *A Mercy* explores how "[racism in America] had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized, legalized [because]...what we now call America was fluid...[leading to] whiteness as a construct to divide poor people" ("Toni Morrison Discusses 'A Mercy'"). More than a division amongst poor people, whiteness has grown insidiously within the LGBTQ+ community into the "standard" or "norm," creating a swath of marginalized peoples within an already vulnerable community. As seen in "Howl," Ginsberg centers his own experience as representative of the anguish and suffering of the queer community at large, but his consistent racialization of space, like the "Negro streets," points to an annexing of queer people of color from the larger queer consciousness he is attempting to portray. In the last decade, scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson and Alison Reed have explored the intersections of race and sexuality that have been left unprobed and under-represented; however, more work needs to be done within the "traditional" canon in order to recover and celebrate the voices of the erased communities that authors such as Ginsberg purported to represent.

A Mercy, then, serves as a prime of example of how a black author is going back temporally to a time before the codification of structural racism and heteronormativity as it exists today and looking at how that structure and the spaces it has constructed came together. *A Mercy* centers around Florens, a sixteen year old slave girl of Angolan descent, whose voice recurs in various chapters and intersects with the third-person narrator. Told in nonlinear chapters that focus on a singular character at a time, *A Mercy* explores the inchoate forms of racial, sexual, and gender hierarchies through a myriad of characters: Florens, Lina (a Native American woman), Sorrow (a white orphan), Willard and Scully (two white and "homosexual" characters), the Blacksmith (a free Black man), Jacob and

Rebekka Vaark (the white owners of the Vaark farm), and Florens' mother (an Angolan woman brought over on a slave ship). Throughout the novel, “whiteness,” as a construction, oscillates between background and forefront; in the first chapter, race and gender become clear through subtle markers, and until the second chapter, there is no real historical foothold for readers to use. However, the historical “landmark,” so-to-speak, Morrison uses to build the novel’s fictional world within the real history of the United States positions the narrative in the precarious time before the robust institutional racism of today was in effect:

Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes--freedmen, slaves and indentured--had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class...[this rebellion] spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing *chaos in defense of order*. By eliminating manumission, gathering, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to *any white to kill any black for any reason*; by compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. (10, emphasis added)

Jacob Vaark, Florens' master and owner of the Vaark farm, ruminates on the state of Virginia in 1682 after the codification of the above laws. To authorize “chaos in defense of order” and to grant “license to any white to kill any black for any reason” not only drew a line between whites and “all others,” but simultaneously, these laws codified a color-coded distribution of life and death that still exists today, as evidenced by the need for the Black Lives Matter movement in opposition to heinous police brutality.

Morrison critics frequently consider death and representations thereof as central to understanding Morrison’s work. Both Juda Bennett and Melanie R. Anderson contend with how Morrison's oeuvre as a whole engages with history and haunting. In *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Anderson contends that the presence of a specter or ghost, whether it is a Derridean or

astral specter, haunts all of Morrison's novels: "Each specter serves as a bridge for the people she haunts, connecting individuals to cultural and personal history and generations to one another" (18). In *A Mercy*, the national past trauma of slavery haunts both the modern moment and the characters within the novel. Juda Bennett's *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* considers how the figure of the ghost trails from one Morrison novel to the next in a way that illuminates a residual queerness within each work. In her chapter on *A Mercy*, Bennett asserts that Willard and Scully's homosexual relationship is rendered alongside the unformed racial narratives of America to depict a time both before racial demarcation and sexual hierarchies as we know them today (136-37). Both Anderson and Bennett help contextualize the way death, dying, and representations of each have figured into Morrison's works, but Sharon P. Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* provides a larger framework for discussing death in terms of race, power, and discourse. Holland asserts that "[b]ringing back the dead (or saving the living from the shadow of death) is the ultimate queer act" (103); reviewer Robert McRuer states that "*Raising the Dead* centers mostly on those who have been excluded from shaping master discourses...the dead [can also be] unruly subjects who perpetually threaten, with dispersal or fragmentation, the coherence and dominance of the living subject" (357). Considering the connections of race, sexuality, and death from Holland's perspective allows for new interpretations of Florens' act of inscribing her own narrative on the walls of her dead master's house.

In his introduction to Toni Morrison's *The Origins of Other*, Ta-Nehisi Coates claims that "the danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger" (xii). Melville's lawyer and Ginsberg's narrator both exemplify this problematic attitude, and as a result, their representations of "otherness" and "queerness" either erase or fetishize race and racial suffering. Specifically, both Melville and Ginsberg racialize space in order to make visible queer suffering and articulate a queer identity within an American political context, both before and after the formal

definition of homosexuality. In “Bartleby,” space as a metaphor for “otherness” develops parallel to the racialization of “otherness,” and the two become intertwined when Melville empties racial language of its racial implications through adopting black and African imagery as markers of queer suffering. Ginsberg, who is writing after the formal definition of homosexuality, continues to conflate space, race, and queerness in a way that simultaneously uses racial imagery while erasing the real people behind those images. In *The Origins of Other*, Morrison’s eloquent meditation on America’s conflation of race and “other” and the reality that the “definition of ‘Americanness’ (sadly) remains color for many people” (17) helps contextualize the ways American literature has shaped and been shaped by the “other,” and in particular, her examination of Thomas Thistlewood’s diary illuminates how analyzing the construction of narratives within the American imaginary might lead to a better understanding of how the ways in which white writers have written helps uphold the oppressive status quo of white supremacy.

In Thistlewood’s diary, there is a catalogue of the minutiae of his day-to-day life as a slave owner, including his sexual exploitation of black female slaves; his record of each sexual encounter included the time, satisfaction level, frequency, and most importantly, where the “act” took place (7). Morrison notes that these “encounters,” which would be rape in contemporary society, fell under the “droit du seigneur,” or the “right of the lord” (8), and Thistlewood’s records of these “encounters” were listed “in between...his notes on farming, chores, visitors, illnesses, etc.” (8). The atrocity of these types of historical records continually informs our modern conception of slavery; however, Morrison suggests that a “reading of [Thistlewood’s] diaries reveals that, like most of his countrymen, he had a seamless commitment to the status quo” (7). *The Origins of Other*, then, attempts to pry apart the “stitching,” so-to-speak, at the seams of this historical status quo in order to better understand contemporary racial injustice. Similarly, Morrison’s *A Mercy* uses narrative techniques to destabilize our contemporary understanding of race in the colonial era; in doing so, Morrison wrests

discursive authority away from hegemonic discourse through Florens' narrative authority. Florens' literacy allows for Morrison to draw subtle parallels between colonial and modern readers in ways that subvert traditional narratives of race, gender, and sexuality. Through her narrative choices, Florens acts like a specter in Jacob Vaark's house and displaces the white authority lingering in the space after his death. Furthermore, comparing Morrison's rendering of two white, "homosexual" indentured servants with the novel's larger framework of "white mercy" reveals how the solidification of institutional racism and slavery became enmeshed with queer, white men's "apolitical" stances that refused to engage with the atrocities of racism while still using the backdrop of race and slavery to make clear their own suffering.⁴ In particular, examining how Willard, Scully, and Florens interpret and inhabit Jacob Vaark's haunting mansion after his death highlights how white, queer men continually enter into the vacuum of patriarchal and racial privilege in order to take advantage of the space for the improvement of their own lives through the benefits of whiteness.

Throughout *A Mercy*, the narrative construction of the novel, as a whole, and within each chapter shapes the novel's contemplation of "self" and "identity" within the colonial American context. On a first reading, it is difficult to ascertain who is speaking to whom, and sometimes, difficult to determine who is speaking. In the first chapter, Morrison opens with a first person narrator whose first words displace the reader from the traditional linear trajectory of a novel and force the reader to question who each character is in relation to another: "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark--weeping perhaps and occasionally seeing the blood once more--but I will never rise up and bare teeth" (3). Depriving the reader of the identities of the "I" and the "you" positions the narrator in a place of authority that deviates from the expectations of a slave narrative. Robert Septo notes that "[Frederick Douglass's]

⁴ I use the term "homosexual" in quotations because while Morrison writes from a modern, post-definition perspective, the setting of the novel is a time when sexuality was still fluid and not defined in the way that we define it today.

1845 *Narrative* represented the first instance in which a text achieved narrative autonomy instead of being dominated by authenticating devices designed to certify the narrator's credibility and humanity" (155); Morrison's *A Mercy*, too, resists mimicking the "authenticating devices" characteristic of slave narratives and does so from the perspective of a young, black female slave. In addition, this opening connects to the way the construction of the self is related to one's community. Susan Strehle, in "I Am a Thing Apart': Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism," focuses on how Morrison's formal construction of the novel enhances its content and engages with the myth of American exceptionalism, arguing that "Morrison's preferred narrative stance as witness to a series of characters' private thoughts...enriches its meditation on the loss of American community" (67). Beginning the narrative with the private relationship between the "I" narrator and the unknown "you" emphasizes the way narration shapes how the reader views the characters and how the characters view each other. Much like Melville, Morrison's emphasis on Florens' sense perception and point of view helps create a temporal gap in which the "redistribution of the sensible" can allow the modern reader to challenge pre-existing views on the literacy and authority of black female narrators.

However, the reader must figure out through various narrative "clues" who Florens is and to whom she is speaking, and this process allows Morrison to open a space between the narrative and the reader challenging preconceived notions of race, gender, and sexuality. Susan Lanser notes that a "major constituent of narrative authority...is the extent to which a narrator's status conforms to [the] dominant social power" (6), and therefore, as the reader is discovering to whom the narrative authority belongs in each chapter, the stability of hegemonic discourse regarding race, gender, and sexuality devolves. *A Mercy*, then, demonstrates one of the principles of Ranciere's "literarity":

[Ranciere] understands modern literature to be constituted out of a series of fundamental contradictions regarding the power and effect of words...The conception of

literature “as a historical mode of visibility of writing and as a system of visibility of things” is the core of his conception of literature as political. (Deranty 25)

Florens' narrative authority and the representation of other minoritized characters, such as Willard and Scully, disrupts the modern perception of the colonial era as well as disrupting modern sensibilities about the connections between power, race, and sexuality. In Mina Karavanta's “Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and the Counterwriting of Negative Communities: A Postnational Novel,” Karavanta argues that Morrison disrupts the historical and literary concept of a homogenous national community through a return to a “pre-nation” America. In Karavanta's opinion, *A Mercy* demonstrates Morrison's “sustained preoccupation with the history and stories of communities formed counter to the dominant imaginary and discourses of community” (725), and I concur with Karavanta's interpretation of *A Mercy* as a “postnational” novel. However, delving deeper into the narrative construction of the story demonstrates how Morrison illustrates the codification of “life and death” with “white and black,” respectively, in order to attempt to destabilize these binaries.

Florens' narrative repurposes death through (1) its material disregard for the sacredness of Vaark's mansion and (2) its ability to collapse the distance between colonial and modern temporalities through engaging the reader's preconceived notions of identity. Death, to be sure, lingers in several of Morrison's works, but the haunting, disjointed narrative presented in *A Mercy* gives life to the complex relations between race, sex/sexuality, and gender during America's nascent years. In comparison to Melville's “Bartleby,” *A Mercy* allows the reader to know the story from beyond the grave; without the interfering interpretation of a narrator, like Melville's lawyer-narrator, the unfettered exchange between the reader and Florens allows Morrison to destabilize modern notions of race and racism through her disruption of the fixedness of life and death. For example, the opening command to the reader, “Don't be afraid” (3), establishes a direct link between the reader and Florens in a position that privileges Florens' authority. As the novel continues, each of Florens'

chapters brings the reader back to her point of view and contextualizes the other perspectives within her larger narrative. In Florens' final chapter, it becomes clear that the Blacksmith is the “you” she is speaking to, but she remembers that the Blacksmith can “read the world but not the letters of talk” (160). All of Florens' story is written down despite her intended audience’s inability to read; therefore, the inscription itself becomes as important if not more so than the actual transmission of a narrative. What her words say is important to the reader, but their symbolic power exists regardless of whether or not anyone besides Florens ever reads them because she has covered the house until there is “no more room in this room” (160). Hollan identifies the power the dead have to be “unruly subjects who perpetually threaten...the coherence and dominance of the living subject” (155); however, that power can also be wrested away from the dead through the actions of living subjects, such as Florens. As a slave, Florens has few rights, and no one suspects her of ever having the ability to inhabit Vaark’s mansion after his death, let alone to carve out her narrative in his wood. Therefore, Florens tears the power away from the dead, white subject and asserts the importance of her own control over her life and narrative and demonstrates how literacy is a tool the oppressed must wield in order to rise up and control their subjectivity. The Vaark mansion is a symbol of Vaark’s control over the wilderness and the subjects of colonial America and the power and legacy of the white master; Florens’ narrative, written over the mansion walls, desecrates both the material and symbolic power of the mansion and Vaark himself.

Jacob Vaark’s mansion acts a central space in the novel that brings all of these wayward characters together; however, the tenuous pseudo-family structure on the Vaark farm falls apart shortly after Vaark’s death due to the fact that these people were brought together through the capitalist means of slavery and indentured servitude. Vaark’s desire to build his house does not emerge until after he visits the D’Ortegas, a well-to-do Catholic plantation family who owe Vaark money due to lost capital--which were, in actuality, enslaved Africans lost at sea. In a trade, Vaark

takes Florence home with him and the rest of the novel grows around the capitalist urge within Vaark to buy and control the space around him. Early on, his language describing the land around him indicates a desire to conquer and an implicit acceptance of the “manifest destiny” belief: “Once beyond the warm gold of the bay, [Vaark] saw forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking” (12). Willard and Scully, when looking into Vaark’s mansion at night, think Vaark is “[climbing] out of his grave to visit his beautiful house...they [Willard and Scully] convinced themselves that no one other than Jacob Vaark would spend haunting time there: it had no previous tenants and the Mistress *forbade* anyone to enter” (143, emphasis added). Underlying Willard and Scully’s reasoning is the assumption that no one would want to be in the mansion and no one would dare to disobey Mistress Vaark. The white master’s control exists even in death, so Willard and Scully cannot even conceive of someone like Florens disrupting and changing the space. Contrary to Willard and Scully’s perception, Florens is sneaking into the house each night and carving her story with a single nail into the walls of Vaark’s house; this action of direct defiance against Rebekka Vaark’s orders demonstrates Florens’ zealous belief in the power of words to disrupt the “sacredness” of this white consecrated space.

Thus, privileging Florens’ narrative authority and returning to a temporal moment prior to modern racism and constructions of “whiteness” opens a space between the narrative and the reader that is temporally suspended. The reader is engaged in her own present moment and simultaneously pulled into an unfamiliar past; however, Florens’ narrative is written to the Blacksmith, who may or may not ever read her story. In writing this “confession” to the Blacksmith on the walls of her dead master’s mansion, Florens is able to disrupt the dominant narrative and write to a future reader. In the opening chapter, Florens describes the Reverend Father teaching her to read: “He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock. When letters are memory we make whole words” (6). Morrison’s subtle emphasis on the importance of literacy

comes full circle in light of Florens' position at the end of the novel. At this early moment, Florens describes being able to physically alter the sensible world (the sticks through the sand) through literacy. Internalizing or memorizing those letters allows for a moment of creation; Florens *makes* the words rather than mimicking the individual letters, and the newfound control over language allows her to defy the silent existence and unremarked death awaiting her.

Morrison creates a subtle parallel between Florens' rebellious and secretive “confession,” scratched onto the walls of her dead master’s house, and the brief moment of imagination that concludes Willard and Scully’s sole chapter. Teasing out the connections between Willard and Scully’s narrative arc and the larger “white mercy” arc of the novel illuminates how the nebulous formations of racial and sexual hierarchies interacted in colonial America before their solidification into our contemporary understanding. While “anti-futurists,” such as Lee Edelman, might claim that it is not a privilege but rather an indoctrination when “Scully and Mr. Bond...imagine a future” (157), Alison Reed condemns the “anti-future” stance as one that “embraces death as a supposedly radical form of rejection...[negating] a politics of community through the decision to opt out of reproduction futurism...[and discarding] historical legacies and current manifestations of grassroots mobilization for social change” (59). Reed’s critique is rooted in her analysis of Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, in particular, his passage on sensuality: “To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life itself, and to be present in all that one does...” (Baldwin). However, her vehement connection of “sensual” with “present” and “life” precludes any consideration of how a text, such as *A Mercy*, might destabilize the divide between life and death in order to deconstruct systems the sexual hierarchies built around sustaining the modern biopolitical order. In *A Mercy*, Florens demonstrates an instinctual awareness of how binary systems like signification work and often control the world around us, such as black and white and slave and free: “Often, there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much, like not reading the garden snake

crawling up to the door saddle to die” (4). The overwhelming nature of signifiers seems to cloud Florens’ access to the thing itself, and her awareness of this blockage signifies an awareness of the constructed nature of language. In failing to “read” the garden snake on the threshold of the door, she “fails” to assign the garden snake to a binary status of good or evil before its death. Here, it is clear that Florens is invested in the relationship between signifier and signified, even if she lacks the language to explicitly extrapolate on the connection, and her writing on Vaark’s mansion walls acts as an intervention on her own behalf that disrupts the relationship between the signifier (white dominated space) and the signified (white supremacy), much like the garden snake sits on the threshold of the door and refuses to move, in order to assert her own voice over Jacob Vaark’s legacy.

In constructing the space meant to serve as his legacy and meant to demonstrate his domination or control of the land, Vaark exemplifies how the American conception of manifest destiny is intimately tied to the construction of whiteness in colonial America. Whiteness allows Vaark to buy and build on his land, and it is his whiteness that gives the space credibility and authority. Therefore, after he dies, there is a power vacuum that leaves a white, patriarchal space un-inhabited by a white, patriarchal power. However, Morrison implies that Willard and Scully are both comforted by the white specter of Vaark’s ghost and its lingering power over the mansion: “With Master Vaark content to roam his house and not appear anywhere else, scaring or rattling anybody, Willard felt it safe and appropriate for him and Scully to stay...” (144). Willard and Scully stay, but as mentioned previously, they make no effort to improve the lives of the slaves and other indentured servants around them, and their actions exemplify how white supremacy works on an unconscious level: even when one figure of white supremacy is removed, others will move in to take advantage of the racial hierarchy in order to both maintain a system of order and to better their own lives through the benefits of whiteness. In her subtle critique of white gay men, Morrison exposes how the unique position these men have and continue to hold in America will always be self-serving

when they do not explicitly take into account the “others” who are disenfranchised by the system. Alison Reed critiques queer theory rather than queer literature; queer theorists do not mean to disenfranchise other minorities, but their “apolitical” stances produce a background of assumed whiteness. Thus, while the critique of identity politics is that it keeps us all separate, the truth is that identity politics reminds communities of their inherent differences and the necessity for fighting for each other rather than trying to find a transcendental commonality that stems from an inherent place of privilege.

Conclusion

The genesis of this study was two-pronged: my interest in queer theory and the realization a major study of Melville's corpus through a queer theoretical lens did not exist. In the original conception of chapter one, I focused on filtering Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* through a Deleuzian lens in hopes of reconciling post-1870 language with pre-1870 sexuality. As the project grew, I realized the connections between Melville and numerous American writers could provide a more productive avenue of research, rather than confining myself to a study of Melville. While the connections between Melville, Ginsberg, and Morrison are not obvious, I wanted to work with texts across a broad time period that engaged similar ideas revolving around queer identity and its intersections with American political subjectivity. Looking back on the project, each of these texts contributes to an understanding of the way literature shapes and creates identities. "Bartleby," *Howl*, and *A Mercy* are all resistive texts created in order to craft identities out of language, and approaching each text through its "literarity" aided in understanding the metatextual implications of the proposed relationship between language and queer identity. In times when racial, sexual, and gender stereotypes manifest and define the dominant discourse, language becomes a way for individuals to manipulate and influence reality, thereby rejecting the confines of a hierarchical society.

While the ideas for this thesis began as purely academic, over the course of the last eighteen months, the shifting political landscape in America has greatly informed the direction of this project. In the context of the recent American presidential election, the dangers of considering our nation to be post-heteronormative or post-racial are palpable. Mark Lilla, a writer for *The New York Times*, attributes the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election to the failure of liberal identity politics. His overarching argument is that the "repugnant outcome," the appointment of now President Donald Trump, was the result of divisive identity politics that made religious, middle-to-lower class white Americans feel ostracized and as if Trump was the only candidate

representing them. Lilla argues that “[n]ational politics in healthy periods is not about ‘difference,’ it is about commonality. And it will be dominated by whoever best captures Americans’ imaginations about our shared destiny.” Trump’s easily quotable “Make America Great Again” slogan becomes this cycle’s representation of “our shared destiny,” if one follows Lilla’s line of thinking. Lilla merely parrots and restates what Emmanuel Levinas in *Peace and Proximity* critiques as a dangerous European hegemonic desire for false peace:

Peace on the basis of the Truth--on the basis of the truth of a knowledge where, instead of opposing itself, the diverse agrees with itself and unites; where the stranger is assimilated; where the other is reconciled with the identity of the identical in everyone. Peace as the return of multiple to unity, in conformity with the Platonic or Neoplatonic idea of the One. (162)

Levinas’s argument against the Hellenic idea of the One body of people who repose in peace concludes with his idea that “consciousness is born as the presence of the third party in the proximity of the one for the other” (169). Levinas’s words seem even truer in a post-9/11 world where identity embracing politics seem in a constant battle with identity effacing politics. The Black Lives Matter movement is constantly met with cries of “All Lives Matter”; the Christian right cries persecution over holiday cups, while Muslim men and women are harassed, and even murdered, in disturbingly increasing numbers; and the integration of LGBTQ+ communities into post-gay marriage America hinges on our ability to conform into a model based on heterosexual norms.

All of these disparities point to an America that has not accepted the dangers of identity effacing politics that claim we all begin in the same place, with the same opportunities, and the same backgrounds despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. For many Americans living at the intersections of racial diversity, gender and sexual minority, and socioeconomic status, a lesson in the premise of Levinasian ethics is unnecessary because the realities of a world that demands conformity and submission as a condition of its respect and recognition is an ever-present reality. How, then, can

a study of literature hope to provide a space for recognizing the inherent humanity of all without reducing the importance of social and political identity? In searching for guidance, I came across Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*, and her interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy in post-9/11 America provides incredible insight: "[As humans and scholars, we must] interrogate the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense...[in order to] return us to the human where we do not expect to find it" (151). Butler's emphasis on what we can *sense* pointed me to both Ranciere's concept of "literarity" and the "redistribution of the sensible" and Reed's interpretation of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. On the surface, it is a simple suggestion to base our perceptions on our senses and to always question what we are seeing or hearing or sensing. However, in an era plagued with claims of "fake news" and the insurmountable vastness of the internet, our sense of the world has become muddled. Through this thesis, then, my hope has been that re-engaging with seemingly passe literature, such as "Bartleby" and *Howl*, and bringing them in conversation with new texts like *A Mercy* reinvigorates the literary senses.

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