

in search of

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Abstract

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Abstract

Note: This is the introduction to a longer essay. Work on the longer essay was stalled, due to the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 and 2021. It is a project in process, this moment in the project's progress captured at the University of Washington library in perpetuity.

1. SCAFFOLDING

I ask myself: What does it mean to be a gay white woman in america? How does a gay person live in america? And so I want to know: what does it mean to be a gay woman writer in america? Who are my predecessors? Who are my contemporaries?

I hate writing essays, probably because I love my secrets and I love doing things well. Essays are about unraveling your thoughts to strangers, and I often do that badly. I am a thirty-year-old white graduate student for whom what I haven't read looms at the edges of my hedging. I develop arguments and immediately question their validity, because I know I haven't read everything on the topic. In fact, the more I read, the more I learn that I have more to learn, more to read. Frustration, or annoyance or irritation, can be exciting emotions in writing. Self-doubt is not. There's a built-in driving force behind frustration, with an expectation that with enough effort the frustration will give way to relief. That's the "traditional" dramatic structure, anyway, conflict rising and rising until, finally, a satisfying release. And so, frustration, or annoyance or irritation, can be exciting in writing because it promises a release, relief.

We are meeting here (you, my reader, and I) in language that can't evade its contexts. I like using the word "hate" about my feelings because it's both strong and childish, both fleeting and lasting. When I say "I hate writing essays," I like how childish, babyish even, it sounds. To me, the use of the extreme "hate" in terms of a task that I, as a writer, do all the time, gives it a playfulness that a more moderate verb wouldn't. It becomes almost flippant. Yet, hate itself is not

flippant or playful or easily cast aside. I'm writing from an America sick with hate, in a Washington state where hate crimes are difficult to prosecute, on a peninsula stolen from the Nisqually in the mid-1800s. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison says, "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language..." (13). Here we are, then, in language that was brought from an empire to a country whose racialized origins can't be captured in one phrase, in an essay that no matter how I bend or push still exists in the sphere of a prestigious research university. And no matter how much I would like to subvert the eventual release from frustration, to stay mired in the emotions, to keep my writing in the richness of life with its simultaneous pain and pleasure—neither you nor I will be satisfied until it comes.

Frustration, hate, a fraught archive, and struggling within racialized language are key to understanding the project I was undertaking in the second half of my master's degree in creative writing. I started thinking about this project in a ten-week sprint of reading nearly all of Toni Morrison's fiction and quite a bit of her critical writing. She writes, in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," of developing "a theory of literature that truly accommodates Afro-American literature" (15). Toni Morrison's lifelong project was described to me as articulating a black aesthetic in writing. My unthrottled excitement about Morrison's theories and fiction led me to wonder: could I articulate a queer aesthetic? While I was reading Morrison and considering what it would mean to articulate a queer aesthetic, I was becoming more and more frustrated with what queer seemed to mean to literature. I'd heard that Morrison's books were "queer," but whatever that meant to the people saying it to me was not what it meant to me. There were a handful of gay men characters and male-male sex acts in the books, and a couple of potential subtextual woman-woman romantic relationships here and there, but no lesbian or gay woman

elements that were central, explicit, or on the surface. Was I thinking about queer too literally or was I aching for representation? So there I was, listening to Toni Morrison, frustrated by Toni Morrison, and wondering what, as a gay white writer struggling to find my own blind spots, I could do to continue her project.

I decided to read only american authors because I am american. America is fraught in a special, unique way. It's fraught for my white body, the body of the colonizer, with relatives who participated in clearing land of native forests. I wanted to read stories by people somewhat like me in body and sexuality, so I chose authors who lived and identified in some way as gay, lesbian, queer. From the outset, I wanted to read fiction, but understanding that the borderlines between fiction and nonfiction are just as constructed as those around gender and sexual identity, I have expanded to prose as a whole. I read novels, short stories, memoirs, and essays. These are decisions I made. Isn't it true that we all have to make decisions? I am writing to you from an america where rhetoric is a weapon, and I am trying to use it as a tool. I am trying to say, that I know that words matter, categories matter, and though they seem separate from lived experience, they are not. That I am making a plaintive effort to simultaneously explain, claim, and apologize for the categories I chose.

And so, I read. I find all the things I hate about my white legacy inscribed into the pages of the books I read: white lesbians for whom sexuality is the defining factor, who erase the role of race in the stories, a lack of women who live their love for other women in their lives—the bisexuals who inevitably marry men. And I know, writing that, that I am adding to a narrative of bisexual erasure, and I don't not identify as bisexual, but I think of the difference between living a straight life and living a gay life and I feel, suddenly, impossibly, full of grief.

Jasbir Puar, in line with Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, articulates how folding a version of homosexuality into the national identity serves to exclude populations of 'sexual-racial' others, and in fact this exclusion is necessary in order to fold privileged white LGB subjects into the national identity. As Morrison articulates how ever-present slavery, an inescapable reality of subjugation, was the example against which independence and freedom were inscribed into the founding documents of the country, Puar articulates how disqualification of Muslim, Sikh, Black, and brown bodies makes possible the reality of accepting white queers into the ascendancy and national identity of america.

Both of these authors spend considerable time unraveling the inherent contradictions that allow empire and nation building to occur, how the ascendancy of whiteness is upheld through "a process whereby a national population comes to believe in its own superiority and its own singularity"(Puar 5).

I might argue that the proliferation of conspiracy theories that marked the final years of the Trump presidency, including Q-Anon and "alternative facts", is the result of such intellectual contortion necessary to believe in a reality whereby a small population of white bodies is "good", made possible only by the demonization of others. This process of subjugation creates a sense of impunity (exemption, being chosen) whereby actions taken to further the project of re-writing a national identity in the image of straight white men such as the January 6, 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol Building are in the name of a greater good. While this can be seen on the personal level in the late 2010s and early 2020s, it can also function as a micro version of the macro work that is done in order to prove the ascendancy of whiteness and Americanness. This past year alone the macro work done in america includes unpunished murders of Black people by police officers, sterilization of women in ICE facilities, state-sanctioned genocide and forced labor of

Uyghurs in China, and negative health effects from environmental disparities in black and brown neighborhoods made possible by decades of housing segregation.

Perhaps because of the gymnastics that white writers are more likely to engage in in service of confirming their rightful place in american society, I have found myself drawn to the fiction and memoir of women of color in my attempt to read as much gay women's literature as possible. While reading Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Cherríe Moraga, Carmen Maria Machado, Octavia Butler, and Nella Larsen, I feel like I am stepping into a reality that I recognize. I feel angry at white authors who keep on writing into racial erasure or tropes or embodiments of fears and desires, while being celebrated for their groundbreakingness along one sexual or gender line.

So, as I read some set of queer books, I noticed certain convolutions taking place in certain of the books I was reading, as well as in how they were being discussed in critical writing.¹

While Morrison explicitly looks at the process of how othering is inherent in identity formation in american literature, Puar considers how it happens in legislation, policing, and other dominions of the nation-state. Morrison considers how the "Africanist presence" embodies the fears and desires of white writers, while Puar considers how ostensibly-liberal movements leverage anti-Muslim rhetoric in order to gain political capital. Puar looks specifically at how the category of "queer" shifts in order to uphold certain (white) dominances. Pulling together Morrison's model of analysis of fiction and Puar's model of analysis of queer movements, what's happening in the books written by american white gay woman authors in the 20th and early 21st century? There are two themes that I'm especially curious about. The first is the splintering of narrative or pushing against "traditional" realist modes. The second is the coming of age /

¹ For example, Emma Parker's 2015 essay "Contemporary Lesbian Fiction: Into the Twenty-First Century" cited later in this essay, which compresses lesbian fiction into a singular experience through a globalist lens.

coming out / going to New York (or San Francisco) / finding oneself / finding a 'chosen' family narrative and the places where it promises a finality of happiness.

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Tracking Influences

Kathy Acker - lover of and mentor to Lidia Yuknavitch

Dorothy Allison - cited by Genevieve Hudson and Kristen Arnett as an influence, friends with Cherríe Moraga, went out of her way to meet Toni Morrison when carrying a manuscript over for her boss