FAIL BETTER: THE AESTHETICS OF CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

Though literature and literary study have needed defense for most of their respective histories, the current crisis in academic literary study and the humanities more generally has forced scholars into the uncomfortable position of selling their disciplines and simultaneously warning students about the risks involved in earning what the dominant public considers to be "useless" degrees. The paradox, of course, is that dissuading would-be studiers is both ethical and destructive: it is necessary to inform students of the frightful instability of careers in literary study, but doing so renders such careers even more unstable. While some argue that the decline of the discipline is a result of practices within the discipline, I suggest that the root of the problem lies in the dominant discourse, which forces scholars to defend the discipline according to dominant notions of success.

Using Frank Lentricchia's "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic" as a hinge between discussions of the value of literary study and elaborations of the antisocial thesis in queer theory, I contend that the discipline is not socially valued for the same reason it is socially valuable: it facilitates the pleasure of experiencing and envisioning new possibilities in and through the circulation of discourse. Since this aim does not (easily) translate into wealth accumulation or employability, it does not read as "success" and therefore the discipline has difficulty being socially valued. Rather than explaining the various benefits of earning a degree in literature, I argue that the discipline should embrace (its) failure as both a challenge to and re-imagining of dominant notions of success.

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CHAPTER 1
INDEFENSIBLE

Drink the Kool-Aid: An Introduction

We created it. Let's take it over[1]
Patti Smith, "My Generation"

In "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic," Frank Lentricchia remarks:

"In the hearts of those who study literature lies the repressed but unshakable conviction

that the study of literature serves no socially valued purpose. Too bad academic literary

critics can't accept their amateur status—that is, their status as lovers" (65). What may

have been a repressed conviction in '96 is now a bit of an Internet phenomenon. One

need not have a subscription to *The Chronicles of Higher Education* to find a wealth of

articles, blogs, youtube videos, etc. freely admitting, often with stinging bluntness, that

academic literary study is not a viable career path. And one need not take a course on, let

alone specialize in, Marxist critique to figure out why: academic literary study serves no

socially valued purpose. Far from attempting to shake off this conviction, the authors

ensure that it sticks, lodges itself (useless) in the hearts of those who study or would

study literature. Thus one finds page after page describing and/or depicting the 'worse

than desperate' (Pennypacker) situation. The story goes something like this (with a few

creative/ "confessional" liberties taken):

You, a passionate and perhaps promiscuous lover of literature, realize that your

undergraduate experience, though amazing, was not enough. You need more; you *need*

to go to grad school. Contrary to the reductive stereotype, you do not fear the "real

world" and its "real jobs." Rather, you wholeheartedly believe in the value of literary

study—and the life of the mind more generally—and thus you want to continue your

journey as a lifelong learner, eventually securing a job as a professor so that you can share this value with others, who will share it with others, etc. etc. With what you believe to be a thoroughly thought-out plan, you approach your most trusted professor, eager to learn how to "make it" as s/he did.

Much to your surprise, you are met with "the talk." 'Don't go to grad school for English or any other subject in the humanities; there are no jobs. Unless you have a substantial trust fund, don't go; there are no jobs. Even if you get into a top program and even if they offer you funding, don't go; there are no jobs. You will never see those "celebrity" professors you went to study under, and assistantships are a form of slave labor. Don't go; there are no jobs.'

But such well-intentioned advice does not dissuade you (it smells like capitalism, and you were warned against that in an introductory course on literary theory). So you go to grad school…

9.5 years later, you, roughly 35-years-old and roughly $45,000 in debt, finally go on the job market. At this point, you are forced to confront the fact that that seemingly paternalistic speech is in fact the reality. There are few fulltime jobs and most of them have low salaries, little security, and are located in places that you don't want to live. But you will never get one of them anyway. Rather, you join the scores of adjuncts on public assistance who naively believe that they will eventually be one of the lucky ones to win the academic lottery. At some point, you discover that the type of criticism you were trained in is no longer fashionable, and when you turn to your seasoned colleagues for direction, you learn that even they cannot agree on what the discipline is supposed to do and how it is supposed to do it. Looking back, you realize that you dedicated your life to

an exceedingly valuable, if not invaluable, "something," that is, in the eyes of the dominant public, fairly worthless (even if your generous monthly contributions to the US government in the form of student loan payments help subsidize important social services and/or necessary bailouts).

Of course, the "tragedy" of the pie-eyed, would-be studier is not the only narrative within the discipline. Many of those currently circulating depict academic literary study in varying states of disrepair, which, depending on the scholar one is reading, is more or less our fault. It may be that we have 'distanced—or in extreme cases, estranged—ourselves from our object of study' and "divided [ourselves] into competing sectarian groups, each with its own dogmas and its own arcane language" (Alter 14). It may be that we have 'reduced the discipline's legitimacy by locating authority in disciplinary stars' (Shumway 98) and that we "fall back on status to judge the work of our peers because… we don't have any good grounds to know whether [our] judgments are valid" ("Revisited" 181). It may be that our "shape of thought has grown old," that "[i]deas that seemed revelatory thirty years ago… have dwindled into shopworn slogans" (Felski 1). It may be that the pressure to publish has resulted in a glut of "unread or casually read scholarship," a "devaluation of teaching," and serious limitations on of the "freedom of scholarship" to explore "promising but unprofitable lines of inquiry" (Guillory 15-6). It may be that the "demystifying protocols" that "we cut our intellectual teeth on" seem "superfluous," that "the disasters and triumphs of the last decade have shown that literary criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change" (Best 2). It may be that we "literary scholars… have no definable expertise" (Perloff, quoted in Chace), that to study English "is to do, intellectually, what one pleases" (Chace). And it

may be that "we can't sell the public on what we do until we work out a better understanding of what it is we're doing and why what we do really matters" (Bruns 1).

As depressing as these may be, the stories outside of the discipline are perhaps worse. Since, say, the publication of "Last Will," the American public has had to endure a wide variety of failures (some more 'epic' than others): Goals 2000, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, insider trading scandals, the housing crisis, the fall of the banks, Hurricane Katrina, WMDs, drone strikes, etc. etc. etc. In response, the public has increasingly demanded "transparency and accountability" any given group—be it an organization, an institution, a government program, and even a discipline—should clearly and accessibly explain its intended outcomes and the practices designed to achieve those outcomes, and it should clearly and accessibly demonstrate that it achieved said outcomes via said practices; made appropriately "visible," the group, its outcomes, practices, and achievements should be scrutinized by both insiders and outsiders, and the necessary changes should be implemented by whomever is in a position to hold the group accountable.

One need not think long or hard to see the advantages. As a method of determining value, transparency and accountability procedures function to distinguish which outcomes, practices, achievements, and/or groups are worth supporting and which are wasteful, ineffective, fraudulent, and/or abusive. As values, they compel groups to become more transparent and accountable and thus (ideally) less wasteful, ineffective, fraudulent, and/or abusive. Refusing to be transparent and accountable casts serious doubt on the group, its intended outcomes, practices, and achievements, in which case those in a position to hold said group accountable can intervene and implement the

necessary changes. Everybody wins. The problem, of course, is that academic literary

study does not lend itself to transparency and accountability.

The practices and protocols of academic literary study are often—if not always—

rooted in highly complex theoretical/ critical systems that resist clear, accessible

translations (what some of us might consider a 'cocktail party acquaintance' with literary

study). And there's no need to cherry pick the obvious examples—those suspicious

reading practices rooted in Freud, Lacan, Marx and the like—since even close reading, a

skill that is taught at most levels of English instruction, is mired in obscurity when one

gets to the academic level, i.e. Heather Love's 'close but not deep,' Anne Anlin Cheng's

'promiscuous inhabiting of skins that are not one's own,' and even Robert Alter's

seemingly simple 'delighting in the formal resources of literary expression.'

To complicate the situation further, many of our practices and protocols butt

heads. It would be rather challenging for the reader to fully immersive him/herself in a

text while creating the necessary distance for critical reflection, and perhaps impossible

for him/her to read both slowly and quickly at the same time. It would be equally

challenging for the reader to perform a reparative reading while maintaining an

oppositional/ antagonistic stance, and perhaps impossible for him/her to perform a

reading that is both disinterested and ideological. And, as "Last Will" and other

Lentricchian works make clear, the reader will have significant trouble arguing that the

value of literary reading is 'ravishingly pleasurable erotic transport,' when the critical

reading act takes the form of analytic persuasion.

But the biggest challenge we face is accountability: assigning a specific outcome

that is not only aligned with dominant values, but can also be consistently replicated and

measured with a high degree of validity and reliability so as to clearly demonstrate the achievement of said outcome and thereby prove social value. The variety of disagreements about 'what we do and why what we do really matters' may suggest an incoherent discipline whose practitioners are far from agreeing on *any* outcome. But insofar as we deal in reading experiences, the difficulty of proving that we do what we set out to do is fundamental to academic literary study, not just a result of our disagreements. While one can assign recognizably valued outcomes to literary reading—i.e. comprehension and communication skills—the reading experience cannot be accurately predetermined, replicated, measured, and even represented.

Reading experiences vary wildly from reader to reader, informed and sometimes determined by various factors and different combinations of factors. And academic literary study increases this variety, offering different approaches, theories, critical terms/ language, objects of study, reading scenes, etc. Even if the studier aims for a particular experience/ outcome, s/he, having studied, has a wealth of approaches, information, and experiences at his/her disposal. Thus, even in the most extreme cases of what Lentricchia calls 'prereading,' it is likely that the *actual* outcome of the reading experience does not match the *intended* one. This, in particular, is Lentricchia's gripe in "Last Will": as readers, we experience 'ravishingly pleasurable erotic transport,' yet as professionals, we are compelled to secret the unexpected outcomes in favor of the intended ones.

Moreover, many academic responses to the 'what we do and why it matters' argue that the value of literary reading and by extension literary study is the experience of thinking, being, and imagining otherwise. For those who already value what we do, "outcomes" like 'ravishingly pleasurable erotic transport' ("Last Will"), 'the high fun of

engaging in one of culture's most elaborate games' (Alter), 'the pleasure of thinking elsewhere' (Martin),' 'the pleasure of imagining otherwise' (Donoghue), and 'the distinct enjoyment of aesthetic pleasure and the experience of liberation/ self-realization' (Hogan) may seem like worthy aims that are regularly achieved. And yet, if one does not already value them, they are not likely to be convincing. Such descriptions—their abundance speaking to the difficulty of clearly defining the experience—are not only non-specific, they are also not easily replicated and measured, and their alignment with dominant values is debatable at best (not to mention the problem of ensuring that the experience actually happens, since one cannot force the reader to "experience self-shattering transport *now*"). Even Bruns' 'return to transitional space where one can rework self/ other boundaries' does not help us 'sell' literature to a dominant public that demands accountability.

In this context, Lentricchia's suggestion that we accept our status as lovers is risky, and perhaps even self-defeating. Perched atop a fiscal cliff or buried under sequestration, who would subsidize a self-proclaimed 'shut-in bent on literary travel'? ("Last Will" 63). Staring into the yawning chasm of the achievement gap or attempting to circum/navigate the Common Core Curriculum, who would hire an out-of-his-mind Rhapsode (66) to mold 'globally competitive,' 'job ready' students? Confronted by 'the official arrival of the crisis of the humanities' and a public already 'suspicious of what we do in the classroom ("The Crisis"), who would hazard the defense, "we submit to the text and are transported" ("Last Will"). But acceding to our status as lovers is precisely what I suggest.

I take my cue from Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Discussing the construction of queerness as marking the end of the social order, he suggests embracing this status:

> Not that we are, or ever could be, outside the Symbolic ourselves; but we can, nonetheless, make the choice to accede to out cultural production as figures—*within* the dominant logic of narrative, *within* Symbolic reality—for the dismantling of such a logic and thus for the death drive it harbors within. (22).

The Symbolic both severs the subject's pre-subjective experience/ feeling of connectedness to everything else and holds out the promise of re-realizing such wholeness. As the subject's dividedness can never be overcome so long as s/he is a subject within Symbolic reality, "the signifying order will always necessitate the production of some figural repository for the excess that precludes its ultimate realization of the One" (27). In other words, something is always left out; failure is inevitable. Extending the logic of the Symbolic to the social order, Edelman argues that the blame for this failure gets placed on queers, specifically as they figure a refusal of the social order's mandate to reproduce.

I contend that the dominant discourse, particularly its vision of education, figures those who study literature and academics working in the humanities more generally in much the same way. In promoting and realizing a vision of education as primarily a means to employment and ultimately global economic competitiveness, the dominant discourse, in effect, situates academic literary study as disruptive/ destructive to normative notions of success. As with the dominant narrative of futurity, which promotes the (false) fantasy of Imaginary wholeness ensured via heteronormative reproduction, the dominant discourse in education promotes a (false) vision of success as

financial well-being ensured via the replication of already-valued knowledge and skills. Academic literary study runs counter to this vision: it does not equate success with employment and/or wealth and it encourages the creation of new ways of seeing and being, rather than the replication of what already is. In this sense, it fails per the dominant discourse and simultaneously highlights the failure of the dominant discourse.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the failure of the Symbolic is also the cause of subjectivity, and thus the system itself is fundamentally flawed. The fantasy of wholeness is achieved not through the reinforcement of one's subjectivity, but through its loss. Rather than ignoring or obscuring this flaw, Edelman advocates insisting on it—that is, refusing the narrative of wholeness realized through reproduction and instead privileging self-dissolution and the death drive. Edelman explains:

> As the name for a force of mechanistic compulsion whose formal excess supersedes any end toward which it might seem to be aimed, the death drive refuses identity or the absolute privilege of any goal. Such a goal, such an end, could never be "it"; achieved, it could never satisfy. For the drive as such can only insist, and every end toward which we mistakenly interpret its insistence to pertain is a sort of grammatical placeholder, one that tempts us to read as transitive a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever hold (22).

I read academic literary study as mimicking this structure, refusing identity and the absolute privilege of any goal by encouraging studiers to lose themselves in the reading experience and emphasizing the impossibility of a definitive correct meaning, i.e. end. In doing so, it highlights the flaws in the dominant vision of education, insisting that mastery is impossible (and undesirable) and that learning is as much a process of getting lost as it is about knowing where previous others arrived, i.e. the knowledge and skills that mark the "standard" of success.

Using "Last Will" as a theoretical hinge between discussions of the purpose and value of literary study and elaborations of the antisocial thesis in queer theory, I argue that the discipline is not socially valued for the same reason it is valuable: it facilitates the pleasure of experiencing and envisioning new possibilities in and through the circulation of discourse. As this aim runs counter to the dominant discourse, the dominant vision of success, and the dominant approach to success, it reads as "failure." I suggest embracing this failure. And thus rather than defending the discipline in terms of the various social "goods" it promotes, I argue that academic literary study is indefensible.

I begin by situating academic literary study as a counterpublic per Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics*, and I return to his discussions throughout the first two chapters. Warner's notion of publics as 'text- based relations among strangers' is particularly useful for a discipline that deals primarily in texts, both as objects of study and outcomes of study. In the title essay, he emphasizes the precariousness of publics, specifically as "social space[s] created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (90). Such spaces are created and maintained through *successful* circulation: addressees continuously performing the extension of a given public's discourse *in the ways and as the world envisioned in that discourse.* In other words, many publics may discuss literature, but the standards of discussion and the spaces for further discussion that they create define the specific public as well as addressees' membership in that public.

Warner's discussion of the seven rules governing a public suggests that to be socially valued, a public's discourse must circulate according to the circulatory paths envisioned in and as the dominant public's discourse: uniform, replicable, rational-critical dialogue leading up to a decision. Academic literary study does not circulate discourse in

this way. Rather, the discipline encourages studiers to exploit the possibility for new readings and new ways of reading with the aim of making possible more new readings and new ways of reading. To the extent that those who study literature value such activities, the discipline might be understood as not valued for the same reason it is valuable.

I then explore the dominant discourse in K-12 education, specifically its vision of educational success and the approach to achieving it. I focus mainly on the language used in the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS) and the English Language Arts/ Literacy Standards (ELA). Reading CCSS alongside Judith Halberstam's description of success as well as 'undisciplined education' in *The Queer Art of Failure*, I suggest that academic literary study is ultimately indefensible, since it is not primarily concerned with helping students 'make money and advance professionally' (Sexsmith).

To emphasize this, I summarize of "Last Will," introducing the main dilemma that the discipline faces: circulating a vision of the discipline that those who study literature value or one that might be socially valued. I elaborate on the problem using Biddy Martin's "Teaching Literature: Changing Cultures." Both essays speak to a particular moment within the discipline, but I read in the current context of the accountability movement. It is my contention that the current climate, particularly in light of CCSS, necessities a vision of academic literary that refuses to sacrifice pleasure to social valuation. In other words, a vision that embraces the discipline's failure to adhere to the dominant discourse.

In chapters two and three, I demonstrate a writing of failure that simultaneously argues for failure. Chapter two begins with a discussion of the structure of the discipline,

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which ensures failure per the dominant discourse. Academic literary study is founded on the possibility for multiple, potentially infinite, interpretations. This structural feature fuels study: studiers know that they will never arrive at the definitive "right" interpretation and they will never describe the definitive "right" path for arriving at an interpretation, so academic study can still happen, even though the objects' physical properties haven't changed. As Warner explains, all publics have this peculiar structure, in that discourse circulates because it is possible to say other things, in other ways. In academic literary study though, the implicit destructiveness of circulation is more or less explicit. While the academic reading act often posits an interpretation and/or describes a particular path, studiers are trained to experience it as *another* way of circulating discourse, rather than *the* way. This structural "flaw" suggests that those who opt to study literature professionally do so *specifically* to experience and envision other ways of circulating discourse. And thus to adapt discourse in academic literary study so that it adheres to the dominant modes of circulation would be to undermine the value of the academic literary study.

The second section of chapter two explores what I see to be the largest obstacle to being socially valued: pleasure. Since "pleasure" translates as personal, rather than public or general, it is exceedingly difficult to argue for its value. I look specifically at Cristina Vischer Bruns *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What it Means for Teaching*, since her book provides an accessible defense of the discipline that is intended to convince the dominant public of our value.   She argues that literature serves as an ideal transitional object that enables readers to temporarily suspend the boundaries of the self and ultimately renegotiate them. Such experiences are important,

as they help readers adjust to an ever-changing world. Though her argument may appeal to those within the discipline, I suggest that the value she endorses translates as personal, not public.

I then explore the nebulous line between the personal/ private and the professional/ public in relation to "Last Will." I look specifically at David Shumway's "The Star System in Literary Study" to try to complicate clear distinction between personal experiences that count as legitimate scholarly work and those that do not. To make determinations of "successful" public reading acts more difficult—that is, to render determinations of "successful" public readings act undesirable, if not impossible—I read "Last Will" alongside both Leo Bersani's *Homos* and Lentricchia's *The Music of the Inferno.* I suggest that academic literary study is an act of wallowing in that which was previously rejected, both personally and publicly, and thus "success" might be measured according to the degree to which one 'fails better.'

Chapter three demonstrates what an "assessment" of 'failing better' might look like. The chapter is organized as a series of 'failed' readings of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* that attempt to maximize the pleasure of reading the novel. I begin with a failed attempt to summarize it, underscoring the difficulty of demonstrating 'basic comprehension.' Gesturing towards the standard protocol of writing a literature review, I then wallow in the critical responses to the novel as well as Ballard's commentary, enjoying both the illuminating readings and those resistant remainders necessarily produced by readings of literature. I end with my own reading of *Crash* as a problem-based learning exercise that invites readers to solve for the true significance of the crash. As in problem-based learning activities, the problem of the significance of the crash has no one correct

solution and no correct way of arriving at a solution. Academic literary study offers more possible solutions and ways of arriving at a solution and thus it ensures that we cannot definitively establish the true significance of the crash. In other words, it provides potentially infinite opportunities for us to lose ourselves in the novel. Or for us to crash.

The Accidental Theorist: A Methodology

> I've never been sure about the need for literary criticism. If a work is immediate enough, alive enough, the proper response isn't to be academic, to write about it, but to use it, to go on. By using each other, each other's texts, we keep on living, imagining, making, fucking, and we fight this society of death
> Kathy Acker, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books"

> Ever fallen in love with someone
> Ever fallen in love
> In love with someone
> Ever fallen in love
> In love with someone
> You shouldn't've fallen in love with
> "Ever Fallen In Love" The Buzzcocks

I root my project in Lentricchia's "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic" in order to demonstrate the productive possibilities of failure. On the whole, the essay is an unlikely choice for the basis of one's critical approach (and professional life). It's only about six-pages long, not counting the barrage of advertisements, which continuously remind the reader that the text is *not* located in an academic journal. Its publication in *Lingua Franca*—which David Shumway likens to a gossip rag—situates the text as extracurricular, a discussion of academic life, *not* a work of serious criticism or theory. And it responds to the academic scene circa '96, so depending one's current academic life/style, the text may not be applicable today, whether it was then or not.

In addition to its context, its "argument" is debatably academic. Structurally, the text is a loosely organized reflection on (confession of) personal experiences, not a

coherent, clearly focused position that one can easily summarize and confidently deploy as unequivocal support of one's own position. There are a few references to 'great' literary works, but no critical readings of them and no specific explanations of how/ why those particular works are, in fact, great. The suggested reading practices are couched in a scathing rant about literary critics—or perhaps more accurately, one man's life as a literary critic—but there is no data to support the effectiveness of his pedagogical strategy and none that demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the other approaches he mentions. Throughout, the text offers both colorful descriptions of literary reading and decisive opinions about why it's important, but there is no evidence to substantiate any of the ideas—no citations, no references to specific critical or theoretical works, no name-dropping of authorities. In short there is nothing, other than the legitimacy of Lentricchia's critical identity, to legitimize the 'unproven assumptions' (64) and 'unverifiable claims' (66) made throughout. And, as the title indicates, the Lentricchia of "Last Will" is *not* that critical identity.

If that weren't enough, the text is primarily concerned with demonstrating that "professional literary study is a contradiction in terms" (64). As described throughout, the literary is an "unruly, one-of-a-kind thing" that induces 'defamiliarizing, veil-piercing' experiences. And, as indicated throughout, academic performances, specifically those that seek to establish one's "lucid possession of a discipline, a method, and rules for engagement of the object of study," run counter to the purpose and value of literary reading. Thus the problem is not necessarily that one's 'lucid possession' proves futile, that when confronted by "the real thing" (63), the studier's attempts at mastery will always come up short, regardless of how much disciplinary training s/he possesses. In

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other words, it's not that studiers are doomed to fail. Rather, as Acker indicates, 'being academic' is not the proper response. If one finds a work immediate and alive enough to warrant study, the appropriate course of action is to use it to keep on living, imagining, making, etc.—or, as in "Last Will," to facilitate 'ravishingly pleasurable erotic transport' and form 'enworded communities.'

Given the above, reading "Last Will" academically—reading it as "theory" supporting my professional reading act—would seem like an untenable choice, if not because it barely qualifies as legitimate criticism/ theory, then because it argues against the very kind of reading act for which it was chosen. And yet, the same qualities that make its selection appear imprudent are those that open space for an alternative way of approaching academic literary study. Not just texts, but the endeavor as a whole. Situated on the border of academic discourse, its position—both its argument and location—challenges the boundaries that distinguish professional reading acts from personal reading experiences, suggesting that the discipline is a lifestyle or life-styling, not simply the manner in which one subsidizes/ finances one's lifestyle. The argument is structured as a continuous killing-off and simultaneous re/birthing of Lentricchian selves—a potentially infinite ex-ing that celebrates the self bent on dissolution, not the one that seeks (false) wholeness. It privileges play, inventiveness, and performativity, not uniform, replicable, rational-critical dialogue. And it mimics the reading experience, arguing for as it demonstrates a study that aims for self-shattering pleasure. In short, "Last Will" suggests approaching academic literary study as an antisocial practice, one that neither serves nor is intended to serve socially valued purposes.

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Generally speaking, the antisocial thesis in queer theory argues for the advantageousness, if not necessity, of occupying positions that are constructed as precipitating 'the end of society as we know it.' Rooted in Guy Hocquenghem's reading of homosexual desire as the "killer of civilized egos" (quoted in "The Antisocial Homosexual," 827), the thesis operates in the tensions between world-shattering and world-making, accommodating projects that aim to destroy the civilized ego and/ or the structures that support it, as well as those that aim to envision new ways of seeing and being in the world. While elaborations of the thesis vary, they tend to play with the possibilities opened up when one embraces non-hetero/normative, non-re/productive notions of self, relationality, and community—that is, the self that seeks dissolution rather than wholeness, modes of relating to others that do not depend on identifying with or knowing the other, and forms of collectivity that neither reinforce nor replicate the heterosexual family structure.

The structure of my project attempts to demonstrate as it argues for such a disposition. The first two chapters are a long, circuitous reading of "Last Will" that enacts what José Estaban Muñoz refers to as a methodology of hope: a "backward glance that enacts a future vision" (4), which "helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place" (5). In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz suggests focusing on 'potentialities,' 'moments of astonishment and ecstasy,' and 'flickering illuminations' that exceeded their particular then-and-there and point to worlds that are not-yet possible. I read the invitation to 'accept our status as lovers' as just such a potentiality.

In its context, "Last Will" reflects a particular moment in the discipline when then-dominant critical practices were being challenged for moving away from literature, fragmenting the discipline, and rendering academic practices inaccessible and incoherent. Some felt that the over/use of theory and jargon, the over/emphasis on identity politics and political activism, and the general lack of consensus about what study should aim to accomplish were eroding the discipline. Interestingly, the calls for revised practices in the 90s and many of the arguments for the value of literary reading generated since either explicitly or implicitly oppose the very discourse that would render the discipline socially valued today. In other words, criticisms of the discipline from within the discipline rejected, some twenty years ago, the dominant vision of education currently circulating. Recent work with the antisocial thesis makes possible readings of that body of work that can make space for the discipline in the future.

Reading "Last Will" alongside other defenses of the discipline as well as various elaborations of the antisocial thesis, I emphasize that the fundamental aspect of the discipline that we value is also the one that makes it impossible to be socially valued by the current dominant public: the pleasure of experiencing and envisioning new possibilities in and through the circulation of discourse. I deliberately use a short essay with little "academic" content as the "center" of my discussion to demonstrate the ways in which literary study trains studiers to imagine otherwise, regardless of the object of study. While a more complex, more extensive text would seem to lend itself more readily and successfully to a dissertation-sized discussion—there's more to explore and explain and dis/agree with, etc.—I use "Last Will" to show that those who study literature are not limited by/ to an object's boundaries. Thus a six-page personal confession can

generate infinite possibilities.   Though I play mainly with texts sourced from within the discipline—and, it should be noted that the "within" is a vast space—I suggest that studiers, having studied, can—and, in some cases, can't help but—engage any object in his/her antisocial practice.

The ex describes literary reading as "ravishingly pleasurable, like erotic transport," and the transport metaphor provides a useful way of seeing both the discipline's position and an alternative approach to it. Pointing to the seemingly innocuous border patrol question, "Are you traveling for work or for pleasure?", it reflects *the* public's suspicions about what we do: *are they doing professional, scholarly research or just reading for their own fun*? Since literary reading is often pleasurable and is often undertaken as a leisure activity, we are continuously forced to defend the discipline as "more than a thing for weekend amusement only." In other words, it has to do something other than produce pleasure.

To convince the dominant public that our work is work, it must look like work per their discourse: uniform and replicable, not multitudinous and perverse; public and generalized, not personal and specific; aimed at employment and/or wealth accumulation, not something else. But in suggesting that we accede to our status as lovers, "Last Will" opens space for an academic literary study that does not take up a position in relation to this question. Rather, we can insist that our pleasure *is* work and our work *is* pleasure.

David Halperin's reading of Foucault's ascesis in *Saint Foucault* points to this possibility:

> Foucault referred to the arduous activity of cultivating, fashioning, and
> styling the self—of working on the self in order to transform the self into a
> source of self-sufficiency and pleasure—as "ascesis" (ascesis in Greek),
> ascetics, or ethical work. "Ascesis," then, as Foucault conceived it, does

not signify self-denial, austerity, or abnegation; rather, it means something like "training," almost in an athletic sense. Foucault defined "ascesis" as "an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one's self and to attain a certain mode of being." (76-77).

To the extent that we approach study with the aim of being erotically transported—reading in order to lose ourselves in the possibilities presented in the world of the text—our practice might be read as a form of ascesis. As Halperin notes, "Foucualt also argued implicitly against the tendency to associate resistance only with radically non-normative social and sexual practices" (97). Tim Dean also indicates that it is possible "that some people 'love literature' *in exactly the same way* as others love sex" (*Beyond Sexuality* 277). And queer theory more generally tends to work against dominant notions that erotic experiences necessarily refer to or require the engagement of specific "sexual" organs or sites. I refer to "self-shattering" pleasure to both distinguish between "pleasure" as entertainment as well as emphasize the aim of self-loss.

In "Last Will," professional critical practices are thought to threaten or bar such pleasure. I suggest that the training we undergo in engaging with literary and non-literary texts need not be understood as impeding or blocking our ability to be undone in the reading experience. Rather it assists us. Halperin explains:

> The first challenge [Foucault] saw was "to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasures" and, accordingly, to devise relationships that might offer strategies for enhancing pleasure and might enable us to escape the ready-made formulas already available to us—formulas which offer no alternatives to purely sexual encounters, on the one hand, and the merging of identities in love, on the other. (81)

In providing studiers with multiple ways of reading as well as a wealth of reading material, academic study, in effect, 'devises relationships'—though not necessarily with other live humans—and strategies for enhancing pleasure. As "Last Will" indicates,

specializations, critical approaches, theories, etc. can be limiting to the extent that they

are used as ready-made formulas designed to ensure the replication of a predetermined

outcome. And yet, as "Last Will" and the bulk of Lentricchia's fiction demonstrate, they

can also be used to enhance reading experiences. To borrow from a critic's review of

The Music of the Inferno, it "is ready-made for the seminar room" and "[t]he only

possible audience for [most of his novels] is academic" (Russo 441). That we can read

certain texts suggests that our training gives us access to different reading experiences—

we are not limited to ready-made formulas and formula fiction. And as Patrick Colm

Hogan explains:

> Literary study is, in part, a form of such training for possible aesthetic
> enjoyment. This is why literary study matters for purely hedonic reasons.
> Without the sort of training and experience developed in literature
> classrooms, it is very likely that students will have more limited
> experiences of aesthetic pleasure that they could. (Hogan 66)

Hogan's argument is also instructive, as he indicates that the two main values of literary

study are intrinsic and thus "unlikely to carry much weight with legislators" (77).

Ultimately, I am thinking of Francis Restuccia's description of third order

Lacanian Love (Love) in *Amorous Acts*:

> To be in Love in this latter sense is to achieve dissolution, the loss of
> sanity, for it is to cross into the "beyond," to defy the limit of the law,
> exceeding the desire such law produces—and *so* it gives on a devil of a
> job. It is to annex to oneself this missing part that one *must* miss or lack to
> maintain subjectivity. Therefore it is impossible...providing entry into the
> impossible Real. (10-1).

In such experiences, the individual cannot separate the beloved object from the missing

part that one must be missing in order to maintain subjectivity—the object a. Though

such experiences are not sustainable, periodic encounters of this kind can be beneficial,

as they enable us to restructure/ reorganize subjectivity. I believe that literary study

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trains studiers for such experiences, not necessarily by providing them with the theory, but by giving us the strategies to see, in literature, what is missing in ourselves.

Restuccia reads queer theory as enacting the same kind of experience on the level of the social, engaging the destructive energies of Love in order to make possible new social relations: "Having pitched its mansion in the place of excrement, queer theory—refusing to cede its desire and thereby enacting Lacan's ethics of radical desire, after all—makes the buried point that relentless contact with the Real, through the intense work of Love that verges on the superhuman, has the potential to result in a reconfigured queer Symbolic" (xv-xvi). It is my hope that academic literary studiers refuse to cede their desire and insist on the self-shattering pleasure of literary reading. To this end, I use "we" throughout in reference to those who engage in academic literary study. Though I argue against the kinds of unified positions that "we" tends to denote, I use it to encourage community building and collaboration. It also helps sentence flow, as "those who engage in academic literary study" gets clunky and annoying fairly quickly.

<div align="center">Belonging: A Context</div>

> We may quarrel over why literature is valuable and which literature is valuable; we may ignore the question of value in much of our work; but essentially the entities within our field of professional vision are there because for one reason or another they have been thought valuable.
> Walter Slatoff, *With Respect to Readers*

Again: In the hearts of those who study literature lies the repressed but unshakable conviction that the study of literature serves no socially valued purpose. While it might be practical to provide a thoroughly developed account of all of the socially valued purposes we serve, this chapter explores the possibility that we *shouldn't* serve socially valued purposes. To this end, I approach our devaluation through Michael

<div align="center">22</div>

Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics*. From Warner: "Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption" (16). As academic literary studiers deal in texts, whether as objects of study or as the outcome of one's study, and as we are currently having difficulty sustaining ourselves as a public—circulating our texts, and, generally speaking, our vision of a world where academic literary study is socially valued—his seven rules that govern a public are instructive.

Overall, Warner's rules indicate that the key to sustaining a public is expanding the circulation of its discourse. This may seem obvious, but circulation is not as simple as getting more people to show up to your lectures, buy your books, and cite your texts. Addressees must be willing to not only be addressed but also to circulate *their* discourse according to the paths envisioned in *your* discourse, thereby realizing the world envisioned in your discourse. In other words, referencing "Last Will" is not enough; to successfully circulate the world that the ex literary critic envisions, I too would have to "ex" myself, study for pleasure, and recite texts to my students.

As Warner explains, expanding circulation is more or less challenging, depending on the extent to which the given public circulates its discourse in the ways and as the world envisioned in the dominant public's discourse. As the dominant public privileges uniform, replicable, rational-critical dialogue that envisions a world where strangers relate to each other in this way, discourse that replicates such paths circulates more easily. When the circulatory paths envisioned in a particular discourse run counter to

those of the dominant public—reading as erotic transport and teaching as collective madness, for instance—people are less willing to further circulate it and be recognized as belonging to that public. Such counterpublic discourse has more trouble expanding circulation and the counterpublic has trouble sustaining itself.

Since academic literary study has been saddled with a bad reputation, fewer and fewer people are willing to be addressed, let alone actively engage in circulating our discourse (remember there are no jobs). More crucially, insofar our discourse aims to envision news ways of reading and/or provide new reading experiences (thereby facilitating, perhaps despite itself, the self-shattering pleasure of literary reading), it privileges transformation and the imagining of new forms of stranger sociability over replication and rational-critical dialogue. The paths we envision often conflict with the dominant modes of circulation and are thus difficult to recognize as worthy of realization, i.e. they are not socially valued. Hence, we have trouble sustaining ourselves as public. Warner's rules indicate that to become socially valued all we would need to do is adapt our discourse to the circulatory paths of the dominant public. But to do so, we would need to revise our vision of academic literary to something that looks more like 'Xeroxing and prereading.'

Throughout "Publics and Counterpublics," Warner emphasizes the peculiarity of publics. They are "self-organized," "text-based" (67) "relation[s] among strangers," (74) that are "created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (90). They are 'projections and characterizations' that function by obscuring their status as such (114) and creating the "durable illusion" of attributing agency to their participants (97) via the ideologization of discourse as "a discussion leading up to a decision" (123). A public's discourse envisions

a world and a way of envisioning the world that it attempts to realize through the further

circulation of that world and that way of seeing. But in so doing, it makes space for

different visions and different ways of envisioning, thereby putting its world and way of

seeing at risk.

In other words, I don't know Michael Warner personally—we are, unfortunately

for me, strangers. But his *Publics and Counterpublics* (virtually) bonds me with him and

with all those whom he references, all those who read and circulate his book, and even all

those who circulate versions of the antisocial thesis, queer theory, academic literary

study, etc. This gives me a sense of belonging, which makes me feel like my vision of

the world is a 'real' path that has a real chance of circulating to effect some kind of real

transformation of the social. Warner also benefits: in using him, I further circulate his

discourse, thus (virtually) bonding all who read this with him, those whom he references,

those who circulate his book, etc. In circulating his discourse, I attempt to get my

addressees to further circulate the world of counterpublic discourse as counterpublic

discourse, thereby realizing a world where "embodied sociability, affect, and play have a

more defining role than they do in the opinion-transposing frame of rational-critical

dialogue" (122). But in expanding on his vision, I may circulate it in the "wrong" way;

my vision and/or way of envisioning may be inconsistent or incompatible with his.

The precariousness of publics lies specifically in this challenge of circulating

discourse. Since publics "commence with the moment of attention… and cease to exist

when attention is no longer predicated" (88), they must continuously get existing and

potential members to "perfor[m] their extension" (89). This is particularly evident in

Warner's rule #7, "*A public is poetic world making*":

> There is no speech act that does not try to specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation: not just through its discursive claims—of the kind that can be said to be oriented to understanding—but through pragmatics of speech genres, idioms, stylistic markers, address, temporality, mise-en-scene, citational reference, interlocutory protocols, lexicon, and so on. Its circulatory fate is the realization of that world. Public discourse says not only "Let a public exist" but "Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way" (114).

Whether it takes the form of visual, verbal, or audio texts, a given public's discourse envisions a world and a way of seeing the world that it attempts to realize in and as further attempts to envision that world and that way of seeing the world. While garnering 'mere attention'—people 'showing up' (88)—is enough to constitute a public, success is determined by "further attempts to cite, circulate, and realize the world understanding [its discourse] articulates" (114). Thus, circulation is not merely making a particular discourse available to potential addressees; it is making that discourse available in the ways and as the world envisioned in it and then getting others to do the same. As this distinction is key, I'll give a few examples.

While there are a wide variety of different 'circulatory paths' associated with the Grateful Dead, one in particular demonstrates the difference between making a vision more available and making it available as that vision: ticket sales. In 1983, the Grateful Dead launched Grateful Dead Ticket Sales (GDTS, now Grateful Dead Ticket Sales Too), a mail order method of obtaining tickets to Dead shows. As the band had already achieved massive commercial success, there was no need to provide another method of circulating their discourse. The vision was already out there. And yet, having achieved massive commercial success, GDTS was necessary in order to circulate the vision as that vision. The band's popularity as well as changes in technology made it difficult for

Deadheads, particularly those who "followed" the band, to get tickets. And since being a

Deadhead is a way of life, not simply a taste in music, the band needed to make sure that

their vision was still a 'real' path.

> From the "mission" section of the GDTS facebook page:

> Our mission was to make sure that the long time fans of the Grateful Dead
> were able to obtain tickets in an age where Charge-By-Phone sales were
> taking over. Grateful Dead knew that many of their long time fans did not
> have credit cards and would be left out when it came to obtaining
> tickets… Tickets were sold by mail with no advertising and on an unlisted
> phone number, by word-or-mouth [sic].

Relying on word-of-mouth transmission, rather than advertising and the easy access of a

listed phone number, would seem to be a counterproductive way of expanding

circulation. And, to a certain extent, it did make their discourse less available. In "selling

up to 50 percent of the tickets for each venue directly to Deadheads via mail order,

usually a month or more before they went on sale at the local venue," (Barnes) access

was limited to those who had the 'cultural capitol' to acquire tickets. New/ potential

addressees who did not know about GDTS had difficulty getting tickets, credit card or

not. And yet, since the band's vision of the world encourages 'long strange trips,'

'enjoying the ride despite the potential of going to hell in a bucket,' and 'strangers

stopping strangers just to shake their hand'—to name but a few—they had to provide a

path that would allow fans to *not* have day jobs, credits cards, and permanent residences.

Another example, one where circulation frustrates commercial success, is

RE/Search Publications. A San Francisco based "archive, publishing, and oral history

project" founded by V. Vale, RE/Search is a salient example of the connection between a

(counter)public's discourse and the way it is made available. RE/Search envisions a

world of "more freedom, more consciousness and more creativity." Their discourse

"encourage[s] Do-It-Yourself creativity in a group context toward a world where

everyone will be not only an artist-scientist but also a cultural forensic pathologist,

working to realize the full potential of the DNA we were born with"

(http://www.researchpubs.com).   And they attempt to circulate it as such.

> From their "FAQs" page:
>
> Each RE/Search publication is printed in tiny runs, they are
> uncompromising in their content and some are not for the squeamish! ()
> Each book is by definition a limited edition and they are rarely available
> even in independent bookstores… please order NOW! as our books are
> starting to sell out, and likely will never be reprinted in this age of *e-
> Books*.

From the their "RE/Search history" page:

> Our books are printed in tiny quantities, are uncompromising in content
> (unlike books from a corporate publisher)—each one is a rare, **limited-
> edition** work of art. Look at our catalog—many books you see today will
> not be here tomorrow, so get them while you can (it is impossible to get
> $15,000 to reprint a book anymore). Our back list is NOT available in
> chain bookstores because they don't order them. So PLEASE **ORDER
> DIRECT**, and help keep **RE/Search** going.

From their description of *prOnnovation*?:

> Another "edgy" compendium from RE/Search, synthesizing for your
> pleasure future societal conceptual border-crossings. Be ahead of your
> time and read/ contemplate/ savor futuristic ideas, before the mainstream
> corporate culture machine waters/ dumbs them down into mere
> consumable style and image.

Though their website aims to make their discourse more available, it emphasizes the

difference between simply extending circulation and extending it as a particular vision of

the world. In their world of artists-scientists, discourse circulates as 'works of art' that

are 'uncompromising in their content.' Thus their discourse is not made available in ways

that help ensure larger audiences, i.e. 'watered/ dumbed down' content that would entice

chain bookstores (and 'the squeamish') to order their books. Like the "original

visionaries" and "permanently inspirational thoughts of liberty and revolt" discussed in

their discourse, they're books are 'harder to find.' RE/Search refuses to produce more

accessible formats like trade editions and e-Books that would expand their circulation at

the expense of their vision. And their website asks addressees to 'perform their

extension' in a particular way—'order direct'—rather than obtaining their books from

other venues (even if one can go to Amazon.com and get a new copy of *Angry Women*

for around $17 rather than paying $44 for one of the two copies that RE/Search had at the

time I wrote this).

> In an interview with Ron Placone, Vale emphasizes the difficulty:
>
> Someone like me, who's never gotten a grant in his life, never kissed up to
> anybody anywhere, and who just publishes exactly what I think people
> ought to know about, it's a challenge to get my books out there because
> there are so many corporate imposters out there that claim to tell the truth
> or be underground or whatever. Really, they've had their balls cut off of
> them, most of them. It's edited and designed by committee.

Vale has trouble circulating his vision of the world, since he refuses those circulatory

paths that would help ensure larger audiences—'fake' or 'castrated' visions of 'the truth'/

'being underground,' that are 'edited and designed by committee,' mass produced, and

mass marketed. One might think here of the inspiring story of E.L. James' "DIY" success

with her *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy. From its modest roots as fan fiction and with the

help of a corporate publisher and its marketing team, the first installment became a *New

York Times* bestseller for over 50 weeks, the trilogy sold over 70 million copies

worldwide, and the public has been promised film versions as well. Vale too produces a

variety of BDSM books—*The Confession's of Wanda von Sacher-Masoch*, *The Torture

Garden*, *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist*, etc. (and, in keeping with the DIY tradition, he

sends a hand-written note to each addressee). But as they do not engage in "shock-for-

shock's sake" and there is no "dumbing-down [of] content for gratuitous sensationalism" (I can't help but think of Katie Couric's interview with James, during which Couric made sure to wear leather) his books do not enjoy the same numbers. In other words, circulation is not just making a particular discourse more available.

And finally, an example from academic literary study: Jane Gallop's "The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters." Throughout, Gallop describes a version of close reading, clearly linking her circulatory path to the world envisioned in and as that path. 'Reading what is there rather than what you think ought to be there' (8) envisions and attempts to realize a world where people "listen to [others], try and understand what they are actually saying, rather than just confirming our preconceptions about them, our prejudices" (12). Her essay might be read as justifying academic literary study in an effort to make it more available: since academic literary study helps people "learn not only to read better but to fight and love more fairly" (17), more people should major in it, more people should buy our books and read our articles, more people should fund our projects, students, departments, etc. And yet despite the feel-good rationale and the recognizability of close reading, the specific circulatory path Gallop envisions makes her discourse *less* available.

She encourages 'reading like a child,' the reader focusing on the 'marginal or trivial elements that we are taught to dismiss,' the teacher "undoing the training that keeps us to the straight and narrow paths of main ideas" (8). But identifying the main idea is fundamental to English instruction at many levels, as it is typically the "main" indicator of a student's reading ability. This is especially obvious in the realm of standardized testing. On standardized reading comprehension tests, the "gist" of a reading passage is almost always tested, typically in the first item. Distractors—that is,

the wrong answers—are often created from those minor elements that are 'eye-catching' but are not main ideas (8), thereby testing the reader's ability to differentiate between the "important" elements and the minor ones. And most, if not all, objective items test the readers ability to 'read globally'—"to think of the [reading selection] as a whole, identify its main idea, and understand all of its parts as fitting together to make up that whole" (11). Thus teaching students to let "the whole book, the main argument, the global picture fade into the background" runs counter to the recognizable path of reading comprehension.

Gallop also emphasizes the slipperiness of "main idea" reading: it seems to aim for the very thing that the author is saying, and yet "most of the time" the hunt for the main idea is rooted in reader expectations, what readers have been taught/ learned to expect from the texts of a particular author, genre, time period, movement, etc. (10). Thus main ideas and reader expectations are mutually constitutive: if I have learned/ been taught to expect a particular idea, and especially if I have been rewarded for finding it, I will continue to read for that idea and continue to find it (this is what the ex refers to as 'prereading'). Expectations enable discourse to circulate more easily. Readers know exactly where they are going and exactly how to get there, and insofar as they want to be "successful" they will replicate the particular main idea and the processes for arriving at it.

But Gallop encourages reading for the unexpected, which makes replication more difficult and thus frustrates circulation. While the practice itself is generally replicable— any given reader can focus on the minor things—different readers will find different things eye-catching, surprising, shocking, etc. and, as Gallop notes, it is not possible to

make a complete list of all of the things that close readers might notice (7). Moreover,

reading for the unexpected is paradoxically directed *against* replication; it is the

replicable practice of learning something new. Gallop explains:

> When the reader concentrates on the familiar, she is reassured that what
> she already knows is sufficient in relation to this new book. Focusing on
> the surprising, on the other hand, would mean giving up the comfort of the
> familiar, of the already-known for the sake of learning, of encountering
> something new, something she didn't already know. In fact, this all has to
> do with learning. Learning is very difficult; it takes a lot of effort. It is of
> course much easier if once we learn something we can apply what we
> have learned again and again. It is much more difficult if every time we
> confront something new, we have to learn something new (11).

In other words, readers don't and *shouldn't* know exactly where they are going and

exactly how to get there; instead they are encouraged to explore and arrive at different

places, i.e. not replicate what is 'already-known.'

This kind of learning then is limited to those who are willing to put forth the

'effort of learning something new every time they are confronted with something new,'

which inevitably reduces the chance of circulation, if only by weeding out the "lazy"

readers. More significantly, when the reader gives up the 'comfort of the familiar,'

reading becomes riskier. Since I don't have the safety net of the expected, I cannot be

sure that what I learn is "correct" and that I will be rewarded for successfully identifying

what the author is actually saying. If the threat of scholarly failure weren't enough,

reading for the unexpected reassures me that what I already know is *not* sufficient, that I

am lacking something, that I failed and will continue to fail. Add to this that possibility

that I may not "like" what I learn—for instance, that evil characters "are all in the family"

("Last Will" 63) or that 'I have filth in my soul' (60)—and Gallop's circulatory path,

though a more ethical way of reading, is also more difficult to realize.

As the examples demonstrate, the ways in which a speech act specifies the lifeworld of its circulation can ease or trouble its circulatory fate. If the circulatory paths envisioned are recognized and/or recognizable as worthy of realization, the discourse has a better chance of circulating. If those paths are not recognizable and/or recognized as worthy of realization, the discourse won't circulate as easily. This is the dilemma that publics face: modify your vision to increase active uptake, or continue circulating your vision and hope for the best. For counterpublics, the decision is not so easy. As a public, a counterpublic is self-organized by discourse—Warner's rule # 1—but its "members are constituted through a conflictual relationship to the dominant public… (118) [a]nd the conflict extends not just to policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public or to the hierarchy among media" (119). Moreover, "[t]he subordinate status of a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed" (121). In other words, its members are not simply opposed to the dominant position on a particular issue; they are opposed to the dominant way of participating in discussions about it. They are, that is, opposed to the worlds and ways of being envisioned in the dominant discourse.

This presents several circulation challenges: addressees have to recognize the circulatory paths not just as circulatory paths but paths that can be realized; they have to be willing to assume the risks involved with being seen or caught circulating that discourse; and they have to circulate the vision as that vision. In short, addressees have to want to belong and be recognized as belonging to a public that has that character, speaks in that way, and sees the world in that way. Thus counterpublics have more

circulation obstacles. Participation in their discourse marks one off from others: "ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would want to participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene" (120). (We might think here of the difference between being seen reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* and being caught reading *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* or being observed teaching reading comprehension strategies and being caught discussing minor elements or reciting texts to your students). This limits the pool of potential addressees, as people are less willing to be addressed—even if one's participation is limited to just showing up—and to further circulate the discourse and thereby be recognized and recognize themselves as belonging to that counterpublic.

Moreover, counterpublics do not necessarily privilege the dominant language ideology—uniform, replicable, rational-critical dialogue (115)—nor do they tend to privilege the dominant reading ideology—acts of reading that can be described in terms of public agency (123). Rather, they aim to "supply different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity" (121-2)—that is, transforming the social through different ways of circulating discourse. Thus, depending on what they imagine, their discourse is not necessarily recognizable as worthy of circulation. Discourse that circulates as playing, wallowing, enjoying, stylizing, exploring/ crossing boundaries, etc. is difficult to recognize as 'a discussion leading up to a decision.' Such circulatory paths often translate as "personal" experiences, not acts that can assume the status of public opinion. And they are not especially uniform and replicable, becoming less so the more that they encourage inventiveness. In other words, one not only risks being marked off, one also risks the particular path *not* being realized.

An especially telling example is Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking.* Dean details the difficulty of getting people to recognize themselves and/or be recognized as belonging to this counterpublic: the type of embodied discourse circulated in and as barebacking is not only difficult to recognize as discourse—sex acts as "texts" that "[signal] profound changes in the social organization of kinship and relationality" (6)—but, as Dean notes, it is often viewed as "pathological self-destructiveness or, at best, gross irresponsibility" (2). Moreover, the circulatory path envisioned aims more for transformation—being "a little more promiscuous about promiscuity itself…permitting [it] to affect all forms of attention, all those moments when our regard approaches and touches something else" (5). This is hard sell, even if one obscures its roots in 'bug chasing.' Being open to risky contact, suspending judgment, and failing to identify with others are paths that conflict with those of many publics. More fundamentally, to the extent that public discourse must be taken "as addressed to us," so that "[o]ur subjectivity is understood as having resonance with others, and immediately so" (Warner 77), circulatory paths that do not depend on "knowing, liking, or being like [others]" (Dean 143), seem to run counter to the creation of publics in general.

Dean's "argument" takes the form of this vision. He summarizes it thus:

> *Unlimited Intimacy* adds to the research on barebacking not only in describing its practices, institutions, fantasies, and self-representations in greater detail but also by treating it as fully socialized behavior, that is, as the basis for a new subculture. The book then complicates this approach by showing how the subculture offers a uniquely permeable form of social organization, thus suggesting its participants' resistance to identification. Having anatomized the subculture's demographics, I wish to emphasize that its commitment to overcoming boundaries renders bareback subculture oddly unlocatable. The difficulty of circumscribing it helps

account for both the excitement and the anxiety that the subculture elicits (43).

Like the subculture he describes, his argument is also oddly unlocatable. He "check[s] the impulse to either criticize or to defend [this subculture]" (x) and "makes no claim to objectivity or ethnographic validity but only to a discipline of listening to and thinking seriously about the subculture" (33). In other words, it is an 'argument' that doesn't argue, but rather describes. And the describing doesn't voice or speak for the "objects" of study, but rather listens to them without judgment.

Dean's book also underscores another obstacle: counterpublics' circulation troubles are intensified by the ease with which certain publics, particularly dominant ones, are able to circulate their discourse. It is exceedingly difficult to replace "the stock narrative of [HIV as] inevitable sickness and death… [with] a story about kinship and life" (69) that sees "voluntary seroconversion" as "a new basis for community formation" (78), when the dominant discourse "idealiz[es] optimum health as the body's normal state" (65) and circulates risky behavior as "*be[ing] diseased,* even in the absence of pathological symptoms" (67). Thus the more a dominant path circulates—'cultivating health' and 'reducing/ avoiding risks'—the more difficult it is to realize a counterpublic vision—'thinking promiscuously.'

Interestingly, Warner indicates that the ease of circulation results from a 'misrecognition of the poetic function'—the 'fruitful perversity' or, to play off Dean, 'the risky promiscuity' that counterpublics exploit. In his discussion of rule # 6, Warner explains: "The *magic* by which discourse *conjures* a public into being, however, remains imperfect because of how much it must presuppose. And because many of the defining elements in the self-understanding of publics are to some extent always contradicted by

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practice, the *sorcerer* must continually *cast spells* against the *darkness*" (105-6, emphasis

mine). To successfully circulate discourse, the world-making potential of publics must

be obscured by a special kind of 'sorcery' through which the "potentially infinite axes of

citation and characterization" (91) appear to be limited to those envisioned in the

discourse, thus limiting the possibilities for active belonging to those recognized in the

discourse/ by that public. In the case of dominant publics, the sophisticated magic of their

discourse conjures circulatory paths that are 'misrecognized as universality or normalcy'

(122). Those who fail to be enchanted, who seek to imagine different possibilities for

circulating discourse, who "cannot so easily suppress from consciousness their own

creative-expressive function" (124) do not belong.

<div align="center">Success is "Counted" Sweetest: Another Context</div>

> It's nice to be liked
> But it's better by fair to get paid
> I know that most of the friends that I have don't really see it that way
> But if you could give 'em each one wish
> How much do you wanna bet?
> They'd wish success for themselves and their friends
> And that would include lots of money
> Liz Phair, "Shitloads of Money"

Since academic literary study is an educational endeavor funded in some way by

taxpayer dollars, it is necessary to explore the current dominant discourse in K-12

education. In addition to the reading higher education in and through the dominant

circulatory paths that Warner describes, the public is likely to apply the same vision of

education to all publicly funded educational endeavors. Indeed, the Obama

administration's recent creation of an online college rating tool and the projected plan to

tie federal funding to college ratings indicates that such readings are already being done.

In addition to the College Scorecard tool introduced in February 2013, The White House

released the "Fact Sheet on the President's Plan to Make College More Affordable: A Better Bargain for the Middle Class" in August of the same year. According to the "Fact Sheet," the plan calls for "paying for performance," including "[tying] financial aid to college performance… challeng[ing] states to fund public colleges based on performance [and] hold[ing] students and colleges receiving student aid responsible for making process toward a degree." It seeks to remedy the misuse of public funds by 'identifying colleges that provide the best value,' where value is determined by, among other things, "outcomes, such as graduation and transfer rates, graduate earnings, and advanced degrees of college graduates."[2] As for consequences:

> In the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the President will seek legislation allocating financial aid based upon these college ratings by 2018, once the ratings system is well established. Students can continue to choose whichever college they want, but taxpayer dollars will be steered toward high-performing colleges that provide the best value. (whitehouse.gov).

While one could expound on myriad problems raised by the last thirty years of education reforms, I focus on the language used to *describe* both educational "success" and the approach to achieving it, specifically in the current Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS). As a full account of the 'standards movement' is not within the scope of my project, I look mainly at this latest instantiation of accountability reform, because it circulates and is realizing a vision of education as *primarily* a means to employment. I suggest that the emphasis on 'college- and career-readiness' as well as the rationale undergirding the initiative, 'global economic competitiveness,' render academic literary study necessarily indefensible, since it is not *mainly* concerned with making studiers employable.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam explains, "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity and wealth accumulation" (2). S/he[3] elaborates on this in an interview with Sinclair Sexsmith:

> …at this moment, intense capitalist accumulation, we're living with one model of success and failure and one model alone. And that model is, that to make money and to advance professionally is what it means to be successful, and everything else is failure. That's given us a zero-sum model against which we can judge our achievements in life, and that's very unfortunate, because it squashes out all kinds of people doing alternative things for alternative reasons that may be much more valuable to their communities and to the world.

This is model of success envisioned in and as the dominant discourse in national education, particularly CCSS, the standards-based reform effort coordinated by National Governor's Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). CCSS is the latest mechanism of accountability policies in education, which aim to ensure global economic competitiveness and educational equity by establishing high educational standards, systems for measuring the achievement of those standards, and punitive consequences for failing to achieve them (Mathis).

Though "success" is never explicitly defined, the goal of education reiterated throughout the CCSS website, www.corestandards.org, is 'college- and career-readiness'—a more palatable version of Halberstam's 'making money and advancing professionally.' The language used situates the initiative as a means to a seemingly universally desirable end—economic competitiveness—and encourages the public to view education as *primarily* a means to this end. While 'making money and advancing professionally' are undoubtedly practical goals, when they become the primary aim of education they 'squash out all kinds people' studying non-money-making things, in non-

money-making ways, for non-money-making reasons. And the language used in the

CCSS website does just this.

Per the CCSS website, educational success is undeniably linked to getting a job.

In the "Frequently Asked Questions" section of the "About the Standards" page, the

Common Core is defined as "a set of clear college- and career-ready standards for

kindergarten through 12th grade in English language arts/ literacy and mathematics" and

the site uses "college- and career- readiness/ ready" so frequently that it might be read as

a kind of Orwellian 'duck speak.' The nuances of "education," "educating," and being

"educated," are obscured in the 'double-plus good' of being employed/ employable.

For example, the page dedicated to 'what parents should know' begins with the

following:

> Today's students are preparing to enter a world in which colleges and
> businesses are demanding more than ever before. To ensure all students
> are ready for success after high school, the Common Core State Standards
> establish clear, consistent guidelines for what every student should know
> and be able to do in math and English language arts from kindergarten
> through 12th grade.

The same response is given for the 'frequently asked question' "What do the Common

Core State Standards mean for students." And the site provides the following response to

the 'frequently asked question' "Why are the Common Core State Standards Important":

> High standards that are consistent across states provide teachers, parents,
> and students with a set of clear expectations to ensure that all students
> have the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and
> life upon graduation from high school, regardless of where they live.
> These standards are aligned to the expectations of colleges, workforce
> training programs, and employers.

While "life" tends to be tacked on to success in college and careers, the standards

are 'aligned to the expectations of colleges, workforce training programs, and

employers.' Granted, success in life can be described in potentially infinite ways, and thus it is perhaps unfair to expect the website to do more than gesture towards all of the possibilities. And yet, the emphasis on employment/ employability indicates that the kind of (life) success education aims for is financial.

"College-readiness" appears to offset the emphasis on employment. The website describes this condition as being "prepared to take credit bearing introductory courses in two- or four-year colleges." Yet success in college is ultimately understood as graduating.[4] And when we consider the "five key pieces of information" that the College Scorecard tool uses to determine a college's rating—"costs, graduation rate, loan default rate, median borrowing, and employment" (http://www.whitehouse.gov)—it is clear that the value of college is first and foremost a financial decision rooted in employability. That is, deciding about college education is a cost-benefit analysis that weighs the amount you'll end up paying for your education against the likelihood that you'll not only graduate but also secure a job that will enable you to pay back your student loans. Practical as this may be, it does not leave much room for those non-money making majors and, depending on the ideology of the political party in power, majors related to careers that rely mainly or exclusively on public funding, i.e. P-12 education and social work.

The translation of educational success as eventual financial success becomes clearer when we consider that the past thirty years of education reform has been driven by the seemingly unarguable value of 'global economic competitiveness.' The in/famous

1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* set the tone for

discussions of education reform and descriptions of educational success:

> The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-
> educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for
> international standing and markets, not only with products but also with
> the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops…Knowledge,
> learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of
> international commerce and are today spreading throughout the world as
> vigorously as miracle drugs, synthetic fertilizers, and blue jeans did
> earlier. If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still
> retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our
> educational system for the benefit of all. (10).

Since its publication, education reform has, for better or worse, sought to 'keep

and improve on America's slim competitive edge in world markets.' While the

attitude of American exceptionalism has been more or less toned down in

government-produced discourse, educational success continues to be defined in

terms of students' ability to help the US compete economically.

And thus one of the main rationales used to justify CCSS is global

economic competitiveness. In *The "Common Core" Standards Initiative: An*

Effective Reform Tool?, William J. Mathis explains:

> According to the [Obama] administration, common standards are
> necessary for national economic competitiveness in a global economy…
> President Obama's letter transmitting the Blueprint to Congress says that
> "we must raise the expectations for our students, for our schools and for
> ourselves" to prevent other nations from out-competing us. The National
> Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers also
> assert that international competitiveness requires common core standards.
> Think tanks and business organizations routinely link standards to
> economic competitiveness. (2).

Later, he notes that "[t]hose advocating common standards often lead with some variation

on their important role in helping the U.S. compete effectively in an international 21st

century society" (6). Though Mathis is mainly concerned with challenging the

assumptions upon which the initiative is based, his discussion indicates that, per the

dominant discourse, economic competitiveness is an unarguably valuable goal for

education. As a 'leading' rationale, its value seems to go without saying.

Though equity and reducing achievement gaps are also cited as motivating

factors, such goals are complicated not only by a range of funding issues (Mathis

14-5), but also by the role of corporations in policy development. Mathis situates

CCSS as an extension of President George H.W. Bush's 1989 reform efforts,

specifically his meeting with National Business Roundtable leaders to establish

"the nine essential components of a high-quality education system" and his "first

'education summit,' at which governors agreed to set national goals." Mathis

explains: "Educators were for the most part not represented in these two efforts.

As a result, standards-making shifted from the professional sphere to a business-

influenced political domain" (4).

This shift is clear in the development of CCSS. Mathis explains:

> Historically, the development of subject-matter standards had been the
> province of specialists in those subjects working in universities and
> schools. By contrast, Achieve [the corporation commissioned to draft the
> standards] work groups met in private and the development work was
> conducted by persons who were not, with apparently only one single
> exception, K-12 educators. The work groups were staffed almost
> exclusively by employees of Achieve, testing companies (ACT and the
> College Board), and pro-accountability groups (e.g., America's Choice,
> Student Achievement Partners, the Hover Institute)… Of the more than 65
> people involved in the common core design and review, only one was a
> classroom teacher and no school administrator is listed as being a member
> of the groups. (5).

Work groups may have included former teachers, as some employees of testing

companies do have classroom teaching experience[5]. But, at the very least, the

overwhelming contribution of businesses and political groups to reform efforts suggests

that economic outcomes played a major role in determining what constitutes educational

equity, reduction in achievement gaps, and success in college, careers, and life. It should

also be noted that the "Gates Foundation provided more than $160 million in funding,

without which Common Core would not exist" (Karp)[6].

One might reasonably assume that successful business practices can provide

helpful strategies for re/organizing leadership as well as creating and implementing

effective capacity-building efforts.[7] Yet, when business standards and business-thinking

drive content standards in non-business related fields, it is difficult to argue that the aim

of education is *not* financial success. This becomes (painfully) obvious in the Common

Core State Standards for English language Arts & Literacy in History/ Social Studies,

Science, and Technical Subjects Standards (ELA Standards)—the full name of the ELA

Standards, which pretty much says it all. Reflecting the unarguable goal of employment/

employability, the ELA Standards explicitly value non-literary experiences over literary

ones. As an educational endeavor lacking an obvious and/or demonstrable connection to

economic competitiveness, literary study is less valued and more vulnerable to revisions

and/or cuts.

In the "Key Design Considerations" section of the introduction to the ELA

Standards, the website provides specific recommendations for the percentages of literary

and informational texts taught. Using the 2009 National Assessment of Educational

Progress (NAEP) as a model of college- and career-ready reading, the ELA Standards

suggest a 50/50 split between literary and informational texts through 4th grade. But the

distribution increasingly favors informational texts as students progress through school.

By 8th grade, students should be reading 55% informational texts and 45% literary ones,

and by 12th grade, students' reading diets should consist of 70% informational texts and only 30% literary ones (www.corestandards/ELA-Literacy/).

Despite the website's emphasis on the "[s]hared responsibility for students' literacy development," English teachers must teach nonfiction texts if the school adheres to this breakdown. This, in itself, is not necessarily a major issue, as informational texts can enhance the experience of reading literature. The problem is the rationale:

> Part of the motivation behind the interdisciplinary approach to literacy promulgated by the Standards is extensive research establishing the need for college and career ready students to be proficient in reading complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas. Most of the required reading in college and workforce training programs is informational in structure and challenging in content.

This is reiterated in Appendix A of the ELA Standards:

> Students today are asked to read very little expository text… yet much research supports the conclusion that such text is harder for most students to read than is narrative text… that students need sustained exposure to expository text to develop important reading strategies… and that expository text makes up the vast majority of the required reading in college and the workplace. (3).

And again on the "Key Shifts in English Language Arts" page:

> Students must be immersed in information about the world around them if they are to develop the strong general knowledge and vocabulary they need to become successful readers and be prepared for college, career, and life. Informational texts play an important part in building students' content knowledge.

One might agree that "the standards pay substantial attention to literature, as it constitutes half of the reading in K-5 and is the core of the work in 6-12 ELA teachers." But success is clearly *not* associated with reading literature, specifically because reading literature is *not* an activity *primarily* associated with marketable employment skills.

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This is also reinforced in the suggestions for writing assignments and assessments. Using the NAEP guidelines, the ELA Standards recommend a steady increase in persuasive and explanatory writing, rather than writing that conveys real or imagined experience, i.e. narrative. By 8th grade, students' writing should be 35% persuasive, 35% explanatory, and 30% narrative; by 12th grade, students' writing should be 40% persuasive, 40% explanatory, and 20% narrative. Taken together, the ELA Standards endorse an understanding of college- and career-ready literacy as overwhelmingly non-literary, specifically because literary endeavors do not contribute much to the goal of employability. The website does attempt to make a case for the study of literature: "Through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own." And such experiences are deemed valuable because "the twenty-first-century classroom and workplace are settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together." But this type of soft skill is not represented in any of the actual standards.

One might challenge this assessment of the literary by explaining the various marketable skills developed through academic literary study. But, I provide this portrait of CCSS to situate the discipline as a challenge to the dominant vision of education and educational success. The frequent appearance of "English"/ "Literature" on various lists of "worst college majors"—by which they mean those least likely to lead to employment—as well as the dire tenure-track employment prospects for English Ph.D.s suggest that those who opt to

study literature operate under a different model of success, one that doesn't aim primarily, if at all, for wealth accumulation and/or professional advancement. Moreover, given the lack of jobs in the field, academic literary study might also be read as endorsing an alternative approach to success, one that values aimlessness and diversion as much as, if not more than, predetermined goals.

The dominant approach to success as reflected in CCSS and accountability policy more generally is setting clear goals and focusing activities on the achievement of those goals. The logical assumption is that one has a better chance of achieving success if one has a precise understanding of what success looks like *before* setting out to achieve it. This approach is intentionally limiting: predetermined goals keep one focused on achieving those goals and help ensure that the processes/ steps designed to facilitate achievement actually facilitate achievement. Thus, per the Common Core website, "[e]ducational standards are the learning goals for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level" and some version of the phrase appears on almost every page. Though standard-based education reform has endured justifiable criticism (Mathis 6-7), learning goals themselves are often vital components of effective instruction [NOTE: K & E]. But as with the dominant definition of success, when goal-setting is understood as the primary mode of approaching and achieving success, it too 'squashes out people doing alternative things for alternative reasons.'

In line with his/her endorsement of failure as a mode of challenging normative notions of success, Halberstam advocates 'undisciplined education.' S/he explains:

> The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to
> follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production… Indeed terms
> like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be the code words, in academia as well as
> other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training

and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy. Training of any kind, in fact, is a way of refusing a kind of Benjaminian relation to knowing, a stroll down uncharted streets in the "wrong" direction; it is precisely about staying in well-lit territories and about knowing exactly which way to go before you set out (*Queer Art* 6).

Such an approach to educational success runs counter to that of the dominant discourse. Standards, whether "high" or "low," are designed to ensure that students can confirm what is already known, i.e. the 'extensively researched' determinations of the knowledge and skills required for success in college, careers, and life. Though the CCSS website emphasizes that the standards do not dictate what or how teachers should teach, the destination is clear. Indeed the whole point of the standards is to establish a 'clear, consistent' understanding of where students should end up when they graduate. This does not necessarily preclude 'visionary insights, flights of fancy, and strolls down uncharted streets in the wrong direction,' but it undoubtedly limits the possibilities for them. At the very least, the seemingly unarguable value of knowing where one is going, where one should arrive, discourages Halberstam's undisciplined education: 'losing one's way,' 'resisting mastery,' 'failing,' etc. in order to envision new modes of knowledge production and new ways of being in the world.

Academic literary study might be read as a form of undisciplined education. As a long-standing member of what Michael Bérubé refers to as "that important category 'useless degree programs that won't get you a job and that you will have to explain to your parents,'" the discipline is difficult to sell as a necessary/ logical step in one's career goal, especially if that goal aims for financial success. And yet, as he emphasizes throughout "The Humanities, Declining? Not According to the Numbers," students are

still students pursuing such useless degrees. He argues that the supposed decline in the

humanities is intentionally overblown in an effort to revise disciplinary practices, and

cites 'numbers' and 'arithmetic' to prove that "those insistent accounts of the decline of

the humanities in undergraduate education… are [f]actually, stubbornly, determinedly

wrong."

Bérubé claims that such accounts:

[e]ven when they are couched as defenses of study in the humanities…are
attacks on current practices in the humanities—like the study of race,
class, gender, and other boring things. Or the rise of "theory." Or the
study of popular culture. Or the preponderance of jargon. Or the
fragmentation of the curriculum.

Interestingly, lamenters locate the ruination of the discipline in the divergence from some

notion of *the* legitimate path of study. What's more, Bérubé points out that "most of the

things blamed for the decline in enrollments happed *after* the decline in enrollments had

stopped." It may be that those who attack such practices do so because they don't

particularly like them—or, as Bérubé suggests, the 'colleagues down the hall who engage

in them.' But it's not clear that students don't.

Citing uber-accurate statistician Nate Silver, Bérubé indicates that undergraduate

numbers haven't changed much, specifically in English:

"[T]he number of new degrees in English is fairly similar to what it has
been for most of the last 20 years as a share of the college-age
population." Silver said, "In 2011, 1.1 out of every 100 21-year-olds
graduated with a bachelor's degree in English, down only incrementally
from 1.2 in 2001 and 1.3 in 1991. And the percentage of English majors
as a share of the population is actually higher than it was in 1981, when
only 0.7 out of every 100 21-year-olds received a degree in English."

Bérubé also suggests "checking the *Digest of Education Statistics*," where one will

discover that the decline in the humanities from 1970 to 2010 was not as significant as

one might have thought: "In 1970 the humanities accounted for 17.1 of all bachelor's

degree (143,549 out of 839,730). In 2010 the humanities had indeed fallen—to 17.0 of all

bachelor's degrees (280,993 out of 1,650,014)."

Given that the blameworthy practices became popular in the 80s and 90s,

the above suggests that students may actually enjoy exploring race, class, gender,

theory, popular culture, etc. It may be that English and humanities programs are

the only places where they can actually explore such 'boring things,' and explore

some or all of them, rather than focusing on just one specific type of academic

practice or one specific goal of one's academic practice.

Perhaps more importantly, students' decisions to major in the humanities may

indicate that they do not subscribe to the dominant approach to success, whereby they set

a clearly defined goal for their future career and plan their educational endeavors

accordingly. Bérubé's description of the "remarkable story" of undergraduate education

in the humanities points to this possibility:

> Despite skyrocketing tuition rates and the rise of the predatory student-
> loan industry, despite all the ritual handwringing by disgruntled professors
> and the occasional op-ed hit man, despite three decades' worth of rhetoric
> about how either (a) fields like art history and literature are elite, niche-
> market affairs that will render students unemployable; or (b) students are
> abandoning the humanities because they are callow, market-driven
> careerists… despite all of that, undergraduate enrollments in the
> humanities have held steady since 1980 (in relation to all degree holders,
> and in relation to the larger age cohort), and undergraduate enrollments in
> the arts and humanities combined are almost precisely where they were in
> 1970.

In other words, despite all of the warnings about the dead-end path that is a degree in the

humanities, the number of students willing to take the risk hasn't changed much.

Financial/ career success may still a/ the goal. But, given that the humanities is often

represented as, at best, a detour, those who pursue useless degrees may not need to know exactly where they are going.

Stephen J. Mexal's "Don't Be Afraid of Going to Graduate School in the Humanities" suggests approaching graduate degrees in a similar way. He argues that graduate school in the humanities is not a professional school and therefore should not be understood as such. He explains that "[p]rofessional schools, such as those for law or nursing or medicine, have a direct and designed relationship with employment in a particular field." Yet graduate schools in the humanities have 'historically' "lousy placement rates." In other words, it is not an educational endeavor designed to get studiers jobs in the particular field of study. This, according to Mexal, is not a reason to forgo study, but rather a way of approaching graduate education.

Mexal cites various studies reinforcing the depressing job market for tenure-track positions, or what some refer to as 'real jobs' in academia. But he also emphasizes that studies show those with Ph.D.s in the humanities *do* get jobs, particularly ones that they are happy with. Citing the findings of a recent National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) study of humanities Ph.D. employment, Mexal explains:

> [O]nly 1.8 percent of all humanities doctorates were unemployed in the sense of being involuntarily out of work, at a time when the national unemployment rate was about 5.6 percent… The study also found that even though a large number of humanities Ph.D.s don't work as professors, only 14 percent hold jobs wholly unrelated to their degree. More importantly, those working in jobs unrelated to their Ph.D.s are doing so because they want to, not because they have to.

Thus, would-be studiers need not be afraid of going to graduate school; they just need understand that they probably won't end up as professors. While such knowledge may dissuade some, it also opens space for studying the humanities without worrying about

the pressures of publishing, presenting at conferences, and gaining teaching experience. In other words, studying outside of the 'direct and designed relationships to employment in the field.'

More interestingly, Mexal notes, "people who earn doctorates in the humanities tend to report a high degree of professional satisfaction, regardless of where they're employed." He even goes so far as to suggest that those who earn Ph.D.s in the humanities may not want to become professors, as those working outside of academia report higher degrees of job satisfaction. Mexal focuses on employment data mainly to dispel the myths of joblessness. But his discussion suggests that employment/ employability should not necessarily be the *main* factor in the decision to go to grad school in the humanities.

Citing a study performed by Maresi Nerad and Joseph Cerny, Mexal explains, "few humanities Ph.D.s regret their decision to go to grad school." The study found:

> Even among English Ph.D.s employed in business, government, or non-profits—fields for which their Ph.D. was, strictly speaking, completely unnecessary—64 percent said that given the choice to do it over, even knowing how things would turn out for them, they would still pursue a Ph.D. over law school, medical school, a doctoral study in a different field, or no graduate school at all. Overall, 89 percent of them felt that the Ph.D. was worth it, even though they hadn't joined the profession many had likely thought they would.

This suggests that the choice to go graduate school is not exclusively or even primarily motivated by employment options. Graduate education is not necessarily valued in terms of its ability to help one 'make money or advance professionally.' And thus knowing that one's Ph.D. will turn out to be 'completely unnecessary' in one's professional life does not mean that pursuing a Ph.D. isn't 'worth it.' Though Mexal recommends approaching the decision in the same way as "any other economic decision"—and he urges would-be

studiers to "[n]ever pay out of pocket"—his discussion suggests valuing graduate degrees

in the humanities in alternative ways for alternative reasons. That is, valuing them for/

according to something other than their ability to get degree-holders jobs.

In "The Decline of the English Department," William Chace, perhaps

unintentionally, suggests a similar approach to graduate education. Speaking of the 'glory

days' of literary study, he recalls:

> Finding pleasure in such reading, and indeed in majoring in English, was a
> declaration at the time that *education was not all about getting a job or
> securing one's future*. In comparison with the pre-professional ambitions
> that dominate the lives of American undergraduates today, the
> psychological condition of students of the time was defined by self-
> reflection, innocence, and a *casual irresponsibility about what was coming
> next* (emphasis mine)

Though I'm not entirely on board with his argument, particularly his suggestion to make

academic literary study a more coherent discipline—"such reading" refers to

'understanding the tradition and historical culture that assembled around masterly

books'—his comments suggest positioning the discipline outside of dominant approaches

to success, and relocating it where it was during its heyday. Rather than a direct route to

assured employment, academic literary study might again be understood as 'a declaration

that education is not about getting a job or securing one's future.'

Though Chace places much of the blame for the decline of the English department

on scholars themselves, he also examines economic causes, specifically the relationship

between financial concerns and students' educational goals. He explains:

> Alexander W. Astin's research tells us that in the mid- 1960s, more than
> 80 percent of entering college freshman reported that nothing was more
> important than "developing a meaningful philosophy of life." Astin…
> reports that "being very well off financially" was only an afterthought, one
> that fewer than 45 percent of those freshman thought to be an essential
> goal. As the years went on, however, and as tuition shot up, the two

traded places; by 1977, financial goals had surged past philosophical ones, and by the year 2001 more than 70 percent of undergraduate students had their eyes trained on financial realities, while only 40 percent were still wrestling with meaningful philosophies.

Financial considerations are obviously important and rising tuition costs make such concerns more immediate. But the movement away from goals like 'developing a meaningful philosophy of life' is an equally important and equally immediate concern. Though hotly debated, the projected accountability policy for colleges reinforces the idea that educational endeavors should be assessed according to financial value, rather than the philosophies developed in and through the experience. And this mentality is likely to be internalized by the time students graduate, as the language of CCSS reinforces it throughout the K-12 educational experience. In this case, it might not be advantageous to refocus academic literary study's marketing campaign on possible careers/ employment opportunities. Rather than helping students keep their 'eyes trained on the financial prize,' the discipline might reaffirm the value of diverting one's attention long enough to 'wrestle with meaningful philosophies.'

Insofar as academic literary study encourages such diversion and is itself a diversion from the designed and direct path to employment, it runs counter not only to the dominant notion of success, but also the dominant approach to achieving success. Though the discipline obviously cannot extricate itself completely from practical/ financial concerns, it need to revise its aims, practices, and discourse to adhere to the dominant model of success and dominant approach to achieving it. Rather, it might position itself as indefensible, per the dominant discourse. It might, in other words, embrace (its) failure. This is, I suggest, is what "Last Will" urges us to do.

Everybody Takes a Beating Sometime

Tai: Why should I listen to you, anyway? You're a virgin who can't drive.
Cher: That was way harsh, Tai.
Clueless (1995)

"Last Will" might *feel like* a scathing—and perhaps 'dishonest'/ 'irresponsible'

(Fjellestad 408)—critique of professional literary critics. Like *Clueless*'s Tai spitting in

the face of the friend who made her popular[8], literary criticism's "Dirty Harry"

demonstrates his gratitude for the years of fame he enjoyed by not only cutting his ties,

but also soiling the image of the professional critic. The "ex" establishes that he is done

being associated with *those people*, and like a bitter ex, he has nothing nice to say:

academic literary critics are repressed, self-inflated impersonators who preread and

Xerox. Since they 'can't write' but want to be imitated, they feign moral superiority and

take what amounts to cheap shots at those who "could really write" (60). And when

they're not engrossed in bolstering their critical personae via publications, they're busy

infecting students with their ideas and practices so that future critics will be just like

them.

But he doesn't stop there. Just as Tai confronts Cher with the self underneath the

performances of popularity—the virgin who can't drive—the ex confronts the

professional critic with the self underneath the performances of professionalism—the

secret "me-the-reader, in the act of reading" (59). Alternately figured as a horny teenager

getting off on the literary, a junkie mainlining the literary, and a cult leader possessed by

the literary, the secret reader studies literature for the experience of 'ravishingly

pleasurable erotic transport.' Whereas the critic, "to be certified as a literary critic," (60)

must represent him/herself as a morally correct—if not superior—being full of 'righteous

understanding' that s/he 'assiduously disseminates' in order to effect "appropriate social change in wholesome directions" (64-5), the secret reader knows s/he is *not* a 'better person.' S/he willingly "creates bonds of sympathy with all kinds, even with the evil characters" (63) and wallows in the very "cesspool that literary critics would expose for mankind's benefit" (60). And not only is s/he not sure 'just what it would avail him/her to criticize the text,' (60), but, more fundamentally, s/he feels that the 'reading experience makes talking about it irrelevant, and that any talk about what s/he undergoes would be inauthentic' (59). Thus the secret reader is *not* an activist, social interventionist, or agent of social change; s/he's a 'filthy shut-in bent on literary travel.'

While the ex's portrait of literary critics may be 'way harsh,' it emphasizes a fundamental dilemma that counterpublics of literary studiers face: circulate a vision of the world where pleasurable reading experiences are socially valued, or translate our practices into a vision that is already valued. Throughout, the ex describes the value of literary reading as a transport out of the self that enables the reader to see, be, and imagine otherwise, or what I refer to as self-shattering pleasure. Those who opt to study literature professionally—as opposed to pursuing more stable, more lucrative careers— likely recognize and appreciate the value of this experience. Indeed a host of defenses of literary study take similar positions to that of the ex, arguing for the importance of experiencing the suspension or destruction of the boundaries of the self. But such experiences don't translate easily into socially valued purposes.

While those who opt to study literature professionally—as opposed to becoming "real doctors"—are not necessarily as concerned with their reputations as the essay implies, to the extent that they want to sustain themselves as professional critics, they

need to produce accounts of their reading experiences that increase or, at the very least, maintain the number of active studiers. To do this, the circulatory paths they envision need to be recognizable not just as paths that are worthy of realization, but paths that can actually be realized. In other words, they can't stray *too* far from the dominant ones. We are thus tasked with proving that what we do is more than "a thing for weekend amusement only" (60), while simultaneously maintaining the primacy of the reading *experience* over more recognizably and demonstrably practical goals, like the development of literacy and communication skills. And this is no easy feat.

Biddy Martin takes up this challenge roughly three months later in "Teaching Literature, Changing Cultures." The essay serves as the introduction to *PMLA's* 1997 special issue on teaching literature, which speaks to a particular moment of rethinking and remaking academic literary study. "Why literature, why now?"—because:

> …the current shifting of literature departments in North American
> institutions to cultural studies makes [her] worry about the fate of the
> reading practices that the term *literature* invites, permits, or requires, the
> fate of reading that suspends the demand for immediate intelligibility,
> works at the boundaries of meaning, and yields to the effects of language
> and imagination (7).

Though she opens with this seeming criticism, she does not analyze and/or indict the shift, but rather sees it as an opportunity to think collectively about our work as teachers and scholars. In particular, she focuses on the problem of time: like most people, we don't seem to have enough of it and our relation to it is probably unhealthy. But literary study is somewhat unique in that it takes an overwhelming amount of time to accomplish comparatively small (and I'd add non-lucrative) goals. Or "years of analysis for a day of synthesis" (Marc Bloch, quoted in Moretti 57-8).

Throughout, Martin attempts to describe the kind of 'culture-changing' literary study that inspired us "to make a profession of teaching literature" (7), emphasizing that such practices and experiences take a long time. She suggests that the wide variety of "productivisms that organize our time and approaches to work" (18) impede our ability to engage in and, more importantly, facilitate this kind of study. It's bad enough that we demand too much of our own time, but making such demands of students' time is unrealistic, if not destructive. Ultimately, she advocates a collaborative effort to envision "critical and pedagogical practices that make students mindful of the tensions, contradictions, ambivalences, and pleasures in reading and teaching" (23).

But in the middle of her essay (page eight of a roughly sixteen page article), she calls attention to our reputation outside of the discipline: "eggheads who get a lot for doing almost no useful work" (14). Significantly, this discussion interrupts her 'nice story about teaching,' and thus troubles her essay's call "to put pedagogical concerns at the *center* of our professional and literary exchanges" (23, emphasis mine). Though she works to undermine this image, the overpaid egghead ultimately tells another story: our incompatibility with dominant methods of social valuation. This figure—in many ways the "nemesis" of the Rhapsode—is concerned with accountability: measuring, representing, and demonstrating the time spent studying literature, specifically in ways that *easily translate into social value*. It is not necessarily interested in rethinking pedagogy, especially that which aims for the kind of culture-changing study that Martin advocates and that many of us value.

This is particularly evident in her response to the egghead: rather than facing up to it with the values she cites throughout, she spends almost a page listing all of our

'productivisms'—those same activities that interfere with culture-changing study—representing us as 'over-functioning to the point of questionable sanity' (14). While this may be true—many of my 'nonacademic friends and partners have wondered whether I am entirely sane about my work'—her response underscores the difficulty of translating the value in studying literature that we see and regularly experience into a value that non-academics can get behind. More than a misrepresentation of who we are and what we do, the overpaid egghead "haunts" her entire essay, looming over all of her inspiring descriptions and demanding accountability.

The tale begins with an irony that foreshadows the "mismatch" that the overpaid egghead comes to figure. Martin's title "Teaching Literature, Changing Cultures" suggests that teaching literature is socially valuable because it can effect cultural change, a defense offered by many others as well. Despite this suggestion, there are few references to specific cultural changes that have resulted, should result, or will result from literary study (one might think of this absence alongside Lentricchia's note that "the literary academy has long be staffed by people with righteous understanding, who assiduously disseminate that understanding in the classroom, and still the world remains governed by sexism and so on"). Instead of specific changes, Martin cites the more general 'contributing to intellectual life and building of more-vigorous, more-critical cultures" (7). It sounds valuable and perhaps even feels good too. But there's no "proof": no charts, graphs, stats, quantitative or qualitative data. Even her vignette lacks evidence of changes that resulted from her teaching experience (and we have only her testimony as proof that culture-changing study actually happened). We must assume—and given that *PMLA* is read mostly by college teachers and would-be college teachers, we probably

will assume—that the study of literature builds more-vigorous, more-critical cultures and contributes to intellectual life. But how would we demonstrate, let alone prove this, to a public that does not make the same assumptions?[9]

More tellingly, throughout the essay she locates the potential for cultural change in specific practices, activities, and experiences—the kind reading that we that we value. In addition to the above-mentioned 'suspending the demand for immediate intelligibility…', she advocates: 'promoting interdisciplinary concerns and interests, and addressing the affective as well as the cognitive dimensions of the "life of the mind" (7); developing and encouraging "complex, deep, and imaginative thinking" (10); "produc[ing] new, more capacious modes of apprehension or open[ing] the space of nonlogic" (16); suspending "intellectual mastery and psychological defense" (17); and facilitating the "deep engagement of [the] self in the pleasures of thinking elsewhere" (21). And she recounts an inspiring personal example of a teaching experience.

Again, such descriptions may sound valuable (and are)… to *us*. We understand, more or less, what she means by 'interdisciplinary concerns and interests,' 'affective and cognitive dimensions of the life of the mind,' 'more capacious modes of apprehension,' and even 'opening the space of nonlogic.' But *the* public is not likely to be moved by such non-specific and obscure language. And we will have significant difficulty selling the suspension of intelligibility and mastery—those two outcomes tend to be *highly* valued, if not the 'normal'/ 'universal' assumption about the purpose/ goal of education. Moreover, how would one translate such engagement with the text into accessible, demonstrable educational goals? Once translated, how would one go about measuring them? What kind of "outcome" would one look for to prove not only that these goals

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were achieved, but also the degree to which they were achieved? And how would one then represent all of this in a way that the public could understand as 'normalcy?' Imagine, for a second, trying to prove experiences like: the feeling of "the selvedges of the language-textile giv[ing] way, fray[ing] into *frayages* or facilitations' (Spivak, quoted in Martin 16); being led "to the garden of primary time, where all the varieties of *instants* grow" (Cixous, quoted in Martin 18); and, of course, ravishingly pleasurable *erotic* transport (I emphasize "erotic" here because despite the our fondness of 'erotic' and 'promiscuous' reading, I'm 99.9% sure they don't appear in the departmental course objectives that we're mandated to put on our syllabi).

It's not surprising, then, that Martin does not account for this 'time spent' with productivisms: it speaks for itself. But there's the rub: if one doesn't already see the value in such study, as a means to social change or an end in itself, Martin's effort to represent it as socially valuable, admirable and accurate as it may be, is not likely to change that opinion. This becomes especially clear in her example of a summer seminar that she co-taught. The seminar, involving rising high school seniors, provided a wonderful, exceedingly valuable experience for young studiers of literature. Yet her recounting of the experience lacks any evidence of student learning, and many of the "learning goals" she cites run counter to *the* public's expectations of education.

Early in the essay, she laments the lack of time for "lingering and dwelling" (10) in undergrad and graduate courses (high school teachers have similar complaints given the need to cover tested curriculum). In the summer seminar, however, they had plenty of time for such activities, "spending hours on as few as three passages, even on punctuation and its effects." We might think of the Rhapsode's difficulty getting through

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a syllabus. She describes how the students "*enjoyed* the rapid-fire exchanges and collaboratively built analyses often associated with good discussions, but they also *took pleasure* in retreat, lassitude, and lollygagging" (emphasis mine). She concludes that "[b]ecause of the large amount of time we spent with so few students, we were able to see what an anxious, if *exciting*, process reading can be when readers suspend their need to know and to control" (13).

The value of this experience may be obvious to us as literature teachers and scholars. But if her reader does not already value such experiences, the story is not likely to persuade him/her to come to our side. She talks of enjoyment, pleasure, and excitement—experiences enabled and encouraged by 'the suspension of the need to know and to control.' And yet 'knowledge' and 'control' of texts and language are often the measures by which people are held accountable for their time spent studying literature. The distance between "sides" is further accentuated by the teacher-student ratio, 1:9, and even more so by the skill level of the students, 'advanced.' One might grant such liberties as 'retreat, lassitude and lollygagging' in an intimate, non-punitive setting to students who have already proven themselves. But these are not likely to be celebrated— if they are even tolerated—in large, mixed ability settings that count towards student graduation (and, in some cases, school funding). With thirty plus students of varying levels of proficiency, how does one distinguish between retreat and boredom, lassitude and laziness, lollygagging and confusion? How does one distinguish between a student's 'necessary solitude' and his/her sneaky texting, updating of facebook, tweeting, etc?

Significantly, Martin does not mention assessments—not diagnostic, formative, or summative. While Martin, her co-teacher, and/or the students' high school teachers may

have formally assessed the students, the results were not important enough to mention, i.e. 'at the end of the course, all of the students wrote A final papers/ earned As on their final exams', or even 'all of the students got 5s on the A.P. English exam the following year.' Which is to say, assessment was beside—or not—the point: the purpose was to "introduce the students to the intellectual rigor and excitement they could expect from university education" (12); the purpose, in other words, was the *experience*.

Martin does remark, ""[o]ver the summer, we heard and read increasingly sophisticated analyses of literature, or *so I like to think*" (13, emphasis mine). The positioned qualification 'or so I like to think' is a testament to her academic honesty; *she* thinks they were sophisticated, but others may disagree. It also indicates the challenge of measuring the types of experiences and activities she describes. Pleasure, excitement, enjoyment, etc. resist measurement, particularly in ways that translate into being social valued. And while such experiences can and do lead to sophisticated analyses, if those that her students performed "promote[d] the keeping open of literary questions" (15) and demonstrated "an insistent focus on how meanings are made and pleasures produced" (16), they run the risk of being undervalued as well.

Martin recalls: "Many of the students worried about the tensions between what they were learning and what some of their high school teachers had taught them about authorial intentionality and meaning in literary works" (14). I don't think Martin is trying to criticize high school teachers or their pedagogy. Instead, the comment points out a rift between what is considered valuable academic practice in different contexts. At the high school level, academic practice is measured, specifically by one's ability to demonstrate understanding of authorial intent and meaning. In other words, one's

knowledge and control of texts and language. The time spent studying literature gets routinely tested, specifically by the state and now by the national government, or rather National Governors Association. And despite the debatable accuracy of such measurements, they can and are represented in charts, and pie graphs, and statistics, and they are used to determine and reinforce social value—that of specific practices and their practitioners.

Which brings me to the overpaid egghead: in the middle of her uplifting narrative about the 'rhythmic development of engagement and open solitudes,' she feels compelled to remind college literature teachers of our social image and the need to change it. It's an interesting moment: not only is *PMLA* read mostly by college teachers and would-be college teachers and the special topic is college teaching, but also her story speaks directly to the teaching of literature. Why interrupt it with a long paragraph that is *not* about teaching practices, but about employment conditions that we're well aware of? She explains: "Contrary to representations of college teachers as eggheads who get a lot for doing almost no useful work, most members of our profession are paid relatively little and work too hard" (14). She follows this reminder—we may think of it in terms of behavior modification programs—with a laundry list of our "useful" works. Such preaching to the choir may suggest that the choir has lost their faith and/or is singing a different, even blasphemous, tune. Or, it may just be a handy list of talking points, since she knows we will inevitably have to defend our use of time. And she knows that the activities mentioned translate as more or less "valuable."

Martin's language suggests that the overpaid egghead is not just a gross misrepresentation; it also reinforces dominant notions of what constitutes "useful" and/or

"valuable" work, requiring us to respond in kind. One might compare her list's use of active verbs to those used in a resume: *direct, offer, serve, devise, teach, supervise, prepare, write, attend, evaluate,* etc. (the "business-y" feel is also emphasized in her recurring reference to institutional "meetings"). And yet, the thrust of her essay lies in different verbs: *linger, dwell, reflect, think, suspend, receive, wonder, astonish,* etc. While directing, offering, serving, etc. undoubtedly require one to linger, dwell, reflect, etc., the necessity of the doing former limits the time for doing the latter. And while supervising, preparing, attending, etc. are undoubtedly important academic activities, Martin's essay questions whether thinking, suspending, receiving, etc. are equally, if not more, valuable academic activities.

Martin cites the lack of time for such activities as the main problem facing college educators (and college students). This perhaps explains why she devotes almost a full page to the additional, time-eating job responsibilities. One might read her interruption as mimicking those of these productivisms: institutional mandates to be "productive" continuously cutting into our nice classroom experiences and our ability to create more of them. Yet the interruption also highlights the problem of aligning what we consider valuable academic practice with academic practices that are actually valued.

Looking again at Martin's list of useful works, we might note that most, if not all, are measurable in some way. At the very least, we can count the number of: 'independent study projects' we direct; 'extra tutorials' we offer; meetings, lectures, conferences we attend; student papers, dissertation chapters, colleague/ journal/ press manuscripts we evaluate; etc. And perhaps the most telling, she ends the long sentence that begins "And when we are not…" with "we have time to do research, for our

publications or for updating our courses." In other words, when we're not doing all those other things that can be counted, we have time for research, an activity that, though seemingly difficult to measure accurately, ultimately gets counted according to the number of publications that the research generates or the number of courses updated with that research. But what we cannot count easily, if at all, makes up the bulk of her essay. And what we cannot count is why we 'chose to make a profession of teaching literature.'

Roughly twenty years later, Rita Felski sums up this problem in her introduction to *Uses of Literature*: "In the media and public life, what counts as knowledge is equated with a piling up of data and graphs, questionnaires and pie charts, input-output ratios and feedback loops…In such an austere and inauspicious climate, how do scholars of literature make a case for the value of what we do?" (2). Though she suggests that "there is no reason why our readings cannot blend analysis and attachment, criticism and love" (22)—and I agree with her—the current climate gives us a reason: analytic attachment/ attached analysis or loving criticism/ critical loving can't be easily represented in data and graphs, questionnaires and pie charts, input-output ratios and feedback loops. Such circulatory paths are not recognizable as worthy of realization when "austerity" is the dominant way of envisioning stranger sociability.

Stanley Fish echoes this reason in his recent *New York Times* blogpost: "we're probably measuring the wrong things and the right things are not amenable to measurement" ("Two Cultures…"). Later he elaborates:

> Not only is there no right answer when the subject is Melville, there's no
> right question, just the undesigned and often circuitous process of turning
> the object of your attention this way and that way until something
> arresting emerges, and then you do it again, without the programmed
> prompting of any deus ex machina. How can you measure or preplan
> that? You can't, and so much the worse or Melville, who will just have to

be left behind, along with a great deal else that belongs to the culture of art and intuition ("Two Cultures…").

To demonstrate this point, I'll turn to Michael Fielding, an Education scholar who provides an important word of caution about assigning outcomes. Discussing target-setting and what are referred to in various fields as SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound), he explains:

> …the objection is not to measurability *per se,* but rather to the idolatry of measurement, which is both more likely and more necessary within a context that sets its standards and rests its future on the attainment of publicly accessible, readily understandable outcomes. The worry here is that the strength of convictions about the necessity of measurement blinds its proponents to the limitations of current instruments and we all end up not only mismeasuring the measurable, but misrepresenting the immeasurable or elusive aspects of education which so often turn out to be central to our deeper purposes and more profound aspirations (280)

Fielding cites similar problems with the other acronym components. The specific, clear outcome "within a strongly instrumental process like target setting runs the risk of severely weakening its essential links with the larger undertaking which it is designed to serve" (279). The realistically attainable outcome tends to aim for "basic competence" (281) and can "become a mental and practical barrier to creativity, risk taking and the more exploratory dimensions of learning" (280). And his issue with relevance is essentially the same as that explored in much of the literary criticism of the last fifty or so years, namely relevant to whom?

Fielding's worries about target setting for primary and secondary education are exacerbated at the level of academic literary study. We deal almost exclusively in the 'immeasurable or elusive aspects of education,' since, for the most part, we can assume that once a student gets here, s/he has 'basic competence.' To use Fish's "target": students will be able to 'turn the text this way and that until something arresting

emerges.' The unclear and nonspecific 'turning of the text this way and that' stands in for the wide variety of complex approaches and theories we employ when we read. Elaborating on this vagueness may provide specificity, but not clarity, as in Martin's 'opening space for nonlogic' and even 'promoting interdisciplinary concerns.' Obviously "something" is neither specific nor clear, its vagueness serving to underscore the unpredictability (hard to plan for) and open-endedness (hard to measure) of academic literary study. That the something is 'arresting' presents more trouble: one reader's epiphany is another's par for course, as in ex's students' discoveries that 'Pound's *Cantos* is anti-Semitic, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is imperialist' (69), DiLillo's *White Noise* is elitist and ethnocentric' (64), etc.

More troubling, though, are the limitations placed on literary study—specifically 'risk-taking, creativity, and the more exploratory dimensions of learning'—when one's ability to engage in a specific set of practices and protocols becomes the reigning outcome that all studiers must achieve. Our discipline is rooted in the possibility for multiple interpretations. We encourage new reading, new ways of reading and new experiences. Thus the conflict between academic literary counterpublics and the dominant public is not simply a matter of policy questions—how many "English" classes should be required, how much funding English departments should receive, which SLOs should be included on all syllabi, etc. It is rooted in fundamentally incompatible visions of the world. If the public believes that "if it can't be measured, what good is it?" ("Two Cultures..."), that the goal of education is 'to ensure college- and career-readiness' and 'global competiveness,' and that colleges can and should be ranked according to 'student outcomes,' they will have trouble valuing a discipline that promotes immeasurable

experiences and the imagining of new ways of seeing and being. If a studier believes that

the purpose and value of academic literary study is the experience of 'something

arresting,' the experience of 'enchantment, recognition, knowledge, and shock,' the

experience of 'ravishingly pleasurable erotic transport,' etc. s/he will have trouble

defending the discipline in socially valued ways.

CHAPTER 2
FAILING BETTER

Containing Multitudes

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)
Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

In "Public and Private," Warner describes counterpublics as follows:

…some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their
participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general.
Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules
obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions
and protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or
what goes without saying. This kind of public is, in effect, a
counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness
of its subordinate status (56).

Thanks to the Internet, it's really hard to be unaware of our subordinate status (not that

anti-intellectualism is anything new). But more telling than the 'don't go to grad school

for English' sermons and the 'elegies for the humanities' (Jusdanis 12) that engulf the

web is the tension that defines us: the dispositions, protocols, and assumptions that

distinguish academic literary study from both non-professional, "lay" reading and the

kind of reading espoused in dominant discussions of English language arts (ELA). Within

the discipline, dispositions, protocols, and assumptions vary, sometimes fundamentally.

And yet most of us would agree that what we do is different than what readers do when

they're reading for leisure and different than what is done when readers need and/or want

to develop their literacy and communication skills. Interestingly, our disagreements make

this consensus '*unshakably*' clear.

We debate how we should read: closely, suspiciously, ethically, promiscuously,

reparatively, etc. and which of the highly specific practices and theoretical concepts

associated with each should be employed, when, how, and to what extent. We debate the pace at which we should read: slowly, rapidly, various combinations of the two, as well as when which speed is appropriate. We debate what we should read and in what proportions: non/ canonical texts, highbrow/ middlebrow/ lowbrow literature, literary theory and criticism, texts from related disciplines, or any text we find interesting and/or relevant. And we debate the proper ways of demonstrating our reading: writing clearly, writing accessibly, writing with potentially inaccessible complexity/ clarity, writing "objectively," writing with a distinguishable style/ personality, etc. But there is no need for such disagreements when one is reading for entertainment, and no room for them when one is reading in order to get ultimately a job.

Despite (or because of) our disagreements—that is, the wealth of choices we offer for potentially valuable reading experiences—we are marked off from others: we are elitists, snobs, and liberal indoctrinators, book destroyers and reading ruiners (and, in some cases, 'easy As'), out-of-touch dreamers and/or eggheads, and budget-suckers who provide no useful service to the institution and its students. While this may be a gross misrepresentation of who we are and what we do, our discourse is often used as evidence supporting it. We tend to privilege certain texts and authors over others, which implies that we think our preferences are superior and thus we are too. We tend to write with a high degree of complexity or, in some cases, obscurity, which suggests that we want *only* equally sophisticated people to read our work. We tend to cite fiction and theory rather than quantitative or qualitative data ("facts"), which renders our work groundless or "mental masturbation." And, as in the above, we tend to debate seeming minutia, which reinforces the "quip" that we are Piled Higher and Deeper.

Of course, such tendencies might also be described as: specializing in particular genres, times periods, theories, approaches, etc; attending to and/or playing with the nuances of and tensions in language and ideas; promoting ways of knowing that are not readily and/or easily quantifiable, summarizable, representable, and replicable; and wallowing in the "waste" of accepted beliefs and norms. *Or* the tendency to view nothing as 'going with saying' *other than* the "fruitful perversity" of discourse. Warner explains: "Public discourse postulates a circulatory field of estrangement that it must then capture as an addressable entity. No form with such a structure could be very stable. The projective character of public discourse, in which each characterization of the circulatory path becomes material for new estrangements and recharacterizations, is an engine for (not necessarily progressive) social mutation" (113). As with any public, literary studiers engage in the reflexive circulation of discourse (90). But, insofar as "the rule of thumb for literary study is that as a matter of principle other readings are always possible" (Alter 213), and insofar as 'we all believe' that "no theory, no *set* of theories, can account for all the riches of a reading experience" (Fjellestad 409), our discourse is rooted in the fruitful perversity of discourse, working specifically to make other readings and other rich reading experiences possible.

This makes it difficult to expand circulation. Again, to increase the chances of success, a public speech act must contain its possible extensions. By limiting what constitutes "proper" active uptake, a speech act increases the chances of uniform replication and ultimately the realization of the world envisioned in the discourse. But since addressees can choose to perform the extension of a given speech act in multiple ways, there is no guarantee that they will perform it "correctly." They might circulate it

among the "wrong" kind of strangers in the "wrong" kind of way, mutating the discourse such that it realizes the "wrong" world. The antisocial thesis is a particularly salient example of this: it recharacterizes a discourse that is not meant to be circulated by the people who circulate the thesis, not intended to be circulated in the ways envisioned in the thesis, and certainly not aimed at realizing the world that is the process of being realized through the circulation of the thesis.[10]

Such acts of recharacterization are precisely what academic literary study trains studiers to appreciate and perform. We learn to approach discourse as uncontainable, not only by reading a wide variety of texts but also by performing multiple, conflicting interpretations. In other words, our discourse circulates in and as the fruitful perversity of discourse. This is one of the main reasons the discipline is valuable and also one of the main reasons it is not socially valued. Rather than masking the world-making potential of discourse, we exploit it in an effort to envision new ways of participating in our public, new ways of circulating discourse, and new ways of imagining stranger sociability in and through the routine action of reading (Warner 76). Establishing uniform, replicable visions of the discipline is antithetical to what we do, since it would limit our ability to extend discourse in multiple, ever-changing ways. And thus we necessarily have difficulty being socially valued.

To begin, we tend to begin from the premise that there is no one "right" reading and no one "right" way of reading. As professionals, we may suggest "better" texts, "better" readings and "better" ways of reading, but ultimately "better" is a matter of subjective value judgments that inspire individual studiers to perform certain extensions and not others. And though study "is an activity shaped by distinctive conditions and

expectations… governed by conventions of interpretation and research developed over decades…and subject to the judgment of other professional readers" (Felski 12), the discipline enables, if not encourages, individual studiers to make the "better" judgments for themselves. Even the most rigid program of study requires that studiers be able to perform the extension of multiple/ conflicting discourses, follow multiple/ conflicting circulatory paths, produce multiple/ conflicting interpretations. It's no wonder that we have trouble agreeing on a uniform, replicable vision.

Our prerequisites, the spaces of circulation where novice studiers begin to learn how to circulate our discourse, introduce the variety of possible "correct" paths that study might take. Survey courses serve as much to familiarize studiers with the "standard" texts associated with a particular time and place as they do to offer a broad view of the myriad ways discourse can be circulated; and, as limited/ limiting as the courses may be, their differences indicate that, on a fundamental level, literary study requires exposure to a wealth of possible circulatory paths.[11] In other words, one may eventually choose to focus on the Romantics, but on does so with the understanding that their way of circulating discourse and the worlds their discourse envisions is one general grouping of possibilities among other, equally valid, even if conflicting groupings.

In addition, studiers are required to take at least one introductory course on literary theory/ criticism, which establishes the ways that our discourse can be and has been successfully circulated. Such courses might seem to limit possible extensions to those with demonstrated records of success, or, in some cases, those that seem to promise the most future success per the current moment/ trends. But they also reinforce the variety of avenues for successful circulation—Marxism, Reader Response, New

Historicism, etc.—as well as the promise of variety—since so many different paths have been successfully taken in the past, it is reasonable to assume that in the present and the future, alternative paths can be taken with equal success. Though this basic structure is replicated across English programs and therefore seems to present a unified vision of the discipline, it complicates uniform replication and therefore the expansion of circulation. Individually, each perquisite might be said to mark certain boundaries of study—this is what constitutes early American lit, this is what constitutes literary criticism, etc., etc. But as a whole, they undermine the boundaries they seem to set up, indicating the wealth of "dominant" discourses in the discipline. In other words, from the get-go studiers are taught that there is more than one way to "correctly" perform the extension of our discourse.

The higher one travels up the ivory tower, the more diverse the options are for active uptake (sometimes referred to as 'lack of agreement' or 'incoherence'). Specializations, approaches to literature, theoretical apparatuses, critical terms, etc. present studiers with even more potential circulatory paths. And while professionalization often requires that we align ourselves with particular reading practices, we are encouraged to use preexisting discourse as material for new estrangements and recharacterizations, i.e. produce new readings and new ways of reading. Uniform replication is generally frowned upon. To borrow from Best and Marcus, any one way of reading is not necessarily "a unitary mode or pilgrimage to a single point, but [rather] a road branching in multiple directions," even if there is 'significant overlap' and 'connections at key points' (3). I use this description from their introduction to the special issue of *Representations* on 'the way we read,' because our

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academic journals' special issues tend to exemplify the premium we place on performing the extension of our discourse in multiple, ever-changing ways.

The spaces of reflexive circulation created in and through our academic journals' special issues, in effect, contain possible extensions in order to multiply them. As public discourse, special issues address anyone and organize relations among strangers. But, unlike other spaces of circulation that project broader characterizations—anthologies, conferences, most undergrad courses and some grad courses, and even academic journals' regular issues—in the special issue, "the limits that are the imagined scene of circulation" (91) are more clearly and narrowly defined. The potentially infinite extensions are contained not only by the particular journal's specific characterization of its addressees, but also by both the special topic, the introductory essay, and, to a certain extent, the essays included in the issue. Thus one might expect to find a comparatively unified vision, in effect, the special issue saying: *To successfully circulate discourse on X, follow the paths envisioned within.*

In addition to the limits specified by the journal's characterization of its public,[12] the special topic clearly defines the boundaries of the discussion: *The articles contained within this issue talk mainly or exclusively about X.* But it also tends to reduce the number of potential contributors to those who are authorities on the topic: *As X has been deemed important enough to warrant a special issue, it deserves to be talked by equally important people.* In this case, the potential for alternative extensions of the topic depends on whether the authorities contributing are interested in modifying both their established positions on the topic and the kinds of circulatory paths they're known for

envisioning. Whatever vision they choose to circulate, their assumed authority reinforces it: *Since this is what authorities are saying about X, you should say it too*.

The possible extensions are further curbed by the introductory essay. Usually written by an authority or uber-authority, the introduction does the most containment work, explaining some of the possible positions that can be, have been, and are taken up in relation to the special topic: *This is how discourse on X can be successfully circulated*. And the more authority the essay seems to have—the sense of legitimacy lent by the status of the author combined with all of the people s/he cites—the more contained the discourse appears: *This is how discourse on X is "normally" circulated*. The respondents' essays may also curtail extensions, depending on who they are and whom they cite: *Authorities on Y circulate discourse on X in this way*. And insofar as the essays are organized as a dialogue or debate, the special issue seems to "understand the ongoing circulatory time of discourse on the special topic] as though it were a discussion leading up to a decision" (123): *We will now circulate discourse on X in this way*.

Per the special issues' specifications, one might expect the same circulatory paths to be more or less uniformly replicated, or, at the very least, paths that are intent on limiting possible extensions. But, more often than not, one encounters the opposite. The special topic tends to be chosen because discourse on it has been extended in a variety of different ways and some contingent immediacy[13] has prompted studiers to further exploit its fruitful perversity: *X is currently ripe for exploring more possible interpretations*. The introductory essay not only sums up the various extensions, but also either explicitly or implicitly acknowledges each essay's status as material for new estrangements and recharacterizations: *Given what has been said about X, what else can we say about it*

now. The essays within the issue tend to vary, both in the circulatory paths they envision and the preexisting discourses they cite: *X can be approached and/ or understood in all of theses ways in relation to all of these other objects*. And the space of circulation created by the special issue elicits further extensions: *Since the journal devoted this whole space to X, the authorities within devoted time and energy to discussing X, and there has been no decision about X, it's worthy of further discussions and interpretations*. Which is to say even our most seemingly closed spaces are designed for and generative of openness.

A particularly telling example is the special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* that "contains" the infamous debate about Baudrillard's reading of J.G. Ballard's *Crash*—a debate that I explore in my final chapter. The title of the special issue defines the topic broadly—science fiction and postmodernism—but the introductory essay significantly narrows it—reactions to two of Baudrillard's essays on SF. And the list of recognizable contributors—the usual suspects of SF discourse—as well as the fact that about half of them engage the *Crash* reading indicate that the space of circulation is unusually limited.[14] Indeed it was an incredible "score" for me, when I was doing my lit review of *Crash*, since I could access several different readings in one shot (some special issues are particularly grad-student friendly). And yet, this seemingly narrowest of spaces—a few short essays by like-minded contributors responding to two essays by the same author about the same topic—presents a variety of different options for possible circulatory paths.

To summarize what would seem to be a highly restricted space, that of the *Crash* debate: various authors use the material provided by Baudrillard's essay to envision their

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respective paths—from self-critical reading, to embodied reading, to posthuman reading, and even Ballard's injunction against critical reading—and realize the worlds they envision in and as particular ways of circulating Ballard's *Crash*, Baudrillard's discourse, and discourse in general. Though Baudrillard's texts tend to be circulated as a kind of dominant discourse among literary publics, the circulatory paths and the world they envision are not replicated by the special issues' respondents. Indeed, some argue vehemently against his vision. Active uptake in this space entails replication to the extent that it fosters recharacterization—that is, citing/ explaining the moments in/ aspects of Baudrillard's essay that enable the author to produce his/her different vision. And while the individual responses seem to argue for the "correctness" of their particular visions, the aggregate—the entire circulatory field—suggests that the only correct paths are the ones that circulate discourse in and as the possibility for new estrangements and recharacterizations. In other words, we perform the extension of a preexisting discourse, not merely to replicate it, but to transform it in some way (Warner 122).

Of course, other disciplines circulate special issues that contain multiple extensions as well. But our counterpublic is particularly resistant to replication. The ex highlights this contradistinctively in his depiction of professional critics. The formula "all literature is *x* and nothing but *x*, and literary study is the naming (exposure) of *x*" is a uniform, replicable, rational-critical vision of the discipline that eschews the fruitful perversity of discourse in an effort to expand circulation. Regardless of how accurate his assessment of then-current trends was, we tend to reject such reductive, formulaic practices. And yet, that's how our discourse would need to circulate in order to be socially valued by a dominant public that mandates transparency and accountability. The

formula, in essence, is a description of outcomes-based, outcomes-driven study, a vision that is more likely to be recognized as valuable and therefore valued. The intended outcome of any given reading act is the naming of the social order. Studiers read with the intention of exposing 'imperialism, sexism, homophobia, etc.' and then expose it in their discourse, thereby demonstrating the achievement of the intended outcome and reinforcing the intended outcome as the intended outcome. The process is repeated over and over again, each repetition proving the effectiveness of the process, the aggregate providing a clear, consistent understanding of what studiers 'need to know and be able do in order to be successful.'

The point here is not that this is what we do/ did, but that this how we would have to *represent* what we do in order for *the* public to begin to consider our work socially valuable. Highly nuanced approaches are (over)simplified so that they can be accessibly communicated and consistently applied. Pleasurably divergent reading experiences are channeled into uniform, replicable, demonstrable reading acts so that they can be assessed to determine the extent to which they achieve predetermined outcomes. And the intricate work of imagining new possibilities that feminist, queer, postcolonial, etc. theories can and do facilitate becomes the easy hunt for examples of "othering." Of course, this vision has advantages: academic literary study becomes a coherent discipline, with clear(ish) goals and clear(ish) methods for both achieving and demonstrating the achievement of those goals.

Writing around the same time, Denis Donoghue offers a similar vision to avoid, specifically referencing the problem of transparency. Citing Matei Calinescu's *Rereading*, he explains:

With the growth of 'extensive reading,' the growing prestige of science, and the rise of political democracy modernity has fostered a powerful longing for transparency doubled by a hostility to those forms of secrecy that were traditionally claimed as a prerogative of power, whether supernatural or human…" This desire for transparency takes many forms, all reductive. It shows itself in the determination to construe every work of literature… as a simple parable, invidiously recited, of men and women. More clamorously, it presents itself as a desire to find great literature rotten with fantasy and corruptly in league with men of power (72).

It seems odd that one would opt to study literature in order to demonize it. Though I'm sure there are many people who choose fields of study that they don't really like, I find it hard to believe that scores of highly intelligent, highly capable people who "don't particularly care for literature" (Alter 12) or "secretly hate literature" ("Last Will" 63) decided to pursue an arduous, non-lucrative, unstable career in literary study. In my mind, it's much more likely that the dictates of transparency compelled them to publicly 'find great literature rotten with fantasy and corruptly in league with the men of power,' and keep private their 'secret lives with literature.'

With the advantage of hindsight, Best and Marcus point to this possibility: "Jameson's image of the critic as wresting meaning from a resisting text or inserting it into a lifeless one had enormous influence in the United States, perhaps because it presented professional literary criticism as a strenuous and heroic endeavor, one more akin to activism and labor than to leisure, and therefore fully deserving of remuneration" (5-6). "Activists for social change" is a more marketable representation than 'pleasure-seekers exercising their imagination' (Donoghue 73). And insofar as a secret life with literature is a prerogative of power—those with enough time and money to pursue and enjoy a life of literary transport—studiers might justifiably try to distance themselves and their work from activities that are easily associated with leisure.

Unfortunately, "exploiting the fruitful perversity of discourse" falls on the side of leisure. This perhaps is most obvious in the realm of writing instruction, where the tensions between dominant circulatory paths and our circulatory paths may be "acutely felt" (Warner 122). I am thinking here of the notion that we teach students to be "better" writers.   Though "better" ultimately depends on the particular public one is addressing, one can reasonably assume that our developed understanding of grammatical conventions, argumentation, and style supports such a claim. And yet, the idea also suggests that we teach a set of skills, rather than an experience.

The contrast between the two is apparent in Donoghue's discussion of expository writing programs (EWPs). Citing Wlad Godzich:

> "It is not an exaggeration to state that the effect of the new writing programs, given their orientation, is not to solve a 'crisis of literacy' but to promote a new differentiated culture in which the student is trained to use language for the reception and conveyance of information in only one sphere of human activity: that of his or her future field of employment." (76).

Donoghue then cites John Guillory's description of the kind of speech acts taught in EWPS:

> "We will have no difficulty in recognizing what this speech sounds like: it is the speech of the professional-managerial classes, the administrators and bureaucrats; and it is employed *in its place*, the 'office.'…Students need no longer immerse themselves in that body of writing called 'literature' in order to acquire 'literary' language. In taking over the social function of producing a distinction between a basic and a more elite language, composition takes on as well the ideological identity of the sociolect, its pretension to universality, it status as the medium of political discourse."

And finally, Donoghue explains "the aim of EWPs is merely to train students to take part in the decorum of social and public life. The divided forces of a plural society— ideologies of race, class, gender, creed—are meant to be reconciled in offices of

management and the corporations" (77). Here, "better" writing instruction serves to make students more employable and thereby (ostensibly) resolve the tensions/ antagonisms that divide society. And one might read these twenty-plus-year-old comments as harbingers of the current "college- and career-readiness and global competitiveness," which, according to the dominant discourse, is the purpose of education.

Yet composition courses are undoubtedly important. Students who are not proficient in the 'universal language of political discourse' have limited opportunities and limited agency. In other words, they tend be less employable and less likely to be able to combat structural oppression. The tension here is between communication skills and the experience of language, both in the reactions to EWPs and the authors' ability to critique EWPs. In addition to describing a function of language, they also describe an experience of it: an inhabiting of a space of circulation—discourse on composition—and a living of its world—classist oppression. Literary study trains studiers to do this: to experience language as an inhabitable world *that can be changed through discourse*.

First, though our public reading acts tend to take the form of analytic arguments, our objects model wildly different styles of writing and their styles are a large part of what we study, if not why we study. Modeling is key: regardless of a teacher's preferred strategies, if s/he wants students to be able to do something, s/he has to model it first. The composition teacher provides students with examples of the kind of writing s/he wants them to be able to do, i.e. non-fiction texts, often that demonstrate successful arguments. In literature courses, this might mean providing students with written or oral examples of critical readings. But students still have to read literature. Cross-contamination between

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analytic writing and "creative" writing is inevitable (if not encouraged), as studiers are exposed over and over again to more and more options for circulating discourse. This, in itself, works against uniform replication, if only slightly[15].

Moreover, fictional texts explicitly present themselves as world-making projects that enable readers to inhabit other worlds and experience other ways of being. The ex emphasizes in his transport metaphor: "books propelling me out of the narrow life that I lead in my own little world, offering me revelations of strangers, who turn out to not be totally strange; a variety of real worlds, unveiled for me, for the first time" (63). In conjuring a fictional world, regardless of how similar it is to one's own, literature insists on the possibility of using discourse to envision new ways of seeing and being. Academic literary study trains students to access and enjoy these visions, as well as how to share them with others.

This may require evaluating the experience so as to critique one's own way of seeing and being as well as the ways of seeing and being available in one's current society. In other words, ideological influences play a role in what worlds are possible and which worlds get realized: at any given point, not all strangers can offer revelations and not all revelations can be offered; similarly, at any given point, not all strangers will turn out to be not totally strange and not all revelations will be read as being revealed. It is not unlikely that, having experienced texts in this way, studiers will attempt to circulate discourse so as to realize a different vision of their current world.

Gregory Jusdanis argues that this is literature's function: to highlight itself as different from the "real world" so as to allow readers to critique the "real" world and change it:

> Although literature itself does not transform the world, it fosters a cognitive perspective that enables both critique and real-life impact. By encouraging the maximum use of fabrication while defending its space as an abode of fabrication, literature creates an alternative universe that makes sense only as a juxtaposition to the real one. Traditionally this capacity has been called creativity, the freedom we experience in art, when we find ourselves no longer bound by the rules of signification, gravity, law, or religion. This latitude encourages us to take a flight of fancy while being conscious of the here and now (66).

Whether we agree with Jusdanis, he suggests that the hope of social transformation is built into literature. This may be a source of pleasure for some, as they are no longer bound by the possibilities of their "real" world and may be able to envision a "real" world with altered boundaries. And as we are encouraged to 'take a flight of fancy,' we need not feel forced to critique the text prior to or during the reading experience.

Most importantly, literary study, unlike composition, insists on the world-making potential of discourse by training studiers to play with an inherently flawed system of signification. Composition courses emphasize standards of accurate communication such that students' ideas are easily accessible to their intended addressees. Literary study presents studiers with the possibility of writing what can't be written so as to re/make language. The ex explains: "Great writing is a literally *unruly*, one-of-kind thing, something new and original in the world of literature, which (like all cultural worlds) is dominated by the conventional and the rule-driven: the boringly second rate…I assume, but cannot prove, that there can be illuminating conversation about the peaks of unruly originality, from Homer and Dante to Joyce and Proust." Here, he suggests that the measure of greatness is the degree to which a text generates new estrangements and recharacterizations—this is why there can still be 'illuminating conversation' about texts that seem to have been thoroughly critiqued. And though he's referring to fiction, insofar

as literary study trains studiers to appreciate unruly writing, it is tough to thoroughly

discipline our critical reading acts. Unruliness, in other words, encourages different

readers to play with different interpretations without resolving meaning into a uniform,

replicable thesis like "[a]ll of literary history is said to be a display of *x*, because human

history is nothing but the structure of *x*" (64).

He also points to the possibility of using language to restructure or reorganize our

way of seeing and being. Experiencing the 'peaks of unruly originality' is not simply

being transported to a different world; these peaks are 'illuminating' moments when

readers realize that language can do things that they thought it couldn't do. In other

words, when a text manages to signify something that we previously thought was

impossible to signify—or, in the simplest terms, manages to describe a feeling that we

couldn't describe.

In "Why There is Always a Future in the Future," Mari Ruti provides a

comparatively accessible Lacanian gloss:

> [Joyce] undoes—destroys and dismembers—language…Joyce is driven by
> a certain élan or improvised ardor. Regardless of how defiant or
> subversive his writing gets, Joyce endeavors to awaken, rather than to
> choke, the signifier. In other words, he harnesses the destructiveness of
> the death drive in the service of new life. One could, in fact, argue that
> creativity is precisely this: the ability to produce an opening for the new
> by taking apart the old (120).

These moments are particularly pleasurable as they destroy the seemingly rigid Symbolic

that structures our notions of self and our relations to others. Thus the ex also refers to

'great writing' as "the real thing," which is 'enlarging, defamiliarizing, and 'veil-

piercing.' And one need not be a Lacanian to experience them. In literary texts,

langauge breaks down fairly frequently, structures of meaning collapse, and alternative

possibilities emerge. In the most general sense, this experience is encouraged by the principle of multiple interpretations, which insists that language can't be mastered and encourages studiers to look/ make 'an opening for the new.' Thus, while we may teach students to use language to clearly and effectively communicate ideas, we also train studiers to take pleasure in the experience of it.

This is not to say that 'anything goes' in our public reading acts; they are not works of "fiction." But so many things do and can and might go that it is difficult to agree on what *should* go. Proper active uptake varies wildly, even under the supposed umbrella of the analytic argument, and thus, even if we wanted to, we'd have trouble containing the possible extensions of our discourse, ensuring uniform replication, expanding circulation, and ultimately realizing the worlds we envision. To the extent that we *encourage* new estrangements and recharacterizations, we, in effect, encourage the 'not necessarily progressive' mutation of the discipline. That is, the "wrong" strangers circulating the "wrong" visions such that the "wrong" worlds of literary study gets realized.

This inevitable "failure" is the subject of Robert Alter's *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. Of course, he doesn't refer to it as such, but he might as well have. Throughout, he locates the value of literary reading in the pleasure of playing with multiple interpretations, what he refers to as the 'high fun' of engaging "in one of the most elaborate and various games that human culture has devised" (228). In Alter's view academic study enhances—or *should* enhance—one's play, enabling the studier to maximize his/her enjoyment of the "the restless multiplicity of meanings and interpretations" (215). To the extent that he is correct, our discourse has but one,

impossible-to-contain method of proper active uptake: extending the pleasure of literary reading by increasing the opportunities for multiple interpretations.

Alter's book is particularly instructive, as the circulatory paths he envisions are comparatively accessible and valued—which is to say recognizable as both worthy of realization and potentially realizable. Aside from the moments that position his position—his 'ideological critique of ideological critique' (Beck 77)—he focuses on 'the resources of literary expression' that create a complex and enjoyable experience: literary language, character, style, allusion, structure, and perspective. These same concepts are often taught in ELA classes and they are part of the Common Core ELA standards. In other words, his circulatory paths are generally accepted as standard practice for readers and teachers of literature. But rather than rendering the academic reading act more transparent and more easily accounted for, literary study becomes deliberately unrecognizable per the dominant discourse and necessarily (enjoyably) incoherent per ours.

Alter's argument not only demonstrates the fruitful perversity of discourse, but also emphasizes its value: literary texts, by design, generate inexhaustible interpretations and experiencing this multiplicity without resolving it into a single vision is thoroughly pleasurable. And thus he details several perversions that studiers, having studied, can and should engage in. Study, in this case, works against replication, not only of a dominant interpretation, but also a dominant way of arriving at an interpretation. His 'high fun' is not about getting the right answer, or following the right path, but rather 'delighting' in the *impossibility* of a right answer and a right path. As relishing the multifariousness of literature (and, I would argue, discourse in general) is the aim of study, our discourse

should work to increase possible interpretations, thereby giving us more to enjoy. Which is to say, containing possible extensions—establishing "best practices" and generally accepted meanings—is antithetical to what we do.

But Alter's argument goes further: literary texts not only shouldn't be contained, they can't be. He demonstrates this by focusing on just six ways of engaging with a text. Significantly, the six he chooses are taught at most levels of English instruction, and thus it is likely that studiers have performed these kinds of extensions many times, that these circulatory paths are well-traveled, and that studiers have already experienced some, if not many, of the interpretations they generate. On the surface, then, their ability to provide the pleasure of multiplicity would seem to be limited. And yet, "the capacity of literary texts, as intricately structured vehicles of communication, to stimulate many readings and exclude many others" (228), enables the studier to, in effect, 'do the same thing over and over again and experience different results.' Throughout, Alter models the application of each of the six resources with 'lively' readings of a variety of predominantly canonical—in other words, widely interpreted—works, thus showing that even the most replicated circulatory paths cannot help but produce new estrangements and recharacterizations when the object of study is a literary text.

But this 'unruliness' inevitably and necessarily frustrates our ability to agree on a unified vision of the discipline and circulate discourse in a uniform, replicable way that would increase of chances of being socially valued. Alter emphasizes this in his final chapter, "Multiple Interpretations and the Bog of Indeterminacy." Having rigorously modeled potential uses of each of the resources, he demonstrates other possible circulatory paths that are more critical-theory based than his.

He briefly summarizes nine different readings of *Robinson Crusoe,* and then explains:

> Each of the interpretations I have sketched out possesses a certain plausibility, though it goes without saying that no reader (including this one) will find them all equally plausible. The perplexing thing, in any case, is that one would be hard put to demonstrate that any one of these nine readings was actually wrong, or, on the contrary, that any one was so triumphantly right that it excluded the possibility of all the others (213).

The sample readings demonstrate not only literature's 'capacity to stimulate many readings' but also the inevitable lack of agreement on proper active uptake. Even when our public reading acts take the same analytic form, we have trouble choosing a 'triumphantly right' interpretation and excluding possibilities that we don't find (or don't want to find) equally plausible.

But just as we have trouble establishing a 'triumphantly right' reading or right way of reading, we have trouble establishing definitively "wrong" readings and "wrong" ways of reading. This is particularly evident in the "rubric" he provides for determining readings that are 'absurd,' 'preposterous,' or 'bad':

> …when a reader assigns arbitrary meanings to key words or names in the text, when he or she proposes implications of social institutions invoked in the text that they never had in their historical setting, and when details provided by the narrator or by the characters in their dialogue are ignored or misrepresented, we are entitled to conclude that the reading in question is wrong (228).

Though seemingly clear, these markers are subject to interpretation: what seems 'arbitrary,' 'anachronistic,' or 'misrepresentative' according to one critical moment can acquire 'a certain plausibility' according to another.

As Alter explains, not only do literary works "consis[t] of too many disparate elements engaged in constant, shifting interplay," but they also "turn on an experiential dimension that is not finally reducible to the formal vehicles through which it is

conveyed" (206). This dimension includes a long list of variables, many of which are not controllable and/or readily identifiable.[16] Among them is "[a]ll that accumulates in the passage of time [which] not only distorts texts but illuminates them" (217). Thus, the "wrong" path for a particular moment can become the "right" path for a different one. As the ex-literary critic notes, "[o]nly ten to fifteen years ago, the views I've just cited on Pound and Conrad would have received barely passing grades had they been submitted as essays in an undergraduate course. Now, such views circulate at the highest levels of my profession in essays of distinguished literary critics" ("Last Will" 60). And trends have changed in the roughly twenty years since this statement, those views no longer circulating as freely at the highest levels of the profession.

My final reading of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* focuses specifically on this experiential dimension, suggesting that the novel is designed to maximize "the permutantional force of the freight that each reader brings to the text" (Alter 216). Most obviously, the individual reader who has been in a car accident will likely read the text differently than one who has not. But *Crash* is also a particularly salient example of the ways in which "the intervention of history as a highly refractive medium" can serve to both 'distort and illuminate' (217). In addition to the "prophetic" quality of the novel and much of Ballard's work, the sex-death-technology triangulation, the celebrity death crash, and the fantasy of fusing with celebrities can be read very differently now than could have been in 1973. Moreover, the novel might be said to invite Alter's no-no's, providing space for readers to assign seemingly arbitrary meanings to the word "crash" (and perhaps even the name of the narrator, "James Ballard"), for readers to propose seemingly anachronistic implications of social institutions like marriage/ family, and for readers to seemingly

ignore and misrepresent details provided by possible protagonist and narrator James as well as those provided by possible protagonist/ antagonist Vaughn, among others.

But we need not pick such a "problematic"[17] novel, as the experiential dimension forces us to continuously challenge and revise what constitutes an implausible reading of canonical works. This is one of the (perhaps unintended) takeaways from Alter's argument, particularly his discussion of the Fool Principal:

> Language is laden with thematically portentous meanings and at the same time threatens to break down into meaninglessness, exposing its own material conditions as a mere congeries of arbitrary sounds. Let me suggest, with this example from *Lear* in mind, that it is very often possible to detect in literary texts a capacity to multiply and destabilize meanings through aesthetically pleasing patterns. (232).

This reading of *King Lear* and the practice he demonstrates—reading for the moments when "words at once are startlingly expressive and dissolve into the arbitrariness of the formal systems in which they take part" (235)—would not have always been considered plausible. It requires, for instance, that one be able to see the signifier as arbitrary. More than this though is his notion that literary language is both centripetal and centrifugal, thus "it seems as though everything is powerfully pulled together" (236), and yet "it is never possible to specify definitively what the center of a text is or what it means." It seems, to me at least, that if there is no definitive center, the look of implausibility will change according to the particular moment's determination of the "closest" center/s. And the experiential dimension is likely to have a hand in where they are and where they could be.

The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age itself is evidence of this: Alter's decision to explore the path of pleasurable multiplicity was inspired by the "reigning academic orthodoxies" (4) of the specific moment, which encouraged a center that was

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too far-removed from the one that he prefers. His celebration of the promise of inexhaustible possibilities—potentially infinite extensions—serves to explain why studiers need not "move on from literature to some form of politics or metaphysics or politics and metaphysics combined" (19). He faults then-current modes of circulating our discourse for being "acquired through exposure to thinner, more univocal, less complexly pleasurable uses of language" (48) and for encouraging "theorizing that is wrong-headed, confused, self-contradictory, or obfuscating" (3). This holds to the extent that the studier experiences such discourse in a similar way *and* that s/he feels his/her experience as a studier was diminished by an overemphasis on it. Those who enjoy/ed 'suspicious readings' or tolerate/d them as part of the pleasure of multiplicity may disagree.

Moreover, he locates the impetus for the shift to the new center, not in the "discovery" of new "facts," but in subjective determinations of a "better" way of doing literary study: "Literature *at last* would be studied with *intellectual rigor*, against the background of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and linguistics"; literary study would no longer be 'underconceptualized,' operating with an 'unexamined faith' in the value of texts (10). The experiential dimension undoubtedly played a role in this critique: New Criticism doesn't work for everyone, especially if one's lived experience of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. is not reflected or negatively reflected in this public's preferred practices and objects of study. But we still haven't agreed on what "intellectual rigor" should look like, what the proper ratio of abstraction/ concreteness should be, and what the primary value of literature actually is. The answers differ depending on the specific person and his/her specific experiences.

As Walter Slatoff explains:

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Our discipline is defined essentially by this group of objects that *interests* us and we are provided with no a priori guides as to what to do with the objects and with no necessary course to follow. *It is understandable and inevitable that we follow a great many…* What constitutes "literature" is defined and limited largely by communal and individual *value judgments*…most of us study and teach literature because we value it and we devote *most of our attention* to those writers and works we *value most*… That our very 'discipline' is rooted in and shaped by *subjective* choices inevitably complicates our purposes and suggests that we can hardly proceed as though we were scientists exploring natural phenomena. (22-3, emphasis mine).

In other words, academic literary study ultimately comes down to personal preferences, whether that means pursuing the pleasures of trendy multiplicities, passé multiplicities, or even not-yet-possible multiplicities.

Performing Pleasure: Go Fuck Yourself or Fuck You Explain This One[18]

And nobody's falling in love
Everybody here needs a shove
And nobody's getting any touch
Everybody thinks that it means too much
And nobody's coming undone
Everybody here's afraid of fun
And nobody's getting any play
It's the saddest night out in the USA
LCD Soundsystem "Beat Connection"

Alter's book points to the larger obstacle: pleasure. The hurdle of multiplicity might be overcome, were it not that we enjoy what we do. Pleasure is a hard sell; it either translates as entertainment or it doesn't translate. "Pleasure" as entertainment is distinguished from work; it is a leisure activity, typically understood as producing a pleasant or pleasing experience. Obviously this won't win us any favors. Academic descriptions meant to clarify it tend to render it more obscure, re/describing its indescribability with elaborate concepts like jouissance, desubjectification, the unsayable, etc. Explanations can easily be passed off, both within and outside of the discipline, as

needlessly complicated jargon, even when they do provide insight and inspiration. And the ex's attempts at translations do not fair much better: while masturbating, doing drugs, and going mad may be accessible and relatively accurate ways of glossing 'the defamiliarizing, veil-piercing experience of being enlarged,' they are not likely to be recognized as socially valuable by 'the man or woman in the street' and thus not likely to render the discipline socially valued.

The challenge of translating pleasure as a publicly recognizable circulatory path is underscored in Cristina Vischer Bruns' *Why Literature: The Value of Literary Reading and What it Means for Teaching.* Her book is especially instructive as it provides a defense of the discipline that is designed to convince to *the* public of our value. Mobilizing a wide variety of justifications for literary reading, she suggests that literature functions as a transitional object that enables the reader to suspend the boundaries of the self and renegotiate them. She argues that both immersive and reflective reading are necessary to reap the fullest benefits of literature, thus accounting for not only lay reading but also academic literary study. And she offers suggestions for teaching so as to enhance the literary reading experience. While her discussion would likely appeal to those within the discipline, it underscores the difficulty we have being socially valued.

Bruns begins by reviewing possible responses to the 'why literature' question, including skill development, worldly knowledge, pleasure, shock, recognition, and enchantment. She concludes that they are individually inadequate because they subordinate or ignore the others. Significantly, she notes that the affective states would not be convincing as ends in themselves, implicitly conceding that *the* public requires a justification that involves some form of recognizable public agency. She argues that

object relations theory accounts for all the possibilities *and* provides the validation

necessary for those outside of the discipline: a healthy balance of immersive and

reflective reading "make possible reworkings of our relation with the world" (26). (And I

would note that she does *not* argue that it makes readers better people.)

She describes immersive reading as the practice of being open to and inhabiting

the world of the text, or 'being the book' (49). The experience is described as one of self-

suspension or self-loss:

> When a reader gets carried away by a book, allowing her sense of the
> boundary between herself and the world of a literary work to blur for a
> time, that text becomes available to her as a valuable means of self-
> formation and transformation…Taking on the images and moods of a
> literary work can give form to otherwise inaccessible parts of herself,
> making them available for her knowing and also for change (35).

And she explores a host of scholarship that uses similar language: Phillip Davis's

'category-mistake,' in "taking books personally to such a depth inside that you no longer

have a merely secure idea of self and relevance to self" (quoted in Bruns 52);

Rosenblatt's "temporarily all-consuming" (53) transaction; C. S. Lewis' "laying aside of

oneself and surrendering to the text" (54); J. S Miller's "entering other worlds with

imaginative abandonment" (57), etc. The benefits of this mode of reading are described

in terms similar to those used by antisocial theorists: "This potential for self-

transformation through immersive reading extends to the reader's larger society, as the

loosening of self-other boundaries can deeply influenc[e] readers' experiences of

difference and patterns of relating to others" (34).

The problem, as Bruns emphasizes throughout, is that immersive reading cannot

be directly taught, nor can it be preplanned, predicted, or convincingly measured—that is,

on a large scale with a high degree of validity and reliability. This is clear in the

summative assessments that she suggests. She assigns an analytic essay, but the content of the essay is sourced from students' journals and their reading of other students' journals. While I agree that this is an effective way of enabling students to "see literature not as some solely academic subject disconnected from themselves, but as an ancient and current human practice that can change them" (149), it doesn't translate outside of publics that do not already see literary reading as such a practice. More tellingly, the essay doesn't suffice; students must also complete a "project" that enables them to immerse themselves in reading again. This may include: memorizing passages and reciting them, much like the Rhaspode; writing fiction inspired by their reading experiences; or creating a visual representation of their experiences, as in a slide show, painting, sculpture, etc. In essence, Bruns suggests project-based learning, which can be an especially effective teaching strategy. However, the aim is to encourage further immersive reading, not to develop effective communication skills for use in the public sphere. Which is to say, even our "best" sales pitches are hard sells.

Her rejection of pleasure is especially interesting to me, as the experience she describes is a milder form of the self-shattering described by antisocial theorists. Bruns indicates that pleasure, in the amusement or entertainment sense, would be viewed as "little more than a self-indulgent pastime." In this case, reading is merely a leisure activity. "Pleasure" might also refer to the experience of "shar[ing] in other lives through reading literature without losing a sense of our own separateness," in which case reading "is a means to ease loneliness, to experience a sense of connection with other difference from ourselves without the risk of a threat to our own individuality" (15). She rejects this

defense, as there are myriad other ways to access this experience and it's not clear that literature would be the preferred method.

Most tellingly though, she rejects pleasure outright on the grounds that reading experiences can be painful. She uses "Last Will" as an example:

> Lentricchia's repeated phrase "veil-piercing", while pointing to a gain in insight that might appeal to many, conveys a force that feels more painful than pleasurable. (A "piercing" of any kind is not comfortable to experience or observe.) For Lentricchia, the reader, literary reading provides not simple pleasure but an unsettling or stripping form of vision or insight into other lives and other worlds, which he nevertheless craves. Literature can disrupt and disturb as well as delight (16)

The above can easily refer to *jouissance*, disaggregating desubjectification, or eros. In other words, her case, at root, is for the value of erotic reading. This is clear when she notes its riskiness:

> The act of submitting oneself to this kind of experience of an object necessarily involves some risks, both real and perceived… Holding in unresolved tension the paradox this-is-me and this-is-not-me requires a capacity to tolerate the instability of this tension. There is also a risk of the unknown outcome of the self's experience of an object, who we might become as we relinquish ourselves to its influence" (39).

And perhaps equally clear in her discussion of reflective reading, which emphasizes one's ability to keep oneself open and not suspicious/ hyper-vigilant. Reflection inevitably happens and reflective reading can enhance immersive reading, but it can also prevent the reader from "temporarily abandoning herself to her experience of the object" (65). In other words, the Self gets in the way. I read her dismissal of "pleasure" as indicative of *the* public's quarantining of the erotic. Her argument is similar to mine, but our addressees are different: a counterpublic vs. a public/ *the* public. In either case, the circulatory paths are not recognizable per the dominant public because such experiences translate as personal, not general.

In his discussion of rule #7, Warner explains that the public sphere appears to be a unitary space, i.e. *the* public. Even though publics are "essentially imaginary projections from local exchanges or acts of reading" (Warner 116), the unity of the public enables publics to be thought of as "acting" thereby giving individuals the sense that they can effect social change. Acts of circulation can be aggregated to the point where they stand in as public opinion—the discussion of *the* public, the will of *the* people—and discourse that circulates as such is viewed as more powerful than the state. In other words, people don't have the power, *the* people do.

We might think of the new option for petitioning the U.S. government: the online tool "We the People." Created by the Obama Administration, the cleverly named system enables an individual to easily circulate a petition online, and if it gets 100,000 signatures in thirty days, someone at the White House will respond[19]. The unity of the public undergirds the very notion of petitioning, but this option is particularly interesting. In addition to the virtual quality of the signers (ultimately, it's your email address doing the signing) [20] the website identifies, for now, the line where *a* public ends and *the* public begins—100,000 acts of circulation. To qualify as worthy of state response, the discourse must prove itself as more than a discussion among *some* people; it has to circulate to the point where it becomes a possible discussion of *the* people. The signature threshold, an undoubtedly practical necessity, demonstrates the functioning of the unity of the public: when the space of circulation extends past a certain point, it is "endowed with legitimacy and the ability to dissolve power" (55) and thus the petition is "sent to the appropriate policy experts" (https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/).

As Warner explains, the unity of the public is ideological:

It depends on the stylization of the reading act as transparent and replicable; it depends on an arbitrary social closure… to contain its potentially infinite extension; it depends on institutionalized forms of power to realize the agency attributed to the public; and *it depends on a hierarchy of faculties that allows some activities to count as public or general and others to be merely personal, private, or particular*. (117 emphasis mine).

A petition is a clear example of this: it's basically an exactly replicated discourse that asks addressees to easily perform its extension in support of a decision[21]. The new online option—a form of institutionalized power that, as distinctly contemporary, speaks to the endurance of the notion of *the* public—crystalizes the proper language ideology. The website describes the petitioning process as 'making your case' and encourages petitioners to "clearly articulate your goals and what you would like the Obama Administration to do" as well as "include additional information or research to support your request" (https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/). Thus, to increase your chances of expanding circulation and thereby your chances of accessing agency, ensure that your petition is *easily* recognizable as a rational-critical dialogue leading up to a decision[22].

Discourse that does not take the recognizable form of a generalized, generalizable rational-critical dialogue is considered personal, private, or particular. It cannot be 'transposed upward' and it does not promise to confer the same degree of agency in relation to the state. Warner gives two nice lists of examples: "curling up, mumbling, fantasizing, gesticulating, ventriloquizing, writing marginalia, and so on" (123); and 'throwing shade, prancing, dissing, acting up, carrying on, longing, fantasizing, throwing fits, mourning, and "reading"' (124). To these, we might add the various activities described in "Last Will": embodying an author's voice, living a text, going collectively mad, fumbling, creeping along, flying from ideas, and wallowing, as well as the more

passive submitting to the text and being erotically transported, tranquilly personified, infused, and taken over. These circulatory paths do not count as public or general and therefore worthy of state consideration. But those who engage in such activities regularly may believe that discourse can and should circulate in these ways, that the worlds they envision are worthy of realization.   In other words, they may be 'unshakably convinced' that the personal, private, particular reading experience is 'a good enough reason to study literature.'

This makes our discourse especially risky. To the extent that pleasure is a personal experience that we value, it's not clear when that discourse gets too personal. And "Last Will" is clearly personal. The first sentence introduces the essay as a confession, with all of the boundary-blurring baggage that a "confession" carries: "I once managed to live for a long time, and with no apparent stress, a secret life with literature" (59). The ex proceeds to make public the previously personal side of Lentricchia the literary critic and the rift between his "two selves unhappy with one another" becomes available for public scrutiny, regulation, policing, etc. In her reaction to "Last Will," Danuta Fjellestad recalls, "[w]ithin a few days, *everybody* (or so it seemed to me) was talking about the article: each casual encounter between academics, each dinner party with more than one academic at the table, each graduate seminar provided an occasion to discuss Lentricchia's essay." *Why did everyone decide to circulate* his *discourse*? I too have led a secret life with literature, I too have had an unfortunate number of frustrating teaching moments, and I too have had a wealth of erotic reading experiences. But I doubt revealing them publicly would cause "tremors in the academic world" (Fjellestad 407). Fjellestad suggests that his personal experiences were considered worthy of active uptake

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because of his 'public image,' which was further developed, rather than killed off, in what she describes as "clear, quotable, and consumable" modification of that image (411).

Shumway's "The Star System in Literary Studies," which Fjellestad references in support of her response, elaborates more thoroughly on this possibility. He argues that the supposed legitimacy of particular ideas or texts often has more to do with the stars attached to them than the actual ideas and their expression. He discusses a variety of factors that contributed to and perpetuate the star system—the shift from philology and literary history to criticism, the conference circuit, stars' appearances in nonacademic media, etc.—but his main bone of contention is the premium placed on the development of personality. In the star system, names are supported by personalities, sometimes more than by the author's work, and fans are encouraged to identify with the personality, rather than question or test the validity of the ideas. Identification increases the chances of replication—if only the citing of the name/ personality—and the star's power expands.

This is particularly clear in his discussion of stars' public performances, which "give many conference goers or lecture attendees the feeling that they know the famous one" thereby "transform[ing] the merely famous scholar into a star." He highlights Gayatri Spivak's "characteristic tics and patterns of delivery," Stanley Fish's "humorous putdown[s]", Jane Gallop's "burlesque of conventional notions of femininity" (92), and Jacques Derrida's "disregard for the usual limitations of aural comprehension" (96). Such features probably enhance the stars' personalities (I've never "seen" them, so I can't speak from personal experience), and, as Shumway suggests, they blur the line between the personal and the professional by "mak[ing] available a personality" and thereby

giving addressees "the feeling of a *personal* connection" (92, emphasis mine).

Significantly, he indicates that such connections work against collectivity, as the

premium on personality breeds not only disagreement but also a system that raises a few

stars to prominence at the expense of those who will always be excluded from the

community they seek to join (98).

Both Fjellestad and Shumway point to the dicey location of literary study on the

border of the public and the private, specifically in their determinations of where the

personal experience becomes personality construction. Fjellestad draws the line in the

classroom. She explains:

> As long as we expect students to speak the language of criticism, as long
> as we either reward or penalize them for succeeding or failing to translate
> their encounters with literature into the critical idiom of our academic
> community, it is our duty to help them acquire the vocabulary, the mode
> of thinking, the protocols of reading accepted and cherished by our
> community. (409).

Insofar as the literary professional has a duty to provide students with the foundation

necessary for success, s/he should at the very least *try* to transmit the standards of the

discipline. As shepherd, the professional has an obligation to work "for the good of the

sheep, to protect them from harm," (*Criticism* 148) and raising an unmarketable sheep is

tantamount to slaughter. Fjellestad sees Lentricchia as privileging his personal way of

reading—a way that promotes his public persona—over his pedagogic responsibilities.

She describes the resolution of the conflict between Lentricchia's two selves as a lifestyle

choice: "Having denounced theory, Lentricchia has resumed the *life of an enthusiast*"

(407, emphasis mine). In other words, he opts to relish his personal reading experiences

both in and out of the classroom rather than observe his public duties as a teacher.

Interestingly, Fjellestad, like the ex-literary critic, is interested in enhancing personal reading experiences. She explains that theory, 'when well-taught,' can "help readers see more in a text, enjoy the text in new, perhaps unexpected, ways and induce readers to reflect on the pleasures and traumas of their encounters with literature" (409). Teaching theory well includes teaching so as to "help us recover the passionate, the haunting, the transformational, and the uncanny powers of literature" (411). And, she describes the act of teaching as a 'sharing of knowledge' through which "we share ourselves, our passions, preferences, prejudices, loves, distastes, admirations" (410-1). Notice, none of these translates as public or general. In other words, whether one agrees with a particular teaching strategy or not, the personal is a necessary component of public reading acts.

Shumway's distinction is trickier, as it depends on one's vision for the discipline. His main point of contention is the lack of agreed-upon standards for 'good work.' And though he doesn't advocate total agreement or "an actual decision among competing theories" ("Revisited" 182), he is concerned about the fragmentation of the discipline that results from an uncritical belief in the authority of stars. Thus, he indicates that appeals to personal experiences are legitimately professional when they are made in an effort "to establish communal identity"; they cross the line when they "see[k] to distinguish the author from everyone else" (97). To "accurately" distinguish between the two, one would need to know the author's specific intentions (or at least know him/her personally to see if s/he's faking) or have a clear idea of what 'communal identity' *should* look like.

He cites "women's studies, African American studies, and gay studies" as examples of areas that use shared experiences in the service of community building. Yet

discourse in these areas tends to emphasize the necessary conflicts inherent in forming community/ collectivity, in many cases deliberately frustrating any easy decisions about what personal experiences "matter," when, where, why, how, and to whom. Donna Haraway gives an apt description of the challenge: "Women's studies must negotiate the very fine line between appropriation of another's (never innocent) experience and the delicate construction of the just-barely-possible affinities, the just-barely-possible connections that might actually make a difference in local and global histories" (113). Circulating shared experiences may be a necessary component of community building, as active uptake is required to sustain any public. But the sharing of one's personal experiences is never an innocent act; and even the "most straightforward readings of any text are also situated arguments about fields of meanings and fields of power" (114). Insofar as we recognize affinities and connections as 'just-barely-possible,' personal experiences that work to distinguish the author may be an admission of non-innocence that opens space for 'just-barely-possible' reading practices and readings.

Shumway compares the star system in literary study with Hollywood celebrities to suggest that studiers identify with stars as an ideal, and stars, in turn, play to this in their public performances. As with the "liberties" granted to celebrities, the amount of personality available to disciplinary stars may seem unfair, if not destructive. And as with celebrities, abuse of one's privileged position is distasteful: a star whose public performances are specifically designed to enhance his/her scintillating public persona so that s/he can "demand special travel budgets, support for research assistance, and more frequent leaves" thereby providing him/her with "even greater mobility and thus the opportunity to appear at more conferences and to accept more lecture invitations

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(Shumway 92)—in other words, a star who is primarily interested in being a star—would seem obnoxious, especially given the number of scholars trying to eek out an existence. But the star, as a star, has a better chance of realizing the world envisioned in and as the circulation of his/her discourse. S/he still risks its fate, but addressees are more likely to recognize his/her paths as realizable or even "normal." In other words, s/he has a better chance of making his/her personal way of being publicly available as a way of being.

To use Gallop as an example: her performances may demonstrate the ways in which "the construction of a personality [has become] a means of acquiring cultural and academic capital" (97), but they may equally demonstrate the "bleeding"[23] of the personal into the professional and vice versa. "[T]he wordplay characteristic of her work" and her "very much embodied" utterances are methods of professional self-presentation as well as rigorous professional reading practices. But they can also be Gallop's personal ways of seeing and being, rendering the line between her "real" personality and her professional one difficult, if not impossible, to locate.

From *The Daughter's Seduction*:

The opposition exchange/ use becomes, from one sentence to the next, the opposition acquire/ enjoy, with the word for enjoy, 'jouir.' 'There, in the enjoying [*jouir*, use], the conquest of knowledge is renewed each time it is exercised,' says Lacan, as we recall Heath's notion of psychoanalysis as a knowledge that is not contained, but rather affords constant surprises, constant reimplication. There is no 'confidence of knowledge' when it comes to using it, rather than exchanging it. It is the use, the enjoyment, the *jouissance*, which exceeds exchange. This opposition of *jouissance* and possession can refer to a legal meaning of *jouissance*, as having the use of something. Notice the example of usufruct, given in the dictionary under *jouissance*. 'Usufruct' is the right to the *jouissance* but *not the ownership* of something; in other words, you can use and enjoy it, but you cannot exchange it (50).

Gallop's "brand" of "highly self-referential" wordplay is a form of use, arguing against as it resists exchange. She 'unfaithfully strays from the author's words,' "produces that which does not hold as a reproduction," (Gallop 48) and attempts to "transform the relations of the symbolic in representation" (Health, quoted in Gallop 48). We might compare this with Shumway's reference to "use": "[i]t is common to now hear practitioners speak of 'using' Derrida or Foucault or some other theorist to read this or that object; such phrasing may suggest that the theorist provides tools of analysis, but the tools are not sufficient without the name that authorizes the procedure" (95). Not only is Gallop's "use" directed against demonstrations of mastery—establishing that one owns and can exchange texts—but it also bypasses the names of the stars. As a feminist practice of infidelity, use deals in "unauthorized, illegitimate" thoughts, which "lac[k] the Name-of-the Father (Gallop 47).[24] Performed with a sexy deftness, it is undoubtedly a professional act, requiring extensive, deliberate training and addressed mainly to those with similar extensive, deliberate training. But insofar as the "real" Gallop enjoys engaging in such wordplay, I'm not sure that she stops doing it when s/he moves from a professional to a personal context (if she's anything like me, she does it in her sleep as well). In this case, her professional practice would be indistinguishable from her personal way of being.

Moreover, her "personality" encourages not just the replication of her name in article after article, but also adopting a particular lifestyle: using and being used rather than exchanging and being exchanged. Viewing every encounter as an opportunity for enjoying knowledge rather than owning it seems, to me at least, to be a much more preferable way of not only studying, but also living one's life. When knowledge is

understood as uncontained and 'affording constant surprises,' living becomes the thoroughly enjoyable, infinitely 'renewable conquest of knowledge.' Though this is an apt description of what discourse in education refers to as a "lifelong learner," it does not translate as public or general. One's lifestyle is generally thought to be personal and particular, and thus Gallop's performances may be read as encouraging audiences to identify with her as personally so as to increase her star power.

What may seem like self-promotion—the development of a personality in order to seduce audiences and garner more star power—might also be the circulation of discourse in the ways and as the world envisioned in it so as to realize that world. Indeed Gallop's work suggests that "embodied sociability is too important to [her]", and thus she "depend[s] more heavily on performance spaces than on print," and she "cannot so easily suppress from consciousness [her] own creative-expressive function" (Warner 123-4).

And this counterpublic refusal "to cede the original hope of transforming not just policy but the space of public life itself" (124) is also evident in "Last Will." Though the essay seems to argue against Lentricchia's former conviction—the one that made him in/famous—that "a literary critic, *as a literary critic*, could be an agent of social transformation, an activist who would show his students that, in its form and style, literature had a strategic role to play in the world's various arrangements of power" (60), the essay actually argues for a strategic role that literature can/ does play in the world's various power arrangements: self-shattering pleasure.

"Last Will" begins by describing the work/ pleasure distinction in terms of publicness and privateness. This seeming polarization is nicely reflected in the layout of the first page: the paragraph describing the "public" Lentricchia is on one side; the

paragraph describing the "secret" Lentricchia is on the other; a graphic of a distinguished-looking professor—nothing like the oft-cited image of Lentricchia on the back of *Criticism and Social Change*—emerges from the middle. The suggestion is that the professional critic's public image masks the conflict of a split self.[25]

Professionalism, according to the ex, is defined by the critic's distance/ distancing from erotic transport: unlike the journeys we took as teenage readers, the professional trip is all business, with a strict itinerary of demonstrating mastery and effecting all-important social change (64). And yet, in ratting out the professional critic as a secret reader, he underscores the ruse: we're all traveling for pleasure, but we try to pass our vacations off as work. To be Lentricchian about it: "vacation" from Latin *vacatio* freedom from something, from *vacare* to be empty.

Throughout, literary reading is described as an experience of self-loss, a freedom from and/or emptying of the self. But rather than simply describe it, the ex enacts this pleasure, publicly "freeing" himself from his former professional self, emptying the literary critic of its professional identity. In other words, he deliberately fails to uphold/ reinforce his public self/ Self. Since the ex singles out *Criticism and Social Change* as 'damaging evidence' against his private self, I'll start with this smoking gun that "no context can modify" (60). Late in *Criticism*, Lentricchia explains:

> To write is to establish perspective by metaphor, by incongruity
> ("establish": fix, ordain, found permanently, as in the founding of
> governments or institutions). To make a metaphor is to violate linguistic
> 'propriety' and the 'proper,' conceptions which, as Marx insists, are
> intimately related to private property—mine, my own. In the rhetoric of
> metaphor, language asserts its collective, classless potentiality as it moves
> against a stubborn, constellated series of notions like origin, privacy,
> ownership, virtue, the bourgeois subject, the liberal individual—all of
> which undergird the cultural staying power of capitalism (147).

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Twenty years later, the title "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic" makes a property metaphor move against notions like origins, privacy, ownership, virtue, the bourgeois subject, and the liberal individual, specifically as they undergird the cultural staying power of the *literary critic*. The title frames the text as an act of bequeathing, the ex-literary critic transferring/ disposing of his "property." But up until this point, the "ex" does not exist. Thus, the act doubles as both a disposal of Lentricchia's former critical identity and a creation of an anti-identitarian critic, the "ex."

> About two pages later in *Criticism*, the "posthumous" Lentricchia explains:
>
> To exist socially is to be rhetorically aligned. It is the function of the intellectual as critical rhetor to uncover, bring into the light, and probe all such alignments… Only when such political work of identification is understood, when our various and devious "identities" are put on the table, when our involvements are brought thus bluntly before us, in all their repugnant detail: only then can the rhetorical work of transformation realistically begin" (149).

"Last Will" is a short probing of Lentricchia's alignments (particularly compared to his much longer *Edge of Night*). His various and devious identities are put on the table in blunt and potentially repugnant detail, and thus we are confronted with a multitude of "Lentricchias": the secretly stressed public literary historian/ polemicist; the me-the-reader in the act of reading; the ex-reader of literary criticism; the sixteen-year-old "virgin" reader; the literary junkie who can't define his drug; the frustrated graduate professor; and the undergrad Rhapsode. But rather than doing the work of identification, the identities that populate the text serve to destabilize this new critic and the ex emerges as a fragmented, unlocatable voice continuously killing-off and simultaneously rebirthing Lentricchian selves. In this way, the essay mimics the experience of literary reading celebrated throughout: 'ravishingly pleasurable erotic transport,' or a self-shattering

encounter that enables one to wallow in that which was formerly rejected in order to make something new.

This is the type of jouissance described by Leo Bersani at the end of *Homos*. Bersani discusses "Genet's cherished act of rimming," explaining that " Even if Genet himself disappears (dies) during such a vision, a world is getting born. The rimmer in his jouissance has demiurgic powers. Genet is orally impregnated by eating his lover's waste. Having eaten Jean as death, Genet expels him as a world of new images… " (179). Though Bersani is speaking literally, and the jouissance experienced is located in a specific (embodied) sexual act, it might equally describe a reading act, either personal or public. To be 'orally impregnated by a text's waste" is not to resolve the differences presented in a text or those presented by its critics—this type of antagonism is precisely what Bersani argues against. Instead, it is to 'use the remains,' as Genet says, to rethink and reenvision what texts and criticism can do. "Rimming" the text then requires that the critic 'disappear,' i.e. lose themselves and their critical identity (which may be tantamount to professional death or ex-ing) in their 'foraging.'

Bersani explains:

In a society where oppression is structural, constitutive of sociality itself, only what society throws off—its mistakes or its pariahs—can serve the future. In Genet, error is the aesthetic and social equivalent of fecal matter; it has all the paradoxical promise of fertility and renewal that Genet associates with waste. But Genet's partial dismissal of his work is itself culturally threatening. It betrays the ethic of seriousness that governs our usual relation to art, inviting us to view literature, for example, not as epistemological and moral monuments but, possibly, as "cultural droppings" (180-1).

This same 'betrayal of the ethic of seriousness' is at the heart of "Last Will," particularly as the ex dismisses his old work/ self. And much of Lentricchia's fiction is flooded with

references to excrement, particularly in relation to his acts of writing and the act of literary criticism. He too 'invites us to view literature and literary criticism as cultural droppings' and, as in Bersani, to get "high on linguistic waste and… rethink what we mean and what we expect from communication, and from community" (181). In "Last Will," this means refusing to establish a critical identity that 'no context can modify.'

Lentricchia's *The Music of the Inferno*, published roughly three years after "Last Will," elaborates on what such a refusal might look like. Both texts function as a kind of revenge against the self, specifically the literary critical self. *Music* paints a fairly "negative" image of the literary critic, particularly in Robert Tagliaferro/ Forza, the orphan-sponge who "spent his life wallowing in the waste of books" (129) and Prof. Ayoub, the scholar of filth, who 'himself is hell' (193). The novel is packed with literary references—or more accurately "uses," in Gallop's sense—that undercut the authority of the texts and "Lentricchia" in order to create new worlds.

At the heart of the novel is the invitation to "Go fuck yourself" (187)—that is, intentionally disconnect from the Self. The line doubles as both a reading of *Paradise Lost* and a critical practice: continuously un/making the self by wallowing in that which was rejected. In "Last Will," this means confronting the aspects of the self that were deliberately excluded from critical readings in order to maintain one's public image—"Tell us truly, is there no filth in your soul?" ("Last Will" 60). In the novel, it takes the form of a main character that continuously recreates himself as and through fiction.

Given all the references, there are many potential readings. This, I think, is the point. The basic plot of the novel details Robert Tagliaferro's failed attempt to discover his true parentage and his destruction of the image of Utica's Italian founding fathers. In

other words, the novel argues against fathering and being fathered: the ex-critic refusing to be a critical father and refusing his literary fathers. The origin of "Tagliaferro" is questioned on the first page, specifically by Robert himself, "who believes his name to be fake" (3). His status as son is also ambiguous: his biological parents are unknown and he spends his youth in the tensions between the real/fictional world of the Reeds (Reads?), his adoptive parents whom he refers to as 'aunt' and 'uncle,' and that of the Spinas, his neighbors to whom he devotes a son-like attentiveness. He deliberately orphans himself, moving to New York to work in the basement of a used bookstore.

In the course of the novel, he visits his adoptive father, only to again denounce the Reed's claim to him and deny Morris's role as father. In his final exchange with Morris, Robert points to various possible versions of the story of Tagliaferro (103-11), but he is unable to gain the "knowledge" necessary to piece together the real story. Whether Morris knows the real story or not is unclear—and thus it is not clear whether the "father" deliberately withholds the "truth," does not know the "truth," or cannot know the "truth." Morris dies soon after and thus Robert is left to forever weave fictions of Tagliaferro.

His status becomes more complicated in his "self-fathering," his creation of Robert "Bobby" Forza. More than an alias used to hide his identity/ origin—which he ultimately reveals and which no one really cares about anyway (189)—Forza signals the act of self-creation that is also a self-annihilation. The day before he embarks on his return trip to Utica, Robert assesses his "image," literally looking at photos of himself taken each year of his forty-two-year exile. Staring at the "Roberts," he remarks: "For Robert? What is Robert to me, or me to Robert, that I should weep for him?" (17). The line alludes to Hamlet's "What a rogue and peasant slave am I" soliloquy, delivered after

he witnesses the passionate performance of a roving player. Confronted by the 'monstrousness' of the player, who "in a fiction, in a dream of passion,/ Could force his soul so to his whole conceit" (II.ii 529-30), Hamlet upbraids himself for his inaction. And thus he is moved to "act." He plans to have the players perform the murder of King Hamlet, not to exact revenge but to determine the false "father" (the ghost or Claudius). He ends his soliloquy: "The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (II. Ii.581-2). In other words, the "truth" will be revealed through (his) fiction. Interestingly, Robert references Hamlet's "consummation devoutly to be wished" (28, 87) twice, and on both occasions he's referring to non-reproductive sex.

Much like Satan who creates himself in his 'intentional disconnection' from the father, Robert creates Forza in his 'intentional disconnection' from Tagliaferro. And yet, this creation of Forza allows him to continuously rewrite Tagliaferro. Robert, then, is both father and son. In a complicated spiraling inward, Tagliaferro births Forza who births Tagliaferro. The substitution of "Robert" for "Hecuba" in the passage marks Robert *Tagliaferro* as a fiction. Like Hecuba, Tagliaferro is merely a character and thus Robert *Forza* should not weep for him. The allusion then also enacts Robert's self-fathering: in disconnecting from Tagliaferro, Robert births Forza.

Yet the substitution of "me" for "he" marks Robert *Forza* as an actor. Like the player, Forza merely performs the stories of others, a point reiterated in numerous ways throughout the text: in his memory ("personal history") which is constructed from books (72); in his tendency to 'talk like a book' (28) and his repeated allusions and citations of literature; in his reference to and status as the 'orphan-sponge who soaks up and expresses the feelings of others, though he himself is dry' (133); and ultimately in his

performance of the history of Utica's founding fathers. Where Tagliaferro is a false

reality, Forza is a real performance; where Tagliaferro is a boundless fiction, Forza is a

bounded role. In the end, both are full of shit.

Playing off Restuccia's reading of queer theory, I read the ex/ Lentricchia as

'pitching his mansion in the place of excrement' (xv) in order to reorganize literary study.

The ex's suggestion that critics look at the filth in their own soul's would have the effect

of 'demystifying or wiping out the fundamental fantasy' (144) of the critic who knows

the text instead of lives it. In light of Lentricchia and McAuliffe's *Crimes of Art and*

Terror, it points to the demystification of art as well: the book suggests that we "put aside

the virtually unavoidable sentimentality that asks us to believe that art is always

somehow humane and humanizing, that artists, however indecent they might be as human

beings, become noble when they make art, which must inevitably ennoble those who

experience it" (Crimes 9). In this case, study becomes a wallowing in that which was

rejected, rather than a replication of legitimate, legitimized knowledge and skills. In

other words, the practice of failing better.

CHPATER 3
EPIC FAIL[26]

Assessment Fail

EPIC FAIL: 1. A mistake of such monumental proportions that it requires its own term in order to successfully point out the unfathomable shortcomings of an individual or group; 2. Complete and total failure when success should have been reasonably easy to attain; 4. The highest form of fail known to man. Reaching this level of fail means only one thing: You must die, or the world will fail itself due to such an extreme level of failage; 8. An annoying as all fuck "internet meme" or trend used by people who aren't innovative enough to come up with an appropriate term, expression, watch too much Attack of The Show, or spend over 8 hours behind a computer
Urbandictionary.com (8/8/2013)

Some speak of the future
My love she speaks softly
She knows there's no success like failure
And that failure's no success at all
"Love Minus Zero/ No Limit" Bob Dylan

Assessments are an integral part of education, as they enable teachers to "gathe[r] information about learning progress and mak[e] instructional decisions based on the information" (Kauchak & Eggen 167). The two key features of an effective assessment are validity and reliability: "Validity is the degree to which the assessment measures what it is supposed to measure… Reliability describes the extent to which measurements are consistent" (411). Both features are aligned to the specific learning goals of the given activity or set of activities, as in lesson plans, unit plans, courses, etc. A valid assessment is designed to provide accurate information about the degree to which a student achieved the specific learning goal/s. A reliable assessment can be replicated and repeatedly provide accurate information about the degree to which students achieved the specific learning goal/s. But what if the learning goal is failing better?

The following demonstrates what such an assessment might look like: a 60-plus page reading that never arrives at a definitive meaning of *one* contemporary novel that never arrives at a definitive meaning.

In the *Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam argues:

> Under certain circumstances failing, losing forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world… Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers (2-3).

Though written almost forty years prior, JG Ballard's *Crash* can be read as championing failure in a similar way. The novel begins and ends with failure—Vaughan's failed collision—and is saturated with failure throughout: the characters are failures who operate under a failed logic that leads to failed plans and ultimately a failure of meaning. Moreover, the novel itself can be read as failing in that it: 1) does not privilege a particular character as its protagonist; 2) provides neither a clear climax nor a clear resolution 3) leaves the "crash," its title and central idea, wide open to interpretation as a symbol, figure, both and neither; and 4) employs an ambiguous tone that complicates readings, only for its author to add ambiguous commentary that makes the tone—and the novel—nearly impossible to figure out.

Insofar as the critical reading aims to produce a definitive meaning of the text—in order to confirm what is already known, to demonstrate one's training, or both—*Crash* forces critics to fail… or perhaps to *crash*. With its provocative subject matter—sex, drugs and car crashes—and its thorough, scientific/ pornographic detailing of the subject

matter, the novel lends itself all-too nicely to readings that showcase a critic's academic agility. But, in attempting to assimilate the text, critics are continuously confronted with a resistant remainder that is open to infinite elaborations. Put another way, when things fail in the novel—be they plans, characters, or even narration—rather than resolving conflict and imparting or at least suggesting meaning, they generate further conflict and disrupt meaning. This is perhaps why criticism tends to be heated and divisive.

And yet, in forcing failure, the text suggests a different kind of success, one that doesn't aim to make sense of, ignore/ abject/ refuse, control/ discipline, or assimilate the remainder, but exploits it instead. In this way, *Crash* not only resists critical assimilation, but also engenders and even endorses a critical process that maintains tensions, promotes possibilities, and rejects definitive answers. In other words, if there is no chance of being "right," no matter how deftly one proves others wrong, then one's reading can be more creative (adding one's "true" voice, rather than ventriloquising the academy), more cooperative/ collaborative (productively, rather than destructively, using others' ideas, even if they don't precisely fit or agree), and more surprising (Frankensteining new worlds, be they wondrously monstrous or offensively unnatural/ horrifying). What follows is a demonstration of such a failure/ success.

I begin with a failed attempt at summarizing the novel, highlighting the ways in which it frustrates the simple act of describing what happens. I focus on three specific failures: the failure to establish a definite protagonist; the failure to establish definite motives for the characters; and the failure to establish a definite climax. Such failures make it exceedingly difficult to explain even the most basic elements of the novel without

adding one's interpretation and pointing to other explanations. Thus on a fundamental

level, the text refuses one right reading and one right way of reading.

I continue with a discussion of the failed criticism, emphasizing both the

difficulty of rendering a definitive meaning and the (potential) pleasure of experiencing

and playing with different possible readings. Noting its messy intertexuality, I suggest

that the novel forces readers to exploit the remainder/s produced by the text and its

criticism. And I add Ballard's commentary to highlight the novel's resistance to critical

assimilation, his remarks tending to favor pleasure over sense-making.

I end with my own failed reading, suggesting that the novel is an exercise in

problem-posing education, a learning strategy that poses a problem for which there are

multiple solutions and multiple ways of arriving at solutions. By posing the significance

of the crash as an authentic, ill-defined problem, the novel ensures multiple

interpretations without privileging any one as the "right" one. I offer a "solution" using

Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

<div style="text-align: center;">Summary Fail[27]</div>

Sometimes a memory
Only sees what it wants to believe
And what fills in between
Are days and nights that don't mean a thing
The Black Crows, "Bad Luck Blue Eyes Goodbye"

Very generally, *Crash* depicts a group of people who find automobile collisions

erotically stimulating[28]. They intentionally get into car crashes, observe professionally

staged crashes, drive around looking for other people's accidents, fantasize about

imaginary collisions, watch films of collisions, and engage in a lot of collision-inspired

sex acts[29]. They also do a lot of drugs[30]. The narrative begins at the end, with the first

<div style="text-align: center;">119</div>

chapter basically telling the whole story, and the remaining chapters fill in the details, which, for the most part, are slightly different versions of the same events—crashes and sex acts. And the plot of the novel seems simple enough: a man gets into a car accident, joins a group of crash fanatics led by a man bent on dying in a crash with a celebrity, has sex with this leader, and ends up planning his own death-crash. But the plot could also be summed up as: a man recruits an accident survivor to help with a project—a crash with a celebrity in which both he and the celebrity die—and though the man fails to kill the celebrity, he does inspire one of his followers to plan his own death-crash[31]. The choice between the former and latter depends on who is read as the protagonist, a role that is usually obvious. But as with many other aspects of the novel—for the purposes of this section, the characters' motives and the narrative structure—the characters' roles are ambiguous. Thus the novel frustrates even the simple act of summarizing, revealing a resistant remainder in the given critic's reading even before the actual reading begins.

While it's possible to identify the principle players and the main events, the characters' roles, motives, desires, etc. and the events' functions, causes and effects—in other words, the connective tissue that makes it a story—change depending on how one *wants* to read the novel. A summary without such connective tissue might look like the following: James Ballard (James), the narrator, gets in an accident and begins an affair with Dr. Helen Remington, the passenger who is mildly injured and whose husband is killed in James' accident. James meets Dr. Robert Vaughan, the group of crash fanatic's leader who is obsessed with the idea of dying in a car crash with Elizabeth Taylor. James accompanies Vaughan as he plans and rehearses the crash. Seagrave, a professional stunt driver and member of Vaughan's posse, attempts a crash with Taylor before Vaughan.

Vaughan and James have sex, and then Vaughan dies in a failed attempt to crash into and kill Taylor. The novel ends with James planning his own death-crash. Two other characters make appearances, usually in sex acts: Catherine, James' wife, and Gabrielle, the most seriously injured accident victim in the group.

Though not necessarily inaccurate, this short summary omits information that, depending on one's reading, may be important, and it mentions events that, depending on one's reading, may not be worth noting. For instance, a reading that highlights the mediating function of technology might add a brief description of Vaughan's methods—his incessant photographing of collisions and his subsequent collaging of them—and omit reference to James' affair with Remington. A reading that focuses on the function of gender in the novel may mention Vaughan's sex act with Catherine and perhaps even that between James and Gabrielle, and may omit reference to Seagrave's attempt on Taylor (or it may describe it differently). Thus despite the absence of (subjective) connective tissue, the summary still produces a resistant remainder, i.e. it fails.

The narrative ensures such failure through its own (deliberate) "fails." It achieves a "protagonist fail" by allowing readers to assign the role to either Vaughan or James. This failure to establish *the* protagonist enables readers to summarize the narrative in multiple ways, one's choice of the hero informing the events selected for a given summary. It achieves a "character fail" by providing just enough information to suggest several motives for the characters' actions without privileging one as *the* motive. The lack of character development—both the limited information about the characters and the absence of information about their growth/ learning—opens space for various descriptions of what happens in the novel since why it happens isn't precisely clear.

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Again, the summarizer's choice influences what is highlighted in the summary, rather than the "important" information being self-evident/ obvious. And the novel achieves a "plot fail" by refusing to establish a definite climax. The novel's circular structure returns readers to the beginning and thus situates itself in a discomforting "now" that requires readers to create a future meaning, i.e. one's reading of the novel. In other words, in the absence of a definitive defining moment that makes sense of all, readers must find their own way out of the endlessly looping narrative. The path one chooses often determines the events referenced in the summary, so what happens changes, depending on the reader. Such fails individually make summarizing a challenge, as it is difficult to explain what happens without revealing one's stakes in the summary. But together they suggest that the point is to fail, since what happens and what doesn't happen is an argument itself.

Protagonist Fail

> The telephone was ringing
> That's when I handed it to Liz
> She said, "This isn't who it would be
> If it wasn't who it is"
> Phish, "Wolfman's Brother"

The lack of a definite protagonist forces readers to choose one and, in choosing, not only privilege a certain reading but reveal the potential for other readings. James may seem the logical choice, as he is the narrator, and the novel's criticism often reads him as such[32]. However, one could easily argue, as Robert Caserio does, that Vaughan is the hero. In fact, the synopsis on the back cover of the Picador edition suggests such a reading:

> In this hallucinatory novel, the car provides the hellish tableau in which
> *Vaughan*, a 'TV scientist' turned 'nightmare angel of the highways,'

experiments with erotic atrocities among auto crash victims, each more sinister than the last. James Ballard, his *friend* and *fellow obsessive*, tells *the story of this twisted visionary* as he careens rapidly towards his own demise in an intentionally orchestrated car crash with Elizabeth Taylor (emphasis mine).

This clearly points readers to Vaughan, James being merely the 'friend and fellow obsessive' who narrates 'the story of Vaughan' and his 'twisted vision.' Convincing cases can be made for both Vaughan and James, yet readings of the novel are rarely devoted to arguing for a specific protagonist, perhaps because such an important role is assumed to be clear. And while assigning roles doesn't necessarily change what happens—James still gets in an accident, joins Vaughan's clique, and ends up planning his death, and Vaughan still dies in an attempt to crash into Taylor—it leads to summaries that privilege certain events, relationships, and information over others, *and* inflect events, relationships and information with the critic's argument. The following charts four different courses—two that follow from James as protagonist and two that follow from Vaughan as protagonist—in order to demonstrate the complications one encounters when attempting to summarize.

If, for example, James is the hero, the plot can be described as moving towards his realization of a sex act with Vaughan—the "climax"—and ending with James planning his death-crash—the "resolution." One might argue that the novel is about the journey towards transcendence, which can only be achieved in death; James attempts transcendence in his sex act with Vaughan, and failing, he realizes that he can only attain a "higher" state of being by dying. Thus he plans his final crash. In this case, one's summary might want to highlight James' sex act with Vaughan and his planning of his death crash. His relationships with/to the minor characters, specifically his sexual

encounters with Remington and Gabrielle, might be said to enhance his search for meaning, while his marriage functions as a kind of barometer measuring the success of his search[33]. So it might be important to mention these characters in the summary.

Of course, one could also argue that the novel is about the dangers of techno-culture, which can easily lead to death; James is seduced by the idea of Vaughan as fully technologized body, and attempts to become him through association, sexual union, and ultimately mimicry. For these readings, a thorough examination of Seagrave's attempt on Taylor would not be necessary; a brief mention in the body of the argument, not necessarily the summary, could suffice. Yet a nuanced discussion of James' relationship with his wife as well as his affair with Remington and Gabrielle would seem important, particularly as they emphasize James' understanding of and relationship to/with his body. Thus it might be helpful to get a heads-up about these characters/ sex acts in the summary.

But if Vaughan is the hero, the plot can be read as recounting the events leading up to his failed crash with Elizabeth Taylor—the "climax"—and ending with the forthcoming repetition of his death crash in James' plan—the "resolution" (one might also argue that there is no "resolution," only repetition). One might argue that the novel is about celebrity-obsessed culture, which can lead to literally dying to be famous. Vaughan uses and abuses his supposed friends in order to make up for his failed attempt at being a TV celebrity. His final crash, like that of Seagrave, suggests that he will remain "irrelevant," an ironic comment on the supposed relevance of celebrities particularly given James' demonstration of ultimate devotion to Vaughan in the planning a death-crash. Referencing Vaughan's failed career, James' job at the studio, and Seagrave's

crash in the summary might be beneficial. Vaughan's relationships with/to the minor

characters function to enhance characterization, highlighting his Ahab-esque

monomania[34] in his willingness to use/ sacrifice his followers in order to achieve his goal.

So the minor characters and their relationships to/with Vaughan would seem important

information for the summary.

Of course, one could also read the novel as critiquing groupthink, which causes

victims of trauma to blindly follow clearly flawed leaders to death. Vaughan's failure is

established in the first chapter and the remaining chapters can be read as reinforcing the

flaws in his logic as well as his method/s. One's summary might then want to briefly

describe his "scientific" methods and perhaps even reference the narrative's description

of him as a madman. At the same time, he gains new followers, namely James and

Catherine, and despite Vaughan's ultimate failure, James ends up planning his own

death-crash. One should probably explain James' and Catherine's conversion to

Vaughan's logic, but it isn't necessary to mention James' affair with Remington. The

sexual encounter between Vaughan and James may emphasize Vaughan's ruthlessness,

but it is not the climax. And Seagrave's role in the narrative becomes central, as he

serves to highlight Vaughan's flawed goal, logic and/or leadership.

The point is: it's difficult to summarize the novel without smuggling analysis into

one's summary, as I have just done. And while deliberately constructing a summary that

supports one's argument is not necessarily a "failure" (though it might be shady), the

ambiguities in the novel that force such maneuvers also ultimately force critics to fail,

since even well-handled, well-supported readings are confronted by a remainder. This is

not only apparent in the equally convincing readings of Vaughan/ James as hero, but also in the novel's failed characters.

Character Fail

> And how could I ever refuse
> I feel like I win when I lose
> Abba, "Waterloo"

In addition to the narrative's failure to establish a definite protagonist, it fails to definitively establish character motivation. The novel's repetition points to several "conflicts" that the characters can be read as trying to resolve: the creation of a new sexuality, the processing of their traumas, and/or the possibilities of technology, among others. But the lack of character development—both the lack of information given about the characters and their lack of change/ growth—maintains the possibilities as possibilities without privileging one in particular or any combination of them. In the absence of a clear motive, it's difficult to render a "correct" summary, since the events and information that are best suited for one motive may not be best suited for a different motive. Moreover, more than the assigning of a protagonist, why they do what they do can be the argument itself, not just information supporting one's argument. Thus summaries tend to be bent towards the summarizer's argument, privileging information that reinforces a particular motive and reading, even as it reveals other possibilities[35].

Rather than work through some of the possible summaries that the different motives generate, as in the above, the following focuses on the difficulty of assigning a definite motive. In addition to presenting various possibilities, the narrative depicts characters that are arguably failures as characters and as people. As characters, they lack development and they fail to develop. The limited information about the characters'

backgrounds and the absence of information about their learning, change, and growth

leave room for multiple motives without privileging one in particular. As people, they

not only fail to achieve heteronormative success, they fail to be motivated by it. This

suggests that they aim to fail, and such intentional failure opens space for even more

potential motives. The narrative's "character fail" thus frustrates one's ability to

summarize the novel without adding analysis and interpretation. In other words, the novel

forces critics to fail from another angle.

The narrative "action" consists mainly, if not exclusively, of sex and collisions,

and the repetition throughout provides a wealth of support for various motives, even as it

maintains the tensions among them. Given the repeated descriptions of collision-inspired

sex acts, we may assume that the characters are motivated by the erotic possibilities of

collisions[36]. Vaughan in particular points to this motive, as his project seems aimed at

ushering in a new sexuality. And yet, as noted above, this is not necessarily the sole

motive, if a motive at all, sexuality possibly being a 'short cut to some other vision'

(Revell 48). The narrative also repeatedly details the characters' scars, emphasizing that,

with the exception of Catherine[37], all of the characters have been in major accidents[38]. So

we may assume that they are attempting to make sense of/ process their traumatic

experiences. This motive can be used with the idea that they get-off on collisions or as

the overriding reason for their behavior. Or it may not be a motivating factor at all; their

accidents may be initiatory events that prompt the exploration of something else, namely

the possibilities presented by technology. James in particular seems intent on exploring

the possibilities of a 'deviant/ perverse technology'[39] through collisions. Such a motive

may combine all three ideas, as in the sex-death-technology triangulation, or it may come down to just technology.

Since the repetition fails to single out a particular motive, one may look to characterization for clarity. Yet the narrative refuses to privilege a motive by failing to develop its characters. We get basic descriptions of what they look like, with emphasis of course on their injuries, and passing mention of their professions, but that's about it. They may have feelings, they may fight deep emotional battles stemming from childhood traumas, and they may experience overwhelming joy in the process of realizing long-held hopes and dreams. But we don't hear about it. Instead of 'richly individualized characters,' the novel offers 'flat and functional puppets' (Wager 53-4) whose thin development gives few clues as to why they might engage in such behavior.

Moreover, the characters do not learn, change, grow, etc. in the course of the narrative. Instead, they repeat; they continuously have sex, do drugs, and involve themselves in collisions, without any changes, statements of purpose, reflections on learning, etc. that would clearly indicate why they do what they do. The narrative's repetition continues through the final paragraphs, a complication that I discuss more thoroughly in the next section. Rather than reflecting on Vaughan's death and explaining or at least hinting at its relevance and/or implications, James dedicates the final paragraphs of the narrative to descriptions of the sex acts inspired by Vaughan's collision (or perhaps by the vehicles he wrecks). His descriptions mimic those throughout the narrative, providing no new information other than that the characters will continue to engage in the same behaviors depicted throughout the novel. In other words, despite

being the focal point of the narrative, Vaughan's collision produces the same reactions as the other collisions.

Observing a sex act between Remington and Gabrielle—the act, 'appropriately' taking place in view of the "remains of the dismembered vehicle in which Vaughan had died"—James notes "I was glad that Helen Remington *was becoming* ever more perverse, *finding* her happiness in Gabrielle's scars and injuries" (223-4, emphasis mine). And James ends the penultimate paragraph remarking, "Already I knew that I *was designing* the elements of my own car-crash" (224, emphasis mine). Both comments indicate that the characters will continue repeating the same behaviors in the "future," but there's no indication of whether they choose to continue despite, because of, or without regard to Vaughan's death and the failure of his purported goal[40]. As with the descriptions throughout the novel, those that end the novel—which the reader might assume would shed some light on the characters' motives—maintain the tensions mentioned above: Remington exploring sexuality or, as with Vaughan, the 'wounds that are the keys to a new sexuality' (13) amidst the wreckage of (a deviant) technology; James, wife in arm, planning his crash after marking the crashed car with his semen[41]. Thus the "end" of the novel provides no indication that the characters have learned anything and no indication of what, if anything, they should have or intended to learn. This failure to establish any change makes its difficult to figure out what exactly motivates the characters and thus which events and information should be used to explain what happens.

In addition to being failures as characters, they are failures as people, particularly where success is determined by one's ability to add up to/ in heteronormative society. Halberstam explains, "success in heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to

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specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (2). The little background information given in the novel—which, since there's so little, seems underscored—indicates that the characters fail in this equation. Though mainly heterosexual, they demonstrate none of the qualities of "reproductive maturity" that designate success. They are predominantly non-monogamous and intentionally childless, and those who do have children, the Seagraves in particular, are "bad" parents.

The narrative actually seems to mock—or at least contest—reproductive maturity, particularly in its depiction of children. The children in the narrative seem to defy the image of the Child that Lee Edleman explores and undermines in *No Future*, in that they only appear as sex objects or future crash fanatics[42]. Vaughan's choice of young, 'school girl' prostitutes and the references to child-onlookers at accident sites signal the non-innocence and/or a disregard for protecting the supposed innocence of children. More tellingly, in an interesting moment of irony, James details Gabrielle's preparation of a hash cigarette and follows it up with a sentence establishing her job as a social worker in the *child-welfare* department as well as her 'long-standing' friendship with Vera Seagrave (94). The moment stands out, not only because it gives readers the little background information on Gabrielle, but also because the descriptions of drug use are punctuated by the presence of the Seagrave's infant son. In other words, the woman whose job is to ensure the welfare of kids facilitates the use of drugs in front of an infant (not to mention the question of whether her friendship with Vera influences her determination of whether the child should be removed from the home). Thus the Child "whose innocence solicits our defense" (Edelman 2) who "has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in

perpetual trust" (11), and who is "immured in an innocence seen as continuously under siege" is not only *not* protected/ defended, it is wholly absent, replaced by kids who are "[marked] by the adult's adulterating implication in desire itself" (21).

As if that weren't enough to qualify the characters as heteronormative failures, wealth accumulation is not a motivating factor for any of them. While James and Catherine seem well-off, James neglects his profitable job, barely going into the studio (not to mention what associating with the likes of Vaughan and Seagrave could do to his professional reputation), and the descriptions of Catherine's work life are dominated by sexual encounters rather than professional/ financial success. Vaughan is jobless throughout, deeming the project 'too important' to waste time working, and, of course, he failed, possibly deliberately, at his job as a TV scientist. Remington changes jobs to be more useful to the project rather than for professional and/or monetary gain, and Seagrave, whose business "had clearly seen better times during his brief heydey as a racing driver," (93) is clearly not motivated by money. Such tidbits individually can point to a particular motive—Vaughan making up for his failure as a celebrity, James choosing the "real" experience of the collision over the "fake" experiences he produces at the studio. But together they create a group of "failures."

In their introduction to a special issue of *GLQ* on queer bonds, Joshua J. Weiner and Damon Young explain:

> We recast the question of queerness as, before anything else, a question of social bonds coequally constituted by the corrosive and adhesive pressures of eroticism. Queer bonds, we suggest, are what come into view through the isometric tension between queer world-making and world-shattering, naming a togetherness in failures to properly intersect, the social hailing named by recognition as well as its radical occlusion (223-4).

The crashpack can be read as naming a togetherness in failures to properly intersect, their bond produced by the corrosive and adhesive pressures of eroticism. Again the scant background information highlights their failure to fit in/ with heteronormative society, and the group forms in the triangulation of sex, death, and technology[43]. Read this way, the characters' behavior may be aimed equally at world-making and world-shattering and/or maintaining the tension between the two. In other words, the characters intentionally fail to intersect properly, instead exploring the spaces 'way off the page,' to use Ballard's phrase.

This makes it difficult to identify a specific, definitive motive: are they carving out space for new worlds at the same time as they undermine existing ones?; are they contesting normativity and/or heteronormative success?; are they attempting to create/ explore alternative possibilities for community building?; are they exploiting the corrosive and adhesive pressures of eroticism to discover a new sexuality? Or, more generally, are they exploring the possibilities opened up by failure? It seems interesting that most, if not all, of the deliberate collisions in the novel are "failures." Visiting his wrecked car, James explains "I tried to visualize myself at the moment of collision, the *failure* of the technical relationship between my own body, the assumptions of the skin, and the engineering structure which supported it" (68, emphasis mine). He thus introduces the possible motive of failing or inhabiting failure. Not surprisingly, the collisions he chooses to detail fail: Seagrave's accident re-enactment that he refers to as a "fiasco" (86), Seagrave's failed attempt on Taylor, and, of course, Vaughan's final collision. Such emphasis on failure opens space for various motives, each of which would alter the way one summarizes the novel. It also suggests looking not at why they

do what they do, but why they don't do what they don't do. Summarizing thus becomes

near impossible, as the novel can be as much about what happens as what doesn't

happen.

Plot Fail

> When you say it's gonna happen "now"
> Well when exactly do you mean?
> See I've already waited to long
> And all my hope is gone
> The Smiths, "How Soon Is Now"

The climax is perhaps the most obvious example of what doesn't happen… or at

least what might not have happened. With the exception of the first chapter and the final

two sections of the last chapter, the narrative is linear. Told in past tense, it reconstructs

the events leading up to Vaughan's collision/ James' sex act with Vaughan and ends with

James planning his own death-crash. In addition to providing a clear sequence of events,

the narrative begins with an introduction that basically sums up the novel and directs

readers to its goal, the 'discovery of the significance of the crash, specifically through

Vaughan' (10). One might reasonably assume that by the end of the novel the

significance of the crash would be revealed, that Vaughan's collision as well as the

characters' fascination with crashes would make sense, that the narrative would have

worked itself up to a definitive defining moment when everything becomes clear… or at

least easily inferred. But again, the narrative sets readers up for failure.

The problem is: the narrative is not linear; it's circular. Not only does the novel

begin and end with Vaughan's final collision, the complicated mixture of tenses that

James uses to describe this "event" locates the collision in a habitual present, in which

meaning is continuously deferred. Thus even the seemingly linear bulk of the novel gets

recoded as repetition rather than progression, what David Roden describes as "an 'enjoyment', such as the 'optimum sex death', ceaselessly deferred by the endless relations of equivalence among modules" (101). The narrative, in other words, doesn't "climax." The significance of the crash is never stated, and in the absence of a moment that makes sense of it all—a definite climax and subsequent resolution through which readers could identify the connective tissue—readers are left to recreate the novel, and particularly the significance of the crash, in their own (critical) image. This becomes clearer in an examination of the critical response to the novel, which I will explore later. For now, a closer look at the novel's circularity shows how the novel fails to establish a definite climax and how such failure frustrates one's ability to explain what happens.

James begins his story explaining "Vaughan died yesterday in his last *car-crash*"—an opening line that obliquely recalls that of Camus' *The Stranger*, another debatable meditation on meaninglessness—and ends with a paragraph that suggests the repetition of Vaughan's collision rather than its closure through meaning: "Meanwhile, the traffic moves in an unceasing flow along the flyover. The aircraft rise from the runways of the airport, carrying the remnants of Vaughan's semen to the instrument panels and radiator grilles of a thousand crashing cars, the leg stances of a million passengers" (224). In switching tenses, the final paragraph locates Vaughan's collision in an 'unceasing' present, the "meanwhile" suggesting an in-between time, as if the narrative is still waiting for a climax (and a resolution). Carried by the ever-rising aircraft, Vaughan's semen seeds the traffic and passengers below, suggesting a kind of cyclical repetition that leads readers back to the obscure geometry of radiator grilles and leg stances, the same geometry that is supposed to offer meaning.

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The same shift in tense occurs in the first chapter, sandwiched between a past-tense introductory summary and a short passage that returns to the past tense perspective and launches James into his "retrospective." Like the final paragraph, this passage presents an habitual present that emphasizes the repetition of Vaughan's project, particularly if we read the novel as a kind of (atrocity) exhibition of Vaughan's performances always existing in the "now." The passage begins "*Now* that Vaughan *has died*, we *will leave* with the others who gathered around him, like a crowd drawn to an injured cripple whose deformed postures reveal the secret formula of their minds" (17, emphasis mine). Here, past, present and future collide: the choice of present-perfect refuses to locate Vaughan's death in a definite time period; it 'has' happened, but there's no indication of when "now" is. This is further complicated by the future 'leaving,' which may suggest the leaving of the accident site that actually occurs at the end of the chapter, described in past tense. Or it may suggest a leaving of the world in death, thus pointing to the penultimate passage of the novel that cryptically begins "On our last evening" and ends "Already I knew that I was designing the elements of my own car-crash" (224). In both cases, the future becomes the past, thus highlighting the circularity of the narrative. And, to further confuse things, the finality of the 'last evening' is left open, with James' past progressive 'designing of a car-crash' that somehow happened and yet never actually happens in the narrative. Instead, readers are cut off by the 'meanwhile…,' which sends them back (forward?) to the present and the passage in the first chapter.

The passage continues "All of us who *knew* Vaughan *accept* the perverse eroticism of the car-crash…" (17, emphasis mine). The past returns as Vaughan only to inflect the habitual present, the continued acceptance of the perverse eroticism of the car-

crash, which is what James asks readers to do with the potential added bonus of

'revealing the secret formula of their minds and lives'[44]. The passage continues, first

with present perfect—"I have watched copulating couples…"—and then simple

present—"Young men… masturbate as they move on worn tyres to aimless

destinations…" (again, not only do we not know when, we don't know where we are or

where we're going). The descriptions of car-sex are punctuated by the use of "later" and

"later still," signaling a compression of time that refuses the closure of meaning in the

future. Interestingly, the principle participants are young men, young women, and a

teenage girl—not quite children, yet in their not-quite-adultness they seem to figure a

very different future than that of Edelman's Child. Like the final passage, this passage

ends with a reference to sexual fluids: an anonymous young male, 'shaft glistening' over

a teenage girl, who "strikes at the frayed plastic roof of the car, marking the yellow fabric

with his smegma" (18). While there is a problematic frequency of males 'marking their

territory' with bodily fluids—semen seems to be always irrigating the grooves in the

fabric of car seats—such acts have no hetero-reproductive value. These 'seeds of the

future' simply ensure the repetition of further 'marriages of violence and desire' (Ballard

156)… without children (Marriage, more often than not, refers to the fusion of human

and technology, rather than some supposed natural relation between the sexes).

The narrative thus positions itself in a discomforting "now." Discussing the

symbolism in Ballard, David Pringle argues: "Human beings are of the animal world, and

yet not of it, unable to move in either direction—towards the animal or away from it—

without losing their identities. As a result, human beings find themselves stranded on the

terminal beach of the present. In fact, the beach in the story of that name is made of

concrete, not sand, and concrete is preeminently the symbol of *now* in Ballard's fiction" (132). Pringle locates *Crash* in this category of fiction about the "now" and the 'claustrophobia' he cites as emblematic of this category can be sensed in the critical readings of the novel, particularly in the assumption of a climax. Criticism often attempts to escape the 'severely limited horizons of the novel' (133) by locating a climax (typically Vaughan's failed collision) in order to situate the novel within a forward-moving, future-thinking narrative (typically one that aligns with the given critic's agenda). If, for example, the collision is a warning of some sort, then we can/should move forward with caution, alert to the dangers and seductions of whatever the crash is warning us against. If the collision is an endorsement, then we can/should move forward with clearer direction, attentive to the possibilities of exploiting whatever the crash is endorsing.

Yet just as "the characters [are] boxed in by motorway embankments" (133), readers are confined to a continuously looping narrative that refuses to be straightened out. Since the narrative does not lead to/ progress towards a climactic moment that retroactively imparts meaning on the previous events, readers are forced to select a moment from a variety of possibilities, a choice that changes the meaning of the novel as well as the description of what happens. Summaries then might look like cherry-picking, as the events selected, particularly the one chosen as the climax, end up being those that provide the straightest route through the summarizer's argument.

Of course readers can also choose to not choose and instead focus on the narrative's failure to climax. Interestingly, all of the possible climaxes are also failures. That is, acts that fail to go as planned *and* moments that are supposed to reveal meaning

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but do not. James' sex act with Vaughan, Vaughan's collision with Taylor, and James' planning of his final crash: all of these acts fail to come off and fail to provide meaning. James' sex act with Vaughan suggests multiple conflicts—exploring his relationship to/with his body, solving the codes of deviant technology, and processing his accident[45]—none of which are resolved by the act. Similarly, Vaughan's collision with Taylor neither unleashes a new sexuality nor, as discussed above, produces any change that would indicate a resolution or a particular conflict that the characters are attempting to resolve. Moreover, the collision is undercut by Seagrave's failed attempt to kill Taylor[46], so the act, in effect, fails even before it is undertaken. And, as mentioned above, James' final crash never happens.

The circular plot, with its "climaxes" insisting on failure and repetition (or the repetition of failure) marks the narrative's resistance to meaning and thus underscores the difficulty of assigning/ creating meaning, even at the basic level of summary. Given that the novel depicts a group of people who deliberately get into car crashes, the death drive seems an obvious approach[47]. And Ballard does one better: the novel not only depicts but also enacts the drive, circling around, yet never arriving at the significance of the crash. The title itself calls attention to the drive, continuously insisting on a meaning that it continuously resists. Roden goes so far as to suggest that "there are no crashes in *Crash*, only its metaphorically displaced tokens" (99). Using Baudrillard, Lacan/ Zizek, and Haraway, he argues: "The crash stands in for the cyborg *real*: the thing that cannot be coded, interfaced, or controlled, monitored through feedback or subjected to recombinant logics. It can be represented only as that recalcitrant X which resists the affinities of cyborgs and thus 'belongs' to the cyborg universe as a consequence of its repeated failure

to knit together as a whole." This necessary failure to 'knit together as a whole'—to make sense of the crash—is both cause and consequence of the narrative, just as subjectivity is cause and consequence of the failure of the Symbolic. The crash, in other words, is the foundation for the narrative and yet, as Roden explains, "the novel rigorously programs its exclusion" (101). Meaning is continuously deferred, the potential climaxes serving not to reveal meaning but to resist it. In this case, the plot is as much about what doesn't happen, the failure of meaning, as what does happen, the failed acts.

The drive seems to nicely resolve the complications mentioned above: the circular structure mimics the drive and the lack of a climax ensures the continuous deferral of meaning; the ambiguous protagonist can be read as the move toward the dissolution of subjectivity/ identity, which could also be read as the characters' motive. James' notes this early in the novel in a reflection on Vaughan's killing of a dog: "The long triangular grooves on the car had been formed within the death of an unknown creature, its vanished identity abstracted in terms of the geometry of this vehicle. How much more mysterious would be our own deaths, and those of the famous and powerful? "(13). The "goal" then is not to produce and/or reinforce identity but to abstract it, not to solve the mystery but to further mystify it. And yet the drive is not the only way to approach the narrative's failure to climax and the narrative in general (that would be a definitive reading).

If Roden is correct that "*[t]he crash has not taken place*" then the plot might be read, not as a seemingly linear progression of related (failed) events leading up to a moment that can't happen, but as Lauren Berlant's notion of a "situation." She explains:

> A situation is a state of things in which something that will matter is
> unfolding amid the usual activity of life. It is a state of animated and
> animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a
> sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become and

event (5)… The situation is therefore a genre of social time and practice in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos (6).

For all of the characters' animation—all their driving, crashing, fucking, and tripping/ getting high—they remain suspended in a moment before an event. This is clear from the first page, when Vaughan's collision is established as a failure, and reinforced in the mixture of tenses used to describe the collision, which suggest repetition without change. Again, 'the crash has not taken place'; the event has not happened. The new geometry of meaning referenced throughout points to an 'emergence of something,' a change in 'the relation of persons and worlds' yet the 'rules are unstable,' hence the problematic method of storytelling employed.

Perhaps more interestingly, the narrative seems to qualify as a 'situation tragedy.' Berlant defines and describes it thus:

> *[S]ituation tragedy*: the marriage between tragedy and situation comedy where people are fated to express their flaws episodically, over and over, without learning, changing, being relieved, becoming better, or dying. In the situation comedy, personality is figured as a limited set of repetitions that will inevitably appear in new situations—but what makes them comic and not tragic is that in this genre's imaginary, *the world has the kind of room for us that enables us to endure.* In contrast, in the situation tragedy, one moves between having little and being ejected from the social, where life is lived on the outside of value, in terrifying nonplaces where one is squatter, trying to make an event in which one will matter to something or someone, even as a familiar joke (in the situation tragedy, protagonists often try heart-wrenchingly to live as though they are in a situation comedy) (176-7).

The difficulty in assigning clear causal links between the actions in the novel results from their episodic nature. The characters crash, do drugs, and have sex 'over and over without learning, changing, being relieved, becoming better, or dying'[48]. And most of the novel takes place in nonplaces[49]. Referencing the self-described climax of James' relationship

with Vaughan—a strangely anti-climactic conversation that takes place in "the mezzanine lounge of the Oceanic terminal" (193)—Luckhurst notes "[n]o better (peculiarly specific) space could sum up the anonymous zones in which the novel unfolds: buildings devoid of cultural accretions, temporary housings for transient travelers, transitional areas for those between meaningful destinations" (129). Ultimately living in his car, Vaughan in particular is a 'squatter' in the novel's nonplaces. He moves between roadways, parking lots, junkyards, hospitals, airport terminals, and his workshop, which is located at Seagrave's home that is also the place of his failed business (93). Having been rejected as a TV personality, Vaughan desperately tries to make an event happen; as 'the man who dies in a crash with Taylor' (130), Vaughan would finally matter. Of course his crash fails.

Berlant claims "that supermodernity/ neoliberalism produces the situation tragedy as a way of expressing the costs of what's ordinary now, the potential within any grounding space to become a nonplace for anyone whose inconvenience to the reproduction of value becomes suddenly, once again, apparent" (291 n 19). The novel's unsettling "now-ness" might then be read as an 'expression of the costs of what's ordinary now,' the normativizing narratives and apparatuses that ultimately create a world that *does not* 'have the kind room for us that enables us to endure.' The crash functions to reveal the flaw/s in such narratives: as will be explored later, they promote an impossible, unrealizable goal and, in doing so, they create the very situation-tragic heroes that they need to eject. At the same time, the crash becomes a site around which those who are inconvenient to the reproduction of value can commune. In other words, a space of failure, for failures, by failures. And thus is my remaking of the crash in my

own critical image. Before looking at how other critics do it, it seems fitting to end this section back at the beginning: with a summary of the novel.

<center>*Conclusion Fail*</center>

> And I fail
> But when I can, I will
> Try to understand
> That when I can, I will
> The Smashing Pumpkins "Mayonaise"

Crash depicts a group of failures who seem to find automobile collisions erotically stimulating, though they fail to find meaning in both their sex acts and their collisions. They intentionally get into car crashes, observe professionally staged crashes, drive around looking for other people's accidents, fantasize about imaginary collisions, watch films of collisions, and engage in a lot of collision-inspired sex. They also do a lot of drugs. But the narrative fails to establish why they engage in such behavior. The narrative begins at the end, with the first chapter basically telling the whole story, but it doesn't climax. The remaining chapters fill in the details, which, for the most part, are repeated descriptions of failed acts that the characters don't learn from.

The narrative begins with Dr. Robert Vaughan's failed collision and reconstructs the failed acts that precede it. James Ballard (James) narrates the story, but despite being the narrator and sharing the name of the author, the narrative fails to privilege him or anyone as the protagonist. James' relationship with his car fails and he gets in an accident with Dr. Helen Remington, whose husband dies in the crash. The two have an affair, which fails to reveal the significance of their accident, and thus they seek—and fail to find—meaning in other partners. James meets Vaughan and accompanies him as he obsessively plans and rehearses the failed collision (its failure underscored in the

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obsessive preparations). Seagrave, the professional stuntman Vaughan enlists to rehearse

the collision, fails to respect the importance of Vaughan's project and attempts a crash

with Taylor before Vaughan. His collision fails to kill Taylor and, though both he and a

minor actress die, his collision fails to bring about meaning. James and Vaughan have

sex, which fails to reveal the meaning James' thought it would, and Vaughan dies in a

failed attempt to kill Taylor. The novel ends with James planning his own crash, which

fails to actually occur within the narrative. Two other characters make appearances,

usually in sex acts that fail to bring about meaning: Catherine, James' wife, and

Gabrielle, the most seriously injured accident victim in the group.

<center>Critic Fail</center>

> A complete discontinuity existed between Reagan's manner and body
> language, on the one hand, and his scarily far-right message on the other.
> Above all, it struck me that Reagan was the first politician to exploit the
> fact that his TV audience would not be listening too closely, if at all, to
> what he was saying, and indeed might well assume from his manner and
> presentation that he was saying the exact opposite of the words actually
> emerging from his mouth
> J. G. Ballard, *Atrocity Exhibition*

> You imagine me sipping champagne from your boot
> For a taste of your elegant pride
> I may be going to hell in a bucket
> But at least I'm enjoying the ride
> The Grateful Dead, "Hell in a Bucket"

Crash is not really the ideal novel to get critically involved with. Though it's a

fairly straightforward narrative—it's somewhat linear and driven by descriptions of

events rather than the psychological/ philosophical musings of developing characters—it

has an enormous amount of intertextual and critical baggage. As if that weren't enough,

it has an opinionated, wise-ass father who tends to butt it. Not the makings for a smooth

relationship. But that doesn't stop it from being a serious good time.

The novel itself is a pleasurable read, an opinion that can easily be refuted and probably says more about me than it does about the actual novel. But given that it is so entangled in other texts, inflected by so many other voices, it is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down. That's when the real fun begins. The critical battle over the meaning of *Crash* is a particularly salient example of the way Ballard resists the definitive, simultaneously refusing the exchange of his texts, specifically among critics who would own them through meaning-making, and opening them up to all sorts of use. This, I would argue, is the brilliance of Ballard. The closer a given critic comes to a definitive reading, the more frustrated his/her attempt becomes. Ballard ensures this with continuous commentary that mocks, contradicts, and ironizes critics' arguments *and* his own statements. This is especially interesting, given the high stakes of the debate: the re/positioning and/or validation of SF (science fiction) as worthy of "serious" academic interest; the re-evaluation of the relationship between fiction and theory, particularly the appropriation of literature through mis/applications of theory; and the justification of literature through an examination of the roles that literature, criticism, and theory—as well as authors, critics, and theorists—should play in society. In the face of such weighty implications and the purported context of a culture going to hell in a bucket, Ballard seems to ask readers to at least enjoy the ride.

It seems fitting that a novel so saturated with the death drive would become an object around which a debate seems to endlessly circle. Edelman explains:

> As a name for a force of mechanistic compulsion whose formal excess
> supercedes any end toward which it might seem to be aimed, the death
> drive refuses identity or the absolute privilege of any goal. Such a goal,
> such an end, could never be 'it'; achieved, it could never satisfy. For the
> drive as such can only insist, and every end toward which we mistakenly
> interpret its insistence to pertain is a sort of grammatical placeholder, one

that tempts us to read as transitive a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever holds (22).

Ballard's comments function as a drive-like insistence, challenging readers to make meanings and then undoing the meanings they create. In rescinding, rewriting, and "clarifying" his statements about the novel and its themes, he refuses the identity of Ballard-as-author who might be said to "mean" or "intend" this or that. By continuously negating meaning and identity, Ballard enacts and stands as a figure for the kind of negative excess of the death drive, which, read against meaning and identity, affords a 'constant access to jouissance.' Reading the novel then is less about finding a meaning, be it a warning against or a celebration of contemporary culture, and more about finding ways to subject the novel to more possibilities-- not in the hope of stabilizing and/or ensuring a future meaning, but in promoting further access to jouissance.

The first hurdle to a definitive reading is its intertexuality. *Crash* is a kind of 'spin-off,' to use the language of television that Ballard so enjoys, of *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) (*AE*). *AE*, which is a kind of oblique spin-off of his short story "The Terminal Beach" (1964), is a collection of non-linear, loosely related "vignettes" that describe the psychic fragmentation of the main character, multiply-named Traven/ Travers/ Travis/ Talbot/Tallis/Talbert/ Trabert, The Re/Search edition (1990) adds to the various narrative voices Ballard's annotations written for that edition, an introduction by William Burroughs, illustrations by Phoebe Gloekner, and photographs by Ana Barrado. And there's a film adaptation, David Cronenberg's 1996 *Crash* (which also spawned its own debate in *Screen*). While Ballard locates the "gene" of *Crash* in a section of *AE* titled "Crash!" (*AE* 97) written in 1968, he includes his 1970 exhibition of crashed cars into the mix of influences (*AE* 25). Even if, as Victor Sage argues, *Crash* "acts out one

small biographical strand of *The Atrocity Exhibition's* programme of providing the reader

with an encyclopaedia of postwar history, as a catalogue of 'imaginary perversions,'"

(42) such a heteroglossic "origin" complicates a straightforward reading. The

overdetermined intextuality of the two works is emphasized not only in the repeated

reference to 'new geometries of meaning' and of course car crashes, but also in the

variety of recycled names and characters—Catherine, Karen, Vaughan, Elizabeth Taylor,

James Dean, etc.—reminiscent of Deleuze and Guatarri's "Since each of us was several,

there was already quite a crowd" (3).

And the space gets more crowded: Ballard's introduction to the French edition of

Crash provides a general "explanation" that looms like a Miltonic ghost over the text and

its criticism. In addition to a lengthy discussion of the role of sci-fi in contemporary

society, he delivers the oft-quoted final sentence (in both senses of the word): "Needless

to say, the ultimate role of *Crash!* is cautionary, a warning against that brutal, erotic and

overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the

technological landscape" (Vale & Juno 98). Much like his annotations in *AE* that

Luckhurst describes as 'occupying the margins' and 'writing the explanatory notes of the

reader' (75), Ballard's introduction leaves little space for the reader to move about

without tripping over someone else, be it Ballard or the host of critics who cite the

introduction as proof of Ballard's intent.

Enter Baudrillard. As with any novel, there are a variety of critical voices that

lend themselves to readings of *Crash*, but much of the novel's criticism is tied up in

Baudrillard's reading of it, making it difficult to extricate the novel from a particular

brand of academic analysis and from Baudrillard, who as we know has his own critical

history. Baudrillard's argument—that "*Crash* is the first great novel of the universe of simulation" (319) in that it presents a valueless and therefore limitless existence of the body—is consistently referenced—and, more often than not, rejected—in criticism of *Crash*. In a 1991 special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* devoted to SF and postmodernism, various critics take aim at his argument in a rather unfriendly debate. N. Katherine Hayles disputes Baudrillard's dismissal of the boundaries between simulations and reality, claiming that "[h]yperreality does not erase these limits, for they exist whether we recognize them or not; it only erases them from our consciousness. Insofar as Baudrillard's claims about hyperreality diminish our awareness of these limits, it borders on a madness whose likely end is apocalypse" (322). In line with Ballard's introduction, she reads *Crash* as a warning, specifically against the very amoral transcendence that Baudrillard describes, which ultimately leads to real death.

Similarly, Vivian Sobchack faults Baudrillard's disregard of the lived experience of the body. She explains, with reference to her own lived experience of pain, "[o]ne's own body resists the kind of affectless objectification that Baudrillard has *in mind*; rather, it responds affectively to such mortification as he *imagines* with confusion, horror, anguish, and pain…" (327). She too reads the novel as 'cautionary' and cites Ballard's introduction as well as his writing style as proof of the novel's stance against such disembodied objectification, emblematized in Vaughan's (and Baudrillard's) immature, irresponsible 'jacking off' that is satisfied only in death.

David Porush is equally unforgiving. While he doesn't go so far as to "wish Baudrillard a car crash of two" (Sobchack 329), Porush seems to paint Baudrillard as a kind of King Lear, ranting about his dispossession and "construct[ing] an angry jeremiad

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out of [his] nostalgia for the props of the old reality and the architecture that's been demolished" (325). Rejecting Baudrillard's seeming nothing-can-come-of-nothing stance against the loss of the real, Porush reads sci-fi, not *Crash* specifically, as presenting new imaginative possibilities for transcendence.

Brooks Landon is a little nicer or perhaps just funnier. He reads the "killer Bs," as he calls Ballard and Baudrillard, as concerned primarily with the act of reading, which is perhaps why his response is structured around the personal dilemmas presented by the texts. Like Sobchack, he situates his reading in his body, but he's more embracing of the pain: "Reading *Crash* makes my knees hurt, my teeth ache, my skin crawl, my stomach churn, my balls shrivel because—God help me—the book is so perfectly, so threateningly *right*, even (gulp) *normal*. Baudrillard knows that, and knows why, and the genius of his writing is that he tries to take us on a similarly hyperfunctional, hypercritical ride" (326-7). And Landon seems to enjoy the ride, or so his subtle mockery of the "trendiness" of the debate seems to suggest. The questions he poses, simultaneously establishing the stakes of the debate and ridiculing those who put stake in them, make the debate sound like a bunch of hipsters who hear a band they "discovered" in an itouch commercial— elaborate arguments masking the I-was-there-first, I-know/understand-it-better, the-Man-will-never-really-get-it attitude of superior coolness.

As if the space weren't crowded enough, Ballard also weighs in… and rather heavily. His "A Response to the Invitation to Respond" is a scathing critique of the kind of one-upmanship that Landon implies. The title itself introduces his mockery of academic criticism—so many people responding to responses—which he further describes as "the apotheosis of the hamburger" and "bourgeoisification in the form of an

over-professionalized academic with nowhere to take its girlfriend for a bottle of wine and a dance… rolling its jaws over an innocent and naïve fiction that desperately needs to be left alone" (329). While Ballard hadn't read the other responses prior to writing his, he senses that critics may need a night out (perhaps after some drinking and dancing, they'd be better positioned to partake of that amoral pleasure Baudrillard suggests?). And yet, since he hadn't read the other responses, it may be that he was actually responding to Baudrillard; after all his was the particular response that Ballard was invited to respond to. Ballard should have known (perhaps he did) that such virulence would not go unnoticed. Or un-responded to.

In his editorial introduction, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has the dubious honor of explaining Ballard's comments. He seems a little hurt—who wouldn't be after your guest of honor shits all over your party?—and wonders how Ballard could have written such a thing, given that "[f]ew SF writers have created an oeuvre of such disturbing and sophisticated prose as Ballard, [and] few are less likely to be demolished by academic criticism" (307). Like a gracious host, he cleans up the mess, blaming the killing of SF on big corporations and military culture (it's not us, Ballard; we would never do that to you) and excusing Ballard's tirade as an attempt to protect the border "between the fields of art and the locusts of rationalistic analysis" (307) (he doesn't hate us; he just likes his space).

In the more comfortable position of looking back a year later, Nicholas Ruddick argues that Ballard's response *is* directed at Baudrillard's reading of *Crash*, which Ruddick views "as a serious misreading, possibly even a shameless distortion, of *Crash*'s themes" (356). He too reads the novel as cautionary, though in a different way than the

special issue's respondents. Attentive to Ballard's oeuvre and comments in interviews,

he views *Crash* as part of Ballard's larger project of warning against the unleashing of

unconscious, dark desire, particularly via disaster/ catastrophe: "The catastrophic

interactions between individual and landscape in Ballard's fiction are expressions of the

disjunctions between conscious and unconscious desire at the psychic level. The

unconscious level represents *real* desire, the intractable ground of being, and it is

Ballard's project to make this reality manifest, with the very Freudian—and ultimately

moral—idea of bringing to light what is dark" (359). The potential 'shameless distortion

of the novel's themes' seems to result from Baudrillard's lack of specific textual analysis

in an effort to "confirm his own insights" (357). Perhaps this is what Ballard is raving

against: not necessarily a misreading, but a highly selective reading that aims to co-opt

the text in order to promote one's own particular literary stance (and career). In this case,

he may be justified in vehemently protecting those boundaries that Csicsery-Ronay

describes.

Aidan Day also reads Baudrillard as cherry picking, which supports Day's larger

project of bringing back the close reading. As with other critics, Day's argument both

offers a specific interpretation of the novel and reinforces his own aim: "The text of

Crash forces recognition that one of the necessary activities for a reader considering a

literary text is to engage closely with the subtle textures of literary language and

structure, rather than merely to impose theoretical notions without regard to those

textures" (278). Thus he faults Baudrillard for not "paying significantly close attention to

the text" (277), and remedies this with a particularly close reading of *Crash* in relation to

Baudrillard and Ballard's other works and interviews, using lots of that specific textual

evidence that Ruddick calls for to refute Baudrillard. Day argues that, read closely, *Crash*

critiques rather than advocates postmodern amorality. Interestingly, he cites Ballard's

1994 interview with Will Self regarding the infamous introduction: "I went wrong in…

that introduction… in the final paragraph, which I have always regretted, I claimed that in

Crash there is a moral indictment of the sinister marriage between sex and technology.

Of course it isn't anything of the sort. *Crash* is not a cautionary tale. *Crash* is what it

appears to be. It is a psychopathic hymn. But it is a psychopathic hymn which has a

point" (quoted in Day, 290).

So *Crash* is *not* a cautionary tale? Day reads this as Ballard's rejection of the idea

that the author stands outside of the text rendering moral judgments. *Crash* as a

cautionary tale would suggest that Ballard is doing just that. Instead, he is implicated in

the text and this, for Day, makes it parodic:

> The parodist may attack through mockery his or her object but at the same
> time reveals an admiration for, an involvement with or a fascination with,
> the object that is being attacked. James [the character] is in the text of
> *Crash* to signal the depth of the author's own implication in the material
> he is presenting, the depth of the author's own psychopathology. He is
> there to signal the extent to which the author himself is colonised by the
> fictions of the late-twentieth century (291).

Like Sobchack, Day views Vaughan as the dangerous logical conclusion of Baudrillard's

hyperreality. The point of Ballard's 'psychopathic hymn' for Day is to illustrate "the

mental and conceptual disease of the modern world" and Vaughan stands as "an extreme

and exaggerated instance of it" (291) that ultimately spreads to James. Playing "nicely"

with Luckhurst's renaming of *AE's* protagonist as "T-Cell," the highly contagious

Vaughan (and Baudrillard) add an immediacy to the issue of boundary protecting: it's not

the 'locusts of rationalistic analysis' but a different kind of plague that threatens to infect

us. Ballard's response might then be an effort to further raise awareness of this disease, his request for us to 'stay our hands' a prophylactic, lest we are touched by the contagion.

Victor Sage also reads *Crash* as a parody of contemporary culture, yet the infectious element for him is laughter. He argues that the novel is a humorous and insightful social critique in the spirit of the Gothic horror. Reading the novel through several frames—that of Baudrillard's *The Transparency of Evil*, the Gothic horror tradition, and *The Atrocity Exhibition*—Sage argues that "Ballard is concerned indeed to explore loss of affect (he invented the phrase, the 'death of affect', in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, in 1969), and he is also interested in replication, and prosthetics, but that deadpan style is a primary medium of Gothic effects, an ironical way of representing a transcendence of the horrors of our biomorphic psycho-history, not simply or primarily a metonymic reflection of the prison of technology" (47-8). Sage uses a number of serious, esoteric theoretical and literary examples—despite the editor's comment in her preface that "[w]e insisted that these essays be accessible to that mythic beast, the Common Reader, who might just as readily be spotted at the Lowdham Book Festival as in a college seminar" (xi)—but his point is that *Crash* is supposed to be funny. As thrilling as Baudrillard might be for some readers, he's not really funny… or at least not to Sage. He argues that "Baudrillard's quotations from the novel manage to get rid of the impact of Ballard's prose, the suppressed giggle of excitement, concealed under a po-faced listing of terms" (43). Sage follows this up with a particularly witty reading of Ballard's use of the word "binnacle." His reading underscores what he sees Baudrillard as missing: Baudrillard's "is a purely thematic account of Ballard's writing, which is actually an encyclopaedia of jokes about a new application of imagined drives: narcissim, fetishism,

coprophagia, sado-masochism, etc." (44). Thus the dark parody of a diseased era is turned into a hilariously infectious journey through semen-smeared vehicles. Might Ballard's response then be a joke about the new applications of his novel?

Though he doesn't suggest specifically this, Bradley Butterfield opens space for such a reading. In defense of Baudrillard, Butterfield reads Baudrillard (and Ballard) not as dangerously amoral, but as 'aesthetic revolutionaries' rethinking the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, morality and literature/ literary theory. Their revolutions are grounded in a "relentlessly negative aesthetic that does not allow for the possibility of positive moral closure" (67). As with other critics, Butterfield highlights the seductiveness of Baudrillard's writing—what Hayles, referencing her student, refers to as a 'powerful drug' that "should be used with care" (323)—and views it in terms of David Carroll's "paraesthetics' as aiming " to undo the closures constituted by theory *from within* and to develop critical strategies that are capable of pointing to, or linking up with, what is 'beyond theory'" (71). He reads Baudrillard as 'going beyond dichotomies of good and evil,' "playing the devil's hand" and pulling readers into "his abyss." For Butterfield, "[w]hat Ballard fears in the 'theory and criticism of s-f' is not theory's abyss, however, but the inertia brought on by its moral reductions, which spell death to the 'spirit of SF.' Ballard exempts Baudrillard, whom he intuits has seen the truth of his book: that it is meant to be unapologetically amoral, that as an artist Ballard too plays the devil's hand" (75). Ballard's rant, then, is not about protecting the borders from Baudrillard, but from the paralysis induced by debates like the one over Baudrillard's reading of *Crash*.

While Ballard's response may seem nasty, a snarky Tim Gunn cutting up people who ultimately ensure his success, I think it's hilarious. Ballard can be extremely witty. My current personal favorite is a comment about Ralph Nader, but may just as easily refer to current obsessions with purifying and vigilantly surveilling anything that might come in contact with our children: "Many of Nader's targets seem ridiculously puny— did any of us, for example, ever regard breakfast cereal as anything but a good-humoured method of blocking the infant's trumpeting mouth as we recovered from our hangovers?" (*UG* 260). This comment perhaps sheds some light on his depiction of children and it also suggests that Ballard's response to the debate, harsh as it may be, is actually funny, or more appropriately ironic, and such good-humoured-ness functions to resist definitive readings. Edleman suggests approaching the death drive through de Man's reading of irony, what Edelman calls "that queerest of rhetorical devices" (23). He argues that irony, like the death drive, functions as an 'arbitrary text machine' undoing narrative: "[t]he mindless violence of this textual machine, so arbitrary, so implacable, threatens, like a guillotine, to sever the genealogy that narrative syntax labors to affirm, recasting its narrative 'chain of… events' as a 'signifying chain' and inscribing in the realm of signification, along with the prospect of meaning, the meaningless machinery of the signifier, always in the way of what it would signify. Irony, whose effect de Man likens to the syntactical violence of anacoluthon, thus severs the continuity essential to the very logic of making sense" (23-4). Ballard's 'implacable' comments break narratives, those created by critics and by Ballard himself.

Case in point: it seems especially curious that Ballard's response to the debate seems to castigate all his (academic) critics *but* Baudrillard: "Vast theories and pseudo-

theories are elaborated by people with not an idea in their bones. Needless to say, I

totally exclude Baudrillard (whose essay on *Crash* I have not really wanted to

understand)" (329). I find his phrasing interesting as it repeats the same 'needless to say'

that begins the cautionary warning that he laments in the 1994 interview. Perhaps he is

subtly reminding Baudrillard of that introduction, since in his reading, Baudrillard

contradicts Ballard's introduction twice: "[the Accident] is the initiator of a new manner

of *non-perverted* pleasure (contrary to what the author himself says in his introduction

when he speaks of a new perverse logic)" (315); "*Crash* is hypercritical, in the sense of

being beyond the critical (and even beyond its own author, who, in the introduction,

speaks of this novel as 'cautionary…')" (319). This dismissal of Ballard's supposed

intention becomes a kind of Death Star vulnerability that critics use to destroy

Baudrillard's argument (an aesthetic choice to ensure resale value a la *Family Guy*?).

The irony abounds: is Ballard taking a shot at Baudrillard or does Ballard just like that

phrase?; is his exclusion of Baudrillard really an inclusion and with whom is he included/

excluded?; does Ballard's not wanting to understand mean it's too hard to understand,

that he doesn't particularly like what Baudrillard says, or that, as Butterfield suggests,

Ballard doesn't like its implications about his work?; and why does he keep saying things

that supposedly don't need to be said, particularly when such needlessly spoken

statements seem to contradict each other? In any case, the 'arbitrary textual machine'

ruptures the narrative, requiring some serious suturing, as demonstrated in the above

arguments that work so hard to make sense of Ballard's comments.

But he's not done. Right after 'excluding' Baudrillard, Ballard adds, "Of course,

his *Amerique* is an absolutely brilliant piece of writing, probably the most sharply clever

piece of writing since Swift—brilliancies and jewels of insight in every paragraph—an

intellectual Alladin's cave" (329). Is Baudrillard a shady sorcerer, tricking readers with

his shiny insights and the promise of a rich academic career? Does his reading of *Crash*

fail to delight readers in the way that *Amerique* does? Is Ballard trying to make up/ save

face for his not wanting to understand Baudrillard's essay on *Crash*? Or is Ballard

faulting Baudrillard for missing the satire of *Crash*? In a 1997 interview about

Cronenberg's film, Swift comes up again, as does Ballard's ambivalence about his

introduction. In response to Andrew Hultkrans' question "What were you cautioning

against," Ballard explains: "Well, cautionary tales take many forms. One of the most

famous of all, Swift's "Modest Proposal," employs the deadpan approach. It seems to

embrace the very subject that is the target of Swift's anger. I'd like to think that *Crash*

lies in the tradition of that type of cautionary tale" (78). So it *is* a cautionary tale? Is

"Modest Proposal" then also a 'psychopathic hymn with a point?' After thinking about

the debate for six years, is Ballard realigning himself with Baudrillard? Or does Ballard

just really like Swift? These comments seem to reinforce Day's reading of the parodic

author who, with his deadpan style and protagonist of the same name, embraces his

subject matter in order to critique it.

> Yet Ballard goes on to "clarify":

> I mean, when I was writing *Crash*, I certainly didn't think I was writing a
> cautionary tale. What I thought I was doing was following certain trends
> that I saw inscribed in the sensation-hungry, rather affectless landscape
> that was emerging in the '60s. I was following these trends that I saw
> inscribed across the graph paper to the point where they seemed likely to
> intersect, you know, way off the page. I saw this new logic, a nightmare
> logic, emerging, and this was what I was exploring. I was, in a sense,
> carrying out an autopsy before the cadaver was cold.

Notice he still has not answered the question. Instead, he circles around the answer,

suggesting that the novel is more exploratory, a testing of or experimenting with a 'new

nightmare logic,' not necessarily to warn people of its dangers, but to observe how it

might work. In this sense, he can be read as embodying the negativity—that 'likely

intersection way off the page'—produced by contemporary culture—the 'trends inscribed

in the emerging landscape'—via James who acts as cadaver *and* 'carries out the autopsy.'

While being implicated in this way may suggest parody, it's possible that he's parodying

not the amorality, but a different aspect of contemporary culture. For unlike Swift, who

has no children and therefore cannot benefit from his modest proposal, Ballard has a car

(which he accidentally crashed not long after the novel was published) and a vested

interest in the dissection of cultural cadavers, those not-yet-cold casualties that embody

the flaw in the system.

Ballard ends his answer to Hultkrans' question with comments that recall

Baudrillard's claim that *Crash* "is simply fascinating, without this fascination implying

any kind of value judgment whatsoever. And this is the miracle of *Crash*. The moral

gaze—the critical judgmentalism that is still part of the old world's functionality—cannot

touch it" (319). Ballard explains:

> What *Crash* does—it's particularly noticeable in the film—is remove the
> moral framework that reassures the spectator that these horrific scenes are,
> in fact, constrained within some system of moral value. And I think that
> unsettles people, because they ask questions—I mean, "Do the filmmaker
> and the writer really *believe* that auto wrecks are erotically stimulating?"
> (78).

Ballard, of course, does not find such events 'erotically stimulating,' and such a question

underscores the problem of the 'old world's judgmentalism,' which strives to but cannot

make sense of his narratives. For Baudrillard, this judgmentalism is based in a system of

opposition that imparts value based on those oppositions. Ballard's novel undermines

this system by depicting a universe "always already caught up in the continuous figures

of circulation" and simultaneously "devour[ing] its own rationality, since it does not treat

the dysfunctional" (318). Ballard's comments seem to repeat the same 'devouring of his

own rationality,' as his ambivalence towards the novel's 'ultimate role' demonstrates.

With Baudrillard, I think that *Crash* is "truly saturated with an intense initiatory power,"

(319) and, though Baudrillard is not a Lacanian, I think it's fruitful to approach (in order

to exploit) that power from the perspective of the death drive.

Butterfield argues that "[t]he main difference between the Lacanian and the

Baudrillardian readings of *Crash* is that in the former fragmented subjects seek respite

from the symbolic (the world of signs) by re-creating prelinguistic, masochistic fantasies

around car crashes, whereas in the latter they seek in each crash an exchange of sexual

energies with the dead and entry into a symbolic realm that no longer values distinctions

like conscious/ unconscious, normal/ perverse, and living/ dead in opposition" (72). As is

perhaps obvious, I'm not a fan of the "faithful" reading, as such readings—clear, concise,

and correct as they may be—tend to limit the possibilities of a text. In the case of a

strictly Baudrillardian reading, the limitations can be rather stifling. Luckhurst notes the

'seductive convergence' between Ballard and Baudrillard, but cautions that "[t]o pinpoint

this register seems to accord suspiciously with trying to legitimate Ballard by forcing his

texts into the sole frame of postmodernism. If the space between touches on this logic, it

is also traversed by many other, competing theses" (188 n. 4). Luckhurst's argument

emphasizes the problems of using a single frame to read Ballard, claiming that his texts

exist in the spaces between literary/ academic categories and thus can (and should) be

approached in multiple ways. *Crash* is especially problematic given the amount of attention it receives—as Gasiorek points out "a veritable cottage industry of criticism has developed around *Crash*" (17)—and the tendency to privilege it "as a text to govern over the whole oeuvre" (Luckhurst 123). The trouble with a strictly Baudrillardian reading is, as Luckhurst worries, "the abandonment of Ballard to Baudrillard's very specific take on the Simulacra" (127).

Significantly, Luckhurst "rescues" the novel by incorporating more voices. He cites Scott Durham's reading, which focuses on the characters' failures to successfully complete the simulation since their respective crashes don't exactly come off as intended, and includes Deleuze's 'demonic simulacra,' which introduces difference where it should be returning the same. For Luckhurst, "[n]othing could be further from the similitude of Baudrillard's 'era of simulation', in which everything is reduced to indifferent equivalence, the same story (the story of the Same) told over and over again for every cultural event. This at least resists turning Ballard's work into a cloned product, one of a series of terms in *Simulacra and Simulation* which carries the same 'genetic code' indifferently" (128).

In the same way, a strictly Lacanian reading could have the effect of eliding Ballard and a mega-theorist such that Ballard's oeuvre tells the same story over and over. Regardless of how a given critic/ theorist reads it as functioning—as offering 'respite from the Symbolic' or as 'powering contemporary social existence' (Gasiorek 82)—the death drive manifests frequently in Ballard's fiction. Yet Ballard's comments bar the possibility of such strict readings. Citing a variety of different interviews, both Luckhurst and Gasiorek note Ballard's role in the difficulty of definitively deciding what the text is

and what it is meant to do, as does Robert Caserio, who explains "[t]he deadpan earnestness with which Ballard and "Ballard" present *Crash* makes it impossible for the reader to determine if the novel is, after all, a joke" (303). Perhaps this impossibility, this indeterminacy of both text and author, is the joke.

And the joke is on us. I read Ballard's "failure" to state definitively what it is that he is warning against and instead continuously mire the text in conflicting voices as an effort to frustrate identity and stave off meaning indefinitely. In this way, Ballard becomes a figure for the death drive, rather than an author depicting/ explaining it. Edelman explains:

> To figure the undoing of civil society, the death drive of the dominant order, is neither to be nor to become that drive; such being is not to the point. Rather, acceding to that figural position means recognizing and refusing the consequences of grounding reality in denial of the drive. As the death drive dissolves those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves, so the queer must insist on disturbing, on queering, social organizations as such—on disturbing, therefore, and on queering *ourselves* and our investment in such organization (17).

This seems to be an apt excuse for Ballard's "Response…," which undoubtedly disturbs the academic organizations that praise him and the identity of Ballard-as-author whom they praise. Moreover, insofar as the novel obsessively depicts and thus affirms the drive, Ballard's comments can be read as rejecting the denial of the drive, a denial replicated not only in "moral" readings, but also in definitive readings in general. In removing the "moral framework"—the logic that would make sense of the novel and his comments about the novel—Ballard forces readers to confront the drive and the 'consequences of grounding reality in a denial of it.' Thus, I read Ballard not as warning against the absence of a moral framework, but the very moral framework he removes, one that is ultimately rooted in what Edelman refers to as 'reproductive futurism.'

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Edelman describes the logic of reproductive futurism as:

> …the compulsion to embrace our own futurity in the privileged form of
> the Child, to imagine each moment as pregnant with the Child of our
> Imaginary identifications, as pregnant, that is, with a meaning whose
> presence would fill up the hole in the Symbolic—the hole that marks both
> the place of the Real and the internal division or distance by which we are
> constituted as subjects and destined to pursue the phantom of meaning
> through the signifier's metonymic slide (15-6).

Despite the amount of sex that James and his wife have (with each other and other

people), there is not only an absence of children, but also an absence of discussions of

children and a desire for children. There is a "disturbing" scene when Seagrave flicks his

son's 'miniscule penis' and parodies breastfeeding, amidst a group of sexual "deviants"

smoking hash but in all it seems these characters are not particularly interested in

ensuring their futures, let alone ensuring such futures by reproducing. Instead, they seem

to resist the promise of Imaginary wholeness, the 'filling of the hole in the Symbolic,'

and opt instead for the dissolution of identity. As unsettling as this may be, what I think

people find truly unsettling is not that 'such horrific scenes are not constrained within

some system of moral value' but that they are produced by such a system. Edelman

explains, "Lacan makes clear that the death drive emerges as a consequence of the

Symbolic… [The] constant movement [of the Symbolic] toward realization cannot be

divorced, however, from a will to undo what is thereby instituted, to being again ex

nihilio. For the death drive marks the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the

loss, the Real loss, that the advent of the signifier effects" (9). This resonates with an

annotation in *AE* discussing the relationship between Ballard's exhibition of crashed cars

and his writing of *Crash*:

> As it was, the audience reaction to the telescoped Pontiac, Mini and Austin
> Cambridge verged on nervous hysteria, though had the cars been parked in

the street outside the gallery no one would have given them a glance or devoted a moment's thought to the injured occupants. In a calculated test of the spectators, I hired a topless girl to interview the guests on closed-circuit TV. She had originally agreed to appear naked, but on seeing the cars informed me that she would only appear topless—an interesting logic was at work there… The cars were exhibited without comment, but during the month-long show they were continuously attacked by visitors to the gallery, who broke windows, tore off wing mirrors, splashed them with white paint. The overall reaction to the experiment convinced me to write *Crash*, in itself a considerable challenge to most notions of sanity (25).

Again, Ballard expresses his ambivalence about the novel, which, per this comment, seems to be a 'challenge to most notions of sanity,' that psychopathic hymn with a point rather than the warning against a new nightmare logic. The point, which Ballard recognizes in the reactions to the exhibition, is revealing through a recontextualization of the cars that 'excess embedded within the Symbolic' produced with the subject. In their normal context, the crashed cars are ignored; recontextualized alongside of the topless interviewer (who was almost raped later in the evening) and without the commentary that would make sense of the exhibition, the cars bring out the drive. This is further explored and exploited in the novel and his commentary about it.

Perhaps none of this is funny—violence, vandalism, rape, death, etc are certainly not laughing matters. Yet I can't help but chuckle at the defiance of that 'deadpan' quality that critics note, so resistant to definition. Ballard's comments are particularly entertaining (to me) because they constantly point out what critics seem to be missing: that in rendering a conclusive meaning—typically at the expense of other critics who are really not Others but the same/ Same—they replicate the frustrated movement of the Symbolic; their attempts to secure an Imaginary critical identity through readings of texts simultaneously produce the negativity that both bars that identity and fuels further debate. By egging on such debates, Ballard thus highlights the presence of the drive in academic

criticism. It seems that Edelman's 'truly hopeless wager' in *No Future*—"[t]hat taking the Symbolic's negativity to the very letter of the law, that attending to the persistence of something internal to reason that reason refuses, that turning the forces of queerness against all subjects, however queer, can afford an access to jouissance that at once defines and negates us" (5)—is the "better" bet when racing with Ballard. Given the inevitability of crashing, perhaps it's best just to enjoy the ride.

<div align="center">Teacher Fail</div>

> It's like the culture
> Without the effort or all of the luggage
> It's like a discipline
> Without the discipline of all of the discipline
> It's like a movement
> Without the bother of the meaning
> It's like a culture
> Without the culture of all of the culture
> "Movement" LCD Soundsystem
>
> It's educational
> "U-Mass" The Pixies

Crash can be read as favoring the "naïve" and/or "nonsensical" approaches to knowledge production and transmission that Halberstam reads in Jacques Ranciere's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Halberstam explains:

> While the 'good' teacher leads his students along the pathways of
> rationality, the 'ignorant schoolmaster' must actually allow them to get
> lost in order for them to experience confusion and then find their own way
> out or back or around. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* advocates in an
> antidisciplinary way for emancipatory forms of knowledge that do not
> depend upon an overtrained pied piper leading obedient children out of
> darkness and into the light. Jacotot summarizes his pedagogy thus: 'I
> must teach you that I have nothing to teach you.' In this way he allows
> others to teach themselves and learn without learning and internalizing a
> system of superior and inferior knoweldges, superior and inferior
> intelligences (14).

Like an ignorant schoolmaster, the novel forces readers 'to get lost, experience confusion, and find their own ways out or back or around.' And, as the different readings of the novel demonstrate, there are various ways of getting lost and various ways of finding oneself out and back and around. Yet rather than privilege a particular path and a particular destination—a "right" reading and a "right" way of performing that right reading—the novel encourages readers to create different readings. In addition to its ambiguous protagonist, circular structure, failed characters, and instigating/ antagonistic author, the novel's refusal to reveal the significance of the crash invites readers to 'teach themselves,' to construct their own meanings in their own ways, without having to parrot others' (superior) arguments, theories, and/or methods. In this sense, the novel can be read as a kind of problem-based learning activity.

Problem-based instruction is a teaching strategy that, as the name suggests, focuses on the solving of a problem. According to Kauchak & Eggen's *Learning and Teaching: Research Based Methods*, a practitioner's guide to improving instruction, an effective problem is both *authentic*—"[c]onnects student learning to real-world experience" (341) and *ill-defined*—"has more than one solution and no generally agreed-on strategy for reaching it" (349). Since the problem has neither a definitive answer nor a definitive method of deriving the answer, students are free to explore the problem as they see it and work through solutions in their own ways. Problem-based instruction thus promotes self-directed learning, a form of metacognition encouraged *"when students are aware of and take control of their learning progress"* (339). As with the ignorant schoolmaster, the traditional hierarchy of teacher-over-students is flattened: instruction is process-oriented and student-driven, rather than content-oriented and teacher-driven, as

in lecture or direct instruction. In other words, students make the decisions: *they* decide which prior knowledge to apply in order to identify and solve the problem; *they* decide which information to seek out based on *their* evaluation of what they don't know and what they need to know; and *they* select the information they ultimately use in their solutions. Throughout the process, students engage in dialogue with the teacher (and, in the case of cooperative problem-based activities, with other students), than passively listening and repeating. In addition to increasing student motivation and engagement, problem-based learning encourages creativity and divergent thinking, since students aren't forced to find the (teacher's) one-and-only solution using the (teacher's) one-and-only method (360).

Crash operates in a similar way: it poses the significance of the crash as an authentic, ill-defined problem and asks readers to construct their own solutions. Again, the variety of readings of the novel shows that the problem can be solved in multiple ways, using multiple methods. The way one chooses to pose the problem can inform the solution and the methods used to solve the problem. Yet, as is often the case with ill-defined problems, "identifying the problem [can be] one of the most demanding aspects of problem-solving" (Kauchak & Eggen 350). *Crash* makes this particularly challenging and thus ensures multiple readings.

In addition to the novel's title, the first chapter establishes the "crash" as the focus of the problem-solving experience. James' comment that he 'discovers the *true* significance of the crash' (10, emphasis mine) cues readers: find the significance of the crash. While this may seem like a simple task—perhaps not even a problem at all—the ambiguity of "the crash" renders the narrative an ill-defined problem. Neither the first

chapter nor the remainder of the narrative indicates what is meant by "the crash"—is it a specific collision, a particular phenomenon involving collisions, or an abstract idea that the collisions represent. More problematically, the novel's title omits the definite article so "the crash" referred to in the narrative may actually be the metafictional crash that occurs when a reader attempts to identify "the crash" and/ or discover its significance.[50] This absence of a clear referent creates a significantly open-ended problem-solving experience: the problem can be as much about the importance and/ or implications of "the crash" as it is about what "the crash" signifies. Thus what may initially seem like direct instruction—James narrating a "truth"—quickly becomes a problem-based activity, the ambiguity of "the crash" opening the narrative to various ways of posing the problem. More importantly, this lack of clarity enables the problem to be posed in ways that are *fundamentally* different, and thus no one solution or method of solving can account for all of the potential problems. That is, there can be no definitive solution or generally agreed-upon strategy for reaching it.

Insofar as the first chapter sums up the novel, one might read it as describing the problem. "The crash" can be read as a particular collision or the collective collisions. The "the" may suggest focusing on a specific one. Vaughan's failed collision begins the novel, so the "the" may refer to his. The problem might then be posed as 'what is the significance of Vaughan's crash' or more particularly 'what is the significance of its failure?' Wager's reading addresses the former, but not the latter; David Roden's reading and that of N. Katherine Hayles address both problems, but in very different ways. It should be noted that these readings do not necessarily solve this problem, but incorporate it in their solutions to other problems. Which is to say, their solutions might have looked

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different if they had focused solely on this problem. "The crash" may also refer to James' first minor accident (or the first major one described in chapter two). The problem might then be 'what is the significance of James' crash,' a potentially messy problem given not only the slippage between "accident" and "crash" but the retrospective nature of the narrative. Gasiorek's and Foster's readings speak to this problem (and highlight its messiness), but these readings also do not focus solely on this problem, so again the solutions may have looked different.

In addition to a specific collision, "the crash" may refer to all of the collisions in the novel as one of various phenomena described: deliberately crashing, the likelihood and/or excitement of being involved in a car accident, the interest in/ obsession with collisions, etc. In the first chapter, James refers to Vaughan's collision as an accident and then details Vaughan's imagining, planning, and staging of collisions (13-5). Thus the problem might be posed as 'what is the significance of the deliberate crash as opposed to/ compared with the accident.' This is another tricky problem: it is a more nuanced version of 'what is the significance of the crash' that specifically examines the potential difference/s and/or relationship/s between "crash" and "accident" *without* collapsing the two. That is, the reading maintains the two as distinct experiences, as in Gasiorek's reading and my reading of Seagrave. So while various readings seem to touch on this problem, their use of "crash" and "accident" interchangeably—or in the case of Baudrillard, just "accident"—indicate that they are solving a different problem.

James also notes that he and the other characters adopt Vaughan's logic (17), so the problem might be posed as 'why/ how is the crash significant to the characters' or 'why do the characters intentionally crash?' Wager and Foster address the problem,

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while Pringle addresses it as it relates specifically to James. And James mentions that the characters find collisions erotically stimulating (13, 17), so the problem might be posed as 'why/how might crashes be erotically stimulating' or 'why do the characters find crashes erotically stimulating?' Foster and Caserio can be read as taking on this problem. Both of these potential formulations can be tweaked as the narrative develops, particularly as James describes the minor characters' involvement in the narrative. So 'how is the crash significant to the narrative' might become 'how is the crash gendered/ classed/ raced' or 'what might the significance of the crash suggest about gender/ class/ race.' Luckhurst and Gasiorek touch on the issue of gender, and Pringle looks at both gender and class. Race figures more prominently in criticism of Ballard's later novels.

Of course, "the crash" may not refer to literal car crashes at all, but any number of abstract "crashes" that the narrative evokes. Ballard highlights this in his infamous introduction to the French edition. Prior to his warning, he suggests several ways of posing the problem: "Do we see, in the car crash, a sinister portent of a nightmare marriage between sex and technology? Will modern technology provide us with hitherto undreamed of means for tapping our own psychopathologies? Is this harnessing of our innate perversity conceivably of benefit to us? Is there some deviant logic unfolding more powerful than that provided by reason?" (98). Thus "the crash" may refer to the marrying of sex and technology, the tapping of our psychopathologies, the harnessing of our perversity, and/or the actualizing of deviant logics. These formulations yield solutions that reinforce what the reader believes the "crash" refers to at the same time as they suggest the importance and/or implications of that referent. In effect, two arguments are made: "the crash" refers to X and the novel suggests Y. Most critical readings utilize

this type of formulation, hence the discrepancies among them. In other words, there's

more than one way to skin a cat, particularly when it's not clear what kind of cat is being

skinned.

Ballard's formulations also highlight the other aspect of an effective problem: its

authenticity. He asks *us* to connect *our* 'real-world experiences' to the novel. It goes

without saying, one's position, agenda, and experiences inform the way one reads… to a

greater of lesser extent, for better or worse. The narrative exploits this, the ambiguity of

"the crash" in particular requiring readers to connect with and/or relate to the problem in

their own ways. And since the way one relates to the problem can inform, and in some

cases determine the posing of the problem, the problem's authenticity expands the way

the problem can be posed.

He suggests that the problem's authenticity relies less on the unfortunate

possibility of experiencing a car accident, and more on the immediacy of technology's

potential role/s in our lives (98) and what such roles might suggest about humans' "place

in the universe" (97). Thus the reader's encounters with and relationship to technology

can alter his/her posing of the problem: in general, a technophile will likely view the

problem differently than a technophobe; those innocent kids on the Net will likely see it

differently than their parents/ teachers. One might argue that, given the rapid changes in

the technological landscape that have occurred since the novel's publication, *Crash* is

more authentic, more relevant now than it was forty years ago, technological innovations

continuing to become more potentially "deviant" and/or "perverse." Thus the changes in

the degree of authenticity—the likelihood that the reader could realistically encounter the

problem—as well as the look of the authentic experience—the particular technological

innovations spurring such inquiries as well as the ways we engage with them—produce even more options for the posing of the problem.

Salman Rushdie's 1997 reflection on the death of Princess Diana highlights the changes in authenticity as well as the way that the connections one makes can inform the posing of the problem. Written over twenty years after the novel's publication and almost twenty years before my reading, Rushdie's New Yorker piece 'sees in the car crash' a different 'real-world connection' than those of previous critics. For Rushdie, the novel and the tragic death of Princess Diana create a picture of "a culture that routinely eroticizes and glamorizes its consumer technology… and turns the famous into commodities, too—a transformation that has often proved powerful enough to destroy them." Both "the crash" and the tragic event mark the "bringing together [of] these two erotic fetishes" and thus tell an 'uncomfortable truth': "We are the lethal voyeurs" (68). Though not critiquing the novel, Rushdie's reflection suggests posing the problem as 'what is the significance of the bringing together of the two fetishes.' In the same way that Sobchack emphasizes the literal pain experienced when the body is injured, Rushdie underscores the literal deaths that can occur from such a marriage. And the recent deaths of Paul Walker and Ryan Dunn may make the novel seem more authentic and/or make the more theoretical/ abstract connections seem irresponsible or even callous.

The problem's authenticity also invites critics in through their academic interests and backgrounds, the novel resonating not only with a critic's technological experiences, but also with the way s/he thinks and/or works. The novel lends itself rather promiscuously to a wide variety of critical and theoretical approaches and this generosity further increases the possibilities for posing the problem. "Transcendence" readings, for

instance, tend to downplay technology's presence in the novel and, with the help of

theory (Freudian/ Jungian psychoanalysis, mysticism), argue for the characters' attempts

at a higher state of being. Other readings, like Baudrillard's and Roden's, apply

theoretical apparatuses to the narrative's depiction of technology.

<center>Student Fail</center>

> Perhaps I am a miscreation
> No one knows the truth there is no future here
> And you're the DJ, speaks to my insomnia
> And laughs at all I had to fear
> Laughs at all I had to fear[51]
> Dar Williams, "Are You Out There"

To "end," I'll suggest an addition possible solution: the student who intentionally

fails and thereby highlights the flaws in the teacher's knowledge. First, I return to

Edelman and his discussion of paradoxical flaw in politics:

> The drive holds the place of what meaning misses in much the same way
> that the signifier preserves at the heart of the signifying order the empty
> and arbitrary letter, the meaningless substrate of signification that meaning
> intends to conceal. Politics, then, in opposing itself to the negativity of
> such a drive, gives us history as the continuous staging of our dream of
> eventual self-realization by endlessly reconstructing, in the mirror of
> desire, what we take to be reality itself. And it does so without letting us
> acknowledge that the future, to which it persistently appeals, marks the
> impossible place of an Imaginary past exempt from the deferrals intrinsic
> to the operation of the signifying chain and projected ahead as the site at
> which being and meaning are joined as One. In this it enacts the formal
> repetition distinctive of the drive while representing itself as bringing to
> fulfillment the narrative sequence of history and, with it, of desire, in the
> realization of the subject's authentic present in the Child imagined as
> enjoying unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness (10).

Like politics, the novel poses the car crash and Vaughan's crash in particular as the site

of 'unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness'; yet unlike politics, the novel does not

disguise the impossibility of such a place/ achievement. Rather than 'opposing itself to

the negativity of the drive,' the novel enacts it, at once staging the dream of eventual self-

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realization *as* the dream of self-dissolution and consistently demonstrating the failure of such a dream. Heteronormativity fails to fulfill, and self-dissolution fails to uphold heteronormativity. The emphasis on staging, theatricality, and stylization highlights the characters' 'inauthentic presents,' exposing the narrative of fulfillment, figured as the crash, as fiction rather than reality. This is specifically the function of Seagrave, the 'punch-drunk' professional stuntman who fantasizes about "film stars forced to crash their own stunt-cars" (103). Read as Vaughan's "student," Seagrave figures an education bent on failing to confirm the teacher's knowledge.

Throughout Seagrave problematically inflects the narrative, particularly the idea of the crash as an authenticating experience. For James, the "potent confusions of fiction and reality [were] summed up in the pathetic but sinister figure of Seagrave disguised as the screen actress [Elizabeth Taylor]" (111). As inseparable from his costumes, he *is* his role, which is depicted as more "real" than the live humans he plays, and yet his character is easily elided with the mannequins in the "fake" crashes staged by the Road Research Laboratory (RRL), who are also described as more real than their audience. Seagrave the stuntman is both real driver and sit-in—or even prop—for the "real" driver, thus he underscores the problem of authentication through representation, the realization of identity and meaning through a playing out of a false narrative. In other words, Seagrave's crashes are both real—he actually crashes into things—and staged—he crashes into specific things for specific purposes according to a specific plan. These complicatedly real/ fictional crashes are part of false narratives that are consumed as real: he is "not" the person in the commercials and a kind of Everyman in the RRL crashes; the suspension of disbelief allows the commercials to be read as real, and real data is

mined from the strategically planned and executed RRL crashes. Given that Seagrave's authenticity is socially determined—he is dubbed a professional by the same capitalist system of reproduction that uses him alternately for knowledge production in the RRL experiments and as a marketing tool in car commercials–he signals the impossibility of creating new meanings and new narratives using the same old myth/ fantasy of fulfillment and its structure. Insofar as the other characters are read as attempting an authentic and authenticating experience through staged crashes, Seagrave as authentic stager-of-crashes poses their goal as one of becoming representations, that is of becoming, like Edelman's Child, figures for impossible Imaginary wholeness. Juxtaposed with Seagrave's crashes and character in general, the potentially transcendent experience of the staged crash begins to look a lot like the heteronormative narrative of self-realization and the characters look a lot like stunt-people or props within a larger narrative of meaning-making.

As the only "real" stuntman, Seagrave particularly haunts Vaughan's imagined and actual crashes, suggesting a complicated spiraling inward of fiction and reality by being the role that Vaughan attempts to perform and performing the role that Vaughan attempts to be. In other words, Seagrave calls Vaughan out. Insofar as Vaughan attempts to effect a 'joining of meaning and being' in his crash with Taylor, Seagrave's presence in the text, even before his death crash, undercuts the project. He is cast to play Taylor in a crash staged for a commercial, thus he performs the fiction that Vaughan dreams of making a reality by becoming Taylor-the-crash-victim. Vaughan's project, then, is already fictionalized, already inflected by its representation. His dream of realizing identity through a fusion with Taylor doubles back on Seagrave's fake fusion with Taylor

such that Vaughan might be read as attempting to become a "more real" Seagrave, a truly authentic stager-of-crashes, with Seagrave as a stunt-Vaughan. In this case, Vaughan's project closely follows the heteronormative narrative of self-realization, assuming that there exists a more real experience that can make him whole.

This makes for a precarious antagonism between the two, as, in order to complete his narrative of fulfillment, Vaughan needs to keep Seagrave in his fictional place—that is, his place as the stunt-Vaughan. After an accident staged by RRL during which Seagrave is injured, James comments, "[f]or some reason Vera Seagrave absolved Vaughan of any responsibility, although—as I realized later and she must have known already—Vaughan was clearly using her husband as an experimental subject" (93). Yet Vaughan is unable to control his subject (something Vera must have already known, just as she "already knows" Seagrave is dead before anyone informs her of his accident, and-- if we take the woman-as-site-of-knowledge even further—just as she is able to 'explain everything' to James in her cryptic statement about being in the car with Vaughan prior to his final crash). Seagrave too dreams of crashing into Taylor, yet his vision is less calculated, less planned, and less "meaningful." This is highlighted in an early conversation:

> [Seagrave] 'I'd like to get them all in those cars we have to drive… Can you see them, Vaughan, in one of those high-speed pile-ups? Doing a really groovy rollover. Or a hard head-on job. I dream about that. It's your whole thing, Vaughan…'
> [Vaughan] You're right, of course. Who do we start with?'…
> [Seagrave] I know who I'd start with…'
> [Vaugahn] 'Maybe'
> [Seagrave] '…I can see those big tits cut up on the dash.'
> Vaughan turned away abruptly, almost as if he were afraid of Seagrave stealing a march on him (95).

Seagrave taunts Vaughan, suggesting that 'his whole thing' is not exactly his, and more subtly that his whole thing is rooted in a desire for self-realization. Seagrave disrupts Vaughan's plan with the threat of taking his position as driver of the car. Interestingly, Seagrave is the also the only real father in the novel, and in this particular conversation he serves, like the Father, to interrupt Vaughan's fantasy of wholeness. At the same time, he mocks Vaughan's authority as 'leader'/ 'father' of the group of crash fanatics and the role of the father in general. Insofar as Vaughan is defined by his project, Seagrave threatens not only to usurp Vaughan's role as leader of the group, but also to defer the realization of his identity by enacting Vaughan's crash.

Moreover, Seagrave's hash-inspired, concussed description of his dream of a 'groovy rollover or a hard head-on job' markedly contrasts Vaughan's thoroughly developed plan, which is detailed in the atypically long scene that follows this conversation. Seagrave's dream is not about making new meanings or realizing identity; that's Vaughan's 'whole thing.' Seagrave crashes just to crash. This is reinforced in a later conversation between Vaughan and James:

> [James] 'But why Elizabeth Taylor? Driving around in this car, aren't you putting her in some danger?
> [Vaughan] 'Who from?'
> [James] 'Seagrave—the man's half out of his mind'…'Vaughan—has she ever been in a car-crash?'
> [Vaughan] 'Not a major crash—it means that everything lies in the future for her. With a little forethought she could die in a unique vehicle collision, one that would transform all our dreams and fantasies. The man who dies in that crash with her…'
> [James] 'Does Seagrave appreciate this?'
> [Vaughan] 'In his own way.' (130).

The conversation reinforces the antagonism between Vaughan and Seagrave, Seagrave always threatening to disrupt the plan. And it is Seagrave, not Vaughan, who is 'half out

of his mind,' as James, the ever-dutiful disciple, warns. Perhaps this is a reflection of Seagrave's constant drug use—we never see him sober—or, more likely, his refusal to look for meaning and establish identity. Unlike the other characters, Seagrave is *not* described in terms of his interest in the erotic possibilities of the crash or its potential to reveal new meanings, nor is his body described in terms of the obscure geometries that point to meaning. Seagrave is all costume and theatrics, with no potential for meaning. Thus he marks a different antagonism, that between belief in and identification with one's sinthome.

Vaughan's project stands in relief: it may not be as much about 'transforming everyone's dreams and fantasies' as it is about Vaughan being the man to do it. Interestingly, the ellipsis cuts off meaning—what about the man who dies in the crash with her? Reading Lacan's use of the ellipsis in his formula for the subject who believes in, rather than identifies with, his/her sinthome, Edelman argues, "this ellipsis itself should be understood as the defining mark of futurism, inscribing the faith that temporal duration will result in the realization of meaning by way of a 'final signifier' that will make meaning whole at last" (37). Such is the function of Vaughan's project; in fusing with Taylor, Vaughan aims to 'make meaning whole at last.' Like the Child in Edelman's argument, Vaughan's crash with Taylor ensures his identity while promising to make him whole in the future. Vaughan, in other words, believes in his sinthome. Edelman explains:

> As the subject's 'only substance,' though, the sinthome, like a catachresis, brings the subject into being at the cost of a necessary blindness to this determination by the sinthome—a blindness to the arbitrary fixation of enjoyment responsible for its consistency. Disavowing the meaningless fiat of such a catachrestic sinthome, the subject misreads its identity as a metaphor instead, one that names its relation to an Other whose positivity

seems to guarantee Symbolic reality itself. Such a subject, who would thereby mistake the sinthome for a site of potential meaning, can be said to 'believe in' its sinthome (36-7).

Vaughan is blind to the arbitrariness of his fixation, believing wholeheartedly that his future crash is the site of meaning, the place where 'meaning and being' will be joined as one. Elizabeth Taylor, with her sex appeal and celebrity status, is the perfect candidate for the marriage of sex and violence since she is, for Vaughan, Woman, that is Other. Jacqueline Rose glosses, "Subjects in language persist in their belief that somewhere there is a point of certainty, of knowledge and of truth. When the subject addresses its demand outside itself to another, this other becomes the fantasied place of just such knowledge and certainty. Lacan calls this the Other—the site of language to which the speaking subject necessarily refers. This Other appears to hold the 'truth' of the subject and the power to make good its loss. But this is ultimate fantasy" (32). Vaughan's project attempts to play out this ultimate fantasy of discovering truth and achieving wholeness through a fusion with Taylor-as-Other, who, according to Vaughan, is also the Other of everyone else. At one point he reprimands James: "Ballard, she's central to the fantasies of all the subjects I've tested. There's a limited amount of time, though you're too obsessed with yourself to realize it. I need her report" (148). Interestingly, Vaughan accuses James of being 'too obsessed with himself,' as if, like arguments in favor of the Child, Vaughan is selflessly pursuing the project for the greater good [there's an interesting reversal, in that James' non-reproductive sexual pursuit of Vaughan that obstructs the project would put James on the side of negativity]. As the only character with a child, Seagrave perhaps recognizes the hole in such arguments and the futility of Vaughan's goal.

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Seagrave's 'own way of appreciating' Vaughan's belief in his sinthome is to 'steal a march on him,' the "climax" of their antagonism. Seagrave's attempted crash with Taylor preempts Vaughan's plan, and in doing so reveals Vaughan's project as one of self-realization while demonstrating the impossibility of such fulfillment. Seagrave, then, functions as the novel's identification with its sinthome. Like Edelman's sinthomosexual, Seagrave's character works to "scor[n] such a belief in a final signifier, reducing every signifier to the status of the letter and insisting on access to jouissance in place of access to sense, on identification with one's sinthome instead of belief in its meaning" (37). Dressed in his Elizabeth Taylor costume, Seagrave mocks Vaughan's belief in the importance of 'the man who dies in that crash with her.' If the project were about transforming fantasies, then Seagrave-as-Taylor would seem a more apt candidate for the crash as "Taylor" crashing into Taylor, the representation colliding with the real thing. Vaughan's insistence that he be the man to do it then seems like another attempt at being a celebrity and thus 'making good' for his previous failure as a television star.

And Seagrave's crash "fails" in what James refers to as an "acid death-out" (211). Seagrave kills Taylor symbolically but not literally; instead he ends up literally killing a minor actress and proves that such crashes do not yield the meaning that Vaughan and James hope for. "The final and longed-for union of the [minor] actress and the members of her audience" (189-90) leads to further repetition of crash sex. James' description of the effects of the crash mimics the descriptions of Vaughan's collision: "Each of the spectators at the accident site would carry away an image of the violent transformation of this woman, of the complex of wounds that fused together her own sexuality and the hard technology of the automobile. Each of them would join his own imagination, the tender

membranes of his mucous surfaces, his groves of erectile tissue, to the wounds of this minor actress through the medium of his own motorcar" (189). The relative tense locates the effects of the crash in some future of the past—when and if that was, we can't be sure—and points readers back to the passages that begin and end the novel. The novel spirals both in and out; Seagrave fills in Vaughan's ellipsis with a circling back/forward to the beginning/ end of the novel. The attempted fusions of sex, death, and technology are cause and effect of the attempted fusions of sex, death, and technology. In effect, there is no future here, only repetition.

Significantly, Seagrave's name is absent in the description, thus not only is the man who dies in the crash not important, the crash does not reveal any knowledge or truth about him… or anyone. Instead, the image of the mutilated minor actress recalls the earlier description of Seagrave's "immaculate mask of a woman's face resembl[ing] a nightmare parody of [Taylor] far more sinister than the cosmetic wounds at the moment being applied to her" (110). Again there is a circling of the narrative and a conflation of fiction and reality, as the real image of the mutilated actress doubles back on the fake image of Seagrave "already… look[ing] as if he had been obscurely injured in this collision" (110). It is this image of Seagrave that James singles out as 'summing up the potent confusion of fiction and reality,' a confusion that is repeated in the joining of the spectators' imaginations to the image of the minor actress. The narrative of futurity turns out to be nothing but a piling up of fictions, the realization of which is a bad acid trip.

Both Ballard, in an interview with V. Vale and Andrea Juno (24), and James liken the bad acid trip to 'letting a Trojan horse into their minds' that nightmarishly brings them back to childhood and undifferentiated ooze (195). This experience resonates with

Bruce Fink's explanation of jouissance: "This pleasure—this excitation due to sex, seeing, and/or violence, whether positively or negatively viewed by conscience, whether considered innocently pleasurable or disgustingly repulsive—is termed jouissance, and that is what the subject orchestrates for him or herself in fantasy. Jouissance is thus what comes to substitute for the lost 'mother-child-unity' which was perhaps never as united as all that since it was a unity owing to the child's sacrifice or foregoing of subjectivity" (60). Seagrave, and more specifically his 'acid death-out,' is the novel's Trojan horse, ushering in the negativity of the drive and insisting on 'access to jouissance rather than sense.' His failed crash demonstrates that the fantasy of fulfillment is a fantasy of dissolution, a 'sacrificing or forgoing of subjectivity' rather than a realization of it.

His name itself suggests the movement towards the dissolution of identity and the impossibility of the heteronormative narrative of fulfillment. Discussing the major symbols in Ballard's fiction, David Pringle argues that water symbolizes the past, particularly a return to the 'biological soup' hinted at in Ballard's/James' description of the bad acid trip. According to Pringle:

> The meeting place of water and the past in Ballard's imagination is the
> womb, where the fetus hangs suspended in warm amniotic fluid… (127).
> The past belongs simply to the unconscious world—in a word, to life,
> symbolized by water… For the human being, the conscious animal, there
> is no place in the past. However much we may yearn to go back, the gates
> of Eden are closed. If we attempt the return we can succeed only at the
> expense of ceasing to be fully human. To go back to the womb is to
> become a fetus again; to search for the forgotten paradise of the Sun is to
> become dissolved once more in the great biological soup in which we all
> originate… (128-9).

"Seagrave" then suggests the desire to return to the pre-social, pre-language self and the impossibility of returning to such Imaginary wholeness within social life. The sea is a grave; the return to wholeness is death, both of identity via the self-dissolving act of

crashing and of the body/person in the death-crash. The description of Seagrave's

'immaculate mask' ends with him "watch[ing] Vaughan with some resentment, as if

Vaughan had forced him to dress up each day in this parody of the actress" (110).

Perhaps his resentment has less to do with being Vaughan's experimental subject, and

more to do with Seagrave 'scorning Vaughan's belief in a final signifier.'

Rather than providing meaning, Seagrave's crash, and Seagrave's character more

generally, "figures the availability of an unthinkable jouissance that would put an end to

fantasy—and, with it, futurity—by reducing assurance of meaning in fantasy's promise

of continuity to the meaningless circulation and repetitions of the drive" (Edelman 39).

He not only refuses to look for meaning in the crash, he disrupts the other characters'

searches for meaning. James notes:

> Later, I realized what had most upset Vaughan. This was not Seagrave's
> death, but that in his collision, still wearing Elizabeth Taylor's wig and
> costume, Seagrave had pre-empted that real death which Vaughan had
> reserved for himself. In his mind, from that accident onwards, the film
> actress had already died. All that remained now for Vaughan was to
> constitute the formalities of time and place, the entrances of her flesh to a
> wedding with himself already celebrated across the bloody altar of
> Seagrave's car (187).

With Taylor 'already dead,' identity and meaning, according to Vaughan's logic, should

have been realized. But in the place of realization, there is repetition, the future 'wedding

already celebrated' not only across Seagrave's car but also in the sex acts inspired by the

crash. All that remains is Vaughan's staging of the 'real' crash, which, as we know from

the first pages, also fails. Given that Seagrave's failure highlights the impossibility of the

narrative of fulfillment, it's possible that Vaughan recognizes his mistaken belief in his

sinthome. And thus he deliberately fails to kill Taylor.

CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION: STUDYING FOREVER

I'll tell you what I hate about writing. Finishing it. It comes to an end.
You can't come forever.
Frank Lentricchia, *The Edge of Night*

…drug dealers don't sell drugs. Drugs sell themselves. It's crack. It's not
an encyclopedia. It's not a fucking vacuum cleaner. You don't really
gotta try to sell crack, OK? I've never heard a crack dealer go, "Man, how
am I going to get rid of all this crack? It's just piled up in my house."
Chris Rock, *Bring the Pain* (1996)

I end at the beginning, with a statement of the problem: per the dominant

discourse, those who opt to pursue academic literary study have significant difficulty

justifying the choice, as the time and money spent on an advanced degree in English will

likely not contribute to any recognizable form of success. This is not the problem that I

started with roughly seven years ago. Initially I was exploring allusion, specifically the

ways in which allusion functions to continuously remake texts, enabling readers to

exploit the resistant remainders necessarily excluded in any reading act. This function is

particularly evident in Lentricchia's fiction—the inspiration for the initial project—which

uses allusion to continuously work through previous reading experiences and public

reading acts. Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction* and Lee Edelman's *No Future*

served as the theoretical basis for my thinking at the time. I even presented at a

conference.

But early in the dissertation writing process, I opted to split my time between

academic study and various full- and part-time jobs, including standardized test developer

and public school educator (I also wrote and taught a financial literary course tailored to

adult recipients of public assistance…my boss at the EARN center and I thoroughly

enjoyed the irony of me teaching people to be 'good capitalists'). Not that I subscribe to

the dominant notion of success, but as an unfunded grad student paying out pocket, I was tired of being broke and watching my working friends buy houses and cars and expensive handbags, etc. etc. etc. This changed my position and, with it, my problem. Entering the world of (supposedly) "real" jobs made me realize that pursuing a Ph.D. had led me directly to "failure": I had accumulated massive debt with nothing to show for it—no money, no equity, no marketable degree, and no babies. But I still wanted to continue studying.

In the course of my research, I happened upon "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic." The acerbic critique of the discipline was news to me: not only was I in high school at the time of its publication—dreaming a dream that, per these discussions, was already dead—but, as a studier, I had experienced the divisiveness reflected in the essay as a pleasurable multiplicity that enabled me to access potentially infinite reading experiences and produce potentially infinite interpretations. Study, in many ways, had been an escape from the world of accountability that I inhabited in my day jobs. And thus, I decided to change my direction and attempt to create a space where the seemingly naïve, impractical, or even ridiculous statement that "I study literature because I love it" is a valid and valuable defense.

Approaching the "end" of the process, I know that the career that will likely sustain me financially, standardized test development, neither requires nor rewards such achievements (though interestingly the other test developers whom I work with celebrate such seemingly impractical knowledge-seeking). And should I choose to return to my previous career as a public school educator, I may be less hirable, since a district will have to pay me considerably more money for studying texts that I will probably never

teach. And unless I win the lottery, I will likely be paying off my student loans well into

retirement. But as I have tried to demonstrate, the pleasure of having studied—a pleasure

that I can continue to experience…forever—makes my "useless" degree well worth it.

And I hope others will have the opportunity to fail better as well.

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[1]   Throughout, my titles and epigraphs are meant to frustrate the boundaries and boundedness of my argument. Such inclusion (intrusion) of my own voice may undercut the seriousness of my argument, but it does have an academic excuse: it's as much a gesture towards Ballard as it is a form of (self-) entertainment. Discussing *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Roger Luckhurst notes the difficulty that Ballard's titles—both of paragraphs and "chapters"—present to framing the text. The 'constantly shifting hierarchy of titles,' (74)—titles that are often citations of artworks and Ballard's other stories—"reveal a fundamental instability, a troubling lack of authority, making the edge of the text difficult to discern" (75). More "academically," they 'echo' Derrida:

> What happens when one entitles a 'work of art'? What is the topos of the title? Does it take place (and where?) in relation to the work? On the edge? Over the edge? On the internal border? In an over-board that is re-marked and re-applied, by invagination, within, between the presumed centre and the circumference? (quoted in Luckhurst 74-5).

My titles and epigraphs, then, might be read as a way of troubling my authority, obscuring the edge of my argument, and highlighting a fundamental instability.

My epigraphs also trouble the framing of my argument. Some sections begin with a related quotation from an author and/or critic, and many of the sections begin with a slice of at least one song. Thus my project has a soundtrack. This too has academic support, even if it seems self-gratifying. In a small moment in *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant, reading a John Ashbury poem, discusses the soundtrack:

> In melodrama, the soundtrack is the supreme genre of ineloquence, or eloquence beyond words: it's what tells you that you are really most at home in yourself when you are bathed by emotions you can always recognize, and that whatever dissonance you sense is not the real, but an accident that you have to clean up after, which will be more pleasant if you whistle while you work. The concept of 'the soundtrack of our lives'… is powerful because it accompanies one as a portable hoard that expresses one's true inner taste and high value. It holds a place open for an optimistic rereading of the rhythms of living, and confirms everybody as a star. Your soundtrack is one place where you can be in love with yourself and express your fidelity to your own trueness in sublime conventionality… (34-5).

As a soundtrack for my argument, the epigraphs signal an attempt to be more 'at home' in this writing, which is at once faithfully and truly me, and yet filled with dissonances that need to be cleaned up later, perhaps by the reader who can whistle while s/he works. If nothing else, it positions me better, or at least more interestingly, than a listing of the identity categories I occupy and/or the experiences that inform/ed the writing. Hopefully it opens space for optimistic rereadings of the rhythms of the argument without seeming that I'm too in love with myself. And it might even question certain academic conventionalities.

I also make generous use of endnotes, specifically rather long-winded ones. This is an attempt to trouble the margins, as the information presented in the notes may in fact be important enough to occupy—or perhaps more important than that which occupies—the center position, i.e. the argument itself. In relegating it to the space on the side/ at the bottom/ after the show, I attempt to complicate the privileging of certain information over other information. They also point to other possible readings, even if I can't possibly gesture towards all of them.

[2]   The other two measures mentioned in the statement are "[a]ccess, such as the percentage of students receiving Pell grants" and "[a]ffordability, such as average tuition, scholarships, and loan debt."

[3]   My use of both pronouns reflects Halberstam's comments in the same interview:
        Some people call me Jack, my sister call me Jude, people who I've known
        forever call me Judith—I try not to police any of it. A lot of people call
        me he, some people call me she, and I let it be a weird mix of thins and
        I'm trying to control it.

[4]   Appendix A of the ELA Standards explains:
        To put the matter bluntly, a high school graduate who is a poor reader is a
        postsecondary student who must struggle mightily to succeed. The
        National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Writ, Choy, Rooney,
        Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004) reports that although needing to take one
        or more remedial/ developmental courses of any sort lowers a student's
        chance of eventually earning a degree or certificate, "the need for remedial
        reading appears to be the most serious barrier to degree completion" (p.
        63). Only 30 percent of 1992 high school seniors who went on to enroll in
        postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000 and then took any
        remedial reading course went on to receive a degree or certificate,
        compared to 69 percent of the 1992 seniors who took no postsecondary
        remedial courses and 57 percent of those who took one remedial course in
        a subject other than reading or mathematics. Considering that 11 percent
        of those high school seniors required at least one remedial reading course,
        the societal impact of low reading achievement is as profound as its
        impact on the aspirations of individual students (3).
While graduation rates are indeed disturbing and remedial/ developmental courses are essential for helping students develop their literacy skills, this justification for higher reading standards aims for more than just successful passing of introductory courses. And while earning a degree is a practical and justifiable goal, it is not necessarily always the primary aspiration of individual students.

[5]   Having worked for a major testing company, I can vouch for the fact that some employees have classroom teaching experience. Many of my former and current colleagues were public school educators, and I was one as well.

[6]   In "The Problems with the Common Core," Stan Karp suggests that CCSS might be more a 'marketing campaign than an educational plan.' He explains the a "defining characteristic of the Common Core project is rampant profiteering" and that its tie to federal funding "open[s] up huge new markets for commercial exploitation."

[7]   Though perhaps a shameless plug for my husband's work, Marc Brasof's research employs distributive leadership theories in Business scholarship to explore the possibilities of incorporating student voice in schools. See Brasof *Student Voice in School Reform: A Case Study of Madison High School's Youth-Adult Governance Model* (2013).

[8]   In a more Lentricchian fashion, we might also think of *Goodfellas'* Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci) killing Billy Batts (Frank Vincent): Lentricchia not only refuses to 'go get his shine box,' but he also attempts to "whack" the evidence of his shining days.

[9]   Felski sums up the difficulty of measuring change:
In some cases, to be sure, literary works can boast a measurable social impact… But when we look at many of the works that literary critics like to read, it is often far from self-evident what role such works play in either initiating or inhibiting social change. Stripped of any direct links to oppositional movements, marked by often uneasy relations to centers of power, their politics are revealed as oblique and equivocal, lending themselves to alternative, even antithetical readings. Texts, furthermore, lack the power to legislate their own effects; the internal features of a literary work tell us little about how it is received and understood, let alone its impact, if any, on a larger social field. Political function cannot be deduced or derived from literary structure. As cultural studies and reception studies have amply shown, aesthetic objects may acquire very different meanings in altered contexts; the transactions between texts and readers are varied, contingent, and often unpredictable. (8-9)

[10]   This is the particular move in the following from Edelman's *No Future*:
However much we might wish, for example, to reverse the values presupposed in the following statement by Donald Wildmon, founder and head of the homophobic American Family Association, we might do well to consider it less an instance of hyperbolic rant and more as a reminder of the disorientation that queer sexualities *should* entail: "Acceptance or indifference to the homosexual movement will result in society's destruction by allowing civil order to be redefined and by plummeting ourselves, and our children and randchildren into an age of godlessness. Indeed, the very foundation of Western Civilization is at stake."… dare we pause for a moment to acknowledge that Mr. Wildmon might be right—or, more important, that he *ought to be* right: that queerness *should* and *must* redefine such notions as "civil order" through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity? (16-7).

[11]   The texts circulated in survey courses also vary. Particularly in the post-canon war era, it is not entirely possible to say that all studiers have read a definitive group texts produced in given time/ place.

[12]   The given journal characterizes not only its addressees but also its contributors as the kind of people who circulate that journal's discourse. This limits the space of circulation to those who are willing/ want to be recognized as belonging to that journal's public. To use journals that I pull examples from: being recognized as belonging to the public of *PMLA* is different than being recognized as belonging to the public of *GLQ* or *Representations* or *Science-Fiction Studies*. And though being published anywhere is a feather in one's cap, the different membership privileges associated with different journals ultimately influence potential contributors and their contributions. I may be more or less likely to attempt to circulate my vision in a given journal based on how it will look on my C.V.; I might be more or less likely to massage my vision to better fit with a given journal's characterization of its public and thereby help ensure that my vision gets published; and I may be more or less likely to put forth the effort of crafting a publishable vision for a journal depending on the likelihood that it will eventually get published.

In addition, depending on the degree to which the journal is interested in maintaining the "authority" of the space of circulation that it provides, possible extensions of the discourse are more or less restricted. In some cases, journals mainly circulate the discourse of authorities or those who are authorized via their relationship to authorities. Generally speaking, an author becomes an "authority" to the extent that others perform the extension of his/her discourse, and thus, highly reputable journals may appear to be spaces of replication. In further circulating an already-circulating vision, they not only expand circulation but also reinforce the dominance of that particular vision, thereby curbing possible extensions. I will note here that on my journeys through academic journals have I encountered many of the same authorities as well many references to the same authorities, *but* I have yet to see one uniformly replicated. Or, perhaps more accurately, I have yet to *experience* one as uniformly replicated.

[13]   Some possible immediacies: some type of anniversary, either of a text or an author; a significant cultural change that speaks directly to the topic; a tipping point of the topic's circulation, such that it has become necessary to do some sort of 'stocktaking' to use Robert Caserio's term; a conference that spawned the special issue, etc.

[14]   At the end of I.C.R.'s introduction, he explains: "The essays in this issue share a highly theoretical perspective, derived mainly from poststructuralist literary theory. They are, in addition, almost exclusively concerned with print embodiments of SF, and with fiction written by Anglo-European men. The only reason for this is that things have just turned out that way" (308).

[15]   Warner notes: "Style performs membership. Academics belong to a functionally segregated social sphere, and in the humanities especially that sphere is increasingly

maginal, often jeopardized. People use style to distinguish themselves from the mass an its normalized version of clarity" (142).

[16]   In addition to the reader's agenda, Alter explains that a "reader's bias of selection… is generally determined by more than a conscious intellectual project, owing something in varying degrees to his or her personal history, psychology, sensibility, education, belief system, and even mood." It should be noted that not only do one's personal history, psychology, sensibility, etc. change, but the degree to which they influence selection can also can change, even during a reading act.

[17]   Warner glosses:
> [Foucault] treats a problematic not just as an intellectual tangle, but as the practical horizon of intelligibility within which problems come to matter for people. It stands for both the conditions that make thinking possible and for the way thinking, under certain circumstances, can reflect back on its own conditions. Problematization is more than arguing; it is a practical context for thinking. As such, it lies largely beyond conscious strategy.

[18]   The title of this section is a combination of Lentricchia's redescription in *The Music of the Inferno* of Milton's Satan—'go fuck yourself'—and Don Pease's description of *The Edge of Night*:
> *The Edge of Night*, is not locatable in any one context. It would be likewise, I think, impossible to identify you with any one criticism of you or your work... If I can give it a name, you are producing the dark underside of the conceptual apparatus of literary theory and literary professionalism that exists at the present time, and exposing what can be otherwise... If one wanted to do literary justice to this book, one would have to disidentify, as you have done, from every one of the preexisting frames of literary reference that would fix or stabilize you in any one of the number of "discrediting" positions. You said in effect: "Fuck you. Explain this one" (O'Hara and Lentricchia 30).

[19]   The White House, like Warner, is aware the trickiness of determining what constitutes "public opinion." And thus, the website notes that "it's up to you to get to 150 signatures in order for your petition to be publicly searchable on the We the People tool on WhiteHouse.gov." In other words, your individual opinion does not count; at least 150 other people have to hold the same opinion in order for it be considered worthy of even circulating on the website. And there is also a caveat: "Since the White House has never featured anything like this, we expect to make some adjustments to improve the platform based on how people use the system and your feedback. We may change the signature threshold so that the workload for responding to petitions in a timely fashion is manageable." Significantly, the number of signatures that qualifies as worthy of a response is the only specific adjustment mentioned.

[20]   Here we might note Warner's first reason for the misrecognition of the poetic function: "Public speech lies under the necessity of addressing its public as already existing real persons. It cannot work by frankly declaring its subjunctive-creative project. Its success depends on the recognition of participants and their further circulatory activity and people do not commonly recognize themselves as virtual projects" (114). In the virtual world of the online petition, the signer may be a virtual projection, signing petitions that s/he would not sign as his/her real self, using an alternative email address/ online identity.

[21]   Signing a petition is comparatively easy way to perform the extension of discourse. The online option makes it even easier, as it reduces the problems of visibility. One can sign without worrying about being caught circulating the discourse.

[22]   The petitions circulating in an effort to deport or not deport Justin Bieber are salient examples. Though one's taste in pop culture may seem to be a personal, private, and particular matter, the petitions take the form of rational-critical dialogue, rendering the pop singer's status a matter of public opinion. From the petition in favor of deportation: "He is not only threatening the safety of our people but he is also a terrible influence on out nations youth" (https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/deport-justin-bieber-and-revoke-his-green-card/ST1yqHJL). At the time of writing this, the petition had 264,595 signatures.

[23]   I use "bleeding" to reinforce Gallop's use of embodied language. We might think of the permeability of the personal/ professional in literary study in terms another passage in Gallop:

> Fluidity has its own properties. It is not an inadequacy in relation to
> solidity. In the phallic fantasy, the solid-closed-virginal body is opened
> with violence; and blood flows. The fluid here signifies defloration,
> wound as proof of penetration, breaking and entering, property
> damage…Menstrual blood is not a wound in the closure of the body; the
> menstrual flow ignores the distinction virgin/ deflowered (83)…the vagina
> (unknown in the phallic phase, says Freud) has a juicy receptivity which
> makes penetration not painful, but free-flowing exchange, leaving no solid
> borders to be violated. The vagina flows before penetration. It does not
> wait for man to break its seal, but hospitably prepares a welcome for his
> entry (84).

[24]   Thus we might think of enjoying Derrida or Foucault, or "cruising" them as in Guy-Bray and Dean. We might think again about Acker's 'using each other to keep living, imagining, making, fucking, and fighting this society of death.'

[25]   We might think here of Bruce Fink's discussion of the hysteric's discourse:
> Whereas the university discourse takes its cue from the master signifier,
> glossing over it with some sort of trumped-up system, the hysteric goes at
> the master and demands that he or she show his or her stuff, prove his or

her mettle by producing something serious by way of knowledge. The hysteric's discourse is the exact opposite of the university discourse, all the positions reversed. The hysteric maintains the primacy of subjective division, the contradiction between conscious and unconscious, and thus the conflictual, or self-contradictory, nature of desire itself… Knowledge is perhaps eroticized to a greater extent in the hysteric's discourse than elsewhere. In the master's discourse, knowledge is prized only insofar as it can produce something else, only so long as it can be put to work for the master; yet knowledge itself remains inaccessible to the master. In the university discourse, knowledge is not so much an end in itself as that which justifies the academic's very existence and activity. (133).

[26]   The following sections are threaded together by the idea of failure, more pointedly the "epic fail." My use of "epic fail" combines the "high theory" of Halberstam mentioned above and the low theory (or perhaps 'theory from below') of my former junior high students. For Halberstam, failure allows one to open oneself up to 'knowledge from elsewhere' at the same time as it contests normative definitions/ determinations of success. For my junior high students—most if not all of whom had yet to read an epic (though they saw *Troy*)—the neologisms "fail" and "epic fail" refer to instances of loose irony that cannot be adequately defined by language, but, like porn, are known when they are seen and based on community standards. Such an academic interpretation of their use of the terms is itself a "fail" (perhaps a "youth culture fail"), as it is both inadequate and too "adult" in its attempt to reign in experiences that in many ways escape punishing norms.

        My students' descriptions—note, not definitions—often circled around the terms, obscuring them even further. In addition to identifying various "fails" and "epic fails" that occurred in and out of school during the school year, they routinely pointed me to websites that embrace, if not celebrate, failure: epicfail.com, failblog.org, truefail.com, tasteofawesome.com, and fmylife.com, to cite the most memorable of the impressively large lot. Such sites often use the Internet meme "fail" that allows people to place captions, specifically "fail" or "epic fail" (depending, naturally, on the degree of "failage"), on photos or videos that depict some form of failure. "Fail" captions are typically preceded by they type of fail, as in the above 'youth culture fail,' designating the realm/activity in/at which the agent failed. When "epic fail" is used, the failure speaks for itself.

        In these relatively unregulated, non-academic, though thoroughly commericalized spaces, those innocent kids on the net—and, of course, those non-innocent adult users—consume, re/produce, and re/envision failure. From the seemingly stupid attempt at a seemingly inane goal to the unintentional near (or far) miss that is perhaps a clearer form of insightful social commentary/ critique, failure becomes a different kind of success. Add to this the fact that the "fails" and "epic fails" that appear on the webpages are voted on—that is, the ones that users see, and especially the ones that users see first, are the ones that received the most user votes—and you have a (heteroglossic) space that (democratically) turns failure into success. And users can write comments.

My titles follow this form: "summary fail," "plot fail," "character fail," etc. This is both an homage to my former students (who are all "successes" in my book), and an attempt to blur or perhaps bridge the boundaries between academic and "pedestrian" thinking.

27   To add to the confusion that I explore in this section (even before I begin this section), I suggest situating my discussion of summarizing *Crash* alongside Halberstam's discussion of *Dude, Where's My Car?*—not necessarily because both works depict a relationship between two males and/or two males and a car, but because Halberstam's examination highlights both the difficulty of and investments in summarizing a 'loopy narrative' (one might actually devote an entire essay to a dialogue between the two). She explains: "I start with a plot summary, since saying what happens in *Dude* is actually a lot harder than it may seem; in fact "what happens" and "what does not happen" are a big part of the theory of stupidity and forgetting that the film advances. The plot summary, usually a rejected methodology in literary studies, reveals the stakes in repeating, looping, summarizing, forgetting, and knowing again" (59). Similarly, 'saying what happens in *Crash* is a lot harder than it may seem.' It isn't jam packed with different versions of the same day repeated over and over again, as in the case of *Dude*. But, like *Dude*, the plot, particularly when one compares the various descriptions of the plot, reveals the stakes Halberstam mentions (it should be noted that some readings of the novel 'reject this methodology' and such rejection may also point to those stakes). The narrative's repetition and circularity, combined with its thinly developed, static characters, leaves a lot of room for interpreting what happens, why it happens, what such happenings imply, etc. It's perhaps not surprising then that a summarizer's choice of what information to include and exclude in his/ her summary tends to reinforce the summarizer's argument as well as his/her investment in the narrative and the argument… even before s/he begins arguing. At the same time, given all that room for interpretation, a given summary's explanation of 'what happens' and, in its omissions, 'what does not happen' opens space for other explanations of what happens and doesn't happen. In other words, given all the options, the narrative forces critics to *not know* precisely how to explain what happens.

Moreover, the narrative is, in essence, a memory; James remembers his experiences after his first major car accident. And though the narrative does not explicitly advocate forgetfulness and stupidity, its circularity contests memory as a way of knowing/ 'tidying up disorderly histories' (15), particularly since, like Jesse and Chester, James and the other characters 'fail to advance, progress, and accumulate knowledge' (Halberstam 61). The narrative ends where it started, and readers are left to fill in the holes (or tidy up this disorderly 'history'), a rather challenging task considering the dearth of information provided about the characters. In other words, the characters don't learn and we're not sure what, if anything, they (and we) were meant to learn since we're given very little information about their motives, conflicts, desires, background, etc. Such openness to interpretation—both of 'what happens' and 'why it happens'— might be read as advancing an alternative theory of knowing that, like *Dude*, privileges not knowing.

28   This first sentence, though very general, marks the difficulty of summarizing the novel. Though the narrative seems to link the collisions in the novel to erotic stimulation, the novel may be more concerned with depicting a group of people who: deliberately/ intentionally get into car crashes for purposes other than erotic stimulation; plan and/or imagine collisions for purposes other than erotic stimulation; unite with other accident victims and explore the possible significances of collisions, erotic stimulation be one possibility among many; follow a crash-obsessed leader, despite his 'self-evident madness' (*C* 19); etc. Ballard notes, "obviously sexuality as a whole provides a gigantic fund of metaphors and exploratory techniques which the imaginative writer can use—and I've done so. Simply because the sexual element in our makeup is so powerful—almost everything we do has a sexual component in it somewhere. Also, it's one of those areas which has an enormous emotional charge, so that for the writer, it's a shortcut to dramatizing whatever private obsession, myth, dream, vision (or what have you) he wants to…" (Revell 48). In other words, the collisions in the novel may have nothing to do with erotic stimulation.

29   Ballard's use of "crash," "accident," and "collision" is problematic throughout the novel: sometimes they are used synonymously, and sometimes they suggest different experiences. Reading them literally, that is, as referring to the novel's descriptions of a car hitting something—another car, an animal, 'road furniture,' etc—I use "crash" to refer to the deliberate act of driving one's car into something, "accident" to refer to a car unintentionally hitting something, and "collision" to refer to instances of overlap/ ambiguity. However, since the significance of "the crash"—what it is meant to signify as well as its importance and/or implications—is the main problem the novel asks readers to solve, one cannot necessarily assume a literal referent. Thus, from the outset, summarizing is exceedingly difficult, not only because one risks collapsing the three terms, but also because one's interpretation of the significance of "the crash" can inform the way one chooses to use these terms and/or describe the literal instances of a car hitting something and the potential causes and effects of such instances.

30   Despite the rampant drug use in the novel, most summaries don't mention it (and there is a noticeable absence of sustained discussion of it in the novel's criticism). Given the repeated references to 'deviant' logics and the repeated descriptions of risky behaviors, one might think it important to mention the characters' use of mind-altering substances in the summary (and explore it in the essay), particularly as they can conceivably impair one's judgment and/or enhance one's thinking.

31   Both Robert Caserio and Victor Sage highlight Ballard's "dead-pan" style, noting that Ballard's tone suggests that the novel might ultimately be a joke (Caserio 303, Sage 42).   The plot too suggests that novel might be a joke, albeit a bad one: a man kills someone in a car accident and ends up planning his own death by car crash/ a man obsessively plans and rehearses a car crash and he ends up botching the crash after his friend beats him to it. One might fruitfully compare this with Ballard's other novels written during this period—together referred to as the 'urban disaster trilogy'—which have similar "bad joke" structures: in *Concrete Island*, a man marooned on a blind

"island" created by motorway intersections plans his escape, and in planning his escape, discovers that he doesn't want to leave; in *High Rise*, a man seeking solitude and life direction moves into a posh apartment building and ends up literally living off of his neighbors and contemplating the same life path he left. One could also compare them with Ballard's later novels, for instance *Cocaine Nights*—a man travels to a retirement community to clear his brother's name and, like his brother, ends up pleading guilty to a crime that he doesn't commit—or *Super-Cannes*—a man attempts to find the motive behind a killing spree and ends up planning the same killing spree. The recurrence/ repetition of this structure may privilege the "bad joke" summary over others and/or validate the suggestion that *Crash* is intended to be a joke.

[32]   David Pringle is especially certain that James is the protagonist, as is Aidan Day. Day's summary is particularly instructive, as his identification of the protagonist speaks to his argument for the novel as a warning and the necessity of close readings:

> The retrospective narrator of Ballard's *Crash* is a male protagonist who is named–in what might be seen as a self-reflexive, frame-breaking, postmodernist intrusion into the text—'Ballard'. I shall call the character 'Ballard'–James – in order to distinguish him from Ballard the author. In the novel we learn that following his own experience of a car crash, James encountered a circle of car crash victims, each of whom was preoccupied with the dynamics of car crashes: the twisted machinery, the mutilations of the human body. The presiding spirit of this circle was Dr Robert Vaughan–a 'one-time computer specialist', 'one of the first of the new-style TV scientists' (Ballard 1995: 63)–now the 'nightmare angel of the expressways' (Ballard 1995: 84), obsessed with cars and with the erotic possibilities he found in the idea of the broken bodies of crash victims. We discover at the outset of Crash that Vaughan has died in a failed attempt to crash his car into 'the limousine of the film actress' Elizabeth Taylor (Ballard 1995: 7). More on why it should be Elizabeth Taylor, whom Iain Sinclair has called the 'key motivating element' in the novel, later (Sinclair 1999: 11). The narrative then proceeds to trace the series of events leading up to Vaughan's death. (279-80).

Note his use of textual evidence to support his summary, which demonstrates as it enacts his argument for close readings. Note also his emphasis on the physical damage done to the body and his explanation of the protagonist's name, both of which, in his close reading, support the argument for the novel as a warning. And note the absent information: no Remington, no Catherine, no Seagrave, no drugs, no sex act with Vaughan, etc.

[33]   One could argue that the closer he gets to meaning, the "closer" he and Catherine become. After his initial major accident he explains: Catherine had rededicated herself to her marriage. Before my accident our sexual relationship was almost totally abstracted, maintained by a series of imaginary games and perversities… All this had now passed, replaced by a small but growing repertory of tendernesses and affections. As she lay beside me, willingly late for her office, I could bring myself to orgasm simply thinking of

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the car in which Dr. Helen Remington and I performed our sexual acts (83). And after his 'bad acid trip'/ sex act with Vaughan: "In these strange days, as I recovered from my acid trip and my near-death afterwards, I remained at home with Catherine… Catherine would move behind me like some electric nymph, a devotional creature guarding my gestures of excitement with her calm presence" (208-9).

[34]   I might also suggest a reading of the "white-whale-ness" of "the crash"/ a reading comparing *Crash* and *Moby-Dick*.

[35]   Consider, for example, the summaries of Warren Wager and Robert Caserio. Wager's longer, more detailed summary directly cites specific events, and such specificity highlights his argument. He deliberately chooses events that are described in terms that suggest 'psychic transformation'—autogeddon, flight, crystallization, etc. (61-2). Caserio's brief, fairly general summary focuses on Vaughan and his motive, which is also Caserio's argument. "But this love-making pursues not sex but an idea: to wit, that aggression on the road only appears to be the triumph of accident or of a desire for punishment or of a death-drive" (302).

[36]   See Robert Caserio, Dennis Foster.

[37]   Catherine being the exception makes the trauma motive, particularly when it's combined with the erotic possibilities of the accident, more problematic.

[38]   Seagrave compounds this problem. First, all of his collisions in the novel are deliberate and yet they can be considered accidents since he intends to hit certain things in a certain way but his collisions don't come off as planned. Second, and more importantly, though Seagrave enjoys crashing, there are no references to sex acts involving Seagrave. So it's difficult to argue that he is processing a trauma and it's difficult to argue that he finds collisions erotically stimulating.

[39]   Identifying James' motive is especially challenging, as the conflicts related to sex, death, technology, and their various combinations seem equally plausible. He references his marriage throughout, both his accident and his involvement with Vaughan seeming to fuel their sex lives. And yet, the emphasis on his brush with death, particularly the references to Remington's dead husband (20), suggests that he may be attempting to process the experience. He explains: "The week after the accident had been a maze of pain and insane fantasies. After the commonplaces of everyday life, with their muffled dramas, all my organic expertise for dealing with physical injury had long been blunted and forgotten. The crash was the only real experience I had been through for years… After being bombarded endlessly by road-safety propaganda it was almost a relief to find myself in an actual accident…" (39). So in addition to or as part of his processing of the traumatic experience, he may be attempting to resolve the conflict between "real"/ embodied and simulated/ disembodied experiences. And the prominence of technology also suggests that he is attempting to discover the role/s of or possibilities presented by technology: "I realized that the human inhabitants of this technological landscape no longer provided its sharpest pointers, its keys to the borderzones of identity" (48-9); "…I

had already enlisted Vaughan in my *confused hunt*….I was convinced that the key to this immense metallized landscape lay somewhere within these constant and unchanging traffic patterns" (65, emphasis mine); "Sitting here in this deformed cabin, filled with dust and damp carpeting, I tried to visualize myself at the moment of collision, the failure of the technical relationship between my own body, the assumptions of the skin, and the engineering structure which supported it" (68). To add to the challenge, his role as narrator suggests including his motivation for telling the story, which may point to any or all of the above, or a different motive altogether, specifically memorializing Vaughan.

[40]   The "failure" of Vaughan's project is debatable. Later, I will suggest a reading of the collision as a deliberate failure. For now, it's enough to plant the seed: Vaughan deliberately misses Taylor's limo in order to ensure the continuation of the crashpack; had he achieved his meaning, their work would be done.

[41]   James' marking of the car is an impossibly loaded gesture that can support a number of motives. He explains, "With the semen in my hands I marked the crushed controls and instrument dials, *defining for the last time* the contours of Vaughan's presence on the seats…" (224, emphasis mine). Earlier in the chapter, James remarks, "Increasingly I was convinced that Vaughan was a projection of my own fantasies and obsessions, and that in some way I had let him down" (220). Thus this gesture may be aimed at establishing the reality of Vaughan—he wasn't just a projection—and thus James' motivation for telling the story may be to memorialize Vaughan, to process the experience of Vaughan, or to further make him "real." The gesture may also signal James' recognition that his fantasies and obsessions can be actualized/ realized (which seems to complicate reading Vaughan's failed crash as a failure), in which case he might be motivated by the possibility of actualizing/ exploring his fantasies. And the gesture may be read as James' vow to not let Vaughan down, hence James' planning of his own crash and/or his telling of Vaughan's story. In this case, Vaughan's motive is central, with James merely along for the ride.

To make things messier, the car itself is problematic, as it is James' car, not Vaughan's. Vaughan decides to use James' car for the all-important final crash, rather than his own symbolically loaded Lincoln, which is often liked to his body and thus would seem to better serve his purposes. This decision suggests that James plays a larger role in Vaughan's project than simply administering a survey to Taylor. The role James plays can support Vaughan's motive—helping accident victims process/ explore their traumas—or the motive can support the role—James as a figure for media saturation makes a good accomplice for Vaughan's exploration simulated experiences. I would add that it also produces the kind of doubling effect that Halberstam reads in *Dude*, in that "each finds himself reflected in and completed by the other." Halberstam explains,

> The doubleness of white male stupidity [in *Dude*] and in all the dimbo
> films shows white male subjectivity as powerfully singular, even when it
> is represented as double, precisely because it is mirrored in the ordinary
> relations between men; patriarchal power, in some sense takes two: one to
> be the man and the other to reflect his being the man. But the doubling

also draws the dudes down into the swirl and eddy of homoerotic
attraction which heterosexual patriarchy inevitably leaves in its wake (66).
Given that the car is the same make and model as the one James' wrecks in his first major
accident, Vaughan's selection of this car may be an act of mirroring and completing
James (and James' marking of the car might be read as mirroring and completing
Vaughan).

One might argue that the doubling effect occurs throughout, but two specific
passages underscore it: "Along the pavement a traffic policeman walked towards the car,
clearly recognizing the Lincoln. When he saw me behind the wheel he moved on, but for
a moment I had relished being identified with Vaughan and the uncertain images of crime
and violence that were forming in the eyes of the police" (188); "Trapped within the car
after it jumped the rails of the flyover, [Vaughan's] body was so disfigured by its impact
with the airline coach below that the police first identified it as mine. They telephoned
Catherine while I was driving home from the studios at Shepperton… As I took her arm
she stared through my face at the dark branches of the trees over my head. For a moment
I was certain that she had expected me to be Vaughan, arriving after my death to console
her" (220). Such doubling may function to demonstrate the homoerotic attraction that
heterosexuality leaves in its wake, which can "resolve" the issue of motivation—
exploring sexuality and/or normativity—and that of the novel's meaning—the crash
revealing the negativity produced by heteronormativity.

[42]   Ballard's work in general is not very "child-friendly," as children are often
neglected, abused, or wholly absent.

[43]   In an interview with Andrew Hultkrans, Ballard notes:
     I mean, when I was writing *Crash*, I certainly didn't think I was writing a
     cautionary tale. What I thought I was doing was following certain trends
     that I saw inscribed in the sensation-hungry, rather affectless landscape
     that was emerging in the '60s. *I was following these trends that I saw
     inscribed across the graph paper to the point where they seemed likely to
     intersect, you know, way off the page.* I saw this new logic, a nightmare
     logic, emerging, and this was what I was exploring. (78, emphasis mine).

[44]   One might add that the novel aims to 'reveal the secret formula of the critic's
mind and life' since its openness to interpretation allows for multiple "correct" readings
that often say more about the critic than the novel itself.

[45]   James explains:
     Perhaps some latent homo-erotic element had been brought to the surface
     of my mind by his photographs of violence and sexuality. The deformed
     body of the crippled young woman, like the deformed bodies of the
     crashed automobiles, revealed the possibilities of an entirely new
     sexuality. Vaughan had articulated my needs for some positive response
     to my crash… However carnal an act of sodomy with Vaughan would
     have seemed, the erotic dimension was absent. Yet this absence made a

sexual act with Vaughan entirely possible. The placing of my penis in his rectum as we lay together in the rear seat of his car would be an event as stylized and abstracted as those recoded in Vaughan's photographs. (102-3).

This suggests that the sex act is supposed to reveal a new sexuality and/or allow him to find meaning in his accident. Later, James' refers to this act as "the climax of a long punitive expedition into [his] own nervous system" (193). So the act is perhaps aimed towards a discovery about James' relationship to/ with his body. On the following page he explains, "All the experiences of our weeks together had left me in a state of increasing violence, which I knew only Vaughan could resolve. In my fantasies, as I made love to Catherine, I saw myself in an act of sodomy with Vaughan, as if only this act could solve the codes of a deviant technology" (194). The act then might promise to reveal the meaning and/or possibilities of technology.

[46]   James notes:
Later, I realized what had most upset Vaughan. This was not Seagrave's death, but that in his collision, still wearing Elizabeth Taylor's wig and costume, Seagrave had pre-empted that real death which Vaughan had reserved for himself. In his mind, from that accident onwards, the film actress had already died. All that remained now for Vaughan was to constitute the formalities of time and place, the entrances of her flesh to a wedding with himself already celebrated across the bloody altar of Seagrave's car. (187).

[47]   This is particularly evident in criticism of Cronnenberg's *Crash*.

[48]   Vaughan's death may appear to be an exception, since he dies. Yet one could argue that he doesn't actually die, since the narrative, being circular, brings him back to life, only to kill him again.

[49]   Both Luckhurst and Gasiorek read Ballard with Marc Auge's discussion of nonplaces.

[50]   To make things more confusing, an exclamation point is sometimes added to the title.

[51]   I might add the line from later in the song: "there's so much to see through/ like our parents do more drugs than we do."

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