ABSTRACT

Why do many gay poets often stew in darkness? Gay shame led to Hart Crane’s death (1899-1932). For young Thom Gunn (1929-2004), gay shame played the role of an unwelcome bedmate that would persist well into the poet’s career, breaking into their bedside drawer, snatching up the diary, popping the lock with a bobby pin, and writing passages. The emotional and psychological damage had already been done to Gunn by the time they eventually came to terms with their gayness. Richard Siken (1967-) decided to represent men in love and lust for these portrayals are rare, according to them. While Crush accomplished this, it still posits male-male relationships as flawed, not for something inherently wrong with gayness itself, but because the world actively resists positive portrayals of gayness, even as the author seeks to represent them. Three generations of gay poets run into the same problem: to represent relationships between men as wholly positive.

This thesis interrogates claims that we have achieved sexual equality, that we have overcome, and even erased, stigma attached to nonnormative sexuality, and, further and more specifically, that shame can become less disadvantageous if we simply choose to utilize its negative affects as generative modes of being and thinking. Through an analysis of these poets, I argue that gay shame continues to inhibit writing, for as technically impressive and beautiful as this poetry may be, it continues to recycle the following message: male-male relationships are beautiful but fleeting, predisposed to destruction before they can even mature. My hope is to intervene in queer and literary scholarship focused on present and future utopia. These portrayals
are romantic and alluring for their call to "move on" from our troubled past, but they breed generations of queer folk too optimistic to be critical.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people helped with this project directly and indirectly, in both big and small ways, and, while the manner varied, all proved significant. A shout out to my cohort at Georgetown University for keeping me sane even when I felt otherwise. Big hugs to the brilliant and caring Kristen Case and Misty Krueger for their past and continued guidance with and beyond this project. A special and substantial thank you to Alex, my partner, for without him none of this would have been possible. I hope that one day I can return the favor to each of you. Finally, I would be remiss to forget Dorian, Ellie, and Oliver — my meowboxes — for their endless cuddles and emotional support — catnip and mouse toys for all!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 3

Gay Shame ........................................................................................................................................ 4

Poetic Theory .................................................................................................................................. 13

Hart Crane ........................................................................................................................................ 18

“Fear” .............................................................................................................................................. 20

“Modern Craft” ................................................................................................................................. 21

“Voyages” ........................................................................................................................................ 23

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 28

Thom Gunn ......................................................................................................................................... 31

“Carnal Knowledge” .......................................................................................................................... 33

“The Allegory of the Wolf Boy” ......................................................................................................... 35

“On the Move” .................................................................................................................................. 38

“An Amorous Debate” and “Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt” ......................................................... 42

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 45

Richard Siken .................................................................................................................................... 47

“Driving, Not Washing” ...................................................................................................................... 51

“You are Jeff” .................................................................................................................................... 53

“Snow and Dirty Rain” ...................................................................................................................... 59

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 62

Epilogue ............................................................................................................................................. 63

Bibliography ...................................................................................................................................... 67
FOREWORD

“...The risk of shame should not prevent us from exploring any aspect of queer life, no matter how embarrassing or discreditable.”

For most of my childhood, I lived in a trailer park that resembled a carton of eggs, only a sliver of division between one trailer and the next. The largest room was the living room. It was approximately twelve feet by ten feet and had seven windows amongst its three exterior walls. But not much living occurred there, because it was arranged so that the old man next door, a homebody, could peer into the windows and monitor my activity when unsupervised at home. He did this for my parents who feared that I was straying from my conservative, Catholic upbringing.

I’m gay; I discovered this in sixth grade. Despite my upbringing, it was no more significant to me than finding a new freckle. I decided to tell my news to my best friend, a red-haired “cool girl” that blossomed early and went by the nickname “Double D.”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a fag and we’re chill.” So I lied and told her that I changed my favorite color from orange to red. I don’t even like red.

---

That same year, I asked my soft-spoken grandmama for the first season of *Will & Grace* while on our annual Christmas shopping and dinner trip. I watched it after school while doing my homework and it was often the highlight of my day. In the middle of the mall’s atrium, she seized my arm and raised her voice louder than I had ever heard before, “That’s a show about sin, and I will not buy you that filth!” She went on and on. I stopped speaking to her. I barely speak to her today.

After Christmas, I used the Walmart gift cards that I received to buy an 11” TV and the first two seasons of *Will & Grace*. When my mother found out, she lazily said, “You better not grow up to be one of those disgusting faggots... I’ll throw you out.” The way she spoke told me that this was a common reaction to having a gay child and that I should’ve already known that.

“I’m not,” I laughed nervously. “That’s gross.”

Before I’d even lost my baby teeth, I knew that one day my family and friends would leave me. I knew that I’d never find someone to love me like my father loved my stepmother. I knew that gay marriage was a sin and that only men and women could live happily ever after. I often cried watching Taylor Swift music videos because I knew that kind of all-consuming, unashamed love was beyond anything I’d ever know. I knew all these things and so many more. I’m no longer that closeted boy, but I still understand what it means to belong to a community that’s commonly labeled perverse. Because I knew these things, I censored myself. I remained closeted with few exceptions throughout my teenage years and never gave myself room to consider that I could find a healthy relationship with a man.

Early in my youth, I adapted to hiding in the shadows of dry rot and paint.

My skin remains stained.
INTRODUCTION

“The avoidance of shame becomes the single most powerful, driving force in [the gay man’s] life.”

Both chronologically and in esteem, Walt Whitman (1819-92) is often the first American poet to come to mind when discussing gay male poets, despite “gay” still meaning “happy” and Whitman never explicitly stating their sexuality. Regardless, the “Calamus” poems explore and praise romance and sex between men and Whitman’s sexual openness has, in many ways, become their legacy. In “Starting From Paumanok” Whitman wrote:

I will therefore let flame from me the burning fires that were threatening to consume me,
I will lift what has too long kept down those smouldering fires,
I will give them complete abandonment,
I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love

Rictor Norton maintains that, afterwards, the poet suffered such intense backlash that they began to change pronouns from “he” to “she,” to suppress passages, and to claim to have six illegitimate children, none of whom have ever been verified as having been anything more than

---

3 Throughout this thesis, I use they/them/their pronouns to avoid unnecessary gendering of those that I have cited. Although, I will not alter another author’s comments if they chose to gender someone. Nor will I use they/them/their pronouns for figures in poems in which the speaker has gendered themself or others. I do not know these people personally, and I do not want to assign them pronouns, because maybe (and especially if) one or more of them struggle(d) with their gender identity. Further, this project is about the shame that accompanies gay relationships, and so much of that shame originates in antiquated ideas that there are two “natural” and opposite genders/sexes (which I have conflated here to emphasize common perceptions of sex and gender) that attract each other. By avoiding a compulsive gendering of these writers, it feels to me like a small step in the right direction of resisting compulsory heterosexuality and its signifiers. While this is a small and imperfect solution, I believe it has a better politics than the conventional way.
the invention of a person determined to escape notoriety, to shed the stigma associated with being, or being perceived as, “homosexual,” a term I use only to avoid anachronism.

Whitman’s actions — the revisions and hiding practices — can be better understood through Tony Adams’ discussion of the closet: “I live in and out of the closet… perpetually negotiate coming out, and, consequently, struggle with same-sex attraction.” When all is said and done, the closet is “a time of… ‘existential frustration’… and a time characterized by inhibited interactions, intentional and intense use of hiding practices, acts of omission [and] lies…” While readers often perceive Whitman’s frank discussions of sex as a sign of liberation, their attempts to engage with “adhesiveness” or “manly love” reveal the anxiety and secretiveness of the closet; that is, negative response to Whitman’s poetry led the poet to revise, conceal, and lie in an effort to negotiate their stigmatized position. The added burden that gay writers experience when discussing their lives forces them to decide between the acceptance of shame and the fallout that this causes or the isolation and secrecy of the closet.

Gay Shame

In David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub’s *Gay Shame*, a collection of essays compiled from and inspired by a conference of the same theme at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 2003, the introductory article, “Beyond Gay Pride,” contextualizes the need for gay shame by positing it as the antithesis to popular discussions around gay pride. While the call for

---

6 Adams, 67.
pride over the past several decades has made it easier to be sexually open, it has also made it
difficult to discuss the myriad ways that LGB+ people remain subjected to negative affects, for
fear of somehow undoing pride. As such, Halperin and Traub call on gay shame to confer
“potential legitimacy and acceptability on the discussion of issues that don’t make gay people
feel proud, that even proud gay people aren’t always proud of.”7 That is, a focus on gay shame
is not an attempt to reinforce the closet and its signifiers, but to continue to discuss or, rather,
refuse to censor, current and common LGB+ experiences: “…The risk of shame should not
prevent us from exploring any aspect of queer life, no matter how embarrassing or
discreditable.”8 My project exists alongside Halperin and Traub in that, while it dwells in gay
shame, it does so in an attempt to deconstruct utopic ideas of pride that disallow us to see that
progress is still possible.

Turning to gay writers, Christopher Hennessy observes that “gay poets — whether their
sexuality is explicitly part of their work or is one of many aspects of a complex identity — have
sought to understand themselves and their world by exploring the intimate relationships
between language and desire, language and identity, language and the body.”9 These intimate
relationships are anchored in the shame of belonging to a stigmatized group. Alan Downs notes
that gay men, more broadly, are uniquely and profoundly traumatized by growing up “in a
world that is run primarily by straight men.”10 Downs writes, “The truth is that we grew up
disabled. Not disabled by our homosexuality, but emotionally disabled by an environment that

7 David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, 10.
8 David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, 11.
9 Christopher Hennessy, Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets (Ann Arbor, MI: University of
10 Downs, 6.
taught us we were unacceptable, not ‘real’ men and therefore shameful.”"11 As children, gay men and lesbians learn that there is something “disgusting, aberrant, and essentially unlovable” about us; although we may seek love, Downs adds, it is always accompanied by a fear that our genuine selves are unlovable.12 Thus, gay men and lesbians engage in hiding practices to protect against feelings of shame. As Michael Warner observes, these hiding practices, while beneficial, become a source of pain because “later in life, [these men and women] will be told that they are ‘closeted,’ as though they have been telling lies.” In effect, gay men and lesbians “bear a special burden of disclosure”13 that heterosexuals do not. But it is also clearly a catch-22: sex, especially sex perceived as perverse or transgressive, is something one is forbidden to discuss, and yet to remain closeted is to keep secrets, to lie, to sulk in the shadows of shame.

To illustrate this point, briefly consider David Wojnarowicz’s photo-text collage *Untitled (One Day This Kid…)*.14 While the photo itself shows Wojnarowicz as a toothy-grinned boy, the text transforms the kid into any boy that will grow up to discover that his sexuality makes him abject: “One day this kid will grow larger... When he begins to talk, men who develop a fear of this kid will try to silence him with strangling, fists, prison, suffocation, rape, intimidation, drugging, ropes, guns, laws, menace, roving gangs, bottles, knives, religion, decapitation, and immolation by fire.” While this passage captures only a fraction of Wojnarowicz’s language, it stands as an irrefutable example of how queer people suffer at the expense of their sexual and romantic desire in the face of a homophobic world. The work

11 Downs, 21.
12 Downs, 12.
14 David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (One Day This Kid…)*, 1990.
concludes that all of this will “begin to happen in one or two years when he discovers he desires to place his naked body on the naked body of another boy.” What if the boy does not talk? They will not only find themself burdened and charged with keeping secrets and will isolate themself from the very people that can understand them. This complicates the relationship with the closet and brings me to the project of this thesis: to explore how gay poets (although the question effects all gay men and lesbians) disclose information which they are simultaneously forbidden- and expected to disclose.

Since Stonewall, scholars have attempted to answer this question to varying levels of success, but my project finds itself particularly indebted to Robert K. Martin and Thomas E. Yingling. Originally published in 1979, Martin’s *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* features analysis of two of the three poets of interest here: Crane and Gunn. Radical for its time, Martin insists on the centrality of sexuality to the meaning of a poem and observes that “gay literature has always, since the Greeks, been a literature of indirection. It has operated through a series of more or less coded references.” While I agree with this claim, Martin soon becomes too hopeful. They continue, “One of the more immediate effects of gay liberation may be the elimination of the need for such a code.”15 Written after Stonewall but before the AIDS epidemic, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* presents a too optimistic take on sexual liberation. At certain times, Martin’s study comes across as too trigger happy, too ready and willing to dismiss the lingering effects of a long history of gay shame. Aware of this problem, Martin updated the second edition, published in 1998, to note that the book is more of

a "gay liberation tradition"\textsuperscript{16} and "represents the enthusiasm and political energy of the 1970s in its optimistic vision of a transformed sexuality."\textsuperscript{17} Even now that the United States has marriage equality, I do not share Martin's earlier optimism — irrefutably, all queer identities remain stigmatized, burdened with a sense of shame that makes holding your partner’s hand in public an act of defiance.

Similarly, Yingling’s analysis in \textit{Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text} offers much to my project, but their search for a singular homosexual voice seems far too reductive to be wholly productive. With that said, Yingling’s main goal is one that we share: to understand “how homosexuality is articulated… once [the homosexual] ‘appears’ in culture, and once he begins to understand himself as being of a certain (stigmatized) social order.”\textsuperscript{18} Given their respective and respectable aims, I hope to bring the work of both of these scholars into the twenty-first century by revisiting the notion of a gay tradition through the (admittedly cynical) lens of shame, but one that manifests differently in the poetics of each poet. It is not a homosexual voice or text that unites the poets as the diverse styles of the poets will show, but their common experience of gay shame. The tradition that I speak of is \textit{thematic}: the three poets span over a hundred years, but each of them produce(d) poems that depict(ed) gay love as extraordinary and fleeting, a thing incapable of being sustained in our current social-political framework.

\textsuperscript{16} Martin, ix.
\textsuperscript{17} Martin, 262.
Central to my argument is the tradition of shame in poetry by gay male poets of the twentieth century and how these have shaped a gay male poet of the twenty-first century. Shame is a loaded word, one which people use to varying degrees and with nuance; it is word that seems to be a central pillar of queer theory, psychology, and even public discourse (e.g., slut shaming). Shame is a common word defined by the New Oxford American Dictionary as “a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior,” resulting in “dishonor” or “a loss of respect or esteem.” Shame is a self-conscious emotion which means that it relates to our perceptions of our self as well as how other react to us, but feelings of shame are not dependent upon whether others know the source of our feeling. Even as the actions of others shame us, the effect itself remains internal because “shame is an experience of the self by the self,”¹⁹ and it is “felt as inner torment, a sickness of the soul.”²⁰

The definition of shame at work in this project is related to debasement²¹ in that to be marked by stigma, to be shameful, lowers one’s perceived value. The shame that comes from this socialization and the inner torment that results plays a structuring role in the identity of some, if not all, gay men and lesbians.

Defining and identifying shame has been of utmost importance to many queer theorists. In The Trouble with Normal, Warner argues that shame dominates the realm of sex more than any other facet of life,” and this shame is damning to the ashamed person because “sexual shame is such that exposing it taints a person, no matter how moral or immoral the sex might otherwise be,” and there is no avoiding this shame because once exposed as a sexual deviant

²⁰ Sedgwick et al., 133.
²¹ In Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame, Kathryn Stockton embraces a similar definition.
one’s credibility is lost for “policy publics have no way of recognizing sex as ordinary or as
diverse. It is scandal or nothing.”22 With the stakes so high, it is no wonder that gay writers put
an immense amount of effort into coding their work.

Many queer theorists have embraced shame such that it becomes a source of power.
Edelman’s No Future might be the most influential of these texts, but more recently theorists
such as Kathryn Bond Stockton have called upon shame’s “generative powers, it [has a]
propensity to lure its devotees into violent, illuminating states of mind.”23 Regardless of which
camp one belongs to, queer theorists are firm in the structuring aspect of shame. For Sedgwick,
“at least for certain queer people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent,
structuring fact of identity.”24 While I agree that shame is generative (They say the best art
comes from pain, right?), I question the positive spin placed upon it. Why seek positivity in
something inherently bad? I believe that doing so desensitizes us to the reality of shame as
something oppressive and harmful.

Consider the following passage from E. Lynn Harris’ memoir What Becomes of the
Brokenhearted:

When we finished [having sex], I felt excited, but Donald wore a look of disgust. I asked
him if everything was alright. He looked at me and shouted, “You goddamn faggot.”
Then he started beating me unmercifully with his large fists… Suddenly this psycho
stopped beating me, spit in my face, and then leaned over me, opened the door, and
kicked me with the heel of his shoe out of his car into the cold rain. On the graveled
alley I saw blood on my hands. My nose was bleeding. But I didn’t think about the pain
of his fists. All I could think about was Donald spitting in my face. It was devastating.

22 Warner, 17-9.
University Press, 2007), 151.
24 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (Durham, NC: Duke
University Press, 2003), 64.
No one had ever done that to me. It was like he was saying to me, “You don’t deserve to be a human being. You’re lower than low. You ain’t shit.”

Far from justifying the behavior, certain scholars might argue that this experience serves as an opportunity for Harris to learn caution, discretion, and to better understand the world in a new, fuller way than before; this is too close to victim blaming to be comfortable or unproblematic. Insistence on a positive shame prevents us from seeing what is actually happening here: Harris was brutally attacked because the man they had sex with was taught to be ashamed of their very nature. Therefore, while I agree that shame is generative in that it can cause one to change their perspective about themselves and others, I will focus on its generativeness in only as far as these poets in question fuel their writing with an understanding of themselves as Other or abject. This shame may write poems but it also structures the way that love and sex between men are articulated since poetry is, rightfully in my view, “particularly connected by critics to the state of mind of its author.” Like speaking, writing removes an author’s thoughts from the privacy of their head and places them on display.

In this light, my philosophy aligns most closely with Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Like the authors Love chose, the authors here “have a lot to tell us” about “what it is like to bear a ‘disqualified’ identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury — not fixing it.” Love writes, “We find ourselves deeply unsettled by our identification with these figures: the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm

---

in the present.” Of course, as a gay man I find the call for pride — the call to move on from our dark communal past — attractive. However, pride too often becomes a call to forget the past, to refuse to acknowledge that the past influences the present; it breeds generations of gay men and lesbians that do not know about Stonewall, the extermination of queer people during the Holocaust, or that, according to a study published in 2018 by The Williams Institute of UCLA, about fifty-seven thousand youth (ages thirteen to seventeen) across the United States will be subjected to conversion therapy before the age of eighteen. We must “risk the turn backward,” Love asserts; “hope that is achieved at the expense of the past cannot serve the future.” With this in mind, I see my own project as an effort to understand how poets past and present live(d) with gay shame and how it manifests in their poetry. The shame that I discuss, gay shame, is a specific type of shame the heterosexuals are immune to. While all sexuality is shameful, the shame the heterosexuals face is nowhere near as precise and cutting as that gay men and lesbians experience. While in most circles, queer or heterosexual, talking about sex and sexuality is a faux paus, gay people have the added pressure that they cannot talk about sex because their specific sexual attraction is forbidden by archaic, Puritanical understandings of sex and its purpose. The drawback of gay shame is, of course, the suggestions that gayness and shame are inherently linked. And while they are inherently linked, it has nothing to do with nonnormative sexuality but, instead, everything to do with the privileging of heterosexuality. The way that gay shame manifests in the following poems has to do with how they portray male-male relationships.

28 Love, 8-9.
30 Love, 29.
Poetic Theory

Foremost, my approach to reading poetry is influenced by the fact that I also write poetry, and thus I arrive at this project with the mindset of a gay poet and experience with shame and stigma. In 1802, William Wordsworth said, "All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings… thought [about] long and deeply." In response, T.S. Eliot writes, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” What Eliot appears to overlook is Wordsworth’s assertion that poetry is not just an outpouring of random emotions but, instead, emotions with intent (emotions “thought [about] long and deeply”). While Eliot seems to disagree, to think the poet is a mere vessel, a hollowed-out mode of transportation, their logic insists that, “but, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape these things.” Thus, both poets believe in the usefulness of emotions and personality and yet, simultaneously, argue that emotions must be tamed. What this ends up meaning is that poets write about their personal experiences, but revise them, and this creates distance between the poem and fact.

While figures such as Eliot and Harold Bloom have interrogated and posited their own ideas on poetic tradition, my understanding of tradition adheres less to theirs than to my own reading of the poets of this project. I do not seek to trace a singular gay voice like Yingling. Nor, do I assert, along the lines of Eliot, that these lyric poets attempt to represent or embody “the whole of literature of his own country.” While I diverge from Eliot’s theory of tradition, it illuminates the usefulness of a project centered around tradition. Eliot writes, “No poet, no artist

of any art, has his complete meaning alone” because poets understand the influence of their predecessors upon them and visa versa. Building upon Eliot, Bloom considers the psychological struggle that authors face while trying to overcome their anxiety in the face of their literary predecessors. Bloom says that there is little difference between poetic history and poetic influence “since strong poets make that history by misreading” each other, “so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.” In fact, Bloom concludes that there are “hidden roads that go from poem to poem” mapping out the influence of one poet on other poet. Thus, Bloom might say that a tradition based on gay shame comes from the repeated occurrence of gay poets reading their predecessors and bringing their own experiences with abjection to that work. While I imagine that Thom Gunn heard of Hart Crane, and Richard Siken both Gunn and Crane, I do not want to build my tradition upon assumptions about who one has or has not read or familiarized themselves with; for my purposes, the above theories of Wordsworth, Eliot, and Bloom reveal a concept of tradition useful to map out the similarities and differences between these three poets. While these poets vary in style, their thematics overlap and expose the damage that cultural prejudice does to a person. My argument diverges from these scholars because it is a thematic, not genealogical, tradition. While gay shame and other biographical information are thematized in the poetry of these three poets, and in many ways their biographical information overlaps, their poetry reveals that there is no sincere singular homosexual voice or style that exists, but that all gay poets are hindered by their stigma. As others have shown, gay poets discuss the undiscussable (their gayness) under the guide of

---

34 Bloom, 95.
abstraction, and close analysis reveals a concurrent frustration with a world in which their romantic and erotic desires are deemed damaging. These poets present gay relationships as beautiful, transformative, but fleeting and, as a result, destructive.

Lastly, John E. Vincent interrogates the function of difficulty and closure in the work of queer poets, and their embrace of this difficulty as central to — not merely a symptom of — understanding the work of gay poets brings a needed perspective to this project. Among other formal techniques, Vincent considers address and “shifty pronouns” which provide “readerly pleasure” as a result of their irreverence, surprise, and breakage from normative modes of gender and being.35 Vincent writes:

Homosexual and heterosexual desire and bonds, given their different cultural valuation, have entirely different available narratives, legality, forms of expression, as well as different available relations to abstraction, specification, self-definition, community, ritual, temporality, and spatiality. This is not to suggest that there are not overlaps, but rather that any treatment of homosexual desire as simple another form of desire (read, heterosexual) will be fundamentally flawed, if not also in the service of a homophobic fantasy of a world without gay people in it.36

Given these specific challenges, Vincent introduces poetic difficulty — which lives at the axis of “what can and cannot be said” — and, more specifically, queer difficulty, which he defines as a “‘pervasive’ reading style, which is insistent about taking pleasure in the disjunct, the places where dominant codes of meaning, identity, identification, or desire are held off by mysteriousness, excessiveness, or obliquity...”37 To the "pervasive reader," these frustrating moments are crucial spaces to "attach to the unattachedness of these moments."38 Vincent

36 Vincent, 30.
37 Vincent, 1.
38 Vincent, 4.
insists this latter point is fundamental to queer difficulty, that the describability or indescribability of something, whether the critic can articulate it or not, cannot be ignored.\textsuperscript{39}

Keeping in mind Vincent’s notion of queer difficulty and the simultaneous demands of the closet — disclosure and secrecy — that leads gay poets to code their work, the readings I provide in the following chapters are more interested in working with, not against, the styles of the poets in question. In other words, instead of trying to construct a coherent reading of the poems, I will focus on what their complexity or, even, simplicity signifies. In a glance, the movement from Crane to Gunn to Siken reveals an ever-increasing transparency that owes itself, in part, to a decrease on the insistence of silence regarding sexual matters, and yet, despite this, it remains difficult for any of these poets, perhaps most interestingly Siken, to articulate positive representations of same-sex relationships.

Lastly, it remains necessary to address the lack of discussion on Gillian C. White’s groundbreaking book, \textit{Lyric Shame: The ‘Lyric’ Subject of Contemporary American Poetry}.\textsuperscript{40} While I discuss shame and lyric poets, the project of this thesis is not to interrogate the prevalence of shame in the lyric form itself. White asserts that the war between Lyric and Anti-Lyric poets led to the manifestation of shame in the lyric form itself, one born of the lyric poet’s failure to evolve, to become a Language or otherwise avant-garde poet. While this is interesting, I do not believe that an extended discussion of it here is beneficial.

\textsuperscript{39} Vincent, 12.
Allow me to digress for a moment and address the whiteness of these poets, not to mention their privilege as presumably cisgender and middle-class men; that is, the experiences of these poets represent a very small subset of gay men. To borrow the language of Richard Dyer, "White power... reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences, and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal. White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity... to be made strange." I agree with Dyer. I hope to destabilize the predominantly white-centric conversations around queerness, to make it easier for people of color to exist in the dialogue of queer theory. These poets do not speak for all white men, nor all gay men, much less any gay man of color, but, instead, through their work, I can address an issue that affects all men that do not adhere to so-called normative male behavior, even if the stigma affects us each differently and to varying degrees. Martin’s tradition also left out poets of color, and I would like to see both their work and my own expand to include queers of color. Perhaps one day my argument will be adapted to include the following influential poets and many more: Jericho Brown, Eduardo C. Corral, Langston Hughes, Carl Phillips, Danez Smith, and Ocean Vuong.

---

HART CRANE

"...The literary expression of male love, however succinct, will invariably be considered excessive."42

Rumor has it that the night Crane committed suicide, the poet propositioned a man, who responded violently, leading to Crane’s plunge into the ocean, and their untimely death at the age of thirty-two.43 What led to this fateful night? Feeling defeated as a poet coupled with shame about their sexuality, Crane attempted to escape their problems through a period of extensive travel. Unfortunately, their alcoholism and sense of hopelessness only worsened. After their arrest in Paris for drunkenly picking a fight with police officers, Crane returned to the United States and published “The Bridge,” the culmination of seven years of work. While Crane intended “The Bridge” to be their lifetime masterpiece, it was originally planned to take a mere fraction of the time to complete, and thus when they finally completed it only for it to receive poor reviews, Crane’s mental health worsened. This “failure” coupled with the shame of their sexuality led to Crane boarding a cruise to Mexico with their date, Peggy Cowley, a female-friend-turned-lover. Ostensibly, Crane had the thought that if they were a failure as a poet, at least they could mend the wound inflicted by being gay by playing the role of a heterosexual. Ultimately, Crane’s attempt to suppress their gayness proved unsuccessful, leading to the fight and their death.

43 Just one person to have referenced this story was William Logan in “Hart Crane Overboard” from Our Savage Art: Poetry and the Civil Tongue (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012), 166-71.
In my analysis, I will show that Crane was a romantic; they believed that love, when good, was reparative, and, when bad, destructive. They held this belief, in part, because from their earliest years, they witnessed the dissolution of their parents’ relationship. At the young age of seventeen, Crane moved from Ohio to New York City to distance themself from their parents, explore their sexuality, write poetry, work, and apply to college. Of course, Crane quickly learned that even in a metropolitan area like New York the stigma against same-sex attraction was still rampant, proving to them that their sexuality barred them from the positive/transformative love.

On Crane, Gregory Woods calls attention to the space that Crane’s sexuality assumes in scholarship, a space decidedly reserved for the source of their depression, alcoholism, and eventual death. Woods asserts that scholars refuse that Crane’s sexuality could have had even the smallest positive influence on their poetry. I agree with Woods. However, since I am dealing with gay shame and, in many ways, Crane’s sexual frustration and sense of failure are their legacy, I find myself in a peculiar spot. I want to defend the poet by pointing out that some of their most exciting and memorable poems (e.g., “Voyages”) found inspiration in their sexuality. However, I also want to take the stance that Crane’s sexuality influenced their life in myriad positive and negative ways because of the Western world’s historical obsession with sex and gender, but that it would not have, ideally. Crane’s sexuality — no one’s sexuality — should be perceived as inherently negative, and yet the reality is that one’s sexuality predisposes them to criticism.

44 Woods, Articulate Flesh, 140.
“Fear”

A widely ignored poem, “Fear,”⁴⁵ stands as a clear example of the summative claims of this chapter: Crane believed in the benefits and pleasures of male-male intimacy, but he thought it barred them from the idealistic view of love because of prejudice against same-sex attraction.

The first quatrain sets the tone of the interior space of the male host’s home juxtaposed with the outside world, clawing at the windows, trying to invade the warm and intimate space within which the speaker, guests, and host enjoys themselves: “The food has a warm and tempting smell, — / But on the window licks the night.”

In the second stanza, the intimacy between the speaker and the host heightens even as we learn that there are other guests:

Pile on the logs... Give me your hands,
Friends! No,- it is not fright...
But hold me... somewhere I heard demands...
And on the window licks the night.

The speaker notices the host who pleas (“I heard demands”) for the “friends” to be unafraid of the night outside the window. All who are at the house are protected by the structure of the house and comforted by the warmth of the fire. The host takes the hands of presumably the speaker, and in tandem, they remain strong against the outside only by embracing each other. The houseguests are afraid of the outside world, and it is the outside world from which they must protect themselves. This poem stands as an excellent example of the tradition of gay shame: connections between men can bring joy and comfort, but in this world that ceaselessly attacks these romantic and sexual configurations, they cannot last forever.

⁴⁵ Hart Crane, Complete Poems and Selected Letters, 93.
Turning to “Modern Craft,” one of Crane’s early poems, we can see how Crane’s shame around their sexuality, and their belief that it barred them from curative love, shaped their poetry. The poem consists of three quatrains and it presents a dark reading of modern love. In the first of three quatrains, the speaker reflects on the central figure, an indifferent woman. The speaker has “touched her flesh of moons,” and yet the woman remains cold and unresponsive, “drowning her pearls in alcohol.” While the pearls symbolize an innocence, her sexual exploration and drinking suggest the opposite to the speaker; they describe this as an “innocence dissolute,” an innocence for show and not substantive. This reading is further exemplified by the second quatrain, where she beautifies herself, putting herself on display, and yet “bolts herself within a jeweled belt” — a belt which while decorative also recalls a chastity belt: begging for attention but under the false pretense of innocence.

The title, “Modern Craft,” suggests that this is a portrayal of modern love that is artificial or disingenuous. The woman has been touched by many people but instead of being swept off her feet, she is jaded: “Too many palms have grazed her shoulders: / surely she must have felt.” In return for her body, love has offered her nothing.

The third and final quatrain offers reader’s some insight into the speaker’s understanding of their sexuality. Up until now, the speaker has remained emotionally distant from the woman they observe but becomes sympathetic to her as they draw a comparison between themself and her:

Ophelia has such eyes; but she
Even, sank in love and choked with flowers.

---

46 Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, 95.
This burns and is not burnt… My modern love were
Charred at a stake in younger times than ours.

The speaker compares the eyes of the woman being observed to the eyes of Shakespeare’s
Ophelia. Although their eyes are similar, Ophelia was unable to endure the harmful love of her
life: “…she / Even, sank in love and choked with flowers.” The woman of the poem drowns her
sorrows in alcohol, but she, unlike Ophelia, lives; the pain she feels does not manifest in
physical ways: “This burns and is not burnt…” The speaker immediately elaborates: “My
modern love were / Charred at a stake in younger times than ours.” This reference to capital
punishment aligns the speaker with Ophelia: their love can end in destruction, death. The
woman in the poem suffers but not in any immediately physical sense, in fact she seems numb
(and not just because of the booze) to physical signs of affection or contact. “Modern Craft”
does not offer a positive take on love for anyone, but that almost exacerbates our understanding
of the speaker’s perception on their own love; they would rather be jaded than utterly destroyed.
The speaker understands their sexuality and the dangers it exposes them to; Crane’s chooses to
articulate love between men as doomed.

If “Modern Craft” captures the destructiveness of love, “Carrier Letter” illustrates the
potential that Crane saw in love to transform and repair. The poem situates the speaker since
their lover has left: “My hands have not touched water since your hands, - / No; - nor my life
freed laugher since ‘farewell.’” Despite the distance between the lovers, their connection
“follows” and “endures.” Pictured in the image of a dove, this love remains in the speaker’s
heart, a “surging gentleness” that has only “worn more bright.” Unfortunately, Crane’s
perception of love as healthy and enduring finds little traction in their work.
“Voyages”

In Crane’s early-to-mid-twenties, they began dating a sailor, Emil Opffer. A relationship that would become their most meaningful romantic relationship, inspiring the “Voyages” sequence of poems as well as parts of “The Bridge.” Although no exchanges between the two remain today, the influence this relationship had on Crane remains intact. In a letter to a friend, Waldo Frank, Crane wrote about the affair with Opffer (using their name later in the letter):

For many days, now, I have gone about quite dumb with something for which “happiness” must be too mild a term. At any rate, my aptitude for communication, such as it ever is!, has been limited to one person alone, and perhaps for the first time in my life (and, I can only think that is for the last, so far is my imagination from the conception of anything more profound and lovely than this love). I have wanted to write you more than once, but it will take many letters to let you know what I mean (for myself, at least) when I say that I have seen the Word made Flesh. I mean nothing less, and I know now that there is such a thing as indestructibility. In the deepest sense, where flesh becomes transformed through intensity of response to counter-response, where sex was beaten out, where a purity of joy was reached that included tears. It’s true, Waldo, that so much more than my frustrations and multitude of humiliations has been answered in this reality and promise that I feel that whatever event the future holds is justified beforehand. And I have been able to give freedom and life which was acknowledged in the ecstasy of walking hand in hand across the most beautiful bridge of the world, the cables enclosing us and pulling us upward in such a dance as I have never walked and never can walk with another.

While this passage contains Crane’s signature abstraction, it is clear that Crane saw the relationship with Opffer as the closest thing to a transformative love that the poet would experience in their short life.

---

In another letter to Frank, Crane says sexual stigma is unable to affect them, but also admits, quite contradictorily, that they are concerned about the negative effects it may have on their poetry:

I discover that I have been all-too-easy all along in letting out announcements of my sexual predilections. Not that anything unpleasant has happened or is imminent. But it does put me into obligatory relations to a certain extent with "those who know," and this irks me to think of sometimes. After all, when you're dead it doesn't matter, and this statement alone proves my immunity from any "shame" about it. But I find the ordinary business of earning a living entirely too stringent to want to add any prejudices against me of that nature in the minds of any publicans and sinners.  

Thus, in “Voyages,” we see both Crane’s attempts to write about the transformative love of their relationship with Opffer while also trying to conceal it for, in Crane’s view, the world, symbolized in imagery of nature, is suffocating and will interfere with same-sex relationships of any kind.

The first of the “Voyages” poems is the only poem written before Crane and Opffer began their relationship, but it captures Crane’s outlook on nonnormative sexuality. The poem is set on a beach and the speaker looks upon children ("bright striped urchins") as they play and holler, enjoying their innocence as they fondle their “shells and sticks” all the while unaware of the inevitable “bleach[ing] / By time and the elements.” In other words, the children freely play, perhaps even touch their genitals, because they are blind to cultural structures and appropriate bodily contact. While the speaker watches and yearns to warn them that soon their behavior will be curved or normalized, they know that between their hollers, the foreboding sound of the waves crashing on the beach, and their innocence and naivete, there is no way they could possibly understand the warning. The world has already drowned out opposing perspectives.

49 Hart Crane, Complete Poems and Selected Letters, 329.
50 Hart Crane, Complete Poems and Selected Letters, 24.
They cannot understand the “line / [they] should never cross nor ever trust beyond it.” The pitiless line demarcates the shallow and deep ends, youth and maturity, and normative and nonnormative sexuality. It is inevitable, the speaker knows, that this moral “line” will continue, either way, the children already bear the mark upon them in the form of the “stripe” on their clothing. One day, if they cross the line, they will forfeit their innocence and risk death. The speakers says, “And could they hear me I would tell them: / …the bottom of the sea is cruel.”

If “I” is a warning about sexual ethics, then “II,” “III,” and “IV” explore the positive and transformative aspect of love, even as it foreshadows its ending. “II” begins and immediately suggests that despite the warning of the first poem, the lovers will risk destruction (“—And yet,”) even if their union is fleeting (“this great wink of eternity”).

The speaker imagines the sea as a “sceptred terror,” one who scribbles their “sentences” on “scrolls of silver,” rending judgment on the lovers. The speakers asks the sea to keep them together with the lover:

Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe.
O minstrel galleons of Carib fire,
Bequeath us to no earthly shore until
Is answered in the vortex of our grave
The seal’s wide spindrift gaze toward paradise.

The speaker asks to be bound together until death, left afloat, far away from the stark realities upon the shore. In the Introduction to Twentieth Century American Poetry, Christopher Beach notes that in an earlier version of the poem, Crane described the sea as “our bed” and “enlist(s) us / to her body endlessly.” Beach describes this original version as “the forbidden act of a sexual encounter with the sea” being “figured as a dangerous ‘voyage,’” Thus, the lovers are
safe from the wrath of the sea only by the “pieties of lovers’ hands.” Of course, this safety is fleeting but only after the lovers are united in “transmemberment,” the exchange and melding together of bodies.

In “III” the lovers remain safe from the sea’s judgment. They remain united “No stroke / Wide from your side” in what appears to be sexual bliss:

And so, admitted through black swollen gates
That must arrest all distance otherwise, —
Past whirling pillars and lithe pediments,
Light wrestling there incessantly with light,
Star kissing star through wave on wave unto
Your body rocking!
and where death, if shed,
Presumes no carnage, but this single change, —
Upon the steep floor flung from dawn to dawn
The silken skilled transmemberment of song;

Permit me voyage, love, into your hands…

This passage, often cited as Crane’s greatest achievement, captures the poet’s reliance on romanticism and oblique eroticism. The imagery of the “black swollen gates” between “whirling pillars and lithe pediments,” “light wrestling,” and “your body rocking!” summon images of sexual play and penetration. The two men emerge as stars, fully transformed by their experience, united in sexual bliss, a “transmemberment of song.” Unfortunately, the moment of sexual bliss is short lived and “Voyages IV” hints at the end of the relationship: “No stream of greater love advancing now / Than, singing, this mortality alone.”

---

“V” sees the lovers separate from each other; their relationship concluded. Unlike in “III” they do not kiss “through wave on wave,” but become divided by a “tidal wedge” and “no cry” or words can “deflect the world”:

… For we

Are overtaken. Now no cry, no sword
Can fasten or deflect this tidal wedge,
Slow tyranny of moonlight…

There is nothing either can say to deflect the world which wedges itself between them, bringing about the death of their relationship: “Your eyes already in the slant of drifting foam; /

Your breath sealed by the ghosts I do not know: / Draw in your head and sleep the long way home.” The moonlight is a tyrant. The sea has decided not to keep them afloat; instead, to come between them, which is symbolized in the image of the speaker’s lover sinking into the seafoam, recalling the cruelty of the bottom of the sea from “I.”

Yingling wrote that the sixth and final poem in the sequence focuses on the speaker searching for “Belle Isle,” or a yet made “island of homosexual desire.” He writes:

...The ending of ‘Voyages’ is supremely radical rather than recuperative: it images the continuance of homosexual desire despite the ‘failure’ of an individual relationship and thus refuses the apparent wisdom of its opening poem and affirms a commitment to homosexuality even in the face of the cruelty that marks the bottom line. What is most important to our understanding of this finale is that this is figured as echoes and accents, the diacritical marking of language. These closing figures serve the supremely important and political function of allowing the text to present homosexual desire within the field of language understood now not as a medium of incarnation but as one of difference, of diacritics, of writings.52

52 Yingling, 103.
With this claim, Yingling argues that Crane, from 1923-6, sought for an “authentic voice and ideological recognition of homosexual speech and writing.”53 While problematic that there could be a singular “homosexual voice,” Yingling’s observation brings to light a theme in Crane’s poetry — love between members of the same sex lacks a place in language or the greater world. In the sequence, the world — waves, moonlight, etc. — come between the men. The world does not allow the men to be “bound in time” away from “earthly shore,” as requested in “II.” While we could choose to read the poem alongside Crane’s biography and attribute the separation of the lovers in the poem to the separation of Crane and Opffer in real life, doing so would miss Crane’s point: the outside world does not tolerate gay relationships, even as the relationships prove beneficial and enjoyable for the participants.

Conclusion

Yvor Winters, who had been at one time a close friend and early fan of Crane, turned on them after the publication of “The Bridge,” stating that “the flaws in Mr. Crane’s genius are, I believe, so great as to partake, if they persist, almost of the nature of public catastrophe.”54 According to Winters, Crane’s poetry was untamed, visionary but unrevised: “These poems illustrate the dangers inherent in Mr. Crane’s almost blind faith in his moment-to-moment inspiration, the danger that the author may turn himself into a kind of stylistic automaton, the danger that he may develop a sentimental leniency toward his vices and become wholly their victim, instead of understanding them and eliminating them.”55 Although Winters claimed to

53 Yingling, 143.
have not known about Crane's sexuality until after the young poet's death, Winters condemned it, calling their attraction to men a mere "weakness" that Crane "cultivated on principle."\(^{56}\) Beyond Winters, Crane's heterosexual friends warned them that their sexuality was debilitating. Crane’s mother reacted so poorly to the news that it created a rift between them that lasted the remainder of the poet’s life.\(^{57}\) As for Crane’s father, the poet knew that their sexuality would not be accepted and, therefore, chose to live with the secret, indefinitely.

If we give Winters and other literary critics the benefit of the doubt, that Crane's work was immature and overburdened by an impenetrable opaqueness, that they "failed" as a poet,\(^{56}\) we have to accept that it is, at least partly, the result of belonging to a literary canon that demands self-expression only so far as it is heterosexual. Crane’s perception of the world, even as they criticized T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* for being too grim, became increasingly dark throughout Crane’s career — the world was not a place of hope, nor was their sexuality much more than something that predisposed them to destruction.

In *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*, Michael D. Snediker takes up the noble task of reintroducing optimism to “critical circulation.”\(^{58}\) Snediker observes that academia currently prioritizes “queer pessimism” a “gravitation toward negative affect and depersonation.”\(^{59}\) Snediker insists that rather than “importing a set of subjectival stipulations extrinsic from the discursive system of the poem,”\(^{60}\) critics should focus on only what the poem itself provides: “Queer optimism attends less to what motivates a project than to

---


\(^{57}\) Yingling, 27.

\(^{58}\) Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 2.

\(^{59}\) Snediker, 4.

\(^{60}\) Snediker, 3.
a project’s content.”\textsuperscript{61} Attending to the content of poems, of course, is not a radical suggestion, but it also risks misconstruing the work, since the poem, in fact, comes out of a mind in the body of a person.

In the critic’s reading of Crane, they focus on the abundance of smiles in their poetry and reads the smiles as not facades (which is more common), but genuine, even though from birth to death Crane led a deeply troubled life. Snediker asks, “What does it say about Crane scholarship, and criticism more generally, that a smile, critically speaking, so seldom is allowed to be a smile?”\textsuperscript{62} My answer? In the case of Crane, it is a focus on the poem as well as their biography. Yes, it is possible that a smile is just a smile, but to insist that is the case, without acknowledging that the poem is a product of a subject as much as it is a product of a person, is as equally problematic as what Snediker criticizes. Crane did not grow up in a bunker, but in a world with strong ideologies that deemed the gay “lifestyle” unacceptable.

\textsuperscript{61} Snediker, 16.
\textsuperscript{62} Snediker, 44.
THOM GUNN

"In order to negotiate compulsory heterosexuality safely, they learned to encode the personal aspects of their lives into an acceptable — i.e., heterosexual — context."63

A prominent gay poet of the second half of the twentieth century, the early poetry of Thom Gunn exemplifies the structuring aspects of gay shame. Gunn was closeted for much of their career; they came out in 1976 with the release of their sixth book of poems, Jack’s Straw Castle. Gunn admits in a collection of essays, first published in 1982, that their sexuality was something difficult to accept.64 Gunn also recalls that, in early books, “If a poem referred to a lover, I always used ‘you.’”65 Furthermore, they observe that there was no real reason to write openly about their sexuality because poems with any gay subject matter were unlikely to be accepted for publication (this also recalls Crane’s comment on being too openly gay a figure and the fear that it would hurt their writing career).66 While Gunn did not explicitly express their sexual and romantic attraction to men in their early work, the existential frustration they felt is visible in the themes of their early work. Sex and masculinity are performances that Gunn had immense difficulty reconciling with their biological-male self.

Like Crane, Gunn was also heavily influenced by their own relationship to their parents. Born in 1929 to Bert and Charlotte Gunn, the poet learned early-on the harm one can experience in an unhealthy relationship; their parents were unhappily married and divorced a decade after

63 Jim Elledge, Masquerade: Queer Poetry in America to the End of World War II (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), xxx.
66 Hennessy, Outside the Lines, 10.
Gunn’s birth. In 1944 (five years later), Charlotte committed suicide and Gunn and their brother, Anders, discovered their mother’s body, already in rigor mortis. In 1999, Gunn said in an interview with British critic James Campbell that it took several decades for to come to terms with their mother’s death. Due to their father’s drinking and abuse, Gunn was much closer to their mother — it was their mom that inspired their passion for literature, and this tragedy would inevitably influence their perspective on love. In the poem, "My Mother's Pride," Gunn concludes "I am made by her, and undone." It is clear that Gunn saw love as both reparative and destructive; it transforms the participants for good or bad. Unfortunately, given Gunn’s gay shame, their sexuality seemed unsustainable and this predisposed them to the bad.

Gunn also believed that poets use their experiences to launch their writing. They theorized that poets are always influenced by their experiences or “occasions.” These occasions can be internal (such as a sexual longing) or external (such as a sexual act). From these occasions, Gunn says all poetry begins and from there may diverge according to the author’s will, but they always have roots in the associated occasion. Despite their not writing explicitly about their sexuality at this point in their career, Gunn found personal meaning in the world through the process of writing poetry.67 Because all poetry begins with occasions and I know that Gunn experienced sexual shame and trauma, I can safely read their work with an eye for this structuring aspect.

In my analysis, I follow the thread of masculinity in Gunn’s work and hypothesize the way that it brings a sense of purpose and identity to Gunn’s speakers. At the beginning of Gunn’s poetic career, they lived “in the closet,” struggling to come to terms with their sexuality.

---

67 Gunn, The Occasions of Poetry, 173.
Coming to the United States, Gunn quickly became enamored with motorcycle culture (as well as Blue Collar culture more generally), to such an extent that they have poems across three collections that engage with it. For Gunn, stereotypical masculine ideals and culture provide stability and identity.

“Carnal Knowledge”

Gunn’s first collection, *Fighting Terms* (written as an undergraduate), received praise, in part, for its frank presentation of love as a ground for combat. From this collection, “Carnal Knowledge”\(^{68}\) begins: “Even in bed I pose.” This line sets the performative tone of this poem, a piece about the fissions between a desiring body and judging mind, and not only that but the fissions that can exist between lovers: “...my self is not like my body, bare. / I wonder if you know, or, knowing, care?” Throughout the poem, the speaker perseverates on these two incompatibilities: “‘There is a space between the breast and lips.’ / Also a space between the thighs and head, / So great, we might as well not be in bed.” Again, the speaker sees the mind and body as not inherently linked — there is a space, a disconnect between them. The matter is made worse by the lover that either does not understand the speaker’s protests or does not care; they are not physically or emotionally compatible and so the speaker poses: “I am not what I seem, believe me… / … I pretend.” The speaker is “flaccid,” suggesting impotency, and the lover “want[s] a competent poseur.” Of course, the speaker expected as much from the beginning: “I hardly hoped for happy thoughts…” But that does not stop the speaker from dreaming “in a most happy sleeping time” that they “did not hold each other in contempt.”

As Stefania Michelucci writes about Gunn, sex can be “a chaotic satisfaction of desire… that does not bring communication and fusion… but only mutual hostility, or even mortal hatred…”\textsuperscript{69} The carnal knowledge suggested by the title seems to be, not only that what the body desires is not exactly what the mind desires, but also that two people can have sex and still feel nothing for one another:

Abandon me to stammering, and go;  
If you have tears, prepare to cry elsewhere —  
I know of no emotion we can share.  
Your intellectual protests are a bore  
And even know I pose, so now go, for  
I know you know.

Now that the sexual act has reached its conclusion, they have nothing else to share.

Michelucci draws attention to the “dualism”\textsuperscript{70} within which the speaker is caught.

Michelucci writes:

[Gunn] called the attitude adopted in his early poems ‘a mixture of dishonestly and ignorance,’ aware that this ‘dishonesty’ was also based on the fifties cultural code condemning inclinations that, for Gunn, were natural, and consigning him to a double life, a double ‘act’ in his erotic poems. In the poetry of Gunn’s youth, passion passes through double cultural and ideological filters which obligated him to feign something he did not feel, and relegated him, willingly or not, to deceit and inauthenticity.\textsuperscript{71}

Michelucci’s point, and I agree, seems to be that the friction of Gunn’s romantic and sexual desire for men and the cultural codes of the time appear in their poetry as performativity, the need to play a role other than the self.

It would be remiss, however, to ignore that Gunn resisted a purely gay or closeted reading of this poem:

\textsuperscript{70} Michelucci, 47.  
\textsuperscript{71} Michelucci, 49.
The danger of biography… is that it can muddy poetry by confusing it with its sources… In my early twenties, I wrote a poem called “Carnal Knowledge,” addressed to a girl, with a refrain making variations on the phrase “I know you know.” Now anyone aware that I am a homosexual is likely to misread the whole poem, inferring that the thing “known” is that the speaker would prefer to be in bed with a man. But that would be a serious misreading, or at least a serious misplacement of emphasis.\footnote{Quoted in Tóibín, 218.}

While Gunn dismisses a closeted reading of “Carnal Knowledge,” they are not dismissing the reading of performativity. The poem is still clearly about incompatible lovers and the separation of mind and body. Whether the poem is one of the closet or a less specific secret that the speaker keeps from their lover, Gunn’s poem acknowledges that sex and sexuality are not inherently beautiful and honest; they are performative arenas that have the potential to be uncomfortable or hurt. Further, while Gunn resists a gay reading, their later reflection comes across as an attempt to distance themself from shame, the shame of having once been ashamed of their sexuality.

“The Allegory of the Wolf Boy”

Gunn left England shortly after publishing 	extit{Fighting Terms}. In 1954, they emigrated to California, primarily to relocate for their partner, Mike Kita, but also to work at Stanford University beneath Yvor Winters. At that time, Gunn had little knowledge of American authors and thus Winters introduced them to a whole new literary world that profoundly impacted their writing (for instance, Gunn’s induction to writing free verse). Gunn held Winters in such esteem that, after leaving Stanford, they would return to study creative writing with them. Gunn never
spoke of their sexuality to Winters despite their closeness; Gunn said, “[Winters] would have been appalled at the idea that I was queer.”

Even in America, which Gunn saw as less conservative than Britain, living in the closet continued to shape their writing. In an interview with Christopher Hennessy, Gunn called “The Allegory of the Wolf Boy” an allegory for the closet. The basic plot: a young man hides beneath a proper facade during the day but is able to come out at night, to be his true self, to embrace his id, but the plot is not as simple as it seems for the process of coming out is not without its repercussions. He plays tennis and drinks tea, and none of his friends seem to fully understand that he does not belong (“...he is not ours”) — he “plays [them] in sad duplicity.” At night, the boy stashes his clothes and wanders out into the “dark and dust,” going “beyond / His understanding” to the wilderness, a place of “insect lust.” The boy comes out seeking the “infertile light” of the “moon” which will enable him to “loose desires hoarded against his will / By the long urging of the afternoon.” In the moonlight, the blond boy begins to transform, the “familiar itch of dark hair,” both reminiscent of fur as well as pubic hair brought on by puberty, his sexual awakening. In this state, the boy succumbs to nature, momentarily disposing of his facade, “only to instinct and the moon being bound.”

In the last line there is a turn, the boy “drops on four feet. / Yet he had bleeding paws.” Michelucci addresses this in terms of crucifixion: The bleeding paws “assume the connotation of stigmata. They evoke the image of crucifixion, testifying to the moral and social violence to

---

73 Quoted in Michelucci, 35.
74 Thom Gunn, Collected Poems, 61.
75 Hennessy, Outside the Lines, 19.
which his homosexual instincts will be subject.” This turn in the poem calls our attention to the suffering that must take place for the boy to fully succumb to his nature. In other words, he can reveal his sexuality only if he is willing and able to endure the social repercussions.

Michelucci goes on to say that “The Allegory of the Wolf Boy” is about transforming “at night not into a predator (like the name ‘wolf boy’ would lead one to believe), but into prey, since he is victim of an uncontrollable power which makes him blindly obey impulses, and act according to instinct” (emphasis mine). Although I agree with Michelucci about the uncontrolableness that Gunn conveys, I would point out that the boy is not entirely forced into the transformation, but instead, seems to long for the night to come. He is active in the process of transformation — he “wedges his clothes between / Two moulded garden urns” and “seeks the moon.” It does not appear that the boy is resisting the change; he is not victim to his sexuality. He is victim to the “urging of the afternoon” (read: bourgeois society) that demands he hoard his desires “against his will.” Ultimately, however, we agree that the poem is about an unspoken and insurmountable “profound shame” over a sexuality that is perceived as abject.

“The Allegory of the Wolf Boy” reveals Gunn’s belief that sexuality is something which can either liberate, if it is normative and healthy, or otherwise constrain. Gregory Woods writes, “Gunn has the habit of seeing love and sex, for better or worse, as metamorphic forces.” Woods points out that in Gunn’s poetry, as in this poem, Gunn criticizes bourgeois society, or posing, and sees the embrace of one’s natural state as more respectable: “Contrary to lycanthropic conventions, which generally give rise to the nightmare of the werewolf, to

---

76 Michelucci, 128.
77 Michelucci, 128.
78 Michelucci, 134.
79 Woods, Articulate Flesh, 222.
become an animal in Gunn’s books often involved becoming more human, more humane. It is a means of release from pose, an emancipation of the poseur.” As I will soon say about the figure of the motorcyclist in the poetry of Gunn, lycanthropic conventions resist bourgeois mores and Gunn, more precisely, respects lifestyle of form of existence that permits one to do this without shame, even if it hurts. Gunn, at this point in life, seems to simply want to exist without the burden of gay shame.

“On the Move”

Gunn’s early works seek a sense of identity and this came in the form of the leather and motorcycle counterculture that they discovered upon moving to America. Alfred Corn argues that Gunn found an identity as a man through Existentialism, and the effect that this had on their poetry can be traced to the decline in popular Existentialism in addition to the ways that Gunn’s work became less metaphorical and more open about sex. Although Corn’s analysis of “On the Move” illustrates the subversive way Gunn plays with Existentialism and sexuality through subtle references to the Shakespearean “will” (meaning: penis). If we turn to “On the Move,” Gunn’s insecurities as a gay man are made abundantly clear in the praise of the image of the American motorcyclist. Later in their career, Gunn reflected on their early work and admitted that they “angelicized” the motorcyclist, because they believed in the myth of the motorcyclist as a “wild man part free spirit and part hoodlum.” During the twentieth century and still today, many people within the gay community have resisted the stereotype established

80 Woods, Articulate Flesh, 225.
82 Thom Gunn, Collected Poems, 39.
83 Gunn, The Occasions of Poetry, 177.
during the Victorian Era of the effeminate gay man. Gunn was one of the many gay writers of the time that endeavored to posit gay men as exceedingly masculine, which is what drew them to the leather and motorcycle culture.

Gunn seemed to find motorcyclists courageous for manufacturing their identity at a distance from normative society. The first time Gunn writes about the motorcyclists is in “On the Move,” where they appear as “small, black, as flies hanging in heat,” but quickly grow larger and larger as they drive towards the speaker. The inclusion of the color black conjures images of the motorcyclist clad in leather. Notably, the production of leather is known as tanning or, more colloquially, as curing, and it is the process by which animal pelts or skin are repurposed for commercial use. This is significant because Gunn sees the leather they don and, by extension, the motorcyclist as a sort of chosen skin, as a preferred self, a way to reclaim one's agency. Woods observes that for Gunn “the male body seems swaddled in a wet-suit of neuroses which needs to be unzipped.” For Gunn, however, it is not enough to peel back the wetsuit; it must be exchanged for leather, a skin cured of its flaws. Unlike the wetsuits which are made of synthetic rubber, the leather is a natural material — one perfected.

What the skin signifies or contains, however, is masculinity. For Gunn, masculinity is an opportunity to develop an identity. Does it ever work? For the motorcyclists it appears to, or at least gives them a jumping off point. As the speaker gazes at “the Boys,” Gunn’s description becomes increasingly evocative and romantic. The motorcyclists appear in “gleaming jackets trophied with the dust.” The engines of the motorcycles are described as a “…hum / bulges to thunder held by calf and thigh.” Here, the enjambment alludes to the eroticized image of the

---

84 Woods, 227.
motorcyclist with their legs straddling the machine. Not to mention, the reference to “bulges” alongside the description of the motorcyclist’s calf and thigh conjures images of the male crotch and all the connotations of phallic power. Despite the eroticized image, the motorcyclists are not reduced to mere objects. The speaker describes the motorcyclists, presumably without their knowledge or consent since they are at a distance, but they retain their agency — they remain respectably active and, to use Gunn’s words, “self-defined.” As Gunn states in the poem “Lines for a Book,” “I think of those exclusively by their action…” The motorcyclist is admirable for the refusal to submit to, as well as the ability to succeed outside of, a normative system. It is this skill or endurance that Gunn finds compelling.

While America introduced Gunn to free verse, Clive Wilmer observes that “America changed the atmosphere of [Gunn’s] poems more than it changed their style. The tense Existentialist loneliness of his earlier work gave way to something more casual, an easy Californian hedonism, though his poems were seldom without darkness.” Wilmer adds that identity, how we become who we are, remained of interest to Gunn. To fully grasp the importance of this point, we have to understand motorcycle culture within its historical context. Motorcycle culture was established by veterans of World War II who refused to mesh back into capitalist society and, instead, used their shared experiences with violence, war, and camaraderie to form fringe communities: “Young men with shared recreational interests became ‘demonic bedfellows’ in the eye of American mainstream media… [these young men] became a new enemy that served as powerful symbols of the forbidden lust for freedom from the ascribed

85 Michelucci, 2.
86 Michelucci, 3.
social norms of the time.”87 The motorcyclist, thus, becomes a queer figure to which Gunn latches onto upon coming to the United States.

Returning to “On the Move,” although Gunn appreciates the physicality of the motorcyclists, they also appreciate, the hint of “meaning in their noise.” Unlike the birds from the first stanza that seek their “instinct, or their poise, or both” and which move “with an uncertain violence,” the motorcyclists “use what they imperfectly control / To dare a future from the taken routes.” Gunn admires them for their meaning, their movement, in a “valueless world” in which repetitive, scripted actions rather than instinct rule. For Gunn, the literal movements of the motorcyclists down a road becomes a larger symbol for progressiveness: “One is always nearer by not keeping still.” The motorcyclists shamelessly embrace a lifestyle counter to the norm, but they do so and remain proud. Does Gunn do this? Eventually, yes, they can write openly about love and sex, but it remains that it came at the expense of Gunn’s health since the poet was known to have struggled with drug and alcohol abuse as well as sexual promiscuity. So much of gay sociality exists in night life scenarios and this takes a toll on the body, mind, and overall life of those involved. That is, especially in the past, one can be with their people, finally accepted, but the admission fee is one’s physical and emotional health.

A similar story is told in “The Unsettled Motorcyclist’s Vision of his Death.” The speaker, riding a motorcycle, is content with “being what I please,” and he maintain that his “will cannot submit to nature.” The fact is that Gunn, enamored, found meaning in their success in escaping the economic and, by extension, reproductive expectations of the heteronormative

87 Paul Dean Blankenship, Gender, Style, Technology: The Changing Landscape of Motorcycle Culture, Dissertation, University of Texas at Arlington, 2013, 23.
man. It is the queer figure of the (hyper)masculine male dismissing domestication that was popular in the emerging gay leather scene of the latter half of the twentieth century that Gunn admired, participated in, and wrote poetry about. Gunn admitted that the poem “Modes of Pleasure” is about going to the leather bars and “The Menace” was written for “people not into leather” but who want to know “what it is about.” Gunn’s interest in the masculine motorcyclist is their distance from the effeminate, and the power of an identity that Gunn believed in their own insecurity as a man coming to terms with their gayness can only admire from afar.

“An Amorous Debate” and “Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt”

Martin observes that Gunn’s poetry exhibits a “prevailing sadness” and “guilt” about their sexuality and its inexpressibility; they “cannot reconcile the needs of the body with the claims of the mind.” While Gunn uses clothing and skin as shields or concealment, the poems are always about the body, how the body is inscribed by sex. Likewise, Stephen Burt praises Gunn’s ability to put the body into verse, going so far as to say that “sight, for Gunn, often alienates; touch unites.” Burt continues, “Gunn uses this property of touch to present, and to analyze, friendship, erotic love, and the finally unerasable boundaries between even the closest selves…” I concur with both scholars, although I would amend Burt’s analysis to say that Gunn fantasized what it would be like to physically become one with another human as in

---

89 Martin, 179-80.
“Tom-Dobbin,”\textsuperscript{91} where Tom and Dobbin literally become a single being: “…Which is me, which him? / Selves floating in the one flesh we are of.” And again in “An Amorous Debate,”\textsuperscript{92} the two lovers unite: “… they melted one / into the other.” Of course, the two lovers in this second poem can only unite once their defenses are down, symbolized by foreskin:

> ‘Strange,’ she said, ‘you are still encased in your defense. You have a hard cock but there is something like the obduracy of leather still in your countenance and your skin, it is like a hide under hide.’

... Then a tremor passed through his body, the sheen fell from him, he became wholly sensitive as if his body had rolled back its own foreskin.

With this in mind, sex is not merely a physical need of the body, but capable of transformation, but one must first be comfortable with being fully exposed and open to the experience. So even in this sexual poem between a man and woman, the speaker struggles to relieve himself of his defenses, but once he can the lovers merge in sexual bliss.

This encounter in “An Amorous Debate” seems similar to the subtly erotic poem, “Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt,”\textsuperscript{93} except the much less explicit exchange between men in the latter occurs indoors while the former is overtly sexual and public, on the bank of a river, which reminds the reader of the ease and carelessness with which heterosexual encounters can occur.

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{91} Thom Gunn, \textit{Collected Poems}, 200. \\
\textsuperscript{92} Thom Gunn, \textit{Collected Poems}, 280. \\
\textsuperscript{93} Thom Gunn, \textit{Collected Poems}, 118.
\end{footnote}
due to their privilege. “Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt” explores a mutual interaction between men, a tattoo artist named Blackie and a customer, but Gunn romanticizes the exchange to make it both intimate and transformative. The poem begins with the speaker and an unnamed other(s) watching through the shop windows as Blackie draws stars upon the “youngster,” both men have “an equal concentration” on their faces, thus drawing attention to consent and commitment of both. The instant that Blackie marks the boy is exciting and intimate:

...The hand
is steady and accurate;
But the boy does not see it

For his eyes follow the point
That touches (quick, dark movement!)

A virginal arm beneath
His rolled sleeve: he holds his breath.

Notably, the boy’s virgin arm is further eroticized by the image of a rolled sleeve, a defense peeled back, which conjures images of foreskin and Gunn’s use of skin as a shield. The exchange between Blackie and the youngster is one in which his defenses are down and they can enjoy the shared connection. Once Blackie finishes, the boy pays and leaves, with “the Electric Rembrandt’s” touch the youngster becomes “starlike,” his body transformed into a work of art. Likewise, Blackie is literally richer from the experience. Both men leave the exchange better off than they were going into it. However, it is fleeting and happens under the guise of capitalist production. Unlike the transparency of “An Amorous Debate,” this erotic poem between men requires a hidden agenda for Gunn to pen it.
Conclusion

The reality of shame is that it is an inhibited emotion, meaning that we avoid it and the expression of it. If we do not feel shame, then we avoid addressing the issues, and thus it reoccurs and severely diminishes our quality of life without us ever understanding to what extent. Gunn once said, “If a poem referred to a lover, I always used ‘you.’ I figured it didn’t affect the poetry. But it did. Later I came out… In the title poem of ‘Jack Straw’s Castle’ I end up in bed with a man, and I wrote this quite naturally, without a second thought. Ten years ago, I doubt if the incident would have appeared in the poem. It wouldn’t have occurred to me to end in that way.” Gunn’s early work, even as it is some of the most memorable, suffered censorship because of gay shame. As Gunn came to terms with their sexuality, they were able to create work that discussed gay relationships without the crushing weight of shame and this led to their richest and most successful work, *The Man With Night Sweats* (1992).

Like other poets throughout the twentieth century, such as Crane, Gunn feared being labeled effeminate; to embrace their sexuality without code or metaphor, as in their later works, meant forfeiting a sense of self as a traditional — capital M — Man. In an attempt to avoid this, we see in Gunn’s early career an effort to create a space for themself within the gay community capable of sustaining their perception of self. The leather scene, which Gunn frequented until death, seemed to offer them this place. Unlike Crane, Gunn reconciled their sexuality and perception of self. Woods calls Gunn a “model of the contemporary gay poet in transition” because while they spent much of their career concealing their sexuality, they spent the latter portion trying to reveal it, even exploit it: “Thom Gunn, having once dressed his versions of

94 Downs, 35.
95 Quoted in Tóibín, 218-9.
men in the most restricting of sexual uniforms, seems since to have been trying to undress
them.”

Gunn’s poetry, Woods notes, evolved “in a manner directly related to [Gunn’s] sexual
orientation.” Woods’ words remind us that gay shame inhibits writing; it may produce poems
about sexual hardship or abstract, genitalia-specific free sexual encounters, but what it tries to
conceal, unconvincingly, is the romantic or sexual desire for someone of the same sex. Gunn’s
poetry evolved, becoming more honest, alongside the author. While I agree with Woods that
Gunn is a model of the contemporary gay poet in transition, I want to be careful not to isolate
this period of transition to the late twentieth century because it is ongoing, still, in 2019, not
only because stigma continues to exist around nonnormative sexuality, but also because,
historically, gay poets that stand as models for younger writers, tend to have been deeply
ashamed of their sexuality. There are few “proud” gay poets that write explicitly about their
sexuality for young writers to look upon for guidance.

Despite Gunn coming to terms with their sexuality, throughout their entire career their
poems of love remain violent, portraying sex and love as destructive and reparative, as in their
early work. A major part of this, of course, can be attributed to Gunn’s prevalence in the San
Francisco gay community throughout their life, including during the AIDS epidemic. While
Gunn was eventually able to speak openly about sex, they remained burdened by the view of
gay sex as one inherently linked to destruction, even as it provides moments of ecstasy. Gunn’s
legacy lives in part through the award named after them; their last collection of poetry, Boss
Cupid, won the Publishing Triangle’s inaugural Triangle Award for Gay Poetry, which
following Gunn's death was named in memory of their significant contributions to gay poetry.

97 Woods, Articulate Flesh, 228.
RICHARD SIKEN

“Given that our lives as gay men are thought to be anomalous, contradictory, obsessive and obscene, we have taken up paradoxical ways of speaking... We strive to make sense of the conflict between the negative versions of our lives and our own more positive versions: to forge some kind of unity out of our contrary needs to be different and to fit in.”

Richard Siken is a contemporary American poet best known for the collection Crush. Since publication, Crush has been immensely successful, both within popular culture and academic circles. Among its accolades, it was the finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Lambda Literary Award, and the Thom Gunn Award, and won the 2004 Yale Series of Younger Poets prize, selected by Louise Glück.

While I do not have a trove of biographical information on Siken from which to work, like I did for Crane and Gunn, in various interviews Siken has spoken about their life, writing process, and inspiration. As a contemporary gay poet, Siken strives to create a space in literature for gay men to exist: "I want proof that two men can love each other. I don’t see evidence of it in my daily life — men holding hands, or kissing in public, for instance — so I search deeper for it. I’d rather have proof and not have to be in the vanguard, but that’s not my experience of the world.” We see this attempt in “Little Beast” — Siken writes, “History repeats itself,” in section three, “I know history. There are many names in history / but none of them are ours.”

Not only does this echo, as I have argued, the projects of Crane and Gunn, but Siken positions...
Crush as an attempt to create a space for gay people to exist. According to Siken, poetry is a great place to “invent a new template” that fits in with the lives of gay writers, lives that do not fit into the dominant heterosexual template. On their own writing, Siken says it is “an eagerness to be understood.” This line calls attention to Siken’s claim, mentioned earlier, that they do not see gay love in real life and thus they feel obligated to write it for themself.

Doing so, however, is not without its challenges. Siken calls attention to two ways that English makes that project difficult. First, English’s dependence on pronouns:

Certainly, in my first book Crush there was a conflation between "you" as a speaker or future speaker or one "you" or a variety of different "yous." One of the reasons, strangely, that you can't talk about gay love is because of pronouns. There is a confusion and problem in terms of a he talking to a he, he said, he said, he did, he did, there is a complication that happens immediately.

Second, the stigma against gay sex in English speaking/Anglo communities contaminates language for the gay writer: “AIDS is unavoidable. Even if I don’t mention it as such, I have to acknowledge a certain emotional charge to what used to be (mostly) neutral words: positive, negative, blood, pathogen, ill, to mention a few.” At first glance, it seems that above list of words is actually not neutral, but I believe that what Siken intends by “(mostly) neutral words,” is that they are words the do not carry social or sexual connotations. For instance, positive and negative are by definition not neutral, so that cannot be what Siken suggests, but both words, prior to HIV/AIDS, did not so easily connotate disease. Siken’s comments shed some light on

the world of *Crush*, explaining, in part, why the pronouns are elastic and ever-changing and the language of gayness is inherently skewed toward the dark and negative.

In the foreword to *Crush*, Louise Glück writes, “This is a book about panic.” Glück adds, “Panic is a synonym for being: in its delays, in its swerving and rushing syntax, its frantic lists and quests, it fends off time and loss. Its opposite is oblivion: not the tranquil oblivion of sleep but the threatening oblivions of sex and death.”

Likewise, Nell Casey says that in *Crush* “the fits and starts of thought and meaning add up to much more than if [Siken] ever tried to explain himself in full.” Casey continues, Siken “hurls the reader into a world of nerve-wracked love — relationships haunted by obsession and futility — expressed with such eloquence as to make the pain of it strangely alluring. With sophisticated wordplay and provocative shifts between first and second person, Siken expresses a frustration with earthbound details and bodily confinement.”

As Glück and Casey state in these passages, Siken puts immense effort into complicating and distancing the speaker from coherent understanding and sensemaking as a way of indirectly discussing their own anxiety around the erotic and the inevitability of loss.

While the speaker in Crush distances themself from the narrative through a continuous shift in address, I theorize the presence and effects of gay shame. As Downs said, "The stigma and shame associated with being gay “prevent[s] us from developing a strong sense of self.” Instead, we become masterful at code-switching.”

This code-switching deeply influences the speaker of *Crush*. The sense of a multilayered speaker echoes Siken’s description of themself

---

106 Downs, 25.
while writing the collection: "My experience of my Self (sic) was fractured, liquid, multiple."\textsuperscript{107} As I have shown in this project, often the role of the gay poet becomes discussing sex in code or assuming masks; Siken is of a similar opinion: “I think gay culture, for better or worse, has embraced artifice more than any other subculture.”\textsuperscript{108}

Building upon Glück’s comments on panic, I interrogate the prevalence and abundance of gay themes, including the intersection of panic and sex, and argue that they assume a more specific stance in the light of gay shame. While the collection is a sophisticated and beautiful take on the intensity and melodrama of young love, it also portrays gay love as violent and, reluctantly, doomed. The text is not autobiographical, but Siken divulged that the death of their boyfriend influenced \textit{Crush}: “It made the book a little more about elegy... and I guess a little more desperate because everything seemed fragile and temporary.”\textsuperscript{109} Furthermore, \textit{Crush} portrays love between men as violent but also erotic, the two become conflated, and this is part of the tragedy of the collection. Regarding Siken’s own experience with violence and eroticism, they said, “I can say that my experience with violence has nothing to do with being gay and everything to do with being male. Violence is about power, being gay is about who you want to kiss. They may be conflated for me, but I don’t think that’s the norm.”\textsuperscript{110} As a teenager, Siken recalls their sexuality budding alongside intense bullying, and thus on occasion the erotic and the violent blurred for them. \textit{Crush} depicts a world that actively seems to resist positive portrayals of gayness, even as the author seeks to represent them. Siken posits the world as

\textsuperscript{107} Hall, 221.
\textsuperscript{109} Casey.
\textsuperscript{110} Hall, 229.
predictable in its attempts to conceal perceived moral infractions and general ugliness. Living is not picturesque, but a miracle, nonetheless.

The poems are written cohesively, in a way that makes writing about any single poem within a silo near impossible, because when read together the collection portrays life as series of raw emotions, including love and heartbreak, ecstasy and misery, physical and emotional anguish. As such, I collect analytical fragments from numerous poems to convey my point. The speaker is a drifter who tries to overcome the darkness of being alive through connection to other men, but finds in these relationships more pain, in part because the world does not sanction two men connecting emotionally or physically. Ultimately, the speaker of Crush resolves to find hope and purpose in whatever way they can, even if it comes with a side of misery.

“Driving, Not Washing”

In Siken’s “Driving, Not Washing,” Theodore and Henry, two young men, attempt to escape from “something shameful and half-remembered.” Henry drives. Theodore has been shot. Siken writes, “It’s a road movie, a double-feature.” “Desire, / like a monster, crawls up out of the lake / with all us watching, with all of us wondering if these two boys will / find a

111 Hall, 233.
112 While I have not addressed the collection’s interest with the language of film, Siken plays with the Shakespearean quotation, “All the world’s a stage.” For instance, the poem “Dirty Valentine” insists that “We are filming the movie called Planet of Love. Then, in a later poem with the title, “Planet of Love,” the speaker says, “It’s a movie, you’re the star…” Thus, when Siken declares, “It’s a road movie,” we can understand the poem within the context of a classic Hollywood road movie, a genre of film featuring long distance travel, “frustrated, often desperate characters,” masculinity, self-discovery, and “rebellion against conservative social norms.” (For more information on the road movie see: Neil Archer, The French Road Movie: Space, Mobility, Identity (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2013); David Laderman, Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010).
way to figure it out.” Meanwhile, “angels,” perhaps a symbol for religious zealots, pour “out of
the farmland, angels are swarming / over the grassland, / …dropping their white-hot bombs of
love.” In response, Theodore says, repeatedly, “We are not dirty... We are not dirty.” In this
poem, the world seems to be trying to destroy these young men because something about them
— ostensibly their sexuality — is deemed dirty by the zealots. The speaker confesses,
“...They’re trying to drive you into the ground to see if anything / walks away.” In fact, not
only should they not love each other, they should just settle for basically anyone else: “They
want you to love the whole damn world but you won’t, / you want it all narrowed down to one
fleshy man in the bath, / who knows what to do with his body, with his hands.” But loving a
man is out of the question.

The next poem, “Road Music” continues with the story of Theodore and Henry:

There should be just one safe place
in the world, I mean
this world. People get hurt here. People fall down and stay down and I don’t like
the way the song goes.
You, the moon. You, the road. You, the little flowers
by the side of the road. You keep singing along to that song I hate. Stop singing.

The problem is that there is no safe place and that is the tragedy of Crush. If one is unlucky
enough to have sadness or anguish or stigma, they will always, no matter what, have a
connection to it for the entirety of their lives:

A man takes his sadness down to the river and throws in in the river
but then he’s still left
with the river. A man takes his sadness and throws it away
but then he’s still left with his hands.113

---

Siken and the speaker have a relationship to gay shame and no matter what happens between them, other men, or the world they are indefinitely connected to that shame; no amount of “coming out” or coming to terms can save them.

“You are Jeff”

I
There are two twins on motorbikes but one is farther up the road, beyond the hairpin turn, or just before it, depending on which twin you are in love with at the time. Do not choose sides yet. It is still to your advantage to remain impartial. Both motorbikes are shiny red and both boys have perfect teeth, dark hair, soft hands. The one in front will want to take you apart, and slowly. His deft and stubby fingers searching every shank and lock for weaknesses. You could love this boy with all your heart. The other brother only wants to stitch you back together. The sun shines down. It’s a beautiful day. Consider the hairpin turn. Do not choose sides yet.114

As the poem begins, the speaker must decide between two seemingly identical brothers named Jeff: “Both motorbikes are red and both boys have perfect teeth, dark hair, and soft hands. The one in front will want to take you apart, and slowly… The other brother only wants to stitch you back together.” Physical touch can be both damaging (“throw,” “tear,” and “murder”) and curative (“stitch you back together”). Sometimes, as in the instance cited, the curative is also damaging, in a very specific way. There is a false dichotomy here, which seems to echo Siken’s attempt to blur the lines between Jeffs via address. Ultimately, the speaker cycles through the same scenarios over and over again, switching between the worst- and best-case scenarios, from fantasy to nightmare.

114 The alignment of these sections from “You are Jeff,” beginning in Siken on page 50, are displayed slightly different than what I have here; this is due to font restrictions. I have tried to stay as faithful to Siken’s intent as possible, though.
The poem rapidly switches from realism to surrealism, the mundane to the extraordinary. Throughout the twenty-four-section poem, we are asked to reevaluate everything, from setting to speaker and addressee. The characters are thrust in and out of mostly everyday settings including a highway, grocery store, suburban home, bar, and heaven (the notable exception). The reader is not given a reason for these shifting settings or why they suddenly vanish or return. As a reader, I find myself switching between the role of bystander and indirect addressee, all while trying to find a logical explanation for the words in front of me. The speaker tries to distance themself from the shame they experience, but it always comes back.

The poem goes to great lengths to show that language is flawed. Words can be manipulated and used to lie. They can be unintelligible (“you cannot understand him,” Section 20). In using just a few words, the speaker can change the situations of their story, again and again. Thus, sense and understanding is indefinitely kept out of reach of the reader. Because of this, what is the use of language? Words can damage but the mind can distract you from the pain: "You’re in the hallway / again, and you open the door, and if you’re ready you’ll see it, but / maybe one part of your mind decided that the other parts aren’t ready" (Section 10). The rest of this section flips through various unsettling images within a hotel; "it's a puzzle: each piece, each room..." The mind seems to be preventing us, as predicted, from the truth. We are not yet ready, but still we "put our ear to the wound that whispers," waiting for the answer. The "wound that whispers" is the heart. We know the speaker is not talking — they are not ready to choose — and yet "someone’s doing all the talking but no one’s lips move" (Section 16). The heart still speaks. That is, the speaker is perseverating on the question at hand: whom do they love?
The speaker in “You are Jeff” explores the themes of love, identity, and shame. One way to approach the poem is to think about it as the story of one man's struggle with a blossoming homosexuality. There are two brothers (our relationship to them varies) and the speaker (presumably, the younger brother), watches the older brother and fantasizes about him, other men, and scenarios in which they love, are loved, and are hurt because of their desire.

You are playing cards with three Jeffs. One if your father, one is your brother, and the other is your current boyfriend. All of them have seen you naked and heard you talking in your sleep. Your boyfriend Jeff gets up to answer the phone. To them he is a mirror, but to you he is a room. *Phone’s for you*, Jeff says. Hey! It’s Uncle Jeff, who isn’t really you uncle, but you can’t talk right now, one of the Jeffs has put his tongue in your mouth. Please let it be the right one.

In section seven above, the lines between the speaker and the father, brother, uncle, and boyfriend blur, but somehow remain distinct, if barely. Although three of these men have seen the speaker naked, the reader assumes each was within a different context. Yet, to the father and brother, whom we have no reason to believe are not heterosexual, the boyfriend is nothing more than a mirror of the speaker. He is another man and this is not acceptable, a point driven home by Siken’s use of the incest taboo: “One of the Jeffs has put his tongue in your mouth. Please let it be the right one.” As we find out in section thirteen, love is not the wholesome enterprise the world would have us believe it is: “Let’s say you’ve swallowed a bad thing and now it’s got its hands inside you. This is the essence of love and failure.” Like Crane and Gunn, Siken posits love as precarious. Here, love and failure are compared to making the wrong decision, to taking something inside of you (pun intended), and having it result in a cancer or something equally destructive. Again, in section fifteen, the wrong decision for a motorcyclist can mean death:
“Blood everywhere… the red light hemorrhaging… your lips blue, hands cold… on the last day, while the bruise won’t heal… it’s splitting you in two.”

The relationships in this poem are centrally constructed around decision-making, insecurity, anxiety, and violence. Each brother wants to be the other, and yet both remind each other of themselves. Like the Jeffs that are the same and yet are not. The brothers resent this dynamic, resent each other for being identical and different, and this manifests in a violent desire to both destroy and embrace each other. Consider section four, the speaker appears to be the younger brother and fantasizes about the older brother, watching his back thinking about “memory and fantasy.” The speaker thinks the feeling is reciprocated but neither boys can express their desire and so they resolve to use trickery: “O how he loves you, darling boy. O how, like always, he invents the monsters underneath the bed to get you to sleep next to him, chest to chest or chest to back, the covers drawn around you in an act of faith against the night.” Yet, older Jeff also readies himself, waits for his little brother on the side of the road with a wrench in hand, ready to throw it with intent to hurt: “When [older Jeff] throws the wrench into the air it will catch the light as it spins toward you.” However, the weapon stays afloat, prolonging impact, spinning, anxious, beautiful.

By recognizing that words are fallible, the speaker learns that physical touch can supplement the weakness of words; the same words the Siken drew attention to as resistant to the communication of gay love. However, this expression of love, for the speaker and the lover, does not come without repercussions. The speaker uses the distant “you” to keep themself at bay because they understand that love between men is never safe, not because of the couple, but because of commonplace homophobia: “You just wanted to prove there was one safe place, just
one safe place where you could love him. You have not found that place yet. You have not made that place yet. You are here. You’re still right here” (Section 18).

When juxtaposed with Gunn’s motorcyclists, the obsessiveness with which Siken’s motorcyclists lack understanding or meaning is ironic, and it feels almost elegiac. In “You are Jeff,” the speaker longs for a sense of meaning, but the rhetorical movements of the poem keep the meaning constantly out of reach. Because words are never stable in this poem, Siken does not allow for Gunn’s reading of the motorcyclist as a masculine ideal exuding meaning: “There are twins on motorbikes, but they are not motorbikes.” Siken seems to adapt Gunn’s masculine motorcyclists in a way that challenges the ostensible meaningfulness of masculinity. That is, Siken’s motorcyclists fail to find meaning in their constructed identities because they are fragile and imperfect. It is only in the act of touching another that meaning can be found. Although masculinity plays a significant role in the poetry of Siken, it does so not only as a form of fetishization but also as a form of critique. Whereas in Gunn’s poetry, masculine identity and a sense of purpose intersect in the figure of the motorcyclist, in Siken’s poetry the speaker achieves an identity through the physical touching of another person. The motorcyclists in Jeff are flawed but by being on a motorcycle it allows them to reflect on what they want. For the men watching, it gives them time to reflect on what they are missing (for instance, the boy in the car without a brother who wishes he had a brother). However, being a ‘man’ or masculine is not enough, in and of itself, one needs to live for themselves. Needs to overlook their father and brother judging their lover for being the same. They need to overcome the words that are not being said, and instead act by touching another person. This is where Gunn and Siken agree;
both prefer action over passivity. And this is perhaps the point in lauding the masculine. Unlike Gunn’s motorcyclists, movement here is not a solution.

Older brother Jeff wishes he could open up to his little brother and climb inside their skin: “Jeff is thinking about his brother down the winding road behind him. He is thinking that if only he could cut him open and peel him back and crawl inside this second skin, then he could relive that last mile…” In Gunn’s poetry, masculine identity and purpose is achieved through movement, but Siken’s men flee without direction, searching for answers they may not find — answers they will only find through physical touch. In the above quotation, older brother Jeff actually thinks he will find meaning by moving backwards, even regressing, wishing he were his inexperienced little brother, and therefore having not experienced the thrill of the road yet. Both poets posit action as desirable, but where this action manifests makes all the difference.

By the end of the poem, the speaker learns that love can be expressed even if the words do not exist, and even if the love is taboo. It is physical touch that can overcome these barriers: skin on skin. This experience, finding meaning in touching another, is made clear by the final section of the poem:

24
You’re in a car with a beautiful boy, and he won’t tell you that he loves you, but he loves you. And you feel like you’ve done something terrible, like robbed a liquor store, or swallowed pills, or shoveled yourself a grave in the dirt, and you’re tired. You’re in a car with a beautiful boy, and you’re trying not to tell him that you love him, and you’re trying to choke down the feeling, and you’re trembling, but he reaches over and he touches you, like a prayer for which no words exist, and you feel your heart taking root in your body, like you’ve discovered something you don’t even have a name for.
The first couple of lines continue to show the speaker unable to accept their sexuality. There is a boy. The boy loves him even if he cannot communicate it. This should and would be a wonderful thing, but the speaker still feels like he has taken the bad thing, the cancer, inside themself, and he is tired of feeling this way. Soon, the boy touches him, and this insignificant act affects the speaker significantly. It does not matter that it cannot be put into words because it, love, exists despite the discomfort and violence. For Siken, intimate contact between men is passionate and even magical. While moments of pure bliss are rare in Crush, this section stands as a testament to the speaker’s hopeful belief in the gentle and transformative potential of love between men. Yet, these moments are rare because Siken posits male-male encounters as fleeting and impossible to sustain because the social-political framework of the world not only resists, but fights against, them.

“Snow and Dirty Rain”

In “Snow and Dirty Rain,” the final poem, the speaker revisits several of the themes from earlier poems in the collection: naming, language, and the gay experience in a world doggedly against gayness. While the speaker’s interest in naming\textsuperscript{115} resumes in a manner not very different from before (“I’m thinking My plant, his chair, / the ashtray that we bought together. I’m thinking This is where / we live.”) it quickly evolves into a pointed observation about when and where it is okay in our world to embrace the love of another man. The answer? Never and nowhere.

\textsuperscript{115} While the speaker is frequently playing around with names and naming, the best example of this obsession is in the prose poem, “Saying Your Names,” 33. The speaker drifts through dozens and dozens of names and the various identities that one person can occupy at any given time — including but not limited to “your name like a song I sing to myself” and “names I call you behind your back, sour and delicious, secret and unrepeatable.”
The speaker, as they have said before, desires to build a place for them and their lover to live happily and safely, but in these final poem the only place for this is unintelligible and manufactured:

I crawled out the window and ran into the woods. I had to make up all the words myself. The way they taste, the way they sound in the air. I passed through the narrow gate, stumbled in, stumbled around for a while, and stumbled back out. I made this place for you. A place for you to love me.

It is an unrecognizable place: “If this isn't a kingdom then I don't know what is. / So how would you catalog it?” Is it not a kingdom because that would suggest some semblance of authority, something which speaker possesses very little? They continue, “I was trying to describe the kingdom, but the letters / kept smudging as I wrote them…” and then, “Let me name the stars for you. Let me take you there.” They add, “Explaining will get us nowhere.” Wherever this place is it does not seem to be comprehensible with the language that we currently possess.

If the place does not exist, then they have no option but to embrace happiness, if not safety, for however long it presents itself: “We have not touched the stars, nor are we forgiven…” What we have is “a gentleness that comes, / not from the absence of violence, but despite / the abundance of it.” In this world where chaos and violence reign, a soft touch can become a weapon to keep the darkness at bay.

The speaker gives the lover “the map of [their] heart,” and while it is a “landscape after cruelty,” it is still “a garden,” a place of birth and death, and this place is a “crossroads,” a place where a crucial decision is to be made, carrying with it far-reaching consequences. Luckily, “the
world is no longer mysterious” and “history repeats itself,” so the couple knows how to navigate it. The world may be falling apart but they have each other:

The lawn drowned, the sky on fire,
the gold light falling backward through the glass
of every room. I'll give you my heart to make a place
for it to happen, evidence of a love that transcends hunger.
Is that too much to expect? That I would name the stars
for you? That I would take you there?

The two men know what the world is like to men that love each other but the physical touch between them can soften, even transform them into something less jaded or cold: “...The splash / of my tongue melting you like a sugar cube? We’ve read / the back of the book, we know what’s going to happen.” In other words, the relationship will fall apart — the world will make sure of that — so they might as well enjoy it while it exists: “The fields burned, the land destroyed, the lovers left / broken in the brown dirt. And then it's gone.” Even as the expression of love is tainted by violence, it continues to provide a safe port.

The way you slam your body into mine reminds me
I'm alive, but monsters are always hungry, darling,
and they're only a few steps behind you, finding
the flaw, the poor weld, the place where we weren't stitched up quite right, the place they could almost slip right into through if the skin wasn't trying to keep them out, to keep them here, on the other side of the theater where the curtain keeps rising.

The lovers have been damaged by the world, but have recovered for the most part, minus the scars, but it is precisely these imperfect spots that risk an opening for the world to tear them apart. The dark world has continually attempted to destroy the speaker, to get inside, to tear the lovers apart; it has jaded their perspective on love, but despite this, for the moment, they resolve

116 From “Dirty Valentine,” 4; and “Little Beast,” 5, respectively.
to be better: “I wanted to hurt you / but the victory is that I could not stomach it.” Although the
world declares, “We have / swallowed him up,” the speaker chooses not to pass on the trauma
to the partner. Gay shame does not manifest in this collection as an inability to discuss gay
relationship but a willingness or ability to do so only when the relationship is short lived and
tumultuous.

**Conclusion**

In response to criticism and inquiries about this pessimistic take on the world Siken has
responded: “In an early interview, right after *Crush* was published, I was asked why my
aesthetic vision was so violent and grim. I answered, truly without guile or hostility, ‘What
world do you live in? Because I want to live there.’ It seems to me that everything in the world
is actively trying to kill everything else in the world, on every level, and always has. I think we
live in a world of palpable abrasion… poetry seems like an arena where I could investigate
these abrasions.”¹¹⁷ In a nutshell, *Crush* and Siken shows us that the contemporary experience
of the gay man remains marred by shame and a difficulty to discuss sexuality. Whether it is
pronouns or word contamination, Siken shows us that English resists positive gay
representations. With that in mind, *Crush* is an exploration in finding a way to make that
possible, even as journey itself resists and irreparably damages the speaker and lovers.
Relationships between men are rewarding and extraordinary, but one must accept, according to
the tradition of gay shame, that they are fleeting for the world as it is today and a hundred years
ago resists them.

EPILOGUE

“This is why homophobia is a terrible evil: it disguises itself as concern while it is inherently hate.”\textsuperscript{118}

1917 — Henry Gerber, an early pioneer of gay rights, is committed to a mental institution for being gay.
1924 — Sodomy is illegal in every state. Henry Gerber founds the Society for Human Rights, the first documented gay rights organization in the United States, although lesbians and bisexuals are banned.
1925 — The Society for Human Rights dissolves. The Examiner writes an article about the organization under the headline “Strange Sex Cult Exposed.”
1952 — The American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual lists “homosexuality” as a sociopathic disorder.
1953 — Pres. Eisenhower bans gay men and lesbians from working for the federal government.
1969 — The Stonewall Riots (often cited as the beginning of sexual liberation)
1973 — The American Psychiatric Association removes “homosexuality” from their diagnostic manual.
1978 — Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected to a political office, is murdered.
1982 — Reagan administration calls HIV/AIDS a “gay plague.”
1983 — Bobby Griffith jumps to their death.
1993 — Pres. Bill Clinton signs “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”
1997 — Comedian Ellen DeGeneres comes out as a lesbian to harsh criticism and the eventual death of her television sitcom.
1998 — Matthew Shepard is brutally murdered.
2000 — Vermont becomes the first state to legalize civil-unions between same-sex couples.
2004 — The first legal same-sex marriage in the United States takes place in Massachusetts.
2005 — California becomes the first state to pass a bill allowing marriage between same-sex couples, but it is quickly vetoed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.
2008 — The California Supreme Court rules that privileging opposite-sex couples for marriage is unconstitutional.
2015 — Same-sex marriage is legalized in all fifty states.
2016 — The Center for Disease Control publishes a study that shows gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are nearly five times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth.
2019 — Conversion therapy remains legal in over half of the country.

\textsuperscript{118} From Tyler Oakley, \textit{Binge} (Gallery Books, 2016). Oakley is the most prominent social-rights advocate and LGB+ spokesperson on the internet and has been for years, and while his work is not “academic,” it undoubtedly shapes the perceptions of Millennials and Gen X-ers on the LGB+ movement.
While this timeline provides a brief overview of significant moments in the journey to sexual liberation and contextualizes the period in which these three poets live(d), it also points out something that seems too often overlooked: romantic and sexual relations between people of the same sex continue to seem transgressive and, in turn, risky. Hart Crane died by their shame. Thom Gunn eventually came to terms with their shame, but it took its toll on their life. We have no hard evidence to suggest that Richard Siken struggled with the closet, but their poetry as well as interviews, reveal that their perspective on the world and sex has been greatly shaped by sexual stigma. If Crane is a testament to the early twentieth century gay poet, and Gunn (as Woods insists) is a testament to the transitional gay poet, then, I argue, that Siken stands as a representative of the current struggle gay poets (and, more broadly, gay men) continue to face. While Siken’s poetry is proud, it is by no means unaffected by gay shame; Crush explores the intersection of sex and death in a violent world, and it would be irresponsible to argue that this has nothing to do with perceptions on the poet’s sexuality.

Over two decades after the publication of Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory, the following line remains radical: “Even when coupled with a toleration of minority sensualities, heteronormativity has a totalizing tendency that can only be overcome by imagining a necessarily and desirably queer world.”\(^{119}\) It remains so because, to imagine a world that is necessarily and desirably queer, Michael Warner flips the script on heteronormativity. Whereas conservative types argue that queerness is unnatural and harmful, Warner calls attention to the unnaturalness and harm of heteronormativity. That is, no one is born preconditioned into the straitjacket of heteronormativity, but one has it imposed upon

them. In effect, one is born queer but becomes normative. This is still a radical idea (despite scientific backing) because queerness remains stigmatized and perceived as abnormal. Again: it has been over two decades. And have we actually moved more than incrementally toward achieving a desirably queer world?

José Esteban Muñoz might charge my scholarship with a kind of disabling pessimism — but why does pessimism need to disable? In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz seeks to intervene in “the dominant academic climate” that dismisses “political idealism” and “shout[s] down utopia.” Muñoz argues that while the academy rejects optimism as naive, in the author’s mind, academic pessimism is the problem for it is too “easy,” “stunt[ing],” and “resoundingly anticritical.”120 Queer pessimism “disabl[es]” us.121 With this in mind, queer pessimism is the opposite of reparative reading because it merely points out the progress we have not made.

With that said, I believe that this project has used pessimism in three key ways: (1) To evaluate claims that sexual liberation, especially since achieving national marriage equality, is actively here. (2) To redirect our attention to the progress that has been made even if it could stand to continue. (3) To understand that despite the progress that has been made, shame around nonnormative sexuality remains a central structuring aspect of the lives and careers of gay men and lesbians. Merely hoping for this to not be the case does not make it so.

Muñoz asks us to defer to the future: “Queerness is not yet here… We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”

121 Muñoz, 12.
122 Muñoz, 9.
Thus, “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on a potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”\footnote{Muñoz, 1.} If queerness, and all that it signifies to Muñoz, is on the horizon, at what point are we to achieve it? To borrow the language of Lauren Berlant, is Muñoz’s queerness another form of cruel optimism?\footnote{Lauren Berlant, \textit{Cruel Optimism} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).} Is queerness simply an endlessly deferred promise for a better future? Muñoz asserts that the victories the gay community has achieved, such as marriage equality and the right to serve in the military, are “in direct opposition to the idealist thought that [the author] associate[s] as endemic to forward-dawning queerness.”\footnote{José Esteban Muñoz, “Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in Face of Gay Pragmatism,” in \textit{Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity} (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 21.} Are we to listen to Muñoz's call to hold out against pragmatic gay politics in hope that queerness will one day be more than a faint glow on the horizon? Does that seem anymore critically productive than desiring, as some anti-relational queer theorists do, a complete reconstruction of our current homophobic social-political framework?

Forty years ago, in \textit{The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry}, Martin suggested that the coding and donning of facades by gay writers would disappear because of sexual liberation. Central to this idea, of course, is the notion that sexual equality had been or soon would be wholly achieved. Obviously, this is not the case. While I would love to embrace a more optimistic outlook on the world, the fact remains that it is not my experience, nor the experience of many, many queer folk, and thus it would be irresponsible to do so.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Wojnarowicz, David. Untitled (One Day This Kid...). 1990.


