OUT OF TIME: QUEER EXCESS, TRAUMA, AND THE ART OF NATION-MAKING

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

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Washington, DC
April 8, 2013
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the ways depictions of queer trauma work to cultivate a desirable citizenship. The term “heterocapitalism” describes a national ethos that demands maximum productivity in as little time as possible, a drive to master time itself, to the end of nation-state futurity. Those lives that fail to (re)produce in a timely manner are queer, and as lives that fall outside such a massive social project, they are abject and are beyond the scope of social inclusion. Significantly, however, this thesis argues that these lives are not only beyond the fold of life but that they actively pose a threat to the well-being and futurity of the heterocapitalist nation-state. Finally, taking up Foucault’s second epoch of power, this thesis contends that cinematic depictions of violence to queer bodies distribute these images as “obstacle-signs” that serve to reinstate and reinscribe normative laws of embodiment: viewers, horrified by the violence that queerness invokes, are effectively deterred from committing a similar crime against the state.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writing of this thesis has been a challenging process, trying both my academic and personal resolve, and I have many people to thank upon its completion. I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Dana Luciano, for her skillful critique, patience, and encouragement. I would also like to thank Dr. Pamela Fox, my academic and professional mentor, for her selfless guidance and support throughout my time at Georgetown University, and for modeling the type of educator I hope to one day become.

I would not have been able to finish this thesis without the support of my co-workers and family. I would like to extend a special thanks to Dave Winder, Casey Krall, Nicole Escuadro, and Libby Edwards; your generosity of spirit, patience, and support gave me the final push I needed to complete this project. Allison Tojo, Christa Anderson, and Hulee Heck, I thank you for constantly offering me perspective and joy. To my brother, Andy: our critical conversations and your unwavering belief in my abilities have fueled my progress in ways you cannot know. Mom and Dad, though we view the world from very different perspectives, I have always known you were in my corner, and for that I thank you.

Ultimately, I dedicate this thesis to Sonia Valencia, whose unwavering optimism and support finally let me reveal all of my colors. I couldn’t have done this without you.
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INTRODUCTION

Early cinematic representations of homosexuality often positioned queerness as comic relief or in contrast to the socially appropriate heterosexual unity. When Hollywood production codes of the 1930s banned overt reference to or identification of homosexuality, filmmakers deployed stereotypes of homosexual gender performance, such as the butch woman or the pansy, taking an angle of “connotation rather than denotation” in order to suggest but not explicitly name queerness for its deviance. Eventually, Hollywood began to amend its production codes and two of the most famous representations of homosexuality, *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) and *The Boys in the Band* (1970), portrayed queer people in urban spaces and/or employed at middle-to-upper class jobs (Benshoff and Griffin 6-8). However, since the 1960’s and 1970’s, Hollywood representations of homosexuality have not changed very much. Despite New Queer Cinema, an independent film movement dedicated to providing more nuanced representations of queer lives, Hollywood is still producing narratives where queer characters are devious criminals or victims of sensationalized trauma, still often in upper-class urban or suburban locations, such as in the 1993 film *Philadelphia*, 1998’s *American Beauty*, or 2008’s *Milk*. Those queer bodies which do manage to be represented outside this traumatic trope live highly normative, unthreatening, consumable lives; consider, for instance, 2010’s *The Kids Are All Right*, which features two upper-middle class white cisgender lesbians who own a home and are raising two children. The plot revolves around the chaos that ensues after one of these women begins sleeping with a man and is propped up by the cultural capital offered by California, Whole Foods, and environmentally sustainable landscape architecture.
These formulaic representations of queerness, either as victims of trauma or nearly-successful assimilationists, pose this question: Who is being represented, and who is doing the representing? In other words, are these films simply (re)presentations of their producers? And why? Texts structure a power dynamic wherein most autonomy and authority rests with their creators, and the Hollywood blockbuster adds an additional burden: in order for a film to be successful, a broad audience must be privileged, sometimes at the expense of the writer’s vision, and often at the expense of the subjects being represented. These very visible, highly funded films are produced, packaged, and marketed according to a target audience. My inquiry takes the representation of queer trauma in film as its departure, and asks after the effect of these representations on their viewership. In this study, I will propose that the repeated representation and circulation of queer trauma serves two purposes: one, to materialize the queer body as always already traumatized in the cultural imaginary, and two, in doing so, to both cultivate and reify the lifestyles and embodiments of a normative audience.

The development of cinematic representations of queerness is simply a part of the larger discourse on sexuality and normalcy that began to develop, in its modern form, during the 19th century. In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Michel Foucault describes how sex became a cultural and political phenomenon and the primary avenue for knowledge and control; to know a person’s sexual habits and desires was to know the “truth” of that person and became the most effective way to understand and coerce a person’s effects. Since it is not the body but the effects of the body that are the object of biopower, sexuality was no longer considered “a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check” but rather an “effect of the body” which power produces, an effect which “proliferat[es], innovat[es], annex[es], creat[es], and penetrat[es]
bodies in an increasingly detailed way” (History of Sexuality 107). Thus, to be recognized as such, sexuality must be a finely-tuned and managed product, regulated to and measured against “normative” habits and behaviors. Foucault argues the proliferation of discourse specifically around sexuality was “governed by the endeavor to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation” (108). These desired habits and behaviors are encouraged and actively cultivated, whereas the undesirable habits are left to languish, or, as some have argued¹, actively and systematically excluded. The development of medical and social discourse provided not only language to name the degree to which bodies adhered to ideal standards of sexual practices and desires, but also imbued sexuality with meaning and moral imperative, where engaging in normative sexual practices, i.e. for reproduction, became a matter of morality, and this moral imperative was necessary and useful for internalization and reiteration.

In 1993, Judith Butler took up Foucault’s historicist perspectives, as well as Lacanian psychoanalysis, and considered the way that normative sexual embodiment and practices was not only a matter of being a good citizen but of being a citizen subject at all. In what would become one of the foundational texts in contemporary queer theory, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” begins articulating the ways in which normative embodiment determines location in a socio-symbolic order, which in turn serves to make reiterate materiality. What I find most useful to my argument, however, is the contingency of subjectivity upon normative embodiment and identification.

¹ see Achille Mbembe’s “Necropolitics”
For Foucault, the socio-political subject is not subject but *subjected*, an effect of power, and he is subject to the degree he embodies normative behaviors and epistemologies. Butler expands this conception of subjectification into identificatory practices, wherein citizenship is not only sociopolitical but cultural and psychic, and to be subject is to “qualify… for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” (2). Since Foucault argues that sex is understood to be the core of a person’s truth, and the understanding of which the most efficient way to order and control a social body, cultural intelligibility, “the speaking ‘I,’” is only possible through normative embodiment, or in this case, by virtue of having gone through a process of assuming a normatively sexed body (3). Using regulatory ideals, the sociosymbolic order uses “a set of normativising injunctions” to seal the borders of sex (or race or class), and the life which fails to normatively embody, which lies beyond the realm of intelligibility, threatens the subject with psychosis, psychic unlivability, and abjection. The materiality of the body will be inextricably linked to the norm, and the nonnormitive body will similarly immediately conjure the criminality of infraction of and abjection from the law.

The cultural surveillance of sexual practice, then, is crucial for the successful integration and reproduction of “healthy” sexuality and thus a healthy and (re)productive citizenship. Bodies must be empowered, organized, and arranged for their most “effective” uses, and many scholars have examined how temporal schemas are the primary matrix of arrangement for surveillance of bodies in general, and sexual bodies and practices specifically. Drawn from religious orders and armies, temporal schemas were applied in spaces as varied as the factory and the school so that “time [could penetrate] the body and with it all the meticulous controls of biopower” (*Discipline & Punish* 152). Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the rhetoric Foucault uses to
describe this temporal organization of bodies specifically suggests the relationship between coercion and industry and production. “ Increas[ing] the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility)” and ultimately exerting control requires unrelenting temporal regulation, not only commanding tasks be performed a particular way, but by “constituting a totally useful time… [through] constant supervision, the pressure of supervisors, [and] the elimination of anything that might disturb or distract” from the task at hand (Discipline and Punish 138, 151). Foucault makes clear the imperative to extract as much labor from a given time period as possible as part of an “anatomo-chronological schema of behavior that seeks to capitalize the time of individuals, accumulate it in their bodies…[and] to organize profitable durations” (153, 157). Bodies must be adjusted en masse toward “temporal imperatives,” biopolitical objectives that emphasize “collective and obligatory rhythm[s], imposed from the outside; … control[ling] the development and [the act’s] stages from the inside,” (Discipline and Punish 152). As the assembly line is organized according to regimented phases of labor, so are bodies arranged in time.

Many scholars have argued that temporal regulation to produce normative sexuality sustains a heterocapitalist project, and that it is in the state’s best interests to ensure the constant internalization, reification, and citation of normative sexuality. Foucault himself begins his inquiry by pondering this very question:

All this garrulous attention which has us in a stew over sexuality, is it not motivated by one basic concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative?
I still do not know whether this is the ultimate objective. But this much is certain: reduction has not been the means employed for trying to achieve it. (History of Sexuality 37).

Though he may not have known in the moment of the above excerpt, his observations in the last essay of The History of Sexuality, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” suggests capitalism would have never come to fruition without these invested, insidious mechanisms of power: “This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of population to economic processes” (141).

Because the object of biopower is to capture and direct the capacities of the body, ultimately, by imposing these temporal rhythms to sustain and increase productivity, the disciplines define the relationship the body has with the object it manipulates. These “obligatory prescriptions” create a “body-weapon, body-tool, body-machine complex” whose only defined function is according to that obligatory prescription. Butler argues that for Foucault, “the soul is taken as an instrument of power through which the body is cultivated and formed. In a sense, [the soul] acts as a power-laden schema that produces and actualizes the body itself.” (33-34). Disciplinary power becomes a “coercive link” between the body and its “apparatus of production,” in order that it might accumulate time in individuals that is available for use and control, ultimately to turn a profit. If the body is a means of both material and human production, biopower mitigates the relationship the subject has with his or her own body. In the sense that reproduction produces (human) capital, it is in the nation-state’s best interest to have a direct
investment in the (re)productive process, to secure that it is operating in such a way that produces the best possible product for the state’s future enterprises.

Judith Halberstam, in *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, notes the cultural privileging of stability, longevity, and futurity, as well as the condemnation of those who live their lives not as perpetually-delayed teleological processes but in spurts and gasps of activity and feeling, or those people who do not have access to such normative timelines. Halberstam notes “queers, AIDS victims, and drug addicts,” among others, who inhabit a temporal space that is excluded from the “normal,” and this method of living is deemed “immature, and even dangerous” (4). Halberstam observes that “notions of the normal…may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality” and ruled according to and alongside “strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples,” and even such daily activities as waking and sleeping schedules are based on perceived needs of child health. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman takes up the figure of the Child as emblem of the reproductive futurity imbued with such social and moral imperative it is “impossible to refuse” (2). These normative timelines, what Elizabeth Freeman refers to as “domestic time,” privilege and foster a middle-to-upper class positionality by imbuing naturality and desirability into particular schedules of waking and sleeping, child rearing, and work days, but also futurity, and are characterized by perpetual planning and accounting for/attempting to know the unknowable, wherein capital is considered immortal (5).

In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman elaborates the ways in which these temporal schemas are normalized and imbued with moral imperative. The naturalization of temporal schemas, which Freeman terms “chrononormativity,” uses time to
organize “individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” while giving false meaning to those whom these temporal arrangements privilege, much in the way social and medical discourse provides meaning and morality for normative sexual expression (3).

These temporal figurations include socially acceptable timelines for careers, marriage, child-bearing, and death, and Freeman brings attention to the ways the state is fiscally implicated in (and benefits from) these temporal categorizations through events such as taxation, social-security registration, and marriage licensure: “Corporations and nation-states seek to adjust the pace of living in the places and people they take on: to quicken up and/or synchronize some elements of everyday existence, while offering up other spaces and activities as leisurely, slow, sacred, cyclical, and so on and thereby repressing or effacing alternative strategies of organizing time.” “Class enables its bearers with what looks like ‘natural’ control over their body and its effects, or the diachronic means of sexual and social reproduction” (19). Recalling Foucault’s assessment that subjectivity only occurs relative to the degree of normative embodiment, Freeman uses Bourdieu to assert that “subjectivity emerges in part … through mastery of certain forms of time,” and “institutionally and culturally enforced rhythms, or timings, shape flesh into legible, acceptable embodiment” (4). In the eyes of the state, a socioeconomically “productive” life is the only life available at all.

Summarizing much of the critical labor performed in queer theory in the last two decades, Halberstam notes the divorce of “queer” from the lived experience resultant from embodied homosexual practices, and goes on to define “queer” as “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (6). If the object of power is to maximize production within a given time frame, as Foucault discusses
in *Discipline and Punish*, and the essence of a subject is both her productive and reproductive capacity, then those who fail to produce human capital for the state in a timely manner are chronoreproductive failures. Freeman argues that “as denizens of times out of joint, queers are a subjugated class,” even if/while occupying other positionalities of relative privilege. To this formulation I would add that it is not only assuming a normatively sexed body which is a requirement for subjectivity, but a body that is on time; that is, a body which works toward a specific national futurity that espouses and cultivates heterosexual capitalist ideals. Of course, there are many who fail to live a chrononormatively productive life, and this is the basis upon which I use and define the term “queer,” as any body which fails to be chrononormatively (re)productive to a heterocapitalist, nationalist end.

Those bodies which fail to assume toward the capitalist future of the state fail to register in the symbolic order, and, as Butler argues, exist in the realm of the abject. The subject is initiated into intelligibility according to the degree to which he identifies and reflects the principal, organizing and normative “image” of ideal embodiment. Identifying with the image is always a measuring game, and it is the ego’s duty to maintain that illusion of completion, to continue to misrecognize and identify with a cohesive image, a pure normative embodiment, that does not actually exist. As Butler posits, the perpetual reproduction and citation of this misrecognition produces a fissure in the primacy of the norm, from where abject bodies, “those who are not yet subjects, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject,” emerge (Butler 3).

Failing to normatively signify is a failure to be an intelligible subject, resulting in expulsion from this normative symbolic order. As the norm is reiterated and recited, however, so
again are those abject lives which misrecognition produces, “bound to the ‘human’ as its constitutive outside” (Butler 8). Insofar as the definition of normal necessarily produces the abnormal, queer visibility is capitalism’s bastard child, or, in Judith Butler’s words, “its own founding repudiation” (3). Given life outside the confines of the family economy, made possible thanks to capitalism and the growth of manufacturing industry, queer people are simultaneously disavowed for their presumed inability to produce and reproduce heterocapitalist people and values (Freeman 28). Thus, as the abject is produced over and again only through the delineation of subject, so does capitalism produce the possibility of life outside its regulatory temporal schemas, always (re)producing the possibility of its very undoing.

Butler too draws a line of comparison between her formulation of abjection and the Lacanian real, stating that what “is foreclosed or repudiated within psychoanalytic terms is precisely what may not reenter the field of the social without threatening psychosis, that is, the dissolution of the subject itself” (243, note 2). The Real is the excess which resists symbolization, but brushes with the real are what has traditionally constituted, psychically speaking, definitions of trauma (Lacan, “Tuché and Automaton” 5). Given Freud’s definition of trauma as a penetration of the protective barrier that distinguishes an individual subject from the outside world, the abject, as that constitutive outside of the subject, becomes that which threatens the subject.

I will argue, in Chapter 1, that queer bodies, as the outside of symbolizable life, both in the confession of embodied infraction and the violence withstood to material bodies, become in and of themselves a trauma threatening to undo normative life. As beings which symbolize not a subject-position but deviance from the law, these bodies exist in the “representative, scenic,
signifying, public, collective” epoch of power that Foucault argues was usurped by modern biopower. However, it is this semio-technique of power which enables images of queer trauma to circulate and stand to warn the normative citizen away from similar infractions.

In her reading of Robert Graves’ poem “It’s a Queer Time,” Elizabeth Freeman notes that queer time gives rise to alternative histories that “are more than reveries; they are moments of extreme bodily sensation.” Freud argues that the experience of traumatic neuroses is a retroactive effort to (re)construct the experience of actual physical violation, in order to prepare the psyche. Through the repetition and recirculation of these traumatized queer bodies, or what I will later discuss as “object-symbols,” in film, I will argue that these representations manipulate a lived history of queer trauma in order to discursively materialize the queer body always already traumatized, and that these cycling images of dissolution serve as a site for re-identification for normative audiences.

Finally, in Chapter 2, I will take as my case study Boys Don’t Cry, Kimberly Peirce’s 1999 film depicting the murder of Brandon Teena, a young transgender man living in rural Nebraska. Departure and excess are fundamental to the concept of trauma and the “constitutive outside” to heterocapitalism. As these concepts are central motifs to this film, I will show how my formulation of queer trauma appears in Boys Don’t Cry as the threat of subject dissolution.
CHAPTER I

FROM FOUCALUT TO FILM: TRACING THE MANAGEMENT OF EXCESS BODIES

For Foucault, the penal reforms of the 17th and 18th centuries arose from the need to develop more efficient means of punishing the ever-evolving property illegalities to which industry and production gave rise. In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Foucault notes that the growth of industry and capitalism would have been impossible without the systems of power which enabled them to take such a foothold, and in turn, capitalism helped cement these systems of power and organization in the social body. Capitalism, in its most essential terms, demands the extraction of the most profit from the fewest resources possible. This process hinges on the production of excess labor, or what Marx refers to as “surplus labor,” and its production is always a crisis of time. Surplus labor is the amount of labor beyond that which is needed to procure the resources to sustain that labor, and in order to extract this labor, labor time must be manipulated to its most efficient pace. This surplus labor is what the capitalist extracts in order to ensure the exchange value of the goods is greater than the resources required in its production. A successful capitalist reduces excess in time and materials on one end of production in order to increase excess in the form of profit on the other.

For the capitalist, excess becomes a threat when it represents lost capital gain. As I have shown, queer lives embody this excess: as sexual bodies, they fail to make “productive” use of their (re)productive potential. In this chapter, I intend to trace the path of excess, and consider the ways the epochs of power Foucault describes in *Discipline & Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* represent the increasing threat, and the need to mitigate and eliminate the threat,
of an unproductive, potentially destructive “useless” energy. First, I will posit that queer bodies, as beings which cannot symbolically register, are in and of themselves a constitutive excess and traumatic threat to the normative psyche. Then, I will show how these lives embody the excess that classical sovereign forms of power shed and become the constitutive outside to the normative heterocapitalist psyche, and, through the repetition and circulation of images of physical trauma, are used to cultivate that normative subjectivity. Finally, I will explore how the circulation and reiteration of these images of queer trauma serve to discursively materialize the queer body as always already traumatized, still in the name of encouraging desired subjectivities while letting the undesirables languish.

**Queer Bodies, Traumatic Bodies**

In order to discuss the ways queer bodies, as bodies out of use and out of time, become a traumatic threat to the continuity of heterocapitalist subjectivity, it is crucial to note the way the abject is always already tied to the subject, and we can understand this best by first examining psychoanalytic constructions of subjectivity. For Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, consciousness emerges as a result of a mental protective barrier, which, as a result of constantly receiving stimuli, becomes hardened and immune to the impact of external stimuli and differentiates consciousness from external stimuli and matter (607). Though this protective barrier serves to protect the consciousness from stimuli that would overwhelm it, the consciousness only exists as a result of differentiation from the world without, and as a subject position can only exist by virtue of what it is not. Lacan takes up the matter of differentiation
and separation and argues that the child becomes a “socially elaborated” being, or subject, by virtue of a severing from the mother initiated by the Oedipal crisis (“The Mirror Stage” 79). For both Freud and Lacan, subjectivity demands a recognizable departure and differentiation, irrevocably tying the subject to the space from which it came.

Lacan refers to that pre-Oedipal place from which the subject comes, but to which he may never turn, an “impossible encounter,” as the real. The intrusion of the symbolic order, marked by language and the dictates of kinship relations, propels the child from the chaos of the real into ordered sociality (Lacan, “The Function and Field” 229). For Lacan, the order of the symbolic hinges upon constructing relationships between one symbol and the next, and moving along the chain. It is fair and important to note that, as a social construct that hinges on ordering meaning in relation to events, time has no place in the disordered real; as a concept which ascribes relational meaning between events, time is only relevant to the symbolic. The real is a disordered, atemporal chaos that, even after a subject’s entry into the symbolic order, remains a present and constant force that both anchors and threatens sociality.

As I mentioned in my introduction, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler draws a comparison between the assumption of a subject position and cultural recognition and inclusion. Further, she also demonstrates the similarities between her conception of the abject, which describes “certain abject zones within sociality,” and the Lacanian register of the real. Like the real, the abject “also deliver[s] the threat [of the dissolution of the subject], constituting zones of uninhabitability which a subject fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of
psychotic dissolution” (243, note 2). As I have discussed, queer bodies occupy this site of abjection due to their failure to contribute to the normatively heteroreproductive family unit that sustains capitalism. As bodies that fail to maximize productive time, I would argue that temporal productivity and failure demarcates the central border between psychic livability and social abjection.

How is it, though, that queer bodies become a traumatic threat to heterocapitalist subjectivity? If we briefly revisit psychoanalytic constructions of consciousness, both Freud’s and Lacan’s models suggest that it is by virtue of an other that the subject comes to be; a subject is defined by what it has left and is no longer. Butler argues that “figures of homosexualized abjection must be repudiated for sexed positions to be assumed,” (109) but, like the retroactive acknowledgment of the real, that repudiation can only take place after a prior identification; that is, the repudiation is over and again a disavowal. The subject’s very subjectivity depends on an inverse relationship with what it left. However, when that boundary between the symbolic and the real, the subject and the abject, is permeated, a threat to mental and bodily integrity occurs in the form of trauma.

Freud first begins figuring trauma as an overflow of stimuli that the ego cannot redirect and represses, causing neurosis, and later goes on to describe as traumatic “any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield [of the consciousness]” (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 607). These excitations can occur in the form of a physical threat to bodily or psychic integrity of which the subject cannot make sense, and when the
psyche fails to bind these excitations, “a disturbance analogous to a traumatic neurosis” occurs (611). The hyper-excitement caused by a brush with death threatens the barrier between subjectivity and pre-subjectivity, and recalling that propulsion from homeostasis into the linguistic order of the symbolic is what constitutes subjectivity, the exposure to the limits of language reorders all that follows from it (Lacan, “Tuché and Automaton” 55). Despite the attempts of the psyche to make sense of the traumatic encounter by revisiting it, there will always be an element of trauma that eludes processing and acknowledgment in language.

This brings me to the crux of my argument: queer life embodies that always-already present threatening excess by virtue of their abjection. As abject life, queer bodies are excluded from the symbolic order; as a founding repudiation, there is always something excessive that resists integration into the symbolic order. Queer bodies got into the abject because they fail to be chronoreproductive to a heterocapitalist ends. The threat of queer life resides in the nature of their abjection. Their failure to effectively manipulate “repro-time” puts them out of time and excludes them from subject-citizenry, and they reside in a space that is equally as temporally irrelevant: the real. However, brushes with the queer real threaten to send heterocapitalist citizen-subjects spinning backward out of temporality, the most sacred schema of social organization in Western rationality. Insofar as queerness demarcates the boundaries of subjectivity, the queer body is that unintelligible excess, psychically and culturally, that a heterocapitalist society must conquer in order to thrive.
Foucault and Old Forms

This desire to eliminate threatening excess is not a new phenomenon; in fact, we can trace the movement of excess and the social project to eliminate it through Foucault’s three epochs of power: the juridical top-down, sovereign power, the semio-technique, and modern biopower. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, as well as *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Foucault argues that throughout history, mechanisms of power have shifted from a top-down sovereign mode of power that focuses on fear and excessive force to one wherein the focus is the production of obedient subjects within the law. Though he gestures toward the possibility of the co-existence of sovereign law with biopower in “Right of Death and Power over Life,” Foucault generally maintains that biopower has usurped this old top-down juridical form. However, as I have used Judith Butler’s work to show, the production and cultivation of psychic and citizen subjects simultaneously produces abject life. Through a close inspection of Foucault’s discussion of the semio-technique of power, I will argue that the criminal lives biopower produces are taken up in a project reminiscent of the “semio-technique,” wherein these lives come to represent failure and criminal infraction. Queer bodies, I will argue, serve to guide the cultivation of normative citizens by bearing the burden of excess that it has been society’s project to exorcise.

“The tortured body is first inscribed in the legal ceremonial that must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 35). The objective of classical judicial codes was to elicit, usually through torture, a criminal’s confession to the crime, for “the
only way that [civil and criminal] procedure might use all its unequivocal authority…was for the criminal to accept responsibility for his own crime” (38). By uttering a confession to a crime, the criminal uttered a compliment to the penal code, both admitting he was NOT within code and further solidifying and citing the law’s precedence and sovereignty. “The speaking and, if necessary, suffering body” became the site upon which the practice of interrogation and punishment came together and worked simultaneously to secure the law’s longevity and sovereignty.

This guilty body was necessary “in the actual carrying out of the penalty [beyond simply the torture which elicited his naming as criminal] and an essential element in the ceremonial of public punishment” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 43). By compelling the criminal to utter his confession, name himself criminal, “In him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all;” The body did not simply display the sentencing, but the sentencing was part of the body; the body became a site of inscription for the law to be legible for others to see.

Foucault describes criminality, in the classical age, as offending the sovereign, whose word is law. “[Public punishment and execution are] a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted… by manifesting it at its most spectacular” (48). The sovereign seizes the body of the condemned man and, with a force greater than the damage caused by the condemned, displays the body marked, beaten, and broken. By making this process public, Foucault calls it an exercise of terror: “to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign. The public execution did not re-establish
justice; it reactivated power” (49). The force of the spectacle was not relative to the damage the crime caused; rather, the public display of force by the sovereign relied on excess force, was specular, and ritualized. “It made it possible to reproduce the crime on the visible body of the criminal; in the same horror, the crime had to be manifested and annulled” (*Discipline & Punish* 55). Specular punishment required excess power to reinstate the force of the sovereign by enacting a punishment whose force was beyond that of the atrocity of the crime, “to overcome it by an excess that annulled it” (56). Excess effectively allowed criminality to be absorbed into the sovereign.

This excess force works to reinstate the power of the sovereign not only for the criminal but also for the potentially criminal. The criminal became a site of inscription, where, through public punishment, the crime against the sovereign was re-enacted as well as punished. As the body of the criminal became the crime itself, the body of the criminal fails to signify a subject but an infraction against the law, a gap in juridico-political intelligibility, and by punishing this fissure to the extent of preemptively mending other possible fissures, the continuity of the sovereign is restored. However, specular forms of punishment did not last; in the 18th century, the movement toward a more efficient mechanism of power began.

According to Foucault, the penal reformers of the 18th century argued torture was inhumane and that the objective of judicial torture should be solely punitive. Foucault takes issue with this postulation, however, and argues that what the reformers were truly arguing against was “the dysfunction of power relating to a central excess,” located in the excessive force of
punishment by sovereign. Thanks to emerging forms of production and property ownership, there arose a need to more effectively address the diversifying and broadening forms of illegalities that went hand in hand (77). Punishing criminals with such great and excessive force became impractical and ineffective. This “bad economy of power” (79) moved penal reformers to decree that “since the injury that a crime inflicts upon the social body is the disorder that it introduces into it…in order to be useful, punishment must have as its objective the consequences of the crime…and its possible repetition” (92-3). Thus, the prevention that had been borne of sovereign power’s excess and wasted force “tended now to become the principle of its economy and the measure of its just proportions” (93). Under the sovereign regime, the excess force of specular punishment was used to order and discipline society; under the new “semio-technique,” rather than excess force, excess lives are used. I will show that, within the semio-technique, the circulation of images of punishment to criminal bodies, having absorbed the social and psychic excess shed in the departure from the top-down regime, becomes the most effective way of not only protecting the cultural psyche of the normative citizen-subject but of cultivating a properly productive citizenship.

Under the semio-technique, the objective of penalty was now “to punish exactly enough to avoid repetition,” and the reformers settled on representation as the most effective means of achieving this end. Rather than the ritualistic, public physical punishment, the semio-technique diffused “punitive signs” throughout society that relied on the inextricable semiotic link between the punishment and the crime it punishes (105). This “art of images linked by association”
established logical and meaningful relationships between the punishment and the crime it punishers so that whoever thinks of the crime will immediately think of the punishment. For punishment to have its most intense, yet economic, effects on those who have not committed the crime, these “obstacle-signs,” carried forth by the body of the punished, block the processes of desire for the crime by instantly summoning the punishment that would, ideally, bring a greater displeasure than the potential pleasure brought by the crime itself (Discipline & Punish 94-5). This circulatory technique of memory and images is far more efficient than an over-expenditure of force on a single criminal body.

It is important to note that Foucault remarks that in the project of discipline, the criminal body is actually of secondary importance to its representation; “the memory of pain must prevent a repetition of the crime…but it is not pain in itself that will be the instrument of the technique of punishment” (94). It is far more crucial for the memory of pain and the crime to which it is linked to be widely circulated than it is for the physical punishing of the crime to be maximized; to the state, the body of the criminal becomes a tool, and “if the punishment happens to seize the body, to apply techniques to it that are little short of torture, it is because it is—for the condemned man and for the spectators—and object of representation” (127-8). Thus, the punishment for criminality becomes less about punishing the individual criminal but about making an example of him; eliciting the violence of his punishment to prevent desirable citizens from similarly deviating from the law.

It is significant that Foucault uses the language of semiotics, as it allows us to make an
easy connection between criminality and abjection. The obstacle-signs that the criminal body delivers circulate among citizens not in order to remind the citizen of the existence of criminals but rather to reintroduce “the real presence of the signified” by way of the penalty, which has been infallibly and inextricably bound to the crime (128). As we have shown, admitting a crime is to be the crime, and ideally the obstacle-sign will link the crime to the punishment. Therefore, the criminal ceases to represent himself as a subject but, as crime, symbolizes the absence of law. Since the punished body doesn’t represent the subject but rather the failure in the continuity of the law, under the semio-technique the image of the criminal conjures a gap in the legal code that only the criminal’s punishment can repair. Recalling that trauma is an exposure to the external, beyond the symbolic, I would argue that, as gaps in the semiotic chain, criminal bodies pose trauma to normative citizen-subjects as they threaten to permeate the social. What began as a project to eliminate excess on behalf of the sovereign has taken the form of an attempt to eliminate the criminal, excess life beyond the fold of citizenship.

As the monstrous criminal becomes a threat, society defends itself as any psyche would against the threat psychic and bodily dissolution. Though he initially argues that modern biopower completely supplanted older social organizations, in The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, Foucault allows for the possibility of permeable epochs of power and argues that while sovereign and the semio-technique of power are no longer the major form of power, they are still “elements among others, working to incite, reinforce, control monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it.” Significantly, Foucault argues that the right to death works as a complement to the
force of cultivating and optimizing a specific life. The right to take life, which used to characterize the sovereign, is no longer in the name of the sovereign, but rather “on behalf on the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 137). Violence and the right to take life is exacted upon those who pose a threat to desired life, and we see the wages of these embodied infractions in the cultural reproductions of trauma to criminal queer bodies. In the next section, I will demonstrate that the function of circulating these images is twofold: first, by considering Freud’s repetition compulsion and the repeated revisiting of scenes of trauma, I will argue that these representations work to elevate the trauma queer bodies threaten into the symbolic order in order to retroactively generate anxiety and master them. Second, that mastering happens by the display of queer trauma as punishment, which cements the immediate association between queer life and trauma, producing the obstacle sign. Finally, turning queer bodies into obstacle signs works to cultivate heteroreproductive subjectivity under the threat of punishment by citing queer bodies as always-already traumatized.

**The Repetition Compulsion and Semio-Trauma**

In this section, I will argue that the cultural response to this traumatic threat is akin to the repetition compulsion Freud describes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principal*: representations of queer trauma are reproduced and circulated in an effort to master and eliminate the threat queer excess poses to heterocapitalist society. Images of punitive violence become synonymous with
queer life, and the gap in the law that queer bodies pose is covered up as the Law reinstates itself through force. The obstacle-sign is complete and society is preserved.

Queer bodies are excessive: in the sociopolitical sphere, these bodies fail to capitalize on chrononormative schemas that work toward the longevity of a capitalist nation-state. This non-participation both situates and relegates queer life to what Butler refers to as abject: they inhabit a space beyond the sociosymbolic and, by mapping the limits of subjectivity and yet resisting symbolization, continually threaten to undo normative subjectivity and the chrononormativity upon which it is based. Since, as Butler has argued, the ability to correctly adhere to social law determines psychic and social citizenship, the criminal who “falls outside the [social] pact disqualifies himself as a citizen and emerges…a villain, a monster, a madman, perhaps, a sick and, before long, ‘abnormal’ individual” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 101). It is essential that we note the language of citizenship and abnormality in this passage: The criminal is deemed outside the breadth of sociopolitical inclusion, or life itself. In Elizabeth Freeman’s words, “the socioeconomically ‘productive’ is what it means to have a life at all,” and as I have shown, queer life, in its psychic and social excess, is that life which threatens the heterocapitalist citizen subject with atemporality. Borrowing from Freeman and Butler, I would like to examine both psychoanalytic conceptions of trauma and the repetition compulsion in more detail to understand how the repeated deployment of cultural productions featuring queer trauma, namely film, is an example of an attempt of the normative psyche to master the trauma queer life poses.

Freud’s central conception of trauma revolves around external stimuli breaking through
the barrier of consciousness. Recalling that for Freud consciousness only arises out of a distinction from the external, the threat of penetration into a cohesive unit is enough to completely dissolve subjectivity. Once these external stimuli have broken through, the psyche becomes concerned with “mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them…[changing them] from free flowing into a quiescent state” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 607).

Healthy psyches, as well as psyches that anticipate an increase in stimuli, can arrest and integrate these stimuli, changing them into a “quiescent” state. These changes, I would argue, take the form of Butler’s “normativizing injunctions,” and the primary one with which I am concerned, of course, is chrononormativity. One concept I find particularly useful is Freeman’s discussion of “binding in time,” and the parallels that can be drawn between this concept and the psyche’s response to traumatic penetration of the psyche. When large amounts of traumatic stimuli flood the psyche, Freud posits the energy of the mental apparatus then focuses on “binding [the excess stimuli], in the physical sense, so that they can then be disposed of.” (607). The normative psyche seeks to arrest, bind, traumatic invading stimuli to protect itself. Insofar as we can see the project of a heterocapitalist future as that psyche which needs protection, herein lies an easy parallel to Freeman’s “binding in time.” When “time binds,” “human energy is collated so that it can sustain itself” in a chrononormatively meaningful way. “Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches” came to normalize schemas that enabled industrial production (Freeman 3). We see this temporal cultivation throughout Foucault’s description of the organization of bodies under biopower in Discipline & Punish and The History of Sexuality, Vol. I, all with the objective to maximize the effects of bodies to the most productive end.
Some non-heterosexual lives have been bound into the national temporal psyche; those who have been invited into the fold fall within the chrononormative schema, embodying a “homonationalism” which Jasbir Puar describes as “contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary” (2). Homonationalism is committed to the “dominant ascendency of whiteness” as it pertains to cultivating subjects who will further neoliberal capitalist projects by “disavowing sexual-racial others” (2).

However, those queer bodies that resist absorption and representation pose a constant threat to heterocapitalism by virtue of their constant (re)production, owed in part to the departure from the agrarian family unit capitalism itself afforded. In a reading of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, Cathy Caruth posits that it is by the very act of departing the captivity of Egypt for Canaan, “the return of the repressed,” that constitutes the Jewish people as a nation. I would argue that it is the queer body’s return from exile, the infraction that causes a traumatic gap in the chain, which threatens subjectivity in the exposure of queer life.

When the threat to the subject’s life or integrity is understood a moment too late and the subject is unable to ready the psychic anxiety that would have braced for such fear, traumatic neurosis occurs. First, Freud notes that the chief factor in the degree of effect of trauma is the factor of surprise. Normally, Freud says, a threat to bodily integrity results in anxiety, which is a “particular state of expecting the danger of preparing for it.” This preparedness readies the psyche for the danger, allowing it to bolster the protective shield. However, this readying, this anxiety, is contingent upon the psyche being made aware of the threat; Freud calls “fright… the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it, emphasis[ing] the factor of surprise” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 598). As is more commonly understood, in
“Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History,” Cathy Caruth defines trauma as the “overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (“Unclaimed Experience” 185). The subject recognizes the threat to life one moment too late, and a lapse in consciousness occurs in the sense that the subject misses the experience of the threat (Caruth, “Violence and Time” 25). This lapse in consciousness, the threat that is only understood retroactively, occurs at the moment the criminal body, the queer body, emerges. I have shown that the criminal body, in being synonymous with his infraction, symbolizes only a rupture in the social chain. It then follows that queerness would cause such a rupture, threatening and exposing a heterocapitalist psyche to the atemporality and chaos from whence it came.

The repetition compulsion, then, is an effort to master the threat of the excess of trauma, that is, queer life, by producing anxiety. The attempt to mastery hinges on an attempt to represent the unintelligible through the reinscription of the norm via punishment. By conjuring both the bodies and violence against them, the obstacle-sign relationship is closed and the law reinstates itself. When people see this, two things happen: 1) it works to reinscribe queer bodies as always-already traumatized, reinforcing the disavowal. 2) The repeated citation of these images serves to construct the materiality of the queer body as similarly traumatized, again keeping queer life at the fringes of social life.

When threatened with or subjected to trauma, the psyche, Freud says, “is bound to…set in motion every possible defensive measure,” but when these measures fail and the psyche is overwhelmed, the subject becomes “fixed” to his trauma, and he repeatedly revisits the scene of
the trauma in order to “master the stimulus retrospectively” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 609). The objective of “the repetition compulsion,” as Freud terms it, is to re-experience the threat, but in enough time to adequately prepare the psyche for the threat itself. Freud argues that “a compulsion to repeat…exhibits to a high degree an instinctual character,” and the constant return to the site of trauma is not an effort to relive the experience but to retroactively symbolize a psychic situation that never actually existed. The paradox is that with the threat of queer trauma, heterocapitalist subjectivity is incapable of constructing such a scenario by virtue of the fact that, for the normative psyche, queerness is an absence in and of itself in addition to causing such a break in the psyche. The repetition compulsion, Freud says, is a fixation wherein the psyche constantly returns to the site of trauma, either in flashbacks or dreams, in order to make sense in time of that which eluded processing at the time of its occurrence due to a lack of mental preparation (608). What Lacan adds to this formulation is that this glitch in the symbolic process is real in the sense that it remains unsymbolizable, that there is an excess that is outside of time, in the form of a threat of death, that can never be fully articulated and absorbed into the symbolic (Horner 68). However, the very paradox of these attempts are that unconscious processes are always out of time; time only becomes relevant to our understanding of events when they enter consciousness (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 607). To make sense of a traumatic event is to arrest and bind the stimulus and process it in and of a chronological schema. Violence to queer bodies is returned to in film in order to garner anxiety in a visibly temporal format.

As I described earlier, queer life out of psychic and social time defies and breaks the laws of chrononormativity; the absence of the temporal reiteration of these norms, Butler notes, is a
certain exclusion from social life, and writes the queer body as criminal and thus beyond the limits of social subjectification. Beyond just the psychic threat queer life poses to heterocapitalist subjectivity, we can see the threat, and response to this threat, queer life poses in real-time. History is littered with the bodies of those “abject beings” who have suffered violence as a result of their criminality, “freaks” and “abominations” that pose a threat to “normal” people everywhere. Even the most benign attempts at queer inclusion garner violent responses, and one needs only to look at the political rhetoric around same-sex marriage, a wildly homonormative campaign in and of itself, to see evidence of this fear. The National Organization for Marriage, a nonprofit organization that organizes in defense of “traditional” marriage, claims that “Gays and Lesbians don’t have the right to redefine marriage for all of us,” and that same-sex marriage threatens “the children of tomorrow” (nationformarriage.org). Citing the largest anchors of heterocapitalist futurity, marriage and reproduction, this language explicitly voices the fear that the inclusion of non-heterosexual life into the social fold threatens to redirect the successful trajectory of a heterocapitalist nation.

The response to such threats are not only exclusionary but often violent; the assaults and murders of such figures as Matthew Shepherd, Harvey Milk, and Brandon Teena, among countless others, suggest that these bodies, by their mere visibility, do in fact pose a threat to chrononormative, heterocapitalist life. One thing to consider, however, is the way that the violence inflicted upon these lives and bodies rarely remains at a corporeal level. As Heather Love notes, “the history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants” (Feeling Backward, 1). It is certainly prudent to take a moment to consider which bodies are given the sort of media attention that all three of the people I have listed have
had; violence against queer people of color, for instance, is rarely as publicized, and many theorists have taken up asking whose deaths are made visible and why.\(^2\) However, in terms of this project, I am interested in the way that the depiction and circulation of images of violence to queer bodies works to reinstate and compel normativity. I will propose that the depiction and circulation of violence to queer bodies completes the transformation of queer bodies into the obstacle-sign of Foucault’s semio-regime, and in doing so secures the queer body as always-already traumatized in order to compel normative identification.

Queer life, as I have shown, is a criminal gap in the chain of the law—an infraction against normative subjectivity that offends the norm. If we recall Foucault’s description of the semio-technique of power, the one which I have argued queer life resides in, we will remember that the success of punishment rests on the “art of images linked by association:” the thought of the crime must automatically conjure its punishment, enough so that the crime and punishment are inextricably linked, to the extent that one symbolizes the other (Discipline and Punish 104). This link between the crime and its punishment creates the “obstacle-sign,” wherein the power of the sovereign is immediately restored—when one imagines an offense to the sovereign, the sovereign’s response, as the punishment for the crime, is always-already present.

Foucault notes that an effective obstacle-sign will “set the force that drove the criminal to the crime against itself” (Discipline and Punish 106). Given that heteroreproduction is the basis for life in a heterocapitalist regime, it is fitting that many narratives of queer trauma revolve around social or physical death. Further, Insofar as we can understand the sovereign as normative

\(^2\) See, for instance, Judith Halberstam’s In a Queer Place and Time, which performs an extensive inquiry into the death of Brandon Teena and his subsequent martyrdom by White urban gays.
embodiment, the criminality of the queer body is immediately responded to and nullified through the violent punishment inflicted on it, so that the queer body will always-already conjure the response of the normative subject to the queer threat. As I have said, queer bodies out of time are threatening because they threaten to throw heterocapitalism into atemporality; violence against queer bodies, then, is the reassertion of chrononormativity.

However, the synonymous relationship between the crime and its punishment does not become an obstacle-sign until it is perceived by the potentially criminal; that is, it cannot re-order the desiring processes until the obstacle-sign is circulated in a larger system of signs. As obstacle-signs, depictions of violence to queer bodies must be widely circulated, accepted, and redistributed, “shaping the discourse that each individual has with others and by which crime is forbidden to all by all” (108). The objective of the obstacle-sign is that, upon viewing, it will redirect any impulses to commit the crime, as, according to Foucault, the drives and desires of citizens are “affected only by the obstacles that laws oppose to it” (Discipline and Punish 104). The distribution of these images maps the contours of the discourse around queer life, thereby securing that accessing queerness, as that life which lies beyond representation, is only in terms of its trauma.

These cultural productions, then, serve to naturalize the punishment of queer existence as in the best interest of the lawful citizen. The wages of queerness are death, and in these obstacle-signs, these cultural productions, the aim is for the viewer to see that it is not only natural but “in his own interest” that “the incorrigibles be eliminated” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 106). The queer body as violated body is retribution for his excess, for his unused potential that should have gone toward the good of the heterocapitalist state. The threat of queer excess is managed:
through violence to the queer body, the excess that threatens the subject is managed as the law is once again present and re-cited.

It is this re-citation of the law that not only serves to justify the elimination of queer life but repeatedly compels the assumption of normative subjectivity. In classical psychoanalytic models of consciousness, it is precisely the threat of violence that initiates a subject’s entrance into normative subjectivity; the castration anxiety is what forecloses the possibility of the incest taboo and compels the subject to seek fulfillment outside the mother. Lacan figures this injunction as the Name of the Father that causes the primary severing into the symbolic order; According to Butler, the Lacanian scheme presumes that the terror over occupying these abject positions, becoming “villains, monsters, or madmen,” and homosexuality is marked as “the living prospect of death,” (96, 98). As I have shown, queer bodies threaten the sacred notions of time upon which heterocapitalism is based. However, for this threat to be perceived there must, Butler argues, first be an identification with queer life before the automatic “repudiation and abjection of homosexuality and the assumption of a normative heterosexuality” (111). One of Butler’s central critiques of Lacan is that though he says the real exists before language, it is only accessible through language. In the same way, for the threat of queer life, as that life that lies beyond the borders of intelligibility, to be perceived, there must first be an identification that is rejected (Butler 112). In other words, queer life becomes point of disavowal along the road to subjectivity, and the trauma that these cultural productions showcase acts as the castrating threat which over and again compels that disavowal and produces normative bodies. The wide circulation of this violence in film only secures the process of normative identification as performative citation that must happen over and again, rather than an originary site.
Significantly, Butler notes that the imaginary identification with homosexuality that must necessarily precede normative subjectivity is the basis upon which queer bodies come to signify, albeit in an abject position, in public discourse at all. This signification is what I would argue becomes the site around which there arises a need to retroactively generate anxiety. Given that the queer body is surfacing from the real, the constant repetition of violence to queer bodies is an attempt to “bind” and “master” the excess that threatens the very borders of intelligible citizenry. In closing these borders, in mending the break in heterocapitalism that queer bodies pose, these images of violence serve the larger purpose of generating the anxiety and resolution that protects the heterocapitalist psyche from queer dissolution.

There is an aspect in one of Freud’s early formulations of trauma which I find useful: the concept of mimesis and (re)memory. In “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” he concludes that hysterical symptoms, while caused by an underlying “traumatic scene,” do not derive the entirety of their force from the original scene itself. Rather, “in every case the memory of earlier experiences awakened in association to it plays a part in causing the symptom” (“Aetiology” 100). If the effect of trauma is the remembering of traumatic episodes, and the repetition and (re)memory are part of what constitutes the trauma in and of itself, we can then understand the repeated representation of trauma in popular culture as self-citing and self-perpetuating, wherein the violence to queer bodies is a repeated effect with a historically dislocated cause or event; that is, the repetition of these images further assigns queer life to abjection and unrepresentability, discursively marking the queer body always-already traumatized and beyond the limits of iterability and intelligibility.

Butler herself notes that “the production of texts can be one way of reconfiguring what
will count as the world. Because texts do not reflect the entirety of their authors or their worlds, they enter a field of reading as partial provocations, not only requiring a set of prior texts in order to gain legibility, but—at best—initiating a set of appropriations and criticisms that call into question their fundamental premises” (19). Butler brings our attention to this point in order to note the possibility for resistance to and reconfiguration of discourse, particularly in its process of making material. I would argue, however, that the production of texts that re-cite the fantasy of heterocapitalism by depicting the destruction of queerness only serves to perform and reiterate heterocapitalism’s dominance.

**Queer Trauma Narratives and the Cinematic Making of Meaning**

As Butler hints, creative texts, as representations, are one way to alter the way meaning is made. There exists a vast archive of representations of queer violence, and were these the only representations of queer life that existed, one might get the impression that a queer embodiment is a certain death sentence, completely erasing the fulfilling lives led by queer people around the world. To that end, many have studied the ways one should approach such a history of trauma, how “to engage with the past without being destroyed by it” (Love 1). While this question is certainly relevant to queer viewers interacting with an archive of representation that repeatedly depicts its own destruction, I am concerned with how representations of queer violence come to affect a dominant and normative viewership, and the ways these representations speak to a sense of identity to which queer life is the complete antithesis.

I have taken film as my medium of study for a number of reasons, and in my next chapter, I will use one particular narrative, *Boys Don’t Cry*, as my case study. Film provides a
unique platform upon which to analyze both the psychosocial and material implications of queer representation. Historically, film has lent itself well to psychoanalytic readings, complicating questions around identification and the production of “reality.” Further, film has material implications and limitations beyond that of other methods of meaning-making; the technology and capital required to produce and distribute a film, even for limited viewing, is far beyond that which is required to write. Given that we exist in a time of mass and instant consumption of images, I believe film is the best medium through which to discuss the ways that images of queer violence are distributed as obstacle-signs to encourage normative embodiment.

In “The Imaginary Signifier,” Christian Metz responds to one of the first explorations of the relationship between psychoanalytic theory and the cinema conducted by Jean-Louis Baudry. Baudry posits that “cinematic apparatus” situates the spectator and the objects viewed in such a way that meaning is made necessarily by the spectator. This process of making meaning from the moving images on the screen, he argues, is analogous to the mirror stage. In response, Metz argues that in fact “what makes possible the spectator’s absence from the screen” is that he already understands himself as a unique subject; the drama of the mirror stage is not that which plays on the screen (696). Rather, the experience constitutes the subject as “all-perceiving” of those deep images projected in front of him, reaffirming his own self-identification and capability to view images and others as objects. Thus, the experience of the social activity of the cinema is more akin to an entrance into the symbolic, wherein the gaze is an inherently voyeuristic one of power and control (702).

Metz notes that in the theater, the power relationship is more unilateral because the

3 See “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” Cinethique 1970
actors, as objects seen, provide an element of consent, simply by the virtue of the fact that they remain for viewership. However, in cinema, “the actor was present when the subject was not,” during the shooting of the scene, and ultimately, the viewer is present when only the image of the actor’s body remains; the actor himself is not present when his image is consumed (704). Laura Mulvey, in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” notes that this subject position, consuming an object without consent, is male. This dynamic of presence and absence lends itself to a relationship wherein power is skewed and the consent of the actor is nowhere to be seen; only his image remains.

It is this very voyeurism and the absence of the body that enables queer violence to be taken up and circulated as an obstacle-sign. We will recall that for Foucault, the object of punishment in the semio-technique is not the body but the image of the punished body; the body needn’t be present at all were it not a site for the original re-inscription of the law through violence. For narratives of queer violence, particularly those based on a true story, the images and scenes of violence, the gendered punishment brought on by the criminality of queerness, is circulated without the actual presence of the queer body. Since we have shown that punishment for criminality is naturalized and seen as in the best interest of the viewer, the sight of these renderings of queer violence serve to naturalize, without the presence and consent of the violated, the punishment for his crime. The naturalization of the destruction of the queer body is enabled by, and, I would argue, depends on, the alienation of the camera that separates the images from the body, enabling the distribution of violated, punished queer bodies as obstacle-signs to cultivate normative heteronormative embodiment.
CHAPTER II
THE MAN IN THE MIRROR: *BOYS DON’T CRY* AND THE VIOLENT ELIMINATION OF QUEER EXCESS

Under what conditions and under the sway of what regulatory schemas does homosexuality itself appear as the living prospect of death?

–Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*

In 1993, Brandon Teena, a 19-year-old trans man from rural Nebraska, was gang-raped and murdered, sparking national outrage and later engendering at least two creative productions depicting the event, a documentary and an Academy Award-winning feature film, *Boys Don’t Cry*. In this chapter, I do not intend to examine the real-life events of Brandon Teena’s murder and its cultural aftermath, as other theorists have already performed this critical inquiry. Rather, as my concern in this paper is the way creative representations of trauma construct and reiterate the queer body as always already traumatized, I will take as my object of study Kimberly Peirce’s 1999 film *Boys Don’t Cry*. In this film, Brandon Teena passes as a heterosexual man until shortly before his death, and I will show how his exposure as transgender poses a threat to

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4 *The Brandon Teena Story*, Dir. Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir
5 See, for instance, Judith Halberstam’s “The Brandon Archive” in *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*
normative subjectivity, and the ways in which the elimination of this threat is necessary for the sustained continuity of a heterocapitalist ideal.⁶

In “Phantasmic Identification and the Assumption of Sex,” Judith Butler asks after the forces and consequences that compel subjectification by way of the citation and reiteration of normative sexuality. For Lacan, “the Law, which, in regulating marriage ties, superimposes the reign of culture over the reign of nature” (“The Function and Field of Speech” 228). “The Law,” here, refers to normative sexuality that ensures a national capitalist futurity, and as we have discussed, any lives which fall outside of this paradigm fail to constitute subjectivity at all. Further, this law forecloses the possibility of a return to this fulfillment under the threat of psychotic dissolution, and if we can understand the Law to reform to normative embodiment, those who live outside a heterocapitalist paradigm are under the constant threat of trauma. This “appears not only as the prospect of losing the status of a subject, and hence, of life within language, but as the terrorizing spectre of coming under an unbearable censor, a death sentence of sorts” (Butler 98). Thus far in my inquiry, I have argued that queer life embodies a traumatic excess, and the representation of queer trauma in films serves as a tool; those depicted are “obstacle-signs” whose trauma is circulated to make the consequences of queer criminality material. In Boys Don’t Cry, I intend to explore how Brandon’s identification with and

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⁶ It is important to note that this reading does not claim any insidious intentionality on the part of Pierce to display and circulate trauma in the way I have proposed; in fact, I would suggest just the opposite. Foucault has been frequently been misread and criticized for personifying power as a grammatical subject that takes citizen life as its object. Rather, power situates and effects subjects, and thus “cannot be accounted for in terms of the subject which is its effect” (Butler 9). It is within this matrix, then, that I locate Peirce, whose creative production is similarly circulated and consumed by lives whose very ability to circulate and consume is of and through heterocapitalism.
presentation of a male gender allows Tom Nilssen and John Lotter safety in their subject identifications, but when the fact that Brandon is biologically female is exposed, the psychic and physical trauma he suffers secures his expulsion from the sociosymbolic order into the realm of the abject and symbolizes the management of the traumatic excess he poses to normative masculinity.

In “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Linda Williams explores the way that female bodies are depicted in “excess” emotion or physical experience in the “body genres” of pornography, the horror film, and the “weepie” melodrama. She complicates the frequent dismissal of these stylistic maneuvers as simply a manipulative ploy to excite the viewer, and instead complicates these excessive representations to ultimately understand their function as “cultural problem-solving” (603, 616). Given the constant repetition and reproduction of this violence through various films, as well as my exploration into the ways visual representations of violence to queer bodies work to “solve” threats to heterocapitalism, I find this model very useful, and will discuss Boys Don’t Cry within this framework. Though Boys Don’t Cry does not fall squarely into the genre of horror film or melodrama, I would argue that like the cultural initiative to “manage” the excess of the female body, queer bodies similarly solicit such a response. Though Williams argues that the utility of the spectacle of violence is greater than its ability to arouse fear, I would maintain that this capacity is nonetheless imperative for a film to function as an obstacle-sign. The success of these “body genres,” as Williams calls them, “is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on screen;” that is, how many viewers faint or vomit in horror films, how many people cry while viewing tear-jerkers, and, perhaps the most obvious, the level of arousal generated in pornography (605-
6). As Foucault discusses, the obstacle-sign must move in the viewer such a sensation as the punishment depicted is thought of in the viewer’s own context. Thus, the success of narratives portraying queer violence hinges upon the ability to generate excess sensation by depicting the queer body “beside itself with fear and terror” (605).

The viewers first encounter Brandon in the drama of the mirror stage as he identifies with the male image in the mirror. For Lacan, the mirror stage is a tenuous relationship, defined by the subject’s ability to misrecognize and identify with an ideal, cohesive image in the mirror despite the “fragmented body” of the infant’s lived experience (“The Mirror Stage” 78). I find the “fragmented body” useful here when considering Brandon’s experience and the ways the misrecognition is maintained by piecing together the missing elements of his embodied existence. In the opening scene, Brandon is examining his appearance in the mirror and adjusting the markers of his masculinity: adjusting his hair and straightening his shirt. The camera initially centers Brandon’s reflection in the mirror, the cohesive, masculine whole with which Brandon identifies, and only after this shot does the camera pan out to encompass Brandon’s body, securing that the audience only retrospectively sees the pre-mirror stage. It is only after we see the image in the mirror that Brandon’s body is shown, retrospectively, and is thus posited as the real, as that “primal expulsion outside the subject” from which the subject emerges, only available in hindsight as something departed (“Response to Jean Hyppolite” 324).

Brandon cements his identification with the image in the mirror by inserting a sock into his pants to approximate the physical and substantiate the phallus.

At the moment Brandon identifies with the image in the mirror, marking the beginning of Brandon’s entrance into the symbolic order as male, Brandon’s cousin Lonny interjects and
establishes Brandon’s presence in the signifying chain. Lonny acknowledges the discord between the primordial real and the image offered in the mirror when he looks at Brandon’s body and his “lesbian phallus,” the sock, and says, “That is the most frightening thing I’ve ever seen in my life; it’s like a deformity,” exposing Brandon’s physical lack as a fragmented primordial child, as well as the threat that Brandon poses as a queer body endowed with the lesbian phallus.

However, when Brandon adjusts the sock to the correct size, Lonny looks at the image, and, seeing that the imaginary and the image are closer to union, acknowledges “that’s better.” As a gay man himself, Lonny affirms Brandon’s possession of the phallus when he notes “If you was a guy, I might even want to fuck you,” to which Brandon replies “You mean, if you was a guy,” simultaneously asserting his desire to have the phallus and interpreting Lonny’s desire to be the phallus. Of course, in this moment, both Brandon and Lonny are reiterating normative gender scripts, where the desire for men is an indication of femininity, but as I will go on to show, this reiteration is necessary for survival. After a moment of reflection, Lonny, perhaps rhetorically, ponders “So you’re a boy? Now what?” affirming Brandon’s symbolic existence. There is now a Brandon who can be, who “is,” and from this point Brandon’s symbolic, masculine identity hinges on the affirming eye of the Other for its existence.

Brandon goes to great lengths to maintain the phantasmic identification that his masculine image fulfills: stealing tampons he’s too embarrassed (or broke) to buy, scrubbing his jeans in the middle of the night, and hiding tampon applicators beneath a mattress, all to preserve his masculine subjectivity in the eyes of the Other by reiterating heteronormativity. What is

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7 See Judith Butler’s “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary” in Bodies that Matter
most significant in his effort to reiterate normative gender scripts, however, is the gendered physical trauma to which Brandon subjects himself which works to further construct Brandon’s social masculinity.

John and Tom, functioning as Name-of-the-Father signifiers, deploy and regulate a masculinity that hinges on a violent embodiment, and Brandon constantly subjects himself to physically threatening situations to mimic this masculinity. For instance, while Brandon sits at a bar in the beginning of the film, the camera approaches him from behind and then in profile shot, relying on a cinematographic trope that stages him in mystery. Seeing a woman at the end of the bar, Brandon further performs masculinity in this male-dominated, heteronormative space and slides next to her and buys her a drink, inventing a history about an ex-fiancé to locate his masculinity in time and space. When Brandon leaves to purchase cigarettes for Candace and another man sits in his place, Brandon responds according to heteronormative protocol and enters into a physical altercation, and as John approvingly examines Brandon’s wounds and comments that he’ll have a “shiner in the morning,” Brandon excitedly turns to view his reflection in the glass behind him, examining the physical wound on his face as it reflects back to him the strength of his own, externally affirmed masculine ego-ideal. Later, to jeers of “stud” and “cowboy,” Brandon proudly goes “bumper-skiing” despite repeatedly falling off the back of a moving truck. In a moment reminiscent of the murder of James Byrd Jr., another profound act of violence committed in a rural locale, Brandon acknowledges to Lana that he “let[s] John tie [him] up to the back of a truck and drag [him] around like a dog” because he “just thought that’s what guys do around here.” By undergoing physical traumas that indicate successful masculinity
to those arbiters of heteronormativity, Brandon’s place in the phallic symbolic order is acknowledged, further reifying the masculine ego-ideal with which he identifies.

However, despite Brandon’s work to locate a social masculine identity by constantly compensating for his shortcomings in relation to the ego-ideal, the female body (both Brandon’s and Lana’s) incites a violent intervention. As a response to the threat that Brandon poses to John and Tom’s heteronormative masculinity, they commit gendered violence that penetrates Brandon’s masculine “I” and attempts to dislodge the phallus that he so precariously possesses, causing a psychic break that exposes the real and ultimately kills him.

Unlike the constitutive trauma that Brandon undergoes to bolster his masculine identity, the malignant threat the female body poses to the cohesion of Brandon’s subjectivity is present from the beginning of the film. Immediately after Brandon’s date, the film transitions to a scene where Brandon is being chased by a group of men, being called both “fag” and “dyke” in a way that threatens to resignify Brandon as queer and immediately conjures the threat of violence due the brush with the trauma of symbolic dissolution. Brandon, referring to the date, says he doesn’t know what went wrong, still tethering his identity to the masculine gender. Lonny angrily responds “you are not a boy, that is what went wrong! [...] Why won’t you just admit you’re a dyke?” trying to rename Brandon according to his female body, exposing the gap in Brandon’s méconnaissance. However, Brandon continues to assert his masculinity by citing his intelligibility as male in the eyes of women: “Tell them that, they say I’m the best boyfriend they’ve ever had.” At this moment, a brick is thrown through the window and glass shatters, suggesting the first possibility of penetration by the Name-of-the-Law and the shattering of the queered masculinity in the mirror.
It is when Brandon leaves the anonymity and social centrality of Lincoln, Nebraska, and travels to the rural, working-class margins of society in Falls City that feminine and economic lack render the bond of the *méconnaissance*, and the validation of that subjectivity in terms of the Other, more tenuous. Brandon specifically locates the tension between his masculine subjectivity and his female body in economic terms, though still holding to the privilege of possessing the masculine. When Lonny inquires about “those doctors,” Brandon claims “it’s insane,” and that he “will be an old man” before he gets the kind of money that would allow a physical transition into a male body. His economic status prevents him from safely signifying in the heterocapitalist order, and he must rely on the generative powers of the phallus to construct a futurity in which he is still a masculine subject transcending the real female body. Nonetheless, Brandon and Lana are unable to physically leave because the traumatic real of Brandon’s body, which causes significant trauma to the “normal” people around him, thus inciting anger and punishment in the form of what Butler refers to as “gendered violence” (96). Brandon is bodily trapped as a female because he lacks the economic and social means to transition, and the lack of economic means is also what keeps him physically entrapped in Falls City, Nebraska, eventually leading to his death.

Lana, as the object of Brandon’s desire and the only female character developed in the film, poses the most immediate threat to Brandon’s position in the symbolic order as male. As with Brandon’s earlier encounters with women, the camera identifies with Brandon’s masculine gaze and Lana is seen before her she sees Brandon. However, before she and her companions go on stage to perform, Lana briefly meets and penetrates his gaze, asking Brandon who he is before he has a chance to address her, posing a threat to the phallic authority bestowed upon him by
virtue of his masculine subjectivity. As their relationship progresses, Brandon and Lana are constantly negotiating the seen/being seen dyad, and the way in which Lana “sees” Brandon threatens to undermine his masculine subjectivity and publicly expose Brandon’s female body, effectively castrating him. In one moment, Lana, retreating from a raucous party of gregarious masculinity and substance abuse, escapes to her room, and as she slams the door all sound from the rest of the house abruptly stops, suggesting an impenetrable feminine space. She then falls backward on her bed and as the camera zooms in on her face in preparation for visual penetration into her inner narrative, the scene cuts to Brandon, also in front of a mirror in a state of vulnerable undress. Leaving the shower in a towel that covers his torso, Brandon catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror, partially naked and wearing a towel arranged to cover his breasts, and quickly turns away from the image. Brandon again combats his female body as he interacts with his own image to renegotiate the ego ideal, turning his back to the mirror before inserting a tampon and hiding the applicator between the mattresses. However, after he has bound his breasts, Brandon turns back to the mirror and rein/asserts the phallus, his masculinity becoming more aggressive as he winks in the mirror and brushes his hair, and finally smirks as he calls himself an asshole. This sequence of scenes, the exclusion of the heteronormative and the arrival of Brandon into Lana’s consciousness as an initially female body in a space closed to the masculine, suggests a feminine/female gaze that intuits the female body of Brandon’s primordial real rather than the masculinity of the symbolic. This “recognition” threatens to rupture the symbolic order, shattering the illusion of Brandon’s precariously stable masculine subjectivity.
Lana frequently has senses and inclinations of Brandon as biologically female, and I would argue that we see these understandings of queer desire represented in the stylistic elements of the film. Linda Williams argues that the “melodrama…stands in contrast to more “dominant” modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative. [It] can encompass a broad range of films marked by ‘lapses’ in realism, by ‘excesses’ of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive” (604). *Boys Don’t Cry* exhibits all of these characteristics, but I make this observation not to suggest the film should fall under the melodrama label; rather, the stylistic elements of the film echo the “lapses” and “excesses” with which queer life threatens the dominant heterocapitalist cultural psyche. Throughout the film, movement and escape are a major motif, often emerging in transitional sequences where time is either slowed or sped up. Most importantly, these queer styles become even more visible when Brandon’s masculinity is threatened by the exposure of his female body. The visibility of queerness, as a stylistic or narrative element, threatens the dominance of temporal linearity, performing the larger threat queerness poses to heterocapitalist subjectivity.

It is when Lana begins to identify the phallus and thus her desire in Brandon that Brandon emerges as legitimate competition to John and normative subjectivity, inciting a traumatic retribution from John. The displays of physical strength and violence become more and more sinister and Brandon and John begin to interact as competitors, reentering the pre-mirror, Oedipal stage. Up until this point, John and Tom, but John in particular, represented the Name-of-the-Father: they embodied heteronormative masculinity in a way that Brandon aspired to embody. However, as Lana’s desire more and more locates itself in Brandon, he becomes a viable competitor for Lana’s affection. Lana’s articulation of Brandon’s masculinity by virtue of
her desire for him offers Brandon the acknowledgment of the other that secures his place in the symbolic order. One evening, at John’s urging, Brandon tries to outrun the police on an empty road. In a very erotic exchange, John leans forward from the backseat to whisper instructions in Brandon’s ear, urging him not to stop, to “go faster,” and ironically not to be a “pussy.” At one point, Brandon exclaims that he can’t see, and John reaches around and down Brandon’s front, the scene goes black and the viewer hears John’s voice whisper “it’s okay, neither can he. You’re flying.” The shot then cuts back to John withdrawing his hand to the backseat, looking satisfied, and Brandon is open-mouthed and panting. John’s breathy voice-over throughout this scene of speed and danger situates an erotic exchange between John and Brandon.

From this point forward, John’s masculinity becomes increasingly paternalistic and possessive, in a way that, especially when Lana is present, is often demeaning, belittling, and aggressive toward both Lana and Brandon, and John and Brandon engage in a classical Oedipal conflict. This shift from John as a big-brother/guide who offered Brandon access to embodied masculinity to John’s consideration of Brandon as a competitor and threat denotes the battle for possession of the signifying phallus characteristic of the Oedipal phase. For instance, at Brandon’s birthday party, John enters the interior female home-space, scanning the room for Lana. John tells her he wants to talk about Brandon, that he’s “just looking out for [her...and] just wants to protect [her].” Later, while talking with Brandon, John first lays claim to Lana by telling Brandon that he’s known Lana since she was a child and could tell all kinds of stories about her, presumably sexual. Finally, though John says he couldn’t think of a better “little man” to whom to give Lana, he warns Brandon not to forget that “this is [his] house.” By claiming ownership of Lana through explicitly temporal and paternalistic rhetoric, John
embraces the Name-of-the-Father as that which suspects Brandon as a threat to normative psychosexuality, and explicitly posits himself as possessing the Signifying Phallus, all in order to compensate for the threat Brandon poses to John’s primacy.

This competition comes to a castrating resolution when the Name-of-the-Father and the law violently intervene and assert their primacy and the lack in Brandon, resulting in the dissolution of Brandon’s male subjectivity. Brandon’s materially female body is traumatically exhumed and exposed by the penetrative masculine gaze, the repudiated site from which he entered into the symbolic order as a masculine subject. Brandon’s subsequent symbolic reordering renders him a woman in the eyes of the Other, but what is more significant, a woman with the “lesbian phallus.”

As the Name-of-the-Father functions as a normative law which sets the parameters within which the “normal” subject can psychosexually function, John and Tom begin the violent insertion of this law by inquisition, first confronting Brandon about his name, appropriate given the act of naming, particularly for a transgender individual, is integral to the constitution of subjectivity. Here we are reminded of Foucault’s discussion of confession, wherein part of the punishment for an infraction was to name the self as infraction through confession, wherein “by confessing, [the criminal] took part in the ritual of producing penal truth” (Discipline & Punish 38). By performing a methodological dissection of Brandon’s identity, John and Tom attempt to coerce Brandon into participating in his own punishment and admitting his embodied infraction, and they are successful—under the threat of a violent exposure, Brandon attempts to expose himself instead, unbuttoning his pants and telling Lana that he was “born with this weirdness, kind of like a birth defect,” naming himself into abjection. John, Tom, and Lana’s mother all
demand Brandon name himself, repeatedly asking “what are you?” After being called “pervert” and accused of infecting Lana with his “sickness,” Brandon tries to describe his gender as a pathology, likening it to a birth defect which doctors are trying to fix, already acknowledging the intrusion of the Name-of-the-Father and its fragmenting effect on Brandon’s consideration of his own gender and subjectivity.

However, Lana is able to affirm Brandon’s masculine subjectivity without needing material confirmation or proof, exhibiting what Judith Halberstam calls “the transgender gaze.” Lana often forgoes the physical “evidence” of Brandon’s sex, such as when Lana catches a glimpse of Brandon’s cleavage or when Brandon is held in a women’s jail, in favor of the masculine subjectivity Brandon embodies. John even asks Lana specifically what she “sees in him,” not only what is attractive but who or what is actually present. After John and Tom expose Brandon for being imprisoned as a woman, Brandon and Lana escape to Lana’s bedroom where Lana is supposed to “verify” the materiality of Brandon’s genitals. Brandon and Lana retreat from John and Tom’s violent probing into the quiet of Lana’s room, Lana further prevents Brandon from exposing himself to her, saying that she “knows [he’s] a guy.” Here, Peirce establishes the female gaze through the quiet sanctuary of the bedroom and by Lana’s “willingness to see what is not there” (Halberstam 87). Further, by refusing to privilege the “scrutinizing [masculine] gaze of science and ‘truth’,” Brandon’s masculinity is affirmed and preserved, which makes possible an alternative, utopian time and space. Lana looks out the window and sees swirling dark skies and speeding lights, and, in a very meta-textual moment, interacts with this queered temporality: “Look how beautiful it is out there. That’s us; we can just beam ourselves out there.” Halberstam argues that coupling of the female gaze, the veracity
of the nonmaterial, and the queered sense of time and place allow for the queer epistemology that keeps Brandon’s masculinity intact, signaling the presence and possibility of queer subversion even in a moment when Brandon’s masculinity is most threatened.

This interrogation culminates in a violent revisiting of the mirror scene that opens the film as Brandon is exposed and forced to look at himself in a mirror. However, rather than constituting an identity, this mirror-stage ruptures Brandon’s identity posited at the beginning of the film. Lana’s attempt to discursively re-materialize the contours of Brandon’s body, as one who has seen and thus knows Brandon “in the flesh,” does not convince John or Tom, who demand to see and know Brandon for themselves. Looking becomes vested with the power to name and thus construct subjectivity, but whereas in the opening scene of the film Brandon held the authority of the gaze, and the power to name himself, in this scene, he is forcibly held, looked at and named as “pervert” and “freak.” As Lana screams for them to leave him alone, John questions “Him? Him?” and pushes her face closer to Johns exposed genitals, demanding that his corporeal materiality, entering language, negate the subjectivity he presented until this point. At this moment, the camera cuts to a staged crucifixion tableau in slowed time and without sound, where Brandon is clothed in a white t-shirt, his arms outstretched and pinned by John and Tom on either side, and Lana kneeling in front of them. Still within the same scene, the camera then cuts to Candace and Kate watching in horror from outside the bathroom and bearing witness to the chaos within. Brandon, fully clothed and illuminated by a spotlight, is standing behind them, also bearing witness to his own violent exposure and humiliation of his body. The camera cuts back and forth between these two Brandons, and all the while each is looking directly into the camera, suggesting they are making eye contact with one another. We are reminded, in this
moment, of Linda Williams’ observation that in horror films, part of what draws the audience in is seeing the “excess” body “beside itself…with fear or terror” (605). Brandon’s body is on display for Lana, Candace, and Kate, as the Name-of-the-Father splits Brandon’s once whole, masculine subjectivity by positing Brandon’s female body and his male ego ideal at odds with one another.

Sex is reiterated upon Brandon’s body in this scene, wherein the material contours of Brandon’s flesh are named “female” in the eyes of the Other, and he does not iterate but is forcibly reiterated as “female” through such acknowledgment by John and Tom. The misidentification which held these two together is split, and Brandon’s once cohesive male subjectivity is dissolved as he sees reflected not the masculine subjectivity with which he once identified but the Other violently determining what he would see in the mirror; that is, the contours of his body reciting and reiterating “female.” The sexually deviant woman is killed out of time, “too early,” before she was aware, usually on her way to meet her lover and not suspecting the danger. Brandon, also a sexual “deviant,” had only arrived to the house to meet Lana and was also unexpectedly confronted with the group of people who violently attacked him “as a kind of punishment for an ill-time exhibition of sexual desire” (Williams 615). For John and Tom, Brandon, revealed as a female who Lana has nonetheless desired, possesses the “lesbian phallus.” As a female who can yet be the source of desiring for Lana, the “lesbian phallus” is “removed from the normative heterosexual form of exchange, and recirculating and reprivileging it between women deploys the phallus to break the signifying chain in which it conventionally operates” (Butler 88). Thus, Brandon occupies a position that threatens to undo to the very systems that endow John and Tom with their subjectivity.
In response to the traumatic threat that Brandon poses, John and Tom violently rape Brandon in an effort to castrate him. “Implicit in the figure of castration…is the presumption that the terror over occupying [inarticulable positions] is what compels the assumption of a sexed position within language” (Butler 96). In the scenes that follow Brandon’s abjection, we see the terror of Butler’s “gendered punishment” coming to fruition. John and Tom reassert the Name-of-the-Father by raping Brandon to feminize him, demonstrating the impossibility of the phallicized dyke, as well as bodily re-constituting him as the phallus. Foucault argues that for punishment to be an effective tool to cultivate a normative and obedient citizenry, there must be an insoluble link between a crime and its punishment, to the extent that the punishment will come signify the crime it punishes (Discipline & Punish 105). For the normative viewer, the rape in Boys Don’t Cry serves to immediately conjure the crime of queer life.

The police interview is the second phase of the confession, wherein Brandon is forced to utter that he was raped vaginally, acknowledging both the existence of and trauma to his female-sexed genitalia. Under the kind of sovereign-semio law within which queer lives fall, torture is used in both the utterance and the punishment of a crime. Brandon renounces his earlier claim to maleness by further describing his gender pathologically, as a “sexual identity crisis,” to the officer taking his statement. When the officer asks whether it is correct that Brandon had never had sex until this point, Brandon simply replies “yes,” denying the sexual experiences he has had thus far because they did not fall into a heteronormative paradigm. Thus, Brandon experiences trauma in two ways—both in the rape and the beatings, and in the subsequent interrogation where he must name his unlivability, name himself a “crisis” or rupture in normative sexuality.
After this point, Brandon’s identity becomes centered on his discursively-sexed body, marking his symbolic and traumatic re-ordering for both himself and the people of Falls City. The camera offers glimpses of Brandon’s body that are naked and vulnerable—when a nurse examines Brandon after the rape, the scene opens to her cutting off the dirtied and torn elastic bandages that Brandon uses to bind his breasts. Whereas earlier in the film the physical aids Brandon used to help identify with the masculine image in the mirror were shown on a confident, masculine Brandon, here the bandages are clearly damaged, and Brandon and cowering and bruised, similarly indicating the unraveling of his masculine gender. Also, when Brandon showers at Candace’s house, the viewer sees Brandon in the shower and travels from his bruised shoulders down his body from behind, guiding the viewer to focus on Brandon’s narrowing waist and curves at the hips. This very masculine cinematographic technique suggests that the viewer should too see him for what he “really” is, a woman.

When Lana and Brandon have sex following the rape, he is completely feminized for both Lana and the viewer, denoting the final dissolution of Brandon’s masculine heterosexuality through the loss of Lana’s acknowledgment of his masculinity. , who had previously referred to Brandon as “handsome,” now coos that Brandon is “so pretty” and asks him to unearth his female past, one to which the viewer previously had no access. However, Brandon’s exposure and rape reconstitutes him female, giving him and the viewer access to a grounded, historical and symbolic chain of existence. Recounting his history as a girl-girl, a boy-girl, he says that as a man “for once everything just felt right,” referring to this phase of comfortable subjectivity in the past, while simultaneously marking its absence as “weird.” As Brandon confesses his past, he also confesses the lies he’s told Lana about his model-sister and actress-mother, as though his
male identity, like the history he invents to accompany it, is a lie and his present female subjectivity is the “truth.” To this, Lana responds by kissing him and initiating sex, telling him she doesn’t know if she’s “gonna know how to do it” and thus acknowledging a femininity that went unconsidered in their prior sexual encounters. Whereas their prior sexual encounters had been graphically represented to the audience, as Lana removes Brandon’s shirt (an exposure that had also not happened before), the scene fades into the next, where the two are lying on the couch and covered with a jacket from the shoulders-up, again registering Brandon’s unbound female body for the viewers. It is important to note that though the film makes it clear that Lana understands Brandon to be female-bodied, she still desires him, and for a brief period of time, Brandon is endowed with the lesbian phallus.  

As I mentioned earlier, the lesbian phallus poses the greatest threat to a heteronormative psychic subject, and the death scene signifies the final penetration of the Name-of-the-Father and Brandon’s final castration. As John stands between Lana and Brandon, pinning Brandon to a wall, Lana tells Brandon that they can still leave together. The camera switches back and forth as Lana and Brandon hold each other’s gazes, and John, seeing this exchange, eliminates Brandon as sexual competition, asserts the primacy of the heteronormative phallus, and shoots him. Amidst the screaming, and as Brandon lies dead on the floor, Tom runs to the body and stabs Brandon repeatedly, further penetrating Brandon with the Name-of-the-Father and eliminating the possibility of his own psychic undoing.  

The trauma of the mirror stage, as well as the trauma of exposure and identity split through the “reverse” mirror stage, work to constitute and dissolve Brandon’s subjectivity. Considering the broad dissemination potential of cinema, how does the intrusion and ultimate
victory of the Name-of-the-Father to regulate normative heterosexuality reify narratives that preclude the impossibility of queer working-class masculinity? Further, given the political, racial, and economic grounding of the film, how does the destruction of this queer subject work to promote and enforce normative identities and national psychosubjectivities? In conclusion, I believe a psychoanalytic reading of *Boys Don’t Cry* aids in the consideration of an historical archive of queer trauma wherein queer bodies and psychosubjectivities are deployed and destroyed under the thumb of normativity, in this case, the Name-of-the-Father.

Thus far, I have discussed the ways that, in *Boys Don’t Cry*, queer embodiment by way of the lesbian phallus garners violent reassertion of normativity. Further, I have also discussed the similarities between films depicting trauma to excess bodies and genres used as “cultural problem-solvers.” Williams argues that the horror film, presuming an audience of adolescent men with burgeoning sexualities, is an extended performance and resolution of the castration anxiety. Teen horror films “kill off the sexually active ‘bad’ girls, allowing only the nonsexual ‘good’ girls to survive” (609-10). In *Boys Don’t Cry*, I would argue that Brandon is murdered for effectively the same reason; he threatens a heterocapitalist psyche because he wields the “excessive” phallus. Like horror films solve the problem of sexual difference by playing out castration as punishment for deviant sexuality, *Boys Don’t Cry* solves the same problem. While the target audience for *Boys Don’t Cry* is not likely teenage boys, the film features multiple recognizable actors; Chloe Sevigny, Peter Sarsgaard, and Hilary Swank all have the power to draw a substantial audience. Additionally, Hilary Swank earned critical acclaim and won an Academy Award for best actress, further securing the film’s future circulation and distribution. The film works as a “cultural problem-solver” by reinstating and reaffirming the triumph of
heterocapitalism over deviant and abject sexualities, speaking directly to and curbing any nascent sexualities that may have otherwise deviated into abjection. It is in this way, then, that *Boys Don’t Cry* becomes an obstacle-sign for the cultivation of normative lives.
WORKS CITED


