QUEER SEXUAL AND TEXTUAL PRACTICE: THE POSTMODERNIST POETICS
OF PYNCHON’S GRAVITY’S RAINBOW

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ABSTRACT

This thesis identifies representations of sadomasochism in Thomas Pynchon’s
*Gravity’s Rainbow* as queer narratives that model the relation between Pynchon’s
postmodernist poetics and queer sexual practices. I employ a queer postmodernist
methodology that extends and complicates Brian McHale’s postmodernist narrative
theory and the queer theories developed by Lee Edelman, Elizabeth Freeman, and Judith
Halberstam. Through my analysis of s/m narratives I explore how s/m, a queer sexual
practice that relies on narrative, both reflects and effects Pynchon’s postmodernist
poetics. I use McHale’s theorization of the “ontological dominant” of postmodernist
fiction to demonstrate how s/m can be read as a subversive expression of queer
negativity, an embrace of the death drive, and an antisocial (feminist) project.
Furthermore, my focus on the role of gender and female s/m practice in the novel
complicates previous Pynchon criticism on sexuality that either ignores female
masochism or attributes it to male pornographic fantasies. Like Pynchon’s postmodernist
poetics, s/m relies on a disruption of normative narrative, a dissolution of discursively
constructed subjectivity, and a resistance to the grand narratives of hegemonic power.
This project foregrounds the underlying queerness of *Gravity’s Rainbow*—the
paradigmatic postmodernist novel—which modifies the dominant critical reading of
Pynchon as a hetero-masculinist author and alters the current conception of what
constitutes a queer text.
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SECTION I

Introduction

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale identifies Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* as “one of the paradigmatic texts of postmodernist writing, literally an anthology of postmodernist themes and devices” (16). Unlike many later postmodernist novels that silence or marginalize queerness, Pynchon’s 1973 novel depicts a broad range of sexual practices. The multiplicity of sexual practices depicted in the text makes it uniquely suited to the queer postmodernist methodology I develop in this study. My methodological approach draws from McHale’s postmodernist narrative theory and queer theory developed by Lee Edelman, Elizabeth Freeman, and Judith Halberstam. I use “queerness” to signify a social and linguistic structural position, as opposed to an embodied identity. By putting these seemingly disparate theorists in conversation I renew and modify the dominant critical understanding of Pynchon—the paradigmatic postmodernist author—to argue how queerness is an integral (anti-)structural element of Pynchon’s influential brand of postmodernism. Through this approach I extend a queer reading to a text that is often assumed to be hetero-masculine. By articulating the queerness of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* I am positing an alternate understanding of what constitutes a queer text and a postmodernist text. My methodological approach illuminates the queer sexual politics of Pynchon’s postmodernism, uncovering a pervasive sexual/political/cultural formation that has previously been overlooked or marginalized. By highlighting the similarities between postmodernist poetics and queerness, I am able to articulate an unacknowledged concurrence between these two
(narrative) practices. I will excavate the novel for the non-normative sexual and textual tendencies that drive its postmodernist poetics.

For this study, sadomasochism (henceforth s/m) is the most illustrative manifestation of queer practice, a practice that replicates the text’s own discursive structure through embodied sexual practice. The novel’s encyclopedic scope enables Pynchon to depict many permutations of s/m—continually complicating and increasing the range of subjects who engage it, the degree of pleasure attained from it, and the uses—beyond pleasure—for which s/m is deployed. Both postmodernist and s/m narratives are mediated through discourse—not only does the novel project a postmodern world, but the s/m practices within this postmodern world rely on the construction of narrative. My focus on s/m stems from a question posed within the novel itself when Thanatz analyzes the institutional stigmatization and control of sexual practice, especially s/m:¹

But why are we taught to feel reflexive shame whenever the subject comes up? Why will the Structure allow every other kind of sexual behavior but that one? Because submission and dominance are resources it needs for its very survival. They cannot be wasted in private sex. In any kind of sex. It needs our submission so that it may remain in power. It needs our lusts after dominance so that it can co-opt us into its own power game. There is no joy in it, only power. (Pynchon 750)²

¹ A question echoed by Douglas Keesey’s review of Thomas Pynchon: Reading From the Margins, when he asks “How is perverse sexuality related to defiance, and to cooptation?” (169).
Thanatz goes on to theorize “Sado-anarchism:” “I tell you, if S and M could be established universally, at the family level, the State would wither away” (Pynchon 750). I posit that s/m has, in fact, been universally established throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Like Sado-anarchism’s subversive impact on the State, the s/m sexual practice that permeates the novel causes the narrative to wither away, or more accurately, s/m’s dispersal effects the dissolution of teleology and narrative structure within *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Through my study of sexuality in *Gravity’s Rainbow* I will suggest that the novel presents a nascent version of Michel Foucault’s theories on sexuality and power, particularly those theorized in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. *Gravity’s Rainbow* was published three years before Foucault’s seminal work. The novel prefigures, through narrative fiction, Foucault’s theorization of sexuality as a historical and social construct. While Foucault’s theories focus on the power/sex dynamics that developed in the nineteenth century, Pynchon’s novel articulates the power/sex dynamics that were contemporary with the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, illustrating the lasting and pervasive effects of nineteenth-century discourses on sexuality; each is equally invested in articulating the consequences of the pathologization and formation of sexual identities, the institutional deployment of sexuality, and the discursivity of subjectivity. The hyperbolic paranoid history depicted in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “a peculiar structure that no one admitted to” (Pynchon 196), anticipates Foucault’s theorization of “sexuality” as “a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major
strategies of knowledge and power” (*History* 106). The encyclopedic scope of the novel is itself a great surface network that links embodied pleasure, sexual practices, and scientific and political knowledge. According to McHale “it is of course in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, that Pynchon practices to the fullest extent his paranoiac mode of secret history, uncovering layer upon layer of conspiracy behind the official historical facts of the Second World War” (*Postmodernist Fiction* 91), and—picking up where McHale left off—I posit that Pynchon’s paranoiac mode of secret history also uncovers the layers of conspiracy behind institutional controls, particularly those that manifest through the deployment of sexuality. Like the agencies of power Foucault discusses in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, the encyclopedic scope of *Gravity’s Rainbow* forces sexuality “to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (Foucault 18). Throughout the novel, s/m is used to both question and eroticize power relations, making the novel an example of the “polymorphous technologies of power” that rose within the proliferation of discourses concerning sexuality (Foucault, *History* 11). *Gravity’s Rainbow* reenacts, on the local level, the ways in which institutions of power deploy sexuality and s/m as a method of political control.

Even if the narrative models how institutions can use sexuality as a technology for control and regulation, the range of discourses concerning sexuality within the novel simultaneously model how sexual practice can be used as a tool of resistance, how discourse inherently “also undermines and exposes [power], renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (Foucault, *History* 101). In a lecture, Foucault explains that individuals “are always also the elements of [power’s] articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (*Power/Knowledge*
In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, queerness is the “vehicle” of postmodernist poetics, an element of postmodernist narrative articulation. Individual instances of s/m perform the text’s postmodernist narrative structure in order to destabilize normative narrative. Foucault’s theories laid the groundwork for contemporary queer theorists whose work focuses on the stigmatization of queer practice in heteronormative discourse. Both Foucault’s theories and Pynchon’s novel are part of an explosion of discourse on power and sex—a highly prolific moment of cultural productions that articulated a new understanding of human life and subjectivity, a genealogy of knowledge that contributes to the collective psychoerotic dynamic of postmodern culture.

Edelman’s *No Future* extends the emancipatory and subversive potential that is inherent to Foucault’s theorization of discursively constructed sexuality. By articulating how individual subjectivity is a product of discourses, thus tying the function of individuals to a broad and shifting network of power relations, Foucault’s work set the stage for contemporary queer theory, which frequently studies how individuals are named, constructed, and stigmatized through language. Edelman’s polemic calls for an embrace of a queer, unintelligible subject position. For Edelman, “queer negativity” signifies an oppositional politics that disrupts heteronormative narrativity through its resistance to reproductive futurism—a heteronormative political telos that privileges the Child as the symbol of generational succession and marginalizes the queer for their non-procreative practices. He explains that “the only queerness that queer sexualities could ever hope to signify would spring from their determined opposition to this underlying structure of the political—their opposition, that is, to the governing fantasy of achieving Symbolic closure through the marriage of identity to futurity in order to realize the social
subject” (13-14). Edelman coins the term “*sinthomosexuality,*” which stems from Lacan’s term “sinthome”—an anachronistic word for “symptom” that refers to the process through which individual subjects create consistency and meaning by eliding the inconsistencies between the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real orders (35). *Sinthomosexuality* is “the site where the fantasy of futurism confronts the insistence of a jouissance that rends it precisely by *rendering* it in relation to that [death] drive” (Edelman 38). Embracing queer negativity grants individuals access to a disruptive jouissance, which Edelman defines as “a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violent passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law” (25). Aside from inadvertently offering a succinct description of s/m practice, this definition of “jouissance,” as that which transcends both ontological and epistemological boundaries, can also be read as an unintentional description of Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics. I will use Edelman’s theories to argue that *sinthomosexuality* is embedded in both the narrative content and discursive structure of *Gravity’s Rainbow.* Specifically, a queer embrace of the death drive is reinscribed in the text’s postmodernist poetics, which destabilize discursive structure and make no promise of a narrative future either within the narrative or outside of it. The novel consistently subverts heteronormative futurity by linking non-normative sexual practices—both s/m and homosexuality—with death, making s/m in *Gravity’s Rainbow* a mode of queer negativity that Edelman did not anticipate. For example, almost all sexual practice in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is non-procreative.3

3 There are, in fact, two instances, constructed as narrative parallels to each other, in which sex momentarily leads to procreation. First—in terms of narrative chronology—is Bianca’s conception on the set of the film *Alpdrücken*—in which her mother, Margherita Erdmann participates in a sadomasochistic orgy. Ultimately, Bianca is erased from the narrative through an implied death. Second, is Ilse’s
Given the scope of the thesis project, I will focus on Pynchon’s depiction of s/m, while gesturing toward an interpretation that acknowledges how all sexual practice in the novel has become queer to some degree. Edelman writes that Dickens’ A Christmas Carol affirms heteronormative values by requiring Scrooge to renounce his queerness, which enables him to “escape the charge of embracing and promoting a ‘culture of death’” (47). I suggest that if Edelman had looked to postmodernist fiction, he would have found a narrative of queer, stigmatized practice that does not culminate in the erasure and renunciation of queer negativity. Had Edelman looked to Pynchon, he would have found a narrative that resists “generational succession, temporality, and narrative sequence” through its avowal of queer practices (Edelman 60). I link the text’s depiction of s/m with Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics—vis-à-vis queer negativity—in order to highlight how postmodern(ist) ontological uncertainty leads to the eroticization and embrace of the death drive.4

Edelman’s theories are the deeply rooted in discursive structures, thus making them highly adaptable to a study of poetics; yet his theories offer no explicit discussion of s/m. Furthermore, Edelman’s work has been heavily critiqued by Freeman who characterizes his polemic as a “white gay male argument” (143). Similarly, Halberstam argues that Edelman’s theorization of antisocial jouissance is only accessible to those who participate in male-male anal sex (150). Though Edelman’s book primarily conception, which occurred as a result of Franz Pokler’s arousal from watching Alpdrücken. Eventually, both Ilse and her mother, Leni, are sent to a concentration camp. Though “Ilse” visits Franz on a yearly basis for several summers, Franz and the narrative are unable to positively identify the stream of “Ilses,” who keep returning, as Franz’s biological daughter.

4 Throughout my project I will use the term “postmodern” to refer to culture—either post-WWII Western culture at large or the culture projected by the narrative—while “postmodernist” refers to narrative practices. McHale distinguishes between “theories of postmodernism—the aesthetic forms and practices of the postmodern period—and theories of modernity—the historical and cultural conditions that presumably gave rise to those forms and practices” (Cambridge 97).
performs close readings of male characters in novels by male authors, I forefront his emphasis on non-procreative sexuality and its link to death in order to extend the subversive potential of sinthomosexuality to women—particularly through s/m practice. Specifically, my methodology draws from and complicates Freeman’s theorization of s/m as a mode of queer critique. She coins the neologism “erotohistoriography:”

as a mode of reparative criticism...[that] honors the way queer relations complexly exceed the present, insisting that various queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensations, produce forms of time consciousness—even historical consciousness—that can intervene into the material damage done in the name of development, civilization, and so on. (120)

For Freeman, s/m is the means through which marginalized subjects can reenact, reconstruct, and reclaim—in order to cope with—instances of historical oppression (143). While Freeman’s claim may seem like a positive reclamation of s/m—a practice that has been consistently stigmatized amongst hetero- and homo-normative academic and activist communities—I am reluctant to accept her totalizing assumptions, which deemphasize pleasure and disallow for productive readings of subjects who engage in s/m for reasons unrelated to historical oppression. The broad range of s/m practice depicted in *Gravity’s Rainbow* alternately reinforces and frustrates a reading of queerness through an erotohistoriographic lens. Certain instances of s/m certainly make use of historical artifacts in order to grant participants access to historical moments. However, the novel’s postmodernist heteroglossia—its intertwining of genres, including historical fiction—complicates a reading of s/m as reparative criticism; frequently, Pynchon depicts s/m
within, instead of in reference to, historical contexts. Freeman’s assertion that s/m is “a kind of erotic time machine that offers a fleshly metacommentary on the dual emergence of modernity and its others, on the entangled histories of race, labor, nationhood, and imperialism as well as sexuality” applies to the overarching function of stigmatized sexual practice in *Gravity's Rainbow* (138). However, an erotohistoriographic methodology problematically elides the primary motivation for many practitioners: pleasure. Indeed, even if the larger effect of s/m practice is a “fleshly metacommentary” on the interrelatedness of sexuality, political power, and institutional control—erotohistoriography, intent on finding positive social value in queer practices, turns away from the specificity of local instances of s/m. Her methodology generalizes s/m as a vehicle of queer resistance to such an extent that Freeman is forced to ignore the complex range of s/m practices, the diversity of its practitioners, and the specific—sometimes problematic—drives behind s/m. Furthermore, Freeman’s theories do not engage with the disruptive jouissance that often results from s/m practice—a jouissance that erupts and disrupts as opposed to generating a coherent, reparative commentary on historical injustice.

Like the complex and conflicting presentation of s/m in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Halberstam insists that “we cannot afford to settle on linear connections between radical desires and radical politics; instead we have to be prepared to be unsettled by the politically problematic connections history throws our way” (162). I posit that *Gravity’s Rainbow* anticipates Halberstam’s complex reading of queerness and stigmatized sexual practice in that the novel, like Halberstam’s theories, frustrates a unified, liberatory reading of queerness—in terms of both the variety of s/m depicted and its destabilizing
narrative function. Additionally, Halberstam theorizes unacknowledged, liberatory modes of subjectivity and queer practice. She identifies shadow feminism, the queer art of failure, and masochism as three potential types of oppositional politics that feminist critics have frequently marginalized and criticized as internalized oppressive practices rooted in false consciousness. My project fuses Edelman’s theorization of queer negativity with Halberstam’s assertion that “negativity might well constitute an antipolitics, but it should not register as apolitical” (108). Like Halberstam, I broaden both the political potential of Edelman’s work and the range of individuals who can access the subversive potential of queer negativity. She differentiates her work from Freeman’s by positing a queer temporality that is suspended from time, as opposed to a queer temporality that travels within time. According to Halberstam, queer temporality and spatiality should “resist notions of art as capable of seeing beyond and in fact makes art about limitation, about the narrowness of the future, the weightiness of the past, and the urgency of the present” (106). Like Edelman’s queer negativity, Halberstam’s theorization of radical passivity is rooted in queer practices that function through masochistic behavior and disruptive jouissance. Both Edelman and Halberstam emphasize how queerness refuses intelligibility; Halberstam writes of “a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate” (110). However, Gravity’s Rainbow demonstrates the extent to which resistant, queer practices can be exploited by those who hold power. The novel critiques this co-optation through the innumerable permutations of sexual practice depicted, which—taken as a whole—seem to ask: What happens when institutions co-opt the
erotics of queer negativity? What happens when institutional structures fail, make a mess, and annihilate?

I emphasize the narrative qualities of s/m and build upon the queer theories articulated above in order to explicate how queer negativity in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is simultaneously a symptom and a cause of postmodernist narrative instability. My queer postmodernist methodology relies heavily on McHale’s work; in part, this reliance stems from the erotic undercurrent in his own texts. Though he tends not to focus his close-readings on Pynchon’s depictions of sexual practice, McHale repeatedly draws comparisons between poetic and erotic practices, with specific reference to s/m on several occasions. My methodology modifies McHale’s theories in order to foreground the intrinsic queerness of Pynchon’s postmodernist narrative, which has been frequently dismissed; moreover, my project attends to the ways in which gendered narrative and sexual practices within the novel complicate McHale’s readings. His work is particularly suited to my study of s/m in that s/m itself relies on narrative structure. I posit that s/m internalizes postmodernist literary devices through embodied sexual practice in unacknowledged ways.

McHale differentiates between modernist and postmodernist fiction by attributing an epistemological dominant to modernist fiction and an ontological dominant to postmodernist fiction. The dominant, McHale explains, was defined by the Russian Formalist Roman Jakobson in a 1935 lecture “as the focusing component of a work of art” (qtd. in *Postmodernist Fiction* 6). McHale reminds readers that the dominant is never monolithic; rather, it should be understood as a means of describing the hierarchical order of poetic devices and themes within a text. McHale posits that postmodernist fiction
foregrounds ontological uncertainty through both the poetics and thematics of the text—a thought echoed two years later by Bersani when he writes that “the major anxiety provoked by Gravity’s Rainbow is ontological rather than epistemological” (“Pynchon, Paranoia” 107, sic.). Through a series of close-readings McHale identifies a range of literary devices employed by postmodernist fiction that create narrative indeterminacy; the devices most relevant to my queer reading of Pynchon’s poetics are: revised histories (91), narrative erasure (101), narrative paradoxes, and nested or embedded narratives (116). In my thesis I will highlight how these literary devices are often deployed in scenes depicting s/m; more importantly, I will explicate how individual practitioners of s/m, who create and play with their own narratives within s/m scenes, employ these literary devices. McHale argues that the postmodernist tendency to destabilize and refigure traditional narrative levels within the text can be read as a metacommentary on ontology in which the text’s content and structure mirror the ontological uncertainty of postmodern culture. By analyzing s/m’s narrative and structural function in Gravity’s Rainbow, I will build on McHale’s assertion that “postmodernist representations of sadomasochism function as models of the ‘sadistic’ relation between text and reader” (226); indeed, s/m is also a model of the relation between narrative content and structure.

While other theories of postmodernism and postmodernity could easily be applied to Gravity’s Rainbow, few—if any—could accommodate the queer postmodernist methodology I develop throughout this project. For instance, Lyotard’s foundational

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5 For a cultural genealogy of masochism and its relation to postmodernity see John K. Noyes’ The Mastery of Submission in which he writes that “masochism’s postmodernity is concerned with…play, parody, and simulation and their role in the constitution of subjectivity” (211). However, Noyes’ work significantly differs from my own in that he does not analyze masochism in terms of postmodernist literature or narrative structure, but rather in terms of theories of postmodernity. Additionally, his discussion of masochism does not explore s/m’s subversive potential, nor does he incorporate a queer methodological approach.
theories, which focus on the postmodern distrust of grand narratives and destabilization of scientific knowledge, relate to the unpredictable nature of rocket technology, the profusion of scientific knowledge in the narrative, and the multiplicity of competing narratives within Pynchon’s encyclopedic tome. By extension, Lyotard’s theories could be linked to s/m through the eroticization of the gender-queer rocket. However, Lyotard, like many other postmodern theorists, only briefly discusses poetic aesthetics, limiting the usefulness of his theories for my methodology, which is heavily invested in language and literary devices. This is not to say that McHale’s theories are the only postmodernist theories that can be related to both postmodernist narratives and contemporary queer theory. For instance, Linda Hutcheon’s theorization of historiographic metafiction, a disruptive narrative practice, prefigures Freeman’s erotohistoriography. Likewise, Halberstam’s discussion of the masochist who becomes suspended from time aligns with Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction that removes itself from the frame of history and questions dominant modes of historical knowledge. For Hutcheon, postmodernist fiction remains primarily concerned with epistemological questions, that do not—as a matter of course—explode (literary or historical) narrative to the same extent that a questioning and breaking of ontological boundaries can. Thus her theories lack the grounding necessary to articulate how s/m pleasure, a disruptive jouissance, is inherently tied to the ontology of language in the novel.

6 Though Andreas Huyssen’s approach to postmodernity, which analyzes postmodernist art’s incorporation of mass culture, relates to Pynchon’s fusing of high and low cultural productions and would be particularly applicable to a discussion of the pornographic genre in Pynchon’s novel, any relation between his neo-Marxist approach and queer theory would be tenuous at best. Frederic Jameson’s extensive work on postmodernism incorporates analyses of both cultural productions and postmodernist culture—much of which is applicable to Gravity’s Rainbow. However, integrating Jameson’s work with queer theory seems almost like a misappropriation of his work in that he consistently marginalizes and/or fails to account for the queerness of queer texts. Indeed, Jameson’s analyses of Warhol have been critiqued for disregarding Warhol’s sexuality and its relation to the (queer) politics/aesthetics of his art.
Perhaps more than any other theory I’ve discussed above, Ihab Hassan’s concept of postmodernism offers the most viable alternative to McHale’s theories. Hassan resists definitions of postmodernism that rely on periodization and in doing so he identifies a genealogy for what he calls a literature of silence: a literary tradition that assaults bourgeois values and focuses on practices of unmaking the self—significantly Hassan is the only critic to so explicitly place Pynchon in a literary genealogy that includes the Marquis de Sade, an argument that undergirds my whole project. Unlike other postmodernist critics that revel in the linguistic play and anarchy of postmodern literature, Hassan posits a spiritual dimension to the world-view projected in postmodernist texts. He identifies the hopeful potential of postmodernist literature in his own neologism “indeterminance,” which delineates “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation” (92). Hassan differentiates the tendencies of modernist and postmodernist literature by outlining the schematic differences between them. For Hassan, postmodernism focuses on the polymorphous/androgy nous as opposed to the genital/phallic, on absence instead of presence, on dispersal instead of centering, on exhaustion/silence instead of mastery/logos (91). I cite only a few of many examples that seem to explicitly tie postmodernist poetics to queer erotics, thus offering the most sustainable alternative to McHale’s “ontological dominant.”

In 2012, McHale suggested that “so ubiquitous is Pynchon in the discourses about postmodernism that we might go so far as to say, not that postmodern theory depends on Pynchon’s fiction for exemplification, but that, without Pynchon’s fiction, there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of literary postmodernism in
the first place” (Cambridge Companion 97). Despite his omnipresence within theories of postmodernist narrative, few Pynchon critics have focused on his unique and divisive approach to sexuality. My queer intervention into postmodernist theory complicates what it means, within the collective critical imagination, to read Pynchon as the postmodernist author-figure. A survey of Pynchon criticism on sexuality revealed three trends. Most frequently critics politically take issue with Pynchon’s depiction of gender and sexuality. For instance, in a 1976 article Marjorie Kauffman writes of Greta Erdmann—a masochist—that “she has no identity beyond the roles she plays” (222). Close to twenty years later, Michael Bérubé makes a shockingly similar argument when he writes: “It may be that Greta Erdmann is a woman ‘constructed’ by male fantasies of woman’s sexual pleasure, ‘constructed’ so effectively as to be those fantasies” (264). Though Bérubé admits that his discussion of Pynchon’s pornography ignores the materiality of the female body, he fails to acknowledge that his psychoanalytic reading of pornography and fetishism in Gravity’s Rainbow equally precludes a nuanced reading of s/m as a pleasurable practice with liberatory potential. Julie Christine Spears’ “queer” reading of Gravity’s Rainbow and Mason & Dixon lies on the extreme end of Pynchon condemnation. Though Sears argues—like me—that aberrant sexuality in Gravity’s Rainbow is “indicative of a death wish and potentially destructive to life” (108), her reading conflates Pynchon’s personal politics with the politics she identifies in his texts. Not only does her reading lack nuance—she disallows for the possibility that Pynchon’s exaggerated depiction of sexuality might have an ironic tone or subversive message—but she also privileges the light-hearted and sometimes comic depiction of homosociality in Mason & Dixon. Sears assumes that the increased visibility of queer culture, between the
publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon* (1997), inspired Pynchon to reconsider and revise his previous “homophobia.” Furthermore, Sears’ reading—published before Edelman’s *No Future*—unconsciously privileges heteronormative values that stigmatize sexuality linked with death. In Douglas Keesey’s 2002 review of Spears’ article, he observes how much “remains to be explored in the relation between sexuality and politics in Pynchon” (169) and, I would add, much remains to be explored in the relation between marginalized sexual practices and the poetics of the text.7

Second, Pynchon criticism that attends to the s/m practice in the novel often focuses on its psychoanalytic or metaphysical aspects. Lawrence C. Wolfley’s 1977 article set the tone for this methodological approach by focusing on the management of Eros and Thanatos in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. He argues that there is no healthy sex in the novel because the society it portrays is “committed to the death instinct” (883). Wolfley posits that the only hope for man, in Pynchon’s postmodern world, is to establish a dialectic between Eros and Thanatos—a hopeful dialectic I locate in s/m practice. Like most other readings of sexuality in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Wolfley’s article is primarily concerned with thematic as opposed to aesthetic issues—though his article gestures toward a reading of the novel in which its poetics work in conjunction with its content. Wolfley identifies the tension between the discursive structure of the text (Pynchon’s “present-tense style”) and the contend of the narrative, which celebrates the death instinct of Western man (887). One of the few critics to explicitly focus on s/m, John Hamill posits that s/m is a process of retreat into the self, a reaction to social entrapment—

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7 Bernard Duyfhuizen’s analysis of both the narrative and discursive levels of the text is a unique methodological approach within Pynchon criticism on sexuality. Still, Duyfhuizen problematically classifies s/m and Thanatz’s “Sado-anarchism” as fetishes (note 3). This approach, similar to Bérubé’s reading of Pynchon’s pornographies, works against the complex representation of s/m and other non-normative sexual practices in the novel.
though he limits his readings to male s/m practice. Hamill’s article builds on Wes Chapman’s work, which focuses on the presence of anti-essentialist assumptions in the male-authored text. These articles briefly treat the text’s discursive structure in that both Chapman and Hamill posit that the narrator’s use of direct-address is intended for a male audience.

Third, and perhaps most surprising since it was a trend amongst all articles I found, was the consistent reluctance amongst Pynchon critics to read s/m as a potentially liberating practice. Furthermore, almost all the articles mentioned above deemphasize the unique ways in which gender and the female body complicate a unified reading of s/m. For most critics, female s/m practitioners in *Gravity’s Rainbow* are either a pornographic male construction or, even more problematic, they are no different than their male counterparts. While I am not arguing that a queer reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* reveals s/m to be a consistent mode of resistance to hegemonic systems of control, I am arguing that the text’s construction of s/m should be read, through a Foucauldian lens, as a complex intersection for points of power. I build on Foucault’s theorization of the deployment and pathologization of sexuality in order to argue that s/m becomes the intersection at which the queer, non-normative tendencies of the characters meet with the non-normative narrative tendencies of the text. I use McHale’s focus on ontological instability and narrative indeterminacy to argue that queer negativity in *Gravity’s Rainbow* reflects the ontological uncertainty of the narrative world projected by the text. This study contributes to both the ongoing project of broadening the object of queer inquiry and of postmodernist narrative theory. While Edelman, Halberstam, and Freeman all attend to the structure of the cultural productions they analyze, they refrain from
applying their theories to postmodernist literature, which, in Pynchon’s novel, extends and amplifies the linguistic and social function of queerness through both narrative content and structure.

I organize my study around the four extended depictions of s/m in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In Section II, I offer a close-reading of the s/m relationship between Weissmann, a Nazi Captain; Katje Borgesius, a member of both the Dutch Underground and the Nazi Party; and Gottfried, a young Nazi soldier. This scene explicitly links s/m practice with death, through Weissmann’s code name—Blicero, or death—which underscores my reading of s/m in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as an embrace of queer negativity. I use Pynchon’s incorporation of the historical fiction genre in order to problematize Freeman’s theorization of s/m as an erotic time machine. Unlike later scenes, Blicero’s s/m is the only practice that includes an extended depiction of drag, which I read as a mode of political parody. For Blicero, s/m and drag become multifaceted performances that both consciously and unconsciously reinforce and undermine systems of institutional authority.

Section III, which focuses on Katje’s transformation into the Dominatrix Domina Nocturna for General Brigadier Pudding, complicates s/m’s liberatory potential. Here s/m is deployed by an institution of power with the explicit intent of distracting and neutralizing Pudding who opposes the new intelligence strategies used by PISCES—the “Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender. Whose surrender is not made clear” (Pynchon 35). I build upon my previous close-reading of how gender functions within s/m narratives, highlighting how Pynchon’s destabilizing poetics reflect s/m’s ability to destabilize gender and power binaries. Later in the novel, Pudding dies as...
a result of his coprophagic practices during s/m with Katje; his death literalizes McHale’s assertion that “postmodernist writing models or simulates death; it produces simulacra of death through confrontations between worlds, through transgressions of ontological levels or boundaries” (232). This scene is central to my supposition that s/m in Gravity’s Rainbow is a microcosmic enactment of Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics.

My object of study in Section IV is Margherita Erdmann, the sole self-proclaimed female masochist in the novel. I discuss the complex relationship between Margherita Erdmann, Tyrone Slothrop, Bianca (Margherita’s daughter), and a host of other characters. Unlike the previous sections, this reading is not limited to one scene of s/m; the structure of the novel prohibits this since Margherita’s s/m scenes are scattered over a wide range of episodes. Indeed, Margherita’s s/m practice has extensive consequences for both the novel’s narrative content and discursive structure, consequences that far exceed any other s/m practitioner in Gravity’s Rainbow. For the first time in the novel, the narrative foregrounds the social stigmatization of s/m as a non-normative practice. Furthermore, Slothrop’s performance as a sadist depicts pornography and social conditioning as the underlying component of adult sexuality. This scene is significant in that it is the first example of s/m that is motivated primarily by pleasure or jouissance—a pleasure that is not explicitly framed as a commentary on systems of institutional authority or as a means of encountering history. In this section I counter previous readings of s/m in the novel by arguing that Margherita’s pleasure should not be read as a male-authored fantasy of female sexuality.

In Section V I discuss the last scene of s/m in the novel: Gottfried’s final submission to Blicero who then places Gottfried in Rocket 00000 and launches it. This
scene is a paradigmatic example of how s/m practice, like the postmodernist poetics of the text itself, can be read as a manifestation of Edelman’s *sinthomosexuality*, which subverts heteronormative values by blocking the production of language and teleological narrative. In this scene, the depiction of s/m leads into a narrative prolepsis, in which Pynchon employs direct address to place the reader in a movie theatre, above which “the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof this old theatre…” (775). More than any other instance of s/m in the novel, this scene overtly foregrounds “ontological boundaries…[as] a means of foregrounding death, of making death, the unthinkable, available to the imagination, if only in a displaced way” (McHale 231). Here, the queer sexual and narrative practice employed throughout the novel culminates in a final queering of narrative that is addressed directly to the reader—a total collapse of narrative levels and narrative itself, from which no future can extend.
SECTION II

Out of the Fire and into the Oven:

Katje and Gottfried under Blicero

Throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* (discursively constructed) subjectivity frequently becomes unintelligible or dismantled through s/m. More importantly, the very discourse Weissmann uses to describe s/m is equally unintelligible to the characters in the narrative. Katje recalls Weissmann’s description of s/m as “a closed flower, capable of exfoliation and infinite revealing (she thinks of a mathematical function that will expand for her bloom-like into a power series *with no general term*, endlessly, darkly” (Pynchon 96).

Both Foucault and Edelman focus on how the cultural regulation of sexual practice perpetuates dominant social structures through its investment in reproduction and through a proliferation of discourses concerning sexuality. This cultural formation that stigmatizes all non-procreative erotic energy is particularly apparent in the nineteenth-century pathologization of perverse pleasures, which are primarily non-genital practices. Though Edelman does not reference Foucault in *No Future*, I locate a parallel between Foucault’s description of perverse pleasures and Edelman’s description of queer negativity—both of which unconsciously allude to s/m, a sexual practice characterized by its polymorphous engagement with bodies and minds, a sexual practice that is consistently stigmatized, a practice that works against heteronormative subjectivity through non-procreative bodily pleasures and through its resistance to normative narratives of sexuality. In reference to the passage quoted above, Weisenburger explains how “Blicero’s [Weissmann’s] cryptic phrases expand like a power series; yet with no common coefficient, these references might be unrelated or at least involve wild leaps”
For Katje, and by extension for the reader who only knows of Weissmann’s words through Katje’s memory, his cryptic descriptions of s/m reflect—in both content and structure—a postmodernist narrative tendency. Specifically, the wild leaps of Weissmann’s s/m narrative recall McHale’s explanation of “heteroglossia” or a “plurality of discourse” that becomes “a means of breaking up the unified projected world into a polyphony of worlds of discourse” (*Postmodernist* 167). By equating Weissmann’s description of s/m to a mathematical power series with no general term, the indeterminacy of his words parallels the reader’s frustrated attempt to locate a stable interpretation of s/m in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and of the narrative itself.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Edelman coins the neologism “*sinthomosexual*ity” as “that [which] conjures homosexuality…in intimate relation to a fatal, and even murderous, jouissance—a fantasy that locates homosexuality in the place of the sinthome” (39). Within *Gravity’s Rainbow* Weissmann is the archetypal *sinthomosexual*. He represents the homosexual, the pervert, and the death drive; his *sinthomosexual*ity highlights the heteronormative stigmatization of unmarried men—men who, according to Edelman, symbolize “a drive toward death that entails the destruction of the Child” (21). The link between death and non-normative sexuality can also be seen in Weissmann’s code name—Dominus Blicero—Dominus from the Latin for “Lord” and Blicero from the German “bleich” or pale which refers to the bleached, white bones of the dead (Weisenburger 37). Blicero is first introduced in the novel in a narrative analepsis focalized through Katje Borgesius. Though Katje is living and working for the White Visitation, a British counter-intelligence agency, this flashback illustrates her life in occupied Europe before she escaped to England. The narrative analepsis depicts Katje
and a young German soldier, Gottfried, submitting to Blicero’s s/m play at a German rocket battery in Holland. In Katje’s memory, Blicero is “always coiled in the whispers of decay” (Pynchon 96). By embracing queer negativity, Blicero’s association with death reveals how he, more than any other character in Gravity’s Rainbow, is forced to bear the burden of sinthomosexuality.

In part, Blicero employs s/m as a means to legitimate and reinvigorate his own claims to power. Through s/m, he embraces the death drive he has come to symbolize and appropriates it for his own pleasure. This episode illustrates Edelman’s claim that the sinthomosexual, once demeaned, “embraces de-meaning as the endless insistence of the Real that the Symbolic can never master for meaning now or in the ‘future’ ” (107). The sinthomosexual’s linguistic and social structural position has no productive meaning and is defined only through its opposition to ontological and linguistic stability. Edelman’s construct of the demeaned sinthomosexual, who embraces (his) demeaning, can be paradoxically applied to both the dominant Dominus Blicero and his submissive, Gottfried. Blicero, an aging man, has been demeaned by Aryan cultural values—which privilege youth and heroism, but Blicero’s sexual “games” also demean the participants. He forces Gottfried to grow out his hair, “the humiliation would be good for the boy each morning at quarters…failing inspections time after time yet protected by his Captain from Army discipline” (Pynchon 97). Here, Blicero imagines that Gottfried’s humiliation sustains him. More importantly, by demeaning, or humiliating Gottfried, Blicero also

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8 This constructs Blicero’s s/m game as an alternative power structure, distinct from the political power relations within the Army. Hamill compares this to a Sadean trope, “As in Sade, the fantasy is played out in isolation in the woods, impenetrable to the outside world….Its eroticism is connected with the need to escape from the ‘outside’ world” (65). Hamill fails to acknowledge how Blicero’s cottage is not isolated; it remains vulnerable to the dangers of the outside world—in particular, the rockets.
participates in the deconstruction of Gottfried’s normative subject position, which will eventually be reconstructed in the context of Blicero’s s/m “game.”

Blicero’s sexual games also de-mean the political sphere through parody, foregrounding the potential for political parody within sexual practice. Katje recalls how Blicero called it the Rome-Berlin Axis: “the night the Italian came over and they were all around the bed, Captain Blicero plugged into Gottfried’s upended asshole and the Italian at the same time into his pretty mouth” (Pynchon 96). Though Gottfried’s power as a young soldier is in line with the exercise of power sanctioned by the state, Blicero understands Gottfried as a threat to his diminishing power. Jean Baudrillard describes how parody as “the reversal of power or [its] hyperextension, can touch power more deeply than any force relation” (Forget Foucault 64, emphasis mine). With strikingly similar language, Foucault writes that “an intensification or extension of power relations intended to wholly suppress these points of insubordination can only bring the exercise of power up against its outer limits” (Power 347). By comically politicizing his s/m game, Blicero’s sexual practice becomes both a conscious parody of the reigning political structures that would deny him power, as well as an intensification and legitimation of his own political power. Blicero’s parody incorporates the dangers and violence of the war, entwining his political power with his sexual virility. By intensifying and hyperextending his political authority into the erotic sphere, Blicero’s game begins to eradicate the boundaries that separate the political from the personal—bringing Blicero one step closer to power’s limit, which will eventually be reached by the end of the novel.

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9 In “Looking Back on Sodom: Sixties Sadomasochism in Gravity’s Rainbow,” John Hamill also identifies “The Rome-Berlin Axis” as “a parody of political power” (65).
10 This episode also reveals how Blicero’s pleasure is dependent upon Gottfried’s submission—without this Blicero would be unable to legitimate his power through sexual pleasure (Pynchon 99).
Not only does Blicero re-enact and parody the political sphere of WWII through s/m, but the novel also constructs its own critically parodic narrative of WWII history. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the narrator reveals how grand narrative of history elides the “true” mechanisms of power at work in the political sphere. When Katje contemplates her own role as a double-agent, when she questions whether her work for the English and her work for the Nazis morally cancel each other out, the reader learns that

The mass nature of wartime death is useful in many ways. It serves as spectacle, as diversion from the real movements of the War. It provides raw material to be recorded into History, so that children may be taught History as sequences of violence, battle after battle, and be more prepared for the adult world. (Pynchon 107)

Blicero’s simulation of power through s/m reflects Edelman’s assertion that politics “enacts the formal repetition distinctive of the drive while representing itself as bringing to fulfillment the narrative sequence of history…the realization of the subject’s authentic presence in the Child imagined as enjoying unmediated access to Imaginary wholeness” (10). The paranoid approach to history in *Gravity’s Rainbow* destabilizes the fantasy of (reproductive) futurism. Not only does war itself bring death, precluding ontological certainty in the present and threatening it in the future, but the secret political machinations behind war expose that fantasy of futurism as an untenable conspiracy. By reading history as a lie, *Gravity’s Rainbow* effectively erases any potential for advancement, erases any potential to locate historical linearity. At this moment in the narrative the reader is faced with an interpretive paradox, unable to stabilize the function of Blicero’s s/m: How can it both parody and reinforce political power? How can Blicero
parody a political power that exists only within the destabilized grand narrative of history?

The novel’s disruption and deconstruction of both literary and political narratives destabilizes readers’ interpretive abilities; indeed, McHale observes that we, as readers, consistently find “ourselves, like Pynchon’s own Captain Blicero, locked inside the limits of a game whose possibilities…we have exhausted—in Blicero’s case, the game of sexual domination; in ours, the game of literary interpretation” (Constructing 113). Though an apt comparison, McHale unconsciously constructs a binary between literary critics and s/m practitioners. By drawing a distinct line between the readers’ game of literary interpretation and Blicero’s game of s/m, he elides how Blicero is a reader as well, struggling to interpret his own narratives and the grand narratives of political machinations he is trapped within. Furthermore, this binary does not acknowledge how readers may participate in s/m, giving them knowledge and experience that would alter their relation to and interpretation of Blicero’s s/m.

In reference to a later scene in Gravity’s Rainbow, though it seems equally applicable to Blicero’s “Rome-Berlin Axis,” McHale writes that “the moment the reader recognizes the inconsistencies and incoherences of the allegory: determinate meaning dissolves into indeterminacy, the two-level ontological hierarchy of metaphorical and literal begins to oscillate, to opalesce…” (Postmodernist 144-5). The reader’s consistent inability to locate stable meaning, in addition to the subversion of power and gender binaries, destabilizes meaning-making structures in the text at large. Blicero, like the narrative he inhabits and like Edelman’s sinthomosexual, “scorns such a belief in a final signifier, reducing every signifier to the status of the letter and insisting on access to
jouissance in place of access to sense” (37). Blicero’s insistence on a type of sexual pleasure that destabilizes interpretive strategies focalizes how pleasure is consistently privileged over stable meaning throughout the novel.

Beyond destabilizing futurity on the political level and frustrating textual interpretation, *Gravity’s Rainbow* also undercuts the image of the Child. In heteronormative society, history is the means through which the Child is socially conditioned and made a political subject. The potential for a “true” history—which *Gravity’s Rainbow* constructs as a lie—becomes impossible in the narrative and along with that, the potential for normatively conditioned children becomes impossible as well. For Edelman the Child signifies heteronormative political telos; in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, children become empty vessels, signifying nothing beyond the lies of history they have been filled with; having no history to build a future upon they fail to embody that fantasy of Imaginary wholeness. The political sphere that Blicero inhabits in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is haunted by “the improvidence of children…and the civil paradox of this their Little State, whose base is the same Oven which must destroy it….”(Pynchon 101, his ellipses). Here, on the level of the sentence, Pynchon reproduces a heteronormative political logic, which is rooted in the fantasy of the Child. His ellipses foreground the gap between Imaginary relations and their perpetually deferred Symbolic fulfillment, much like a queer theory that insists “on its connection to the vicissitudes of the sign, to the tension between the signifier’s collapse into the letter’s cadaverous materiality” (Edelman 8). Pynchon visually represents the temporal and spatial gap between the future political sphere and the material Child for whom the future is symbolically entrusted. His final
ellipses underscore the unknowability of the future—it can neither be represented nor imagined with language.

*Gravity’s Rainbow* calls into question a heteronormative logic organized around futurity by destabilizing dominant cultural values and the cultural narratives used to perpetuate them. This can be seen when Blicero forces Katje and Gottfried to reenact and eroticize “*Der Kinderofen*”—“a reference to the Germanic folktale ‘Hansel and Gretel’ ” (Weisenburger 74). Katje and Gottfried kneel before Blicero, “children out of old Marchen” (Pynchon 96), “that is, out of old fairy tales” (Weisenburger 75). Except in *Gravity’s Rainbow* the fairy tale is re-written. Instead of pushing the evil witch into the oven, saving herself and her brother—in play—from the same fate, Katje escapes. She leaves Gottfried in his cage, “the fattening goose” (Pynchon 97), who will eventually be bound and launched in Rocket 00000, which is symbolically figured as an oven. Through a parodic perversion of a classic fairy tale, Blicer reveals the fantasy of reproductive futurism that’s symbolized in the Child. Blicer’s s/m practice with Gottfried enacts Edelman’s polemical invitation to “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; Fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*…” (29). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Blicer literally fucks that Aryan youth who would be honored as a hero, as the future of the nation.

In contrast to the multiple functions of s/m in this scene, Pynchon’s depiction of drag in this episode is relatively stable—even though it too functions as a destabilizing force within the narrative.¹¹ Blicer’s drag foregrounds gender binaries as social

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¹¹ Queer theory consistently reads drag and camp as forms of parody. In “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” Leo Bersani writes that gay male camp, in part, functions to deconstruct the elaborate social construct of gender, though Bersani also asserts that “parody is an erotic turn-off” (208). Freeman also argues that camp effect depends upon inverting binaries (68).
constructs and replaces them with the binary of dominator and dominated—which Pynchon will, in turn, destabilize in the next depiction of s/m when Katje becomes a Dominatrix. Not only does Blicero’s campy costume do away with gender binaries, it actively mocks and inverts them. Blicero presents himself in “black velvet and Cuban heels, his penis squashed invisible under a flesh-colored leather jockstrap, over which he wears a false cunt and merkin of sable…tiny blades of stainless steel bristle from lifelike pink humidity” (Pynchon 96-7). Here, the symbol of male power is literally crushed beneath artificial female genitalia. In patriarchal society, the cunt is constructed as a symbol of weakness because it is vulnerable to penetration: *Gravity’s Rainbow* inverts this symbol of female difference and disempowerment. Rather than being penetrated, the steel bristles of Blicero’s false cunt penetrate Katje’s “lips and tongue” bloodying them and reinforcing her subjugation (Pynchon 97). Freeman characterizes drag, s/m, and sexual bottoming as queer pleasures that physically encounter history and contribute “to a reparative criticism that takes up the materials of a traumatic past and remixes them in the interests of new possibilities for being and knowing” (144). Yet, her theories fall short when we turn to a novel like *Gravity’s Rainbow* that depicts s/m within a historical moment. Though Katje recalls previous instances when Blicero invokes the costumes of the Inquisition, this specific scene makes no reference to historical structures of oppression, beyond Blicero’s own Nazism, which is contemporary with this moment in the narrative.

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12 Freeman contextualizes this assertion within her reading of s/m in Isaac Julien’s *The Attendant*, though this sentiment—of s/m as something which dons the costumes of the past as a way of refiguring experiences in the present—is consistently repeated throughout *Time Binds* (in the hypothetical examples Freeman uses and in her close-readings of s/m in other cultural texts).
Unlike Freeman, Halberstam offers insight into the cultural narratives surrounding non-normative sexual practices within historical moments—as opposed to reading for the ways in which non-normative sexual practices allude to historical moments. By literalizing the relation between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in the “Rome-Berlin Axis,” Blicero’s s/m reveals how queer practices can be located within a historical moment in the narrative, while simultaneously—for the extra-diegetic reader—commenting on “the materials of a traumatic past.” Not only does this scene rely on a narrative fictionalization of a specific moment in WWII history, it also references an historically verifiable location: a “real” rocket battery that was “hidden in the woods and parkland of this settled tongue of farms and estates that reaches eastward from the royal city, between two expanses of polder, toward Wassenaar” (Pynchon 97). Weisenburger finds “Pynchon’s source on Holland as a V-2 launching site [in] Kooy and Uytenbogaart (Ballistics of the Future 283-84), who write about a ‘Sonderkommando (Special Commando)’ of rocket troops arriving in Wassenaar on September 7, 1944, and remaining until late March of 1945” (75). The narrative includes another accurate historical marker: Blicero makes Gottfried grow out his hair in order to humiliate him when he stands “ranked with his battery near Schuβstelle 3” (Pynchon 97), an actual rocket launch site in near Wassenaar.13 I highlight the historical accuracies of Pynchon’s references, in conjunction with the novel’s internally consistent references to dates,14 in order to differentiate between s/m practice that occurs in a specific historical moment and

13 Weisenburger also cites the historical veracity/specificity of this reference through Kooy and Uytenbogaart who “report that ‘firing site 3’ was located at ‘de Beukenhorst’ ” (75).
14 Since Kooy and Uytenbogaart indicate that the rocket battery near Wassenaar was occupied between September 1944 and later March 1945, this historicized s/m practice is consistent with the novel’s time frame: specifically, the climax of Gottfried and Blicero’s s/m practice—the launch of Rocket 00000—occurs on April 1, 1945—see footnote 38—a temporally viable date since the launch occurs after the troops left Wassenaar and gives the troops enough time to get to the Lüneburg Heath for the 00000 launch.
those s/m practices—in particular Margherita’s, which I discuss in Section IV—that are historically non-specific or temporally unbounded.

Even though the historical specificity of this s/m precludes a reading using Freeman’s erotohistoriography, it does not preclude interpreting Blicero’s s/m as a resistant practice within a historical moment. Halberstam notes that “the effeminate homosexual was persecuted in Nazi Germany both for his rejection of the heterosexual family and for his embrace of the feminine” (161), complicating Freeman’s narrow construction of s/m and drag as modes for encountering history. Halberstam’s work allows me to move beyond Freeman’s discussion of temporal drag. In this scene, both Blicero’s drag and s/m can be read as subversive practices since both practices embrace an oppositional structural position within the Nazi regime. This can be seen in Blicero’s appropriation of the stigmatized female body and in his embrace of the queer death drive. By translating the bureaucratic power of his Nazi rank into that of a parodic Dominatrix, Blicero resists patriarchal gender binaries. His feminized sexual practice works against the Nazi privileging of masculinity; “indeed the masculine homosexual was in complete concordance with the state’s anti-Semitic and misogynistic conceptions of masculinity and femininity” (Halberstam 160). Since Blicero is “too ‘realistic’ to prefer a hero’s death or even a soldier’s” (Pynchon 101), his s/m is a rejection of Aryan values, which privilege youth and physical prowess. Unable to be honored as a young, heroic soldier, Blicero does the next best thing: subsume and reappropriate Gottfried’s subjectivity for his own pleasure, which gives Blicero indirect access to Gottfried’s privileged subject position—the glory of a young soldier.
As I mentioned in the Section I, Halberstam’s chapter on homosexuality and fascism articulates why contemporary theorists cannot assume a causal relation between non-normative sexual practices and resistant politics (162). Indeed, the depictions of s/m in this episode encourage numerous, competing interpretations—problematicating a liberatory reading of s/m. S/m’s competing functions reveal how the deployment of power and the subversion of it are inextricably linked, particularly when analyzed through the mechanism of sexuality. Though Blicero disrupts dominant discourses, this disruption is only possible through the subjugation of others. Blicero’s discursive power reveals “the illusory status of meaning,” which Edelman reads “as [a] defense against the self-negating substance of jouissance” (Edelman 48). By destabilizing his subjects’ politically and heteronormatively constructed identities, Blicero assumes the power of discourse to create and name subjects. By deploying sexuality as a means to reinforce his own power, Blicero complicates the liberatory reading of s/m I previously argued for.

When faced with the ontological instability of WWII, which reflects the illusory status of meaning within the narrative, Blicero, Katje, and Gottfried turn to s/m as a tenuous sort of meaning making system—though Katje seems unconscious, or at least in denial, of how her sexual practice also functions as an embrace of self-negating jouissance. In their attempt to access stability within familiar structures of dominance and power they incorporate the ontological uncertainty that plague political power structures, which are threatened by technological advancements—namely, the rocket. The only certainty within their sexual games is uncertainty. Though Katje believes it’s better for all of them “to enter into some formal, rationalized version of what, outside, proceeds without form or decent limit,” she knows they are unsafe, that rockets regularly misfire,
making “them as much target as launch site…. That they were all condemned” (Pynchon 97-8, ellipses his). For Katje, Blicero, and Gottfried s/m becomes a ritual that offers a respite from the chaotic instability that defines their lives.15

Blicero exploits wartime ontological instability in order to redefine Gottfried’s sense of subjectivity; Blicero’s discursive power is facilitated by the nineteenth-century construction of sexual identities, which in turn constructs sexual subjects as the mechanisms through which power structures operate. Sexuality, Foucault argues, is not a drive, but rather a transfer point for power relations (History 103), making it neither stable nor innate within the subject, who—as a discursive construct—remains perpetually open to reconstruction. By removing Gottfried from the Army barracks to the cottage in the woods, Blicero effectively removes Gottfried from the social structures that defined the boy’s subjectivity. For Foucault, “the deployment of sexuality has its reason for being…in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating and penetrating bodies” (History 107). This is highlighted in Gravity’s Rainbow when Blicero reminds Gottfried of his initial resistance and then acceptance of anal sex: “How tight you were. Until you knew I meant to come inside. Your little rosebud bloomed. You had nothing, not even your mouth’s innocence, to lose…. ” (Pynchon 106, ellipses his). In Blicero’s hands Gottfried’s stable identity disappears along with his ontological stability (which was already threatened by the war)—leaving his body and his identity open to penetration. By linking subjectivity to discursive structures, the narrative initiates a slippage between embodied and discursively constructed subjectivity; destabilizing one necessarily leads to the

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15 In “Looking Back on Sodom,” John Hamill writes that “their fantasy world is an escape from the chaos of war and its economies” (65); it is a retreat that preserves them “from the threat of war and death” (66). This reading elides how the full narrative arc of Blicero and Gottfried’s s/m, their “preserving routine,” ultimately leads to death and the destruction of their subjectivities.
destabilization of the other, which foregrounds the tenuous ontology of the narrative, and the text.

Gottfried is dependent upon Blicero for his new subjectivity, which is literally bound up with his identity as a sexual slave. In this scene the narrator reveals how “the word bitch, spoken now in a certain tone of voice, will give [Gottfried] an erection he cannot will down—afraid that, if not actually judged and damned, he’s gone insane” (Pynchon 105). Foucault identifies “two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to” (Power 331). This definition of “subject” elucidates the mechanisms through which Gottfried’s sexuality has been reconstructed by Blicero’s discourse. Gottfried’s new (sexual) identity and desire are now unintelligible. He embraces the deconstruction of his politically configured identity as a Nazi soldier, in favor of a reconstructed subjectivity linked to non-normative sexual practice. Though Blicero makes it clear that Gottfried was at first unwilling to engage in s/m and anal intercourse and the narrator never clarifies the initial level of Gottfried’s masochistic desire (Pynchon 106), the notion of consent in this context becomes irrelevant to a Foucauldian analysis of power. For Foucault, neither violence nor consent constitute the exercise of power, rather, freedom is the necessary condition for power. Freedom “must exist for power to be exerted…since without the possibility of recalcitrance power would be equivalent to a physical determination” (Foucault, Power 342). When the narrative is focalized through Gottfried he reveals how: “The fucking, the salt length of the Captain’s weary, often impotent penis pushing into his meek mouth…these are necessary, they make specific his captivity
which otherwise would hardly be different from Army stifling, Army repression” (Pynchon 105). Though it’s possible to argue that choosing between two modes of captivity is not freedom at all, Gottfried’s desire to be read as a unique subject, as opposed to just another Nazi soldier underscores how Gottfried ironically exhibits agency through sexual slavery. Gottfried’s choice, like Blicero’s, sets him apart from and in opposition to dominant cultural values—even though that means embracing an identity that remains unintelligible to both the culture at large and his own psyche.

Throughout this episode Pynchon focuses on technology: its development in the name of progress and modernity, its (mis)uses, and its failures. This episode inaugurates the eroticization of technological advancements that Pynchon will continue to build upon as the narrative progresses. Initially the rockets are anthropomorphized through their madness, their seemingly sentient behavior. When the narrative is focalized through Gottfried we learn that he reads the rockets as his pet animals (Pynchon 105).

Technology in this episode can initially be seen in the erratic nature of German rockets which are “crazed, [they] turn at random, whinnying terribly in the sky, turn about and fall according each to its madness so unreachable and, it is feared, incurable” (Pynchon 98). The very technology that should offer protection through offensive war strikes, instead threatens the lives of those who made them. Not only does this danger and uncertainty heighten the pleasure of Blicero’s s/m game (Pynchon 98), it also destabilizes the binary between animate and inanimate objects. As inanimate objects the rockets should be neither erratic, nor objects of desire—they should merely be tools of war. The eroticization of their erratic nature undermines their political function—refiguring them as tools of pleasure. The rockets’ unpredictable violence and aggression put the dominant
Blicero in a subjugated position, which heightens his erotic pleasure. By eroticizing the threat of the rockets, Blicero refigures the rocket as a tool or technology of s/m practice—though the rocket will not be fully subsumed into his s/m game until the end of the novel. This episode initiates the slippage between Blicero’s political power and sexual pleasure, a slippage between his desire to access power and his masochistic pleasure. I will elaborate on the indeterminate function of the rockets as tools for the deployment and subversion of hegemonic power in Section V.
SECTION III
Crossing Lines:

Katje Becomes Domina Nocturna for General Brigadier Pudding

Just two years after the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Fussel published *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), which offers one of the earliest close-readings of the notorious coprophagia scene in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In condemnations of Pynchon’s work, the depiction of “Brigadier Ernest Pudding, the decrepit superior who eats shit (in a repugnant scene that continues as a locus of controversy)” (Clerc 14), is often labeled obscene and unreadable. Fussel, the first critic to deeply investigate this controversial passage and offer a rationale behind the pornographic descriptions, writes that “the presence of Brigadier Pudding in the novel proposes the Great War as the ultimate origin of the insane contemporary scene. It is where the irony and the absurdity began” (329). Since Pudding is a minor character, whose only extended appearance in the novel revolves around s/m so much so that he becomes the archetypal male masochist in the text, I can rearticulate Fussel’s quotation and say: the presence of (Pudding’s) masochism in the novel proposes WWI as the ultimate origin of the insane contemporary scene. Though Fussel foreshadows my own project when he suggests that “the style of classic English pornographic fiction of the grossly masochistic type, [is] the only style, Pynchon implies, adequate to memories of the Great War, with its ‘filth’ and ‘terrible smell,’ ” (330-1), his book—published prior to the rise of postmodern theory and queer theory within the academy—is unable to name “the insane contemporary scene” “postmodern.” Additionally, Fussel is unable to read Pudding’s coprophagic masochism as a subversive.

16 While this quotation doesn’t overtly discuss s/m, out of the limited number of scenes Pudding actually appears in throughout the novel the only extended depiction of/focalization through Pudding is during his submission to Katje. Thus, Pudding is emblematic of male masochism in the novel.
queer practice. While in Section II I detailed s/m’s potential to destabilize political power, in this section I focus on how institutions of power attempt to deploy sexuality as a tool for controlling and regulating individuals, posing several new questions, such as: How or if institutionally deployed erotic scenarios contain within them the potential for pleasure, sexual agency, and resistance? How does Pudding’s historically inflected masochism alter the structure of his s/m narrative? How do Pynchon’s salacious details of coprophagia—“The pain is terrible. With his tongue he mashes shit against the roof of his mouth and begins to chew, thickly now, the only sound in the room….,” (Pynchon 239, ellipses his)—alter our understanding of s/m’s relation to Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics?

Unlike Blicero’s “Rome-Berlin Axis,” in which the sadistic ritual was used to subvert dominant cultural values and reinvigorate Blicero’s personal power through pleasure, Pudding’s s/m explicitly functions as a means of control by a dominant system of power and as mechanism for his sexual gratification. The s/m practice between Katje and General Brigadier Ernest Pudding is orchestrated by PISCES—a fictional British intelligence agency—in order to render Pudding ineffective. Within PISCES, several members express concern over Pudding’s moral qualms regarding the ethical implications of the non-traditional intelligence work being done at PISCES, such as “keeping brain-dossiers on latencies, weaknesses, tea-taking habits, erogenous zones of all, all who might someday be useful,” (Pynchon 78). Pudding opposes these new strategies of power, which he finds both unintelligible and inaccessible. By documenting and classifying individuals through their personal proclivities, PISCES’ intelligence strategies fictionalize what Foucault later theorized as a new technology of sex, which
made sex a concern of the state: “to be more exact, sex became a matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under surveillance” (*History* 116). Ned Pointsman, PISCES’ head, promises his fellow intelligence agents that “Pudding will not go back on any of his commitments…we have made arrangements with him. The details aren’t important” (Pynchon 231). But the structure of the text functions otherwise, Pynchon goes into great detail depicting the elaborate s/m ritual that Pointsman orchestrates for Pudding. The textual emphasis, seen in the explicit depiction of Pudding’s masochistic practice, forefronts the importance of non-normative sexual practice within Pynchon’s postmodern narrative. While the sheer number of scenes or explicit details of non-normative sexual practice do not, by themselves, connote “importance” within any text, the novel’s obsessional iteration, reiteration, and modification of scientific and social-scientific discourses—particularly those surrounding sexuality—cannot be ignored. As I explain throughout this section, the particular details of Pudding and Katje’s sexual practice—her pleasure in whipping him, his unanticipated fantasies, his psycho-sexual substitution of her excrement with a penis, particularly within a scene of s/m deployed by hegemonic power structures—these details demonstrate how “the new diversity of sexualities and the spread of perversions, of ‘diff’rent strokes for diff’rent folks,’ bring with them greater sexual citizenship for women [and, I would argue, queer subjects], the potential for breaking down hierarchical oppositions, and a general movement toward a degendered libido” (Williams 274).

According to Foucault, there was a fundamental shift in the end goals of power between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the normalization to the regulation

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17 A degendered libido that is ultimately figured in the symbolic gender-queer rocket, which I will explain in Section V.
of individuals, necessitating a change in the very structure of power. Pudding, who received military training for WWI, finds the new structures of power and social organization to be unintelligible.\(^{18}\) In part, Pudding attempts to cope with the new organization and logic of power through erotohistoriographic s/m. Freeman writes that erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as a hybrid. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. (95-6)

I posit that the binary the narrative constructs—between Pudding’s antiquated, modernist perception of power and the more contemporary, postmodernist organization of power—replicates the literary devices Pynchon employs to create this postmodernist narrative. In a chapter devoted entirely to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, McHale employs modernist reading strategies as a means of highlighting the differences between modernist and postmodernist texts. He writes that the relation between modernist and postmodernist texts becomes most clear “when we concentrate not on formal textual organization as such but on text-processing, the pattern-making and pattern-interpreting behavior which the text’s formal organization elicits from the reader” (*Constructing* 62). McHale’s

\(^{18}\) Pudding can be read as an avatar of Pynchon himself in that Pudding, like Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, attempts to author a narrative of encyclopedic scope entitled *Things That Can Happen in European Politics*, a project ultimately doomed to failure in that Pudding “found himself muttering at the beginning of each day’s work—‘it’s changing out from under me. Oh dodgy…’” (Pynchon 79). Herman and Van Ewijk observe how “Pudding is forced to realize that he can never complete his mammoth work due to the dynamic nature of the subject…[which] suggests that Pynchon was well aware of the fact that any attempt at encircling the totality of knowledge on even one specific topic would prove to be an unattainable goal” (169).
reading strategy mirrors the shift from a modern to postmodern culture and organization of power. Pynchon clarifies this shift through Pudding, who “was brought up to believe in a literal Chain of Command, as clergymen of earlier centuries believed in the Chain of Being. The newer geometries confuse him” (Pynchon 78). Unlike the younger enlisted men, Pudding struggles to make sense of his social function, his access (or lack thereof) to power, and most importantly the new postmodern formations of knowledge— including advancements in offensive weaponry and the vast amount of (personal) data intelligence officers have access to—both of which fundamentally change the nature of war and the individual’s place within the military bureaucracy. Through s/m Pudding can momentarily access a lost organization of power with (simulated) stable hierarchies and defined roles; thus, Pudding can anachronistically apply modernist strategies of interpretation to make sense of his postmodern world.

Katje Borgesius becomes Pudding’s Dominatrix by taking on the role of Domina Nocturna who, “like the Valkyries, dominae nocturnae were originally thought to hover over battlefields to take off the souls of the dead” (Weisenburger 146). Pudding’s submission to Katje allows Pudding to encounter a past—a history—that is public and private. Pudding interweaves and refigures personal memories of WWI, historical accounts of WWI, and his immediate physical submission to Katje, all of which queer the normative temporality of history; the past traumas become, for Pudding, a visceral experience in the present through the pain Katje inflicts on his body. Like Pudding, Katje treats the present as a temporal hybrid, underscoring a reading of their s/m as an erotohistoriographic practice. Specifically, Katje spent an hour doing her makeup, “consulting from time to time a looseleaf album filled with photographs of the reigning
beauties of thirty and forty years ago, so that her reign these nights may be authentic if not—it is for her state of mind as well as his—legitimate” (Pynchon 235). Not only does Katje’s appearance as Domina Nocturna model a past standard of beauty, perhaps even a past performance of gender, but her clothing—“naked now, except for a long sable cape and black boots with court heels” (Pynchon 236)—alludes to and reproduces the classic pornographic sadistic female depicted by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch in *Venus in Furs*. Additionally, Katje’s sadistic practice with Pudding is shaped by her recollection of Captain Blicero dominating Gottfried, from which she “has learned the proper style” of the sadist (239). Pudding’s nightly submission to Katje emphasizes individual histories, as opposed to official historical facts; “His memories of the Salient do not interest her” (Pynchon 236); rather, she is interested in personal traumas. Katje and Pudding establish a ritual in which Pudding offers up recollections of past pains he experienced during WWI for which Katje rewards him with pain—canings, humiliation, and coprophagia. Pudding’s pain leads to sexual stimulation for both Pudding and Katje—though only Pudding reaches orgasm. This exchange, with its emphasis on unwritten narratives of terror, pain, and trauma, queers the dominant narratives of history and rewrites them through the violence Katje inflicts on Pudding’s body.

In this scene, Pudding recalls the first time he met Domina Nocturna on the battlefield after all his troops were gassed. He was alone when he saw her; “she was dressed all in black, she stood in No-Man’s Land, the machine guns raked their patterns all around her, but she needed no protection” (Pynchon 236). She called to him and said: “I shall never leave you. You belong to me, We shall be together, again and again, though it may be years between. And you will always be at my service” (Pynchon 236). Like
Blicero, Katje, and Gottfried in the former scene, who used s/m as a means of seeking stability and routine amidst the instability of war, Pudding finds Domina Nocturna to be the one stable element he longs to return to.

Pudding’s submission allows him to momentarily escape, or make sense of the polymorphous organization of power in postmodern culture: PISCES’ “lush maze of initials…that’s for the New Chaps with their little green antennas out for usable emanations of power, versed in American politics” (78). On closer examination, it becomes clear that Domina Nocturna is anything but an emblem of stability. Even if Pudding’s submission allows him to access a stable emotional symbol in his life, his interactions with Katje—which shift between his recollection of Domina Nocturna on the battlefield of WWI and his interaction with Katje playing the role of the sexual sadist in the present moment—evokes a queer temporality in which the past is not treated as a stable, lost object. Rather, Pudding’s submission is a queering of history in which past modes of power, supposedly supplanted by PISCES’ decentralized system of power, reemerge through queer sexual practice.

Each evening Pudding and Katje enact a specific ritual of dialogue and embodied practice: he narrates his recollection of Domina Nocturna to Katje, as Domina Nocturna, who then reiterates and embellishes the history she receives from Pudding. For instance, Pudding recalls one of Franco’s regiments who “sang of the bride they had taken. It was you, Mistress: they-they were proclaiming you as their bride….” (Pynchon 237, ellipses his). Katje, as Domina Nocturna, then responds by saying, “Yes…Many of them did become my bridegrooms….I took their brown Spanish bodies to mine” (237). Katje’s

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19 One could also use Lyotard’s description of new organizations of power and scientific knowledge in postmodern culture to explicate Pudding’s confusion and disillusion with PISCES—both in terms of its bureaucratic structure and its reliance on new knowledge formations.
role as Domina Nocturna becomes emblematic of how time is treated throughout Pynchon’s narrative—not as a lost object to be found, but as a temporal hybrid in which past histories—public and private—continually make themselves present. This hybrid depiction of history can be seen in both Pynchon’s paranoid account of history—in which past events continue to shape the present—and through characters’ desires to understand the relationship between their personal experiences of history and the dominant, cultural narratives told about history. This uniquely queer treatment of time and history within Pudding’s s/m narrative mirrors the broader postmodernist narrative strategies of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

While McHale does identify *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a postmodernist historical novel—which “revises the content of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past. Secondly, it revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself” (*Postmodernist* 91, italics his)—he does discuss how Pynchon’s encyclopedic novel incorporates and modifies the historical fiction genre. McHale locates postmodernist, historical narrative tendencies in Pynchon’s “paranoiac mode of secret history” (*Postmodernist* 92)—specifically, apocryphal history, creative anachronism, and historical fantasy. Building on McHale’s work, I locate postmodernist historical revisionism in Pynchon’s depictions of s/m, in particular Pudding’s s/m ritual. For McHale, postmodernist revisionism has two basic structures that, I believe, are blended through queer temporality in *Gravity’s Rainbow*: 1) using apocryphal history to displace official history, and, 2) using apocryphal history to supplement official history.  

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20 When displacing official history the narrative violates the norms of the historical period depicted, thus violating the norms of historical fiction in general (*Postmodernist* 91).
supplementing the historical record apocryphal history “operates in the ‘dark areas’ of history, apparently in conformity to the norms of ‘classic’ historical fiction but in fact *parodying* them” (*Postmodernist* McHale 91, italics his). Pudding’s ritual of recounting and then refiguring the history of WWI with Katje draws from the official historical facts in addition to supplementing them with Pudding’s personal experiences. The narrative context from which Pudding and Katje queer and revise the history of WWI, is itself located in an apocryphal history that narrates the “dark areas” of history and parodies historical fiction on WWII.

Fussel writes that Pynchon “recovered the Second War not from his own memory but from films and from letterpress—especially, one suspects, the memoirs and official histories recalling that interesting British institution of the Second War, the Special Operations Executive (SOE)” (328). Fussel goes on to explain that the historical SOE was used for espionage and sabotage and was rumored to contain “more outré departments staffed by necromancers, astrologers, and ESP enthusiasts” (328). In *Gravity’s Rainbow* PISCES is Pynchon’s fictionalization of the SOE. By depicting PISCES’ deployment of *s/m* Pynchon’s postmodernist revision of WWI is located within an anachronistic depiction of WWII intelligence operations. While Fussel acknowledges that the “unmilitary informality of the SOE’s personnel has become proverbial” (328), it is unlikely that the historical SOE ever orchestrated scenes of *s/m* and coprophagia for the purpose of intelligence work. This narrative structure, which hyperbolizes and parodies historical facts, reveals yet another way queer sexual practice and postmodernist poetics are intertwined throughout the novel. Not only does Pudding’s *s/m* access queer temporality in terms of the scene’s content, but it also forefronts the tension between
official historical archives and a “radically dissimilar version of the world. The tension between these two versions induces a form of ontological flicker between the two worlds” (McHale *Postmodernist* 91). This ontological flicker will be repeated when Pudding dies, which I will discuss later in this section.

Pudding’s s/m ritual, which begins with his passage through a series of antechambers filled with a range of stimuli, alludes to the history of sexuality and its pathologization. A parallel of the text at large, this passage offers a mini encyclopedia of the history of sexuality in the West. For instance, one anteroom holds a coffee tin with the brand name “Savarin. He understands that it means to say ‘Severin,’” (Pynchon 234), while another room holds case histories “and an open copy of Krafft-Ebing. In the fourth, a human skull. His excitement grows. In the fifth, a Malacca cane. I’ve been in more wars for England than I can remember…haven’t I paid enough? Risked it all for them, time after time….Why must they torment an old man?” (Pynchon 235, ellipses his). The items in the antechambers link sexual pleasure with death and allude to the nineteenth-century pathologization of perverse pleasures, anticipating Foucault’s theorization of the deployment of sexuality that “engenders a continual extension of areas and forms of control…concerned with the sensations of the body, the quality of pleasures, and the nature of impressions” (*History* 106). Though nineteenth-century medical discourses concerning sexuality generally offered corrective technologies for sexual perversions (*History* 105), the deployment of sexuality within *Gravity’s Rainbow* should be read as a

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21 In *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion*, Steven Weisenburger reads Pudding’s passage through the antechambers and his s/m ritual as “a satirical inversion of the Kabbalistic ascent to the Merkabah” (144). Instead of reaching God’s light through a redemptive ascent to Yaweh’s throne, Pudding descends through Hell through a series of depraved rituals. While this thesis focuses on the inversion of pleasure and pain through non-normative, stigmatized sexual practice—Pynchon’s inversion of Jewish mystical tradition is ancillary to my reading, particularly since my thesis project differs significantly from most Pynchon criticism that focus on s/m’s spiritual or metaphysical qualities.
localized instance of “biopower” that models, in miniature, the techniques used by institutions of power for the regulation of populations.

Despite knowing that Pointsman has orchestrated the anterooms, Pudding consensually proceeds with the ritual each evening—his pleasure unaffected by Pointsman’s motives. Pudding actually expands the fantasy narrative that Pointsman constructed in his deployment of sexuality. When Pudding kisses and fetishizes Katje’s leather boots “and can feel her toes flexing beneath his tongue, through the black skin” (Pynchon 236), his submission moves beyond an engagement with his personal history and becomes a racially inflected commentary on modern, Western culture. Here, his queer engagement with history can be read through Freeman’s assertion that s/m, “or leathersex, is all about wearing the skins of the dead: as ‘skin drag,’ leathersex invokes the ‘stitching’ of skin onto body, and its traffic in skins can be read as a discourse on blackness even when it does not involve people of African descent” (135). When he consumes Katje’s excrement he thinks “of a Negro’s penis, yes he knows it abrogates part of the conditions set, but it will not be denied, the image of a brute African who will make him behave….” (Pynchon 238, ellipses his). By utilizing his masochistic pleasure in ways unanticipated by Pointsman, Pudding disrupts and counteracts the ways in which institutions of power attempt to deploy sexuality as a means of controlling and regulating individuals.

Pudding’s unanticipated fantasies reflect Foucault’s assertion that power is not one directional but is always being exerted from both the top and the bottom; here “top/bottom” can be read through both the traditional social signification (i.e. hegemonic institutions of power/individuals), in addition to signifying the s/m binary of
Dominant/submissive. Pynchon, like Foucault, destabilizes traditional binary meaning-making systems. Katje, once subservient to Blicero, now wields the power of the sadist—subverting both the binary of Dominator/dominated and the gender binary, which assumes female subservience. By explicitly linking the deconstruction of the power binary to Pudding’s non-normative sexual pleasure, the novel is able to highlight the multivalent functions of sexuality within society. In part, Pudding’s queering of history and his use of the orchestrated s/m scene for unanticipated fantasies demonstrates how queer sexual practice “and the bodily acts that sustain them gum up the works of the normative structures we call family and nation, gender, race, class, and sexual identity, by changing tempos, by remixing memory and desire, by recapturing excess…” in order to “jam whatever looks like the inevitable” (Freeman 173, italics hers). Similar to Freeman’s theorization of a queer, erotohistoriographic practice, Pynchon’s narrative also frustrates narrative inevitability or predictability. Like the postmodernist historical revisions from which “no final conclusion is possible” (McHale 92) and within which Pudding’s s/m is located, Pudding’s queer temporality frustrates normativity—“gumming up” official institutional power strategies and the reader’s attempt to locate a stable interpretation.

Yet Pynchon’s emphasis on Katje’s pleasure complicates a reading of s/m as a mode of erotohistoriography. While the previous scene of s/m elided Katje’s erotic pleasure—instead only referencing the pleasure of psychological (and momentarily ontological) stability Katje gained from s/m—this scene articulates Katje’s sexual arousal when she canes Pudding (Pynchon 237). Though Katje occupies the position of the dominant sadist, she remains subservient to a larger institution of power: PISCES. Like
Pudding, her ability to access erotic pleasure seems unaffected by the use to which that pleasure is put. Though it might be tempting to assume that her pleasure, more than Pudding’s, is ancillary to the institutional deployment of sexuality, the explicit depiction of Pudding and Katje’s pleasure, within a situation orchestrated by those in control, anticipates Foucault’s assertion that “pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement” (*History* 48). Foucault’s assertion problematizes Freeman’s theorization of s/m as a reparative erotohistoriographic practice that enables participants to move back and forth between a “horrific then in the past and some kind of redemptive now in the present, allegedly in the service of pleasure and a freer future” (143). Using erotohistoriography to interpret Pudding’s s/m cannot fully attend to the range of ways s/m functions in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Pudding’s historically-inflected masochism only allows Pudding to momentarily escape the limitations of power that contemporary and future institutions seek to impose upon him.

I turn to Jean Baudrillard’s theories to clarify the break between modern and postmodern culture and the consequent shift in structures of power that Pudding seeks to escape. In “Symbolic Exchange and Death,” Baudrillard traces a shift within the organizing logic of society from a pleasure or reality principle to the principle of simulation. He argues that this shift parallels the shift in the law of value. Baudrillard writes that reversibility “puts an end to the linearity of time, language…and power;” he goes on to say that “today, the entire system is fluctuating in indeterminacy, all of reality absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and of simulation….There is no longer such a
thing as ideology; there are only simulacra” (123). For Pudding, s/m potentially offers a momentary return to the lost real through an encounter with his body, but it also reveals the simulacra of hyperreality. Pudding’s corporeal pain, which he describes as a pure truth, allows him to realize, with shock, that he “listened to so many years of ministers, scientists, doctors each with his specialized lies to tell” (Pynchon 237). Here, the narrative foregrounds a postmodern disillusionment with dominant discourses. Situated in a postmodern, hyperreal culture, Pudding lacks access to the hope of historical telos. Having lost potential to believe in institutional authority and the “truth” of grand narratives, Pudding’s s/m fails to fulfill its erotohistoriographic potential. Freeman’s theories indicate that a disruption of linear time will yield a freer future. I can’t help but wonder if Freeman’s queer temporality really is as subversive as she seems to imply. Indeed, the very concept of a freer future depends on a notion of historical linearity; even if one were to disrupt normative notions of timing, a freer future—a better future—relies on teleological notions of time. By having faith in queer practices’ redemptive potential, erotohistoriographic practice would unconsciously (re)construct its own historical telos. Thus, Pudding’s inability to locate “truth” and his subsequent distrust of institutional knowledge indicates that, within the novel, there is no grounding from which a freer future could extend.

As I noted in the Introduction, Halberstam contends that queer art resists “a notion of art as capable of seeing beyond” and instead focuses on the limitations for queer bodies and queer expression in the future (106). Her theories further problematize the utopian potential Freeman sees in queer sexual practice. By reading for the limitations expressed through queer temporality in art, I highlight the dialectic Pynchon creates
between queer sex and death in the narrative, a dialectic that is replicated on the
discursive level of the text through its ontological dominant. Pudding, like McHale’s
reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, attempts to apply modernist interpretive strategies within a
postmodern society, which I read as another form of queer temporality. The reader,
attempting to impose modernist reading strategies on Pynchon’s postmodernist text will
be perpetually frustrated by the destabilized narrative—like the characters within the
novel who confront ontological and epistemological instability throughout their personal
quests for meaning.

McHale articulates how the narrative of *Gravity’s Rainbow* invites readers “to
undertake the kinds of pattern-making and pattern-interpreting operations which, in the
modernist texts with which we have all become familiar, would produce intelligible
meaning; here, they produce at best a parody of intelligibility” (*Constructing* 81). This
disjunctive reading experience frequently occurs during “unacceptable or distressing
types of content—pornography, broad slapstick comedy…” (McHale 81), or, in terms of
my project: a disjunctive reading experience frequently occurs during moments of queer
sexual practice in the text—practices that often narrate characters’ attempts to interpret
the unintelligible (postmodern) political logic. The frustrated quest for meaning, on both
the diegetic and extra-diegetic levels of the text, foregrounds the interpretive
“limitations” of postmodernist narratives. Through Halberstam’s queer theory, I posit that
the destabilized postmodernist narrative should be read as a manifestation of queer
temporality in artistic productions, queer art that fails to look toward viable expressions
of queerness in the future. Lost in the heteroglossia of discourses that characterize the
postmodern age, Pudding attempts to access some form of intelligible meaning by
subjugating himself to Katje—to the institution of power that constructed her as Domina Nocturna. But Pudding, who is “bound by nothing but his need for pain, for something real, something pure” (Pynchon 237), is frustrated in this quest. His s/m, which itself has a queered narrative structure and narrates a scene of queer practice, culminates in his complete withdrawal from all—modern and postmodern—strategies of power. Building on Fussel’s early Pynchon scholarship, I cite Pudding’s masochism as a paradigmatic example of how queer sexual practice within Gravity’s Rainbow replicates Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics. Specifically, Pudding’s inability to cope with the heteroglossia of discourses that shape knowledge and power in the postmodern world, which manifests in his fatal s/m practice—is a fictionalization of the text’s poetics. Ultimately, Pynchon’s poetics fail to distill the novel’s encyclopedic scope into one coherent reading of the narrative’s “insane contemporary scene.” Both Pudding and the reader eventually embrace what McHale terms the salutary effect of Pynchon’s postmodernist narrative, which disrupts the “conditioned responses of the modernist reader” (Constructing 81) and, I would argue, disrupts the conditioned responses of heteronormativity within the narrative.

The episode ends with Pudding’s reflection that he has nothing to look forward to except paperwork and “a dose of penicillin that Pointsman has ordered him to take, to combat the effects of E. coli. Perhaps, though, tomorrow night…perhaps then. He can’t see how he can hold out much longer. But perhaps, in the hours just before dawn…” (Pynchon 239, ellipses his). This narrative focalization through Pudding foreshadows his decision to opt-out of Their system through his own death. Later, the narrator reveals that “Brigadier Pudding died back in the middle of June of a massive E. coli infection,
whining, at the end, ‘Me little Mary hurts…’ over and over. It was just before dawn, as he had wished” (542, ellipses his). Through a single act of resistance—“forgetting” to take his penicillin—Pudding escapes from the political structures that attempt to control him through their deployment of (non-normative) sexuality. This act reflects Foucault’s assertion that power is a multiplicity of force relations and that “where there is power, there is resistance” (History 95); Pudding uses the very tool—sexuality—that was employed by the dominant institution of power, to subvert and resist institutional power. One could problematize this reading by arguing that Pudding’s fatal s/m allows the institutional deployment of sexuality to succeed by interminably protecting itself from Pudding’s meddling. However, I posit that one cannot so easily dismiss Pudding’s subversive embrace of queer negativity, his conscious decision to end his participation in the System. Indeed, the subversive power of death inherent in a queer refusal to participate/be located by institutions of power, is figured as the ultimate form of disruption later in the novel. This is focalized when the protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop—who spends most of his time being controlled by, or attempting to evade, institutions of power—becomes entirely unintelligible through the dissolution of his subjectivity. Though PISCES initially sent Slothrop into the Zone “to be present at his own assembly….The plan went wrong. He is being broken down instead, and scattered” (Pynchon 750). Eventually nobody is able to find or recognize Slothrop and the narrative suggests that we should “look among the Humility, among the gray and preterite souls, to look for him adrift in the hostile light of the sky, the darkness of the sea…” (Pynchon 757, ellipses his). Thus, we cannot afford to overlook the significance of Pudding’s fatal
s/m practice, a conscious embrace of queer negativity, which is in line with the countercultural politics of the narrative.

Pudding’s subversive and fatal queer negativity is foreshadowed by his actual s/m practice. When Pudding kneels beneath Katje, waiting to consume her waste, he associates the smell of Katje’s excrement with “the smell of Paschendaele, of the Salient. Mixed with mud, and the putrefaction of corpses, it was the sovereign smell of their first meeting and her emblem” (Pynchon 238). Here, Pynchon constructs excrement as a symbol for death. Pudding’s coprophagia transforms Edelman’s embrace of queer negativity into its consumption, a symbolic internalization of the death drive seen in Pudding’s stigmatized ingestion of waste. Like Edelman’s queer, who rejects heteronormative social logic after realizing the fantasy of reproductive futurism upon which politics is based, Pudding, a masochist and coprophile, realizes that the organizing logic of society offers “nothing to look forward to” (Pynchon 239). Pudding realizes that he, like Edelman’s queer, can only ever be a marginalized and unintelligible subject within heteronormative society. He resists and escapes dominant political structures by refusing the stigmatizing interpellation that would construct his subjectivity—that would construct him as a relic of the past and relegate him to a nominal military rank, without any access to power.

Pudding’s consumption of excrement—an embrace of queer negativity and the death drive—is fundamentally a postmodernist practice, an expression of postmodern disillusionment. Beyond destabilizing the male/female and Dominator/dominated binary discussed above, Pynchon also destabilizes the binary between food and waste. When Pudding consumes Katje’s excrement, Pynchon describes it as the “bread that would only
have floated in porcelain waters somewhere, unseen, untasted—risen now and baked in the bitter intestinal Oven to bread we know, bread that’s light as domestic comfort, secret as death in bed…” (238, ellipses his). Destabilizing binary meaning illuminates “the secret of a discourse that is no longer only ambiguous, as political discourses can be, but that conveys the impossibility of a determinate position of power, the impossibility of a determinate position of discourse” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 178-9), which Pynchon replicates through the impossibility of a determinate discursive structure.

According to McHale, the indeterminacy of postmodernist poetics frequently becomes apparent when authors place objects under erasure (*Postmodernist* 100). This narrative structure lays “bare the processes by which readers, in collaboration with texts, construct fictional objects and worlds” (McHale 100). In Edelman’s discussion of heteronormative social logic, he argues that dominant political discourses can only function with the collaboration of individuals who are willing to construct and believe in the fictional fantasy of reproductive futurism. Underlying and connecting these two theories is a queer postmodernist distrust of dominant narratives, a distrust intent on exposing the fictional logic hegemonic discourses rely on. Pudding’s recognition and rejection of social fictions further links his subversive embrace of queer negativity to Pynchon’s postmodernist narrative strategies. Furthermore, the link postmodern culture and queer negativity is not limited to one or two localized scenes. The text’s postmodernist project, which repeatedly exposes the fictions on which institutions of power depend, parallels Edelman’s project of queer negativity, which exposes the fantasies behind heteronormative political logic. Through Pudding, Pynchon lays bare the processes by which individual characters (and extra-diegetic readers), in collaboration
with systems of power (and postmodernist texts), construct a tenable—though fictional—ontological world in order to exist (and create stable interpretations).

By choosing to die, Pudding models the effect of queer refusal, a refusal to participate in the construction of a social fiction, a refusal that the text’s discursive level reflects by emphasizing the “tension between modes of intelligibility and the apparently unintelligible” (McHale, *Constructing* 73). Unlike in *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, it is not until *Gravity’s Rainbow* that Pynchon fully embraces the disruptive postmodernist indeterminacy, “freely exploit[ing] the artistic possibilities of a plurality of worlds, the transgression of boundaries between worlds” (McHale, *Postmodernist* 24-5). What is Pudding’s suicide if not the ultimate transgression of boundaries between worlds, a crossing of “the ultimate ontological boundary between life and death” (McHale, *Postmodernist* 38)? Pudding, like Pynchon’s text, frustrates normative narratives and futurity by transgressing the illusory boundary between dominator and dominated, between social subject and unintelligible subjectivity; Pudding uses sexuality to transgress the boundary between heteronormative and queer, between life and death.
SECTION IV

Her Pleasure and His Conditioning:

Margherita Erdmann, Tyrone Slothrop, and Bianca

My third object of study will be the sexual practice of Margherita Erdmann—the only self-proclaimed female masochist in the text. While previous Pynchon criticism either ignores her gendered engagement with s/m practice entirely or, if they acknowledge it, treat her as the construction of a male pornographic fantasy, I will explore the ways in which Margherita’s uniquely gendered s/m practice converses with the poetics of the novel. Does Margherita’s gender fundamentally shift the relation between postmodernist poetics and queer sexuality that I have previously argued for? Why have previous critics been inclined to attribute her masochistic pleasure to either a false consciousness or to the influence of misogynist pornography—what do they miss by eliding her sexual choices?

Although Pynchon’s first depiction of Margherita’s masochistic practice is rooted in her desire for nostalgia, a memory of past pleasures, her consistent desire to participate in and create s/m scenarios, in addition to what other characters say about her non-normative practices, indicates that her masochism is both a genuine desire for pleasure and a non-referential practice—particularly in comparison to Blicero and Pudding’s s/m. Margherita’s s/m further complicates Freeman’s reading of s/m as an erotohistoriographic practice. Though Margherita’s s/m practice is located in Pynchon’s fictionalized version of WWII, her s/m lacks the historical markers that would specifically limit her actions to that era. Pynchon’s description of Pudding’s s/m and Blicero’s “Rome-Berlin Axis” both carry historical markers that make their s/m practice time specific, while Margherita’s
s/m does not reference past historical events. Her s/m, more than any other character’s in the text, remains an expression of her sexual desire, unrelated to an engagement with history—despite her desire for “nostalgia,” which was merely a circumstantial reaction to encountering Slothrop on her old movie set, rather than an explicit desire to cope with a traumatic past or reenact a specific historical moment. In this section, I will employ Linda Williams’ theorization of female masochism in order to complicate previous Pynchon criticism that attributes her masochistic pleasure to male sexual fantasies. Unlike previous depictions of s/m in the novel, Margherita’s sexual encounters are scattered over a wide range of episodes in the text. This unique portrayal of s/m allows for a more nuanced understanding of how, why, and with what effect Margherita practices s/m, in addition to broadening the range of narrative techniques Pynchon uses to depict her sexual practice. Furthermore, the sheer number of Margherita’s sex scenes, which involve a larger cast of characters than any previous s/m in the narrative, incorporate a range of stigmatized sexual practices, including: masturbation, voyeurism, orgies, incest, anal intercourse, sex toys, fetishes, and the eroticization of infantilized women. Each scene builds upon and complicates the function of sexuality within the narrative, the relationship between sexuality and the text’s poetics, and the origins of adult sexuality and sexual conditioning—or discursively constructed sexuality—within the world of Gravity’s Rainbow.

Pynchon’s first extended depiction of her s/m occurs when Slothrop—the sometimes protagonist and driving narrative force of Gravity’s Rainbow—wanders into an old movie studio in Germany. There he encounters Margherita, a former actress who

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22 Aboard the Anubis, a female character tells Slothrop that “Margherita’s problem was that she always enjoyed it too much, chained up in those torture rooms. She couldn’t enjoy it any other way” (Pynchon 469).
“was directed by the great Gerhardt von Goll through dozens of vaguely pornographic
horror movies” (Pynchon 400). She, like Slothrop, is wandering across the Zone on a quest; she searches for her daughter, Bianca, who was conceived on the very movie set where Slothrop and Margherita now find themselves. It is the Alpdrücken set, a movie in which Margherita appears manacled, whipped, and penetrated by a series of men wearing jackal masks. Bianca’s conception during the filming of Alpdrücken indicates that the sex was not simulated during filming. In part, Margherita’s gendered engagement with s/m practice—conceiving Bianca during the Alpdrücken filming—is what differentiates her from the novel’s other s/m practitioners. Blicero’s s/m is primarily depicted in terms of male-male intercourse, while Katje and Pudding’s s/m focuses on non-genitally oriented practices, both instances preclude procreation through queer practices. Margherita’s procreative s/m complicates the social function of s/m in the text, thus emphasizing s/m’s indeterminate function, which, in turn, reflects the narrative indeterminacy of Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics. Additionally, her uniquely female generative power anticipates Margherita’s unique access to discursive power—the power to generate narrative. The ever-changing consequences of her s/m, which alternately leads to procreation or death, foregrounds the Eros/Thanatos dialectic that effects the text’s postmodernist discourse. Like Wolfley, I read the text’s “orgasmic rush—the continual nowness”—of Pynchon’s present-tense style [a]s a direct transcription of the life instinct. By joyfully embracing and celebrating all the death instincts of Western man in a style of unmediated euphoria, GR dramatizes the perpetual struggle of life against death” (887)—an ontological tension

23 “In the Zone,” is the title of the third and longest section of Gravity’s Rainbow. “The Zone” “refers to occupied Germany in the anarchic weeks and months immediately following the collapse of the Third Reich” (McHale, Postmodernist 45).
that is distinctly postmodern. Indeed, Margherita serves as a fictionalization of the narrative’s emphasis on ontological indeterminacy; she embodies this Eros/Thanatos dialectic.

When Margherita encounters Slothrop on the old Alpdrücken set, they find the wooden, painted chains that were used to “manacle” her in the movie. She asks Slothrop to fasten the manacles around her wrists and ankles and then whip her. Per Margherita’s instructions—“Yes, that’s perfect. Now on the insides of my thighs….?” (Pynchon 402, ellipses his)—Slothrop whips her with a cat-o’-nine-tails; “But somebody has already educated him….No. No—he still says ‘their,’ but knows better….his own cruelty” (Pynchon 402, ellipses mine). Here, the narrative creates a tension between culturally constructed sexuality and a desire to reclaim those conditioning facets of culture that interpellate individuals into sexual maturity. The focalization through Slothrop, while he whips Margherita, reveals his attempt to work against discursively constructed sexuality. Though Slothrop claims this sadistic pleasure as “his own cruelty,” the narrative contradicts him by articulating how his sexuality is a product of cultural and/or scientific conditioning—both examples of the institutional deployment of sexuality that deny the individual control over the construction of his or her (sexual) subjectivity.

In the novel, Slothrop is the paradigmatic example of sexual conditioning. Pynchon’s parodic depiction of Slothrop’s sexual conditioning hyperextends the Foucauldian theorization of discursively constructed sexuality: Slothrop learns that

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24 Like Fussel’s article, Wolfley’s 1977 reading of Gravity’s Rainbow was published prior to the introduction of postmodern theory in the academy; thus, he was unable to identify the life/death dialectic Pynchon establishes between his poetics and his content as “postmodern(ist).”

25 Chapman explains how pornography “is for Pynchon a means by which the state wields power over its citizens at the micropolitical level. As such, it is also an important factor in the formation of sexual identity, particularly male sexual identity” (6). Similarly, Duyfuizen observes the text’s “clear recognition of how conditioned Western patriarchal culture is to the semiotics of pornographic representation” (11).
during his infancy his father “sold” him to IG Farben to be used as a human specimen.

Dr. Lazlo Jamf conditioned Infant Tyrone—as the “scientific” literature refers to Slothrop—to get an erection in the presence of the mystery stimulus. Identifying the mystery stimulus is of the utmost importance to PISCES when they discover a map in Slothrop’s office with colored stars identifying the dates and locations of his sexual conquests; the stars correspond exactly to the distribution of rocket explosions; “the strike can come as quickly as two days, or as slowly as ten” (Pynchon 87). 26 Throughout the narrative PISCES scientists routinely treat Slothrop as a scientific/psychoanalytic subject, speculating on the relation between Slothrop’s sexual practice and the rocket: “a truly classical case of...some pathology” (Pynchon 49, ellipses his), wondering if “a conditioned reflex [can] survive in a man, dormant, over 20 or 30 years” (Pynchon 86), “a statistical oddity” (Pynchon 87), and “Edwin Treacle, that most Freudian of psychical researchers, [who] thinks Slothrop’s gift is psychokinesis” (Pynchon 87). In contrast to Margherita’s unmediated desire for s/m, Slothrop experiments with s/m both as a result of and as a means of working against discursively constructed sexuality.

I am not arguing that Margherita’s masochistic desire is “pure” or innate in the sense of being independent from cultural influences; I am only differentiating between Margherita’s consistent desire for masochistic gratification and Slothrop’s continually shifting sexual practices. Slothrop acts the part of the sadist in order to take control over his sexuality in one of many attempts to escape his extreme cultural conditioning. Though the extent of Slothrop’s sexual conditioning is anomalous in the text, the narrator does articulate “how the penises of Western men have leapt, for a century, to the sight of this

26 Eventually, this quest will prove to be a red herring, as the stimulus is never revealed in any narratively plausible way.
singular point at the top of a lady’s stocking….It’s easy for non-fetishists to sneer about Pavlovian conditioning and let it go at that, but any underwear enthusiast worth his unwholesome giggle can tell you there is much more here” (Pynchon 402, ellipses mine). Here the narrator extends the type of reflexive pleasure fetishists experience to the entire Western male population, which apparently has been sexually conditioned to various visual cues since the nineteenth century. I cite the narrative’s foregrounding of discursively and socially constructed sexuality in order to work against Bérubé’s argument that during the filming of Alpdrücken Margherita’s “torture and dismemberment is itself a Pynchonian representation, and that ‘Pynchon’s’ position in the structure of representation is more or less that of the ‘director’ of any snuff film” (264). As I mentioned in the Introduction, Bérubé goes on to write, in the footnote appended to this assertion, that Erdmann has been constructed as a male fantasy of female pleasure so much so that she embodies this fantasy (264). This statement elides any acknowledgement of Margherita’s own agency in her sexual pleasure, which the text repeatedly emphasizes through its depictions of Margherita’s orgasms in s/m scenarios, scenarios she actively pursues.

Margherita’s complex role in the construction of sexual narratives demonstrates how her sexual agency enables her to take pleasure from “the unavoidable role of power in sex, gender, and sexual representations and of the importance of not viewing this power as fixed” (Williams, 228) in ways that male characters do not. Though Bérubé argues that the text itself encourages an elision of Margherita by constructing her as an object, it is actually Bérubé’s reading that encourages—and performs—the elision of

27 Blicero attempts to use s/m to legitimate his own waning power, while Pudding uses s/m as a distraction from his exclusion from institutions of power.
Margherita’s identity and sexuality. He implies that Pynchon’s foregrounding of Margherita’s masochistic pleasure is merely another manifestation of the text’s “pornographies,” which are apparently constructed primarily for a male audience. I posit that the text’s emphasis on discursively constructed sexuality—which Slothrop attempts to work against by denying cultural influences—should be read as an acknowledgement of pornography’s influence on human sexuality, the narrator’s conscious commentary on the universality of discursively constructed sexuality. Furthermore, even if males are socially conditioned to find female submission erotic, this does not preclude female masochistic pleasure. Williams explains how

\[ S/M \text{'s emphasis on oscillating positions over strict sexual identities and its extension of sexual norms to include sadomasochistic play and fantasy suggest a rising regime of relative differentiations over absolute difference. Some of the apocalyptic force of much sadomasochistic pornography undoubtedly derives from these challenges to phallic laws that stand for strict dichotomization.} \ (226) \]

Williams goes on to argue that s/m—with its emphasis on female unwillingness and attendant punishment for “bad” behavior [i.e. (non-normative) sexual pleasure]—allows “good” girls to access the sexual pleasure reserved for “bad” girls, without being stigmatized (209). According to Williams, “punishment thus serves a function: it absolves the supposedly desireless woman of responsibility and blame for pleasures she nevertheless enjoys” (213). In the episode outlined above, both in terms of the actual

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28 Bérubé even acknowledges that “notably absent…from my own re-presentation of Pynchonian pornography is the materiality of the female body….I might respond that my ‘forgetting’ of the female body in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is but a repetition of the text’s” (264).
production of _Alpdrücken_ and in Slothrop and Margherita’s re-creation of it, Margherita explicitly takes pleasure only when she is physically restricted and whipped.

Later in the novel, Margherita’s desire to be “punished” continues to form a central part of her sexual pleasure. For instance, when Margherita and Slothrop live together she repeatedly antagonizes him until he physically hurts her; Margherita “begs to be tied with her stockings, star-fashion, to the bedpost. Sometimes she’ll leave the house, and stay away for days, coming home with stories about Negro MPs beating her with nightsticks, screwing her in the asshole, how much she loved it, hoping to trigger some race/sex reaction, something a little bizarre, a little different…” (Pynchon 453, ellipses his). Margherita’s desire to re-create the s/m scene of _Alpdrücken_, in addition to her repeated antagonization of Slothrop, reveals how female masochism actively challenges the strict binaries inherent to patriarchal, phallic laws. In constructing her own s/m scenarios, Margherita gains access to both the pleasures of power and of submission. Her words and fantasies construct her as the empowered agent of her own sexuality, she controls and dictates Slothrop’s embodied sexual practices, and she experiences sexual pleasure as a result of occupying the “submissive” role. Inciting Slothrop to sadistic action gives Margherita the power to control her own sexuality and pleasure, even if she uses her narrative power to occupy the role of the masochist. Williams goes on to explain that “sadomasochistic fantasy offers one important way in which groups and individuals whose desires patriarchy has not recognized as legitimate can explore the mysterious conjunction of power and pleasure in intersubjective relations” (218). Margherita’s agency over her own s/m practice, both in how she instructs Slothrop when they first
meet and in her subsequent fantasy narratives, demonstrates how she consciously explores the intersubjective relations Williams discusses.

Thus I work against the critical tendency that elides Margherita’s agency and reads her solely as a sexual object, a trend that unconsciously replicates the patriarchal refusal to recognize certain individuals’ pleasures as legitimate. Margherita’s exploration—which leads to pleasure and knowledge—enables her to take control of her own sexuality in a way that no other masochist in the text ever does. This further differentiates her masochism from the male masochism Pynchon depicts during Pudding and Katje’s s/m scene, in which Pudding participates in an s/m scenario constructed by an institution of power, PISCES. Similarly, Gottfried generally lacks agency in his submission to Blicero. Gottfried is not the author of his own sexual fantasies like Margherita is; rather, he is subject to Blicero’s narrative of sexual power. Margherita’s authority in her own s/m—which does not lead to her death—positions her as the author of her own desire, demonstrating how narrative authority is key to understanding queer practices.

The subversive narrative and social impact of Margherita’s queer practices are further illuminated through Halberstam’s theorization of shadow-feminism. In a later episode, Slothrop whips Margherita until he draws blood, “she kneels and kisses his boots. Not exactly the scenario she wanted but close enough, sweetheart” (Pynchon 453). I draw a comparison between Halberstam’s reading of Yoko Ono’s performance

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29 Although this instance of direct-address is clearly—at least on the diegetic narrative level—addressed to Margherita, it simultaneously collapses narrative levels by addressing the extra-diegetic reader as well. This use of direct-address problematizes the common critical assumption that Pynchon’s direct-address is intended for a male reader and/or the male viewer of pornography. Duyfhuizen discusses Pynchon’s use of “you” directed at “the text’s male narratees and ultimately its male reader/voyeurs” (3), though in Note 2 he acknowledges that “Pynchon has at least one passage, in which the narratee “you” is gendered female,” though he does not identify this scene. Similarly Chapman identifies Pynchon’s use of direct-address as
“Cut Piece” and Margherita’s desire to be whipped and cut. In her reading, Halberstam argues that “to be cut, to be bared, to be violated publicly is a particular kind of resistant performance” (145). Neither Margherita nor Yoko cut themselves. Rather, they set up scenarios to instigate cutting; though their physical submission and passivity in each of these performances might seem to preclude a feminist interpretation, both women demonstrate their discursive power through their use of performative utterances. Each constitutes an antisocial feminist act in that both women’s use of language is the catalyst for male embodied action. Specifically, Margherita controls her own narrative; her words lead to action, to a queer sexual practice that ultimately dismantles culturally constructed subjectivity. By dismantling subjectivity, Margherita’s s/m undercuts heteronormative logic that is based on a denial of disruptive jouissance, which splits apart the heteronormative fantasy of Imaginary unity, offering instead a vision of feminism as “an ongoing commentary on fragmentariness” (Halberstam 139).

Furthermore, Halberstam’s theories undercut Bérubé’s reading of “Alpdrücken, which culminates in the torture, gang rape, and dismemberment of its star, Margherita Erdmann…The dismemberment, of course, is not ‘real’….But the rape is” (240, emphasis his). Since Bérubé, like other Pynchon critics, seems consistently unable to acknowledge female masochism as a legitimate form of pleasure, he assumes that Margherita is raped during the filming of Alpdrücken. The only assumption that can be made is that during this moment of simulated power relations, there is an authentic generative moment that results in the conception of a child. The narrator’s description of the movie set—wooden chains painted silver—would indicate the exact opposite of Bérubé’s reading; the flimsy

intended for men “who are by far the greater consumers of pornography; men constitute by far the larger proportion of rapists and sexual abusers” (22). For a complex discussion of direct-address see “Misreading Gravity’s Rainbow” (McHale, Constructing 87-114).
chains could not physically restrain Margherita. By specifically stating that she orchestrates her own submission, the narrator reveals how Margherita’s “apparent passivity is a ruse intended to disavow what the masochist actually knows to exist but plays the game of denying: his (or her) very real sexual agency and pleasure” (Williams 212). The faux-metal chains indicate that the entire scene is a simulation and eroticization of power relations, a resistant performance of public violation that leads to sexual gratification.

Additionally, Margherita’s desire to be cut and to be penetrated is a narration of unbecoming that destabilizes subjectivity as it has been defined in modern, liberal culture. Masochistic gestures, Halberstam argues, “invite us to unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and think it anew as the site of failure and unbecoming conduct” (145). Margherita’s performance becomes a commentary on the cultural narrative of sex as the epitome of love, liberation, and authentic human connection. This interpretation is corroborated by several other moments in the text that more explicitly critique the 1960s free love movement, which becomes a hollow and ineffective form of resistance in the novel. For instance, the narrator inverts the 1960s counter-culture rallying cry “an army of lovers can’t be beaten” and replaces it with “AN ARMY OF LOVERS CAN BE BEATEN” (sic Pynchon 161). In the novel, love is no longer an expression of connection and humanism as the 1960s free love movement hoped; rather, love becomes—like the violent technologies of war that the 1960s counter-culture protested—an unpredictable and disruptive force, easily appropriated and deployed by institutions of power. By dismantling these received cultural understandings of “love” and “sex” and replacing them with her own pleasure, which is unfettered by
social values and political intent, Margherita evacuates the signifiers “love” and “sex” so thoroughly that she can redefine them on her own terms.

Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, the proliferation of discourses on “love” and “sex” throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow* are no longer tied to hetero-masculinist narratives and pleasure. The narration of her experiences with “Negro MPs”—another narrative of non-normative (female) desire, of penetration and unbecoming that the reader and Slothrop have no way of verifying—is itself a queer and destabilized narrative. By dismantling the cultural narratives that value female purity and deny women sexual agency her subversive queer negativity reenacts the failure and refusal of normative narrative in Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics. In relation to the twentieth-century proliferation of pornographic films, Williams writes that lesbian practices and s/m “both manage to chip away at the rigid separation between the sexes and at the hierarchic dichotomies of active/passive, sadist/masochist, male/female. Does this mean that the ‘implantation of perversions’ is a good thing…represent[ing] a net increase in sexual freedom” (274)? In her analysis of pornography Williams answered “no;” however, in the world projected by *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the proliferation of discourses and the spread of ‘perversions’ does come to represent an increase in sexual freedom. Specifically, when pleasure cultivates its “qualities of perversion; when it dispenses with strictly biological and social functions and becomes an end in itself” (Williams 273), when the desiring subject plays with the endless possibilities of substitution, then we can describe it “as a more feminine economy of consumption, an economy best represented by that image which Steven Marcus (1974, xiv) found so disturbing: the orgasmic woman masturbating ‘with the aid of a mechanical-electrical instrument’ ” (273). By drawing from a variety of
theoretical approaches to articulate multiple interpretations of s/m, I indicate how Margherita’s queer practices disrupt traditional narrative form through their refusal to cohere. In this sense her s/m narratives cause and are caused by the anti-narrative strategies of postmodernist fiction that actively defy unified or singular readings.

Margherita’s relation to narrative control distinguishes her s/m from all the other queer sexual practices in the text. In both Blicero and Pudding’s s/m, the narrator retains control over the narrative and over queer modes of artistic expression. Though the reader learns of Blicero’s articulations in his s/m narrative—recall, “each utterance a closed flower” (Pynchon 96)—the “Rome-Berlin Axis” scene lacks any extended narrative focalization through Blicero, offering only what is mediated through Katje’s memory. Similarly, the discursive presentation of Pudding’s s/m is primarily controlled by the narrator. In that scene, direct dialogue is only used for the communication between Katje and Pudding, whose words merely provide the specifics for an s/m narrative orchestrated by Pointsman. Their dialogue does not alter this institutional deployment of sexuality; they are unable to exert control over their own narratives.

By constructing stories to provoke a sexual reaction from Slothrop, Margherita is able to access postmodernist narrative techniques that were previously reserved for the narrator. Margherita’s narrative authority extends s/m’s potential to undercut normative narratives by granting her unprecedented access to postmodernist poetics; for the first time, the text’s discursive structure places the postmodernist tendency to rework and destabilize traditional narratives directly into the hands of a character, who also happens to be a woman. Like Pudding’s embrace of unanticipated fantasies, of a brute African making him behave, Margherita subverts the culturally constructed subjectivity that her
(pornographic) film roles projected onto her. Unlike Pudding, whose subversive pleasures remain unvocalized, Margherita actively constructs her own masochistic fantasies. Here again, I work against Bérubé’s reading of Pynchon as the director of a snuff film. Even if Pynchon’s narrator occupied this role when narrating the plot of *Alpdrücken*, both Margherita’s re-creation of *Alpdrücken* and her subsequent construction of various s/m scenarios induce an ontological slippage between her narratives and her acting roles—further highlighting her agency. Margherita’s ability to construct sexuality and deploy it for her own pleasure subverts the patriarchal (pornographic) film narratives that attempt to construct her solely as an object.

Through her externalized narrative and sexual agency Margherita is able to reconstruct and claim those identities for herself. At one point Margherita recalls how “it was always easy for men to come and tell her who to be. Other girls of her generation grew up asking, ‘Who am I?’ For them it was a question full of pain and struggle. She had more identities than she knew what to do with” (Pynchon 490).\(^30\) In a reading of Slothrop, Bersani makes a similar argument for the subversive potential inherent in discursively constructed subjectivity, particularly when a character has access to a large proliferation of identities. He writes that

\[a \text{ paranoid resistance, far from confronting apparatuses of control with the impenetrable fortress of a unique selfhood, opens the subject up, makes of the subject a helplessly passive recipient of alien images. And in this apparently docile doubling or reflection of the multitudinous forms of information by which a self might be programmed, the subject can perhaps also disappear as a target of the program. (‘Pynchon, Paranoia’ 115).}\]

\(^{30}\) These patriarchal constructions of female film roles include a cowgirl, a debutante, and a scrubwoman.
Rather than assuming that her unintelligible (non)identity necessarily reduces her to object-status, I argue that incorporating and refiguring these pornographic images, through her self-constructed subjectivity, allows Margherita to become the ultimate, subversive Other within the text. In contrast, Pudding’s subversion of Pointsman’s deployment of sexuality was never externally realized. Where Pudding’s alternate narratives of masochism remain a fantasy in his imagination, Margherita’s sexual fantasy narratives become part of the text’s diegetic world. By narrating them aloud to Slothrop, she gains textual authority in a way that Pudding never does. Unlike any other character in the text, Margherita’s metadiegetic narratives cause action on the diegetic level of the narrative.

Margherita’s vocalized narrative, particularly about the “Negro MPs,” can also be read as a specifically postmodernist narrative strategy in that the ontological status of her words remains unknowable. Both Slothrop and the reader have no way to corroborate Margherita’s stories—are they “factually” true? are they her sexual fantasies? or are they outright lies? McHale theorizes a recurring “concretization-deconcretization structure” in Gravity’s Rainbow (Constructing 67), which has three variants: in some instances the reader is given advanced warning that the following material is not part of the text’s “real” world; at other times the indication of unreality follows the scene, forcing the reader, sometimes hundreds of pages later, to reinterpret a particular episode they had initially assumed was “real;” and finally, there is the variant in which “the unreality of an

31 The narrator indicates that Margherita’s film roles have created “images of herself that survive in an indeterminate number of release prints here and there about the Zone, and even across the sea….Every kind technician who ever threw a magenta gel across her key light for her has gone to war or death” (Pynchon 370, ellipses his). Kaufman cites this quotation to argue that Margherita is “merely the porno-films’ black-and-white type of Willing Victim of Man’s Sexual Rage” (213), an object who lacks any identity beyond what male desire projects on her. I complicate Kaufman’s assertion by arguing that Margherita is able to rework these male-authored identities by incorporating them into her own subversive, queer behavior.
episode is not indicated by any explicit marker, prospective or retrospective, but only by some internal contradiction, or incompatibility with the frame of ‘reality’ within which the episode has been placed, or by some gross violation of extra-textual norms of verisimilitude” (Constructing 68). He argues that this structure frequently appears in relation to taboo behavior, drug hallucinations, or (Slothrop’s) dreams and sexual fantasies (Constructing 68). McHale elaborates on the concretization-deconcretization structure in his discussion of postmodernist self-erasure in which sensationalist material is used “to lure the reader into making an emotional investment in the sequence under erasure, typically by arousing his or her anxieties, fascination with the taboo, or prurient interests” (Postmodernist 102). Postmodernist authors often employ this literary device in “pornographic or quasi-pornographic materials” (McHale, Postmodernist 102).

I build on McHale’s theorization of these postmodernist structures, to demonstrate how non-normative sexual practice (and/or sexual fantasy) are bound to ontologically unstable narratives in the text. However, Margherita’s narration of her violent sexual encounters with “Negro MPs” does not easily fall into any of the three structural patterns McHale theorized. I posit a fourth variant of the concretization-deconcretization structure within Pynchon’s text: namely, the presentation of (erotic) fantasy narratives whose ontologically “real” status remains unknowable for both characters and extra-diegetic readers; yet, despite their unknowable status these narratives are unique in that they have “real” effects within the narrative. Margherita participates in the novel’s concretization-deconcretization structure in ways unacknowledged by previous Pynchon criticism. Her vocalized narrative of taboo behavior prompts Slothrop to sexual arousal and causes him—and potentially the reader—to emotionally invest in her narrative. This emotional
investment, which manifests in the narrative through Slothrop’s physical reactions, illuminates Margherita’s unique relationship to the text’s postmodernist poetics. Her masochism enables her to deploy queer practices and narratives, which seem to have no goal other than her own pleasure or jouissance. By refusing the traditional social and biological functions of sexual practice, Margherita disrupts and destabilizes Slothrop’s, and by extension the reader’s, ability to locate teleological narratives.

While the narrative contains several instances in which characters abstractly philosophize about s/m, Margherita is the only one to discuss—with great specificity—her experience of submission, and more importantly, how submission destabilizes linguistic meaning-making systems. In a narrative analepsis, Margherita recalls her interaction with Blicero, when she serves—due to similar body size—as a stand-in for Gottfried. Blicero’s scientists use Margherita to test the Imipolex body suit that Gottfried will wear at the climax of his s/m practice when he is entombed in Rocket 00000. Both this recollection and her fantasy narratives resist the heteronormative investment in futurity. Margherita remembers how wearing the suit made her feel “things, memories, no way to distinguish them any more, went tumbling downward through my head. A torrent. I was evacuating all of these, out into some void…from my vertex, curl-lines of dialogue, objects d’art…I was letting them all go. Holding none. Was this ‘submission,’ then—letting all these go” (Pynchon 496, ellipses his, emphasis mine)? Margherita’s recollection links stigmatized, submissive behavior with a queer refusal of Symbolic order and signification. For Margherita, submission results in a letting go of objects, memories, and speech, leaving only a void—a queer consciousness that denies social and political values as they have been defined within heteronormative discourses. Through
her complete evacuation of self and body Margherita further removes herself from heteronormative conceptions of subjectivity. This removal ultimately reduces Margherita to a social and linguistic “void;” she occupies the space of the queer who has been forced to bear the burden of negativity, of *sinthomosexual*ity. Indeed, Margherita’s association of *s/m* with a void and with deconstructed subjectivity, allows for any number of feminist or queer interpretations. For instance, a feminist interpretation of “letting go,” of discarding the (patriarchal) cultural experiences that formed her subjectivity, would emphasize how any subsequent construction of subjectivity would be entirely on her own terms; one could use queer negativity to argue that her disruptive masochism exposes the fantasy of/void behind heteronormative logic and subjectivity; additionally, Margherita-as-void could be read as a manifestation of shadow-feminism, a refusal to embody the normative signification of “woman.” Her masochistic practice, linked to the death drive through Gottfried’s ultimate fate, “disarticulates the narrativity of desire” (Edelman 9). Submission for Margherita, like Edelman’s theorization of queerness, can only ever signify the evacuation of the signifier. Ultimately submission, like queerness, is a process of letting go.

Not only do Margherita’s narratives of queer negativity impact her relation to hegemonic power and disrupt her own discursively constructed subjectivity, but her narratives actively extend this power to other characters in the novel, inspiring them to embrace queer negativity. After Margherita’s story about the “Negro MPs,” the narrator reveals that “Whatever it is with [Margherita], [Slothrop is] catching it. Out in the ruins he sees darkness now at the edges of all the broken shapes, *showing from behind them*” (Pynchon 453, emphasis his). The italicized words from this quotation reveal that
Margherita, like the narrative itself, represents “the force that shatters the fantasy of Imaginary unity, the force that insists on the void (replete, paradoxically, with jouissance) always already lodged within, though barred from, symbolization: the gap or wound of the Real that inhabits the Symbolic’s very core” (Edelman 22, emphasis mine). Margherita’s fantasies force Slothrop to see the darkness of the void that shows from behind those broken shapes, forcing him to recognize the heteronormative denial of jouissance. For Edelman, the drives, specifically the death drive, are “intractable, unassimilable to the logic of interpretation or the demands of meaning-production; the drives that carry the destabilizing force of what insists outside or beyond, because foreclosed by, signification” (9, emphasis mine). These drives refuse the heteronormative political compulsion to invest in the future, to participate in the collective reproduction of the Child (Edelman 11). After hearing Margherita’s narrative, Slothrop’s access to the Imaginary unity of the Symbolic—his faith in linguistic meaning-making systems—disappears. Language ceases to signify; in its place, Slothrop finds “ruins” (meaninglessness), “broken shapes” (letters evacuated of signification), and darkness (death).

Beyond Margherita’s destabilized narratives, which abstractly reveal the destabilizing forces that exist beyond and/or behind, the Symbolic, her behavior also reflects a more literal embrace of the death drive and its threat to the Child. For instance, Slothrop learns of Margherita’s past; “the subepisode entitled ‘Ensign Morituri’s Story’ reveals Margherita Erdmann as a destructive avatar of the Shekinah, a Kabbalistic version of the White Goddess. Greta’s homicidal mania for children bodes ill for Bianca, her daughter” (Weisenburger 263). While staying at a sea-side spa, Ensign Morituri links
local newspaper stories about missing children with Margherita’s nightly absences, eventually following her one evening and stopping the murder of a young Jewish boy (Pynchon 486). After hearing this story Slothrop wonders “what about Bianca, then? Is she going to be safe with that Greta” (Pynchon 487)? The effects of Margherita’s queer narratives, which give her access to a powerful and destructive jouissance, are literalized in her “homicidal mania for children.” The narrative even goes on to indicate that Margherita is one potential suspect in Bianca’s disappearance and implied death.  

Like Blicero’s murder of Gottfried that I will discuss in the following section, Margherita’s queer practices resist the heteronormative investment in futurity. Both Blicero and Margherita, like Edelman’s *sinthomexual*, threaten the safety of the Child.

I turn to a different episode involving Margherita and her daughter, Bianca, in order to illuminate yet another way Margherita’s practices can be read as a resistant performance of non-normative sexuality. Later in the novel, Margherita and Bianca are “playing stage mother and reluctant child” for the entertainment of the passengers aboard the ship *Anubis* (Pynchon 473). In this scene, Bianca impersonates Shirley Temple and performs “On the Good Ship Lollipop;” when Margherita tells Bianca to perform “Animal Crackers in My Soup,” Bianca refuses and calls her mother a bitch. Margherita proceeds to pull Bianca over her lap and spank Bianca’s bare skin with a ruler; “Bianca kicks her legs, silk stockings squeak together, erotic and audible now that the group have fallen silent and found the medium of touch, hands reaching out to breasts and crotches, Adam’s apples bobbing, tongues licking lips…where’s the old masochist and monument

32 Duyfhuizen writes that “Many readers read mimetically the scene of Slothrop’s return to the engine-room of the *Anubis*, stating that he does in fact discover Bianca’s body; some are even convinced that Margherita has murdered her daughter. Yet reading in this way misses the psychological dynamic the text builds around Slothrop’s anxiety over the intersection of sexuality and death that haunts his experience” (21).
Slothrop knew back in Berlin?” (Pynchon 474, ellipses his). This performance incites an orgy amongst the passengers; Pynchon depicts couples, threesomes, groups, men and women engaging in vaginal and anal intercourse, masturbation, oral sex, even a lone voyeur taking pleasure in the whole scene. In this episode, there are three primary ways in which Margherita and Bianca’s performance can be read as queer. First, the text emphasizes how s/m practice is an inherently destabilized eroticization of power relations. As Slothrop observes, Margherita—once a masochist—now takes on the role of a sadist. Again, the novel deconstructs binary meaning-making systems, emphasizing oscillating power relations in s/m, which—as Williams observes—deconstruct phallic laws that locate meaning in binary systems of thought. Second, this episode eroticizes the infantilization of women and subverts the heteronormative “disciplinary image of the ‘innocent’ Child” by acknowledging Bianca’s sexuality (Edelman 19). Third, the eroticization of the mother-daughter bond, with its lesbian undertones, queers the mother-daughter relationship and emphasizes the destabilizing power of queer practices.

Margherita and Bianca’s performance foregrounds the postmodernist tendency to disrupt normative narrative. By eroticizing their relationship, Margherita and Bianca engage in taboo behavior; their implied incest disrupts normative (cultural) narratives. Halberstam theorizes a “shadow feminism [that] speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal power” (124). Prior to Margherita and Bianca’s performance, Slothrop learns from a fellow Anubis passenger that Margherita wants Bianca to pursue an acting career, but “wants her to have a legitimate
career. It’s guilt. She never felt her own career was anything more than a string of dirty movies” (Pynchon 468). By specifically linking Bianca’s performance to Shirley Temple, Margherita hopes to launch Bianca on an acting career that is “legitimate,” like Temple’s, as opposed to Margherita’s own infamous roles. Though Margherita wants to prevent Bianca from inhabiting her own legacy, the result of their performance actually undercuts Margherita’s desires. By refiguring and eroticizing the Shirley Temple performance, Margherita further destabilizes cinematic narratives, just like she did when she reclaimed and rewrote her film roles through her own sexual fantasies. As opposed to Shirley Temple signifying unsullied and wholesome American youth, Margherita—through her erotic performance with Bianca—takes authorial control over that pre-existing narrative and subverts the heteronormative privileging of the Child.

By inciting an orgy through her appropriation and queering of the Shirley Temple narrative aboard the Anubis, a ship named after the Egyptian dead of the God, Margherita further emphasizes the relation between queer (narrative) practices and death. The orgy becomes another narration of the Eros/Thanatos dialectic. But the narrative stops short and never depicts the ultimate fate of the Anubis and its passengers.33 Bianca’s fate is also never articulated within the narrative; Duyfhuizen observes that “Bianca’s disappearance from the fictional universe after her liaison with Slothrop is equally vexed….a mimetic reading misses the postmodern narrative function of Bianca’s decharacterization to the

33 The end of the Anubis’ “Welcome Aboard!” song implies that the ship will ultimately be destroyed: And come aboard the Titanic, things’ll really be manic,
Folks’ll panic the second the sunken iceberg is knocked,
Naughty ’n’ noisy, and very Walpurgisnacht,
That’s how the party will end,
So—welcome aboard, welcome aboard, my friend! (Pynchon 470, sic)
level of a cipher and trap for readers who want teleologically to complete her story by a represented death scene” (12-13). This postmodernist disruption of teleological narrative, through a queer embrace of orgiastic pleasure and destructive jouissance, “insists both on and as the impossibility of Symbolic closure, the absence of any Other to affirm the Symbolic order’s truth, and hence the illusory status of meaning as defense against the self-negating substance of jouissance” (Edelman 48). The impossibility of Symbolic closure on the narrative level of the text, seen in Bianca and the Anubis’ incomplete narrative arc, parallels the narrative of the rocket—which hovers at the end of the novel, never falling. Ironically, amidst the seemingly endless iteration of details and narrative in Pynchon’s encyclopedic novel, each of these three narratives are ultimately replaced by textual voids, narrative silences.

Perhaps even more than Margherita, the Anubis itself, what it stands for and the activities of its passengers, reflects a queering of sexual practice that, in the novel, becomes an innate component of the postmodern condition. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Spears named the politics of Gravity’s Rainbow homophobic, citing Pynchon’s repeated association of homosexuality with death and perversion. I work against this “queer” reading by arguing that it is precisely this link—between non-normative sexual practice and death, this emphasis on stigmatized practices—that allows for a liberatory interpretation of s/m practice. Pynchon’s repeated linking of sexuality and death foregrounds the ontological instability on both the narrative and discursive levels of the text. Furthermore, I posit that all sexuality in the novel is associated with death, with the Eros/Thanatos dialectic, which becomes a projection of postmodernism itself—both in terms of the culture of the narrative world and the text’s poetics. The Anubis is a
floating party, “a fabulous or-gy…We can’t recall just how it star- ted./ But there’s only one way it can end!” (Pynchon 470, sic). The moment Slothrop boards the ship he is surrounded by “a density of orgy-goers” (Pynchon 471). Throughout this episode Pynchon emphasizes the non-normative practices of the orgy-goers, the “degenerate company Slothrop has fallen in with” (475). Aboard the Anubis, the exaggerated depiction of sexual practice includes “a girl with an enormous glass dildo inside which baby piranhas are swimming…a Montenegr an countess is being fucked simultaneously in her chignon and her navel by a pair of octogenarians…carrying on some sort of technical discussion in what seems to be ecclesiastical Latin” (Pynchon 475). This hyperbolic and comic depiction of the orgy-goers’ sexual pleasure, aboard a ship named after the god of the dead, is a microcosm of the larger sexual culture depicted throughout the novel and underlies the text’s poetics. Specifically, McHale writes that “if our culture’s ontological landscape is unprecedented in human history—at least in the degree of its pluralism—it also incorporates one feature common to all cultures, all ontological landscapes, namely the ultimate ontological boundary between life and death” (38). Aboard the Anubis, which floats metaphorically between life and death, Pynchon depicts an unprecedented pluralism of non-normative sexuality. The Anubis is literally a (free-)floating signifier, a physical manifestation of sexuality and ontological uncertainty in postmodern culture.

Like the Anubis, Margherita becomes a central symbol of queer sexual and textual practices in the novel; her narrative roles link disparate plot lines and highlight the indeterminate ontological landscape within Gravity’s Rainbow. Many Pynchon critics focus on the text’s use of doubling and mirroring characters, or in McHale’s terms,
“mapping.” Most commonly critics find parallels between Bianca, Ilse, and Gottfried. Margherita has been read as a double of Katje. Almost all the mapping in the novel—which is a central poetic device within the narrative—can, to some degree, be traced back to Margherita and her s/m practice. McHale asserts that Pynchon’s “mapping” of characters onto other characters has its origins in the “modernist structure of analogical integration” (Constructing 79). He differentiates between this integration, which encourages the reader to find non-mimetic patterns “at a level above that of the fictive world in which characters move,” with Pynchon’s postmodernist analogical integration in “Gravity’s Rainbow [where] ‘mapping’ is mimetically motivated” (Constructing 79). He goes on to write that this narrative pattern fuels the reader’s “growing suspicion that almost any character in this novel can be analogically related to almost any other character” (Constructing 80). For McHale, one of the most striking examples of postmodernist poetics’ ontological dominant is the frequent use of metalepsis, the violation of narrative levels of the text; for instance, “cinematic images of copulation lead to the conception of two real girls… in a final, apocalyptic metalepsis, the rocket launched within the film-within-the-novel hangs poised above the theatre in which the film itself is being viewed” (Postmodernist 130). Through mapping, both these examples of metalepsis can be directly linked to Margherita’s s/m practice—the first in that her role in Alpdrücken led to the conception of her daughter, a scene that inspired the conception of

34 McHale identifies “a whole system of analogies among characters and events [that] arise from these episodes: both Slothrop and Franz Pokler map onto Max Schlepzig; Leni maps onto Margherita, Ilse onto Margherita’s daughter Bianca, and Margherita onto her own earlier self” (Constructing 79). Bersani also identifies these “enigmatic and frequently eerie replications,” in addition to extrapolating the narrative trope of doubling to argue that “the entire Zone may be a spectral double of the real world, a collection of images simulating scenes from all over the universe” (“Pynchon, Paranoia” 105).

35 After viewing and becoming aroused by Alpdrücken, Franz Pokler has intercourse with his wife who will later give birth to Ilse. Through internal focalization the reader learns that during intercourse, Franz fantasized about Alpdrücken, pretending that he was having sex with Margherita Erdmann (Pynchon 403).
Ilse; the second in that the rocket hovering at the end of the novel parallels and symbolically continues the parabolic arc of Rocket 00000 in which Gottfried wore the Imiplex suit that Margherita tested. In a later episode, Margherita recalls how “Thanatz would sit with her lying across his knees, and read the [whip] scars down her back, as a gypsy reads a palm….scar-tissue formed silently on her, cell by cell, in the night” (Pynchon 492, ellipses mine).\(^{36}\) Margherita’s body, as a result of her queer s/m practices, becomes a text within a text. Since almost all of Pynchon’s “mapping,” can be linked back to Margherita—whose queer narratives are written, through scar-tissue, on her body—she is the paradigmatic example of how queer practice can be equated with the text’s postmodernist poetics. Both the mapping and the scars are a direct result of her queer sexual practice. As I argued above, Margherita embodies the Eros/Thanatos dialectic through her queer s/m practice, a practice that literally makes her body a text to be read and deciphered, much like Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics, which are driven by the ontological slippage between Eros and Thanatos. When Thanatz attempts to read her scars, his actions fictionalize the interpretive work of Pynchon critics who attempt to read meaning into Pynchon’s postmodernist mapping. Thus, Pynchon’s mapping, which creates thin lines between characters, is symbolically represented in the thin lines of Margherita’s scars, a postmodernist text inscribed in her skin. No other character becomes such a meta-object in the novel—at once a practitioner of s/m, an author of

36 McHale points out how *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a book about reading: “Pynchon’s characters persist in behaving as though their world were a text—which of course, literally, it is—and they its readers. Saure Bummer reads reefers, Miklos Thanatz reads whip-scars…Ronald Cherrychoke reads personal effects (cravat, fountain-pen, pince-nez)….Mr. Poinstman interprets the Book (Pavlov, not Holy Writ)….Enzian the Rocket-Kabalist regards the bombed-out German landscape as a text….Again and again postmodernist allegorical worlds collapse into ‘literal’ texts in just this way” (*Postmodernist* 146).
queer narratives, and an embodiment of a queer postmodernist text; Margherita is the point on which much of the postmodernist narrative hinges.
SECTION V

Climax:

Blicero, Gottfried, and the Rocket that Hovers above “Us”

At the end of the third section of the novel, “Into the Zone,” the narrator writes that “in the trenches of the First World War, English men came to love one another decently, without shame or make-believe…. the life-cry of that love has long since hissed away” (Pynchon 627). According to the narrator, homosexual practice amongst WWI soldiers offered them a chance at life, at staving off or at least momentarily forgetting their own impending deaths. It was without shame and without the eroticization of shame present in Gottfried and Pudding’s masochistic practices. It was a more “decent” type of love, without make-believe—without the s/m role-playing depicted in the novel’s other s/m scenes. In contrast to that life-cry, that decent love making, the narrator writes that “in this latest War, death was no enemy, but a collaborator. Homosexuality in high places is just a carnal after-thought now, and the real and only fucking is done on paper….,” (Pynchon 627, ellipses his). Here the narrator articulates a fundamental shift in sexual practices between WWI and WWII. This articulation underscores how the prevalence of non-normative sexual practices throughout the novel are a direct effect of the traumas of WWII, traumas that, in turn, lead to the ontological indeterminacy of postmodern culture. In the novel, all sexual practice prior to WWII—including homosexuality—had the potential to be socially productive to some degree; it was fundamentally rooted in Eros. Within Gravity’s Rainbow, which focuses primarily on WWII and its aftermath, sexual practice is oriented around Thanatos. Where once Eros and Thanatos were opposites, drives working to cancel each other out, they have now become collaborators.
Since the narrative itself links the queering or perversion of (male-male) love with a historically specific moment, I will explicate how and to what purpose Blicero’s s/m is a mechanism of queer temporality. Freeman writes that

Sadean sex, in its very insistence on reanimating historically specific social roles, in the historically specific elements of its theatrical language, and in using the body as an instrument to rearrange time, becomes a kind of *écriture historique*. S/M becomes a form of writing history with the body in which the linearity of history itself may be called into question. (139)

Freeman goes on to argue that Sade was ahead of queer theory in that contemporary theorists frequently elide the connections between s/m and history “precisely because the accouterments and intersubjective dynamics of S/M so often call up the ghosts of chattel slavery” (139). While Blicero’s final s/m practice with Gottfried calls up no historically specific objects or roles prior to the historical moment in which their narrative occurs, Pynchon’s use of historical fiction can be read as a type of *écriture historique*.37

However, in this instance, it is not the role of chattel slavery that is called up, but rather “the combination of terror and eros, the forgotten and the forbidden [which] is what allows for Nazi imagery to be recycled endlessly as sexual fetish” (Halberstam 170).

37 I locate Pynchon’s *écriture historique* within the cultural response to the traumas of WWII that led to an increase of fascist imagery within popular culture. In part, the Cold War Era saw a conflation of Nazi/Fascist themes and hypererotic pleasures, which become a way of responding, through eroticism, to the unprecedented violence of the Final Solution, rocket technology, and nuclear power. Pynchon’s novel contributes to the proliferation of images and texts on Nazi imagery circulating in the 1970s and early 1980s; some examples include: Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1974), Lina Wertmuller’s *Seven Beauties* (1975), Michael Fassbinder’s *Lili Marleen* (1981), and Elfriede Jelinek’s *The Piano Teacher* (1983). Furthermore, I would argue that the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow* coincides with the rise of gay leather culture that was often inflected with Nazi or fascist imagery—a short hand for the eroticization of taboo (power) relations. For instance, both Tom of Finland and Robert Mapplethorpe’s work contribute to the eroticization of fascism within gay s/m art. For a discussion of Mapplethorpe’s work and its relation to leather culture see Richard Meyer’s article.
Gottfried’s body becomes the instrument through which Blicero disrupts and queers heteronormative temporality. The first narration of the 00000 launch occurs aboard the "Anubis" when Thanatz tells Slothrop about his experience with Blicero. Thanatz says that on the day of the firing Blicero

had left 1945, wired his nerves back into the pre-Christian earth we fled across….You and I perhaps have become over the generations so Christianized, so enfeebled by Gesellschaft and our obligation to its celebrated ‘Contract,’ which never did exist….through that whole terrible day, I had an erection…don’t judge me…it was out of my control…everything was out of control.  

(Pynchon 473, ellipses mine)

In this passage Blicero’s s/m grants him access to a pre-Christian earth, which lacks contemporary notions of subjectivity and leads to a loss of control, explicitly demonstrating the effects of s/m as an *écriture historique*. Additionally, Thantaz contends that (heteronormative) Christian society is based on a contract that never existed. Blicero’s disruptive jouissance, accessed through s/m practice, refuses the logic of Christian/heteronormative social organization and exposes that logic as a fiction.

Blicero’s destructive s/m, which employs the rocket as a technology of both sex and power, illustrates the shift from Eros oriented sexual practice to a queer embrace of Thanatos that prevails in postmodern culture. The fundamental shift in the dialectic

38 This idea of a “pre-Christian earth” can be linked to s/m in that “not only did Sade resurrect an obsolete social system in his orgiastic scene but he also wrote his major works in an era that saw a revolutionary and secular experiment with the Western sociotemporal order….replacing the Christian dating framework that began with the birth of Christ. It interrupted the rhythm of the Christian Sabbath” (Freeman 138). Furthermore, Weisenburger observes that “the firing of Rocket 00000, with its sacrifice of Gottfried (God’s peace), which finally occurs….at noon, during Easter of 1945. But in 1945 the Easter holy day fell on April Fool’s. Easter: April Fool’s” (10); the (coincident?) linking of Christianity and April Fool’s emphasizes the fictitious logic of religion.
relation between sex and death becomes a powerful agent of change within postmodern culture that results in ontological uncertainty. McHale suggests that “periods of rapid ontological change” lead to “playful ontological regression” (Postmodernist 37); in other words, periods of ontological stress often result in a desire to return to more stable ontological moments. But in an ontologically plural landscape, individuals often attempt to reinvoke past social orders in which disparate ontological levels remain separate and stable. The final analepsis of the novel, which occurs just prior to V-E day and the end of WWII, is a period of rapid ontological change. This analepsis narrates Blicero and Gottfried’s final s/m play before the launch of Rocket 00000. At this moment, Gottfried realizes that he has “lost all of his [reality] to Blicero long ago” (Pynchon 735); Gottfried knows that in a few weeks “everything will be over, Germany will have lost the War. The routines go on. The boy cannot imagine anything past the last surrender” (Pynchon 735).

When Gottfried explicitly articulates his lack of ontological stability, both he and Blicero exhibit ontological stress, which they cope with through their playful ontological regression to past social orders. Gottfried kneels at Blicero’s feet and wears a dog collar: “Both are in army clothes. It’s been a long time since either of them dressed as women. It is important that they both be men” (Pynchon 736). By returning to their army clothes, which signifies a return to a stable institution of power, Blicero and Gottfried playfully return to legible identities. However, since this ontological regression is situated within their s/m practice, they unintentionally subvert and destabilize their roles as soldier and Captain through the very “play” they use to regain ontological stability.

By incorporating their army uniforms into their s/m, Blicero and Gottfried queer the intended function of military institutionalized power. I highlight their manner of dress
in order to build upon, and complicate, my previous reading of Blicero’s drag performance. In Section II, I argued that the narrator’s depiction of drag and its social function remained relatively stable throughout the “Rome-Berlin Axis” episode: drag was used to destabilize the privileged gender binary through Blicero’s feminine costume, which he wore while occupying the role of the dominant sadist. In the final analepsis, I read their military accouterment as another form of drag—an allusion to and simulation of the most masculine elements of culture as seen in the extreme violence and power of war. By donning this hyper-masculine attire, Blicero and Gottfried destabilize what drag signifies and how it functions within the text. While Blicero’s drag in the “Rome-Berlin Axis” scene could be read as a conscious parody and deconstruction of gender, Gottfried and Blicero’s final s/m practice, which occurs in a soon to be destabilized, homosocial institution, employs drag as a simulation of and commentary on military hierarchy. Their simulation differs from parody in that both men are well aware that the stable referent, which would make their performance a parody, is quickly slipping away; what can their uniforms signify at this late stage, when Germany has essentially lost the War in all terms but official surrender? Perhaps their uniforms fail to signify a stable referent precisely by signifying the failure of Nazi politics.

Throughout the novel, Blicero integrates his sexuality with his military power in an attempt to work against the Aryan glorification of youth and heroism in battle. Bersani writes that, in its most extreme forms, gay-macho style is “often taken up by older

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39 As opposed to the terms “parody” and “simulation” one could easily read this scene through Jameson’s term “pastiche,” which he defines as parody but “without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour” (The Cultural Turn 5). From this point extends a parallel project to my own—a queer, postmodernist methodology that articulates and builds from the unacknowledged queer aspect within Jameson’s work.
men...because they can count on it to supplement their diminished sexual appeal” (“Is the Rectum a Grave?” 208). Blicero is aware of his diminishing physical and political power, particularly as the War is about to end. Though he can no longer die a hero’s death (Pynchon 101), he maintains the capacity to kill. As an officer, Blicero can sacrifice his own people for the Aryan cause, or, as the novel reveals, for his own erotic pleasure. Gottfried represents the glorification of Aryan youth, the future figured in the fetishization of the Child, which also makes him a symbol of the heteronormative system that has condemned the aging, *sinthomosexual* Blicero to a slow decline. Blicero inhabits “the place of meaninglessness associated with the sinthome, to figure an unregenerate, and unregenerating, sexuality whose singular insistence on jouissance...exposes aesthetic culture...as always already a ‘culture of death’ intent on abjecting the force of the death drive that shatters the tomb we call life” (Edelman 47-8). By using his military rank and s/m practice to articulate his own power, Blicero queers the heteronormative fetishization of the Child. When 00000 is launched, “the flame is too bright for anyone to see Gottfried inside, except now as an erotic category, hallucinated out of that blue violence, for purposes of self-arousal” (Pynchon 773). When he eroticizes and annihilates the already fetishized Child, Blicero explodes heteronormative logic. His male-male sexual practice, which metaphorically and literally peaks during the 00000 launch, kills the Child that would be the hope for the future and in doing so exposes the irony of the heteronormative narrative that displaces its own investment “in morbidity, fetishization, and repetition” onto the *sinthomosexual* (Edelman 47).

The focalization through Gottfried in this episode explicitly links his s/m practice with both language and a disruption of heteronormative narrative. Blicero says to
Gottfried: “Ah, you’re so smug, you little bastard….” (Pynchon 736, ellipses his). While Gottfried kneels before Blicero, the narrator reveals that “No one has ever talked to Gottfried before, not like this. His father uttered only commands….His mother was emotional….he feels he must keep every word, that none must be lost. Blicero’s words have become precious to him” (Pynchon 736, ellipses mine). Here Gottfried distances himself from and queers the heteronormative family unit, replacing his parent’s narratives—or lack thereof—with Blicero and with death, which in turn enables Blicero to dismantle the heteronormative fantasy of reproductive futurism. Blicero’s emphasis on Gottfried’s youth, reveals his understanding of Aryan cultural values which dictate that Gottfried should be privileged and protected for he is the Child in whom the nation is entrusted. When Gottfried realizes that “there have to be these too, lovers whose genitals are consecrated to shit, to endings, to the desperate nights in the streets when connection proceeds out of all personal control, proceeds or fails, a gathering of the fallen” (Pynchon 736, italics his), he internalizes Blicero’s queer narrative of disruptive jouissance. Here, Gottfried explicitly links homosexuality with “endings,” failure, and—by extension—with queer opposition. In this climactic scene, Blicero fully inhabits “the sinthomosexual [subject position], himself neither martyr nor proponent of martyrdom for the sake of a cause, [he] forsakes all causes, all social action, all responsibility for a better tomorrow or for the perfection of social forms” (Edelman 101). Gottfried understands that those who engage in queer sexual practice lose control by abandoning themselves to the momentary pleasures of jouissance, which leads to a “failure” of the heteronormative social contract. I extend Edelman’s “social forms,” which he equates with heteronormative political telos, to include literary narrative forms as well. Thus the
sinthomosexual forsakes all responsibility for the production of normative narratives—both in their structure and teleological arcs.

In their last night together, Blicero asks Gottfried,

Can you feel in your body how strongly I have infected you with my dying? I was meant to: when a certain time has come, I think that we are all meant to. Fathers are carriers of the virus of Death, and sons are the infected…and, so that the infection may be more certain, Death in its ingenuity has contrived to make the father and son beautiful to each other as Life has made male and female…oh Gottfried of course yes you are beautiful to me but I’m dying…I want to get through as honestly as I can, and your immortality rips at my heart—can’t you see why I might want to destroy that, oh that stupid clarity in your eyes… (Pynchon 738, ellipses and emphasis his)

I quote the text at length to highlight three things. First, Pynchon foregrounds the disruption of time and narrative through his repeated use of ellipses. The pauses in Blicero’s monologue not only echo the importance of the suspension of time to s/m practice, but they anticipate the narrative’s temporal rhythm during the 00000 launch when Blicero eroticizes “power as time” (Freeman 153, emphasis hers) during the launch countdown. Second, Blicero associates homosexuality with death—Death makes men attractive to each other, while Life encourages heterosexual love and reproduction. Blicero’s discussion of death, its relation to homosexuality, and his queering of paternal lineage “relies upon the identification of both totalitarianism and homosexuality with the desire for sameness that colors the ‘authoritarian personality’ and threatens dominant or
Oedipal logics of desire” (Halberstam 157). The queer postmodern destabilizing of Oedipal desire is further articulated in the details of “WEISSMANN’s TAROT,” which I will discuss later.40 The narrator equates Blicero with “the father you will never quite manage to kill. The Oedipal situation in the Zone these days is terrible….sons, still trapped inside inertias of lust that are 40 years out of date” (Pynchon 762, ellipses mine). Both the narrator and Blicero rearticulate Gottfried’s earlier queering of heteronormative families; through his sadism, Blicero becomes an eroticized stand-in for Gottfried’s commanding father. By queering heteronormative family relations, Blicero further destabilizes heteronormative institutions of power in postmodern culture. Third, Blicero stresses how all non-procreative sexual practice leads to a queer embrace of the death drive, in that it destroys both Gottfried and the teleological heteronormative narrative he represents. Like Edelman’s theorization of queer (non)identity, Blicero’s oppositional status depends on “taking seriously the death drive we’re called on to figure and insisting, against the cult of the Child and the political order it enforces” that queerness will never create a better tomorrow, especially where the future signifies—as it does in heteronormative logic—a repetition of the past (30). Within Pynchon’s postmodernist narrative, Blicero extends the sinthomosexual’s anti-narrative to its literal end, modeling how queer practices are micro versions of postmodernist poetics.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, McHale argues that the ontological dominant in postmodernist fiction reveals how postmodernist fiction is always about death in that all ontological boundaries are metaphors for death (Postmodernist 231). Blicero goes on

40 Linda Williams offers a succinct survey and commentary on various psychoanalytic and feminist discussions of s/m and how it disrupts Oedipal desire (Hard Core 210-217). Her work could be a starting point for yet another intervention into postmodernist criticism, perhaps a feminist methodological approach to sexuality’s function in postmodernist texts.
tell Gottfried, “I want to break out—to leave this cycle of infection and death. I want to be taken in love: so taken that you and I, and death, and life, will be gathered, inseparable, into the radiance of what we would become….” (Pynchon 738, ellipses his). Blicero fantasizes about a final breaking of ontological boundaries, breaking and surpassing them until the boundaries between life and death cease to exist, until the heteronormative privileging of love and life breaks down and becomes indistinguishable from its “opposite:” the marginalized association of homosexuality and death. In essence, Blicero’s fantasy enacts the effects of jouissance, which can be understood as a passage beyond identity and meaning—as those signifiers have been constructed in heteronormative logic. Blicero’s embrace of the death drive, which grants him access to disruptive jouissance, makes the effects of his queer practices available to the extra-diegetic reader’s imagination, in much the same way that “postmodernist writing enables us to experiment with imagining our own deaths, to rehearse our own deaths” (McHale, Postmodernist 232, emphasis his)—an imaginative exercise that links queer practice, death, and postmodernist ontological uncertainty.

While the ritual aspects of s/m practice are repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel; in the novel’s final episode, the narrator fuses ritualized sexual practice with the ritualized firing of Rocket 00000, which foregrounds how queer practice effects the queerness of Pynchon’s postmodernist narrative structure. When Gottfried is nestled into the tail section of the rocket he recalls his own “eyes pleading, gagged throat trying to say too late what he should have said in the tent last night…deep in the throat, the gullet, where Blicero’s own cock’s head has burst for the last time” (Pynchon 773, ellipses his).

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41 This anticipates my reading of the novel’s final scene when the narrator directly addresses the extra-diegetic reader.
Gottfried’s final thoughts call attention to the relation between queerness and language; queer practice leads to Gottfried’s death and blocks both futurity and the production of intelligible narrative. Again, Pynchon’s ellipses make visible the gap in the Symbolic order that queer practices expose; the narrator does not indicate what Gottfried should or would have said had his mouth been unoccupied. In the previous quotation, Gottfried’s last night is structurally juxtaposed with his throat—between them, in place of articulation, are only ellipses, mute and without signification. I link this queer frustration of language, meaning, and narrative to McHale’s theorization of how modernist and late-modernist texts’ “equation of life with discourse, [and] death with silence remains more or less in the background; [while] the postmodernists bring it into the foreground” (Postmodernist 228). In this scene, Gottfried’s silence, his inability to vocally resist Blicero’s narrative—a direct result of male-male oral intercourse—leads to his death, which itself will be silenced within the narrative. Though a radio speaker has been surgically implanted in Gottfried’s ear, allowing him to hear Blicero’s voice, “there’s no return channel from Gottfried to the ground. The exact moment of his death will never be known” (Pynchon 766). This scene destabilizes the one ontological boundary that should remain clear and fixed. Through silence, a block of communication, no one will hear or know when Gottfried dies. This silence is replicated through the text’s discursive structure, which stops short of depicting Gottfried’s death; thus both the narrative and discursive levels of the text destabilize the ultimate ontological boundary between life and death.

During the launch of Rocket 00000, Blicero calls out German commands in a call and response dialogue with a soldier. The narrator indicates, “there ought to be big
dramatic pauses here….But no, the ritual has its velvet grip on them all. So strong, so warm….” (Pynchon 773, second ellipses his). Yet the structure of this sentence undercuts its content; in this one and a half page section entitled “THE CLEARING,” each call and response is separated by lengthy descriptions of setting and detailed dialogue tags, both of which suspend and slow narrative progression. After the “vorstrufe” or first-stage switch is on,

A pause of 15 seconds while the oxygen tank comes up to pressure…. Vorstrufe is the last position from which Moritz can still switch backward. The flame grows at the base of the Rocket. Colors develop. There is a period of four seconds here, four seconds of indeterminacy. The ritual even has a place for that. The difference between a top-grade launch officer and one doomed to mediocrity is in knowing exactly when, inside this chiming and fable-crowded passage, to order Hauptstufe [lift-off].” (Pynchon 773, ellipses mine)

Here, the narrator emphasizes the importance of the pause in the sadistic ritual of launching Rocket 00000. I say sadistic ritual because the launching of Rocket 00000 is the climax of Blicero and Gottfried’s s/m relationship, the terminal—and fatal—gratification of pleasure towards which Blicero and Gottfried were heading from the beginning. Freeman writes that “genuinely Sadean sadomasochism plays with and literalizes power as time….one of the most powerful aspects of sadomasochism is the way it makes the pause itself corporeal….we can now see S/M as a dialectic between the will to speed up and annihilate and the will to slow down and dilate” (153). The narrative pauses, which the narrator first presents as absent and then presents as a central part of
the ritual, fictionalize the narrative’s queer engagement with time in the final pages of the novel. As I mentioned in the Introduction, McHale interprets the relation between text and reader as a reenactment of the s/m relationship, particularly in a text’s “modeling of erotic relations through foregrounded violations of ontological boundaries” (Postmodernist 227). The discursive structure of the 00000 launch, with its lengthy pauses, models Sadean temporality by slowing down narrative progression for both the extra-diegetic reader and for Gottfried. While I am not arguing that Pynchon set out to write a modern version of the Marquis de Sade’s texts, there are many parallels between Pynchon and Sade’s texts. Most importantly, both authors employ discursive structures that work against the erotic genre that represents “the expectation of [the erotic scene], the preparation for it, its ascent…and when the scene occurs, naturally there is disappointment, deflation” (Barthes 58). Like Sade, Pynchon’s incorporation of lengthy philosophical (and scientific) treatises and his excessive articulation of detail extends and suspends the erotic scene, a narrative and discursive structure that results in an endless deferral of gratification. This can also be seen at the novel’s conclusion when the rocket is left hovering, its arc incomplete. In this sense, Pynchon’s postmodernist narrative replicates the pleasure and pain experienced within the s/m practice of the novel.

In reference to Rocket 00000, the narrator writes “this ascent will be betrayed to Gravity. But the Rocket engine, the deep cry of combustion that jars the soul, promises escape. The victim, in bondage to falling, rises on a promise, a prophecy, of Escape….” (Pynchon 774, ellipses his). Bersani writes that “Gravity’s Rainbow can be very explicit

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42 For instance, both Pynchon and Sade work within the genre of the huge, encyclopedic novel; they destabilize normative temporality through narrative content and discursive structure; they explore, in unprecedented detail, the role of violence within pleasure; and they construct narratives that question and/or dismantle institutional authority.
about the rocket’s phallic significance (Katje, for example, ‘has understood the great airless arc [followed by the rocket] as a clear allusion to certain secret lusts that drive the planet and herself, and Those who use her—over its peak and down, plunging, burning toward a terminal orgasm’; 260)” (“Pynchon, Paranoia” 111). Bersani goes on to argue that the rocket represents something beyond repressed sexuality, “a figure that can itself be taken to chart a kind of erotic relation of resistance and abandonment to gravity” (111). In Bersani’s observation I find an unarticulated connection between queer negativity, s/m practice, the launch of Rocket 00000, the hovering rocket at the end, and Pynchon’s postmodernist poetics. When Gottfried and the rocket descend, the narrative takes a step back from its focalization through Gottfried and offers a general commentary on the bound victim falling, a falling that rises on a promise of Escape. Pairing Katje’s perception of the rocket with the narration of 00000’s descent illuminates the subversive potential inherent to the queer death drive. In Katje’s mind the falling rocket signifies a plunging toward terminal orgasm; she conflates death and sexual pleasure. Thus, 00000’s fall, a gratification of Blicero and Gottfried’s s/m, becomes an escape from institutional control through pleasure.

When Rocket 00000 reaches its apex, suspending Gottfried in time and space, the narrative abruptly shifts its focalization in its final section, entitled “DESCENT,” which depicts a movie theatre filled with a rowdy audience, waiting. Here we learn that “The screen is a dim page spread before us, white and silent” (Pynchon 775), a phrase that highlights the narrative’s postmodernist violation of narrative levels through direct address. The extra-diegetic reader is implicated in the text’s narrative. As “we” wait in the movie theatre for the show to start “the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile
per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap
above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t. There is time, if you need the comfort,
to touch the person next to you, or to reach between your own cold legs…” (Pynchon
775, ellipses his). In some senses this final scene parallels the opening line of the novel,
which also narrates the impending crash of a rocket, “a screaming comes across the sky”
(Pynchon 3). While the narrator eventually describes the initial rocket’s crash site, in this
scene the narrative stops short and does not depict the rocket’s landing. Unlike that first
rocket, which held a coded message for Pirate Prentice, the final, looming rocket offers
no communication, no possibility for a narrative future, and no completion of the
(rocket’s) narrative arc.

The text’s discursive structure juxtaposes the novel’s climax, the analepsis in
which Gottfried and Rocket 00000 are launched, with a prolepsis that uses “you” to place
the extra-diegetic reader in a movie theatre over which a rocket is about to crash. This
juxtaposition creates an emotional immediacy that foregrounds the narrative’s violation
of ontological boundaries. The narrative’s focalization through Gottfried, a poignant
depiction of his final thoughts, enables the reader to become emotionally invested in the
destructive effects of the rocket. For the first time in the novel, the narrator describes the
impact of rocket violence in terms of one individual, as opposed to earlier descriptions of
the rocket that were focused on physical destruction to land and property and did not
reveal the dire effects on an individual character. The emotional tension from Gottfried’s
death carries over to the final scene, where a rocket hovers, threatening, above “us.” By
immediately shifting from the fatal consequences of 00000 in the analepsis to direct
address in the prolepsis, the threat of the looming rocket above the theatre becomes more
than an abstracted warning—particularly since the reader is already invested in a highly visceral narration of the rocket’s catastrophic potential for destruction. The end of the novel breaks “a basic ontological boundary, the one between the real-world object, the book which shares our world with us, and the fictional objects and world which the text projects” (McHale, Postmodernist 180). When the narrator warns us that “our” narrative is about to end, the separation between the world projected in the text and the reader’s extra-diegetic world collapses. By transgressing narrative and ontological boundaries, the text’s discursive structure forces the extra-diegetic reader to confront that most universal of ontological boundaries: death. This threat, which ends on a narrative hesitation or pause prior to the rocket’s impact, extends the experience of the Sadean pause to the extra-diegetic reader and further demonstrates how postmodernist poetics create a sadistic relationship between reader and text.

The manifestation of s/m ritual practices within the text’s discursive structure forecloses the possibility of a teleological future; in place of telos Gravity’s Rainbow offers only a queer resistance to futurity. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Edelman limits his analysis of sinthomosexuality by reading for the ways in which texts marginalize queerness and reinforce heteronormative values through their narratives. In contrast, I explicate how Pynchon’s postmodernist novel privileges queerness by constructing a narrative around sinthomosexuality’s subversive potential. Unlike the texts that Edelman analyzes, Gravity’s Rainbow fully articulates its queer (anti-)narratives by portraying the ultimate, fatal consequences of disruptive jouissance. In Edelman’s reading of North by Northwest (1959) he writes, “Thus Leonard, the sinthomosexual, by pressing his foot onto Thornhill’s hand, attempts to impress upon Thornhill the fact that
by breaking his hold on the cliff Leonard gives him the break for which he’s been asking: the neighborly love sufficient to break him open with jouissance and launch him into the void around and against which the subject congeals” (85). Yet in *North by Northwest*, Leonard is killed and the *sinthomosexual* narrative is blocked. Where Leonard eventually fails to launch Thornhill and his bride-to-be into the void against which subjectivity congeals, Blicero’s queer narratives are allowed to reach their ultimate, subversive conclusion. In contrast to Hitchcock’s film—which concludes in marriage and reinforces heteronormative futurism—the final analepsis of *Gravity’s Rainbow* narrates the shattering effects of sinthomosexuality, in ways that the texts Edelman analyzes do not. Gottfried, like Thornhill in *North by Northwest*, is the avatar around which heteronormative futurism is oriented. While Thornhill represents the heteronormative desire for intelligible subjectivity and his marriage represents the potential for heteronormative futurity, Gottfried represents the Child, the fetishistic obsession with the future, the hope of (Nazi) political telos. By literally breaking open Gottfried’s body through his own jouissance, Blicero fully embodies the *sinthomosexual* who “persists as the figure for such a generalized unbinding by which the death drive expresses at once the impossible excess and the absolute limit both of and within the Symbolic” (Edelman 108, italics his). When Blicero launches Gottfried in the 00000 Rocket, Blicero explodes Gottfried’s subjectivity. Published less than fifteen years after *North by Northwest*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers an infinitely queerer narrative than Hitchcock’s film; the novel resists heteronormative narrative by articulating the fatal consequences of jouissance, denying both Gottfried and the extra-diegetic reader any hope for futurity.
Though I read the launching of Rocket 00000 as the climax of Blicero’s s/m practice, it is not the conclusion of his narrative arc. Prior to depicting 00000’s launch, the narrator relates “WEISSMANN’S TAROT,” what will happen to Blicero after the war is over: “If you’re wondering where he’s gone, look among the successful academics, the Presidential advisers, the token intellectuals who sit on boards of directors. He is almost surely there. Look high, not low. His future card, the card of what will come, is The World,” (Pynchon 764). Blicero’s scattering across the elite, across the institutionalized forms of power to come after the war, is distinct from Slothrop’s final disappearance and scattering across the Preterite. While Slothrop becomes impossible to locate, Blicero’s tarot indicates that he can be found, that he has been incorporated into the hegemonic power structures of America. Blicero’s final actions thus “complete,” in an unexpected way, his narrative of sinthomosexuality. His fate resists teleological narrative form and replaces it instead with a postmodernist insistence on indeterminacy. Countering Weisenburger’s argument that Blicero’s scattering across the elite culminates in a translation of his sexual desire into postwar bureaucratic power structures, I posit that Blicero’s s/m was already an articulation of his political power. In discussing the relation between fascism and homosexuality, Halberstam describes “an individualistic ideology of sexual love that actually dovetailed nicely with certain aspects of the fascist state in its production of and securing of bonds between Aryan men” (156). In terms of Halberstam’s observation, Blicero’s fate can be interpreted as an extension of his queer

43 Weisenburger explains that “Weissmann’s tarot points up the end of his romantic desire and its translation into business, into conformity, into the cartelized military industrial sovereignties of the postwar period, thus into the future threat of nuclear winter figured in GR’s allusions to Hiroshima” (375).
44 While Halberstam’s characterization of Aryan homosexuality is applicable to this iteration of Blicero’s s/m, it does not apply to the initial depiction of Blicero and Gottfried’s s/m relationship, which subverts Aryan masculinism. In the “Rome-Berlin Axis” scene, Blicero privileges his s/m power over that of his military rank, frequently removing Gottfried from military duties so he could participate in Blicero’s feminized s/m games.
practice since his s/m hyperextends his rank as a Nazi captain and links his sexual desire with his desire for political power.

But how can Blicero ultimately be subsumed by the very systems of institutional power his *sinthomosexuality* resists? How can he be read as both the ultimate expression of queer oppositional politics and as the future of institutionalized power in America? Does Blicero’s fate necessarily counteract or nullify his disruptive *sinthomosexuality*?

Unlike Margherita, Blicero never fully controls his own narrative. The narrator, rather than Blicero, reveals his scattering across the elite, which indicates that Blicero has only limited access to narrative control. Though being scattered across elite institutions grants Blicero access to hegemonic power, it also traps him within larger cultural narratives and renders him unable to exert individual agency over his own narrative. Blicero’s scattering is an unintended side-effect of his s/m practice, which he used to gain political power; this is particularly clear when compared with other instances of s/m in the novel, not motivated by a desire for power. Recall how Pudding and Margherita—both marginalized Others in the text—unintentionally gain varying levels of (subversive) power precisely by using s/m to reject institutional systems. By not fully committing to the subversive potential of stigmatized sexual practice, by persisting in his desire for institutionalized power, Blicero remains subject to institutional narratives of control. Though scattered, he remains bound by the System, precisely because his desire to become part of the Elect necessitates a faith in legible subjectivity.\footnote{In contrast to Blicero’s access and desire for political power, Slothrop embraces the postmodernist dissolution of the subject, foregoing the privileges of subjectivity by removing himself from politics altogether.}
Blicero’s fate becomes an intersection between Edelman and Halberstam’s queer theories. Though Blicero embraces and extends queer negativity to its ultimate limit, he refuses to completely forgo his access to politics, just like Halberstam who attempts to “to engage critically with Edelman’s project in order to argue for a more explicitly political framing of the antisocial project, a framing that usefully encloses failure” (106). To some extent Blicero does model a politically viable antisocial project. However, the narrator offers no indication that Blicero will use his political power to internally subvert or queer hegemonic power structures. In part, Bersani anticipates the dangers of Halberstam’s approach when he warns that the opposition between subjectivity and institutional structures of power “can be broken down only if we renounce the comforting (if also dangerous) faith in locatable identities” (“Pynchon, Paranoia” 109). Blicero’s narrative further exposes the limits of Halberstam’s antisocial politics: if the queer subject is not willing to entirely oppose (heteronormative) political power, then their politics remain in perpetual danger of being repurposed by hegemonic institutions. Indeed, by failing to dismantle the system in its entirety, it would seem that Halberstam’s theories on queer failure are in danger of failing themselves. Blicero’s scattering across the elite reveals the hazards of locatable identities; his desire for power binds him to the system that his queer s/m desires could have destroyed.

Blicero acts out sinthomosexuality to its limit, but in a context that—ironically—shores up the heteronormative future of America. Since his threatening queerness only ever disrupted Nazi politics, thus weakening one of America’s wartime enemies, Blicero’s sinthomosexuality can be repurposed for American hegemony. Blicero is subsumed by institutions of power, which appropriate his embrace of the death drive and
translate his *sinthomosexual* sexuality into the political machinations of the future that are oriented around apocalyptic weapons. Though his queerness dismantles heteronormative politics and blocks the reproduction of heteronormative values by killing the Child (Gottfried), the effects of Blicero’s subversion are limited to Aryan (heteronormative) politics. Thus his actions fail to demolish American heteronormative futurism and his *sinthomosexual* sexuality unintentionally strengthens and protects the future of American politics. By killing Gottfried—the Child that signifies Aryan futurism—Blicero cathects his *sinthomosexual* death drive onto the rocket explosion. When the climax of his jouissance is reached Blicero’s own *sinthomosexual* drives are extinguished, his disruptive and erotic potential spent. Once a stigmatized Other—homosexual, pervert, embodiment of the death drive—Blicero’s subversive power is terminated.

**The Gender-Queer Rocket**

Though rockets are not, in our collective cultural imagination, inherently linked to s/m practice, the rocket is the central symbol of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. However, the seemingly omnipresent and endlessly changing rocket is frequently juxtaposed with non-normative sexual practice in the text. As I have articulated throughout my project, it is precisely the rocket’s threat to ontological stability that allows for a reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* in which all sexual practice is linked to death. By coupling the new, WWII rocket technology with sexuality, the postmodern culture projected in the text becomes a culture permeated by queered sexual practice.\(^{46}\) The rocket is figured as a sexual,

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\(^{46}\) Similarly, Sally E. Parry argues that the war in *Gravity’s Rainbow* liberates Jessica Swanlake who is “released from her hum-drum middle class existence…to become an individual and experience freedom and passion. But with the end of the war and the return of the status quo, she reverts to her prewar self, one who does what she is expected to do: marry, have children and support Them, the powers (whoever They are) that be” (105). Parry cites Jessica’s underlying desire for safety, along with her investment in a better post-war future, as the reason for her return to the heteronormative family structure. While perhaps the War’s liberating, or queering, effects on gender and sexuality are not lasting for all characters in the novel,
fetishized object, the threat of which establishes a dialectic between violence/death and sex/pleasure, a collapsing of privileged binaries that underlies the entire narrative. Even within heterosexual intercourse, the eroticization of the rocket disrupts normative narratives. Specifically, the mysterious link between Slothrop’s sexual conquests and the distribution of rocket explosions subverts traditional, linear narratives. As I noted in Section IV, Slothrop has a map with a star for every girl he has had sex with; “the stars fall in a Poisson distribution, just like the rocket strikes...girl-stars and rocket-strike circles” match, “helpfully Slothrop has dated most of his stars. A star always comes before its corresponding rocket strike” (Pynchon 87, ellipses mine, emphasis his). Like the rockets themselves, which fall so quickly that they can only be heard after the crash, Slothrop’s sexual practice resists the traditional narrative reliance on cause-and-effect. This disruption makes both the rockets and Slothrop’s body instruments of queer temporality, both modeling how s/m is “a deployment of bodily sensations through which the individual subject’s normative timing is disaggregated and denaturalized” (Freeman 137, emphasis hers). Furthermore, the rocket’s fate—which will always be its own destruction—corresponds with a disruptive and destructive jouissance, a pleasure that embraces the death drive. The rocket becomes the emblematic manifestation of the Eros/Thanatos dialectic that undergirds all s/m practice.

Parry’s article does support my claim that all sexuality has become queered to some degree within the scope of time depicted in Pynchon’s narrative.

47 Just as an example of how Hassan’s theories could be used to support my reading, I turn to the rocket—a symbol that hovers over the entire novel. He argues that through postmodernist fiction “moves a vast will to unmaking, affecting the body politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche—the entire realm of discourse in the West” (92). Not only is the rocket a polymorphous object, but it becomes the sign of randomness, of perversion. Like the stigmatized sexual practice/queer jouissance it is associated with, the rocket’s destructive power can be appropriated and used in unintended ways. Ultimately, the rocket effects the unmaking of the body politic, it resists traditional cognitive processes, and it unmakes Gottfried’s erotic body.
While the rocket is often equated with a phallus and male sexuality, it is frequently discussed in terms of male-male intercourse. For instance, Enzian—Blicero’s former lover—recalls “that love, among these men, once past the simple feel and orgasming of it, had to do with masculine technologies…Beyond simple steel erection, the Rocket was an entire system won, away from the feminine darkness….He was led to believe that by understanding the Rocket, he would come to understand truly his manhood” (Pynchon 329, ellipses mine, emphasis his). The link between the rocket and homosexuality is rearticulated aboard the Anubis when Thanatz caresses a waiter’s buttocks and describes the rocket to Slothrop, saying “Yes, fueled, alive, ready for firing…fifty feet high, trembling…and then the fantastic, virile roar. Your ears nearly burst. Cruel, hard, thrusting into the virgin-blue robes of the sky, my friend. Oh, so phallic” (Pynchon 472, ellipses his). For Thanatz, the rocket is violent, penetrative, and aggressive. By caressing a man while characterizing the rocket as cruel and hard, Thanatz links the firing of rockets with (gay) s/m practice.

In the same episode, the phallic rocket is refigured as a biological penis when Slothrop has sex with Bianca aboard the Anubis. During intercourse, the narrator explains that Slothrop is actually “inside his own cock” (Pynchon 477, italics his). From inside his rocket/penis Slothrop hears “his sperm roaring louder and louder, getting ready to erupt, somewhere below his feet…maroon and evening cuntlight reaches him in a single ray through the opening at the top, refracted through the clear juices flowing up around him” (Pynchon 477, ellipses his). This narrative focalization equates Slothrop’s sexual climax with the launching of a rocket, which in turn, anticipates and parallels Gottfried’s launch in Rocket 00000. The language used to narrate Gottfried’s final moments echoes
Slothrop’s fantasy. While Slothrop feels how “Everything is about to come, come incredibly, and he’s helpless here in this exploding emprise…red flesh echoing…an extraordinary sense of waiting to rise….” (Pynchon 478, ellipses his), Gottfried is also helpless as he waits to rise with the rocket, wondering “when did the roaring stop?” (Pynchon 774). Like Slothrop’s pre-climactic vision of “cuntlight” through the tip of his “rocket;” Gottfried has a similar vision, just prior to reaching the apex of the rocket’s arc: “a Brocken-specter, someone’s, something’s shadow projected from out here in the bright sun and darkening sky” (Pynchon 774, emphasis and ellipses his).

In the “PRE-LAUNCH” subsection of Episode 9, the narrator describes the rocket as “A giant white fly: an erect penis buzzing in white lace, clotted with blood or sperm. Deathlace is the boy’s bridal costume….the 00000 is the womb into which Gottfried returns….They are mated to each other” (Pynchon 765, ellipses mine). The narrative constructs this scene as a marriage between Gottfried and the rocket—simultaneously corrupting the heteronormative institution of marriage and queering the rocket’s gender by likening it to both penis and womb. In a passage ambiguously focalized through Blicero, we read that “…one of these valves, one test-point, one pressure-switch is the right one, the true clitoris, routed directly into the nervous system of the 00000. She should not be a mystery to you, Gottfried. Find the zone of love, lick and kiss…you have time—there are still a few minutes” (Pynchon 765-6, ellipses his). The narrator’s use of the second-person pronoun parallels the content of the “direct-address” in the final section of the novel—recall “There is time, if you need the comfort…” (Pynchon 775,

48 Weisenburger associates the phrase “waiting to rise” with “erwartung,” “German for a sense of anticipation, foreboding” (81). He goes on to explain that Adorno associated “erwartung” with “the enjoyment of psychic pain…[a] reference point for the state of Captain Weissmann’s psyche, as shaped by German expressionism” (81).
ellipses mine)—before the rocket falls. Both of these scenes, heavy with anticipation, rearticulate how “sadomasochism offers up temporal means for reconfiguring the possible…the deviant pause that adds a codicil of pleasure to a legacy of suffering” (Freeman 169). When Gottfried is placed in Rocket 00000, “the victim is lightly dressed, but he feels warm in here. His white stockings stretch nicely from his suspender-tabs….It’s a dim, whitened room. A room for lying in, bridal and open to the pallid spaces of the evening, waiting for whatever will fall on him” (Pynchon 769). Yet again the marriage bed is queered: Gottfried dressed as a nervous bride, anticipating what will come, anticipating the launch that will suspend him in both time and space. Not only do these passages queer the heteronormative institution of marriage—replacing the wife with a young boy, the husband with the phallic rocket—but they also subvert the reproductive function of heteronormative relations. As opposed to a marriage resulting in the production of a Child, Gottfried’s “marriage” to the rocket leads to death. Furthermore, the rocket’s ambiguous “gender” undercuts the biological functions of heteronormative bodies. Gottfried is entombed in an erect penis with a clitoris and a womb, a womb that will give birth to destruction.

Developed as a technology of power and a tool for hegemonic structures to maintain dominance, the rocket ultimately destroys the political logic it was supposed to defend. It signifies a queer death drive that says “we are the advocates of abortion; that the Child as futurity’s emblem must die; that the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past….an insistence on the negativity that pierces the fantasy screen of futurity, shattering narrative temporality with irony’s always explosive force” (Edelman 31). In Blicero’s queer practice the rocket is appropriated as a tool for his s/m, an
indeterminate narrative that simultaneously subverts and supports hegemonic power. The
gender-queer rocket echoes the novel’s postmodernist resistance to meaning, “destined
nonetheless to fly through and not from, the medium of meaning in which they come only
to mean its degeneration….the radical excess…bespeaks a drive that eludes all efforts to
formulate its meaning” (Edelman 135). As the fundamental link between non-normative
sexual practice and death, the gender-queer rocket becomes a technology of pleasure, of
power and subversion, a postmodernist symbol of ontological instability that opens and
closes the novel without ever completing its narrative arc.
SECTION VI

Conclusion:

Queer Postmodernist Practice “…plays at playing” (Pynchon 99, ellipses his)

Throughout my project I have mined Pynchon’s novel for its most marginalized, most condemned, and most ignored moments. I have written whole sections interpreting what other critics have not even spent a paragraph on, content to write it off as a sexual fantasy, a prurient moment punctuating the ineffably dense narrative. Intent on articulating the text’s omnipresent queerness, I build from and position myself against the accumulated mass of Pynchon Criticism. Rare is the critic who takes sexuality in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a primary object of study, those who do tend to focus on male sexuality and—more problematically—those who discuss female sexuality frame it in terms of male pleasure and male sexual knowledge. Many critics replicate the very critique they levy against Pynchon: reducing women to objects.

But how is this possible? How can the very same (postmodern) critics who revel in the indeterminacy of Pynchon’s poetics, his anarchic play with language, and the innumerable potential readings contained within *Gravity’s Rainbow*, how can these critics present such one-dimensional readings of sexuality in the novel? Though early Pynchon critics obviously wrote before the development of queer theory, many of the most problematic articles on sexuality were published in the ’90s—concurrent with the institutionalization of critical theory in the academy and the first real explosion of queer theory. Regardless of the date of publication Pynchon critics generally do not read sexuality in the novel as a subversive force, in spite of—or perhaps because of—the prevalence of non-normative practices. Thus, my queer postmodernist methodology
offers an unprecedented analysis of Pynchon’s text(s), both in my study’s focus and its depth—I put the “s” in parentheses to indicate that a similar methodological approach could be applied to Pynchon’s other texts and to other types of sexuality in *Gravity’s Rainbow*; there is a significant amount of non-s/m sexual practice in the novel that I don’t attend to.

My project opens up an unexamined space within both queer theory and postmodernist criticism. I hesitate to suggest that “I have queered Pynchon;” this phrase seems to indicate that I have uncovered a queerness that the novel remains unconscious of, that my reading fundamentally works against the text itself. More accurately, I articulate a cultural/sexual/political formation that runs through the entire narrative; indeed, by collecting all the scenes of s/m and building my own narrative around them I theorize a sexual politics that is already at work in the text. My investment in s/m and postmodernist narratives manifests in my focus on the minutiae of sexual and textual discursive structures. In articulating the previously unacknowledged similarities between queer and postmodernist theories I help open up both these fields to a new range of texts. Throughout this project I position myself against the prevailing understanding of Pynchon as the avatar of postmodernist fiction, a genre that is frequently assumed to be both white and hetero-masculinst. Not only does this critical positioning necessitate a reevaluation of what constitutes a queer text, it also complicates many assumptions about postmodernist fiction.

Despite relying heavily on Edelman’s theorization of queer negativity, my methodology and choice of primary text reveal some limitations in Edelman’s work. Edelman focuses on relatively canonical texts, consistently positioning himself against
their underlying politics in order to theorize a queer (anti-)politics. Since all those texts ultimately block or neutralize the sinthomosexual’s disruptive power, Edelman reserves the power of queer subversion for himself, articulating a politics that the narratives only hint at or only construct in order to erase. Ironically, the structure of Edelman’s theoretical writing endows him with the very procreative power he polemically decries. Indeed, No Future generates its own theoretical future, subsequent criticism that builds from and/or works against his theories, a future that I am heavily invested in.

I also locate my project within a renewal of s/m theorization in queer theory, particularly theories focused on female sexual practices. This conversation has it roots in, but remains distinct from, the proliferation of discourse on s/m during the 1970s and 1980s feminist pornography debates—alternately labeled pro-/anti-sex or pro-/anti-s/m. Even today, s/m carries a powerful stigma in both the academy and the culture at large. Freeman presents a viable theorization of s/m, intent on articulating how it can become a productive mode of queer expression and politics. Though her work helps destigmatize s/m, her writing belies a critical anxiety that manifests in her uncompromising language and her hyper-focused approach to s/m. In painstaking detail she defines s/m exclusively as means of encountering traumatic pasts, like chattel slavery or the Holocaust. She writes that “however one views S/M, it is inescapably true that the body in sadomasochistic ritual becomes a means of invoking history…in an idiom of pleasure” (Freeman 137, emphasis and ellipses mine). While Freeman sustains her argument throughout the text, her theory denies the political and cultural messiness of s/m both in textual representations of s/m and in terms of embodied practices. Obviously, no single theory or text can encompass the boundless gamut of s/m practices. However, Freeman’s
commitment to s/m’s historicisms forecloses equally productive and nuanced approaches to s/m, such as: the range in contemporary technologies and accouterment for s/m, the diversity of practitioners and their motivations, the types and effects of different s/m relationships (i.e. a 24/7 s/m lifestyle, the casual kinkster, those who limit s/m play to their homes, those whose access to s/m practice is limited to internet pornography), how public s/m complicates its potential for political productivity (including, but not limited to: leather bars, heterosexual “alternative lifestyle” clubs, educational performances like those at the Folsom Street Fair, or even practices that are not obviously sexual like wearing a choker style necklace)—the list goes on and on. While I certainly spent time problematizing Freeman’s work, I do not mean to invalidate it. Rather, I distance my own theorization of s/m from historically-inflected practices in order to generate a concurrent, but separate, queer understanding of s/m that is primarily focused on its textuality. In my own methodological approach, I strive to articulate the specificity of each reading through language that acknowledges a range of possible—even competing—interpretations.

The postmodernist commitment to linguistic indeterminacy and its insistence on narrative and discursive instability facilitates this nuanced theoretical approach to s/m. The potential of my queer postmodernist methodology is focalized in Section IV, where my reading of Margherita’s s/m works against and complicates almost all the other instances of s/m in the text. There I articulate s/m’s potential for political productivity through its reliance on narrative techniques that are, at root, postmodernist. Furthermore, my focus on pleasure as the primary motivation for her s/m practice opens up new ways of understanding the hazards and the potential of s/m for a queer politics.
Simply put, this project began with one hypothesis: that Pynchon’s postmodernist language play could be equated with his depiction of s/m games. I set out to articulate how these two seemingly disparate practices were really both expressions of postmodern culture. Each section of my thesis contributes to a reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* in which postmodernist literature is a textualization of queer s/m practice. I turn to Pynchon’s own words to help clarify this point. Pynchon offers a rare glimpse into his personal history and his development as a writer in the Introduction to *Slow Learner* (1984). In reference to “The Bomb,” Pynchon writes, “I think we all have tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us, from thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it” (xxix). By articulating how fiction is a response to our helplessness (e.g. ontological instability), Pynchon anticipates McHale’s “ontological dominant”—which theorizes how postmodernist fiction expresses ontological instability through its playful and chaotic use of language.

Building on this, I posit that these postmodernist narrative and discursive tendencies are repeated through queer practice in the text—which internalizes the Eros/Thanatos dialectic at work in postmodern culture by eroticizing power relations. In my thesis, I repeatedly emphasize s/m’s reliance on narrative, and more importantly, I theorize s/m as a queer postmodernist narrative. Again, I find a clarification in Pynchon’s own words,

> the level of danger has continued to grow. There was never anything subliminal about [The Bomb], then or now. Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the
power to do something about it, most of the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. (Slow Learner xxix)

Pynchon, having already argued that fiction, in a destabilized postmodern world, is a mode of expressing terror, goes on to describe (postmodern) power relations. Through my queer postmodernist methodology I articulate how the s/m practitioner is analogous to the postmodernist author: 49 both construct fictional narratives that deconstruct binaries, both juxtapose and intermingle high and low culture; both internalize the same ontological indeterminacy; both are meditations on the nature of postmodern power; both are citational—even when s/m does not allude to history it still incorporates and makes use of received language/dialogues. S/m narratives primarily differentiate themselves from postmodernist narratives in that the pleasure of s/m play is accessed through and felt within embodied as opposed to textual practice. However, this difference becomes immaterial when focusing on the depiction of s/m narratives within Pynchon’s postmodernist text. I could go on, but I hope that in the body of my thesis I have already articulated other similarities between queer sexual and textual practices; more importantly, I hope that others will pick up where I left off and continue to theorize the relation between queer and postmodernist practices in ways that complicate my own work.

49 At least in Gravity’s Rainbow, though I suspect that one could make similar arguments for other (postmodernist) texts.
Works Cited


*Seven Beauties [Pasqualino Settebellezze]*. Dir. Lina Wertmuller. Fox Lorber Home Video, 1998. DVD.
