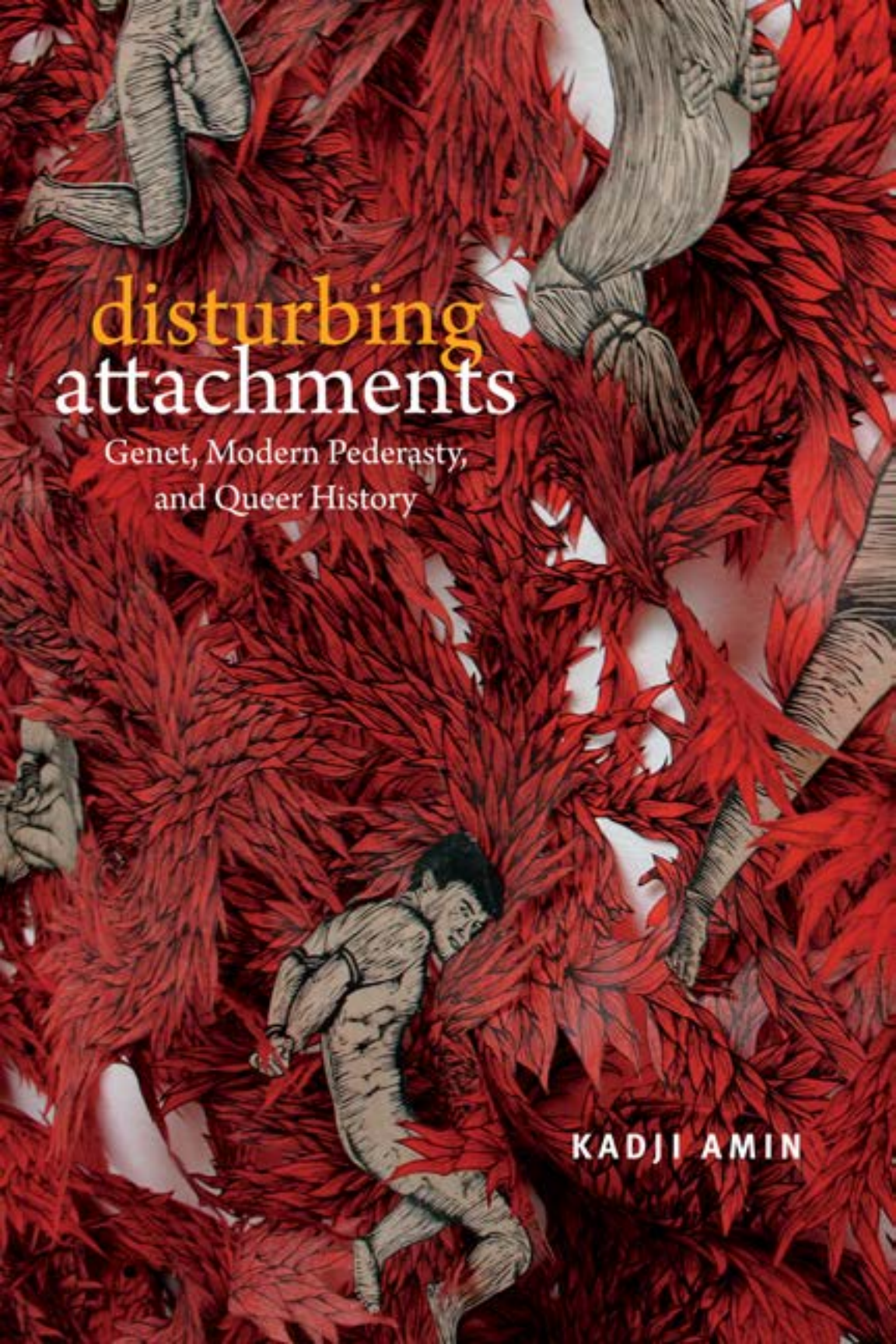
disturbing
attachments
Genet, Modern Pederasty,
and Queer History
KADJI AMIN

# disturbing attachments


*A series edited by*
*Lauren Berlant and*
*Lee Edelman*

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## Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History

KADJI AMIN

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# contents

Solange: S'aimer dans le dégoût,
ce n'est pas s'aimer.

Claire: C'est trop s'aimer.

Solange: To love each other in
disgust isn't love.

Claire: It's too much love.

—Jean Genet, *The Maids*

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# introduction

A truck with a spray-painted "Genet" tag in mauve is spotted in New York City, a queer British pop-punk duo takes the name "Jean Genet" (2004), the U.S. artist David Woynarowitz produces a lithograph in which angels carry weapons, Jesus Christ is shooting up, and a haloed Genet occupies the foreground (1978–79), the Canadian band CocoRosie writes a song narrating Genet's mythic life story with, as its melancholy chorus, "Oh those beautiful boyz / pimps and queens and criminal queers / Oh those beautiful boyz / tattoos of ships and tattoos of tears" (2004), a queer/transgender couple, one of them a sex worker, gets tattoos representing the street queen Divine and her pimp Darling from Genet's 1946 novel *Our Lady of the Flowers* to commemorate their love (2009).[1] These anecdotes are suggestive not only of French author and activist Jean Genet's (1910–86) contemporary subcultural iconicity,[2] but also of the impassioned identification he inspires in many of his queer admirers. Genet is capable of sparking such passionate attachment because he resonates, more than any other canonical queer author from the pre-gay liberation past, with contemporary queer sensibilities attuned to a defiant nonnormativity. Genet, after all, was not only sexually queer; he was also a criminal, hated France, and therefore, all nationalisms, famously "chose" abjection, taking up the position of the social pariah by begging, tramping, and prostituting himself, and allied himself, late in life, with the revolutionary anticolonial movements of the Black Panthers and the Palestinian Liber-

ation Organization (PLO). From the vantage point of a "homonationalist"[3] present in which gays and lesbians, as avatars of sexual modernity, have become assets to liberal states, Genet seems to exemplify a prior historical formation of queerness as politically potent outsiderhood. *Genet embodies the queer romance of the alternative.*

Queers are not the first to have found, in Genet, the quintessential romantic outlaw. Indeed, "outlaw" and "antihero" were performances he first honed as a scrappy thief trying to get out of prison and into the French literary canon. In 1943, the psychiatrist Dr. Henri Claude was charged with determining the extent of Genet's responsibility for stealing a rare edition of Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*. Having already undergone numerous convictions for theft, Genet was eligible for life in prison if sentenced in excess of three months. On realizing that Claude idolized Romantic poets, Genet strove to embody his fantasies, posing as an amoral "noble savage" and vagabond poet in search of "absolute freedom."[4] Claude responded by pronouncing him "morally mad" but not insane. This diagnosis attenuated his responsibility for his crime without, for that matter, mandating institutionalization in an asylum for the criminally insane. As a result, Genet was sentenced to exactly three months in prison, one day shy of what would have meant a life conviction.

Performing outsiderhood was Genet's way into the exclusive world of French letters. Introduced to Parisian high society as a criminal-poet, Genet pilfered his hosts' valuables as a parlor trick to thrill the *haute bourgeoisie*.[5] The fascination he exerted on Jean-Paul Sartre was so great that the latter prematurely canonized him. The first volume of Genet's complete works, published in 1952 when he was still a relatively young author, was composed not of his own writing but of Sartre's mammoth existentialist biography of him, *Saint Genet: An Actor and a Martyr* (*Saint Genet: Comédien et martyre*). In it, Sartre details Genet's heroic journey from dependence and inauthenticity—as a foster child, thief, prisoner, and "passive" homosexual—to existential freedom as an author. In the process, he at once redeems Genet of his outsider past and resuscitates that past as the insignia of all that he has overcome.

Like many minoritarian subjects, Genet had to learn to perform other people's exotic fantasies about him in order to achieve recognition and success. Rather than stripping away the mask, Genet's writing sets the stage for his live performances. His texts give us, as their most fascinating spectacle, Genet "himself," frozen in a series of obscene postures designed to solicit the reader's hatred, pity, and disgust. This is Genet, fantasizing that he is orally tunneling into his dead lover, Jean Decarnin, via the latter's asshole, Genet,

luring gay men with the promise of sex only to beat and rob them, Genet, ogling the strong thighs of policemen violently repressing protests at the 1968 U.S. Democratic convention.[6] This, Leo Bersani tells us, is the Genet we know best, "willfully offering transgressive spectacles to others, making himself into a gaudy performer of their most lurid views of him."[7] By deliberately seeking to coincide with the positions of abjection and evil, positions that, he repeatedly assures us, are the consequence of his pederasty, Genet forces the reader to take up extreme positions. Do we critique and reject him, given his efforts to spoil every political program and ethical ideal? To do so would be to inscribe ourselves within a tradition of scandalized critics, humorless defenders of the bastion of French letters. The only other option appears to be to follow in Sartre's footsteps, sanctifying him *despite* and *because of* the morally abhorrent, socially marginal experience he represents.

Genet's writing predicts this bifurcated reception. The moral universe of his literary work is one of extreme polarization, emblematized by "the eternal couple of the criminal and the saint."[8] Informed at once by a Catholic mysticism and a modernist ethic of transvaluation, it is a universe in which moral poles dizzyingly invert. The high are brought low, guillotined murderers become saints, and sexual humiliation is transfigured into a sign of election. Writing during a moment in which transgression, marginality, and the destruction of bourgeois social values has been claimed as the tenets of high modernism, Genet issues a dare: *"Canonize me. I'm so bad I'm good."*[9] Literary critics have enthusiastically responded, awarding Genet his paradoxical position as "an officially sanctioned representative of marginality within French literature."[10]

Just when he has forced the reader into an extreme position of idolization or disgust, however, Genet deflates and renders risible his demons and saints, exposing his moral universe of good and evil, his erotic universe of phallic power and its worshippers, as a sham. This, after all, is the author who refused to take seriously the role of author, forging his own manuscripts for money, telling an interviewer that he might be "an impostor who never wrote any books," and famously declaring that poetry was the art "of using shit and making you eat it."[11] Genet is playing with us, soliciting our hatred, daring us to invert it into idolatry, then, once his status is secure, assuring us that he never meant a word he said. This play is part of his seduction.

Genet's seduction routine worked for Sartre; it worked for modernist literary critics; and it is working for a new generation of queer readers. If the latter is the case, it is because Genet's moral universe and games of seduction are uncannily familiar within queer culture. Like Genet in his role as seductive

performer, queer sensibilities[12] *polarize*—into transgressive versus normative, utopian versus antisocial;[13] they *invert*—the badder, the better and more radically queer; and they aggressively and lovingly *deflate* their own ideals. Queer Studies' paradoxical position as an institutionalized site for the study of sexual and social marginality in the academy rhymes with Genet's position in the literary canon. This placement requires of queer scholars some of the *same* seduction routines—*"What we study is so bad it's good"*—that Genet was so adept at performing. Such parallels explain why Genet, more so than any other canonized queer pre-gay liberation author, extends such a seductive mirror to contemporary queers.

Rather than luxuriate in the narcissism of idealized reflections, *Disturbing Attachments* exploits Genet's queer exemplarity as a diagnostic of Queer Studies. The book's method is to investigate what his exemplarity obscures by homing in on the mismatches between Genet's historical attachments and those of contemporary scholarship. However seductive, polarization and idealization distort and omit more than they reveal. Specifically, I will argue that they cannot adequately account for the textures of racial, historical, and geographical difference—precisely those differences marginalized across the history of queer inquiry. *Disturbing Attachments* wagers, nevertheless, that a Queer Studies without idealization would not be Queer Studies at all. Rather than presuming the possibility of a neutral objectivity within this field (and rather than pretending that my claiming of Genet will be the definitive or true one), I explore how, *in the moment of an ideal's deflation*, disturbing attachments—to race, history, and geopolitics—may be revealed.

## THE IDEALIZING ENGINE OF QUEER STUDIES

I arrived at this method as Genet spoiled my own investments in him. Initially, I approached Genet as an ideal object for Queer Studies in its utopian, coalitional mode. As a prisoner, juvenile delinquent, homosexual, and prostitute, he incarnates one understanding of *queer* as a term that brings together a range of forms of social marginality.[14] The political dimension of this understanding has been the hope that, in addition to naming miscellaneous modes of social deviance, *queer* might carve out the space for a coalition politics based not on identity, but on a shared relation of distance from normativity.[15] Again, Genet fulfills this ideal, drawing from his multiple forms of marginalization the affective, erotic, and political energy that powered his transnational radical activism with the German Red Army Faction, the Black Panther Party, and

the PLO. It would have been possible to write a book celebrating Genet as the realization of precisely this queer coalitional project, and indeed, this is the book I originally hoped to write. However, as I set about the painstaking labor of research, I grew increasingly disturbed by aspects of Genet's queer relations that would not fit this utopian narrative. Writing such a book would have meant smoothing over or redeeming, as so many Genet critics do, the centrality of racial fetishism not only to Genet's early novels, but also to his late activism with the Panthers and the Palestinians. It would have meant ignoring, as have so many critics, the structuration of Genet's relations by the politically and historically "backward" form of age-differentiated pederasty, with its constitutive inegalitarianism and fraught colonial history. Disaffected and uneasy with Genet, I came very close to abandoning him in the hopes of writing a more utopian book on *truly* marginalized and alternative queer socialities. I eventually realized that the failure was not, as I initially thought, Genet's alone. Granted, Genet is well suited to force such a revelation by taking up extreme positions that he cannot fully inhabit, then turning around and puncturing them. But even if I had chosen a more unambiguously politically "good" figure or group—one better positioned to contest the multiple modes of power that go by the names of colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchal heteronormativity—I would have had to contend with other complicities, other failures, though these may have been easier than Genet's to redeem or to ignore.

Avery Gordon's reflections on how those forms of politicized scholarship that are, in theory, *the most concerned* with denigrated forms of subjectivity so often sacrifice "complex personhood" might be addressed, with particular pertinence, to work in Queer Studies. Gordon reflects:

> Even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents. It has always baffled me why those most interested in understanding and changing the barbaric domination that characterizes our modernity often—not always—withhold from the very people they are most concerned with the right to complex personhood.[16]

Insofar as Queer Studies' institutionalization, the measure of its mettle as a field, has depended on its capacity to *extract theoretical and political value* from the most transgressive objects of study, complex personhood—the ways in which we are all, even the "queerest" or most subaltern among us, both good

and bad subjects, imperfect, contradictory, and "ordinary"—risks being the fallout of the field's institutional norms.[17] The failure of my object of study to behave in the ways that I hoped he would, his failure to consistently and routinely secrete political value was, I eventually concluded, not his alone. It was a failure endemic to the project of revalorizing deviance.

Genet's failures lay bare a methodological dilemma within queer scholarship as well as politicized criticism as a whole: how to counter the pathologization of denigrated groups without reacting by idealizing them. In Western modernity, sexual and racialized deviance has been pathologized, violently policed, and subjected to normalizing discipline in prisons, hospitals, and schools. As a result, the cultures, knowledges, and life-worlds of denigrated groups have been stigmatized and rendered monstrously unintelligible. A powerful tendency within scholarship has been to respond to this damaging legacy of shame and stigma by loudly idealizing the alternatives that emerge from deviance. The result has been a strain of romantic antinomianism in queer culture and scholarship.[18] Our sex, because outlawed, is hotter; our love, because uninstitutionalized, is truer; our families, because freely chosen, are uniquely supportive and antihierarchical; our political movements, because unbound by narrow social identities, are coalitional and capable of fighting oppression on all fronts. In short, because we are forced to invent relations outside of tired old blueprints, our socialities are not only better, more authentic, and more pleasurable; they also actualize real-life alternatives to existing relations of oppression. This idealism, which neatly inverts the historical denigration of queer bonds, has been one of the powerful redemptive impulses of Queer Studies.[19]

Queer Studies in this redemptive mode has seized the resources of scholarship for the project of stressing the viability, the political potency, and the world-building potential of queer life-worlds violently represented as unintelligible in the hope of enlarging the capacity for imagining and practicing alternatives in the present. Such a project, however laudable, puts an idealizing strain on the relationship between scholarship and culture. One refrain in queer scholarship is that theory lags behind culture.[20] What scholars mean by this assertion is that queer cultures abundantly generate alternative imaginaries and political potentialities that it is the theorist's humble work to recognize, document, and translate into the idiom of scholarship. Such faith orients scholars to the circular project of locating queer possibility, positioned as what theory both wants and lacks, in the social.[21] This places a great burden on queer social forms. *What happens when culture fails the expectations with which theory ap-*

*proaches it?* The narrator of Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* (*Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*) (1943) explains to the hetero-bourgeois reader, "Our domestic life and the laws of our Homes do not resemble your Homes." The reason, however, is not that queer households are more loving, ethical, and sex positive, but that "we love each other without love."[22] This simultaneously idealizing *and* deidealizing assertion prefaces the announcement of the pimp Darling's sudden and remorseless decision to abandon the street queen, Divine, who has been lovingly supporting him by prostituting herself. Queer intimacies, taxed with the burdens of pathologization, criminalization, and social abjection and with the precarity and psychic duress these conditions engender, are as likely to produce abuse, exploitation, and the renunciation of care as more loving, sexually liberated, and just alternatives to heteronormative social forms.

The Darling/Divine example—rooted in an early twentieth-century subculture of street queens, pimps, and petty criminals—suggests that *some* queer cultures may be more amenable to idealization and, thus, more translatable into queer theory than others. We might get a sense of which by examining the ethics of queer culture outlined in Michael Warner's "Normal and Normaller" (1999). At the high point in the essay, Warner lists twelve points, each of which reinforces the others in what amounts to a strong case for queer culture as the site for a theoretical and political production of thought that affirms the value of "nonstandard" intimacies and alternative sexualities while leveling a cogent critique of the hierarchies of value that would denigrate them.[23] This essay demonstrates that, in 1999, it is still possible to position queer theory as founded on an articulable list of basic ethical values expressed consistently by an identifiably queer political culture that extends, in a heartening show of historical continuity, from gay liberation through AIDS activism and into the present. To its credit, the essay frankly exposes the grounding of its halcyon unity of queer theory, culture, and politics in a nongeneralizable post-Stonewall U.S. historical context. The epistemological foundation of queer theory on a politicized post-Stonewall gay, lesbian, and/or queer culture continues to delimit the terms under which nonnormative social formations in other historical moments and geopolitical areas might enter the purview of queer scholarship (see the epilogue).

At this juncture, however, the historical continuity of queer culture and its seamless expression in queer theory can no longer be taken for granted. Queer of color critique, transnational, and area studies scholarship have critically interrogated *which* versions of queer culture, *which* histories may serve as not only the object but also the very epistemological foundation of queer theori-

zation.[24] Yet even as the social formations claimable as queer are multiplied, the fundamental problem of idealization persists and, indeed, grows ever more acute. For if the subjects of queer culture are no longer out-and-proud gay and lesbian activists fighting to destigmatize and diversify sexual practices and intimate forms, but rather nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants forced to live in residentially segregated, crowded, and insalubrious conditions,[25] refugees and undocumented migrants struggling under conditions of debility and "slow death," and drug addicts,[26] then to what extent can scholars ethically celebrate the alternatives they innovate? This dilemma is a function not only of focusing on ever more marginalized populations with fewer resources for collective and self reinvention, but also, in some cases, of accounting for prepolitical forms of agency that have not yet and might never articulate a coherent ethical and political platform. Queer Studies has become the name of an effort to amplify the ethics, politics, and inventiveness of marginalized cultures. In setting it this task, however, we risk subscribing to a romance of the alternative whereby even as we refuse to silence the transgressive aspects of marginalized cultures in the name of respectability or assimilation, we may be tempted to idealize their political and cultural effects.

Queer Studies in the present inherits the problem of the persistent idealization of queer culture, however that culture is defined. But what exactly is idealization? We might look back to the 1990s debate about lesbian butch/femme for a relevant anatomization of idealization's operations. In her afterword to *Butch/Femme*, a 1998 volume edited by Sally Munt, Judith Butler notes that the desire to claim lesbian butch/femme sex and gender practices as irreducible to heteronormativity too often leads to the idealization and polarization of each term. She defines idealization as a *purification* of one's object that relies on the *repudiation* of its relationship to normative social forms. Both operations are driven by the "oblique work of shame," which responds to the denigration of the queer object, its status as a failed copy, with an effort to redeem it by disavowing its bedevilment by normativity.[27] Idealization, I would add, tends to be ahistorical, since history, in the Foucauldian sense, is nothing if not the strategic mobility of shifting relational networks within which no one entity can occupy the position of resistance for very long.[28] The fact that U.S. butch/femme lesbian culture is no longer the object of queer theoretical idealization, as it was in the 1990s, should alert us to the ways in which idealization binds us to the circular process, which Robyn Wiegman analyzes in *Object Lessons*, of idealization, disappointment, and the search for a new object thought to be better able to fulfill the aspirations of the field.

What I find most energizing about Queer Studies is that it provides a site within the academy for theoretically informed and nonpathologizing work on deviant sexuality and sociality. However, this focus on social deviance cannot, ultimately, survive the turn to more richly situated queer cultures without checking the field's impulse of idealization. As it becomes more diversified and responsive to its objects of study, Queer Studies stands positioned to offer more textured accounts of the distinct cultural and historical modalities of deviance, its precise relation to multiple forms of power, and the (un)ethical and (a)political visions it fosters. To do so, however, means navigating the contradictions between deviance, with its complex and variable politics, and the idealized polarities that often go by the name of *queer*.

### THE HEURISTIC OF DEIDEALIZATION

Genet is well positioned to illuminate the methodological dilemmas at the heart of Queer Studies specifically and left criticism in general. As a paradigmatic figure for the romance of the alternative, Genet virtually *demands* idealization as a saint or antihero, adeptly setting the trap that criticism will fall into. Eventually, however, he spoils every ideal. When we want to claim him as a precursor for today's queer and transgender prison abolition movement, he insists that the penal colony of Mettray was a "paradise," when we want to celebrate his transnational coalitions with the Panthers and the Palestinians, he confesses that a sexual desire for Arab and black men drew him toward these movements, and when we want to honor his queer bonds, we are confronted with their pederastic inegalitarianism. Genet has the virtue of making critics feel uneasy about the ideals we make him represent.

The experience of *unease* tends to lead to a limited and rather defensive range of scholarly strategies. When a "promising" object fails to deliver, scholars too often compensate by switching gears from idealization to critique, flaying the object for its failure to be sufficiently transgressive or consistently radical. If this occurs early on in a research project, it can initiate the wholesale abandonment of the object that has failed to live up to its promise. Otherwise, we might either sidestep the source of unease, the better to celebrate the object's truly radical aspects, or use it to hone the ego-enhancing aggression of critique, thereby shoring up the critic's position of mastery and political unassailability. Genet taught me that politicized scholarship needs to cultivate a wider set of methods and tactics with which to negotiate what disturbs and disappoints and a wider range of scholarly moods than utopian hope,

on the one hand, and critique, on the other. Scholars might *inhabit unease*, rather than seeking to quickly rid themselves of it to restore the mastery of the critic, the unassailability of her politics, and the legitimacy of her trained field expectations.

The experience of unease, *Disturbing Attachments* proposes, can serve as a generative heuristic for politicized scholarship. It might herald not only something heroically counterhegemonic that ruptures the rationalities of the present, but also a shape of the alternative that rubs against the grain of trained scholarly expectations. It might reveal that field dispositions that sanction some objects of study while rendering others illegible and ignored are neither neutral nor inherently just; rather, they reflect the field's historical inheritance. *Disturbing Attachments* responds to the crisis of Genet's spoilage of the ideal of queer sociality by centering moments when nonnormative attachments and uninstitutionalized relations from the queer past disturb not only the rationality of the gay/lesbian liberal present, but also the field habitus of Queer Studies itself.[29] Its paradigmatic disturbing attachment is *modern pederasty*—an age-structured male same-sex form, practiced by Genet and many others, that, despite its commonality, has been undertheorized within queer scholarship. The problem of pederasty is its inegalitarianism—its impolite and impolitic admission that it gets off on power, including but not limited to that most righteously reproved form of power between an adult and a minor.

Since objects, such as modern pederasty, that inspire scholarly nausea and unease will not further all of the field's aspirations (this is precisely why they cause unease) and I am arguing that we should not be so quick to critique them, they require another scholarly mood, one I term *deidealization*. *Disturbing Attachments* contends that deidealization is the condition of taking deviance, nonnormativity, and minoritarian cultures seriously in scholarship. Deidealization deexceptionalizes queerness in order to analyze queer possibility as inextricable from relations of power, queer deviance as intertwined with normativity, and queer alternatives as not necessarily just alternatives. In centering deidealization, I draw inspiration from another queer tradition, one Genet again exemplifies—that of living with damage in a damaged world. For if queers have become, by necessity, adept at imagining unlikely utopias "somewhere over the rainbow," we have also honed the skill of acerbically puncturing one another's claims to mastery, of making art out of the darkest and most traumatic aspects of queer experience, and of eroticizing not only the successes but also the inadequacies of failed genders and unconventional embodiments. My thinking on deidealization is ethically and tonally inspired

by a body of Queer and Critical Race Studies work by scholars such as Sharon Holland, Heather Love, Antonio Viegas, and Darieck Scott that embraces irreparability.[30] Nevertheless, as I argue in chapter 3, negativity can be idealized as well. While reparation, a term that originates in Eve Sedgwick's reading of Melanie Klein, is often glossed in queer scholarship as the optimistic will to repair and ameliorate a damaged world, I position deidealization within an expanded understanding of reparation that stays close to the latter's origin in the "depressive" position.[31] Deidealization is not the wholesale destruction of cherished ideals, but a form of the reparative that acknowledges messiness and damage, refuses the repudiating operations of idealization, and acknowledges the ways in which complicity is sometimes necessary for survival. It names a form of queer inquiry, which I understand to be already under way, that offers a less binary, less repudiating account of the constitutive entanglement of queer and deviant cultures within a range of modes of social power. It offers an interdisciplinary means to connect scholarship more affiliated with queer theory to empirical and area studies scholarship on sexuality that has tended to be marginalized within Queer Studies, in part because it rarely follows into the terrain of idealization and utopianism promoted by queer humanities scholarship.[32]

Deidealization may not immediately enable a muscular and decisive politics, but it does have consequences for politicized thought. On the most basic level, it calls for an acknowledgment of the "complex personhood" of queer, racialized, and subaltern persons too often assigned the psychically flat role of righting the ills of an unjust social order and denied the right to be damaged, psychically complex, or merely otherwise occupied. Deidealization does, however, require scholars to acknowledge a break between scholarly and political practice. Whereas politicized fields of scholarship too often seek to make scholarship the scene of political practice by critiquing all that is bad and idealizing all that might be good, deidealization acknowledges that the politics of scholarship are only a small part, rather than the full realization, of political activism in a complex world.

## THE DIAGNOSTIC OF ATTACHMENT

Idealization is, in itself, a mode of often impassioned attachment. It tends, however, to preempt a range of other attachments—to objects that defy idealization, as well as to complex conditions that complicate moral polarities, such as history, racialization, and geography. By deidealizing Genet's queer

relations, *Disturbing Attachments* foregrounds their structuration by histories of race, colonialism, crime, and biopolitics. Genet charts a surprise course through queer history, leaping from the criminal and male prostitute subcultures of the 1920s and 1930s directly to the Third World liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s while skipping over the familiar landmarks of gay identity and community formation—homophile organizations, the gay liberation movement, and the building of gay urban business districts. I argue that a pederastic sexuality formed in Third Republic French prisons is at the origin of Genet's passionate cross-racial and transnational activism with the Black Panther Party and the PLO during the moment of revolutionary decolonization. Animated by eroticized differentials of age, sexuality, and sometimes race, pederasty is among a series of problematic and outmoded queer attachments *Disturbing Attachments* uses to deidealize and historicize queer theory.

Genet offers the opportunity to study queer attachments during a moment, which chapter 1 identifies as that of *pederastic modernity*, in which they were *constituted by* and *experientially inseparable from* criminalization, colonial histories of racialization, and eroticized differentials of age and power. Rather than seeking sex, relationships, community, and political solidarity with "other" gay men, Genet actually made a show of disdaining them, bragging, for instance, about luring them with the promise of sex or prostitution only to beat and rob them in his youth.[33] A queer erotics *did*, nevertheless, propel Genet's political affinities and imagined belongings—particularly with French prisoners, decolonizing Arabs, and black Americans. One sense of *queer*, championed by Eve Sedgwick, is of a transitive and transversal *movement athwart or across*.[34] Genet's attractions illuminate queer movements and impulses across social categories that will increasingly be erased by the identity-based notion of political belonging that the gay rights movement, in its bid for liberal inclusion, will use with some success from the late 1970s onward to redefine the imaginable vectors of queer attachment. Perversely elaborated from within *multiple* regimes of power, these queer erotics, relations, and affinities would be *made retrograde* during the rights-based gay and lesbian movement of the 1970s and 1980s, so that an identity and political constituency based exclusively on "the one fact of privately experienced and conducted sexual desire and practice" could emerge by separating itself from other, less easily privatized, forms of social difference, and, therefore, from alternative vectors that might otherwise organize belonging, identity, and desire.[35] By focusing on the transversal attachments of pederastic modernity, this book interrogates the separations between contemporary categories of social difference, including race, nation-

ality, and sexuality. At the same time, it works against the scholarly tendency to idealize movements across categories by attending to the political and ethical trouble they often foment.

*Disturbing Attachments* deidealizes Genet's transversal movements by foregrounding their animation by unsavory and outdated modes of attachment, including pederastic kinship, racial fetishism, nostalgia for prison, and fantasies of queer terrorism. I understand *attachment* as a diagnostic that looks *beneath* relation to the affective and imaginary processes of identification, attraction, and belonging that structure and bind any given relation. As Lauren Berlant proposes, "Attachment is a *structure* of relationality. But the experience of affect and emotion that attaches to those relations is as extremely varied as the contexts of life in which they emerge."[36] Attachment's analytical purchase inheres in its capacity to mark all that is passive, needy, historically overdetermined, compulsive, phantasmatic, and nonvolitional about interpersonal relations. While, in some strains of Queer Studies, the injunction that queer collectivities, kinship, coalitions, and counterpublics operate as a utopian model of more just, egalitarian, and caring social forms implicitly poses queer relations as a practice of justice, the analytic of attachment critically interrogates the unstated assumption that a heroic and even ascetic agency animates queer relations—that is, that autonomous queer subjects can and do choose to participate in just ways of relating and to refrain from dominating, racist, and coercive ones. The reliance of certain models of queer relation on such assumptions of autonomous choice minimizes the nonrational, socially constituted, and historically contingent aspects of queer subjectivity, as well the ways in which feelings of attraction, belonging, identification, and affinity prove resistant to conscious manipulation. *Disturbing Attachments* seeks to move beyond both the injunction that queer relations be *exceptional*—exceptionally just, oppositional, and distant from heterosexual and homonationalist modes of belonging—and the model of autonomous choice that undergirds this injunction by using a focus on attachment to discern how power, race, and history come together to produce queer relations with politically unpredictable effects.[37]

*Disturbing Attachments* investigates what happens when queer attachments fail to live up to the inverted ideals of politicized scholarship. It analyzes forms of transgression with dire material consequences—including imprisonment, social death, and bodily harm—while at the same time investigating how and why they do not necessarily provide the payoff of either utopian world making or progressive politics that scholars might desire. The book proceeds by set-

ting its sights squarely on modes of queer relation that go just beyond the pale of what has been deemed reclaimable by queer theory. Asking why Daddy/Boy, but not intergenerational pederasty, why the black submissive's embrace of "extravagant abjection" in an interracial scene but not the white bottom's racial fetishism, why incarcerated queers' calls for prison abolition, but not their quieter moments of pleasure in incarceration, *Disturbing Attachments* brings unsavory, complicit, and politically problematic modes of queer relation to bear on queer theory.[38] The result is an interrogation of the political imperative of *queer* and the disavowed historical imaginaries that inform the term's contemporary use, and a reorientation of *queer* toward unsavory and historically dated modes of attachment.

The project's focus on the defamiliarizing torque of outmoded queer attachments owes a great debt to the emergent body of work on queer temporality, exemplified by Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1999), Carla Freccero's *Queer/Early/Modern* (2005), J. Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), and Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010). I remain critical, nevertheless, of the ways in which queer time is often idealized. Despite scholars' caveats that time experienced as nonchronological or out of step with national timing is not necessarily resistant, politically progressive, or even nonheteronormative, they most often choose to focus on those moments, pregnant with possibility, when an alignment between queer erotic practices, nonchronological time, and historically distant periods opens alternate possibilities for the flourishing of queer erotic subjects and communities.[39]

I intervene in this conversation by proposing that, before it can explore cross-historical and nonchronological queer desires, queer scholarship on temporality must first historicize the desires encoded within the term *queer* itself. To do this, I develop a new method, *attachment genealogy*—fully explicated in chapter 1 and carried out in each of the chapters—that excavates earlier and more transnational modes of queer attachment to both historicize and expand *queer*'s current affective orientations. Each time an *analytically* queer form of nonnormative sociality clashes with *queer*'s current affective and political connotations, producing the scholarly experience of unease, I perform an attachment genealogy to excavate the attachments that inform *queer*'s aversion to this particular object. In this way, the book explores how disavowed and undertheorized attachments to gay liberalism, gay liberationism, the 1980s–90s

Anglophone discourse of "chosen family," and 1990s queer activism inform *queer*'s attractions and aversions, delimiting what forms of deviance qualify as properly *queer*. By centering relations from the queer past that disturb these recent historical attachments, I seek to expand the affective orientations of Queer Studies. The ambition of this method is to both bring into view and multiply the historical and geographical conditions that shape what is possible, imaginable, and sensible under the sign of *queer*. This enables historical, transnational, and area studies scholarship not only to expand the range of objects that *queer* describes, but also to impact the epistemologies and feeling states of Queer Studies itself.

If Genet's queer exemplarity is my problem, his practice of deidealization is my heuristic. Each chapter is organized around Genet's failure of a contemporary political ideal. In the moment of deidealization, I zero in on one of Genet's disturbing attachments—nostalgia for prison, racialized attraction, pederastic kinship, hatred of the state—and excavate it for the obscured histories and theoretical questions it indexes. The chapters analyze the uneasy tension between these attachment genealogies and pressing issues in contemporary queer politics and scholarship—from prison abolition to homonationalism and pinkwashing to feminist reevalutions of the Black Power movement. By studying "archaic" modes of queer attachment that resist the ideals of the present, *Disturbing Attachments* challenges Queer Studies to avow the history of its affective tendencies and to allow them to be unsettled and transformed by earlier modes of queer feeling.

Queer theory has embraced Michel Foucault's interview "Friendship as a Way of Life" as being about the utopian potential of uninstitutionalized relations to generate reconfigured and antidisciplinary bodies, selves, and collectivities. In the process, it has forgotten that a central topic of this interview, and the blueprint for the uninstitutionalized relations Foucault has in mind, is *pederasty*, not the Ancient Greek kind, but that practiced contemporaneously by French men in the 1980s. Chapter 1, "Attachment Genealogies of Pederastic Modernity," uses the book's method of *attachment genealogy* to examine why, despite its centrality to the history of sexuality, what I term modern pederasty—that is, an age-structured coupling between either adult men, boys of different ages, or an adult man and a youth—remains an inconvenient and embarrassing object for queer inquiry. It closes by theorizing *pederastic modernity* as a generative analytic of the erotic life of modern Western (post) colonial power.

Chapter 2, "Light of a Dead Star: The Nostalgic Modernity of Prison Ped-

erasty," plumbs a politically retrograde feeling—Genet's perverse nostalgia for the silenced pleasures of the pederastic culture of the boys' penal colony of Mettray, in which he was incarcerated as an adolescent. It contrasts Genet's nostalgia with reform-oriented narratives of the boys' penal colonies published during the 1920s–50s, in which pederasty is rejected as a figure for perversely racialized masculine hierarchies incoherent with the French social contract. I critically modify Elizabeth Freeman's concept of erotohistoriography to argue that Genet's 1946 memoir-novel *Miracle of the Rose* theorizes pederastic subject formation as a state of continued woundedness and haunting by a traumatic past that one does not want to repress or forget, for it also contains prohibited pleasures. I argue that *Miracle* models a queer disposition toward the past that would neither turn away in horror and distaste from its commingled affects of pleasure and trauma nor recuperate them through a progress narrative of sexual or penal emancipation, but rather allow their haunting to disturb the certainties of the present.

Chapter 3, "Racial Fetishism, Gay Liberation, and the Temporalities of the Erotic," moves between Genet's writings and two censored journal issues of a French gay liberation group, the FHAR, that position the black or Arab sexual penetrator as the fetishized instrument through which the white bottom may enjoy his temporary release from the burdens of identity via self-shattering. These FHAR texts exemplify the understudied tradition I term *liberationist negativity*, to which psychoanalytic queer negativity, with its celebration of self-shattering and jouissance, is indebted. This chapter deidealizes both psychoanalytic and liberationist negativity by examining how practices of racial fetishism can intensify sexual self-shattering. I seek to shift queer work on desire onto common ground with scholarship on race by theorizing the history and temporality of erotic life.

Chapter 4, "Pederastic Kinship," draws attention to the kinship function of many modern pederastic relationships and theorizes the complex interrelations between pederasty's kinship forms and those of the heterosexual family. I trace the shape of pederastic kinship within Genet's life practices of affiliation, including his habit of introducing himself into the domesticities of heterosexual couples, his practice of financing the heterosexual households of his younger male lovers, and his fantasy of himself as the adopted foundling of the Black Panther Party. By making the argument that Genet's passionate attachment to the Black Panther Party was structured by an erotics of pederastic intergenerationality, this chapter reveals, as Angela Davis wrote regarding Genet's

posthumously published memoir *Prisoner of Love*, "suppressed moments of the history of sixties nationalism" and of sexual politics alike.[40] Ultimately, I position pederastic kinship as a forgotten and uncomfortable attachment genealogy of gay and lesbian "chosen" and nuclear family that restores power and inequality to overly idealized imaginaries of queer kinship.

Through archival research, chapter 5, "Enemies of the State: Terrorism, Violence, and the Affective Politics of Transnational Coalition," reads "The Language of the Wall," Genet's unpublished 1981–82 film manuscript on the imperialist utility of the boys' penal colony of Mettray, and "Violence and Brutality," his almost universally excoriated 1977 newspaper article in support of the German Red Army Faction, as windows into a crucial shift between the 1940s, in which Genet imagines himself a pederast and a criminal, and therefore, an enemy of the French state, and the 1970s, in which he identifies passionately with nonnational revolutionary groups that defend the use of political violence against liberal states. I argue that both texts contribute to homonationalist critique a window into the affective and intellectual labor required to shift affective *landscapes of queer revolt* so that they might sensually apprehend the scale of the global. The chapter's afterword uses the example of Genet's late activism to deidealize the aspirations that animate the utopian queer imaginary of an oppositional antinormative coalition.

I conclude by considering how this book's method of attachment genealogy and heuristic of deidealization might open the way toward an interdisciplinary future, grounded in the specificities of *multiple* racial, geographical, and historical contexts, for the field of Queer Studies. The epilogue, "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories," proposes that the future of the field of Queer Studies—as well as its relevance for scholarship on prior historical periods, racialized populations, and areas outside the United States—requires a reckoning with the field's affective haunting by the inaugural moment of the U.S. 1990s. This reckoning might take the form of a *re*historicization. That is, by engaging *queer*'s *multiple* pasts—including those prior to its explicit deployment as a political and theoretical term in the 1990s—scholars might expand and multiply the affective histories that give *queer* meaning. I frame the book's chapters, which excavate historical attachments that clash with the affective histories of queer theory, as modeling such a version of queer inquiry.

*Disturbing Attachments* contributes to an ongoing conversation in Queer Studies about the history and the futures of *queer* as both method and analytic.

It wagers that when practitioners attend to how *queer* functions in queer scholarship—to what it is taken to mean and expected to do, as well as to what happens when its critical capacities fall short or break down—we can critically and rigorously reorient the field's future. My hope is that this future will be one in which Queer Studies can be more attentive to the opacities of its objects of study, less zealous about the radicalism, reach, and portability of its methods and analytics, and more capacious in acknowledging the historical, racial, and geopolitical multiplicity of feelings and moods that might yet interact with the histories that inform queer inquiry.

# notes

### INTRODUCTION

1 I thank Jade Brooks for the latter anecdote.
2 For a reading of Genet's afterlife as an "authentic queer French 'archetype,'" see Provencher, *Queer French*, 55.
3 On homonationalism, see Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.
4 Stewart and McGregor, "Jean Genet's Psychiatric Examination in 1943," 798.
5 White, *Genet*, 337.
6 See, in order, Genet, *Pompes funèbres*, 303–4; Genet, *Funeral Rites*, 253; Genet, *L'ennemi déclaré*, 311–13; Genet, *The Declared Enemy*, 269–70; White, *Genet*, 316–17.
7 Bersani, *Homos*, 161.
8 Genet, *The Maids and Deathwatch*, 63. "Ce couple éternel, du criminel et de la sainte" (Genet, "Les bonnes," 156).
9 See Mao and Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms*.
10 Durham, "Editor's Preface," 1.
11 Genet, *The Declared Enemy*, 261. "Un imposteur qui n'a jamais écrit de livre" (Genet, *L'ennemi déclaré*, 302). My translation of "D'utiliser la merde et de vous la faire bouffer" (Genet, *Pompes funèbres*, 190).
12 I draw on Deborah Gould's understanding of *queer* less as an identity or a theory than as a *sensibility*, which she historicizes as emerging from 1990s ACT-UP activism. Gould, *Moving Politics*, 256.
13 See Caserio et al., "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory."
14 For examples of Genet critics who applaud him for his identification with other forms of social marginality, see Malgorn, *Jean Genet*; and Eribon, *Une morale du minoritaire*, 323.
15 See Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*; Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens"; Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*.
16 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 4.
17 For an argument in favor of recognizing the "ordinariness" of queer cultures, that is, their intelligibility and enmeshment in the social world, see Love, "Doing Being

Deviant." See also Martin, "Extraordinary Homosexuals and the Fear of Being Ordinary."

18 On the contradictions of queer antinomianism, see Warner, "Normal and Normaller," 134–36.

19 For an early and still relevant critique of the "redemptive reinvention of sex" into democratic and ethical queer socialities, see Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Deidealizing scholarship in Queer Studies includes Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*; Love, *Feeling Backward*; Viego, *Dead Subjects*; Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*. Important works affiliated with queer negativity include Bersani, *Homos*; Edelman, *No Future*; Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

20 See, for example, Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 15; Hale, "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies," 223.

21 Weiss, "The Epistemology of Ethnography"; Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 316.

22 Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, 110. "Nos ménages, la loi de nos Maisons, ne ressemblent pas à vos Maisons"; "On s'aime sans amour" (Genet, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs*, 93).

23 Warner, "Normal and Normaller," 123–24.

24 The search for critical and alternative queer epistemologies drawn from the history and culture of people of color is foundational to the enterprise of queer of color critique. For a sharp critique, from an area studies perspective, of the failure of queer theory to take up epistemologies from the global South, see Arondekar and Patel, "Area Impossible."

25 Shah, *Contagious Divides*.

26 Exciting forthcoming scholarship by Nayan Shah, Sima Shakhsari, and Christina Hanhardt centers undocumented immigrants, refugees, and drug addicts within queer scholarship. I do not mean to suggest that they idealize these figures. In some cases, a careful focus on the particulars of their marginalized positions is leading scholars to reach beyond the binaries of celebration versus critique as well as the queer habit of idealization.

27 Butler, "Afterword," 227.

28 See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 92–102.

29 My term *field habitus* draws on Robyn Wiegman's understanding of the often untheorized aspirations, values, and moral judgments that organize field imaginaries, while emphasizing both the affective and the habituated dimensions of the fluency practitioners acquire. Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, especially 15–16.

30 Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*; Love, *Feeling Backward*; Viego, *Dead Subjects*; Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*.

31 See Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation*; Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading." For a reading of reparation as inevitably inflicting some harm, see Elizabeth Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 177–78. My thinking on deidealization is inspired by Love's reminder that a dimension of damage is inherent in the reparative position, as in Sedgwick's late work: "Recognizing that it is not only reparation but damage at work in Sedgwick's late essays will let us begin the hard work of deidealization. And that's love too." Love, "Truth and Consequences," 240.

32 For accounts of how Queer Studies has absorbed older traditions of empirical his-

torical and Sexuality Studies scholarship while denying them citation, see Duggan, "The Discipline Problem"; Rubin, "Geologies of Queer Studies"; Love, "Doing Being Deviant."

33 Edmund White writes, "Genet considered the whole subject of robbing homosexuals a huge joke and claimed that he had taught several other young thieves how to do it. His sense of solidarity with other thieves was certainly stronger than his links with other homosexuals, especially at a time when homosexuality was still experienced either as a source of shame or an object of ridicule. Given that Genet was not attracted to other homosexuals and regarded rich men as particularly alien, his sympathies and antipathies are easy to understand if not to respect" (White, *Genet*, 316–17).

34 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, xii.

35 Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 63. See also Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things*, 217.

36 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 113.

37 My critique of queer exceptionality is inspired by Amber Jamilla Musser's analysis of how queer thinkers as different from one another as Michel Foucault, Leo Bersani, and Lee Edelman position masochism and self-annihilation the exceptional outside of liberal modernity and its technologies of identity and power. Musser, *Sensational Flesh*, 12–21.

38 Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*.

39 Dinshaw herself cautions, "the condition of heterogeneous temporalities can be exploited for destruction as well as expansion: Ernst Bloch recounts chillingly the Nazis' deployment of temporal asynchrony in recruiting Germans who felt backward in the face of an alien modernity," and a number of other participants in this roundtable discussion issue caveats along similar lines. Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 178. Important exceptions from this general tendency include Love, *Feeling Backward*, and Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others*.

40 Davis, "Black Nationalism," 292.

### CHAPTER 1: ATTACHMENT GENEALOGIES OF PEDERASTIC MODERNITY

1 For instance, David Halperin argues that when Foucault enjoins his readers "to *become* homosexual" in "Friendship as a Way of Life," "his remarks make sense only if he understood his term 'homosexual' according to my definition of 'queer'—as an identity without an essence, not a given condition but a horizon of possibility, an opportunity for self-transformation, a queer potential." Halperin's vision of *queer* not as a sexuality, but as a potential, not as an identity, but as a mode of self-transformation, not as something achieved, but as a futural horizon draws Foucault's more utopian ruminations, inspired by North American gay male cultures of the 1970s and 1980s, into the center of queer theory. Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 79.

2 Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 136. "Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça, être entre hommes, 'à nu' hors de relations institutionnelles, de famille, de profession, de camaraderie obligée? C'est un désir, une inquiétude, un désir-inquiétude qui existe chez beaucoup de gens" (Foucault, "De l'amitié comme mode de vie," 983).