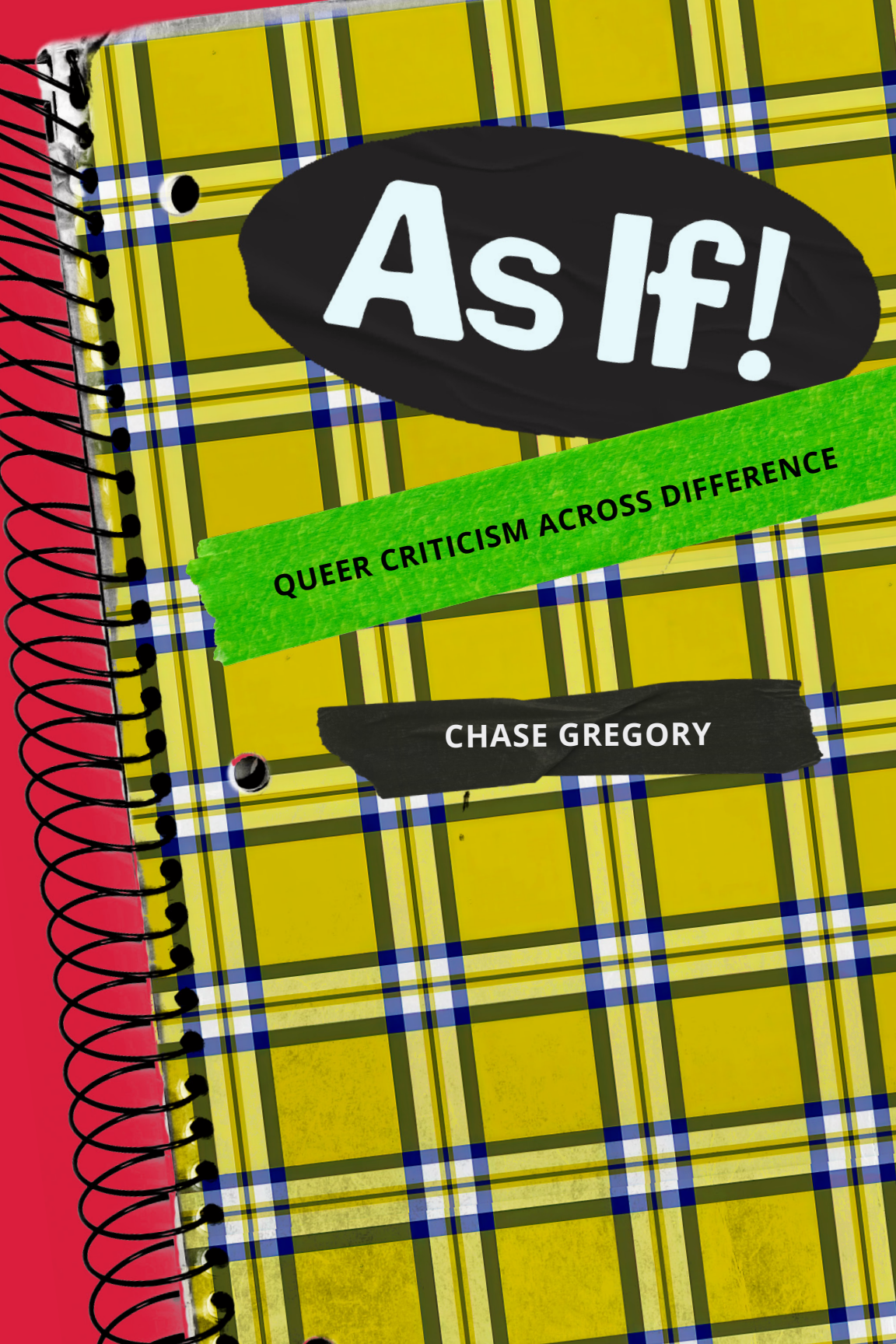
As If!
QUEER CRITICISM ACROSS DIFFERENCE
CHASE GREGORY

As If!

A series edited by
Lee Edelman,
Benjamin Kahan, and
Christina Sharpe

DUKE
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As If!

QUEER CRITICISM ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Chase Gregory

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Introduction
Reading and Writing *As If!*

In the weeks and months following George Floyd's murder and the subsequent uprisings of 2020, I noticed a common refrain from many well-meaning white people. Over and over, in Instagram posts, tweets, Facebook statuses, and sometimes even on in-person protest signs, I saw repeated the looping, milquetoast sentiment: "I understand that I can never understand." The more I saw this phrase, the more it irked me, and I was relieved to find after a few weeks that I was not the only person to notice the sudden virality of this slogan, nor the first to be annoyed by it. Hunter Harris, in a blog post about the experience of watching white Americans "reckon with a reckoning," describes her own encounter with a version of the same mantra: "One friend went to a protest and shared a photo of a neon sign that read 'I understand that I'll never understand, but I'll stand.' Soon, I started seeing the signs everywhere. At first, it was a red flag, then it became its own joke in my mind: *'I understand that I'll never understand. But I'll stand' is what I say when I don't like my friend's boyfriend*, I thought, *but he did just put his card down for all our drinks*."[1] I, too, am perplexed and annoyed by the ubiquity of this phrase and this specific mode of posturing. Why is this the slogan of choice among a certain set of white allies? What work is it doing? What does it assume? And why do I feel, like Harris, that this phrase is a red flag?

"I understand that I can never understand" takes as axiomatic the fact that the speaker is incapable of fully grasping something. In the most obvious interpretation of this sign, that something is the experience of being Black in America—an experience that, it is true, the white person wielding the sign would not have experienced.

In another read, though, the experience that the speaker is purportedly incapable of understanding is the experience of existing in an anti-Black world. If this is indeed the case, the phrase "I understand that I can never understand" is nothing more than a cloying cop-out; that is, "I understand that I can never understand" takes the inevitability of misunderstanding as an alibi to claim extrication from the very systems of anti-Blackness it purports to protest, as if it were possible to opt out. Perhaps, then, what I find irritating is the implicit suggestion that white supremacy cannot be understood by white people. At its most sinister pitch, this phrase positions white allies as ignorant of structural oppression in ways that end up enforcing those oppressive structures. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her formative queer theoretical work *Epistemology of the Closet*, calls this the "ignorance effect"—that is, mobilizing one's own claim to ignorance as a mode of maintaining and enforcing power.[2]

The sentence reminds me of other well-worn phrases. "I understand that I'll never understand" also rubs me the wrong way because it gratingly echoes another response to a different type of reckoning: The statement sounds uncannily like the well-meaning family member who, on the occasion of your coming out, responds, "I don't understand it, but whatever makes you happy." It recalls the "Straight but Not Narrow" buttons that still occasionally grace the backpacks and lapels of well-meaning heterosexual allies. Both acts of linguistic acrobatics read like updated versions of "love the sinner, hate the sin." Such phrases do their best to avoid any identification with the target of their address because of the contamination that such identification risks (Sedgwick calls this risk "the double-edged potential for injury in the scene of gay coming out").[3] It is hard not to squirm at the backhanded allyship at work in assertions like these, which take great pains to distance the identity of the utterer from that of the addressee. At its most insidious, the wedding of identity and understanding is not only reductive, controlling, and hermetic; it is also antithetical to political coalition.

My hunch is that "I understand that I can never understand" in particular touches a nerve with me because its popularity is symptomatic of a related tendency in queer studies, the field in which I work. This tendency—likely as well-intentioned as the white allies posting on Facebook—links knowledge to identity in ways that delimit how theory is produced, valued, and read. The idea that someone's positionality informs their knowledge is not a new idea, nor is it, at this point, as controversial and world-shattering as it once was. Under this logic, it follows that different subject positions might produce different kinds of knowledge(s). Ushered in by groundbreaking work by Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, and others, feminist standpoint theory of the 1980s placed new emphasis on positionality in an effort to resist hegemonic philosophies that posited an androcentric, white supremacist, or heterosexist universal.[4] But despite the noble goals

of identity-rooted scholarship, previously radical efforts to democratize the academy have been ruthlessly co-opted by a neoliberal understanding of identity. In this ideological climate, individual persons come to represent whole categories of people, ideas, politics, or modes of knowledge. In the wake of this neoliberal turn, "the university's management of racialized and gendered *bodies* occurs through its management of racialized and gendered *knowledge*."[5] As such, it often behooves academics working in particular arenas to speak "as" a particular and recognizable identity. This trend is most prevalent within what Robyn Wiegman helpfully labels "identity knowledge" fields—that is, academic areas that specifically tackle issues regarding race, gender, or sexuality.[6] Among these is queer studies, the field with which this book is most concerned.[7]

With knowing irony, early queer studies mobilizes identity in the service of an intellectual project that is later defined by its deconstructionist suspicion of identity. Consider, for example, queer theorist Judith Butler's bemused discovery, early on in their career, that "being" a lesbian was both a result and a requirement of their entrance into the academic professional scene: "The professionalization of gayness requires a certain performance and production of a 'self' which is the *constituted effect* of a discourse that nevertheless claims to 'represent' that self as a prior truth. When I spoke at the conference on homosexuality in 1989, I found myself telling my friends beforehand that I was off to Yale to be a lesbian, which of course didn't mean that I wasn't one before, but that somehow then, as I spoke in that context, I *was* one in some more thorough and totalizing way, at least for the time being."[8] The privilege of the claimed identity "lesbian" that Butler encounters at the conference on homosexuality shores up Butler's academic credibility and therefore, ironically, lends credibility to their critique of identity. By this account—fittingly titled "Imitation and Gender Insubordination"—it is only because Butler theorizes as a lesbian that they can credibly dismantle the very category "lesbian" as a stable or knowable identity from which to write and speak. As Butler quips in the same article: "To write or speak *as a lesbian* appears a paradoxical appearance of this 'I,' one which feels neither true nor false."[9] With the melancholic ambivalence typical of Butler's larger oeuvre, their anecdote admits both the ever-present danger and the intermittent necessity of claiming identity.

As If! Queer Criticism Across Difference advocates for queer studies to more boldly claim its poststructuralist, ironic, literary-critical genealogies. In the thirty years since Butler penned "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," the paradox of this relation has dropped away.[10] In this process of identity idealization, identities proliferate and calcify into stable political entities. In other words, the imperative to treat identity as a felt truth rather than as a social position reduces a complex concept to a question of knowable tautology, instead of relational ambivalence.

I am interested in modes of queer study that resist this imperative. *As If! Queer Criticism Across Difference* examines literary criticism from the first decade of queer theory's entry into the academic scene, 1990–2000. Often, this queer literary criticism is produced within the humanistic disciplinary shelter of English departments; usually, it takes as its critical object literary work such as novels or poetry; always, it is interested in the ways in which identity (particularly sexuality, race, and gender) intersects with cultural production and reception. Specifically, this book revisits queer literary criticism of the 1990s. All of the authors who pop up in the chapters to come are trained in English or comparative literature departments, and their methodology consists of close reading on the level of the word, phrase, or sentence.

I turn to these authors as examples not merely to give them their queer theoretical due or to expand our understanding of the contributors to queer theory beyond a few major players—although I'm happy if that's an accidental side effect. I also do so to draw attention to queer studies' literary inheritance. In a world where academic scholarship is increasingly being funded insofar as it has deliverable sociological correlates, the humanistic or literary aspects of early queer studies have dropped out, along with the modes of writing in which the authors I examine are invested. To be sure, queer literary criticism is but one piece of a complicated queer theory genealogy: Since the term *queer theory* came into common academic parlance, scholars have sought to expand and complicate the presumed genealogies of the field, adding much-needed nuance and depth to the discipline's multiple lineages.[11] Queer studies now extends its methods far beyond those of its literary-critical past; moreover, as many have by now pointed out, the genealogy of queer studies does not begin with English departments alone or with the identities purportedly manning those departments. David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, for example, lament queer studies' "conventional relationship to francophone and Anglo-American literatures and literary studies" on the grounds that such conventions limit queer inquiry to "presumed white masculine subjects."[12] Despite the conventionalities of the average English department, however, I have found that it is precisely at the site of reading that identity breaks down in productive and interesting ways. For this reason, the ease with which Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz yolk "literatures and literary studies" to a particular and limited identity makes me bristle with suspicion.

Here's what is interesting, to me, about the queer critical writing coming out of English departments in this era: Unlike other facets of queer or gay and lesbian studies, early queer literary criticism is rife with cross-identification. In much of the early work of queer studies scholars studying literature, authors perform cross-identifications that seem improbable, inappropriate, or impossible to the authors

who enact them—moreover, they do so with flamboyant relish. It is important that this tendency occurs most often when the authors are writing about literature. Whether it is because the act of reading literature can engender weird and complicated strains of empathy or because the act of writing affords greater anonymity to its authors than the act of physically delivering a paper, there is something about the literary that encourages this kind of identificatory leap. On the contrary, these cross-identifications revel in the messiness of identity, reminding readers of the negativity structuring social relations and challenging the neoliberal idea of identity as coherent, knowable, or a true source of knowledge. I call this writing practice *as if!* criticism.

As If! Queer Criticism Across Difference examines the work of four critics: Deborah E. McDowell, a straight Black feminist writing about lesbian desire; Barbara Johnson, a white lesbian writing about and through Black-authored texts; Robert Reid-Pharr, a gay Black man identifying as part of a community of Black lesbian friends and critics; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a straight white woman writing about gay men. McDowell, Johnson, Reid-Pharr, and Sedgwick are not the only authors in whose work I find this rhetorical mode, but they do offer some of the best examples of *as if!* criticism. They are exemplary but not exceptional. Taken together, these authors reflect a moment in queer literary criticism that—while not a free-for-all when it comes to cross-identificatory writing—was nonetheless a time where such cross-identifications were more permissible or considered intellectually worthwhile.

The proliferation of cross-identification in the work of McDowell, Johnson, Reid-Pharr, and Sedgwick reflects the moment at which these four writers write. *As if!* criticism is in vogue in the academy between 1989 and 2000. In this moment, identity knowledges, deconstructionist methodologies, racial anxieties, and radical activisms clash like particles in a hadron collider. Faced with the crisis of the AIDS pandemic, activist groups attempted to build solidarity among disparate identities by uniting under the very stigma that allowed for the government's dismissal of mass death, all while resisting political rhetoric implying that only certain identities were susceptible to the virus. When the critics I follow were writing, thinking, teaching, and publishing, US state neglect surrounding AIDS blatantly relied on the invocation and separation of certain identity categories (recall, for example, the Centers for Disease Control's early "Four H's" campaign, which warned that AIDS manifested primarily in the "high risk" groups "Haitians, hemophiliacs, homosexuals and heroin addicts").[13] Seeking to combat the Right's effort to label AIDS a "gay disease," groups like ACT UP strategically sidestepped identity, instead universalizing AIDS as a disease anyone, not just gay men, could contract. In the words of art critic and organizer Douglas Crimp, it was at this juncture that "new politi-

cal identifications began to be made . . . across identities."[14] The term *queer*—so the story goes—proved useful for both activists and academics: As a reclaimed slur, it sided with perversion and pleasure rather than respectability and assimilation; as an uncertain descriptor, it disavowed identity categories while still invoking specific stigmatized sexualities.[15] These political experiments, including the reclamation and mobilization of *queer* as a term, inspired a generation of gay and lesbian scholars to rethink their own relation to identity.

Yet, as much as the newly rebranded signifier *queer* promised to unseat the identity politics that had been mobilized by the Right, the project of forging alliance while still grappling with and accounting for difference proved challenging. Like the authors showcased in the next four chapters, other activist-academics writing during the 1990s turned to cross-identification as a possible means of navigating a moment of various crises. Crimp, writing in 1992, observes that "a number of identities-in-conflict [exist] in ACT UP: men and women, whites and people of color, and so forth. In spite of the linguistic necessity of specifying identities with positive terms, I want to make clear that I am not speaking of identities as nonrelational. Because of the complexities of the movement, there is no predicting what identifications will be made and which side of an argument anyone might take."[16] From that same year, art critic Kobena Mercer offers one example of how the political climate under Reagan/Bush necessitated not just new forms of political alliance but also new forms of aesthetic assessment. "In the contemporary situation, the essentialist rhetoric of categorical identity politics threatens to erase the connectedness of our different struggles," he writes. "At its worst, such forms of identity politics play into the hands of the Right as the fundamentalist belief in an essential and immutable identity keeps us locked in the prisonhouse of marginality in which oppressions of race, class, and gender would have us live."[17]

Even as the alliances brought on by AIDS engendered potentially radical cross-racial identifications, such identifications were not immune to—and, in fact, were bound up in—extant systems of racial hierarchy, fetishization, and material oppression. Indeed, the 1990s United States also represents a particular moment of white cultural anxiety about the status of America's racial hierarchy. The scholarly works examined in *As If! Queer Criticism Across Difference* are examples of the decade's heightened focus on race, both by virtue of their critical object choice and by virtue of the way in which their authors frequently flirt with the color line. The 1990s mark a period in American history in which paranoia over the instability of racial categories leads to a resurgence of interest in racial passing in both narrative fiction and the real world.[18] The fact that two of the authors showcased in this book, Johnson and McDowell, write extensively about Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) is no small coincidence.

As If! Queer Criticism Across Difference takes as axiomatic that any invocation of *as* also entails its already-present figurative *as if*.[19] I borrow the *as if* in my title from Johnson's late-career essay "L'esthétique du mal." Johnson, in turn, borrows it from three very different sources. The first is German philosopher Hans Vaihinger's *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (1911). The second is Andrew Boyd's tongue-in-cheek *Life's Little Deconstruction Book: Self-Help for the Post-Hip* (1998), which advises its readers to "be as if." The third is Cher Horowitz's iconic and oft-repeated exclamations of "As if!" in the gay classic *Clueless* (1995). Here, Johnson explicates the impossibility of either full belief in or full identification with the authors or texts one encounters as a critic and teacher. Riffing on the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural pedagogy, Johnson first describes "reading as if" as the suspension of disbelief necessary for theory, translation, and teaching. In Johnson's field of comparative literature, the deconstructive injunction "be as if" amounts to the "bad suture" between a word and its imperfect translation.[20] Drawing an important line from teaching to reading, Johnson emphasizes the literary and textual aspects of such a suture. "As if" reading (that is to say, all reading) constitutes "thought as a break rather than thought as a chain," because there is always a cognitive leap to be made between reading "as" oneself and inhabiting an author's objects, ideas, or position. That is to say, Johnson conceives of "reading as if" as reading that relies on a suspension of disbelief. This in turn allows for a temporary suture between one's own reading position and one's object of study. In pedagogy and in reading, "as if" can be understood as an abeyance of one's current theoretical, material, embodied, or political position in the service of another, temporarily assumed position or perspective.[21] There is no writing as; there is simply the imperative to write as, the performance of writing as, or the impulse to characterize certain forms of writing as more authentic than others.

A major claim of this book can be understood thus: When Barbara Johnson, the subject of my second chapter, writes "as a lesbian" and when Robert Reid-Pharr, the subject of my third, writes "as a lesbian," their relationships to the term *lesbian* are similarly ironic, fractured, and unresolved—this despite the fact that Johnson is a woman who fucked women and Reid-Pharr a man who fucks men. Because of how she is interpolated by and lives in the world, Johnson is ostensibly writing from an authentic position and experience. However, her so-called writing "as" becomes writing *as if!* in the moments when what should be an easy identification becomes difficult. Because it stages Johnson's not-quite-successful identifications with the categories into which she has been hailed (white, lesbian, woman), Johnson's prose reveals the myth of easy identification. Reid-Pharr employs a different and complementary tactic, explicitly adopting identity categories that are counterintuitive to the assumptions of his audience. In his book of autobiographically

inflected criticism titled *Black Gay Man*, Reid-Pharr's sudden claim that he sometimes lives, reads, and thinks "as a lesbian" may seem purely ironic—if not for the fact that Reid-Pharr's insistence on his own lesbianism is also, simultaneously, deeply sincere.[22] This tension, never fully resolved in his book, foregrounds the difficulty of his own (and, indeed, of any) identification. As such, he too writes *as if!*

In each of these examples, cross-identification becomes the mechanism by which the text productively problematizes identity's relationship to authorship. When an author's presumed identity does not align with their avowed identifications, the illusion of identity is thrown into stark relief. The awkward ruptures that result from the chasms that both Johnson and Reid-Pharr must cross to identify as lesbian reveal the awkwardness of the identity category itself. Identity, then, is open-ended rather than a completed entity with definitive actions, behaviors, and interiorities: When someone tries to write according to one script, this mode of writing pulls the rug out from under, objecting, "As if that's the only way!"

Because it blurs the line between self and other, and between desire and recognition, identification is never a straightforward affair. Following Sigmund Freud and his interlocutors, identification is neither the same as identity nor identity's opposite. Rather, as Diana Fuss cogently argues: "Identification inhabits, organizes, instantiates identity. It operates as a mark of self-difference, opening up a space for the self to relate to itself as a self, a self that is perpetually other. Identification, understood throughout this book as the play of difference and similitude in self-other relations, does not, strictly speaking, stand against identity but aids and abets it. . . . In perhaps its simplest formulation, identification is the detour through the other that defines a self."[23] If, as Sedgwick writes in her introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, "to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identification *with*," it may not make sense to speak of "cross-identification" at all.[24] To quote Biddy Martin and Butler in their introduction to a special "Cross-Identifications" issue of *Diacritics*, "The notion of 'cross-identification' may seem paradoxical, for every identification presumes a crossing of sorts, a movement toward some other site with which or by which an identification is said to take place."[25] In this way, identification "prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an *illusion* of identity as immediate, secure, totalizable."[26] The relationship between identification and identity is paradoxical: Identification cannot occur without some concept of fixed identity, but the act of identification highlights the constructedness of identity.

This school of thought—one to which I also adhere—takes *cross-identification* and *identification* to be nearly, if not totally, synonymous. More recently, Kadji Amin argues for a return to a more capacious and difficult understanding of iden-

tification. "It is all but impossible to feel entirely unambivalent about, entirely described by, a social identity category," he writes. "The question, then, is whether we can develop a tolerance for contamination and for the inevitable misfit of identity categories, rather than continually kicking the bucket further down the road, generating ever more terms in pursuit of an impossible dream—that of social categories capable of matching the uniqueness of individual psyches."[27] My project is similarly opposed to an understanding of identification that stitches it seamlessly to identity, insofar as identity is understood as "a personal, felt, and thereby highly phantasmic and labile relation to . . . categories."[28]

Insofar as *as if!* criticism, in its style and method, makes visible displacements, defamiliarizations, and misrecognitions, it shares an affinity with the "disidentification" most famously theorized by José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz moves away from earlier understandings of identity that reduce subjectivity to "either a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of the self."[29] He notes that "identification . . . is never a simple project. Identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world."[30] Focusing on artists of color whose performed identities and identifications "emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere," Muñoz convincingly argues that practice of this difficult and incomplete identification is a queer critical and cultural survival strategy.[31]

The type of writing I explore in *As If! Queer Criticism Across Difference* is thus unlike other versions of autotheoretical writing that have a more straightforward relationship to identity. Nancy K. Miller observes that the posited links between knowledge and identity have long helped foster a style of personally inflected criticism, which she calls "reading as."[32] Tracing this trend within the postseventies academic scene in women's studies, Miller hypothesizes that the proliferation of "reading as" texts is the result of new feminist imperatives to speak from one's identity position.[33] In more contemporary parlance, the type of writing that Miller and others describe might also be called "autotheory," a mode of feminist theorizing that, Lauren Fournier writes, "reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation."[34] As Fournier and others show, there is a long tradition of feminist autotheoretical writing, a literary history that includes works by feminist authors such as Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, Paul B. Preciado, and Maggie Nelson (to name but a few frequently cited examples). Thinking through and with the personal, these modes of writing align themselves with feminist efforts to resist the hegemonic production and valuation of knowledge.

By contrast, *as if!* criticism aligns itself with a wealth of poststructuralist, feminist, queer, and critical race work that seeks to rethink rigid (and often oppressive) identity frameworks and, indeed, to question the very idea of a stable identity or authentic self at all. Negotiating their own interpolation and positionality within their fields at a time when these fields were constantly self-assessing, critics writing *as if!* work both with and against the disciplining logics of the identity knowledge fields of study into which they find themselves unwillingly boxed. This intellectual promiscuity offers a clue as to why, in an era of multiple crises, cross-identificatory autotheoretical writing emerges.

Crucially, the cross-identification showcased in the work of these four authors is not smooth, complete, or easy. These authors cross-identify, certainly, but they do so with a coy insincerity that also draws attention to the differences between author and identificatory object. Wittingly or unwittingly, all four of these authors consistently stage their own identifications across race, gender, or sexuality as, variously, scenes of misstep, ridiculousness, embarrassment, bad passing, drag, breakdown, or disconnect. These messy, interrupted, embarrassing, often gleeful identifications across difference draw attention to the material power structures that police subjecthood inside and outside the academy while also standing in defiance of them. Indeed, the publicness of these cross-identifications alone makes them remarkable. As Fuss notes, "While we tend to experience our identities as part of our public personas . . . we experience our identifications as more private, guarded, evasive."[35] *As if!* criticism, however, performatively stages identification for its readers. In fact, here, problematic scenes of cross-identification serve as a jumping-off point for queer critical inquiry.

The type of criticism I explore in *As If! Queer Criticism Across Difference* is also unlike the social phenomenon of "passing" as it is traditionally understood. In conventional understandings of passing, a person of one group is recognized or perceived as a member of another group. Instead, the routes of identification I trace here have much more in common with Pamela L. Caughie's definition of *passing* as a postmodern phenomenon. In Caughie's revised definition, passing comes to represent "double logic" rather than "the binary logic that governs its common use."[36] Passing, understood in this unorthodox way,

> necessarily figures that always slippery difference between standing *for* something (having a firm position) and passing *as* something (having no position or a fraudulent one), between the strategic adoption of a politically empowering identity (as when blacks pass as white or homosexuals pass as heterosexual) and the disempowering appropriation of a potentially threatening difference (as when men pass as feminist or whites rep-

> resent blacks), and between what one professes as a writer or a teacher (the positions one assumes in an article or a classroom, often as a spokesperson for another's position) and how one is actually positioned in a society, institution, discourse, or classroom. Marked by a discrepancy between what one professes to be (and what one professes) and how one is positioned, passing is a risky business, whether one risks being *exposed* as passing or being *accused* of passing.[37]

McDowell, Johnson, Reid-Pharr, and Sedgwick embrace this risk, theatrically exposing themselves as bad passers throughout their critical oeuvres. In so doing, they take up Caughie's charge to confront "the difficulties of one's own performance as a way of understanding the difficulties of others" as well as Mercer's charge to interrogate "not an essentialist argument that the ethnic identity of the artist guarantees the aesthetic or political value of a text, but on the contrary, how commonsense conceptions of authorship and readership are challenged by practices that acknowledge the diversity and heterogeneity of the relations in which identities are socially constructed."[38] Staging attachments that rarely read as appropriate, *as if!* criticism ambivalently raises the question of difference.

As such, *as if!* criticism is more analogous to drag than it is to other types of gender expression and more akin to blackface than it is to other types of racial performance. While there is a vast contrast in the theorized political effect of these performance practices (drag, by and large, as a helpful cultural tool for critiquing gender-oppressive systems; blackface, almost always, as an insidious cultural tool for maintaining white supremacy), both provoke political outrage, albeit from different sides of the aisle. How these two analogies—drag and blackface—register in contemporary discourse speaks to *as if!* criticism's power to both disrupt rigid structures of identity and unabashedly make use of those same racist, sexist structures. Though they stem from different histories and politics, in both practices, the obvious masquerade of blackface and drag brings the performer into intimate proximity with the race and gender markers to which their makeup refers, while at the same time cultivating a calculated gap between performer and referent. Writing on gay men's attachment to female divas, David M. Halperin questions whether "identification" is the right name for this relation at all: "What we may be dealing with, in the end, is a specific kind of engagement that somehow mobilizes complex relations of similarity and difference—but without constituting subjects or objects in the usual ways. Instead, that mobilization produces fields of practice and feeling that map out possibilities for contact or interrelation among cultural forms and their audiences, consumers, or publics, and that get transmitted from one generation to another. We simply have no good languages for that phenomenon—only a

variety of critical vernaculars (such as 'identification'), all of them misleading or harmful or inexact."[39] Glossing the history of blackface in Hollywood as it relates to the racial fetishism present in Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*, Mercer writes that the image of the blackface minstrel "concerns a deeply ambivalent mixture of othering and identification."[40] He goes on to lay out the many different intersecting vectors of power and desire at work in this ambivalence.[41] Writing knowingly and performatively across identity enacts a similar contradiction: Much as the "unbearable" social relation is paradoxically structured around the failure of the social, so too is these authors' identification across difference structured and propelled by the contradictory forces of "at once . . . incapacity and creativity."[42]

Like a lot of self-conscious performance, *as if!* criticism both reinforces the status quo and undermines it, leaving audiences to wonder if these critics' performative self-awareness saves them from reproducing the very structures of identity they mock.[43] Simultaneously repulsive and attractive, the identifications laid bare in *as if!* criticism reveal both a tenacious insincerity and a desperate will toward connection. The political ambivalence of *as if!* criticism recalls what Lauren Berlant calls "that muddled middle where survival and threats to it engender social forms that transform the habitation of negativity's multiplicity."[44] In so doing, this type of performance opens new avenues of cross-, dis-, or self-identification.

As if! criticism, in other words, is criticism whose flamboyant exhibitionism operates as camp—that is, as both a disavowal and an embrace. In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," Sedgwick offers two ways to read camp (one paranoid, one reparative). On the one hand, camp is "most often understood as uniquely appropriate to the projects of parody, denaturalization, demystification, and mocking exposure of the elements and assumptions of a dominant culture"; on the other, camp might be understood as motivated by an impulse that it "wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self." Significantly, while explaining camp as a sensibility both paranoid and reparative, Sedgwick names many of the strategies and affects consistent with *as if!* criticism, including "startling, juicy displays of excess erudition," "prodigal production of alternative historiographies," "rich, highly interruptive affective variety," "disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture," and, perhaps most tellingly, "the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation."[45]

Among the identity categories *as if!* productively camps is class. Because of the ways in which class fails to materialize as one of the identities taken up by the rise in identity studies in the 1980s, an exploration of class as identity becomes tricky in the context of the history of the US academy.[46] Nonetheless, class also functions as a category of identity and identification in the United States. This is particu-

larly important to note because much of early queer literary criticism appears in the work of scholars who are for the most part working at rich coastal universities. As Matt Brim cogently notes: "If queer theory happened, it happened at the places that are most notable for having the resources to hyperinject intellectual vitality into faculty labor and that are, as a result, the only places where queer theory could have been noticed as having happened. And that class-based spectacularity makes all the difference."[47] The authors showcased in this book are, in large part, no exception to this rule, and we might position them as identifying with a classed elite as well.[48] Like preppy SoCal socialite Cher Horowitz, these critics, for the most part, operate adjacent to the economic elite and avail themselves of the privileges granted to them by their status and institutional access.

At the same time, Brim's choice of "spectacularity" reveals that the performance of class as identity is more complicated than the material realities of a university job would initially suggest. While these theorists are all writing from rich institutions that traditionally serve the ruling class, they are all writing as people who came from decidedly middle-class backgrounds and who are all, in a way, "passing" as people who belong in these institutions. Joseph Litvak, writing in 1997, diagnoses the right-wing anti-intellectualism of the era as one of upper-class repulsion, brought on by the rise of "middle-class sophistication" that "vulgarizes mere (i.e. aristocratic) sophistication and sophisticates mere (i.e. lower-class) vulgarity."[49] For Litvak and others, this repulsion stamped the literary criticism of the 1990s with a specifically queer stigma. Political rhetoric of the time linked an anti-intellectual agenda to an antigay agenda via debates about what and how critics should write and what and how they should read. Leaning into this stigma, cross-class identification in early queer criticism might constitute a kind of sophisticate drag, a bad class passing that camps the stylistic and identificatory restrictions of academia.

As it stands, McDowell, Johnson, Reid-Pharr, and Sedgwick grapple with class as identity in various ways. McDowell's identifications with and "as" lesbian flirt with the regulatory class formations of the post–civil rights era that positioned both lesbians and "bad" (single or "failed") mothers outside of and opposed to the heteronormative middle-class Black subject.[50] Johnson, despite her whiteness, might be said to grapple with the struggle within Black feminist criticism that her contemporary Hortense J. Spillers lays out a few years earlier, when Spillers writes that "*within* genders, the black intellectual class is establishing few models of conduct and social responsibility."[51] In his interruptive interludes, Reid-Parr not only relies on the underclass status of his white partners as a means of eliciting scandal; he also manipulates the classed expectations of academic publishers, "passing" as polite, middle-class, and respectable before using language that refuses to genuflect to these expectations for ultimate shock effect. The culture wars that form

the background of Sedgwick's productively unsuccessful demonstration capitalize on class resentment of the elite institutions from which she (and, indeed, all these authors) writes. These various cross-identificatory engagements with class constitute another way in which *as if!*'s resists neoliberalism, in which class falls away as a category of consciousness. Here, Cher Horowitz again serves as an example, this time not as a member of the elite but as a figure outrageously aping it (a parodic performance even more obvious when one recalls her Georgian precursor, Emma Woodhouse). Camp, rather than being the sensibility of the ruling class, is instead—crucially—a histrionic adoption of ruling-class sensibilities to comedic or otherwise subversive effect. These authors thus invoke camp's long history of mocking the propriety and seriousness enforced by class-inflected standards of decorum.

The *!* at the end of *as if!* signals, among other things, a camp sensibility. In English, an exclamation point can denote many different things—among them interjection, surprise, shock, emphasis, strong feeling, the shrieking that might accompany said feelings, a warning of risk or danger, and (in stage directions) sarcasm.[52] I retain the exclamation point in both my book title and my reference to the type of criticism I seek to name and explore, to distinguish this mode of writing as ironic, theatrical, and on purpose. The punctuation at the end of *as if!* is meant to convey the shock one experiences at an improper identificatory attachment; that rush, what Corey McEleney (writing about Johnson) elsewhere calls "astonishment," shocks us out of our readerly revery and, potentially, shakes things up enough to resist those quotidian categories in which oppressive systems traffic.[53] Another word for this astonishment, perhaps, is *punctum*, a word whose root recalls the punctuation mark at the end of my own title, the *!* meant to signal the kind of incredulity that throws one off balance. Kathryn Bond Stockton, before telling her readers to "go punctuate" themselves, writes that "queers are experts in self-punctuation, self-penetration."[54] It is my hope to describe and reproduce the shock of the punctum, highlighting moments of disorientation and recalibration—what Johnson calls, in a moment of great wisdom, "the surprise of otherness . . . that moment when a new form of ignorance is suddenly activated as an imperative."[55]

Ultimately, the trite white allyship slogan showcased at the start of this introduction continues to bother me not because I disagree with it but because it functions as a justification for inaction rather than an attempt to acknowledge and value the messy intersection of nonproprietary identities and identifications. The critics whom I examine in the following chapters also understand that they can never understand. But unlike the well-meaning Instagrammers of this introduction's opening anecdote, that conclusion is not based on a belief in the inherent truth of lived experience, nor is it based on a belief in one's access to an essential

identity. Trained in a poststructuralist mode in which "understanding" is neither the goal of analysis nor fully possible, these writers provide an example of how we might find the limits of understanding liberatory rather than immobilizing. Like the authors showcased in this book, I do not believe that it is possible for one person to ever understand another. I do not believe in the inherent progressive political potential of intimate understanding, because I know how monstrous those intimacies can be and often are.[56] As a lapsed Lacanian, I still cringe at the idea that one can ever fully know the other in any situation (or the self, for that matter). As a gay white person teaching and writing about anti-Blackness in the United States, I know that scenes meant to elicit white empathy more often than not end up creating a fantasy in which the body of the oppressor is merely substituted for the body of the oppressed, effecting yet another violent erasure.[57] As a queer theorist and as a teacher, ostensibly, of queer theory, I am well aware that understanding sexuality or subjecthood is a fantasy; that in the classroom, this fantasy becomes a laughable learning goal that, by definition, we can never achieve; that "queerness, wherever it shows itself (in the form of a catachresis), effects a counterpedagogy."[58] Misunderstanding is an inevitability that is built into every social interaction between subjects.

For most of their careers, these authors approach the problem of identity and identification differently at different times; they are not always writing in the mode highlighted in this book. They do, however, often employ elements of style that are integral to *as if!* writing. The four chapters of this book illustrate four typical characteristics of *as if!* criticism. In order, these are dissatisfaction, intimacy, interruption, and embarrassment. Each chapter uncovers these elements as they crop up throughout a selective sample of each author's work, before turning to an actual example of *as if!* writing. It is my hope that this structure—in which I trace a stylistic pattern in an author's greater oeuvre, leading up to an instance of critical writing that exemplifies the type of cross-identification I aim to highlight—better illustrates both the evolution of this critical method and its unique properties.

Chapter 1, "Miscarrying On," focuses on dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction in *as if!* critical writing is marked by qualification—that is, by revision, rereading, or amendment, but also prerequisite, requirement, or condition. In this chapter, I examine McDowell's "lesbian" readings and rereadings of Larsen and Toni Morrison. I read her many revisions of an article on Larsen's *Passing*, published three times between 1989 and 1991, as well as her use of postscripts in her monograph *"The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995) in the context of critical conversations surrounding her work, including various instances in which McDowell's person comes to stand in for various disciplinary fields. Repeatedly revising her own assertions as well as the assumptions other critics make about

her based on her assumed identity, McDowell's prose fights back against the critical identity categories into which she and her work are pigeonholed.

My second chapter, "Barbara Johnson's Passing," introduces the concept of intimacy, another common aspect of *as if!* critical reading. Johnson's fifth monograph, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (1998), is riddled with moments of interruption or breakdown. Particularly, instances where Johnson parenthetically comes out to her readers as both a white feminist working on Black-authored texts and (later) as a lesbian who does not read "as a lesbian" are important moments of revelation; I contend that such instances highlight critical loyalties, impulses, and aptitudes that seem surprisingly unobvious, politically unsavory, or inappropriately intimate.

Chapter 3, "Shock Therapy," focuses on interruption. I examine Reid-Pharr's self-described "pornographic" writing alongside his explicit cross-identification with Black lesbian feminists, particularly Barbara Smith and Cheryl Clarke. Reading several essays from his 2001 essay collection *Black Gay Man*, I theorize that the repeated "shock" of Reid-Pharr's pornographic interludes serves to interrupt both narrative continuity and the authority of identity. Chapter 3 ends with an analysis of Reid-Pharr's short essay "Living as a Lesbian," which uses these interruptions to acknowledge material and embodied difference, while simultaneously insisting on forging new ways of identifying. I argue that these shocks allow for the possibility of a tenuous coalition based on something other than fixed identity categories—what Cathy J. Cohen calls a "queer politics of positionality."[59]

My final chapter, "Gay-Male-Oriented and Now," looks closely at staged scenes of embarrassment in Sedgwick's work. Here I read Sedgwick's identifications with gay men and gay-male-authored work in conversation with her more fraught identifications across race. I track how Sedgwick's embarrassing anecdotes signpost her own *as if!* critical strategies. Looking mostly at *Tendencies*, Sedgwick's essay collection that showcases her most notorious cross-identifications, I argue that Sedgwick's encounter with her own whiteness, staged via her exhibitionist anecdotal criticism, constitutes a moment of both impasse and connection.

What emerges in the work of McDowell, Johnson, Reid-Pharr, and Sedgwick is a Sisyphean mechanic: Forming identifications via a faith in the poststructuralist promise of identity's fiction (a queer utopia), these authors nonetheless run up against the impossible project of social relation (a queer antisocial). McDowell's defiant qualifications and revisions to her own work serve as savvy self-interruptions that cross, even as they fracture, disciplinary boundaries. Johnson's uncanny readings of Black-authored texts and spectacularly awkward attempts at "lesbian" reading reveal uncomfortable intimacies and surprising links between the author and the subjects she studies. Reid-Pharr's shocking and explicit interludes test the

limits of cross-identification only to theorize that those limits constitute an unexpected point of commonality. Sedgwick's infamous cross-identifications result in "displacements" that, rather than stop her short, instead catalyze a new militancy born of difference rather than sameness.[60] As such, these identifications address the impossible dichotomy so concisely summed up in the imperative of Jewelle Gomez's polemical meditation on feminist solidarity: "Repeat After Me: We Are Different. We Are the Same."[61]

As I read McDowell, Johnson, Reid-Pharr, and Sedgwick from my own temporal vantage point—a historical moment in which these boundaries often feel impermeable and in which it is hard to imagine playing so fast and loose with something as politically charged as identity—I am fascinated by the critical cross-identificatory strategies their work so boldly flaunts. Roughly thirty years have transpired since the work I have surveyed in this book was first published, and yet I am struck by the ways in which the concerns of the 1990s continue to resonate, in different ways, today. Like many of the pieces of criticism I have examined here, this book was written at a political moment marked by powerful remix of neoliberalism, rising fascism, and anti-intellectualism; through a period of worldwide isolation, mass death, and record-breaking plague; and during an exciting, explosive moment of rupture and revolt against anti-Black and colonial systems of power. At the time of this book's final revisions, we are a year into a US-backed, unprecedentedly documented genocide; the risks of rigid identity politics have become starkly, deathly clear.

The authors showcased in this book write during a time of spectacular, state-sponsored death. All the pieces of queer literary criticism on which this book focuses were published between 1990 and 2001, a period that saw approximately 350,000 AIDS deaths in the United States.[62] Guided by the homophobia of the 1980s, it behooved the Reagan administration to insist that AIDS was a "gay disease," a policy that directly catalyzed these staggering numbers. This is a major lesson of AIDS: In moments of tragedy that break along the lines of identity, identification becomes a topic of much rhetorical and political regulation.[63] As a means of resistance, the cross-identifications on display in this book run counter to a neoliberal belief in an easy or authentic relation between identity and identification, instead producing those campy shocks that lay bare the ruse of fixed identity. As such, the writing of many early queer literary critics often presents a paradox of authenticity: It interpolates these critics into a subject position ("gay," "queer," "lesbian," etc.), but the credentials of that subject position are based on the quality of their reference, imitation, cross-identification, and drag performance. Relishing this paradox, cross-identificatory modes of writing might lead to other, more capacious ways of thinking about the personal as political. On the one hand, the

contrasting affective tenors produced by these identifications produces wild whiplash. On the other, the routes of queer identification they trace are, for me, sources of deep solace, useful disorientation, and delicious pleasure.

The work of these four critics draws attention to the difficulties of difference, enacting what Grace Kyungwon Hong helpfully calls "a cultural and epistemological practice that holds in suspension (without requiring resolution) contradictory, mutually exclusive, and negating impulses" and "an epistemological position, ontological condition, and political strategy that reckon[s] with the shift in the technologies of power that we might as well call 'neoliberal.'"[64] Glossing Lorde's "impossible but necessary politics of 'difference,'" Hong argues that such an impossibility—here defined as that which is outside the conceptual bounds of the hegemonic order—poses "a question that can never be answered, but that must be continually addressed, enacting a temporality of suspension rather than a resolution."[65] I find value in remaining attentive to the ways in which this impossible simultaneity operates. Though it may be a doomed project, cross-identification seems to me a useful antidote to the kind of activisms that, in crisis, produce such pithy, distancing slogans as "I understand that I can never understand."

In short, McDowell, Johnson, Reid-Pharr, and Sedgwick showcase their qualified, intimate, shocking, or embarrassing identifications because they recognize that there are no clean hands in a dirty world. These critical transgressions, if nothing else, reveal the positions and categories to which we are all bound and the power structures in which we are all embroiled. Resisting the boundaries of identity upon which white supremacy and heterosexism operate through their identifications across difference, while still leaning into the inevitable fiasco that is social relation, *as if!* criticism, at its best, performs what Lauren Berlant (writing about Sedgwick) calls "the dread of admitting knowing what brokenness is while managing the rage to repair."[66] Quixotic and doomed though these identifications are, they nonetheless do important work, employing misunderstanding as the very mechanism that drives their critical inquiry.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Harris quoted in Browne et al., "Watching White People."
2. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 5.
3. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 81.
4. Murray-García and Tervalon, "The Concept of Cultural Humility."
5. Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal*, 141.
6. For a comprehensive list of these fields, see Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 2n2.
7. Queer studies, queer theory, and queer literary criticism are three separate but related ideas. In this book, *queer studies* refers to an academic field of study focusing on gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual stigma. *Queer theory* refers to an analytic within queer studies that approaches sexuality and gender as socially constructed—with the understanding that there are many queer theories, all of which approach, describe, and critique the social construction of gender and sexuality differently. *Queer literary criticism*, as I employ it, refers to academic writing on works of literature that uses queer theory as its primary analytic.
8. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 18.
9. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 13.
10. As Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson point out, defining *queer* as purely and simply oppositional robs it of its initial deconstructive potential and, as such, of its ability to theorize identity as complicated, socially contextual, or changing. Wiegman and Wilson attribute this tendency among queer theorists in large part to queer studies' historical pattern of defining itself against "normativity": "While 'queer' has etymological connections to movements that transverse and twist . . . its most frequent deployment has been in the service of defiance and reprimand. The allure of moving *against* appears to have had greater critical currency" than the more intimate and complicit gesture of moving *athwart*" (Wiegman and Wilson, "Introduction," 11). Kadji Amin, in his recent piece "We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents," tells a similar story from a slightly different angle, one that traces a similar pattern within transgender studies. Amin notes a recent trend among thinkers in "minoritarian fields" toward insistence on the one-to-one, unproblematic relation between identification, identity, and identity categories, such that "nonbinary" itself, for example, becomes a fixed identity category, ironically diametrically opposed to "binary" (Amin, "We Are All Nonbinary," 106).

11. Roderick A. Ferguson, for example, has done work to uncover queer theory's intellectual debts to the Black feminist thinkers of the 1970s, while Heather Love further credits mid-century, state-sanctioned sociological studies of deviance with making significant contributions to current understandings of queerness. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*; Love, *Underdogs*.
12. Eng et al., "Introduction," 7.
13. Washington, "The AIDS Epidemic."
14. Crimp, "Right On, Girlfriend!," 15.
15. Jagose, *Queer Theory*; Rand, *Reclaiming Queer*; Wiegman, "Heteronormativity."
16. Crimp, "Right On, Girlfriend!," 15.
17. Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," 22.
18. Dreisinger, *Near Black*, 24.
19. In English, this argument works on a grammatical level. The syntactical work of *as* in the construction "to read as X" is already ambiguous: *As* is both a preposition used in reference to a thing's function or character ("I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar") and an adverb used to compare two different but similar things in a simile ("Hop in my Chrysler, it's as big as a whale").
20. Johnson, *A World of Difference*, 38.
21. To be sure, it is possible to imagine and name authors who implement these tactics in genres beyond literary criticism, particularly in memoir and paraliterary fiction. In *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*, for example, literary critic Michael Saler uses *as if* to describe a specific readerly mindset, what Saler terms the "ironic imagination" (22). Beginning with New Romance, detective, science fiction, and fantasy novels of the late nineteenth century and ending with a gesture toward the virtual realities of the present day, Saler argues that these self-reflexive texts train their readers to hold two worlds in their heads at once (this world and the world of the text) and thus lend themselves particularly well to social projects that extend beyond their pages: online communities, fan clubs, cosplay conventions, and so on. For Saler, the double consciousness required to deeply engage with these alternate realities means that consuming fiction is not merely a matter of escapism but rather one of worldmaking; "ironic imagination" allows modern readers to approach fictional worlds as if they were real while still maintaining critical distance.
22. Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man*, 153.
23. Fuss, *Identification Papers*, 2.
24. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 61.
25. Butler and Martin, "Cross-Identifications," 3.
26. Fuss, *Identification Papers*, 2.
27. Amin, "We Are All Nonbinary," 117.
28. Amin, "We Are All Nonbinary," 115.
29. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5.
30. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 8.
31. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 6.
32. N. K. Miller, *Getting Personal*, 34.
33. Miller cites both Johnson and Sedgwick as examples of "reading as." She also lists Barbara

Christian and Barbara Smith, authors who both serve as important critical interlocutors in my own project. Though she groups these critics and others together as examples of "personal criticism," Miller also takes care to note the differences in their approaches: Johnson's "Gender Theory and the Yale School" includes a "third-person cameo" (Miller, *Getting Personal*, 2); Sedgwick's "A Poem Is Being Written" constitutes "an academic (degree-zero) anecdote from the authorizing groves of campus life" (1); Christian's "Black Feminist Process: In the Midst of . . ." demonstrates how Christian "thinks aloud, so to speak" (10); Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" involves "self-representation as political representivity" and constitutes a plea for more representation of "women . . . like herself" (2). Unlike Miller, I am interested in the ways in which these authors undermine the assumption that they are writing "as" themselves.

34. Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 3.
35. Fuss, *Identification Papers*, 2.
36. Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy*, 3.
37. Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy*, 25.
38. Caughie, *Passing and Pedagogy*, 47; Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," 19.
39. Halperin, *How to Be Gay*, 259.
40. Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," 22.
41. Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," 21–22.
42. Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*; Weiner and Young, "Queer Bonds," 224.
43. It is instructive, for example, that the history of blackface minstrelsy and the history of US camp practice are inseparable histories: Their overlap reveals the ways in which vectors of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality are at the same time incommensurate and mutually constitutive of one another. The connection is not only historical but formal—so much so that some theorists of camp argue that camp, far from having a "consistently progressive politics," might instead "be, after all, a kind of blackface." Robertson, "Mae West's Maids," 394.
44. Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 5.
45. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 28.
46. See Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 328: "The status of class as an object of academic inquiry is an interesting one, as it has never accrued institutional attention as an identity knowledge. In fact . . . identity knowledges were crafted in the divergence of race and gender from class analysis, primarily through the critical figure of Marx, giving rise to a split within left political theory that remains animated, if not at times quite toxic for understanding how structural inequalities and identities are formed today."
47. Brim, *Poor Queer Studies*, 10.
48. It is instructive, for example, to consider Yale's place in Butler's anecdote. While they may be making a point about the university system more broadly, the significance of "Yale" in Butler's "I was off to Yale to be a lesbian" cannot be overlooked. Not only does Yale serve as the primary site of American deconstruction (so much so that "The Yale School" has come to synecdochally stand in for US deconstruction as a whole [Redfield, *Theory at Yale*]); it is also, as Butler's anecdote reveals, a site of emergent identity-based student activism, colloquially known as "the gay Ivy" long before queer theory arrived on campus (Lassila, "Why They Call Yale the 'Gay Ivy'"). New ways of thinking and theorizing were

catalyzed in the clash of these two ideologies of identity. As Corey McEleney notes, 1980s Yale serves as a crucible for the type of queer criticism this book interrogates; indeed, several of the theorists who populate this book overlapped at Yale graduate school at its most Paul de Man–ian moment (McEleney, "Queer Theory and the Yale School"). Several former Elis play an important role in this book: Johnson, Sedgwick, and Reid-Pharr, but also Butler, Lee Edelman, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Joseph Litvak, D. A. Miller, and all attended Yale graduate school during its deconstructionist heyday. See also Wiegman's quip in the introduction to *Object Lessons*:

> While we can't fix our desire (and who would want to), we can follow its effects on the disciplinary apparatus, which means considering how . . . the political imaginary generated by queer critique becomes a disciplinizing apparatus, not simply because the critical authority we have amassed to proclaim in not-identity arises from our institutional location as experts in identity knowledges, but because the claim for being political in the process that everywhere underwrites left identity critique is the most heavily invested sign of our professionalization in identity domains. *You can't get to Yale without it*, which means, Dorothy, we are really not in Kansas anymore. (125, emphasis added)

49. Litvak, *Strange Gourmets*, 29.
50. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 128.
51. Spillers, "'All the Things,'" 77.
52. At once humiliating and delightful, this shock is, in the words of camp theorist J. Bryan Lowder, "not unlike the shock of unexpectedly encountering your best friend on a crowded street in a foreign county. . . . The rush is recognition before cognition, affiliation without identification, id exploding from your psyche like the little mouth in *Alien*" (Lowder, "Joan Crawford's Cream Pantsuit"). See also a quote often (mis)attributed to either F. Scott Fitzgerald or Mark Twain: "An exclamation point is like laughing at your own joke."
53. McEleny, "Queer Theory and the Yale School," 144.
54. Stockton, "Rhythm," 346.
55. Johnson, *A World of Difference*, 16.
56. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*.
57. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 20.
58. Edelman, "Learning Nothing," 125.
59. Cohen, "The Radical Potential of Queer?," 143.
60. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 129.
61. Gomez, "Repeat After Me," 935.
62. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "HIV and AIDS."
63. Similar political and rhetorical strategies are in full force today. Spurred by white nationalism, it is advantageous to the new right to argue that race is a fixed identity category, knowable and policeable. Fueled by antitrans vitriol, it is advantageous to politicians to argue that gender is immutable, biological, and unchanging. Emboldened by US backing, it is advantageous to those invested in Gaza's destruction to argue that Jewish Americanness is a fixed, one-note identity.
64. Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal*, 7.

65. Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal*, 15.
66. Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 50.

ONE. MISCARRYING ON

1. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* xi.
2. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* xviii.
3. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* xxii.
4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "qualification (n.)," March 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6607729647.
5. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* xiv.
6. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* xviii.
7. Clarke et al., "Conversations and Questions," 107.
8. Clarke et al., "Conversations and Questions," 108.
9. Clarke et al., "Conversations and Questions," 108–9.
10. Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," 137.
11. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* 9, 23.
12. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* 9.
13. Clarke et al., "Conversations and Questions," 123.
14. It can only be left to speculation whether Walker's later love affair with singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman would have changed Clarke's opinion on this. Walker, *Gathering Blossoms Under Fire*, 367–90.
15. Jones et al., *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around*, 130.
16. Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," 142.
17. Clarke, "*But Some of Us Are Brave*," 784.
18. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 174.
19. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 173.
20. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 130.
21. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 126.
22. Awkward, "Response," 74.
23. Clarke et al., "Conversations and Questions," 107.
24. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* 111.
25. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* 104.
26. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* 101.
27. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* 105.
28. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* 102.
29. Awkward, "Response."
30. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* xvi.
31. McDowell, "*The Changing Same*," xvi.
32. McDowell, *"The Changing Same,"* 108.
33. Gallop et al., "Criticizing Feminist Criticism," 364.
34. Gallop et al., "Criticizing Feminist Criticism," 394. Gallop's infamous quote reappears in Barbara Johnson's *The Feminist Difference* (11), Elizabeth Abel's "Black Writing, White Reading" (470), Bette London's *Writing Double* (87), Pamela L. Caughie's *Passing and Ped-*