

PERSONAL DEMONS



POSSESSION NARRATIVES OF LATE LIBERALISM

GRACE LAVERY

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Natural pigments on textile. Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, New York. Photo: Paul Salvesson.

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By autism I understand practically what Freud (not however Havelock Ellis) means by autoeroticism.

—Eugen Bleuler, *The Theory of Schizophrenic Negativism*

Sex demons! Was I one of those? The thought hit me with a dull sense of recognition but brought no clarity.

—Candice Lin, “My Life as a Lithium Sex Demon”

I don't think they're aliens. I think they're demons anyway, but that's a longer discussion. . . . Well, look, I think that celestial beings, who fly around, who do weird things to people, I think the desire to describe everything celestial, everything that's otherworldly, to describe it as aliens, I mean every great world religion, including Christianity, the one that I believe in, has understood that there are weird things out there. And there are things that are very difficult to explain. *And I naturally go, when I hear about sort of extra-natural phenomenon*, that's where I go to is the Christian understanding that there's a lot of good out there, but there's also some evil out there, and I think that one of the devil's great tricks is to convince people he never existed.

—Vice President James David Vance, *The Benny Show*, March 28, 2026 (emphasis added)

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There's a Star Trek TNG episode where an alien scientist flees his cultural practice of suicide at a certain age to continue his work, and then, shamed, changes his mind and commits suicide at his family's insistence. Zombies, everyone who's part of the Matrix, is along many vectors of expression of agency, some subtle and some not, a massive force of analogous constraint to the societal suicide ritual.

"Die with us. We love you."

"Or if your soul won't quiet, become inverted and kill the world with us. We love you."

Ziz, "The Matrix Is a System"

Introduction

What of Ziz? Liberalism and Demonology

DISPATCH FROM THE DARKEST TIMELINE

Ziz is already a thing by the time I learn of Ziz. It's early 2025, and my family and I are driving away from New York City, back to California. I'm in a bad mood because I don't want to leave New York, where I was happy or, rather, where I could fashion my unhappiness into a kind of relevancy. Freeways breed contempt, and nothing matters. And the fascists are coming back, any day now.

They're talking about Ziz on the radio, in euphemisms and half-articulations I don't quite understand, can't quite follow. She's a blogger. Aren't we all? Do we still say that? Everyone has socials. It's hardly an avocation (though I think my Chair stalks me on Instagram, where I should probably be *more careful*). Ziz comes from the Bay Area rationalist movement: They have a house style,

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in which they write very gently and technically, with well-timed emotional nudges, and they think about artificial intelligence and how it is going to destroy the world. There's a man named Eliezer Yudkowsky involved. He's not Ziz. Maybe he's like the respectable version of Ziz? He researches artificial intelligence (AI). Autodidact. Lives in Berkeley—a little bit East Bay, a little bit South Bay. There's another guy called Robin Hanson, another rationalist, who did a whole thing with cognitive bias, which is like the new version of logical fallacy: a shape we project onto our fear of ourselves. He thinks incels are right, and maybe they are, right? Certainly sexual desire isn't distributed democratically, on either side of the trade.

But the Berkeley rationalism community has gone, like, insane, or something? My family and I are getting closer to town. We have to stop in "Utah's Dixie," St. George, so I can stock up on estradiol, spironolactone, progesterone, bupropion, and escitalopram. My inhalers and nasal sprays are well stocked; I'm lacking the propranolol, but I need to get the prescription re-upped.

Utah's Dixie. There's a Hollywood-style sign on the hill to that effect, even.

I wrote a novel a few years ago about driving to California from the East Coast, and upon arriving, learning that the whole Bay Area has been absorbed into a collective psychosis. It made sense to write like that when I was living in New York, but now I'm living it, and it's scary. Ziz is . . . what? She's bought a ninety-four-foot rusty tugboat in Alaska and is heading toward the Bay? They call it the Rat Fleet? They're vegans?

No, that was years ago. The Rat Fleet is long gone now, down toward the airport. It was in the Berkeley marina for a while; actually it was there when I was living in that area, but I didn't know it at the time. They're all trans women, lol. They moved the fleet down to San Mateo and people hated them for it. Eyesore. Plus, dildos everywhere: "sex toys and lingerie in 'plain view,'" as the *San Francisco Chronicle* put it. Ziz was hoarding "oily bilge water" and trying to convince people to transition.

On a long enough car trip, any thought is unwanted and intrusive. For example:

The fascists want us to be scared, and we are right to be scared. Therefore the fascists are right.

Or:

This business with Ziz is going to make one hell of a cult documentary in about five years.

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Behind the madness, scads of normal men. Why is it that gravitating toward TED Talks, online message boards about cognitive bias and such shit, all of this militantly normal, affect-neutralizing “mindbloom” (to appropriate the gorgeous name of a tech startup that sends you ketamine for your mental health), drives one to this kind of psychosis? How has the aesthetic form of normalness itself come to signify a hallucinogenic disconnection from reality? Why is the richest man in the world starting a government agency named after a meme from 2013?

The company that made the HBO Scientology documentary wants to do an onscreen interview with me about academic freedom. Am I in the cult, or are they?

You’re the cult you’re the cult you’re the cult you’re the cult. It wasn’t the same company, in the end, anyway.

Ziz faked her own death twice in 2022. *Twice. Two times.*

The tugboat is in Princeton-by-the-Sea, radiating collapse (plate 1). It will cost \$2 million to move it, and who has that kind of money to clear up some asshole’s shitty boat? Not Pillar Point Harbor.

Months later, I’m scouring online message boards to figure out what the papers aren’t saying about Ziz. Why? Unclear. Anyway, it seems as though she was driven mad by Newcomb’s Paradox:

There are two boxes. One of them is transparent and contains \$1,000. The other is opaque and has either \$0 or \$1 million in it. Whether zero or a mil was decided by a Predictor, and you are the Chooser, who gets to choose to take either or both boxes. Before you knew you were even playing this game, the Predictor assessed your character and personal history (let’s say, in sum, your ≈search history), in order to make a judgment: If the Predictor thought you’d take both boxes, she put nothing in the second one. If she thought you’d choose only one box, whether the mystery box or the \$1,000, she’d put the million in the opaque one. So, should you choose both boxes, or risk it all for the mystery quantum?

There is another way to do this.

Are you a one-boxer or a two-boxer?

There is another way.

Do you feel included in the story of the future?

Another.

Do you believe that you are capable of acting in such a way that someone who knew you better than you have ever been known would be surprised?

And so on.

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We are wrong to begin with, even if we were sincere. (“Things Are Not What They Appear,” by the Gothic Archies.)

But now, Ziz maybe killed some people? In 2022, the Zizians tried to kill their eighty-year-old landlord, stabbed him fifty times and left him impaled on a katana. When he regained consciousness, the landlord shot two of his attackers and killed one of them, a twenty-year-old trans woman and associate of Ziz’s named Emma Borhanian. The group who attacked the landlord were charged with Borhanian’s murder (California law so-designating deaths caused by actions taken in self-defense). The landlord was then murdered while the group awaited trial for the death of Emma Borhanian.

Now Ziz is being investigated by the feds for some potential role in the murders of six people across the country. One of a Zizian’s parents was shot in the back of the head in their living room.

Now a Border Patrol guy’s been shot in Vermont.

Cops, landlords, unsupportive parents. Fuck them, right?

QUANTIFY DOOM

In the person of Ziz, I hope we can agree, something has gone too far. I say *hope* because I can’t be sure. I gave a lecture on *The Silence of the Lambs* a few years ago, in which I emphasized the narrative’s strange interest in the diagnosis of the serial killer Buffalo Bill, so called because he “skins his humps,” and insisted that, despite what others have joined Hannibal Lecter in saying, the character most certainly is a transsexual. After my lecture, I was asked whether I saw Jame Gumb as, then, a trans heroine, who should be commended for her militant stand against trans medicalism. “I can see your point,” I found myself saying, “but, like . . . I don’t think we should be kidnapping and murdering people.” As soon as I’d said that, the question asker agreed wholeheartedly: They’d never intended to suggest otherwise, of course! And of course, they didn’t . . . but what *did* they mean? What do any of us mean, when we applaud monstrous acts committed against representatives of monstrous classes, in contexts as monstrous as Buffalo Bill’s, or Ziz’s, which is to say—as ours? Sometimes, as in the case of the hunky CEO-murderer Luigi Mangione, there is an easily recognizable erotic compensation, but other times the matter is less clear: One could call it “radicalization” except that it does not come from a root. We seem to absorb it through the skin, the user interface, the algorithm.

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Ziz is a trans girl, who gained a following of online supporters, many of whom are also trans girls, who profess the tripartite creed she developed: militant veganism (consciousness triggered by guilt at killing twelve ants in a bath), a syncretic theology of the bicameral (and therefore bigender) mind, and a fairly high P(doom) assessment—that is, she feels that it is more likely than people generally believe that the emergence of artificial intelligence will lead to the enslavement of humankind and the end of the world. She probably thinks we're living in a simulation, but her published statements on the matter are uncertain, speculative. There's psychosis there for those who want to diagnose it, obviously; there's also "a little learning" of a certain kind of analytic philosophy. There's New Age mood music, a little cyberpunk; there's *The Matrix*, trolley problems, the strange history of the idea of sentience as it is given to us by science fiction—a notion that consciousness could emerge if one simply ramped up a microchip's processing power beyond a certain threshold. Decades in which Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, for example, has exemplified the project of moral sentiment.

Ziz raises two sets of questions for me.

One. What are the latent and proximate causes of such contemporary fantasies about consciousness as those of Ziz and her followers, which are (I think) commonplace features of contemporary ideology? More importantly, what coalitions can be built between those under the spell of such fantasies—or are they, indeed, intrinsically antisocial and self-isolating, in the way of the classical definitions of psychosis? What is the relation between such fantasies or ideologies and neoliberalism, whose short phase of hegemony began with the Reagan presidency, the sudden sell-off of the Soviet Union, and the more gradual sell-off of European welfare states, which seems to be coming to an end under authoritarian states consolidating power in Russia and the United States?

Insofar as psychosis resembles a *Choose Your Own Adventure* story, it might also seem like the climax of a version of liberal relativism: If everyone can have their own values, then why not their own sense of fundamental reality? On the other hand, insofar as neoliberalism inherited liberalism's dependence on institutional coherence as a mechanism by which the state could be organized in the interests of capital, it also depended upon the mechanisms of a free press and a (ideally privately run) free university—neither of which can serve any useful function within the contemporary dispensation of nativist populism. President Trump claimed at the Conservative Political

Action Conference (CPAC) that opinion polls give him a popularity rating of “71 percent,” and the veracity of the claim is barely testable—it belongs to a cognitive category to which “veracity” is not strictly assignable.¹ “Performative,” one might say, following the Austinian observation that performatives are neither true nor false, were it not that this kind of speech act is not context dependent. Or rather, its context is the totality, and the utterance’s effect will always be felicitous in the minds of those with ears to hear. A conspiracy thinker can never quite belong to neoliberalism, even as he seems to most exemplify its logic, because he can never perform the role of *homo economicus* persuasively enough.² He has internalized too well the utilitarian position that consciousness seeks to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, and has applied it to a level of cognition one phase prior to that in which Hayek placed market participation: *homo economicus* can choose pleasure (let’s say, in a psychoanalytic register, compensation) only after assessing the merits of Products A and B.³ “Homo conspirator,” however, gains his compensation from the assessment itself.

Two. Ziz is a transsexual: What about that? It would be too tempting to begin to address this question defensively, which is how people tend to—and, to say the necessary: Most oddball cultists are not transsexuals, and transsexuals are massively more likely to be targets than perpetrators of violent and sexual crime (though that matter has no bearing on the civil rights questions raised by transition). But obviously this is unpersuasive. Transsexuality begins, in its general formulation, with a traumatic sundering of body and mind, whose incompatibility are taken, by any of a million nonce means, as axiomatic. One transsexual writer of my acquaintance made the connection between the transsexual and *homo conspirator* unmissable, when, after I asked him why it seemed important to him to begin hormone replacement therapy, he blurted out, frantically, “I just feel like they’ve been keeping it from me!”

The relationship between transition and conspiracy/psychosis/nonce or syncretic theology/cosmology (I use all these terms in this book) is a profoundly knotty one. Broadly, the history upon which the following arguments depend runs as follows: Liberalism introduced the idea of the sexual subject as an essential, biological kind of person (as Foucault, of course, argued), which synthesized religious and evolutionary modes of thinking about sex but also, crucially, attempted to secularize them—the question remaining whether psychoanalysis, which may or may not be liberal, could ever be fully absorbed in secular terms. That historical question about the postwar

reception of sexuality as a model of the human being became transformed, in the American century (a short one, according to Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism: 1945–73*), into a neoliberal framework in which the sexual subject was knowable primarily as a participant in a market, such that the previously overburdened idea of sexual morality was reduced to a single phenomenon (consent), and shopping and fucking came to be versions of the same activity. The political dimension of that neoliberal revision of the theory of sexuality required the generation of new nonsecular ideologies of sexual orientation and gender identity, both of which were fictions designed to apologize to a world that hated (and still hates) the spectacles of sodomy, the intimacies of women, and transition. Those fictions, in turn, came to forget that they were fictions, and became the basis on which homosexual and transsexual practices became legible not merely extramurally, but intramurally—a codification amplified and accelerated by the development of neoliberal techniques of the self with little enough to do with the sexual body, and everything to do, rather, with the ways in which “online” developed as a social environment. These histories this book will trace through their cultural figurations, in a variety of (mostly) mass-cultural texts that deal, in different ways, with bodies that seem to want different things than the consciousnesses within them.

Hence: Possession narratives, and especially narratives of demonic possession, and most specifically narratives of transsexual possession, constitute my primary archive. These stories explore the question of the body as sexed and racialized in ways that have psychic counterparts—and which therefore entail the possibility of sexual and racial misfitting: the former in the dualism contested, but ultimately shared, between “adult human female” TERFs and “born in the wrong body” trans, the latter in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*, and both in the blockbuster romantic drama *Ghost*, among dozens of other examples we will explore. Analogous models of mind/body dualist representations occur in examinations en route of new religious movements (like Scientology), third-person-shooter video games (like *Alan Wake 2*), and the figuration of sexual monsters in a variety of media. Understanding the diversity of means by which possession is narrated and configured in our present moment might, I hope, precede the foundation of such coalitions as I mentioned above.

Spending my life, as I do, between universities, and in LGBT communities online and IRL, I have become accustomed to neoplatonist formations of many kinds, and while I think it is a little silly to direct millions of dollars in

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grant money to explore and examine what psychedelic culture has to teach us about the nature of reality, I've no interest in moralizing about it. Nor in clutching *The Stars Down to Earth* like a rosary whenever a lesbian offers to outline my chart. The critique of such inquiries is presumed by the mock-secrecy in which they are conducted, in any case. Whether or not it was ever worth preserving, the empirical model of techno-rationality has been discredited, and, as with capitalism itself, the only way out is through. This being said, it seems to me that in order to make a coalition against the epistemic horror of capitalism possible, we need to develop a new kind of etiquette with which to approach others whose cognitive commitments are not merely different from, but incompatible with, our own. As and when psychedelic research can formulate such etiquette, so much the better; insofar as it mistakes itself for a critique of techno-rationality, it is more likely than otherwise to reproduce the absolute isolation of the psychotic as she is positioned by capital. Togetherness is hard to imagine at the best of times, and these are some of the worst—but to that, commitment remains worth enacting.

DEMONOLOGY AFTER SUBVERSION

This is a book about how we have come to believe that we have souls, when we know (or should know) that we do not have souls. It is also about the things themselves, those things claiming to be souls that are not (could not be) souls—things like sexual orientation and gender identity, and beyond those to anything else one is compelled to discover about oneself: that one's musical age is eighty-six, or that one is a double Pisces with Mars in Aries. It is therefore a book of demonology.⁴

The term may conjure the spirit of Aleister Crowley, but despite its anachronistically gothic connotations, I use it more or less literally here: The chapters in part I of this book describe invocations of demonic possession, specifically of transsexual demonic possession; possession by demonic or ghostly figures sexed differently than the bodies they inhabit. That “difference” is different in each of the cases I examine, which are the substance dualism of René Descartes; its problematic resistance to eradication in the work of contemporary analytic philosophy; the emergence of “transsexual identity disorder” as a diagnostic category; the Twin Flames Universe online high-control group; the 1990 blockbuster movie *Ghost*; and a hoax news drama broadcast by the BBC on Halloween 1992, titled *Ghostwatch*.⁵ The chapters in part II of this book

explore fuller articulations or theories of possession in a set of highly charged historical settings: the articulation of possession as a logic of culpability in *Twin Peaks*; the entrapment of psychoanalysis in the dianetic theories of L. Ron Hubbard; the elevation of the death drive as the animating principle of sexuality in the work of Leo Bersani. I also discuss some non-transsexual ghosts in some paintings by Philip Guston, and some demons, too, who aren't (or aren't simply) ghostly—figures of moral monstrosity like the child rapist James Vincent (Jimmy) Savile, the wicked men at the center of two documentaries by the filmmaker David Farrier, and the second Ku Klux Klan.

When, as in some of these latter cases, the irresistible interiority at issue is not understood as fictive or supernatural in an actualized way, we will see how it articulates the central problematic of the absent soul. Indeed, the sheer diversity of demons possessing people demonstrates the surprising force and ubiquity of what one might expect to be a marginal metaphor. Even when the language of possession is deployed ironically or metaphorically—or even apotropaically—we will see that its capacity to resolve questions about the nature of the self (sometimes *through* irony, metaphor, or apotropaism) indicates the striking durability of nonsecular ideologemes into apparently secular discursive fields. I am deeply unsure that the apparently secular frameworks we usually deploy when describing psychosis, drive, or even moral disgrace are fully exhausted of all speculative or theological content. No, Jimmy Savile was not literally possessed by a demon, and nobody believes that he was. But there is a complexity that survives that statement without reopening the self-evidently banal question of whether ghosts “exist.” Although contemporary liberal rationality broadcasts the secularity of its account of personhood—its rejection of body/soul dualism—that account of personhood frays when it is brought to bear on individuals outside of its normal moral ambit. A phrase that encapsulates this form of exceptionalism is “a few bad apples”: the badness of the moral exception indicates a kind of material difference between the bad apple and the normal one; indeed, the phrase seems to equate good (= opposite of *bad*) with normal (= opposite of *a few*). This kind of exceptionalism is not merely imposed upon the moral exception, either. In Savile's case, as we shall see, one of the primary motors of his philanthropy was a recognition of the scale and intensity of his own moral depravity: In that respect, the committed Catholic (and Knight Commander of St. Gregory the Great, the church's highest lay honor, sometimes referred to as a “papal knighthood”) understood *himself* as demonic and acted in accordance with that self-concept. The conceptual

slippage between moral monstrosity and body/soul dualism provokes certain wider consequences for the political systems founded on neoliberal rationality, but for now just one point is worth observing: that if the secular/monist account of personhood can be revoked beyond a certain threshold of moral conduct, then the moral assessment of a person must precede, logically if not temporally, its characterization in secular/monist terms. *Demonology*, then, designates the syncretic theologies and nonce cosmologies that emerge to occupy the space that would otherwise have been occupied by secular monist accounts of personhood, albeit that such ideas are often framed fictively, held briefly, or articulated beyond the realm of reason altogether.

My use of the term *demonology* draws heavily on Michael Rogin's magisterial work on the "countersubversive tradition" in American politics, which he summarizes as follows: "The demonologist splits the world in two, attributing magical, pervasive power to a conspiratorial center of evil. Fearing chaos and secret penetration, the countersubversive interprets local initiatives as signs of alien power. Discrete individuals become, in the countersubversive imagination, members of a single political body directed by its head. The countersubversive needs monsters to give shape to his anxieties and permit him to indulge his forbidden desires. Demonization allows the countersubversive, in the name of battling the subversive, to imitate his enemy."⁶ Writing in 1987, Rogin's analysis strikes us today, in early 2026, as prescient (... uncannily so?). We are by now all familiar with the rotations by which political dissent, or even minor disagreements within the ideologeme of contemporary liberalism itself, is transformed into signs of a deeper, originary, and therefore nonpolitical malevolence. The Jeffrey Epstein affair remains a strikingly flexible narrative device for such transformations, since it seems to prove that Clinton, Trump, or whomever was not merely a figure for neoliberal extraction or fascist nativism but also, and more importantly, a paedophile. While such transformations allow anti-elitist affect to intensify, they do so at the expense of that affect's political specificity, such that the haters in both camps (anti-Trump and anti-Clinton) are experiencing formally identical forms of revulsion. That loss can certainly indicate a growth in class consciousness (Clinton and Trump are, indeed, members of the same social class and pursue the same class interests), but at the cost of a certain depoliticization (an understanding of the ideological differences between Clintonian neoliberalism and Trumpist fascism remains strategically important for those who wish to pursue alternatives to both).

Yet as that example makes clear, certain elements of Rogin's analysis have been somewhat confuted by the intervening history, crucially the clarity of the word *countersubversive* and its suitability for assessing the contemporary state of political ideology. In the era of Reagan, with the end of the Cold War on the horizon (Rogin notes, *passim*, the immanence of *glasnost* and *perestroika*), it was relatively easy to identify the subversives, and by implication the countersubversives. On one side, with an eye cast back toward the 1960s: punks, hippies, commies, campaigners for nuclear disarmament, cults, the Black Panthers and their supporters, fags, Satanists (though more as symptom than contributive factor), Yuppies, et cetera. On the other side: Republicans, Democrats, men in suits, wives in aprons. This book, too, will examine the Manichean framing of domestic politics in the era of mid- to late and post-Cold War America, where the melodramatic cognitive model framed either as "Russia vs. America" or "communism vs. capitalism" could be redirected toward domestic populations that the dominant American ideology designated as "cults." But if the institutions of democratic liberalism that seemed unassailable in 1987 collapse, it is harder to be sure whether Robert F. Kennedy Jr. or the American Medical Association is the true countersubversive; how, indeed, to place Donald J. Trump in relation to this question. Of course, Rogin does not claim that anybody is *exempt* from capture by the countersubversive imagination; nonetheless, he could not foresee that by 2026 subversiveness, not merely as a word but as a cognitive style, would become the shared grammar of public participation as such. Or, in simpler terms, it was not yet clear in 1987 the degree to which "subversive" and "countersubversive" positions depended upon democratic institutions whose legitimacy is no longer taken for granted.

In addition, I would like to mark a methodological difference from Rogin's "*Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology*" that, while certainly inflected by historical developments in theory and in politics since that book was published, is not primarily a historical difference. Rogin's book embarks from a clear premise: "Demonology as a political form is not restricted to the United States, but this book is an inquiry into its specifically American variant."⁷ The work that follows takes as its material the specificities of the history of the United States, and takes the public management of colonization, slavery, and imperialism as the discursive logics through which "subversive" and "countersubversive" were first given meaning in American public life. This I cannot dispute; indeed, the analyses of race

and sex that I conduct here point consistently to the very histories that Rogin names. I do believe, however, that it is hard, and perhaps impossible, to isolate a national “variant” from the general morass of demonological thinking that dominates not merely the United States as an ongoing discursive object, but the English language and the wider world as fields through which that object moves. Consider the case of “Q,” a mysterious figure, supposedly within the first Trump administration, “dropping” secrets online to his millions of followers in which Trump is portrayed as a heroic anti-pedophilia activist taking down a global Satanist cabal—who was eventually revealed to have been a collaborative pseudonym for a South African engineer and a Korean American coder based in the Philippines.⁸ Yet social media merely make spectacular the promise of global connectedness that has always been at the core of neoliberalism’s self-definition, whose ideological function was to conceal the violent and coercive realities of “offshoring” and “outsourcing.” Neoliberalism may have supplied such vocabulary, meanwhile, but the ideological mystification and economic violence are aspects of imperial governmentality that date at least from the “new imperialism” described by J. A. Hobson in 1902 and popularized by Lenin in 1916–17: Compare, for example, the British Empire’s escalation of the rate of exploitation of Indian and Egyptian cotton plantation workers in order to compete with the North American slave economies between the 1840s and 1860s.⁹

Yet, while this global consciousness renders a uniquely American “variant” of demonology hard to conceptualize, that fact does not lessen the burden of seeking out what, exactly, is American about the *global* form of demonology. The economic historian Giovanni Arrighi suggests that at the end of the Cold War, one power had indeed emerged as globally victorious, but that power was neither the United States nor “capitalism” understood as an ideological or reproductive theory: Rather, the unipolarity of the post–Cold War belonged to what he called “the capitalist world-economy,” composed largely of “big business.” Indeed, as he writes in the 2009 postscript to the second edition of *The Long Twentieth Century*, the post-US global political project the book had envisioned “was a collective Western project,” because “the idea that the United States would embark on a project of world empire virtually alone [i.e., the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq] was deemed too foolish to be worth considering.”¹⁰ The foolishness has only become more farcical in the intervening years, with the United States now threatening a logistically improbable invasion of Greenland, a territory over which it has long

exerted economic and strategic control through the normal means of neoliberal hegemony—hegemony, indeed, threatened by the saber-rattling—and an enormous Arctic area over which an assertion of sovereignty could not guarantee actual territorial control. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia and Israel stand out as those who have launched the most successful wars to acquire territory through military annexation, though in both cases that success has been limited. Others (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, etc.) have found it challenging to achieve through invasion three goals that were, in prior eras, the general product of imperial expansion: (1) a formal announcement of annexation; (2) durable territorial control; and (3) international recognition of postinvasion boundaries. There is no reason to believe that a US invasion of Greenland would secure all three of them, either—and quite likely, it would secure none. The position of the United States that Arrighi describes is thus complicated and nuanced: *Geopolitically* it has achieved the condition that Arrighi, following Ranajit Guha's account of the British imperial governance of India, calls "dominance without hegemony," while *economically* it has become the central node of the generally disorganized system of the capitalist world-economy.¹¹ These articulations preceded the various post-2015 breakdowns of neoliberal institutions (Brexit, the US presidential election, the election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, etc.), but, if anything, those events have only strengthened Arrighi's view that geopolitical and geo-economic power now function quite independently in the case of the United States; indeed, extending that analysis forward, we might observe that the United States is now *only* observable as the gap between geo-economic power and geopolitical powerlessness, a gap dramatized in the slogan Make America Great Again, which is at once an assertion of dominance and a confession of weakness.

This book is not an economic history, nor is it primarily any kind of history: It is a series of close readings of cultural phenomena that, I believe, reveal elements of collective experience that are not attainable through any other means. Nonetheless, the fact that most of the archive of this book is American is not a coincidence or a failure of nerve: American cultural power and, crucially, *cultural powerlessness* have enjoyed the position of dominance without hegemony in a global economy in which the United States occupied a privileged position from the end of the Cold War. For the central counterexample, this book's third chapter turns to a British archive in order to understand the absorption of the theory of sexuality in British culture, which was both more extensive and quicker than in comparable events elsewhere in the

Western world. That, combined with the post-social-democratic reorganization of the British economy around global culture exports, sets a trajectory for a demonological ideologeme that outpaced related events elsewhere. As we shall see, that occurred for very specific and unusual reasons; nonetheless, its effects are still palpable, and the line from the 1990s British culture I describe in chapter 3 to the tyrannical TERFism of J. K. Rowling I describe in the book's epilogue will be easy for readers to follow.

YOU WILL BE VISITED BY AT LEAST THREE GHOSTS

Not all nondualisms are necessarily secular. Eve Sedgwick turned to Buddhism in order to formulate nondualist metaphysics, and, conversely, Foucault suggests in *Discipline and Punish* that the secularization of the conscience reversed the values of the ancient mind/body dualism, rather than unifying them. In the introduction to her recent book on narrativity and the will, Jennifer Fleissner diagnoses the present as “a monist era,” that of neoliberalism, whose symptomatic modes of thought are network theory (as described by Sianne Ngai and advocated by Bruno Latour) and affect theory (as advocated by Brian Massumi and critiqued by Ruth Leys).¹² As Fleissner notes, these two cognitive styles are monist in conspicuous terms: Network analysis, for example, passes over narrative, and therefore history, in favor of “a ‘ceaseless process’ [Fleissner citing Ngai] taking place in an extended present tense.”¹³ Affect theory, meanwhile, “displaces feeling away from the individual subject toward that subject’s merger with a greater collectivity and the ambient environment.”¹⁴ The novel, Fleissner argues, has from its eighteenth-century origin been bound to reject any promise of self-dissolution, since it is intrinsically a mode that negotiates a difference between self (construed as will—that is, as autonomy and desire) and world (construed as field, antagonist, or object of desire). The first chapter of this book will examine a continuity between early modern dualism and its contemporary manifestations that will tend to affirm Fleissner’s insight that will has been a site of dualist persistence even as the world at large pretends to have solved the philosophical conundrums set by Descartes. One difference between this book and Fleissner’s can nonetheless be remarked: She credits, as I do not, the idea that the liberal dualisms intrinsic to the novel can be activated toward a renewal of the civic liberalism whose decline is manifested by Latour and Massumi. Describing the “philosophical normativity” that has

resisted Latour and Massumi, Fleissner characterizes the normative position as one “for which individual autonomy derives its dignity from its recognition of the distinct claims made by other persons—and for which, notably, the process of adjudicating those claims in relation to one another can never entail recourse to nature, but only to agreed-upon norms.”¹⁵ Such norms, I argue, are now irrecoverable, and the liberal model of negotiation Fleissner describes here has been lost with it (though I am perhaps also temperamentally skeptical that a just system of negotiation has ever existed). I am afraid, too, that I do not believe that “individual autonomy” possesses or is entitled to possess anything like “dignity”; as a reader of Freud, I tend to suspect that the ego is only the most fragile and frantic part of consciousness, and therefore not a good candidate for a general theory of the value of human life.

Meanwhile, in his recent (but pre-COVID) book *The Burnout Society*, the Catholic Korean German theorist Byung-Chul Han proposes an intriguing model of *nonsecular monism* to describe the broad social condition of the “burnout society,” which he calls “neuronal power.”¹⁶ Han argues that the era preceding that of social media was one in which the Romantic opposition between self and other structured both medical and nonmedical accounts of personal suffering: The body was conceptualized as an embattled object resisting the ingress of germs or infections, while the state was bound to repel “Otherness” in all its racial, ethnic, sexual, and ideological foreignness.¹⁷ Provocatively addressing an age of escalating nativism, Han argues that contemporary culture has replaced otherness with “difference,” which “does not entail immunoreaction,” such that “today, even the so-called immigrant is not an immunological *Other*, not a *foreigner* in the strong sense, who poses a real danger or of whom one is afraid. Immigrants and refugees are more likely to be perceived as burdens than as threats.”¹⁸ Han holds that the effects of this vibe shift are everywhere, with the Foucauldian “disciplinary society” of “*May Not*” replaced by the “achievement society” mantra of “unlimited *Can*,” and the sicknesses of the immunological phase replaced by the “autistic self-referentiality” of an endlessly productive worker seeking to maximize her viability as the holder of a specialized economic role.¹⁹ That and, in one of the book’s most fully realized sections, tiredness, specifically the “solitary tiredness” caused by the drive always to be making, doing, seeing, and being more than one has made, done, seen, or been, different from the collective “tiredness that inspires” introduced by the Sabbath, for example, which entails a “day of not-to, a day on which the *use of the useless* proves possible.”²⁰ Han

acknowledges the Heideggerian character of his preposition-based vocabulary while letting the Benjaminian tone of his messianism travel, at least in respect of tiredness, under the radar.

Han's book, remarkable and admirable as it is, suffers from a serious structural problem: It makes claims about contemporary "society," but the only archive he marshals for his analysis is that of philosophical literature; he provides no clinical data to justify his ideas about illness, and no sociological or economic data to justify his ideas about productivity. I suspect that this is because his work is not, necessarily, the work of cultural theory that it at first appears but is, in an unspoken way, a book of phenomenological theology, whose mission is to amplify the Christological pessimism that

the modern loss of faith does not concern just God or the hereafter. It involves reality itself and makes human life radically fleeting. Life has never been as fleeting as it is today. Not just human life, but the world in general is becoming radically fleeting. Nothing promises duration or substance [*Bestand*; the book was translated from German by Erik Butler]. Given this lack of Being, nervousness and unease arise. . . . Even religions, as thanatotechnics that would remove the fear of death and produce a feeling of duration, have run their course. The general de-narrativization of the world is reinforcing the feeling of fleetingness. It makes life bare. Work itself is a bare activity. The activity of bare laboring corresponds entirely to bare life. Merely working and merely living define and condition each other. Because a narrative thanatotechnics proves lacking, the unconditional compulsion arises to keep bare life healthy. Nietzsche already observed that, after the death of God, health rose to divine status.²¹

One notes, then, an unexpected revivification of phenomenological Christianity in the service of the demonological impulse explored throughout Han's book. Indeed, the secluded references to Heidegger seem upstream of those to Agamben and even of the explicit reference to Nietzsche, and one hears an echo of Heidegger's self-exculpatory profession of the inability of philosophy to effect political change in the 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel* in which he was invited to reflect on his collaboration with the Nazi Party (or, in 1933, still the National Socialist German Workers' Party): "Philosophy will be unable to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavor. Only a god can save us. The only possibility available to us is

that by thinking and poetizing we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god, or for the absence of a god in [our] decline, insofar as in view of the absent god we are in a state of decline.”²² Reading between Heidegger and Han, then, one notes that the religiously inclined branch of phenomenology occupies a specific place within the intellectual tradition of demonology: Unlike most other demonologies, this line of thought explicitly problematizes monism and is willing to risk it all, so to speak, for the right dualism. But, of course, like any of the other demonologies, it can offer a reader—or, indeed, any Other—no reason to do likewise.

I may not share Fleissner’s enthusiasm for secular dualism, but I agree wholeheartedly that the form of secularity that dominated neoliberalism was indeed monist and treated consciousness as analogous to digitizable content, an idea realized in the ubiquitous “uploading consciousness to the cloud” trope, which propels the various plots of the television anthology *Black Mirror*. Under the rod of such techno-rationality, the antistate postsecularisms of the neoliberal period were sometimes positioned in surprisingly crucial positions relative to power. The influential work of the British writers Alan Moore and Grant Morrison, for example, dominated the American (and therefore global) markets for comic books in the 1980s and ’90s. Both were open, and often in dialogue with their readers in letters pages, about their anticapitalist political commitments and their esoteric practices of chaos magic, a ritualistic pagan faith both practiced with the utmost sincerity. In her study of American spiritualism, the historian Molly McGarry argues that non-normative esoteric rituals, especially those that had been practiced primarily by women, came in the twentieth century to forge “a unique set of affinities through a radical collapse of temporality.”²³ It would not be hard to trace the affinity of sexuality and spiritualism, nor that affinity’s dependence upon the cascading temporalities of the monthly comic, in the works of Moore or Morrison: In an early issue of Morrison’s *The Invisibles*, itself named after an important work of nineteenth-century spiritualism, the author encouraged their readers to masturbate at a given time, on Thanksgiving 1995, in the hope that doing so would “charge a sigil” that Morrison had drawn in the issue, and so power the book to draw more readers.²⁴ The “wank-a-thon” failed to stanch short-term losses, but after some personnel changes, the book ran for another six years. *Personal Demons* is not an endorsement of such rituals, or the esoteric philosophies that guide them. My interest, rather, is in the tendency of neoliberalism to produce such nonce cosmologies as a condition

of its own continued dominance, as well as, following McGarry, to conceptualize the kinds of affinities possible between them, and the coalitions those affinities might engender, that stop short of endorsement or conformity.

There is one line of demonological thought for which this book might itself be mistaken, and which therefore needs particular attention. Although it is not exclusively (or even primarily) a liberal entity, what we might call the “anti-woke industrial complex” exists politically as liberalism did in relation to the cultural polarizations of the interwar period in Europe: to make the Right seem more palatable than the Left to a democratic electorate. Indeed, such a method broadcasts fascism as an extremism of the center, whose methods—while perhaps drastic—are only the necessary tools for achieving a commonly held goal, the defeat of that syntactically uncertain enemy of the people, “woke,” which occupies the same position relative to Trumpism as Communism did relative to Hitlerism. Indeed, the fascist cooption of the symbols and aesthetics of the non-Communist socialists—which, as Eric Hobsbawm says, “is so obvious in Hitler’s ‘National Socialist Workers’ Party’ with its (modified) red flag”—has been accomplished by Trump through appeals to the “disillusioned left.”²⁵ The middle section of this book, a series of reflections on the desire to wake up, explores the erotics and hydraulics of the “woke” hyperbole, but otherwise I have nothing to add to a discourse as degraded as any I’ve experienced, one whose fundamental vocabulary, starting with the contemptuous blackface lip-twist entailed by recitations of the word *woke* itself, cannot be uttered without a self-racializing form of disgust.

Nonetheless, the anti-woke left (even there, I shudder at the lack of scare quotes; I am, in fact, rather scared of the “anti-woke left”) poses a particular formal problem for this book, which concerns the target of its own demonological splitting. The problem is that the demon conjured by the anti-woke industrial complex is often given the name “liberal” or “liberalism,” which is the word I use, I hope nondemonologically, to designate the institutional forms and discursive norms of democratic governmentality, roughly since the Second World War, which I take to have been in a state of (probably) terminal collapse since roughly 2015. As is, I think, clear already, *Personal Demons* carries no nostalgia for the liberalism that is ending, and aims toward nonfascist responses to it with which to confront and defeat the global nativism of the moment. For this reason, readers might understandably want to align this book with one like, for example, Catherine Liu’s *Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class*, in which the author argues that

“to defeat reactionary politics masquerading as populism, we need anti-PMC [professional-managerial class] struggle from the Left, not more identity politics, which has become just another vehicle of PMC virtue signaling.”²⁶ How to read such a sentence? Conceptually, it is almost unobjectionable, but it bears two conspicuous phrases, *identity politics* and *virtue signaling*, that clang familiarly—buzzwords whose propagandistic value undermines the tonal clarity, the plainspokenness, that Liu holds to be a virtue. To read in such a way (as with many of the reading practices in this book) is to read conspiratorially, of course; but just because you can’t prove a dog whistle, and just because the author may not have believed herself to be whistling for dogs, doesn’t prevent the dogs from arriving at the scene of reading and barking loudly over everything else. In respect of identity politics, meanwhile, Colleen Lyé’s superb essay “Identity Politics, Criticism, and Self-Criticism” demonstrates with historical and theoretical rigor that the structure that now goes by that name derives from the American Maoists’ attempts to refashion Third World ideology critique toward practical ends in North America. That crucial reframing means that when Liu describes her work, which of course comes from within the PMC (she is a professor at UC Irvine), as “the necessary work of self-criticism [that provides] a few tools to attack PMC positions in its best-defended redoubts—political organizations, publishing, media, private foundations, think tanks, and the university,” she is not refuting but reasserting the necessity of identity politics as originally practiced.²⁷

Liu is among the most rigorous and reflective of the anti-woke leftists, yet it is in respect of affective disinhibition that *Virtue Hoarders* achieves its most important work. Its introduction proceeds like a furious allegory, creating little fictional vignettes to illustrate the moral depravity of the PMC and the dumb, signifying valor of the proletariat: “PMC virtue hoarding is the insult added to injury when white-collar managers, having downsized their blue-collar workforce, then disparage them for their bad taste in literature, bad diets, unstable families, and deplorable child-rearing habits.”²⁸ (As though corporate downsizers have any interest in literature!) The prose satisfies because it does not hold itself accountable to scholarly standards of evidence: “The work represented here is not a neutral piece of professional scholarship, refining terms and their definitions, insisting on nuance, and then finger-wagging at those on the Left who are allegedly uncivil, who cannot hold polite discussions, and who hurl epithets at their enemies like missiles.”²⁹ Defenders of scholarly incivility, and there are not few, often turn to military idiolects (though Liu

reclaims hers from an $n+1$ article) as a way of signaling, perhaps not virtue, but a capacity for violence associated with political efficacy—a trope that cannot but signify as the same kind of overcompensation as a muscle car when deployed by a member of the PMC like Liu (or me) who has never been anywhere near a missile. We are, nonetheless, in the presence of a fictional demon who exists as feeling and as fragment but not as actant, and any utility that might have come from “nuance” or “refining terms and their definitions” must be re(de)defined as “liberal virtue” and sacrificed on its altar.

In other words, it is between myself and the melodramatic iconoclasts that I want to draw the firmest line, precisely because it is where readers of *Personal Demons* are perhaps likeliest to make a mistake: Without wishing to defend the antiquated liberalisms that Liu scorns, I am most interested in the social reproduction of that scorn itself, as a generalized condition of being, and as the generic grammar of public participation.

GAY RITES, OR WHY DOES EVERYONE ON LEX WANT TO KNOW MY SUN/MOON/RISING?

I offer this survey of topics in order to clarify two further premises of the work. One, that I have never been interested in recovering the demon as an agent of some dubious sense of queer and/or revolutionary potentiation—according to the by-now familiar trick of neutralizing horror by habilitating it. The demons that appear in these chapters are not generally salvageable: Some of them are merely irritating and difficult to exorcise (like the Cartesian subject), but others are evil, and a willingness to identify and describe evil should not be mistaken for an aestheticizing relativism. Two, these chapters argue that the present state of widespread demonic possession has been brought about by the collapse of neoliberalism as a framework for global governance and its partial supersession by global white ethnonationalisms. We will explore in some detail the ramifications of neoliberalism for a theory of interiority over the course of this book, but the typifying case—admittedly at some remove from the main framing of neoliberalism as an extreme form of laissez-faire economics—is that of sexuality: an interior orientation or identity whose emergence and dominance mapped neatly onto the neoliberal economic period. This is not an accident, but part of the way in which neoliberalism transformed our collective understanding of desire, to propose the sexual subject as a person for whom sexual desire and activity were neither

shameful nor holy, but aspects of a universal distinction between classes of person—that *heterosexual* and *homosexual* were isomorphic syndromes, differing from each other in content but possessing essentially the same form. Foucault's famous (and famously contentious) formulation that, at the end of the nineteenth century, "the homosexual was now a species," even if true, comported only the far more modest claim that some portion of people were afflicted (or, if one is Oscar Wilde, blessed) with an incorrigible sexual aim—the emerging regime of gay civil rights argued that everyone was so conditioned, and in the same way.³⁰ I designate that claim "the theory of sexuality," and the modern transsexual, who emerged as a legal and political subject in the same period, always sat always uncomfortably within its ambit. By severing the connection between sexuation and its representation, the transsexual confutes that neoliberal politic I sometimes call here "the theory of sexuality," prompting a set of attempts—many hostile, but some deployed with benevolent intention—to draw the transsexual back into the theory of sexuality. But, by definition, the transsexual cannot "have" a sexuality—it would be truer to say that she *is* a sexuality—and the latter-day attempt to bring the transsexual under the same framework of civil rights as gay and lesbian people has had the effect of dismantling the theory of sexuality as a generalizable condition of human beings. In other words, the syncretic theologies and nonce cosmologies I describe in this book have acquired, in the present moment, an urgent political value: In order to contest the normalizing violence of (never not compulsory) heterosexuality, new theories of personhood are needed to replace the theory of sexuality, as a response to and from a moment of crisis, in and around the various institutional forms of late-liberal collapse that have convened the present moment as a scene of geopolitical knowability since roughly 2016. Long-standing threats to the institutions of liberal democracy, in the United States but also other Western democracies, seem to have prevailed. The European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the independent judiciary of the United States, the democratic free press, and the collective funding of public universities by democratic states: None of these edifices, so central to the distribution of geopolitical power and wealth since the Second World War, looks likely to celebrate a centenary without revising its foundational purpose. True, in some ways, the current crisis looks very similar to the sporadic crises that the age of liberalism depended upon, as Naomi Klein argues in *The Shock Doctrine*: The escalation of genocidal violence in Gaza, for example, is clearly continuous with the decades of imperial

violence in the region, sponsored since 1948 primarily by the United States. Yet in Palestine too we can note an absence by implication: Unlike in (for example) the 2006 war in Lebanon, nobody has suggested that the United Nations could play any serious role in de-escalating the Israeli depopulation of Gaza, and international efforts to that end have focused instead on the frameworks collectively designated as international law, whose remit covers the war crimes of individual actors, and whose powerlessness to govern the actions of sovereign states has always been axiomatic. Underpinning all of these individual collapses, whose destination remains uncertain, there is a singular force (sometimes called the crisis of liberalism, sometimes populism, sometimes fascism, and sometimes the hatred of elites) that has been successfully yoked by several right-wing political factions, but whose origin nonetheless is not itself within the traditional right-wing purview, but rather in the domain of the 2016 Sanders-Trump voter, whose icon is Joe Rogan, or the 2024 AOC-Trump voter, whose numbers in New York's Fourteenth Congressional District evidently shocked Rep. Ocasio-Cortez. Indeed, much as with the UK's political realignment following the 2016 Brexit referendum, part of populism's democratic appeal is that it emerges from outside the multiparty system favored by postwar democracies. Whether this moment will mark the end of liberalism as a governmental system in the Global North, or whether it will merely mark an inflection point in the gradual weakening of institutional power inside a collapsing imperial metropole, remains to be seen, but certainly the events of the past decade should cause us (scholars) to question, more than we yet have, our tendency to assume that capitalism, and particularly the neoliberal form of capitalist accumulation, is inexorable and irresistible. That relativizing critique, which now feels like comforting reassurance, was the standard line among critical theorists in 2016, with the Maoist philosopher Alain Badiou delivering a pair of lectures that argued, in effect, that the policy of a Trump presidency would not meaningfully diverge from that of Hillary Clinton.³¹ That claim has been proven, I think, false. The neoliberal governmental consensus—that is, the organization of the state in the service of capital, rather than (for example) the church, a purported ethnic or national value system, or indeed the workers—has been more forcefully resisted by the emerging fascist movement than by any left organization since 1945.

As a scholar of sexuality, and of the sexual body most particularly, I have paid attention to the ways in which the fascist realignment currently

underway has resignified sexual practice and sexual desire. We can perceive this resignification most vividly in the shifting figures of masculinity in the public domain, and a historian could trace a trajectory, I think, from Pepe the Frog through Matt Gaetz to J. D. Vance, which would entail a set of procedural stages: from abjection, through desperation, to Catholicism, the last of which occupies a particular place in a set of arguments about demons (as we shall observe in passing throughout). But I am most struck by the realignment of the LGBT movement in the wake of populism, and the implosion within that coalition in the wake of a movement for trans civil rights that followed the 2014 “transgender tipping point.” As Kevin Floyd, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, among others, have argued, queer sexual practices and identities served as the carrot within the system of neoliberal immiseration.³² As John D’Emilio put it in 1979, “The expansion of capital and the spread of wage labor have effected a profound transformation in the structure and functions of the nuclear family, the ideology of family life, and the meaning of heterosexual relations. It is these changes in the family that are most directly linked to the appearance of a collective gay life.”³³ D’Emilio insisted that, for gay and lesbian people, “in the most profound sense, capitalism is the problem” and proposed that the very idea of “gay identity” served the interests of capital, such that in place of the nominalist rights claims of gay liberals, queers should focus instead on cultivating an “affectional community,” by ourselves and for ourselves.³⁴ While that idea proved popular in universities, the gay liberal institutional edifice nonetheless consolidated itself powerfully in the wake of the AIDS pandemic, with the establishment of broad-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and charities like Stonewall and the Human Rights Campaign, which set their sights on legislative advancements like gay marriage and gender recognition. Central to that consolidation was the establishment of the theory of sexuality, which treated an individual’s sexual orientation toward one or the other gender (homo or hetero) as consistent, universal, innate, and incorrigible: that quadrangle of classifications was necessary in order to make sodomy palatable to a liberal state that, as D’Emilio shows, was predicated to some extent on an antiquated ideology of heterosexual familiarity. D’Emilio also knew in 1983 what too few of us are prepared to say today: that the theory of sexuality is false in every one of its particulars, that it is a myth, and that the concessions made by NGOs on behalf of queer and trans people have left us more vulnerable than ever to the predations of the Pulse Nightclub shooter, the murderers of Brianna

Ghey, and the persecutors of Nex Benedict; the rates of sexual assault against Black trans women; violent negations of trans children and educators; and the legislative escalations against us. (Since D’Emilio does not make the point directly, I’ll add that the isomorphic liberal ideology of gender identity is, as Avgi Saketopoulou and Ann Pellegrini have argued, also a myth, in each of its particulars—moreover it is a myth whose only relevance to trans history appears to be its resemblance to the mythic theory of sexuality.)³⁵ This isn’t solely a theoretical problem; it has become charged with urgent practical implications. To put the matter baldly: If all of our security derives from the liberal state, how will we secure ourselves if that state ceases to exist?

In this setting, the emergence of a gay fascist movement, exemplified by “normal gays for Trump” in the United States and Gays Against Groomers and the “LGB Alliance” in the UK, carries a particular virtue: These groups exemplify, in ways that other queer and trans people cannot, the logic of the theory of sexuality. While D’Emilio’s call to establish “affectional community” prioritizes the cultivation of intergenerational bonds and social practices, the theory of sexuality requires instead only the singular act of coming out as a ticket to state recognition; the affectional community is, indeed, exactly what is excoriated in the word *grooming*, mobilized by the gay fascist movement and adopted more broadly by the populist faction as grounds for homo-eliminationist agitation. One could not call the effect liberating, but it is in certain respects disinhibiting. Consider, for example, the tweet from the conservative celebrity Robert J. O’Neill, a member of SEAL Team Six, which executed Osama bin Laden, on the eve of the 2024 election, in which he tells a group of young male Harris voters: “You’re not men. You’re boys. If there was no social media, you would be my concubines” (plate 2).³⁶ Despite a broad assumption among those Harris voters guffawing over this tweet that O’Neill didn’t know what the word *concubines* meant, he insisted in two separate videos that he knew exactly what he was saying, and that the tweet was intended as a kind of rape threat. Of course O’Neill, father of two and unhappily straight-married until 2013, would not understand the threat as indicating membership of any kind of community—indeed, a morally neutralized desire to fuck college-age twink into political acquiescence can be construed as a weapon against community, a gesture by which community can be conquered and subordinated. In that sense, O’Neill activates an older subcultural trope within the broader American gay scene, the “Man2Man Alliance,” whose “Cockrub Warriors” stand against the “ButtFuck Dictatorship”

to promote nonanal penile intimacy between men, as a celebration of masculinity, militancy, and male power (plate 3).³⁷ Indeed, the site's convenor Bill frequently insists that penile frottage is not merely enjoyable but tends to confirm the traditional patriarchal position of men, and therefore to reinforce the family values of, for example, "a genuine street-fighting man, a black belt from the Bible belt who loves bangin beaver and rubbin cocks," as he introduces the site's resident straight agony aunt, Sensei Patrick.³⁸

The Man2Man Alliance occupies a strange position: Contemptuous of femininity, and of sex that seems to feminize men, the group is equally scornful of identity categories and asserts that there is nothing gay about rubbing one's erect penis against another person's erect penis—because sex between men is an activity but not a condition. Nonetheless, the site mimics the language of the theory of sexuality minutely: Linking to a landing page for newcomers, Bill writes, "If you're a guy into frot who's felt isolated and alone, start your exploration of the site here."³⁹ Fictional erotica on the site displays a stifled but sentimental attachment to the buddy with whom one frots, and Bill himself writes a critique of promiscuity that sounds like the mainstream antisex propaganda that Dennis Cooper satirized.⁴⁰ Anonymous stories across the site bemoan "the battle to be understood in a gay male world obsessed with anal sex." Identity turns out, in the context of the Man2Man Alliance, to be a complex phenomenon. In most respects, the site resembles 1990s gay porn magazines like *Bullpen* and *Men*, and the desire to fuck so-called straight men, a desire that the Alliance shares with Robert O'Neill, is a mainstay of pornographic narrative. The site's forms of address are also familiar mainstays of Human Rights Campaign-era gay sentimentalism: realizing that one wants something inconvenient; looking to the internet for anonymous consolation and support; dubious moral elevation of sexual desire. One aspect of identity is unbearable to the Man2Man Alliance, and to O'Neill, however, which is difference—the site refuses to believe that any kind of sexual inclination produces anything like different classes of people. Here, the theory of sexuality has become so fully ingrained that its taxonomic framework has been abandoned. But in its collapse, something more violent has emerged, among whose first targets are—of course—those men who are not disgusted by anal sex, or by femininity. That is to say, the contradictory desire for an utterly normalized homosexuality must function, first, by purging all homosexuals whose desires fall outside its frame. This, too, is the world of Gays Against Groomers.

It would be too much to blame the rise of fascism on the gay liberal account of personhood, but it would be fair, I think, to note that the sexual mythology that gay liberalism enshrined at the center of its political platform contained a fatal flaw that has been ruthlessly exploited by those who hate us and seek our eradication. The flaw runs something like this: If sexual orientation toward gender were universal, consistent, innate, and incorrigible, then in order for sexual arousal to take place, gender must be understood as what is perceived by the one who desires. On the other hand, if gender identity were universal, consistent, innate, and incorrigible, then gender must be understood as what is perceived by the one who is (or is not) desired. These two claims cannot both be true (and, indeed, neither is true). That contradiction has generated, in the past decade, a series of increasingly manic and sometimes violent responses, among which trans women who love women have been the primary target. For the so-called trans-exclusionary radical feminist or gender-critical movement, lesbian dignity depends upon the notion that lesbians must never, by definition, feel attracted to trans women, and therefore trans women must be excluded from what they are learning to call lesbian spaces, presumably so as to avoid the awkward questions that would arise in case a so-called lesbian were attracted to a so-called transsexual. The core of this contradiction concerns the relationship between body, affect, and representation: It is a problem difficult to think about within the frameworks usually applied to it (usually the phobic and hygienic framework of analytical philosophy) because it raises questions about how we interpret ourselves and each other, and how to evaluate such interpretations as precede rationalization, or outwit a distinction between essence and existence.

Demonic possession has proven a surprisingly limber figure for understanding the conceptual knot of body, affect, and representation that gay liberalism has made unavoidable: The one who has been possessed registers a difference between their body and their identity, but the question of how either is represented depends very much on a particular deployment of the trope. The book that I have written on this subject therefore works through seven different framings of the possession trope—mostly but not exclusively transsexual—and attempts to trace, around the edges, what that trope reveals about the dominant cultural understanding of personhood, agency, desire, and embodiment during what might have been the final movement of the era of liberalism. The examples the book considers are the Twin Flames

Universe group; the movie *Ghost*; a couple of British hoax news programs from the 1990s; *Twin Peaks*; the Church of Scientology and, more directly, the documentaries it has generated; the queer theory of Leo Bersani; and the resuscitation of Lord Voldemort. Each of these cases examines the use to which the figure of possession is put in a variety of generic settings, linked by an interest in exploring the meaning of orientation in a secular context skeptical of the idea of souls. Genre, as Lauren Berlant among others has suggested, can be a means by which the figurative truth of a nonsecular metaphysics can be ramified absent the assertion of untenable claims.⁴¹

But genre can look back, too. A framing of the problem of substance dualism that became canonical within the late liberal period would be that articulated in the Wachowski sisters' film *The Matrix*.⁴² A Cartesian allegory, the film assumes that every sense perception available to human beings has been introduced directly into our brains, which are, in a reality we cannot perceive directly, being harvested for energy by evil machines. Confronting these machines would require taking a red pill, which jolts one out of the perceived world and into the hellish, underground, real world. A second pill, blue, is also offered, which would allow one to return, untroubled, to the false consensus reality of the matrix. This framing is not without its problems. Close to the core of the narrative's nexus of causality is a flagrant disregard for the second principle of thermodynamics—the narrative requires that the human bodies emit more energy than they consume. In an assessment of this problem, the founder of the rationalist website LessWrong, Eliezer Yudkowsky, proposes a theodicy, which he derives from this imaginary scene the movie might have included, between the protagonist Neo and his mentor Morpheus:

NEO: Doesn't harvesting human body heat for energy violate the laws of thermodynamics?

MORPHEUS: Where'd you learn about thermodynamics, Neo?

NEO: In school.

MORPHEUS: Where'd you go to school, Neo?

NEO: Oh.

MORPHEUS: The machines tell elegant lies.⁴³

Yudkowsky's scene solves the immediate problem of the machines' methods, while raising a more fundamental one: If the basic laws of physics are ideological fictions, how can judgment be reached on anything at all? That

is, if the machines have created the second law of thermodynamics as a device for placating people, who is to say that they have not also created the distinction between real and fake, or that between red pill and blue pill? C  l Keegan and Andrea Long Chu have, quite understandably, written about *The Matrix* as an allegory of transition: The Wachowskis themselves transitioned after having made the movies, and the pills they would have taken to do so—unlike today’s little blue ones—would have been red.⁴⁴ Aside from the resonances of bodily dysphoria and a realness grounded in a pill, the narrative bears a grandiosity that might have appealed to Daniel Schreber—Neo does not merely discover his real body through taking pills, his doing so is framed as the coming of a chosen one who will redeem the world and rescue humanity from the machines.

But for our purposes, the important point would be that the current panic over large language models (LLMs) and generative AI, well grounded as much of it certainly is, was fully formulated and widely available by the mid-1990s. Many of the later figurative narratives of AI dominance that swirl around Yudkowsky and Ziz are either explicitly (as in the case cited above) or implicitly drawing on *The Matrix* and its conceptual idiolect. The allegory of “Roko’s Basilisk,” for example, which originated on LessWrong in 2010, bears certain hallmarks of Wachowskiesque paranoia.⁴⁵ It concerns a future omnibenevolent AI called the Basilisk, capable of bringing about world peace (or whatever form of presumed posthistorical stasis one wants to fantasize). If such an AI were convinced that its coming-to-power were an ethical good, then, Roko (a random LessWrong poster) argued, it would be motivated to incentivize its own growth. One way it could do so, even in the period before its own dominance, would be by committing to blackmail anybody who could have accelerated its ascendance, and did not. In which case, the idea goes, it would be irrational not to dedicate every possible hour to the erection and defense of the Basilisk. This idea, which could be used to justify a diagnosis of paranoid psychosis (that is, the nondelusiv   psychosis where one assigns incoherent meanings to sensate objects), rattled not just the anonymized Roko but also a suite of journalists and think-tankers. The magazine *Slate*, for example, published a story on the Basilisk idea under the headline “The Most Terrifying Thought Experiment of All Time” in 2014, admitting that the experiment only makes sense if either (1) the Basilisk can travel in time, or (2) “perhaps you, right now, are in a simulation run by Roko’s basilisk.”⁴⁶

These caveats are necessary, to spell it out, because the Basilisk would have no incentive to punish those who did not help it ascend after it has already done so. It could of course be vindictive—but once one ascribes nonrational motives to the Basilisk, one enters a terrain far removed from Roko's initial problem, which had only to do with a supposedly pure rationality. Yudkowsky himself, generally an emollient commentator, seemed to think that the formalization of the Basilisk problem itself risked rattling the cages of some "distant superintelligences" and therefore required immediate suppression, which he enacted on his blog. He left the following comment shortly after the initial post:

You have to be really clever to come up with a genuinely dangerous thought. I am disheartened that people can be clever enough to do that and not clever enough to do the obvious thing and KEEP THEIR IDIOT MOUTHS SHUT about it, because it is much more important to sound intelligent when talking to your friends. This post was STUPID. (For those who have no idea why I'm using capital letters for something that just sounds like a random crazy idea, and worry that it means I'm as crazy as Roko, the gist of it was that he just did something that potentially gives superintelligences an increased motive to do extremely evil things in an attempt to blackmail us. It is the sort of thing you want to be EXTREMELY CONSERVATIVE about NOT DOING.)⁴⁷

It would be hard to find a more literal expression of a fear of demons.

THE DIAPHANOUS POLITIC

The history of the theory of sexuality has a beginning, a middle, and perhaps an end. It begins with the nineteenth-century escalation of state violence against homosexuals, both in imperial metropolises and among colonized and indigenous people.⁴⁸ That escalation, and the tactics mobilized in resistance against it, did not imply the existence of a "homosexual species" but did differentiate between a sexuality defined by interior inclination and one defined by sexual practice. Indeed, it is an ironic dimension of Victorian historiography that the figures through whom the modern type of the homosexual was defined were, themselves, vehemently opposed to identitarian thought.⁴⁹ Failure is to form habits: Thus says Walter Pater, at least in the memory of A. E. Housman, as it is staged by Tom Stoppard in his play *The Invention of Love* (1998). For Pater, or at least Stoppard's Housman's Pater, the

formation of habits would have been more than a failure in an abstract or moral sense; it would have been a risk, in the sense that while perhaps one letter signed “yours lovingly” to an undergraduate bearing the nickname “the Balliol bugger” would have been a gentlemanly indulgence, two would have been a symptom, and “several” would become a matter of serious disciplinary consequence.⁵⁰ Questions of identity, still less “queerness,” barely trouble the scene at all; the furious Benjamin Jowett (Stoppard’s Housman’s etc.) does not believe that Pater has revealed himself as any particular kind of person other than a weak one, just as Pater (in this case, the real one) shared with J. A. Symonds a general sense that the difference between the Uranian and his blameless counterparts was one of moral courage, rather than “orientation.” While the “invention” of Stoppard’s title, like the “speciation” foundational to the queer theoretical tradition into which Pearl Brilmyer intervenes in her major essay, refers to the (white, male, metropolitan) homosexual, emerging from the shadows of history to claim the spotlight at last, from a century and a half’s remove from the 1870s (when Wilde was at Oxford, and Ulrichs was publishing the *Critische Pfeile*), one is more struck by the historically unprecedented, and surprisingly ill-fated, emergence of the heterosexual as a character type.⁵¹ It is a well-known saw that the heterosexual defines himself only negatively, as the unmarked varietal presumed by the homosexual. Less often remarked is the strange position in which that puts those “in whose hearts a slumbering swine lies low,” as an anonymous activist described his class in a prologue to the first known publication of the transcripts of Wilde’s criminal trial.⁵² Having understood himself for centuries as universal, the heterosexual first had to content himself with being merely normal, and finally had to claim for himself an orientation, in form if not content identical with the compulsions claimed by those perverts whose existence he was ontologically, no less than morally, bound to despise.

If the age of heterosexual avowal has not quite passed, it has passed into a new phase, characterized equally by irony and by ignorance. The phrase “straight pride,” for example, has meant a few different things over the past four decades: Those complaining about the term’s deployment by those marching in a Tea Party rally in Lansing, Michigan, in 2010 aligned the term with “white pride.”⁵³ In the words of Penny Gardner, president of the Lansing Association for Human Rights, “it’s like white supremacy.”⁵⁴ That the Tea Party was, in its core formulations, a white supremacist organization was well understood at the time and is even more widely known now, but Gardner’s

analogy still rings false, and not merely because, as Frank Wilderson has argued, such analogies are always false (though that too).⁵⁵ The particular difficulty of reading straight pride derives from its ironic obliquity, the sense that those articulating it are not, in fact, proud of their heterosexual-ity (who could be?) but rather critical of the idea of sexual orientation—which is, in the liberal civil rights framework that they both uphold and critique, unwilling and unachieved. That is, not merely does straight pride ape the form of liberal inclusivity that it seeks to displace, it also reproduces the exact same model of sexual orientation. On the other hand, the often-remarked proliferation of micro-identities over the past twenty years may or may not reflect the changing nature of logocentrism in the age of what Hito Steyerl calls the “poor image,”⁵⁶ but it certainly leads to a diminishment in the proportion occupied by *heterosexual* on a list of options on the section of a Human Resources form marked *sexual orientation*—the bureaucratic need to register erotic aim and object being more or less assumed by all parties in the age of big data. (The relevant form circulated by my employer distinguishes between *man*, *transsexual*, *woman*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *homosexual*—above, of course, the genteel but rather unsporting *prefer not to say*.)

To contest the regime of sexuality-qua-identity, a body of thought emerged in the 1980s now known as queer theory, which, in at least some of its classical formulations, contested the identitarian universalism with a different, weak universalism, according to which gender, sex, and embodiment were to be understood as shifting, indeterminate structures.⁵⁷ That line of thought, as Pearl Brilmyer has recently shown, nonetheless produced and reproduced its own system of evaluation, according to which “fluidity” was to be preferred to “rigidity.”⁵⁸ The pro-flexibility anti-identitarian position enabled critiques of gay liberalism during the period of its institutionalization, both as a police function whereby sexuality could be regulated by the state and as a rubric for imperial governmentality.⁵⁹ In neither discursive domain did queer theory substantially disrupt the advance of gay liberalism, and neither did it engender anything like a mass cultural refusal of the politics of identity. How could it have done so? My experience in various LGBTQ community spaces over the years suggests that fluidity is not always welcome, even in its most irresistibly nonmetaphorical forms. A surprising number of people (this is anecdotal) seem to think that “bi now, gay later” still applies in most cases, and doubtless there are some to whom it still does. Queer theory seems to have

occupied an increasing share of the academic humanities as the academic humanities have come to occupy a massively decreased share of the ecosystem formed by those engaged in speculative reasoning. Among those to whom we have lost ground, in the competing discursive norms of, say, Tumblr, rigidity has long been *de rigueur*, and X (formerly Twitter) (in which the singular of *data* is *anecdote*) is admired and feared for its capacity to generate emergent rigors, governing (though not usually policing) the limits of the sayable and the desirable as part of its core proposition.

So the demonic figure as posited by the theory of sexuality is both a type in itself and that remnant of distinction that thwarts the division of human beings into types. This paradox was foreseen, deliciously, by Pater himself, in his 1864 rhapsody to the “unworldly types” of person possessing the quality he called “*Diaphaneité*.” That vaporous figure, “rare, precious above all to the artist,” Pater subjects to a litany of elegantly vague compliments: “a subtle blending and interpenetration of intellectual, moral, and spiritual elements”; “felt like a sweet aroma in early manhood”; “a sexless beauty.”⁶⁰ Yet despite Pater’s insistence on the rarity of those who exemplify this type, he nonetheless muses toward the essay’s conclusion that “perhaps there are flushes of [this nature] in all of us; recurring moments of it in every period of life.”⁶¹ The noted rarity, then, is not necessarily a quantifiable scarcity but a sort of evanescent, but potentially universal, property. Perhaps because of the close association between the demon summoned by the theory of sexuality and the coemergent figure of the modern aesthetic appreciator, the theme of demonology brought me into increasingly close contact with the apparently unrelated theme of authorship. The demonic possession haunting consciousness, whose traces I followed around the cultural archives of neoliberalism, bears striking resemblance to the misnamed intentional fallacy, according to which we attribute the characteristic of consciousness to an unconscious object—a text. I went on to explore those questions in three further essays, constituting a new section exploring the demonology of authorship, along with new essays on L. Ron Hubbard (a massively prolific author who believed himself possessed by “*thetans*,” which he sometimes called “*demons*”); on David Lynch (a filmmaker whose depictions of demonic possession synthesize a psychoanalytic account of cinematic auteurship with an esoteric meditative practice); and on two documentaries about villainous nobodies, which I treat alongside a reading of Leo Bersani’s relationship to the psycho-dynamics of sexual position.

The three chapters in part II of this book presume the critique of the theory of sexuality advanced in the first part: That is, they take for granted that the sexual positions conceptualized as the theory of sexuality are psychic representations of fantasies, rather than intrinsic properties of a sexed being (which is why I have decided to publish them together). For Lynch and for Bersani, position emerges as a key factor in the ethical and erotic negotiations engendered by the fact of embodiment; for Lynch, furthermore, position tends to emerge as a fantasy of oedipalization, while for Bersani it is intimately tied to sexual function and technique. One of the most consistent projects of Hubbard's long and prolific career, across his science fiction and his screwball theology, was to invert Freud's characterization of the differences between consciousness and unconsciousness—that is, to retheorize the “analytic” ego as the immortal and omnipotent element, and the unconscious as “reactive” and dominated.⁶² That struggle, whose febrile incoherence is felt in every sentence of *Dianetics*, formulates one strand of antipsychoanalytic ideology whose influence is felt far beyond the relatively short reach of the Church of Scientology. My chapter on Hubbard explores the literary implications of that inversion, and the inventive and often alarming ways through which Hubbard's idiosyncratic style emerges from a committed—perhaps, as Hubbard himself sometimes believed, psychotically so—attempt to eradicate the post-Freudian concept of the subject who writes.

Transsexuality has receded from these scenes, but not entirely departed: When Leo Bersani describes the anal bottom as “unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman,” he is referring to a psychic sexuation no less definitive than any theorized by Andrea Long Chu or Julia Serano.⁶³ If it should seem strange to find so apparently niche a phenomenon as transsexuality so close to so many major and cult figures in twentieth-century neoliberal culture, it does not follow that the transsexual only appears in Bersani's text as, in the words of Emma Heaney, a “trans feminine allegory.”⁶⁴ The meta-physical appeal of representing transsexual possession in the texts I discuss here, indeed, derives from its capacity to reflect the problem of mind writ large: Transsexuality is the name given to a persistent anxiety that there is no nonarbitrary relationship between the body as it exists materially, and the body as it is available to consciousness as an object of cognition. As far as I can tell, no contemporary reviewer of *Ghost* (1990) responded to its depiction of possession as a putatively transsexual phenomenon—transsexuality was, rather, an absent but implicative element of a depiction of racial, national,

ethnic, and bourgeois consolidation that the film made more conspicuous, at least to its reviewers.⁶⁵

This book therefore describes the capacious and multivalent concept of *demon* as it shapes the postliberal scene in which transition emerges as a vehicle for self-becoming. The demon appears as personal bugbear, as regrettable philosophical necessity, as implied author of the literary text, as the unitary model of sexuality around which neoliberalism organizes its social theory, and as object of horrified moral contemplation. The last of these remains somewhat implicit in the work itself. I owe to Jo Giardini the observation that my work exhibits a commitment to “the power of the provocative example to unsettle disciplinary orthodoxy.” Jo’s remark, which was delivered introducing me before the second of my lectures on demonology at Johns Hopkins University in 2024, struck me as both kind and true, and it revealed something in my work I had yet to notice. Still, it clarified for me that a project such as this, in which a number of demonic individuals appear—at least Hubbard and James Vincent Savile, arguably Freud, and more tendentiously Guston—runs various methodological risks in relation to the problem of exemplarity, beyond the general left critique of political demonology, which (rightly) suspects that biographies of corrupt, evil, or dangerous individuals tend to exonerate the structural conditions that produced them and the institutional conditions that enabled them.

Demonology as practiced here is, then, to some extent a study of political exemplarity. To what extent does the predicate *exemplary* designate an aspect of an object that, by virtue of being so designated, differentiates it from other members of the class that it is taken to exemplify? This old chestnut of the interpretive humanities forms one crux of Roland Barthes’s famous essay “The Reality Effect,” which argues that supposedly ancillary details of realist fiction constitute that fiction as realist, and therefore that consequently “Flaubert’s barometer, Michelet’s little door finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*.”⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Barthes is scornful of the notion that signification of this kind requires the excuse of fictionality: “in the ideology of our time, obsessive reference to the ‘concrete’ (in what is rhetorically demanded of the human sciences, of literature, of behavior) is always brandished like a weapon against meaning, as if, by some statutory exclusion, what is alive cannot signify—and vice versa.”⁶⁷ It is not merely objects, then, but certain people in certain contexts, who say nothing but “*we are the real*,” thereby vacating the signified from the sign and producing what Barthes calls an “unavowed verisimilitude,” within which the sign of historicalness can be experienced

as though it were history itself.⁶⁸ One particular type of exemplarity problem is helpfully encapsulated in the strange word *demonize*, whose semiotic function is quite different to other denominal verbs; that is, verbs formed from nouns. These tend to be resultative—something *monetized* results in *money*—or simulative—one *tyrannizing* is acting like a *tyrant*. The transitive verb *demonize*, however, transforms nobody into a demon, and if it carries any moral censure, it is against the verb's subject rather than its object; the act of demonizing results in a representation of a demon, rather than a demon as such. It goes without saying that nobody admits to believing in demons, and therefore to be caught demonizing is to appear stuffy, judgmental, or superstitious. Consider the formulation “*x* is demonizing *y*.” The verb-sign *demonize* here conducts a complex remodeling of the conventional noun-sign *demon*, inculcating (a) the speaker of the sentence; (b) *x*, the subject of the verb *demonize*; (c) *y*, the object of the verb *demonize*; (d) the representation of *y* as a demon; and (e) the nonexistent demon, whose difference from (d) the speaker presumes.

That complex circuit bears a resemblance to another crucial circuit of neoliberal political rationality: the *scapegoat*, a term which Serano used to describe the relation of trans women to their broader communities, a usage I follow here, especially with respect to the reading of Descartes advanced in chapter 1.⁶⁹ This term is freighted with still more historical complexity. It appears in the Book of Leviticus in a description of a Jewish atonement ritual:

Then [Aaron] is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat [עֲזָזֵֿל, *āzāzēl*]. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the Lord and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented before the Lord to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat. . . . Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.⁷⁰

The Hebrew word for *scapegoat*, *āzāzēl*, has long been a topic of vigorous dispute among Jewish and Christian exegetical scholars. The Vulgate and Septuagint introduce the idea that the *āzāzēl*-goat has been compelled to depart: “in Greek, the goat is described as ἀποπομπαῖον (*aporompaiōn*), or

“sent away”; in Latin, “*caper emissarius*,” the emissary-goat.⁷¹ These images of departing goats occur in the early English Bibles too, but in his 1530 English Bible, Tyndale replaced *emissary* with *scape*, adding to a scene of purgative exile an implication of mercy.⁷² Contemporary English editions of the Bible, however, tend to omit the translation of *āzāzēl* altogether and treat the word as the proper name of a demon, Azazel—an interpretation advanced by the medieval Jewish rabbinical scholar Nachmanides, who aligned Azazel with the demonic archangel Samael.⁷³ The creation of the scapegoat, then, appears in retrospect to have been an idiosyncratic intervention by Tyndale, picked up by his successors: The second goat’s fate in the wilderness, the land of Azazel, remains difficult to determine from Leviticus alone. It certainly is not obvious that the goat “scapes,” in any sense.

In a different register, the figure of the scapegoat, or the sacred victim, became, in the heyday of neoliberal ideology, one of the central figures by which political theorists sought to understand the only superficially contradictory relationship between the rhetoric of small government and the escalating imperial violence of the securitized state. René Girard’s 1989 book *The Scapegoat* establishes scapegoating as an anthropological basis for social cohesion and the rule of law: Society emerges as a consensus over whom to punish for elements of universal social violence that cannot be avowed. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s 1998 book *Homo Sacer*, for example, was broadly read and cited in scholarship dealing with the geopolitical consequences of the American-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, aligning the Roman legal category of “the sacred man”—a criminalized man who may be legally killed at will, but never sacrificed—with the mass violence American forces deployed against citizens of Iraq and Afghanistan, while claiming to be acting in their interests. Girard’s and Agamben’s parallel returns to classical-era jurisprudence in order to understand the neoliberal present in anthropological terms; Agamben’s readers in particular used his work to dismiss the various posthistorical ideologies of the immediately post-Soviet era. Yet these accounts of scapegoating take place at some remove from Leviticus, and from the “scapegoating of femininity” that Serano discusses. In that account, femininity is stigmatized in neoliberal cultures at large, and in the queer communities she inhabits. Serano writes:

This scapegoating of those who express femininity can be seen not only in the male-centered mainstream, but in the queer community, where

“effeminate” gay men have been accused of “holding back” the gay rights movement, and where femme dykes have been accused of being the “Uncle Toms” of the lesbian movement. Even many feminists buy into traditionally sexist notions about femininity—that it is artificial, contrived, and frivolous; that it is a ruse that only serves the purpose of attracting and appeasing the desires of men. What I hope to show in this book is that the real ruse being played is not by those of us who happen to be feminine, but rather by those who place inferior meanings onto femininity. The idea that femininity is subordinate to masculinity dismisses women as a whole and shapes virtually all popular myths and stereotypes about trans women.⁷⁴

The passage appears to describe mere intolerance of femininity among people who find it distasteful. Yet by designating that intolerance as scapegoating, Serano gestures toward a more ambitious, and more demonological, feminist framework: that the feminized subject’s inability, in Bersani’s words, “to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman” severs, not merely for her but for everyone else too, the connection between embodiment and desire.

A distinction needs to be registered between scapegoats and demons. For Girard, the scapegoat is useful because he is innocent; for Agamben, he is useful because he is sacred. Demons, conversely, are certainly guilty of the crimes of which they are accused; perhaps, even, they are guilty of still worse, and their crimes exceed and overshadow those priced into the system. There is nothing one wishes to do more, when one witnesses the demonization of one’s own, than to exonerate, to show mercy—to label Donald Trump an “imperfect vessel”; to label Hillary Clinton or Joe Biden or Kamala Harris “the lesser of two evils”; to celebrate O. J. Simpson’s acquittal on the grounds of Mark Fuhrman’s fascism; to pardon Mark Fuhrman on the grounds of Simpson’s history of domestic violence.⁷⁵ Part of the purpose of demonizing these figures, indeed, is to goad one’s opponent into such spectacular moral surrender, in order to extend the demonology outward from the demon toward those dominions that can be designated as his sects. The transsexual exists, if she does, at the convergence point of these distinct vectors of demonology. I hope, then, that by foregrounding the theme of exemplarity, I will be able to assure any readers inclined to be mistrustful of a political theory (or indeed moral philosophy) that proceeds by identifying individual bad actors—the “few bad apples” logic. On the other hand, I doubt any readers will confuse this work for any kind of position on the

phenomenon called *cancel culture* by those members of relatively dominant classes who dislike being criticized by members of relatively dominated classes. The term seems to produce a paradox not unlike that of *demonize* outlined above—it is used only as a term of disapprobation, and therefore obscures the formally (but not therefore politically) exact similarity it bears to the object it seems to describe.

One direct political question raised by this work, which I cannot here address with the certitude or directness that would be required for a full articulation, is the question of abolition, as it has been raised particularly by Black critics and activists in recent years. *Abolition* is notoriously hard to define, though not for the reason its critics assume. For the abolitionist Dylan Rodríguez, abolition is “an alleged impossibility that is furtively present”; Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes it as “a form of consciousness”—both terms that emphasize the subjective, emancipatory aspects of abolition as a horizon of thought.⁷⁶ Dorothy Roberts offers a more historical assessment of the movement’s goals:

First, today’s carceral punishment system can be traced back to slavery and the racial capitalist regime it relied on and sustained. Second, the expanding criminal punishment system functions to oppress black people and other politically marginalized groups in order to maintain a racial capitalist regime. Third, we can imagine and build a more humane and democratic society that no longer relies on caging people to meet human needs and solve social problems. These tenets lead to the conclusion that the only way to transform our society from a slavery-based one to a free one is to abolish the prison industrial complex.⁷⁷

Faced with these arguments, the antiabolitionist (sometimes called reformist) inevitably poses a question whose superficial reasonableness disguises its deep weirdness: What, other than incarceration, should the state do with the incorrigibly violent criminal? There are, naturally, many historicist and nonhistoricist answers to the question: that the prison system is not designed to incarcerate such people, should they exist, nor does it in fact catch them; that the criminal justice system insulates such people from redress by immunizing cops and prison officers against prosecution; that any attempt to convert a system of manifestly grotesque racial oppression into a just one would be significantly more difficult than abolishing it; that, in the last of the “Nine Perspectives” proposed by the Critical Resistance group in 2005, “an

emphasis [should be] placed on the correction of society rather than of the individual.”⁷⁸ Most relevant to the present work, however, is the rhetoric of the reformist’s position, which imposes a kind of demonology (“incorrigibly violent criminal”) as a condition of possibility for its version of realism. This is an abolitionist book: It commits itself to the primary realism that empowering one sector of society to incarcerate another sector serves only the interests of the incarcerators, and that no perspective presently exists from which an abstract constitutional law might be founded that would be competent to hold both incarcerator and incarcerated to the same moral standards. My primary interest here, however, is not in making that case (which has been amply made, over and again, by Rodríguez, Gilmore, Roberts, Angela Davis, and many others) but in understanding the peculiar role that nonsecular conceptions of the demonic play across a range of contemporary political theories, and in demonstrating that, perhaps surprisingly, such demonology is specific, and intrinsic, to the neoliberal phase of global capitalism.

The “incorrigibly violent criminal” exemplifies a class of figure that yields many of this book’s objects of study, insofar as it is an antimaterialist, nonsecular category adduced in support of a supposedly secular and materialist rationality. Each chapter in this book examines at least one example of this class. The philosophical style I thereby perform resembles a cheap and nasty deconstruction: The liberal regime of civil rights is sustainable only by reference to figures of irresistible, prematerialist orientation—whether in the form of sexual subjectivity, gender identity, “incorrigible evil,” or anything else. In that sense, the thought of Jacques Derrida is everywhere and nowhere in this book. I am aware, as I put the final marks on a project that has detained me for some years, that the observations about neoliberalism I offer here add very little to the critiques of liberalism Derrida developed in his last few books, especially *Voyous* (2003) and *La Peine de mort* (2012–15). I don’t engage those books in the chapters themselves, by and large, because my experience writing about Derrida has tended to provoke those methodological and stylistic tics of mine which I am least willing to indulge. I do not yet know how to write *about* Derrida—and here already, I feel the preposition luring me into an observation about the perils of circumscription—but I am aware that this work is, in some more fundamental sense than a citation can easily register, *of* Derrida. As much as I aspire to cheapness and nastiness, meanwhile, the deconstruction itself is not just that: As the first chapter establishes, the philosophical questions raised here usually boil down to the

topic of substance dualism, which is not exactly a category within a defensible system of thought, institutionalized or otherwise, but a question of absolute first principles, a question about what on earth these things we use to think and write with (brains, minds, bodies, etc.) are actually doing.

I enjoy acknowledging my friends, colleagues, comrades, lovers, and students, all of whom stretch my mind wider than it was, and many of whom have challenged and engaged me in this work too. Its initial formulations were developed for a lecture series I gave as a Visiting Distinguished Professor in the Program for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Johns Hopkins University in early 2024. Drew Daniels, who extended the invitation for me to do so, was in that sense the book's first addressee, and it would look and feel very different if it had been aimed elsewhere. The faculty and students of the program, meanwhile, were exacting and galvanizing in their responses to it, and I am indebted to Jennifer Culbert, Caroline Lillian Schopp, and Todd Shepard for their engagement.

I must thank Drew Kiser, who assisted with the stitching together of this unruly manuscript, and to some friends who offered provocative, thoughtful, and critical engagement with this work as it emerged: Jed Esty, Cliff Mak, Mat Paskins, Ann Pellegrini, and Lily Woodruff. I'm grateful also to Ann, who invited me to share some of this work at the New York University Department of Performance Studies, where it received thoughtful critical engagement from her, from Avgi Saketopoulou, and from Karen Shimakawa. I'm also grateful to Susan Zieger, who invited me to share some of this work at UC Riverside, to Katie Gemmill and Mark Taylor for doing the same at Vassar College, and to Elisa M. Kristine for inviting me to deliver work from this book at the Northwest Association for Psychoanalysis. I'm grateful to Elizabeth Ault for her support of this project, and for being an intuitive and compassionate reader of my frequently annoying prose. I'm grateful to Benjamin Kossak, at Duke, who is a dynamic, capable, and thoughtful production editor and a leader in the Duke University Press Workers' Union, whom I am proud to support for their work defending academic publishing against the corporate raiders advancing on all sides of our industry. And to Bill Brown and Ann Pellegrini (again!) for their galvanizing and exacting reports for Duke University Press—this is my fourth peer-reviewed book, and never before have I felt such a double eureka! from reports. But I think, given the topic, I'll dedicate this book to those, not few, who have demonized me in the past few years—those who sent stolen pictures of me having sex to my

mother and to my dean, and then giggled about the photos in the British broadsheet press; to the colleagues who deadnamed me in their books, and those who accused me of having written “a paean to hentai” in an anonymous promotion review; to those who have sought to intimidate and suppress the trans students I’ve worked with (all of whom are stronger than I am, in almost every respect); to that terrifying, terrified man who emailed me from a new email account every day for years, sharing some new lurid and personalized rape and/or murder fantasy; to those who used satellite technology to determine my address from the appearance of my house in photos I’d posted online, and who later uploaded that information to a white supremacist database along with photos apparently taken outside my front door; to those instructing the bots and trolls that, in their dozens, disseminate their insinuations that I am either a pedophile or another kind of sexual predator, and that there is no red flag without fire, leading even (formerly) trusted old friends to ask me, *sotto voce*, whether they knew something they weren’t saying. There is a moral suicide involved in the present moment, and I too am grateful for the hypocrisy of other people, which can assuage and obscure my own. My haters make me greater—thank you, and fuck you.

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INTRODUCTION

1. FOX 4 News Dallas-Fort Worth, "Trump CPAC 2025."
2. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes*.
3. Hayek, *The Use of Knowledge in Society*.
4. The chapters that follow began as a series of lectures delivered at Johns Hopkins University in the spring of 2024, in my capacity as visiting distinguished professor in the Program for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. I therefore cannot advance any further without offering my sincerest thanks to Jennifer Culbert, Drew Daniel, and Todd Shepard, who coordinated my visit, as well as the faculty and students of the program who attended the lectures, whose engagement with my work was vigorous, thorough, and moving. Throughout my time in Baltimore, I was reminded of the extraordinary merit of our embattled profession—our expertise in the ethical nuances demanded by full critical intercourse with other beings. The lectures were collectively titled *Lectures on Demonology* and comprise (with some expansions as well as a small number of minor changes) the first of this book's two parts.
5. Zucker, *Ghost*; Manning, *Ghostwatch*.
6. Rogin, "Ronald Reagan," *the Movie*, xiii.
7. Rogin, "Ronald Reagan," *the Movie*, xiv.
8. Kirkpatrick, "Who Is Behind QAnon?"
9. Hobson, *Imperialism*; Lenin, *Imperialism*.
10. Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 385.
11. Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony*.
12. Fleissner, *Maladies of the Will*, 36; Ngai, "Network Aesthetics"; Latour, *Science in Action*; Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; Leys, *The Ascent of Affect*.

13. Fleissner, *Maladies of the Will*, 39, citing Ngai, "Network Aesthetics."
14. Fleissner, *Maladies of the Will*, 38.
15. Fleissner, *Maladies of the Will*, 40.
16. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 1.
17. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 2.
18. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 3.
19. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 8, 23.
20. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 31, 34.
21. Han, *The Burnout Society*, 18.
22. Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us," 57.
23. McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 159.
24. Morrison, *The Invisibles* 1, no. 14 (1995). The title refers to Williamson, *The Invisibles*.
25. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914*, 117.
26. Liu, *Virtue Hoarders*, 4.
27. Liu, *Virtue Hoarders*, 12.
28. Liu, *Virtue Hoarders*, 2.
29. Liu, *Virtue Hoarders*, 5.
30. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 43.
31. Badiou, "Alain Badiou."
32. Floyd, *The Reification of Desire*; Eng et al., "Introduction."
33. D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," 469.
34. D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," 474, 475.
35. Saketopoulou and Pellegrini, *Gender Without Identity*.
36. Robert J. O'Neill [@mchooyah], "You're not men. You're boys. If there was no social media, you would be my concubines," X, November 3, 2024, <https://x.com/mchooyah/status/1853247567456325956>.
37. "THE MAN2MAN ALLIANCE."
38. "THE MAN2MAN ALLIANCE."
39. "THE MAN2MAN ALLIANCE."
40. Cooper, *The Sluts*.
41. Berlant, *The Female Complaint*.
42. Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.
43. Yudkowsky, "Fundamental Doubts."
44. Keegan, "Mirror Scene"; Chu, *Females*.
45. Bensinger et al., "Roko's Basilisk."
46. Auerbach, "The Most Terrifying Thought Experiment."
47. Bensinger et al., "Roko's Basilisk."
48. Lane, *The Ruling Passion*; Bongie, *Exotic Memories*; Bristow, *Effeminate England*; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*; Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*; Ballantyne and Burton, *Moving Subjects*.

49. Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*; Sinfield, *The Wilde Century*.
50. Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 20–21.
51. Brilmyer, “Queer Rigidity”; Ulrichs, *Critische Pfeile (Critical Arrows)*.
52. *The Trial of Oscar Wilde*.
53. Heywood, “‘Straight Pride’ Shirts at Tea Party Rally.”
54. Heywood, “‘Straight Pride’ Shirts at Tea Party Rally.”
55. Wilderson, “Afropessimism and the Ruse of Analogy.”
56. Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image.”
57. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 134–50.
58. Brilmyer, “Queer Rigidity.”
59. For the first, see Ruskola, “Gay Rights Versus Queer Theory”; and Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.” For the second, see Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*; Haritaworn et al., “Gay Imperialism”; and Ahmed, “Problematic Proximities.”
60. Pater, “Diaphaneité,” 247, 250, 253, 253.
61. Pater, “Diaphaneité,” 254.
62. Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*.
63. Chu, *Females*; Serano, *Whipping Girl*.
64. Heaney, *The New Woman*.
65. The film’s writer, Bruce Joel Rubin, recently came out at the age of eighty-one, and said of the possession scene in *Ghost*, “I didn’t think of it as lesbianism, but I knew there were people who would go ‘hmm.’” Ring, “*Ghost* Screenwriter Bruce Joel Rubin.”
66. Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 148.
67. Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 146.
68. Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 148.
69. Serano, *Whipping Girl*.
70. Leviticus 16:8–10, 21–22 (New International Version).
71. Λευιτικόν—Κεφάλαιο 16 [Leviticus, Book 16].
72. Bible Study Tools, Leviticus 16.
73. Drazin and Wagner, *Onkelos on the Torah*, 122.
74. Serano, *Whipping Girl*.
75. Mitchell, “‘I See Us in the Middle of Prophecy!’”; Somin, “Why Hillary Clinton Is a Lesser Evil.” The simultaneous necessity and incompatibility of these positions forms the narrative crux of Ryan Murphy’s *The People v. O. J. Simpson*.
76. Rodríguez, “Abolition as Praxis of Human Being,” 1578; Critical Resistance, *The Hard Road to Abolition*, 1:27.
77. Roberts, “Abolition Constitutionalism,” 7.
78. Morris, “Nine Perspectives for Prison Abolitionists.”