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Sexual Deregulation: Reading U.S. Subjects of Affective Labor from the Early Cold War to the Neoliberal Era

by

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Abstract

In recent years, critics of neoliberalism have turned to new forms of affective labor as one of the features of late-capitalist shifts in production. What remains less scrutinized, however, is the extent to which these forms of labor, as they are structured by the industries that make use of them, play a role in the development of homosexual identity categories that have also been understood and represented as affective. My study interrogates how the cultural regulation of postwar bodies intersects with an economic program that valorizes market freedom. I view this phase of homosexual modernity as unfolding through the logic of deregulation, linking new homosexual subjects to larger systems of flexible, affective labor integral to the ongoing project of free-market hegemony. Affect theory frames this story as the embodied and emotive capacity for social bonding, an element of labor that must be managed by and extracted from working subjects. My readings of novels featuring gay and lesbian subjects at work disclose writers’ critical engagement with cultural and economic deregulation from its nascent stages in the United States. My analysis traces the narration and re-narration of this modernizing program from the mid-twentieth to early twenty-first-century writers who wrestle with neoliberalism’s ambivalent impact on sexual identity and politics.

The project consists of two parts each engaging neoliberal adjustments inaugurated in the early Cold War epoch. My analysis of works by James Baldwin, Patricia Highsmith, Jane Rule, and the lesbian pulp author Paula Christian in the first two chapters explores the recurring centrality of service labor as a significant though under-examined feature of the representation of homosexuality in fiction in the 1950s and early 1960s. These works showcase authors confronting the fraught relationship between homosexuality and deregulation ideology, which diminishes the dominance of particular heteronormative arrangements at the same time as it collaborates with new exploitative regimes under late capitalism. The two chapters of the dissertation’s second part examine the significance of historical fiction that revisits the McCarthy period. I read Audre Lorde’s 1982 biomythography *Zami* and Barbara Kingsolver’s 2009 novel *The Lacuna* as pivotal commentaries that re-examine this history through the lens of emotional labor to explore the racial, national, and class-based dimensions of queer identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
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The seeds for this project were planted in Rosemary Hennessy’s seminar on Marxist theory, which I took on a whim my first semester at Rice. Her brilliant instruction provided the first of several jolts to the brain that had me stray from my initial field of study and into waters relatively unknown to me at the time. Rosemary introduced me to many of the field’s fundamental concepts and, in ways that I have come to appreciate, left me to figure out the angles on my own. Since then, her role as teacher and mentor has been nothing short of heroic. I am grateful for the time that she has given to me in every form, from her incisive commentary on each one of my many, many drafts to her steadfast “cheerleading” when I absolutely needed it the most. Rosemary’s attention, intellect, and comradely guidance continue to model for me the best parts of what we do – she is the kind of teacher I hope to be.

Additionally, Susan Lurie’s teaching in feminist criticism and contemporary culture cemented my resolve early on to pursue a new direction in my scholarship. This project has benefitted tremendously from her years of shrewd and thorough feedback, which never failed to present to me perspectives I had not yet considered. Along with
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It was under Susannah Mintz’s supervision at Skidmore College that I developed an obsession with seventeenth-century British poetry that continues to this day. This project does not cover the seventeenth century, British literature, or poetic form; nonetheless, it exists because of Susannah’s early mentorship, which has forever changed my way of reading.

Kim Macellaro was the first English grad I met at Rice as a prospective student in 2008. We got into a heated debate – probably about food – and have been lovingly duking it out ever since. I cannot imagine the last eight years without her friendship. The same goes for Maggie Harvey, whose sharp wit and aptitude for commiseration have been indispensible. Heba Khan has also been a steadfast friend and constant source of
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limitless empathy has been a crucial accompaniment to the ups and downs of the writing process – as she has told me many times, she feels the good and bad right along with me. Thanks to her, and to our many conversations over the years, I have gotten to bask a bit longer in the good and feel a little less lonely in the bad. Lastly, thanks to Chris and Michele, the two amazing teachers who came into each of my parent’s lives and have exemplified for me the best parts of modern family-dom.
Early in Patricia Highsmith’s novel *The Price of Salt* (1952), protagonist Therese Belivet is daydreaming before the start of her shift at a New York City department store:

She would wonder, standing in the time-clock queue in the basement every morning, her eyes sorting out unconsciously the regular employees from the temporary ones, just how she had happened to land here—she had answered an ad, of course, but that didn’t explain fate—and what was coming next instead of a stage-designing job. Her life was a series of zigzags. At nineteen, she was anxious. (13)

This passage is one of several that foreshadow Therese’s subsequent encounter and romantic affair with Carol, a wealthy New Jersey woman who occupies Therese’s attention for the remainder of the book. Therese is framed here as a subject of routine; like the workers she watches with indifference, she lives in a world that is both “temporary” and “regular,” organized by the moments where she clocks in and out, while simultaneously navigating the “series of zigzags” that have brought her to this point. In this, Therese is both an agent in her world and subject to its un-regulated whims. The narrative’s reference to “fate” is additionally provocative, given that most readers already know that Carol is on Therese’s horizon. Accordingly, the notion of fate is mapped onto both Therese’s current state of employment, as well as onto the specter of Carol’s imminent debut. Therese is “anxious” and restless, traits that describe both her work life
and, we come to learn, her romantic life. In this scene, the two are collapsed so that Therese’s burgeoning lesbian desire is disclosed to us through the contradictory nature of her experience in the service labor industry.

The tenuous circumstances that establish her character unfold in the lexicon of workplace contradictions – they are temporary and regimented, aware and unconscious. These circumstances also establish the terms of her impending romantic and sexual exploits with Carol, who she meets at her workplace. In this sense, the department store is both regulatory – of its workers, their bodies and minds – but also the site of certain forms of deregulation, made possible by the relatively more flexible, personality-based labor that Therese performs.

As Marxist historian John D’Emilio famously contends, the emergence of homosexual identity in the U.S. has an ambivalent relationship to developments in capitalist production: as the wage system and industrialization pulled more workers from the domestic to the public sphere of production, so too were laboring individuals increasingly free to engage in social relations outside of heterosexual kinship structures (“Capitalism and Gay Identity”). In keeping with D’Emilio’s suggestion that capitalism and sexual politics share a history that complicates any linear trajectory of social progress, my project explores how shifts in production, particularly to affective labor, resonated with postwar literature that sought public recognition of the queer subject. I argue that this literature saw queerness as a valuable canvass onto which historically specific commitments to citizenship, political affect, and American liberalism could be projected.
The narrative gestures that scaffold Therese’s sexual epiphany through her experiences as a department store worker reflect the historical moment of Highsmith’s writing, which saw the rapid expansion of the service industry in the United States after World War II. Accompanying these historical shifts in culture and production was the global reorganization of capital and the emergence of the United States as an economic force that could cross over new borders for accumulating its wealth. I am interested in each of these coordinates as they relate literally and ideologically to the postwar shift to deregulation as an economic and social principle.

My project addresses a broad selection of texts produced in the United States during the late 20th and early 21st centuries – an era marked by the emergence of a service industry largely dependent on the emotional and affective capacities of its workers – to examine how novelists represented labor, affect, and sexuality to theorize U.S. queer subjects in neoliberal times. I consider how affective labor, a category that has received much recent critical attention as one of the disciplinary regimes of sociality under late capitalism, operates in tandem with emergent queer sexual identity in this postwar literature. Specifically, I examine gay identity’s relationship to capitalism as unfolding through the logic of deregulation, linking new homosexual subjects to larger systems of flexible, affective labor integral to the ongoing project of free-market hegemony. Most urgently, sexual deregulation hinges on the ideological seductiveness of freedom discourse, and its power to inspire a broad public, even as, via the free market, it benefits the few.

My analysis of these cultural trends maps a relationship between two temporal tracks. The first part explores novels written throughout roughly the first decade of the
postwar period, when dramatic shifts in labor relations (along axes of race, class, and gender), as well as the emergence of McCarthyism, made their imprint on cultural politics. Drawing topical inspiration from the new service industry, this literature meditates upon affect and value – as mediated by the queer laboring subject – to expand the terrain of discourse on postwar homosexual identity. These narratives illuminate stakes in national and sexual citizenship that have hitherto remained underexplored.

Part two, then, examines a historical juncture that goes by many names, including late capitalism, postmodernism, neoliberalism, or the late- and/or post-cold war period. I attend to two classic genres of queer cultural production – camp and the gay bildungsroman – as recent sites of critical engagement with the deregulated sexual subject of neoliberalism. This section, which engages neoliberal cultural memory, reads selected texts of popular culture and historical fiction produced within the epoch of heightened neoliberal consolidation spanning the early 1980s to the decade following September 11, 2001. My investigation frames this era as one that meditates self-consciously on the status of deregulated queerness in cultural production and social reproduction through the treatment of labor history.

I conceive of these two parts of this project as bookending an arc in U.S. cultural production whose main struggles span multiple questions or problems: what constitutes sexual identity; the value of sexual self-expression as it pertains to ideas of personal freedom; non-heteronormative family and futurity in the context of biological reproduction; and overt and latent expressions of racism, transphobia, and misogyny within social justice movements. One aim of this project is to suggest that these struggles be read within a critical framework that views them in dialectical relationship to the
conditions and values espoused by the deregulation economy. There is no question that the development of U.S. neoliberalism dictated a shifting set of values for the American subject and, with that, shifting notions of what constitutes value in the accumulation of national and personal wealth. Accordingly, a reading of neoliberal queer subject positions requires a critical lens that attends to developments on both structural and empirical levels. Indeed, one guiding presumption in this dissertation is that a society’s cultural order is determined by the means of production and accumulation of value.

The social currents I investigate constitute aspects of the historical phase largely referred to as neoliberalism. A hegemonic mode of organizing social life that is based in liberal economic theory, neoliberalism posits that the underlying principles of the free-market system are in fact beneficial to all aspects of social life. Within this schema, sexual deregulation describes a social contradiction particular to the neoliberal era that registers the cultural emergence of homosexual identity as it intersects with an economic program that valorizes market freedom starting roughly after World War II. In recent years, critics of neoliberalism have turned to new forms of affective labor as one of the features of late-capitalist shifts in production. What remains less scrutinized, however, is the extent to which these forms of labor, as they are structured by the industries that make use of them, play a role in the development of homosexual identity categories that have also been understood and represented as affective.

An innovative method of production and accumulation of capital at the beginning of the neoliberal period, affective labor has also been a significant mode by which deeply entrenched gendered divisions of labor have been reorganized. As shifting relations of production turned to the affective skills of the laboring subject as a reservoir from which
to produce value and reoriented feelings and divisions historically located in the domestic sphere to the realm of paid production (Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 43-45), affective labor became an essential site for the construction of neoliberal queer identity. The service industry relied upon subjects attached in new ways to postwar ideologies of personal freedom at the same time as these subjects were being re-regulated by labor conditions that increasingly diminished the boundary between home and work, time on the clock, and time spent at leisure.

Whereas the notion of affective excess being projected onto queer subjects is not new, I see affective labor as part of a larger ideological strategy of what Doug Porter and David Craig term inclusive liberalism, which reconciles various subject positions with the logic and flow of late-capitalism. One of the principal arguments of my study is that affective labor does this reconciling work by standing in for, containing, and redirecting queer affective excess, reproduction, and/or abjection via the user-friendly language of postwar production. From the standpoint of cultural memory, queer social reproduction during these decades is being articulated within the logics of neoliberal affective labor. The interpretive strands that comprise this articulation, however, although traceable within many works of postwar queer literature, are not typically thought of as components of sexual deregulation, nor in relation to one another. Moreover, until my study, the representation of queer affective labor has not been addressed in the novels I read, nor has its representation been understood in relation the management of literary forms and conventions that depart from their traditional modes of deployment.

The canon of literary criticism in which my argument intervenes is one that has told a history of postwar queer literature generally organized around sites of queer
resistance, expression, subversive “queering,” or recovery. Part of that recovery project has been the republication of various lesbian pulp novels over the past decade. These reprints have revitalized scholarly interest in postwar pop culture, particularly from a cultural materialist interest in the history of lesbian print production. Since the 1980s, a handful of projects in gay cultural studies have examined the impact of late-capitalist consumer culture on gay politics and the effect of late twentieth-century shifts in industrial production on gendered and sexualized attachments. With a few exceptions, however, much of this work has focused on gay male culture and identity. My turn to affective labor builds upon a critical trajectory that accounts for historically feminized forms of labor, and in this regard I draw upon the Marxist feminist imperative to see affective labor as essential to the productive capacities of late-capitalism.

In addition, the literary history that informs this project is motivated by work on intimate publics, primarily by scholars such as Lauren Berlant, Lisa Duggan, and Jasbir Puar, whose investigations into the historical patterns of affective attachment as they bear upon questions of capitalism, national citizenship, and sexuality speak to my aims in mapping out postwar queer subject positions. It is my contention, however, that the historical shifts in queer politics that have been affected by changes in production and consumption as well as U.S. foreign and domestic policy are actually traceable to an earlier stage than these scholars have recognized. In this respect, my project implicitly calls for reorienting queer cultural analysis toward earlier post-war representations of queer labor and affect management.

This dissertation pursues this re-orientation by telling a story of how historical developments in U.S. culture after WWII coincided with a growing sense of national self-
consciousness on the part of queer subjects and their advocates. The panic enacted through the stigmatizing residue of the American Psychological Association (APA), combined with McCarthyite furor, met up with the homogenizing possibilities presented by the service labor industry. Although the novels I discuss evince a range of political dispositions, the cultural work they perform in the presentation of queer protagonists as workers who are discrete, socially productive entities of self-governance provokes a variety of critical openings, ranging from the suggestion of “alternative” queer “affective economies” to commentary on social production and reproduction as they pertain to queer cultural memory, caretaking, and what Lee Edelman calls the politics of reproductive futurity.

However, this dissertation also aims to intervene in three important topics in political and cultural theory: neoliberalism, affect, and subjecthood. The scholarship I engage on neoliberalism frames the project’s political stance as a materialist one that views society as a function of shifts in capitalist enterprise and, on a human scale, focuses on the labor required to fulfill late-capital’s goal of reaping maximum surplus value from a free market. Concentrating on queer subjectivity, however, requires a way of understanding the interface between these structural circumstances and the political subject. As I explain below, much work has already been done on how neoliberalism shapes political subjectivity and modes of political participation. I build upon this work as well as scholarship on emotions and affect. The latter provides an invaluable link between the structural analysis offered by critiques of neoliberalism and the comparably nebulous study of subjectivity. In short, my study of representations of the queer deregulated subject maintains that queer politics entails interpretive frameworks that
address both structures and subjects. In what follows, I illustrate with more precision some of the ways these key concepts inform my analysis.

**Key Terms and Critical Contexts**

*Neoliberalism*

As a historical conjuncture, neoliberalism is generally described as a set of economic policies modeled after neoclassical approaches to capital and the market that have had unprecedented implications for social, political, and economic life on a global scale (David Harvey *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 21). Within many Western nations, neoliberalism has meant narrowed social entitlements afforded to the general public, the demise of domestic manufacturing, and the growth of service industries. For many parts of the global south, neoliberalism has led to further collusion between international private businesses and the state, the privatizing of communal lands, and trade policies that further drive profits away from domestic production.

Scholars have not reached a consensus on exactly when neoliberalism begins. David Harvey’s Marxist history of neoliberalism’s origins sees the expansion and consolidation of capital among the few as a governing function in the emergence of international power relations:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights,
free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (*A Brief History* 2)

For Harvey, neoliberalism begins at the end of WWII, when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank were established and the Keynesian economy took off. Harvey emphasizes the establishment of the extra-governmental powers of financial institutions that have achieved global dominance in world markets. As such, the World Bank and IMF represent major transnational partners in the totalizing force of neoliberal capital and industrial expansion.

Jodi Dean illustrates many of the ways neoliberalism does not signify economic restructuring alone, but also a general shift in popular logic that adopts the free market system as a social philosophy that privileges freedom as the ultimate aspiration for any individual, whether demonstrable through one’s role as a consumer, voter, or social networker. “Most generally,” she says, neoliberalism entails “a philosophy viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action. Redefining social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations, neoliberalism holds that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets. Freedom (rather than justice or equality) is the fundamental political value” (*Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* 50).

Dean’s observations are traceable in recent developments within queer politics as activism has gravitated from public to increasingly privatized spheres of intervention. This alternation has taken several forms, including the gentrification of previously gay
cruising spots;\(^9\) the rationale behind the Lawrence v. Texas decision;\(^{10}\) the commodity market as an avenue for queer recognition;\(^{11}\) and, of course, the push for marriage equality. Echoing Dean’s insight, these political shifts accentuate the ways LGBT politics have latched onto a neoliberal ideal of personal freedom that regards issues of sexuality as individualized and undermined by structural forces.

My own critical engagement with neoliberalism and subjection draws upon Stuart Hall’s assertion that cultural production is related to social identification. Hall writes,

> We should think of social identities as constructed *within* representation, *through* culture, not outside of them. They are the result of a process of identification which enables us to position ourselves within or to ‘subject ourselves’ (inside) to the definitions which cultural discourses (outside) provide. Our so-called subjectivities, then, are partly, discursively or dialogically produced. (120)

Thinking about neoliberalism as a logic for identification and therefore action, my readings of textual representations of subjectivity echo Hall’s notion that, “Human beings are meaning-making, interpretive beings. Social action is meaningful, both to those who perform it and to those who observe it; not ‘in itself’, but because of the many and variable systems of meanings which human beings deploy to define what things mean and to code, organize and regulate their conduct towards one another” (208). Going beyond Hall’s insights, I consider how innovations in communication and intelligence
feedback have dictated new affective registers that mediate neoliberal culture, identity, and political subject formation. To that end, my project’s attention to affect theory and labor fills in some of the theoretical gaps presented by structural analyses of neoliberalism.

*Affect // Affective Labor*

Affect theory exhibits wide-ranging compatibility with scholarship that aspires to explain the structural, ideological, and sensory aspects of sexuality. Following Arlie Russell Hochschild and Rosemary Hennessy, I understand affect to be a value-producing aspect of waged and unwaged labor whose surplus also attaches in varying ways to modes of identification and sociality. Moreover, as a value-producing feature of labor, affect requires historically specific forms of management on the part of the worker.

The extent to which affect may be analyzed critically has been the subject of some debate. Brian Massumi, an early voice in affect theory, makes the distinction between emotions, which are captured by language and affect, which he understands as the impulses that have not yet come to be represented by a linguistic schema. In contrast, Sara Ahmed emphasizes affect’s uncanny ability to “stick” to various cultural symbols to the effect of both marginalizing and bolstering specific ideologies (“Happy Objects”). My own reading of affect reflects elements of several of these views. Although distinct from emotion, affect is nonetheless captured by a cultural lexicon of sorts. As such, it is understood to be psychological and physiological, but it is also something that has been narrativized within various arenas – from the service industry to popular fiction – to absorb and refract cultural codes relating to sexual identity, history, and work.
My readings of deregulated sexual subjects focus on how the larger historical shifts under neoliberalism as an economic system singularly committed to the exponential accumulation of surplus value took root in the more localized dynamics of homosexual identity formation within the U.S. What this dissertation presupposes, then, is a population of workers whose lives are determined, not merely by an ahistorical exhibition of sexual preference, but by the day-to-day rhythms, negotiations, actions, and interactions that comprise a life. Moreover, the types of work in which these subjects engage is not ahistorical. It has taken place in an epoch that found new and innovative ways to profit from and shape modes of life and usher in forms of labor that increasingly require more from the laborer’s emotional, subjective capacities and communicative skills. In short, under the postwar neoliberal economy, the threads of one’s being that had been popularly considered private and untouched by market forces were becoming recognized as valuable resources for profit.¹³

The novels I read therefore reveal notable elements of the postwar homosexual’s ambivalent relationship to the historical opportunities neoliberalism afforded (disproportionately white, bourgeois) Americans. Among them were increased employment opportunities that granted self-sufficiency, travel opportunities, or simply the increased visibility of homosexual lifestyles via the expanding commodity market. In this context, I read representations of affect, and specifically gendered and sexualized affect, as a marketable capacity in conjunction with structural shifts that brought new exposure to existing homosexual subcultures.

Affective labor, one of the dissertation’s key concepts, highlights some of the social relations that serve as a backdrop to changing feminist and queer political
subjectivity. Attention to affective labor has its roots in the second-wave feminist imperative to recognize and compensate the emotional work required for care work and domestic labor rendered invisible by the wage labor system. To different degrees, the texts in my dissertation illustrate characters whose day jobs require they take on extra duties that pull from their emotional, even intimate, capacities often to the detriment of their physical and emotional wellbeing. Expanding the frame of what kinds of jobs require affective labor, many of these figures work in places (such as casinos or restaurants) that do not automatically conjure images of the same emotional intelligence (and/or abuse or exploitation) discussed within fields more traditionally associated with care work or domestic labor. Part I in particular details the processes of what Marx has called the formal and real subsumption of labor. That is, the mode by which capital accumulation eventually invades all life forms and dictates all forms of production. In the context of affective labor, I read the novels in Part I as detailing processes whereby affect, described throughout each novel more or less through economic terminology, eventually becomes a category determined by the relations imposed by the service industries featured in the novels.

As Hochschild points out, early studies have not always used the label “affective labor” per se, but they have laid much of the crucial foundation for understanding paid and unpaid labor in the market. Emphasizing the psychological and systemic dimensions of what it means to be the face of a huge corporation in the business of providing service integrated into a gendered division of labor in the workplace, Hochschild’s study of airline attendants starts with Marx’s concept of alienated labor. For Hochschild, the worker’s alienation has as much to do with the gendered, affective front airline attendants
are forced to internalize (and represent to clients as “natural”) as it does with Marxist conceptions of the objective alienation all workers face under capitalism. Given the added gendered valence in Hochschild’s study, I argue that alienation, when read in conjunction with queer affective labor, encompasses both Marxist feminist and queer trajectories of subject formation, a scope that expands its critical leverage in both fields. As such, queer affective labor is a crucial category that should remain a central component in studies that involve affective labor.

Michael Hardt’s emphasis on temporality and technology as it relates to non-industrial forms of labor provides an additional lens for this study. Hardt situates affective labor at the end of the timeline of capitalist development as a paradigm of production based on “providing services and manipulating information” (90). For Hardt, affective labor differs from earlier forms of Fordist production in that it “is characterized in general by the central role played by knowledge, information, communication, and affect” (91). As such, affective labor covers a wide range of service industry jobs “from health care, education, and finance, to transportation, entertainment, and advertising” (91). Temporality plays a large part in Hardt’s analysis: rather than adhering to the Fordist model of producing an inventory of goods to supply consumer demand, affective labor industries are reliant on an informational “feedback loop” that allows production to respond to demand after it is demonstrated by the market (93). It is this notion of informational feedback and affective responsive “intelligence” that provides the bridge from traditional feminist notions of affective labor to an expansion of the concept to include cyber technology. For Hardt and others, the post-Fordist model of information intelligence promotes a growth in “precarious labor,” that is, the way a more cognitive,
individualized, and disembodied work promoted by computer communication has a homogenizing effect regarding previous divisions of labor. If labor is increasingly characterized by cognitive cyber communication rather than physical work, the autonomous potential of this work to be freed from a centralized workplace increases the possibility for more fluid labor relations within different industries.

Generally speaking, Hardt’s insights on the radicalizing possibility of affective labor are analogous to how many of the authors I read in Part I frame the possibilities presented by the service industry for their homosexual protagonists. In this context, Silvia Federici’s critique of autonomous Marxism’s development of “precarious labor” is worth serious consideration. Reminding us of Maria Mies’s insight that “what appears as development in one part of the capitalist faction is underdevelopment in another part,” Federici questions the fetishization of technological communication that has cropped up amongst leftist scholars beyond the autonomist Marxist cluster (“Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint,” In the Middle of a Whirlwind, Wordpress.com). As I discuss in Part II of the dissertation, shifts in temporality, as they make possible new formations of both knowledge production and industry, signal new investments for postmodern queer subjectivity, which bear upon questions of social reproduction as well as what Lee Edelman has called “reproductive futurity.”

Reproductive labor in all of its various forms has been a defining aspect of most women’s lives throughout history. The postwar period in the U.S. saw a formalization of the service industry (for now synonymous with affective labor) as an increasingly widespread form of paid labor reliant on formalized methods of disciplining worker affect and behavior (and, in turn, occasioning the worker’s need to self-manage affect in
new ways). My focus on specifically affective labor coincides with developments particular to the postwar era this project examines. The 1950s marked a historical conjuncture that cultivated the dual anxieties of the Lavender and Red scare, both of which were shored up by the medical establishment’s proclivity for pathologizing behavior deemed socially subversive. Within this context, representations of queer subjectivity in postwar literature have been widely understood to rehearse figures of sinister inscrutability, affective excess, or national disloyalty.

Alternatively, however, I am interested in how the literary examples of affective labor I study serve, to varying degrees, as critical interventions that disrupt the commonsense of the queer body as a site of pathology and/or national subversion. In these moments of disruption, depictions of various forms of affective labor loom prominently within the narratives, with queer laboring subjects appearing as the personification of social intelligence, uniquely in possession of a calibrated taxonomy of affects. That these moments of critique become articulated primarily in terms of the queer subject’s capacities as producer of wealth and value in the nascent stages of U.S. neoliberalism illustrates one of the critical openings I hope to engage with this project. What does queer affect become when relegated through the networks of the service industry? In what ways might we understand these early moments in mass queer cultural production as marking seminal instances of neoliberal political desire? The literature throughout this project maps the contours of a queer vanguard of sorts, a collection of subjects upon whom postwar public desire for national cohesion and belonging are projected. To that end, one of my primary goals here involves a reading of neoliberal queer subjectivity as developing in tandem with postwar innovations in disciplinary
immaterial labor that, as Hardt and Negri contend, constituted one of the terrains upon which biopolitical control exerted force over its public. Counter to the discourse of biopolitics, however, which posits a diffused notion of power, I aim to locate moments in the literature that exemplify a top down form of biopolitics reliant on unequal relations of production and exploitation of affective capacities.

My consideration of queer identity and affective labor requires a return to the notion of “immaterial labor,” reinvigorated most recently through the work of autonomous Marxists such as Hardt and Negri. Echoing in many ways earlier feminist thought on paid and unpaid care work, immaterial labor (sometimes referred to as affective labor) has gained new traction in political critique as a concept that, for some, points to the emancipatory social possibilities provided by neoliberal social relations. My work aims to bridge the gap between feminist and autonomous Marxist iterations of affective labor as a way to better articulate how neoliberalism has shaped the queer laboring subject and, in turn, to understand how historical shifts in labor have contributed to the crafting of a specifically neoliberal queer subject.

*The Subject // Subjectivity*

My final critical lens, which engages criticism on the subject and subjectivity, aims to tie together the previous discourses to examine how deployments of affect within the particular logic of neoliberal enterprise comes to bear upon the articulation of particular subject positions.

A critical category that has risen to prominence in tandem with neoliberal enterprise, *subjectivity* encompasses a consideration of how ideologies of identity and
difference under capitalism obscure people’s objectively shared condition as exploited workers. In this context, an examination of the changing ways in which political consciousness becomes refracted through shifting formations of political subjectivity (and, for that matter, difference) is useful for theorizing possibilities for new political collectivity in the neoliberal moment. I conceive of subjectivity as a threshold of sorts, an entry point where individual affect meets up with disciplinary neoliberalism in the form of new political subjects. Attention to the narrative formulations of subjectivity, as read through affect and labor, discloses ways of reading queer subjectivity that extend beyond the textuality of queerness and pivot, instead, on the notion that individualism, as it pertains to constructing the queer subject, is a historical formation that will be surpassed.

My analysis is disproportionately (though not exclusively) focused on lesbian stories; nonetheless, I am reluctant to call this a project exclusively about lesbian subjects. Rather, I view the lesbian emphasis as a cultural reflection of the disproportionate number of women who have always already been recruited into emotional labor economies, both within formal and unpaid sectors. That the authors of some of the texts I discuss may appear to more easily be able to tap into an available and culturally recognized range of codes and affects that have characterized women’s labor for some time is a significant component to the political discourse this project aims to draw out. Because the extent to which these authors tap into a range of culturally legible literary conventions is one of my prime interests in this project, I will pay special attention to the narrative moments that appear in some ways to align most formally to convention in order to better understand the political significance implied by those
gestures. In so doing, I am making an argument for viewing authors’ formal narrative choices as historically situated and revelatory of the cultural power they pose to respond to specific conditions of neoliberalism.

In Chapter One I read the fiction of Patricia Highsmith and James Baldwin alongside late McCarthy-era discourses on homosexuality disseminated by the U.S. federal government and various psychiatric domains. I find in Highsmith and Baldwin the representation of homosexual emotional work as a modernized, deregulated alternative to postwar notions of sexual pathology. Each foregrounds emotional labor as an avenue for the development of homosexual ethical subjectivity via the management of personal affect encoded within the lexicon of the service industry. Encrypted in these narratives of subject freedom are early instances of deregulated subjectivity represented in anxieties and impasses that link the commodification of emotion with the McCarthy-inflected dilemma of one’s interiority as self-incriminating evidence. Thus, in *Salt* and *Giovanni’s Room* feelings of love, care, loyalty, and empathy come to signify a subject’s capacity to earn a living as well as personal material susceptible to state and medicalized scrutiny. In both instances, the narrative’s ambivalence regarding affect as a capacity to be extracted and exchanged in the service labor market is manifested stylistically through the sporadic intrusion of gothic conventions, which hover around the porousness of corporeal boundaries.

Chapter Two pursues deregulation as a concept that frames the double-sided nature of sexual modernity as it is figured in the late-1950s service economy. Here I read the representation of glamorized service industries--the commercial airline and the casino--in Paula Christian’s lesbian pulp novel and Jane Rule’s regional romance. In
each instance service labor is aligned with the loosening of a heteronormative order at the same time as it instantiates the increased, albeit less visible, regulation of bodies and capital in domestic and transnational contexts. *Edge of Twilight*’s juxtaposition of structural and sexual deregulation operates though its central lesbian protagonist, Val, who must come to terms with the other side of deregulated modernity through her service as airline hostess to migrant laborers from San Juan, Puerto Rico. Rule’s novel features Ann, a casino worker whose lesbianism is pre-figured through her endeavors in gendered, affective work that supplements the social disintegration wrought by Reno’s casino enterprise, even as it models nonheteronormative forms of kinship. As in Christian’s novel, such sexual deregulation also requires the erasure of the service economy’s increasing regulation of labor under the logic of enterprise.

Part Two of my project reads cultural texts produced at the beginning and the end of the three decade span that saw neoliberalism’s most intensified consolidation. Here I shift from Part One’s analysis of affective labor as a historical feature shaping sexual liberation to consider contemporary representations of deregulated sexuality in popular culture and critical theory. Accordingly, Part Two details the ways in which historically queer artistic forms such as camp and the gay *bildungsroman* interface with and often contrast the labor history outlined in Part One.

Chapter Three considers the contemporary queer subject of deregulation’s relationship to the literary history outlined above. I examine deregulated queerness as a contemporary subject position whose articulation spans sites of popular culture and critical scholarship. The deregulated queer subject position is interesting to me as a cultural figure that encompasses queer theory’s ambivalent relationship to labor history.
as crucial to cultural criticism. I turn to the influential work of Lee Edelman and J. Jack Halberstam as examples of theorists whose anti-normative critiques entail the problematic repression of social reproduction as a relevant critical category for queer theory. Provocatively, the cultural material attended to by some of these theorists – and in particular, Lady Gaga – exhibit a more nuanced relationship to the labor history their cultural criticism often disregards. In making the case for Lady Gaga’s critical edge, I examine how her signature engagement with camp plays upon what I call the alibi of interpretive immediacy, which invokes the outrageous as an ur-site of camp convention that provides its audience with clues for how to read its history, even as its stylistics appear to be doing otherwise.

The fourth and final chapter concludes my analysis of sexual deregulation by identifying important counter-narratives to the trend outlined in Chapter 3. To that end, I read authorial revisions of the gay bildungsroman by Audre Lorde (1982) and Barbara Kingsolver (2009) as documenting two historically specific (and distinct) examples of the creative methods by which authors sought to write their way out of the queer neoliberal script. More specifically, both Lorde and Kingsolver engage the act of authorship as a form of reproductive labor that harbors indebtedness to a history of labor that is both invisible and a requirement for the work itself. In so doing, each writer formulates authorship as a collective – and quite queer activity – undertaken by multiple energies and bodies and reverberating beyond the immediacy of the text.
For studies that investigate the flexibility of “immaterial labor” as a key component of postmodern wealth accumulation in a variety of contexts, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* and *Multitude*.


As Kathi Weeks illustrates, this is by no means considered a “consensus” on the part of socialist feminist scholarship but, rather, one of the defining poles within a range of debates on the degree to which emotional work – to a large degree women’s work –
should be theorized as part of or separate from the capitalist mode of production (“Life Within and Against Work” 234–36). My thinking here is also informed by the writings of Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, particularly Dalla Costa’s contention that “domestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus value” (33). Though Dalla Costa refers here to unwaged labor, the main thrust of her insights also apply to that which is produced in the waged labor market through the qualities of affect, emotion, and care.

6 For critical analyses that periodize neoliberalism through drastic shifts in early 1970s economic policy, see Duggan’s Twilight of Inequality? and Puar’s Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times.

7 For more on this history and its specific intersection with federal purges of suspected communists around the same period, see D’Emilio’s Sexual Politics and David K. Johnson’s The Lavender Scare: Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Civil Service, 1945-1975.

8 “Affective economies,” originally coined by Sara Ahmed in her essay of the same name, pertains here to a more literalized description of how affect factors into modes of exchange and value within and outside of hegemonic heterosexual affiliations.

9 See Manalansan IV.

10 See, for instance, Katherine M. Franke’s excellent analysis of the intersection between bourgeois ideals of privacy and the federal striking down of anti-sodomy law in “The Domesticated Liberty of Lawrence v. Texas.”

11 See Hennessy’s “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture,” Profit and Pleasure, and Fires on the Border; Nicola Field’s Over the Rainbow: Money, Class and Homophobia;
Teresa Ebert’s *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism* and *The Task of Cultural Critique*; Nancy Fraser’s *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition*; Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages*; and Floyd’s *The Reification of Desire*.


13 This point applies to what I consider the pre-neoliberal cultural commonsense. Both classical Marxist and Marxist feminist scholarship have gone far to demonstrate the extent to which exploitation under capital is, by definition, a condition which manifests itself within the interior of the laborer, whether in the domestic or industrial sphere.

14 See, especially, Chapter 9 in *The Managed Heart*. 
Chapter One:
Homosexuality, Emotional Work, and Postwar Ethics in
*The Price of Salt* and *Giovanni’s Room*

**Introduction: Cold War Contexts**

Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt* (1952) and James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) emerged during two notorious purges in the 1950s United States, an era that redefined citizenship and feeling in the postwar public sphere. These specific but interwoven witch-hunts – namely, the Red Scare and, less famously, the Lavender Scare – targeted individuals believed to possess, respectively, communist and homosexual tendencies, with accusations and evidence that relied upon the intuited particularities of a person’s demeanor and affect. Famously, these tactics of detection institutionalized a protocol for federal prosecution based upon the shifting terrain of individual behavior.¹ As individual, private sensibility took on monumentally political and economic dimensions, the popularization of Freudian psychoanalytic discourse and the well-known decision by the American Psychological Association (APA) to categorize homosexuality as a pathological disorder capable of remedy additionally contributed to shifting social perspectives on personal emotions and behavior.² As Larry Gross and James D. Woods (1999) have noted, the APA’s new claim on sexual pathology, a development that included “inventing medical terms for what had long been seen as moral defects,” fostered a profitable industry whereby “physicians won the ‘explanation rights’ [for homosexuality] that had long been monopolized by the clergy” (Gross and Woods 153).³

I situate my readings of *Giovanni’s Room* and *The Price of Salt* in this particular historical context for several reasons.⁴ For one, as texts that self-consciously take up the
changing status of personal feeling in the U.S., each illustrates dynamic renegotiations of notions of self-possession, agency, and social location that underscore the competing logics of self-determination and social conformity dictated by the early Cold War period. Specifically, *Salt* and *Giovanni’s Room* foreground personal mobility as being a privileged component of homosexual freedom. Access to this mobility develops in tandem with the literatures’ evolving formulation of ethical subjectivity, a broad category that, as I will discuss, manifests in individual characters as a corollary to the emotion work represented in each novel. As a mode that mediates homosexual agency and individuality, the service worker-as-ethical-subject comprises a novelistic response to the American Psychological Association’s (APA) pathologization of homosexuality. This is demonstrated through the literatures’ showcasing of the individual’s capacity for feeling as a resource for personal freedom, a capacity, these texts acknowledge with ambivalence, that is also mined by the networks of accumulation embedded in service work. In their formulations of subjective freedom, then, both novels also reveal particular anxieties and impasses that speak to postwar concerns regarding the commodification of emotion and the McCarthy-tinged dilemma of one’s interiority as self-incriminating evidence. Thus, in *Salt* and *Giovanni’s Room*, intuited feelings of love, care, loyalty, and empathy come to signify a subject’s capacity to earn a living as well as personal material susceptible to state and medicalized scrutiny.

I read these two novels together for several reasons. Fundamentally, both texts portray the domain of service work as a venue of possibility for homosexual self-knowledge and agency. Each features empathy, love, and loyalty as entities to be disciplined and networked toward monetary gain. Each also links characters’
geographical and class mobility to their success or failure as self-adjusted, self-knowing homosexual subjects and, in so doing, theorizes on both the promises of and limits to individualized ethical subjectivity as a barometer for agency and social inclusion.

In what follows, I explicate the early cold war distinction between morality and individual behavior harnessed by U.S. federal discourse in 1950 toward its strategy to eliminate suspected homosexuals and communists from federal employment. It is this distinction, I argue, that provides the ideological groundwork for postwar counter-narratives against APA discourse that plant the seeds of what I consider to be a proto-ethical queer subject. Reading backward in time, I elaborate the federal emphasis on individual abnormality through a close reading of a 1947 *Newsweek* piece on the U.S. Army’s protocol for detecting homosexuals in its ranks. Whereas psychoanalytic and sociological discourse had professed a totalizing view of homosexual abnormality, this early example, I argue, demonstrates an opening in public discourse that posits an individual’s labor capacity as being distinct from abnormality. Beyond being merely discursive, this opening should be understood most fundamentally as reflecting the postwar U.S. economy’s increasing need for a larger, more flexible workforce in the wake of increased wartime production. In the context of the split between labor capacity and abnormality, service labor emerges as a nexus where psychoanalytic exclusion and Cold War labor needs come into conflict with one another. It is this contradiction that constitutes the foundation for homosexual counter-narratives to contest the category of abnormality within a framework of workforce participation. The alienating effects of psychoanalysis and service labor intersect through patterns of what I call “trafficked feeling” that reorient particular feelings away from the idealized ethical subject as objects
for circulation. I examine a limited slice of the ethics genealogy, putting historical materialist and Foucauldian (or queer) theoretic frames into conversation with one another in order to elaborate an ethical framework in which the homosexual laborer comes into view.

Finally, I close read *Salt* and *Giovanni’s Room* as potent examples of homosexual counter-discourses whose responses to the cultural and material conditions of the postwar period constitute a body of critique on labor and commodified emotion from a homosexual vantage point that has gone largely unexamined. My literary analysis focuses particularly on the gothic conventions deployed in both novels, and how these deployments dictate spaces of dislocation between the subject and her feelings of affection, loyalty, care, and empathy. In both texts, the gothic constitutes a space where the relationship between interior and exterior, private and public, the personal and political, the subjective and the structural, are decompartmentalized and exist in uneasy and malleable relation to one another. Reading against the grain of the compartmentalized, ethical subject tentatively drawn out in each novel, I locate the alienating effects of ethics’ attachment to individuality and the particular burden placed on postwar homosexuality borne from the cultural premium put on the capacity to know and regulate one’s interior “self.” This alienation is revealed through the gothic locutions Highsmith and Baldwin deploy. Mediated by service labor and psychoanalysis, self-knowledge and feeling are gothically transformed into objects that have been put into circulation and have thus accrued values and implications that extend beyond the grasp of their points of origin.
Sex and the Public: The Personal as Political Risk

Postwar discourse on the Red and Lavender scares centered on the manufactured split between judging a person on the basis of general loyalty and judging someone’s personal habits as evidence of potential risk to national security. Broadly speaking, this split reflected government efforts to legitimize the simmering purges to a skeptical public by prioritizing concrete evidence over abstract moral code. Gestures toward public opinion did not tout the importance of “loyalty,” judged as it was by a more abstract moral code; instead, government discourse shifted toward a person’s individual proclivities, which could more visibly constitute evidence of a security risk (Johnson 23–4).

In his extensive study of the Lavender Scare, David K. Johnson outlines U.S. politicians’ laborious efforts to legitimate the communist witch-hunt in the eyes of the public. According to Johnson, the federal hunt for homosexuality provided the ideal cover to persecute suspected communists, as well. Accordingly, Senator Styles Brides warned in his 1950 speech, “A man doesn’t have to be a spy or a Communist to be a bad security risk. He can be a drunkard or a criminal or a homosexual” (Brides qtd. in Johnson 23). Thus, explains Johnson,

Other Washington insiders suggested [McCarthy] shift his efforts from “card-carrying” Communists to security risks. “The Senator overstated whatever case he may have and called things their wrong name,” wrote Pulitzer prize-winning columnist Arthur Krock. “He made the important error of confusing security with loyalty.” He would have made a better
case, Krock advised, had he stuck to issues of security, such as “personal
traits and behavior which lay the possessors open to blackmail.” (24)

These records constitute a primary node where the ideological needs of the US state met
up with the observation-based approaches of sociology and psychoanalysis. “Morality”
alone was no longer a sufficient mode of interpellation for detecting subversives. The
federal discourse that sought to individuate homosexuality reinforced it as a category
wherein evidence registered materially on the body concretized fears about homosexual
susceptibility to subversive forces. Increasingly, homosexual abnormality was not
publically represented as a sign of bad morals as much as it was a targeted object open to
case-by-case inquiries regarding one’s capacity for self-control.

I view this discourse on national security as potentially revising and extending
what Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant have termed “national heterosexuality.” In their
influential polemic, “Sex in Public,” they argue against “thinking about sexuality as a
form of intimacy and subjectivity” (208). More specifically, they claim that:

Although the intimate relations of private personhood appear to be the
realm of sexuality itself, allowing ‘sex in public’ to appear like a matter
out of place, intimacy is itself publicly mediated, in several senses. First,
its conventional spaces presuppose a structural differentiation of ‘personal
life’ from work, politics, and the public sphere. Second, the normativity of
heterosexual culture links intimacy only to the institutions of personal life,
making them the privileged institutions of social reproduction, the
accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development. Third, by making sex seem irrelevant or merely personal, heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of non-normative or explicit public sexual cultures…Intimate life is the endlessly cited elsewhere of political public discourse, a promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives, consoles them for the damaged humanity of mass society, and shames them for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood. (192–93)

As Warner and Berlant indicate, a hegemonic concept of sexuality ideologically classified as belonging to a “private” sphere has been mobilized at certain historical moments for the benefit of national interests and, in equally contradictory terms, has been phrased as a public concern to revise the juridical, economic, and social boundaries of what constitutes one’s private, autonomous sphere. To trace the intricate ways in which the Red Scare mandated an increasingly hazy line between abnormality, loyalty-as-morality, and homosexual interiority, however, requires a historically-situated approach that revisits the ideological critique of public and private.

Recent scholarship on cold war privacy has sought to nuance critiques on public and private by tracing historical shifts in public discourse that demonstrate a significantly ambivalent relationship to personal privacy. Deborah Nelson, for instance, provides a reading of Griswold v. Connecticut (1965) that challenges accounts of marriage that view
it as the longstanding ideological domain of private life. Rather, the public debate over privacy previously took as its focus state surveillance technology:

In “finding” this right, the Court made the home a “zone of privacy” protecting the relationship that lay within it – marriage – from the scrutiny of the state through the application of fundamental constitutional guarantees. Moreover, in so doing, the right to privacy became firmly associated, not with the wiretapping or surveillance cases that surround it, but with domesticity and family, with rights of child rearing, procreation, and sexual expression. (Nelson 2)

More than a newly demarcated “zone of privacy,” however, Nelson explains that the Court’s decision re-scripted privacy as “an increasingly incoherent concept” that contributed to a “protean notion” of what, exactly, constituted its conditions (4).

Similarly, the public national discourse on sexuality that occurred in the postwar years challenges Warner and Berlant’s position on national heterosexuality, a zone that gains its validity by “making sex seem irrelevant or merely personal.” On the contrary, as Johnson and Nelson demonstrate, during these years elected officials and other public figures participated in a national conversation on sex and sexuality, which leveraged the public repercussions of one’s behaviors to bolster panic over the spread of communism. Those suspected of committing crimes of perversion were summarily fired, spied upon, susceptible to imprisonment, and usually denied subsequent employment in their fields. The officials who orchestrated these purges went through great pains to connect sexuality
to the post-New Deal bureaucratization of the federal government demonstrating that homosexuality constituted an epidemic located primarily within the corridors of federal government offices (and not, as Alfred Kinsey’s report had famously declared, a more ubiquitous and nation-wide tendency than ever previously believed [Johnson 89–91]).

Far from reinforcing separate spheres, where one’s intimate life belonged to the constellation of elements under one’s own possession, this history illustrates an era where habits and sexual affiliations indeed contained the potential to mark someone (almost literally) as the potentially dispossessed property of the state. Thus, while the APA characterized homosexuality as originating at the site of individual psyche, postwar homosexual identity should also be viewed as both a product of and response to a very different discourse shaping this national political conversation. As such, homosexual forays into self-knowing subjectivity in literature reflect efforts to turn to interiority as a way to deflect homosexuality away from its national implications. Far from rejecting a national discourse in order to reinforce privatized notions of intimacy, however, these novels reflect a hegemony dictated in part by national interest in individual feeling that was well under way at the time of their production. As the next section shows, this hegemony is also reflected through Cold War discourse on labor that reiterates a similar wedge between morality and personal abnormality.

**Abnormality, Labor, and the Postwar Gap**

In 1947, two years after the end of World War II, an article appeared in *Newsweek* that showcased the U.S. Army’s techniques for detecting and removing homosexuals from within its ranks. Titled “Homosexuals in Uniform,” the article listed in bullet points a
... handful of observations from the 3,000–4,000 people the Army was said to have 
“discharged for this abnormality” (Author Unknown 54). The list reported homosexuals 
“tipped the average soldier on intelligence [and] education”; usually “had no family 
history of nervous or mental disease”; and were generally “law-abiding and hard-
working. In spite of nervous, unstable, and often hysterical temperaments, they 
performed admirably as workers. Many tried to be good soldiers” (Author Unknown 54). 
A brief coda to the article, sub-titled “The Blue Discharge,” concludes by outlining a 
“stiff new policy” to replace the existing discharge process, which hitherto had been done 
“quietly” and “protective[ly].” Under the new protocol, the army would differentiate 
between suspected homosexuals with “outstanding combat records” and those “found 
guilty” of “violence or impairing the morals of minors” (Author Unknown 54). 

The Newsweek piece spells out unequivocally an apparent yet uneasy 
juxtaposition of two forms of logic – one that categorizes suspected homosexuals as 
“hardworking” and “law-abiding” and another that “doubt[s] their sincerity,” revealing a 
fragile coherence that emphasizes work ethic on one hand and warns against an 
unreliable interiority on the other. The piece’s tone, which is matter-of-fact about the 
value of accused homosexuals as individuals, reveals the fractures of a pathologizing 
discourse that had historically categorized sexual abnormality as criminal and therefore 
 incompatible with society. 

Buttressed by historical changes in labor relations and a postwar productive 
surplus that increasingly relied upon service-oriented forms of labor, these terrains of 
distinction split the subject along an axis that divided interior “sincerity” and the proven 
outcomes of individual work ethic (Hardt and Negri Empire 29). In short, the piece
reveals a strand of popular discourse on homosexuality that compartmentalized social productivity and moral ambiguity within one subject. Service work thus emerges as an industry that also relies upon the ideological division between emotion and labor capacities. In the next section, I define my use of emotional labor in the service industry, as well as identify how its objectification of emotion reinforces a divide between subjective interiority and labor.

**Emotional Labor and Service Work**

I invoke “emotional labor” in the vein of Arlie Russell Hochschild’s definition of the same term, as a form of work that proliferates in service-oriented businesses such as retail, dining, or (in Hochschild’s study) the airline industry. While some scholars have used the distinct but related term “affective labor” to include these examples in addition to other so-called post-industrial forms of labor (such as communications technology), my focus on emotional work specifically is intended to consider characteristics particular to Hochschild’s famous study – namely, the customer-oriented nature of emotional work, its gendered inflections, and its low wages. As Hochschild has argued, this form of labor distinguishes itself from other forms through its emotional requirements on the part of the worker, which include the ability to anticipate customer desires and expectations, as well as modify personal feelings in accordance with consumers’ personal requirements.

Beyond its formal sectors, emotional labor exists in subtler and more informal arrangements – including paid and unpaid forms of domestic work such as childcare or housecleaning – which rely upon historically entrenched gendered divisions of labor to obscure the commodification of so-called natural feelings that are, in reality, aspects of
the labor required for the job. Emotional labor’s capacity for objectifying, extracting, and commodifying feeling while at the same time maintaining a narrative that views those feelings as natural manifestations of private subjectivity, helps explain how an ethical turn toward the disciplined worker provided a potentially critical wedge against psychology’s monolithic morality. If popular psychology relied on a script that bound homosexual feeling to abnormality, then the permutations of feeling required by the service industry marked a political opening for homosexual discourse to resist the totalizing view of psychoanalysis.

Though their techniques and concerns are different, Highsmith and Baldwin each recast emotions such as affection, pity, and loyalty, as entities that circulate via commodity exchange, an exchange that at certain times, however obliquely, comes to manifest in or evade the homosexual body. I consider this practice to constitute an emotional and political lexicon of “trafficked feeling” that denaturalizes the discourse reified by postwar psychoanalytic logic, a commonsense that views feeling solely as related and attached to individual interiority. By contrast, the concept of trafficked feeling belies the individuating discourse of psychoanalysis to demonstrate how the institutional norms it imparts, like those of service work, usher particular feelings into visibility in the social sphere for the purposes of exchange. Ethical subjectivity, which idealizes self-discipline and agency at the site of the individual, denotes one postwar arrangement of trafficked feelings made available to the homosexual in service work. It is through the moments when trafficked feeling evades registering solely through these “ethical” subjects that the novels represent a departure from earlier writings on homosexuality,
which generally dwelled more narrowly on individuated psychological experiences divorced from any circulation in the social world.

**Historicizing the Ethical Sexual Subject**

Given the extensive scholarship on ethics that has proliferated within a range of fields, the purpose here will be to trace one narrow strand of discourse particularly relevant to this study. I contextualize sexualized ethical subjectivity within the service industry, in particular, to open up discourse on ethical agency to Marxist categories of analysis in order to historicize the intersection between ethics and homosexuality. My objective, in part, is to locate lines of continuity between the now ubiquitous Foucauldian ethical lexicon and that of historical materialism. Put one way, if postwar ethical subjectivity found its utility through the positive demonstration of affective control embodied in service work, then how might situating service work within a broader genealogy of ethics prompt a reconsideration of how shifts in relations of labor have shaped the particular forms of individualism ethics espouses?

In order to explicate the concepts that inform my use of ethical subjectivity, I begin with Foucault’s definition of ethics in order to go back, in very un-genealogical fashion, to Marx’s early humanist thought. In “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” Foucault defines his conception of ethics by considering how he differentiates ethics from morality:

I think, in general, we have to distinguish, where the history of morals is concerned, acts and moral code. The acts [*conduits*] are the real behavior
of people in relation to the moral code \textit{[prescriptions]} imposed on them. I think we have to distinguish between the code that determines which acts are permitted or forbidden and the code that determines the positive or negative value of the different possible behaviors – You’re not allowed to have sex with anyone but your wife, that’s an element of the code. And there is another side to the moral prescriptions, which most of the time is not isolated as such but is, I think, very important: the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, \textit{rapport à soi}, which I call ethics, and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions. (263)

The split between the “subject” and “his own actions” defines Foucault’s ethical subject as a sovereign force of internal regulation. Thus, the internal dynamics of an ethical subject are largely managerial in nature: the ethical individual is one who can manage herself in compliance with a code. Additionally, I would add that there is an element to Foucault’s definition of the ethical self that wants to put ethics in a vacuum, separate from the organizing forces of history, that formulates ethics as being synonymous with individual agency. To be a “moral subject of [one’s] own actions,” contains a logical inversion that suggests that it is the positive evidence of one’s “own actions” alone that primarily determine one’s existence.

For Marx, ethics emerges most significantly as a social expression structured by forces of capitalist production. In \textit{Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844}, Marx elaborates on the residual effects of the idea of ethics, which imposes a narrative that
obscures worker exploitation. In this view, political economy is “a science of wealth” that produces the exponential desire (appearing as “need”) for accumulation of capital in one class as it dramatically reduces the standard of basic human needs among the working class (95). Marx writes: “Political economy…is therefore simultaneously the science of denial, of want, of thrift, of saving – and it actually reaches the point where it spares man the need of either fresh air or physical exercise” (95). This claim describes the one-sided nature to ethical values of “thrift” and “saving” that, while common enough, are in fact components of a broader framework of capital accumulation. Thus, ethical values constitute capital’s primary rationale, which promotes individual responsibility, such as “saving,” to obscure uneven distributions of capital.

Significantly, Marx’s enumeration of ethical values escalates (from “denial” to “want”; “thrift”; and, finally, “saving”) to document a progression of forms of “asceticism” from its most negatively inflected manifestation (“denial”) to its materialization in the culturally valued practice of “saving.” In so doing, Marx establishes how capital’s ideological investment in individual self-discipline registers within a spectrum of forms – flexibly attaching to “the ascetic but extortionate miser” as well as “the ascetic but productive slave” – to sustain narrative coherence for the story of wealth accumulation (95).

Ethics operates for Marx through the appearance of the distinction between “ethics” of “work” on one hand and “political economy of ethics [that emphasizes] opulence of a good conscience, of virtue, etc” on the other (97). Against the appearance of their existing in tension, Marx explains, political economy and ethics comprise two sides of the same coin. While political economy downgrades the worker’s standard of
living, ethical “good conscience” ensures individual compliance with capital accumulation, even as it seems to exist outside of political economy. Marx continues, “It stems from the very nature of estrangement that each sphere applies to me a different and opposite yardstick – ethics one and political economy another; for each is a specific estrangement of man” (97). In other words, the process of estrangement describes more than the estrangement of the laborer, as it includes additionally processes of compartmentalization whereby the appearance of autonomous and contrasting “spheres” of knowledge obscure the similarities that unite them. The notion of compartmentalization as a form of estrangement is compelling to my readings of service labor. For instance, Marx’s description of the social distinctions enabled by ethics discourse provides a nuanced perspective on the familiar false dichotomy between public and private. In this view, the ethical service worker comes to encapsulate the common threads between spheres of psychology and labor.

With a hint of irony, Marx is careful to note an “empirical” nature to the lopsided development of need (“it is always empirical business men we are talking about,” he says [95]). This and other references to political economy’s empiricism and “science” invoke rationality’s deceptive relationship to political economy. “Political economy,” Marx writes, “despite its worldly and wanton appearance – is a true moral science, the most moral of the sciences” (95). The contrast between the “wanton appearance” of capital and its “true” scientific nature is an inversion of the more prevalent Marxian view that seeks to demystify the chaos that undergirds capital’s apparent order. Contextualizing this point alongside his critique on ethics, however, reveals Marx’s primary aim of dissolving a distinction between “science,” that is, a sphere that professes value-free rationality, and
spiritual morality. Thus, capitalism’s “wanton appearance,” Marx insinuates, functions as a complement to that other side of the coin – that is, rationality. The fallacy of regulation and restraint hinges, however, on the appearance of their tension. Returning for a moment to the postwar context, if we substitute psychoanalysis for empirical science, we can begin to map the ways in which homosexual rationality provides a framework that unites the alienating effects of psychoanalysis and work.\textsuperscript{10}

A Marxian framework puts into relief Foucault’s method, which views “techniques of the self” (understood in this context as the individual self-management and -development) as a progression discrete from historical changes in production. Foucault’s cryptic assertion that, “techniques of the self do not require the same material apparatus as the production of objects; therefore they are often invisible techniques” (277), sheds light on the relationship between commodified feeling in service labor and the ethical self. Curiously, the suggestion of “techniques of the self” as particularly “invisible” and distinct from “the production of objects” rehearses the compartmentalization of privatized feeling and the laboring self. Foucault’s vague distinction echoes the mystification of service labor that wants to separate personal feeling from the commodified setting that disciplines its terms of expression. Rather than thinking about techniques of the self as autonomous and, thus, “invisible” in comparison to “the production of objects,” I conceive of service labor’s affective requirements in relation to both people and mass-produced objects – and its capacity to produce particular attachments – as constituting one of the primary material modes through which postwar “techniques of the self” were made visible and inextricably bound up in commodified and networked feeling.
Following Althusser’s recapitulation of Marx on alienation and ideology, ethical subjectivity’s relationship to “the production of objects” can be understood through his thinking in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” which reminds us that

It is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ ‘represent to themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their relation to these conditions of existence which is represented to them there…What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relations of those individuals to the real relations in which they live. (164–5)

Thus, emotional work’s mandate to offer the personalized service and intersubjective connection in response to consumer need fosters the imaginary relation on the part of the worker to the work that develops ethical subjectivity by way of compartmentalizing service feelings from “genuine” ones.\(^1\)

**Ethical Subjectivity and Service in *The Price of Salt***

Originally published under the author pseudonym Claire Morgan, Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt* (1952) became immediately popular for its ending, which provided a happy resolution for Therese and Carol, the novel’s lesbian protagonists.\(^2\) As a novel that meditates on the drudgeries of department store work, the banality of suburban domesticity, and the sleepy qualities of an Americana experienced from the highway, *Salt* is ostensibly a realist novel. Beneath this casing, however, the gothic interludes that
pepper the narrative reveal a stylized dialectic that registers a tension of another sort, which examines the struggle for recognition in the midst of a cultural landscape where being “visible” to society increasingly means falling under the objectifying gaze of state surveillance. This double bind is developed through the tension between the invasive scrutiny of state, psychoanalytic, and legal apparatuses and the idealized ethical subject. Rather than dictating the triumph of homosexual autonomy over a codified moralizing discourse of pathology, *Salt* is an earnest interrogation into the options that remain for individual homosexuals when “ethics” is the language of the private employment sector and “morality” is deployed as the property of the state. Ethical subjectivity meets its limit once it is registered in terms legible to public authority.

The title, *The Price of Salt*, which does not have a direct referent within the novel, nonetheless speaks in a symbolic register to many of its salient elements. Though salt is a natural substance, the title’s syntax spells out its process of commodification: “salt” on its own is not necessarily a commodity, but the qualification of “price,” insists upon it. In one sense, then, the title itself is a story about the transformation of something apparently natural into something to be extracted, designated a value, and exchanged. Like human feeling, salt can appear in commodity form under particular conditions.

One of the more widely recognized chapters in the cultural history of salt is the biblical example of Lot’s unnamed wife who, in defiance of God’s orders, turns and looks at her home city of Sodom as it endures the fire and brimstone God unleashes as punishment for its denizens’ sins of sodomy. As the story goes, Lot and his family are instructed by God to “escape for thy life; look not behind thee…escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed” (*King James Bible*, Gen. 19:17). The command not to “look”
remains unexplained in the passage, but the warning of being “consumed” is especially mysterious. To look is a risk in and of itself: looking at Sodom’s destruction invites the possibility of identification – through empathy, regret, or, most dangerously, desire – with its vanquished citizenry. The story of Lot’s wife is therefore a cautionary tale that condemns not only homosexuality, but also the danger of attempting to see and therefore acknowledge the existence of those whose acts have warranted social exclusion. As punishment for looking, Lot’s wife is turned into a pillar of salt. The only attention the text pays to her defiance and retribution is summarized in the almost passing observation that, “his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt” (Gen. 19:26). The monument of salt left in the wife’s wake symbolizes the personal disintegration that accompanies the will to recognize those whose being has been rendered impossible by authoritarian force.

Similarly, Salt’s recurring motifs of mirrors and (skewed) reflections probe the social implications of looking, seeing, and the Cold War dilemma of demanding to be seen without being watched. The novel first introduces Therese in her own moment of self-reflection, her image triangulated through the prism of Frankenberg’s Department store where she works. In these moments, Therese’s ethical subjectivity is drawn out through her processes of introspection that, to varying degrees, challenge her endurance to mentally cohere with her surroundings. As mentioned earlier, ethical subjectivity entails the compartmentalization of interiority and exteriority, work and home, personal life and work life to manage and discipline the emotional reservoir required for service work. Salt establishes from the outset a portrayal of Frankenberg’s store that vacillates between descriptions of a modern, corporate workplace on one hand, and machinations
evocative of a nineteenth-century factory on the other. The dueling temporalities embodied in Frankenberg’s are a microcosm of the novel’s incorporation of gothic and realist language.

The novel’s first line, which also comprises its own paragraph, begins in medias res: “The lunch hour in the coworkers’ cafeteria at Frankenberg’s had reached its peak” (Highsmith 11). Already, with the detail of “coworkers” rather than “workers,” the narration hints at the corporate emphasis on labels that superficially imposes an air of horizontal organization and cooperation among branches of service staff. This is echoed by Therese, herself, who “ate nervously” reading the “Welcome to Frankenberg’s booklet” because “she had nothing else with her to read, and in the coworkers’ cafeteria, she felt it necessary to concentrate on something” (11).

As the narrative continues to narrow in on Therese, the language shifts registers. Therese is surrounded by “the roar of dishes, chairs, voices, shuffling feet, and the bra-a-ack of the turnstiles in the bare-walled room was like the din of a single huge machine” (11). The “bare-walled rooms” and the “single huge machine” that comprises the Frankenberg’s workplace testify against the false fluffiness and egalitarianism the language of “coworkers” aims to foster. These opening sentences, which depict Therese’s first struggles in the novel, establish the dichotomy between service work and factory work as a false binary. Ironically, the “coworkers’ cafeteria” is not a place of personal interchange or socializing, but an alienating sphere of self-consciousness where, in the absence of a clear focus-point, Therese must direct her attention somewhere.

The scene continues:
The store was organized so much like a prison, it frightened [Therese] now and then to realize she was a part of it.

She turned the pages quickly, and saw in big black script across two pages: ‘Are You Frankenberg Material?”

She glanced across the room at the windows and tried to think of something else. Of the beautiful black and red Norwegian sweater she had seen at Saks and might buy for Richard for Christmas, if she couldn’t find a better-looking wallet than the ones she had seen for twenty dollars. (12)

The prose depicts a tug-of-war, where Therese’s thoughts extend and retract: she shifts from feeling “frightened” by her place in Frankenberg’s “prison” to the alienating and accusatory “script” that hails her as “Frankenberg Material.” The juxtaposed moments of “realiz[ation]” are sequentially deployed in the parlance of the competing regimes – draconian and corporate, respectively – that struggle to shape Therese’s experiences of her environment. In an effort to escape these disorienting reflections, she looks around the cafeteria to focus on something else. Almost automatically, she conjures up an image of what she “might buy for Richard for Christmas,” a moment of apparent escape that nonetheless remains inscribed within the confines of consumerism. Taken together, the passage comprises a whirlwind effect that presents a false start to Therese’s attempts to think her way out of the drudgery of her day. Her process captures a nuanced though compressed range of options whereby Therese’s attempts to think her way out of Frankenberg’s merely provide an array of differentiated consumer contexts.
In the first instance, Therese panics at her realization that she has become “a part of” the prison-like organization. The harshness of this image is subsumed, however, into the equally panic-inducing but affectively friendlier, enthusiastic invitation in the workers’ manual: “Are You Frankenberg Material?” Taken literally, the mention of “material” turns the banality of corporate lingo into a vague threat: Therese’s restlessness is rooted in the acute fear that, indeed, she will eventually materialize into exactly what Frankenberg’s needs her to be. Conversely, as her prison remark expresses, she feels herself becoming, increasingly, part of the dull landscape that surrounds her.

Therese’s impulse to distract herself with Richard’s Christmas gift provides a momentary respite from the claustrophobia of the manual and bland cafeteria walls. Despite her efforts to “try to think of something else,” Therese’s mode of escape plants her back into the circuit of commerce, albeit on the consumer side, contemplating what to buy Richard at Saks. The alternative available to think her way out of Frankenberg’s presents itself in the form of thinking her way out of being a department store employee, but not out of the department store. The moment constitutes what Althusser calls the “inverse” of recognition, which is misrecognition. (Althusser 172). For Althusser, misrecognition is intrinsically connected to the “ambiguity of the term subject” in relation to individuality and, by extension, freedom. What appears as “free subjectivity,” wherein the subject constitutes “a centre of initiative, [and is] author of and responsible for his actions,” is actually the willingness to “(freely) accept his subjection” by “mak[ing] the gestures and actions of his subjection ‘all by himself” (182).

By way of misrecognition, Salt sets out the terms for Therese’s conception of her own individuality. Revealingly, the limit to her agency – or, rather, the form her desire
for agency takes – idealizes the very flexibility and egalitarianism that the corporate language of Frankenberg’s aims to impart to its employees. Therese’s way out of the department store “prison” is accomplished by imagining herself switching positions in relation to it. Importantly, her reference to Saks is also her first reference to Richard, her boyfriend, who develops into one of the main antagonists standing in the way of Therese’s pursuit of Carol. As such, the narration suggests a resonance between the ideological infrastructures of service labor and heterosexuality as institutions that reinforce particular idealizations of individuality and freedom. Framed in these terms, Therese’s passing consideration of Richard, which at first registers as affectionate, indeed reenacts the mystifying locution Althusser attributes to subjectivity. What appears as escape reinserts the subject, on her own terms, back into consumer logic. What appears as love is phrased in the same logic that fuels Therese’s fantasy of trading places with the customers she serves.

Service labor provides the setting for Therese’s ethical subjectivity to emerge, formulated in these early examples of self-contemplation and introspection that she laments are lacking at Frankenberg’s. “Everyone else was living on an entirely wrong plane,” Therese observes, “so that the meaning, the message, the love, or whatever it was that each life contained, never could find its expression” (13). Her profound disappointment that Frankenberg’s is essentially a place of false feelings reinforces service work’s mystifying power over Therese: her desire to have access to “the meaning…the love” that she feels her fellow coworkers withhold presupposes the same emotional authenticity customers come to expect. Importantly, despite the prison-like environs, Therese does not seem to relate the social dullness at Frankenberg’s to the
alienating effects of commodified emotion. “It reminded her of conversations,” she reflects, “at tables, on sofas, with people whose words seemed to hover over dead, unstirrable things, who never touched a string that played” (13). The comparison between the dearth of emotional depth at the department store and the general banality of mediocre socializing “at tables, on sofas” is an inept one. Therese’s ethical subjectivity leads her to take the Frankenberg’s emotional landscape at face value, fetishizing the people around her as free agents rather than understanding them as workers affected by the environmental hazards of extracting emotion for profit.

The subsequent scene at the apartment of Therese’s co-worker, Mrs. Robichek, presents an inverted reflection of Therese’s inability to recognize the effects of her job in people around her as well as herself. Instead of resolving itself in the form of misrecognition, however, Therese’s anxiety escapes her and unravels gothically, first as unmediated fantasy, then as panic. As such, this scene demonstrates a moment when ethical subjectivity – via the gothically trafficked feelings that escape the grasp of idealized ethical self – fails the subject. At her apartment, Mrs. Robichek, who took up employment in the store’s dress department after she was forced to close the shop where she sold her own handmade women’s clothing, invites Therese to go to the mirror and try on the extra dresses left over from her shop:

Therese looked in the mirror in the wardrobe door…It was the dress of queens in fairy tales, of a red deeper than blood. She stepped back, and pulled in the looseness of the dress behind her, so it fitted her ribs and her waist, and she looked back at her own dark hazel eyes in the mirror.
Herself meeting herself. This was not the girl in the dull plaid skirt and the beige sweater, not the girl who worked in the doll department at Frankenberg’s. (22)

The sudden intrusion of gothic language – signaled by the references to “blood,” “queens in fairy tales”, descriptions of uncanny doubling (“herself meeting herself”), and mirrors – introduces the familiar germ of the gothic into Salt. The mirror revises Therese’s earlier imaginary transformation from service worker to customer. Wearing the dress, she imagines once again a fantasy of being released from her Frankenberg’s persona. The promise of the fantasy overpowers the reflection of “the girl in the dull plaid sweater.”

The shadowy passage contains an unhinging: what appeared to be merely a realistic daydream in the cafeteria possesses a magical aura of perversity once located in Mrs. Robichek’s home. No longer contemplating the pragmatic errands of the day, Therese’s fantasy of personal transformation is communicated this time through the fairytale language of queens and dresses. In its gothic retelling, Therese’s narrative does not invoke Richard but, indirectly, Carol, whose eventual arrival into the story is foreshadowed in the reflective moment of equivalence – “herself meeting herself.” Like the thematic association of the gothic with homosexuality, this moment suggests the conventional moment of realization that anticipates her attraction to Carol. In this topsyturvy realm, Therese’s desire does not appear as it did earlier – that is, in the scripted commercially-mediated image of Richard. On the contrary, the gothic dislocations that resist the moment of recognition between Therese and her desire to transcend her time
and place plant the seed of possibility wherein the vague harbinger of lesbian desire can assert itself.

Once the possibility tentatively presents itself, however, the moment swiftly changes focus and Mrs. Robichek’s body, not Therese’s own, becomes the locus of panic:

“If you like it, take it,” Mrs. Robichek urged impatiently, watching from a distance, lurking against the wardrobe as saleswomen lurk while women try on coats and dresses in front of mirrors in department stores.

[…] She couldn’t get the hook and eye unfastened at the back of the collar. Mrs. Robichek had to help her, and she could hardly wait. She felt as if she were being strangled. What was she doing here? How did she happen to have put on a dress like this? Suddenly Mrs. Robichek and her apartment were like a horrible dream that she had just realized she was dreaming. Mrs. Robichek was the hunchbacked keeper of the dungeon. And she had been brought here to be tantalized. (22–3)

As Therese regards Mrs. Robichek “lurking against the wardrobe as saleswomen lurk while women try on coats and dresses,” she eases into taking on the role of the customer and their workplace personas in the domestic space. Therese’s view of the “hunchbacked” Robichek as “keeper of the dungeon” signals a turning point that pivots on the permeability of the boundary between Frankenberg’s and Mrs. Robichek’s home. What began as a mundane affair begins to manifest in Therese as a paranoid need to
escape. “She had been brought here to be tantalized,” Therese imagines. What becomes the tantalizing object? Her brief encounter with desire she could not recognize? The ambiguity of what, exactly, Therese wants to avoid contributes to a sense of panic that circulates between the actors and reflected images of the scene. The vague pleasure Therese experienced earlier gives way to panic as she invests in Mrs. Robichek’s body the future she fears awaits her. The image Therese projects onto Mrs. Robichek functions as an inverse remainder from her anxious musings over lunch – a manifestation of Frankenberg’s material that Therese sees as her future foreclosed.

The scene’s exhaustive intensity narrates a gothic expenditure that constitutes the hidden side of the emotional self-regulation service work requires. The feelings that circulate and transform – from curiosity to vague desire to panic – echo both the magnitude of a worker’s emotional conditioning and the affective residue inevitably displaced at home once the employee can relax. The “horrible dream” Therese experiences is manifest in the realization of just how easily the domestic space can become the extended, though warped site of work. The dress, made by Mrs. Robichek, symbolizes a past she and Therese share in common. If Mrs. Robichek had previously only reminded Therese of the fact that “she had sunk so low as to work in a department store” (22), the dress confronts Therese with the realization that, like herself, Mrs. Robichek’s emotional labor at the department store means she is one more step further removed from the (more) creative activities of their past.

Psychoanalysis emerges as a lexicon that, in addition to the gothic, sets the terms for the slippery relationship between clarity and alienation. Therese projects onto Mrs. Robichek the transformative, monstrous character that originates from her own fears over
the social vertigo Frankenberg’s has bestowed upon her. Ethical subjectivity reinforces
the ideological coherence service work requires through ethics’ compartmentalized logic
that separates public from private and work from feeling. Against these differentiating
elements, the gothic intrudes to chaotically reveal the fallacy of ethical demarcations. The
so-called privacy or personal quality of work ethic is dissolved in favor of a view that
refuses to limit the sacrifices of emotional work to the workplace alone. While, in one
realm, psychological discourse overwhelmingly mandates pathology, its intersection with
gothic style pulls psychoanalysis into contact with its ethical counterpart in emotional
labor.

In the story of Lot’s wife, the stakes of looking and seeing are invested with
matters of life and death, as well as existence versus nonexistence, as Lot’s wife does not
die so much as cease to be, dematerialized into millions of grains. Her defiant attempt to
look outside of her own sphere of knowledge – signified by attempting to see the
Sodomites as they were being erased from the world – transformed her into a non-life,
bereft of any remnants or history. Therese’s attempts to envision her unnamable desire
expose her – like Lot’s wife – to Richard’s judgmental gaze, under which, Therese
experiences her professions of love dematerialize. Their conversation corresponds with
the maiden voyage of Richard’s homemade kite. Therese fishes for Richard’s tacit
acceptance of her feelings, remarking:

“I suppose it could happen, though, to almost anyone, couldn’t it?”

[Richard] went on, winding the kite. “But those things don’t just
happen. There’s always some reason for it in the background.”
“Yes,” she said agreeably… Was it love or wasn’t it that she felt for Carol? And how absurd it was that she didn’t even know. She had heard about girls falling in love, and she knew what kind of people they were and what they looked like. Neither she nor Carol looked like that. Yet the way she felt about Carol passed all the tests for love and fitted all the descriptions.

“Do you think I could?” Therese asked simply, before she could debate whether she dared to ask.

“What!” Richard smiled. “Fall in love with a girl? Of course not! My God, you haven’t, have you?”

“No,” Therese said, in an odd, inconclusive tone, but Richard did not seem to notice the tone. (98)

Invoking the discourse of familiar pop psychology, Richard deflects Therese’s light prodding to insist that lesbianism only emerges out of “some reason for it in the background.” In a moment that evokes her previous encounter with Mrs. Robichek, Therese is thrown into disorientation as she transforms into the object of Richard’s diagnosis. Richard’s reference to her “background” is a gothic telescoping back into a shadowy history that holds an inescapable truth. Therese’s efforts to cohere “agreeably” with the image Richard projects onto her prompts a circular round of self-questioning (“was it love or wasn’t it?”) that causes her to lose her grip on the love that she was hitherto confident in feeling. Richard’s casual suggestion of a pathological past usurps and disorients Therese’s feelings of affection. Richard does not reclaim Therese’s love in
order to redirect it toward him, but rather, wields his knowledge to extract the love to Therese’s bewilderment and disaffection.

The tone changes dramatically, as Richard conclusively dismisses any possibility that Therese can see herself any more clearly through Richard’s gaze. If the earlier gothic mirror scene set the terms for panic functioning as ethical rationality’s networked and regenerated counterpart, then this scene demonstrates Richard’s panic is, again, the unformed remainder of ethical rationality. Regardless of the fact that Therese’s “no” is voiced in “an odd, inconclusive tone,” Richard’s panic is temporarily sated so that he cannot, need not, “notice” any of the ambivalence that might otherwise provide a different perspective on Therese’s position.

As the kite soars higher into the air, Richard charges Therese to “let it out,” and eventually resolves to cut the kite’s string once it has run out:

“Don’t!” [Therese] said angrily. “Are you crazy?” Her hands were tired, but she clung all the harder to the stick.

“Let’s cut it! It’s more fun!” And Richard bumped into her rudely, because he was looking up.

Therese jerked the stick sideways, out of his reach, speechless with anger and amazement. There was an instant of fear, when she felt Richard might really have lost his mind, and then she staggered backward, the pull gone, the empty stick in his hand. “You’re mad!” she yelled at him.

“You’re insane!”
“Its’ only a kite!” Richard laughed, craning up at the nothingness.

(99–100)

Therese’s struggle becomes narrated with a degree of intensity that seems almost out of step with the actions of the scene. Putting the conflict in the context of her identification with the norms of her workplace, however, sheds a little more light on things. The location of the scene’s tension shifts dramatically from Therese’s muted coming out to her almost violent refusal to let go of the kite. “Her hands were tired, but she clung harder to the stick,” and we are left to wonder what it is she is holding on to, exactly.

As I discuss above, at stake here is not merely Therese’s relationship with Richard but, the text insinuates, Therese’s relationship to herself. If her workplace allowed her to form a coherent identity around self-management and control, Richard’s easy dismissal and refusal to even see her introduces the grain of incoherence that threatens Therese’s unraveling. As the thing that can’t be released, the kite comes to symbolize the possibility of a coherent or socially recognizable form of what she feels for Carol, a stand-in for the feelings that have no language outside the bounds of a psychoanalytic and moralistic lexicon. Ultimately, of course, Therese’s individual sense of coherence cannot be reflected in the “nothingness” that occupies Richard’s gaze and sucks the kite into its orbit.

This moral authoritarianism and Therese’s panic foreshadows the terms of Carol and Therese’s ultimate showdown against the universalizing force of law signified by the police, Carol’s husband, Harge, and the private detective Harge unleashes upon the couple’s road trip. At first, Therese observes, Carol merely expresses a rational distance
when they learn about the private eye on their tail: “Carol was not merely pretending
coolness, she really was not afraid. Carol said, what could he do after all, but she simply
didn’t want to be spied upon” (219).

When a few days have passed and the women begin to feel more acutely the
affects of surveillance, the narrative pointedly withholds any positive signs of emotional
reaction, such as indignation or even worry. Rather, the narrative depicts the process as a
form of dematerialization; a kind of subjective dissolving that defines the limits of their
mobility together:

As dawn was breaking, a highway patrolman stopped them for speeding,
and Carol had to pay a twenty-dollar fine in a town called Central City,
Nebraska. They lost thirty miles by having to follow the patrolman back to
the little town, but Carol went through with it without a word, unlike
herself, unlike the time she had argued and cajoled the patrolman out of an
arrest for speeding, and a New Jersey speed cop at that. (222)

Captured by the gaze of surveillance, the world takes on a new form. The patrolman is
no longer an individual to be reckoned with, but another element of a “nameless,
shapeless thing” (222) that follows them, graying the landscape and foreclosing any
possibility for self-determination. Compared to the New Jersey anecdote, the banality of
the “twenty-dollar fine” in an equally ordinary-sounding “Central City” becomes the
measure of how worn their resistance has become.
Using the patrolman as a stand-in for the private detective hired for a specific purpose, the narration conflates state-sanctioned authority with Harge’s personal interests to emphasize the extent to which Carol and Therese’s lesbianism puts them perpetually and structurally in debt. Whether it is the twenty dollars or her daughter, the gaze of surveillance transforms attachments into property that can be relinquished. When Carol confronts the detective soon after her meeting with the patrolman, Therese observes:

The detective looked at her with a false and meaningless smile, not like a person at all, but like a machine wound up and set on a course. “I think you’ll go back to New York. I’m giving you sound advice. Your child is at stake, I suppose you know that don’t you?”

“My child is my property!”

“A crease twitched in his cheek. “A human being is not property, Mrs. Aird.” (222)

The detective’s moralizing admonishment is immediately ironic, of course, since the rationale of the entire surveillance operation is dependent on viewing Carol as a form of Harge’s property. More significant than the hypocrisy of the line, however, is the one-sided mirror of property relations that – indeed – reproduces Carol as a form of property that, by definition, robs her of any claims to motherhood or any other element of being. Read this way, the detective’s retort that “a human being is not property,” is not so much hypocrisy as it is a chilling statement of fact: state surveillance turns a person into an object of study that, by definition, becomes a form of property to the state. In this case,
surveillance has invested the detective with an authority that can, quite unironically, dictate a rationale within moral and legal terms that claims ownership over Carol at the same time as it denies Carol any claim to the child she reared. The correlation the book draws between surveillance and psychoanalysis is clarified here, as Carol’s dematerialization bears a degree of resemblance to Therese’s unraveling at the hands of Richard. These connecting threads – woven together by the portability and wide appeal of moralistic fervor – do not dictate an ethical response as much as illuminate the inadequacy of ethical subjectivity when faced with its structural limit.

But all is not necessarily lost. The novel’s final sentences, which capture Therese’s frantic attempt to reunite with Carol once and for all, include a revision that gives them the last word on the power of seeing clearly and being seen in turn. Bursting into the restaurant where Carol dined,

Therese waited. Then as she was about to go to her, Carol saw her, seemed to stare at her incredulously a moment while Therese watched the slow smile growing, before her arm lifted suddenly, her hand waved a quick, eager greeting that Therese had never seen before. Therese walked toward her. (287)

These final sentences, which deliver as much hope as they do prompt further curiosity, contain four references to looking or watching that emphasize the promise of mutual connection not yet foreclosed by moralizing forces that seek to intervene. For what seems like the first time, the mutual recognition – something “that Therese had never
seen before” – eludes any explanation that would find its referent in either ethical or moral discourse. Escaping rationality or a readymade explanation that would give it a specific shape, the moment takes on something akin to the property of salt before it has a price. Remembering what they had to give up (most significantly, Carol had to shed her motherhood), these last lines are, in fact, bittersweet. The sheer bliss captured by Therese and Carol’s shared gaze is the feeling the novel leaves us with, and yet, in the blankness of that one moment, it is hard to let go of all that remains unknown in their future.

As a revision of the story of Lot’s wife, it may be enough to hold onto the small triumph of a look that, not only goes unpunished, but also is returned. The slight gesture of the mutually exchanged look suggests something that perhaps escapes the polarity of monolithic morality versus personal ethics. Unlike ethics, the intersubjective exchange of the look is an outward-facing action that suggests wider possibilities of connection and solidarity that can remain undetermined by an explicit acceptance or rejection of a moral code. It is an acknowledgment of mutual dependence that does not rely upon formalized machinations of knowledge. In short, it is a form of connection with origins that spring from experience and opens to a future where something as simple as being seen sets the conditions for possibility.

**Patrons of Desire in Giovanni’s Room**

As in *The Price of Salt, Giovanni’s Room* narrates the slippery terrain of objectified emotion and its mystifying repercussions on homosexual subjectivity. For Baldwin, psychoanalysis is the motor that sustains David’s fantasy of self-sufficiency that comprises his sense of self. It is David’s rootedness in self-analysis that allows him to
overlook obligations he would otherwise have to Giovanni, the man he falls in love with while in Paris. At the heart of Baldwin’s novel is a portrayal of marginalized desire that necessitates an alternative economy of human needs. In this economy, where emotional sustenance is exchanged for food and shelter, the devastating effects of homophobia come into view. *Giovanni’s Room* traces the homosexual epiphany and subsequent panic of David, an American who self-deprecatingly admits going to Paris, “as we say in America…to find myself” (Baldwin 21). In Paris, David encounters Giovanni, an Italian immigrant who bartends at an establishment owned by one of David’s wealthy Parisian acquaintances. As the narrative unfolds, David’s romance with Giovanni plunges him into shameful confrontations with the haunting remainders of his relationships past and present. Paralyzed by his inability to come to terms with the emotional needs of those around him, David ultimately rejects Giovanni, an event that leads to both men’s unraveling.

David’s flight from America to Paris is one of the principal organizing tropes of the novel. Once ensconced in Paris’s homosexual subculture, David is faced with the limits of his own efforts to maintain his sense of agency within the networked emotions and needs that override his prior self-fashioned psychoanalytic script. Several critics have read David’s journey to Paris as a failed attempt to “recover [his] innocence” (Henderson 318) or, alternatively, as an escape from his past that works metonymically as a “mask” for his American guilt (Tomilinson 141). In addition to symbolizing white America’s “lack of accountability” (Tomilinson 141), David’s position as insider-outsider of this network mediates his struggle to come to terms with the uneven relations that
predetermine the economized terms of his relationship to Giovanni and thus compound his inner turmoil.

The novel’s opening passages establish David in a country house outside of Paris where he reminisces on the events that we soon find out have culminated in Giovanni’s execution by the state for the crime of murder. Gazing at his “reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane” (Baldwin 3) the narrative positions David as mediating all that surrounds him. As he continues, the narration’s syntax is increasingly emphatic as David repeats and revises the imagery to observe, again, “the countryside is still tonight, this countryside reflected through my image in the pane” (4). The reiteration switches the “reflected” objects – from its the first mention of David’s image reflected, to the “countryside through [his] image.” The change progressively concretizes David’s visage against the retreating, diaphanous world outside registers as an attempted act of reconstitution in the wake of David’s guild-ridden foray into Giovanni’s world. David’s efforts to regain composure are appropriately put in terms of reflection and self-gazing, which structure the narrative’s broader characterization of psychoanalytic self-pondering throughout the novel. For Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson “David's narcissism is merely the symptom of a more deeply rooted political anomie the incapacity of a self to imagine a socio-political context in which it might express itself” (254). David’s so-called narcissism, however, is not so much an inability to imagine such a “context” of self-expression, but rather a function of his gendered, partial embrace of psychoanalysis as providing the narrative that – in fact – would forgive his narcissism for the same reasons Shin and Judson provide. David’s struggle for self-coherence via a psychoanalytic script echoes the novel’s broader structure, which begins with David’s
confession of his first homosexual experience and develops along a trajectory of his subsequent attempts to disavow and repress his desire. What appears in the text as repressed sexuality, however, comes to reflect a broader disavowal of the troubling network of emotional exchange that mediates his romantic desire.

David describes his turmoil after his first encounter with Joey in terms that again dramatize a struggle to regain a de-centered self:

The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. Precisely, I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled through me. (9)

The narrative repetition of “that body,” which constitutes a “black opening of a cavern” where David “would lose [his] manhood” foregrounds the novel’s triangulating of subjectivity, psychoanalysis, and the outside gothic body that threatens to disrupt a coherent relationship between subject and knowledge. Importantly, it is David’s recognition of his desire through Joey’s body that gives “that body” its gothic valence. Professing to “want[ing] to know that mystery,” David’s panic registers in a desire to “have that promise fulfilled through me.” In other words, David’s most immediate and urgent reaction to his affair with Joey is communicated through a calculus that equates the possession of his “manhood” with an ability to contain and “fulfill” his desire autonomously. Thus, David’s sense of himself depends fundamentally on his self-image
as reservoir of his own capacities, productive of his own desire. This desire for self-sufficiency, refracted through his first homosexual experience, forms David’s rendition of ethical subjectivity. As was the case in the earlier windowpane revision, David’s struggle is put in terms of a struggle to, paradoxically, become the autonomous body that both mediates and “fulfill[s] desire. He continues:

I was ashamed…I wondered what Joey’s mother would say when she saw the sheets. Then I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me, my mother having died when I was little. A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern…And I made my decision. I got out of bed and took a shower and was dressed and had breakfast ready when Joey woke up. (9)

David’s lament over what appears to him as his lost autonomy vacillates from meditating on his own mental interiority to turn to his family. The language of self-disclosure includes a brief explication of personal history (“my father…had no one in the world but me, my mother having died when I was little”), which converges with its messy, subconscious counterpart (“a cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor”). The moment constitutes a textual takeover, wherein the uncontrollable excess in the language of a gothic psychic opening does not offer the same transparency David attributes to the family story. The “cavern” David first mentions in reference to Joey circulates from its first appearance to reemerge in the midst of David’s indexing of family strife. In the first
instance, the cavern represents the “madness” David increasingly fears will steal his
“manhood.” His first defense against this madness is to assert his own productive
capacity – importantly, in the domain of “mystery” and “power,” a foreshadowing of the
emotional economy he encounters in Paris. The cavern’s second intrusion, presents the
voices of things “forgotten.” Instead of loss of manhood being what accompanies
“madness,” madness in this instance presents a genealogical alternative to David’s
nuclear family in the form of a homosexual genealogy.

The gothic depiction of “half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of
dirty words” evokes of the final moments of Radclyffe Hall’s seminal lesbian text, *Well of Loneliness*, where – in a scene that is as haunting as it is ambiguously promising – young Stephen’s bedroom is suddenly invaded and “thronging with people”:

> Oh, but they were many, these unbidden guests, and they called very
> softly at first and then louder. They were calling her by name…the quick,
> the dead, and the yet unborn – all calling her, softly at first and then
> louder…She could see their marred and reproachful faces with the
> haunted, melancholy eyes of the invert – eyes that had looked too long on
> a world that lacked all pity and all understanding…their pain, her pain, all
> welded together into one great consuming agony. (436–7)

The “half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories” haunting David are analogous to
Hall’s “marred and reproachful faces with the haunted, melancholy eyes of the
invert…that had looked too long on a world that lacked all pity and all understanding.” In
each instance, history is visited upon the protagonist in the form of narrative and subjective incoherence that conflates itself with the gothic, albeit toward different outcomes in each novel. In Hall, the initial linear confusion manifest in “the quick, the dead, and the yet unborn” resolves itself around the truth of “their pain, her pain, all welded together into one great consuming agony.” Thus, through the common denominator of “pain,” Hall’s narrative revises the organizing precepts of Stephen’s relationship to humanity. The result is what allows Stephen’s accumulated desperation throughout the novel to end in the last minute on a note of optimistic possibility. This possibility finds a productive use for historical pain in the form of alternative alliance provided by the recovered voices of the past and future.

For David, however, the “half-understood stories” that stand as a products of either David’s or history’s misunderstanding, only serve to reflect back to him the fundamental terror that his own story, and thus his mode of constitution, may be only partially formed and thus eternally “opened” – half-understood, even if only by him. David halts the unraveling with a final reassertion of self-determination. Reporting resolutely that, “I made my decision. I got out of bed and took a shower and was dressed and had breakfast ready when Joey woke up,” David evades the shadowy threat of historical knowledge as swiftly as it had descended upon him. His assertion, put in the matter-of-fact terms of self-care and discipline, evokes his reliance on a personal ethic to eschew and work against the vast, gothic openness of historical knowledge.

Despite their revealing differences, each passage from Well and Giovanni’s Room, depicts the homosexual individual’s violent confrontation with a lineage that defies the bounds of both individual subjectivity and heterosexual lines of reproduction and
temporality. The encounter is necessarily violent, these passages suggest, because it pulls the subject out of the immediacy of the present and demands a different sort of account – or view – of an individual’s social place. This other account requires the suspension of the kind of coherence that self-knowledge promises to deliver. Indeed, to open oneself to this history, Hall and Baldwin suggest, is to be willing to disinherit the pleasure and promise offered by the culturally standardized script of self-introspection.

David’s mastery of psychological discourse provides him with a degree of narrative control that shapes his efforts at self-determination. As he continues to explicate his familial background, David takes a narrative detour to describe the nightmares he had of his deceased mother:

I scarcely remember her at all, yet she figured in my nightmares, blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body, so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I clawed and cried, into a break so enormous as to swallow me alive. But when my father or my aunt came rushing into my room to find out what had frightened me, I did not dare describe this dream, which seemed disloyal to my mother. I said that I had dreamed about a graveyard. (10–11)

The imagery of this scene – which juxtaposes the “opened” horror of “her body; that body” with David’s lie about “a graveyard” – echoes David’s overarching commitment to enforce corporeal and mental closure against an openness that threatens to infiltrate him
with histories and feelings beyond his control. As this passage depicts, psychoanalysis does not provide so much the useful content as it does a legible form within which David can script his subjectivity. The misogynistic horror with which David describes his mother’s “sickening soft…opened” body correlates with his own refusal to allow himself to become an “open” vessel under the gaze of analysis. Rather, like the contents of a graveyard, David’s idealized interiority is a container for dead emotion kept out of the flux of circulation that would code his anxiety and panic with systems of analytic value outside his own making.

David’s reluctance to relinquish the script follows him to Paris and continues to haunt his relationships and activities. Paris is a place where homosexual connection is figured not through psychoanalysis but an archaic trope of patronage. As such, David’s struggle constitutes the limits of the psychoanalytic subject who must confront a material reality that exceeds his personal intervention. In “The Expatriate Tradition in American Writing,” Malcolm Bradbury identifies the legacy of patronage that has historically framed the history of expatriate writing:

Doubtless one thing that makes this such a possible affair is that, in the profession of letters, travel and long foreign residence are not difficult undertakings. Needing minimal equipment (an intelligence, an imagination, paper and pen or typewriter) and financed often by the oblique economics of patronage, royalty, or private income, the writer has less to bind him than most of us, is freer to chose his working location in
the context of pleasure or stimulus, and is more disposed to mythicize and justify the activity, to attach dramatic value to it. (16)

Bradbury’s observations on the relative freedom of the writing expatriate and the “oblique economics of patronage” that provide this freedom dictate a tension between personal liberty and indebtedness to the fortune of others that is analogous to David’s dilemma. In a sense, David is the expatriate writer, though, of course, a writer of another sort. His self-narration is one that has subsists on a particular script of accessible knowledge that sustains his distance from those around him. As in Salt, psychoanalysis comes to encompass both the fantastic promise of and material limit to ethical subjectivity: the obsessive introspection that fortifies David’s self-containment is the same force that deludes him into believing he can remain outside the network that, by definition, prefigures his access to hegemonic modes of self-knowledge. To echo Bradbury, like the expatriate writer whose “dramatic value” overwrites the “oblique economics of patronage” that foreground his potential, Giovanni’s Room implicates psychoanalytic interiority as a logic that mythologizes an individual and unencumbered relationship to feeling.

The narrative of Paris of Giovanni’s Room is set in contrast to America through a variety of binary oppositions, the most significant of which come to manifest in an economy of bartering to which David must become accustomed upon his arrival.18 The Parisian economy is posited as service-based and specifically non-industrial, a difference Giovanni highlights throughout the novel in his brief but disparaging references to “oil well[s] in Texas”; “American motor car[s]”; and “Frigidaires” (Baldwin 154, 138, 142)
By contrast, Paris constitutes the scene of emotional exchange, where David and Giovanni learn to trade their measured companionship for other necessities, such as food and cash, doled out to them by the older men they befriend. Not surprisingly, David appears to take to the arrangement with relative ease, as he ostensibly reconciles his pre-figured narrative with one he can impose upon his wealthy patrons. In an encounter that immediately precedes his first interaction with Giovanni, David describes his affiliation with Jacques, a wealthy benefactor, through an economic discourse:

There was, in this tolerance of mind, a fund, by no means meager, of malicious knowledge – I had drawn on it when I called [Jacques] up to borrow money. I knew that Jacques could only hope to conquer the boy before us if the boy was, in effect, for sale; and if he stood with such arrogance on an auction block he could certainly find bidders richer and more attractive than Jacques. I knew that Jacques knew this. I knew something else: that Jacques’ vaunted affection for me was involved with desire, the desire, in fact, to be rid of me, to be able, soon, to despise me as he now despised that army of boys who had come, without love, to his bed. I held my own against this desire by pretending that Jacques and I were friends, by forcing Jacques, on pain of humiliation, to pretend this. I pretended not to see, although I exploited it, the lust not quite sleeping in his bright, bitter eyes and, by means of the rough, male candor with which I conveyed to him his case was hopeless, I compelled him, endlessly, to hope. And I knew, finally, that in bars such as these I was Jacques’
protection. As long as I was there the world could see and he could believe that he was out with me, his friend, he was not there out of desperation, he was not at the mercy of whatever adventurer chance, cruelty, or the laws of actual and emotional poverty might throw his way. (28)

David establishes from the outset an equivalence between Jacques’ money and his own “fund…of malicious knowledge,” which organizes the passage’s unfolding so that nothing – not Jacques’ “vaunted affection”; nor their “male candor”; nor their appearance as “friends” – remains untouched by what David’s circulated knowledge puts into motion. Indeed, it is David’s “fund” that infiltrates the narrative’s first depiction of Giovanni from “the barman” at a distance to “the boy” to be “conquer[ed]” and “in effect, for sale…with such arrogance on an auction block.” Thus, Giovanni’s position as a service worker exposes him as a figure whose objectification appears, as if refracted through cracked glass, doubled – first, by the patronizing gaze of Jacques and David, and second through David’s relation to Jacques which, this passage foreshadows, demands Giovanni’s inscription within this economy.

David’s repetition of “I knew” and “I pretended” constitute the main currents that run though the scene and hold the emotional bargaining chips of “desire”; “affection”; “humiliation”; “hope”; and “desperation” in taught relation to one another. It is his knowledge, David insists, that provides him the luxury of “pretending that Jacques and I were friends” as well as the elasticity of their “rough, male candor” as a cover to “compel” and repel Jacques at will. Shutting down the looseness of Jacques’ “endless…hope,” David concludes ultimately that “I was Jacques’ protection…his
friend,” providing the insurance lest some “adventurer” sees Jacques’ “desperation” and retaliates with violence. David’s final equation that links Jacques’ susceptibility to physical abuse with “chance, cruelty, or the laws of actual and emotional poverty might throw his way” dictates a positive correlation between Jacques’ “emotional poverty” and his potential victimhood that imbues emotion – in this last instance – with a degree of materiality that, like other forms of wealth, become registered on the body and fetishized just the same.

Emotion’s economic language establishes the trafficked feelings that become, in Paris, entities to exchange. David’s description of circuited knowledge encodes the system with values that stick to and transform both the affiliations and individuals with whom he interacts. In this sense – as a scene of spectral circulation and mutable properties – the moment is a gothic one. If America represents for David an idealized yet unstable division between self-closure and a gothic openness to history’s reach, the networked circuits of emotion dictated by Paris’s bartering system fulfils David’s early wish of becoming the self-sufficient arbiter of his desires. David’s hyper-calculated economy of knowledge appears to him as his self-realized autonomy that acts as substitute for his limited mobility, indebted as he is to the men who provide Giovanni and him with sustenance. On the contrary, as in Salt, the scene’s gothic calibrations speak to a particular underlying panic merely masked by the networked feelings that enjoy a degree of circulation that the homosexual subject cannot. In his essay on Gide, written two years prior, titled “The Male Prison,” Baldwin meditates at length on the writer’s sexuality in terms that resonate with the conflation of cognitive and economic language in the previous passage. “It is possible, as it were,” Baldwin writes,
to have one’s pleasures without paying for it. But to have one’s pleasure without paying for it is precisely the way to find oneself reduced to a search for pleasure which grows steadily more desperate and more grotesque...Gide’s trouble…is that today’s unlucky deviate can only save himself by the most tremendous exertion of all his forces from falling into an underworld in which he never meets either men or women, where it is impossible to have either a lover or a friend, where the possibility of genuine human involvement has altogether ceased. (234)

Scholars who have read this or other excerpts from “The Male Prison” in relation to <i>Giovanni’s Room</i> have typically evidence of Baldwin’s fraught relationship to homosexual “depravity” (DeGout 426). Another way of thinking about these passages, however, is through a more general consideration of their glaring similarities, which depict homosexual inequality as mediated through the tropes of exchange and payment in the informal sphere. As David and Jacques demonstrate, indeed, for them, there is no such thing as “hav[ing] one’s pleasure without paying for it” in some way. Moreover, that dependences and affections are allocated along networks of patronage means that “even the most tremendous exertion of all his forces,” David is not immune. Indeed, the network of exchange appropriates even David’s “forces,” which David he demonstrates via his obsession with interiorized self-narration.

In this way, Paris serves as an inverted image of the U.S. economy, which is idealized as the location where the materiality of industrial production and the ostensible
inmateriality of social discourse remain in tense opposition. Paris, by contrast, conflates informal spaces of sociality with economic discourse. The bars in Paris make visible what the Americanized separate spheres cannot: that there is a material dimension to social discourse that systematically disenfranchises individuals while at the same time, constituting one of the most accessible and therefore useful narratives. Paris’s barter economy therefore professes what is obscured earlier: David’s sole mode of autonomy is based upon a script that will, by definition, perpetually distance himself from possible connection, what Baldwin calls “genuine human involvement.” This has less to do with homosexuality per se than with the overly determining scrutiny of a psychoanalytic narrative that prefigures human feelings as having institutionalized and therefore social value.

In the context of networked emotion, one's poverty is not simply constituted by one's access to financial stability, but also through the particular scripts that either sustain or deny a view of a kind of survival based on love. In Giovanni’s Room, denial of this form of interdependence comes to mean the difference between life and death. David’s only resort, the novel suggests, lies in using this knowledge to his best advantage while abroad. Nonetheless, the hierarchies of power and control embedded in the script dictate that David’s relation to Giovanni remains unequal, even if only in David’s terms.

**Conclusion: Revisiting a Queer Ethical Genealogy**

Beyond the distinctive tone of each novel’s conclusion – Salt, of amorous resolution, and Giovanni’s Room, of ominous solitude – the texts also theorize contrasting notions of how the matrices of sexuality, work, and individuality intersect to unsettle the master
narrative of personal freedom. In this regard, the crux of these novels’ differences is told through the capacity of trafficked feelings. These feelings either expose or obscure the effects of work refracted through Therese and David’s ethical individuality. The trafficked feelings that contradict the ideal of ethical individuality ultimately undermine these characters’ perception of social relations of production, viewed as either a fluid set of roles (Therese), or as the pliable scaffolding that may be transcended by individual self-analysis and emotional negotiation (David). The course of these trafficked feelings sets some of the terms for the ideological pulls and pitfalls of ethical individualism in these postwar texts.

In Salt, these terms are enacted through Therese’s fantasy of personal mobility beyond the department store walls, which is bound as much to her rejection of Mrs. Robichek as it is to the financial independence Carol comes to represent. Therese’s lapse into interiorized terror seals her perception of herself as being fundamentally distinct from Mrs. Robichek. Masquerading as psychic panic, her revulsion in the apartment gothically overlaps with the alienating vestiges of emotional work, but – narrated through the self-referential lens of psychosis – remains obscured to her as such. The moment models one rendition of ethical subjectivity’s capacity to fetishize the personalized component of service labor, dividing labor from feeling to highlight individuated perception over the commonality of class position. Therese’s panic, which, as I have argued, originates as an expression of alienation, is coded as psychic and/or homosexual by the narrative, landing on Mrs. Robichek as its object. Networked through the psychological lexicon, panic is dislodged from its labor-based genesis in the text to eventually be projected as a threatening force displaced onto Mrs. Robichek. Thus, even
as panic first appears to form the alienating inverse of ethical self-control, once organized by psychoanalytic logic, it reinforces Therese’s sense of distance from Mrs. Robichek, and cements her imagined status as a free agent. Panic’s transferability in this regard marks it as a trafficked feeling, which permits symptoms of class antagonism (in this case, alienation) to register in an individualized context.

*Salt’s* generally optimistic resolution, which finds Carol and Therese attaining a form of conjoined autonomy, suggests an alternative to individualist ethical subjectivity that looks outward rather than inward, away from self-reliance and toward cooperative meaning-making. Importantly, this conclusion does not reinstall trafficked feelings back to their material origins, but posits the possibility of mutual connection as being that which evades, even momentarily, the trappings of social value.

By contrast, *Giovanni’s Room* refuses any resolution between ethical subjectivity and the economies of feeling that give rise to its form. David and Giovanni’s sexual disenfranchisement becomes conflated with and interpreted through their *material* disenfranchisement, which extracts and reproduces their affection within a system of exchange. David’s struggle to reaffirm his self-containment once in Paris is, by definition, at odds with the ideological and discursive contexts that had provided the ethical terrain of self-discovery he once had enjoyed. The self-analysis that had once been a naturalized component of his personhood becomes, in Paris, his life’s work, constituted by the emotional negotiations that sustain him in his sexual disenfranchisement. These negotiations necessitate a process of objectification whereby he rightly registers his affections as his only tools for survival. Homosexuality is not a psychological condition, but a process of “proletarianization.” In this way, Baldwin’s
refusal to resolve David’s dilemma by the novel’s end constitutes its own form of political progress, which mandates a vision of justice beyond merely a social acceptance of homosexuality.

As *The Price of Salt* and *Giovanni’s Room* demonstrate, a critical approach to idealized ethical subjectivity locates one place where the fantasies, limits, and material realities of homosexual subjectivity converge and can be examined. My interest in ethical subjectivity stems from a body of queer theory that takes ethics as its political starting point, often to the effect of obscuring the ideological investments I have attempted to disclose. Like David, this trend idealizes the present in order to evade the messy remnants of history. This scholarship includes Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, one of the most widely read texts on queer theory in the last ten years. True to ethical form, Edelman’s is an ethics of pure negation—a radical, queer turn against heteronormative futurity that will always “affirm a structure, [and] authenticate social order” (3). Edelman’s solution—to embrace the psychoanalytic death drive as a form of queer politics’ true essence—demonstrates one extreme of homosexuality’s (and queer theory’s) commitment to radical individuality.

Similarly, Lynn Huffer’s queer ethical intervention into Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* argues against the popular queer genealogy that takes for granted psychoanalysis as the origin point of modern sexual subjectivity. Her capacious re-reading of *Madness* finally lands on her revision of queer ethics, an “ethics of eros,” that cares for “the wounded vulnerability of the beloved other” (277–8). Invested in recovering the “ghosts of history” and their “clash with power,” Huffer describes this iteration of queer ethics as “curiosity-as-care”—listening to and learning from the past.
and thereby evading the conventional version of ethics, which “undergirds the normalizing violence of biopower” (245). While Huffer’s ethics professes an attention to history, it does not escape the ideological traces of its foundation, expressed in its unexamined stakes in individualism. Fundamentally, “curiosity-as-care” is a recapitulation of an ethics that erases the material genealogy of its expressed commitments. This idealized production of “care” as an exhibition of and avenue toward “curiosity,” rephrases “care” as mode of communion that, expressed through individual “curiosity” is oriented away from its historical location in forms of labor and social struggle. As such, care is trafficked in its own way, dislodged from its entanglements with commodification and labor to establish a natural component to personal interiority. Relegated to the realm of ethics, “care” becomes a neutral signifier, performed in a vacuum.

That said, my choice to read ethical subjectivity in a postwar context did arise from a curiosity. Edelman’s idealistic yet limiting frames and Huffer’s reliance on ethics present contradictions that remain relevant. Trafficked feelings illustrate the gap between ethical subjectivity’s ideological promise and the historical relations that give such promise its particular form. The recent work in queer ethics is also bound to that history, a history that undermines the premium put on queer individualism at any price.

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See Andrew Wilson’s *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith*, which gives a slightly more nuanced view of how Freud’s later precepts in the postwar years diverged from how his earlier psychotherapeutic findings had filtered into mainstream discourse to illustrate a popularized discourse regarding homosexuality. Wilson writes, “Freud believed that it was pointless trying to ‘cure’ homosexuals of their same sex desires; rather, psychotherapy could be used to help patients come to terms with their sexuality. However, American psychotherapists of the late 1940s and early 1950s, spellbound by the cult of self-improvement and the promise of restoring ‘normality’, translated Freud’s writings into a belief system which they thought could be used to erase ‘unhealthy’ erotic drives and banish all traces of homosexuality” (147).

See also Joanne Merowitz (2010) for analysis of how professional explanations of social irregularity came from the culture-and-personality school. Combining anthropological, sociological, and psychological approaches to individual personality and the modification of behavior, culture-and-personality thinkers developed “a single metanarrative – on cultural transmission via the shaping of personality – to explain various kinds of human disobedience” (Meyerowitz 1083). Originally dedicated to subverting socially damaging theories of eugenics, these popular intellectuals emphasized the notion of cultural inheritance and the importance of parenting for explaining various forms of social behavior and individual disposition. As these ideas became increasingly absorbed into mainstream discourse, the emphasis on culture over biological determination spawned many of the well-known political projects whose implications still haunt foreign and domestic public policy today, such as the infamous Moynihan Report. In sum, the culture-and-personality school came to exemplify an mid-twentieth-
century scholarly consensus that “translated social and economic injustice into issues of mental health” (1084). In other words, Meyerowitz suggests, at the same time the culture-and-personality school sought to promote social equality though debunking the myth of biological determination, it solidified commonsense distinctions between personal interiority and the public sphere.

4 Henceforth referred to as Salt.

5 Paula Rabinowitz triangulates class and geographic mobility with the 1950s film noir, which constituted one response to the oppressive conditions in inner cities (5).

6 My interest in early representations of ethics in relation to homosexuality is inspired by Robyn Wiegman’s observations on contemporary queer theory’s relationship to morality in Object Lessons. Reading Ian Halley’s “Queer Theory by Men,” Wiegman critiques Halley’s rehearsal of the commonsense narrative on the divergence of feminist and queer theory. Via Halley, Wiegman examines the implications of queer theory’s general imperative to refuse and resist vestiges of authoritarian morality, which it locates problematically in US feminism (Weigman 105).

7 My use of “proto-ethical queer subject” is influenced by the substantial amount of scholarship that, following Foucault, has promoted an “ethical” perspective on queer(ed) forms of subjectivity and politics. For two of the most prominent recent examples, see Lynn Huffer, Mad for Foucault; Lee Edelman No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.

8 Emphasizing the psychological and systemic dimensions of what it means to be the face of a huge corporation in the business of providing service, as well as the gendered division of the workplace, Hochschild’s study of airline attendants starts with Marx’s
premise of alienation of labor. For Hochschild, the worker’s alienation has as much to do with the gendered, affective front airline attendants are forced to internalize (and represent to clients as “natural”) as it does with Marxist conceptions of the objective alienation all workers face under capitalism.

9 In her work on domestic work and affect, for instance, Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez discusses the ways the emotional skills of the laboring subject become an increasingly important reservoir from which to produce value, as well as reorient the feelings and divisions historically located in the domestic sphere to the realm of paid production.

10 Like Marx, Max Weber generally classifies ethics as a moralizing expression of rational restraint that transcends the bounds of discrete spheres, whose corollary in the sphere of labor is the “duty” inscribed in individual work ethic (51). In his well-known sociological work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), Weber elaborates a view of the symbiotic development of capitalism and protestant Christianity along the axis of rationalism and ethics. For Weber, monetary greed is not unique to capitalist development per se; what *is* noteworthy, however, is the way historical shifts in religious appeals to moral authority functioned to “canonize as the economic virtues habits which in earlier ages had been denounced as vices” (2). In particular, Protestantism’s turn to worldly virtue in the form of a work ethic is what provided fertile ground for the rationalization of capitalism. Weber’s perspective, that “it might thus seem that the development of the spirit of capitalism is best understood as part of the development of rationalism as a whole” (76) can be differentiated from that of Marx through his starting-point, which looks to a religious basis for the development of
capitalism rather than vice versa. Nonetheless, Weber’s emphasis on the power of work ethic to circumscribe the work place as the location of rationality writ large speaks to its particular usefulness for homosexual counter-narratives against psychoanalysis: “the infraction of [ethical] rules,” he writes, “is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty” (51).

11 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri elaborate on the imaginary relations inherent in their formulation of “affective labor” and make an argument for the application of Marxian alienated labor in the affective context. They write, “When affective production becomes part of waged labor it can be experienced as extremely alienating: I am selling my ability to make human relationships, something extremely intimate, at the command of the client and the boss. Alienation was always a poor concept for understanding the exploitation of factory workers, but here in a realm that many still do not want to consider labor – affective labor, as well as knowledge production and symbolic production – alienation does provide a useful conceptual key for understanding exploitation” (Multitude 111).

12 The biographical details that preceded Highsmith’s writing of Salt are worth mentioning given their symmetry to the novel: needing an additional way to cover the expense of her psychotherapy sessions (her psychotherapist, Eva Klein Lipshutz, was a staunch practitioner of therapy as a cure for lesbianism), Highsmith took up a temporary job at the Manhattan Bloomingdales in late 1948 (see Highsmith, “Afterword”; Wilson). It was there that she had a brief encounter with a woman from New Jersey buying a doll for her daughter. Like Carol, the woman gave Highsmith her name and address where she should send the doll. Highsmith fell ill the next day with chickenpox, recalling in her afterword that “one of the small runny nosed children” at the department store “must
have passed on the germ” (in true Highsmith fashion, the 3-page afterword also spends a considerable amount of time discussing her pox in all their bloody gore [Highsmith, “Afterword,” 290]). As she was subjected to “her mother’s experiments with Christian Science,” she scribbled down an outline for the novel that provided its fictional characters with the resolution her encounter did not have (Wilson 153). While I do not want to overemphasize Highsmith’s biography, this background sheds light on the choice of context for her story. Her alienating experience in psychotherapy, the expense she incurred as a result, and her subsequent recourse to become a laboring subject of that other industry of emotion known as Bloomingdales precipitated the emergence of that part of her self perceived as a commodified entity, a process of acquired knowledge that both enhanced and vexed the romantic leverage of her story.

Despite the content, it was not usually the case that much of the postwar popular fiction about lesbians enjoyed a particularly lesbian following – Salt, whose central lesbians end up together instead of hospitalized, alone, or self-destructive – proved an exception to the rule (Wilson).

13 For gothic novels that treat the theme of homosexuality outright, see E.M. Forester’s Maurice (1913), Radcliffe Hall’s Well of Loneliness (1928). Also, Haggerty’s critical study Queer Gothic details works from the 18th to 20th century that, while not explicitly about homosexuality, nonetheless made use of the gothic to convey subversive, often same-sex desire. See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Structure of Gothic Convention."
In his 1951 study of the “white collar” industry, C. Wright Mills discusses the feelings of resentment among “salesgirls” he encountered as a form of “identification” or lack thereof with their wealthy customers. Mills writes:

Salesgirls often attempt identification with customers but often are frustrated. One must say “attempt” identification because: (1) Most customers are strangers, so that contact is brief. (2) Class differences are frequently accentuated by the sharp and depressing contrast between homes and store, customer, or commodity. [Says one salesgirl:] “You work among lovely things which you can’t buy, you see prosperous, comfortable people who can buy it. When you go home with your [low pay] you do not feel genteel or anything but humiliated. You either half starve on your own or go home to mama, as I do, to be supported.” (174)

My emphasis.

See Mae G. Henderson, who explicates the reflection motif in *Giovanni’s Room* as mediating the contrast between David’s personal guilt and the ancestral guilt he must shoulder due to his European ancestry.

In his comparative reading of Eldridge Cleaver, James Baldwin, and Piri Thomas, Robert F. Reid-Pharr offers another perspective on what he calls “the violence of boundarylessness, or cultural eclipse.” For Reid-Pharr, “homosexuality operates mimetically…standing itself as the sign of a prior violence…that has been continually visited upon the African-American community during the long sojourn in the new world” (373).
While several critics have noted the ways in which Paris figures as America’s counterpart in *Giovanni’s Room*, these comparisons have overlooked the counterintuitive ways that Paris presents a particular homosexual economy in ways that precisely undermine its romanticized reputation as either a bohemian paradise or a seedy free-for-all. Most notably, Shin and Judson explain how “David is unable to construct a gay identity for himself because this Paris is too aesthetic and its mandarin pleasures eventually degenerate into the grotesque lust of old fairies like Guillaume” (254). See also, Yasmin DeGout and Mikko Tuhkanen.

As Douglas Field has noted, with the exception of “Preservation of Innocence” (1949) and “The Male Prison,” Baldwin’s discussion on homosexuality is relegated primarily to his fiction and interviews.

See also Tuhkanen.

See Jodi Dean’s discussion of proletarianization, where she quotes Engels’ note in the 1888 English Edition of the “Communist Manifesto”:

Engels says that ‘proletariat’ refers to ‘the class of modern wage-laborers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labor-power in order to live.’ … Engels and Balibar make clear that the proletariat is not a pure or fixed class. Rather than a statis social group, *proletarianization* is a dynamic, the process through which capitalism produces, uses up, and discards the workers it needs. (*The Communist Horizon* 74–6)
Chapter Two:
The Deregulated Lesbian: Affective labor in Postwar Pulp and Romance Fiction

Introduction

Deregulation, a well-known catchphrase in neoliberal economic policy, is not a term commonly associated with sexual identity. But what if we consider deregulation’s cultural leverage as an extension of the neoliberal epoch? This chapter makes a case for considering economic deregulation’s symbolic influence in early Cold War lesbian fiction. Notably, literary scholarship has celebrated “deregulated subjects” as cultural rebels able to gain “success within the system” (Lachlan MacDowell 173), a claim that equates deregulation with individual freedom. Alternatively, liberal and left discourse has characterized deregulation as a phase that follows the Keynesian welfare schema in order to suggest that state regulation once did and could again remedy the social ills of capitalism.¹ I am thus interested in deregulation as an ideology of obstruction—one that produces particular kinds of liberated subjects via free-market logics. What follows is an examination of deregulation ideology taking root in an American work of lesbian fiction in the late 1950s and early 1960s, where we see the validation of lesbian identity rendered in terms that are aligned with and defend historical interests of U.S. economic hegemony. Documenting what I term to be narratives of sexual deregulation, this new subject is figured as a kind of break as her work becomes the site for the liberalization of cultural norms. At the same time, I want to highlight a discernable tension at the heart of this fiction—one that registers an ambivalence regarding the limited forms of attachments made within the service labor market.
Paula Christian’s *The Edge of Twilight* (1959) and Jane Rule’s *Desert of the Heart* (1964) present early examples of lesbians in popular literature whose trajectories toward sexual freedom unfold within the broader story of free-market enterprise. Each novel features lesbian protagonists whose service industry employment – in the airline and casino industries, respectively – introduces her to other lesbians, as well as the emerging culture of market deregulation within and beyond the U.S. border. As arenas that provoke the loosening of conventional sexual standards, the workplace is also presented as a site for the deregulation of sexual desire for each novel’s protagonist. To that end, this chapter investigates the ways in which *The Edge of Twilight* and *Desert of the Heart* reveal an uneasy resonance between sexual identity’s aspiration toward individual freedom and the emerging culture of deregulated capital under neoliberalism.

In what follows, I trace deregulation’s versatile logic, which latches onto a wide array of contexts – from formulations of deviant sexuality to individualized contexts of waged and unwaged feminized labor – and analyze the promise of sexual freedom as one that often requires the fetishization of deregulation writ large.² *Edge of Twilight* and *Desert of the Heart* document compelling narratives of deregulation’s double-effect, which promises modernity and personal/geographic mobility via lesbian identity on the one hand, while managing the actual violence of social relations that rely in part upon the mobile capacities of the labor force for deregulation’s own ends. Reading these developments through representations of service work illuminates deregulation’s new terrain of fragmentation where one’s labor is re-routed as sexual identity even as it continues to be regulated though increasingly flexible modes by the service economy. Jeanette Foster’s 1956 discussion of literary forms of sexual variance and
heteronormative regulation offers additional illustration of my historical claim that workplace relations were beginning to present new, albeit fraught, opportunities for the pulp lesbian imagination.

*Edge of Twilight* and *Desert of the Heart* represent two examples within a body of lesbian pulp that establishes its storyline and characters in large part through their waged labor in the service industry. While not explicitly leftist in their objectives, these texts reflect a growing consciousness on the part of lesbian subculture regarding the importance and impingements of performing emotional labor while embracing their unconventional identities. By the same token, these novels were written at a time when many homophile political groups were in the process of distancing themselves from the organized Left. Consequently, these writings have not been historically associated with other leftist critiques of their moment. In focusing on *Edge of Twilight* as a case study, I hope to excavate this historical and literary trend that has largely gone unexamined by materialist scholarship.

Lastly, my reading of this literature also serves as an oblique counterweight to recent scholarship on “Queer Value,” which applies Marxian theories of value to queer performativity. Such analyses have suggested that certain forms of waged affective work – such as drag – should be understood as non-exploitative. I remain skeptical of this line of thought, which seems to privilege the liberating aspects of queer affect at the risk of ignoring the structural circumstances that only give the appearance of the queer worker as a free agent in her own labor. In the history I document below, I want to return the question of affective value to a context that refuses to be separated from its capacity as surplus labor and is valued according to the shifting needs of capital.
The deregulation discourse of 1950s lesbian fiction tells a different story about neoliberalism – one that starts earlier than the 1970s. In this alternative rendition, regulation and deregulation are not understood so much as sequential economic stages, but rather as concurrent strategies in the uneven development of post-World War Two capitalism. Although the airline industry was not formally deregulated until decades after Edge of Twilight’s publication, for instance, it was nonetheless a vital participant in the U.S.’s neocolonial project in Puerto Rico. When the novel puts these spaces into contact with one another, diverse groups of people are brought together through their shared position as laborers in the expanding global economy. In this sense, neoliberal policy shifts established in the 1970s–90s demonstrate the formal institutionalization of revamped social relations that by those decades were well underway – being endured and internalized – across a range of social contexts. My emphasis on the literary treatment of feminized labor thus aims to bring the tools of leftist critique to bear upon a cultural commonsense that has uncritically celebrated and thereby flattened lesbian visibility in postwar pulp. Deregulation appears as a component of neoliberal sexual subjectivity that is made visible from the point of labor and its relationship to ideology.

Deregulation’s versatile logic, which latches onto an array of contexts – from formulations of deviant sexuality to individualized arenas of waged and unwaged feminized labor – attaches to the promise of sexual freedom, which in turn often requires the fetishization of deregulation writ large. Twilight and Desert exemplify compelling narratives of this double-effect of the free market, which allows for the expression of particular lesbian identities while managing the violence of a system that relies upon the mobile capacities of the labor force for capital’s own ends. Reading these developments
through service work’s fictive representation illuminates one terrain where deregulation’s ideological power begins to fragment: in these cases, one’s labor capacity is re-signified as sexual identity even as it continues to be regulated though the increasingly flexible modes of the service economy.

I view deregulation’s impact on sexual subjectivity as one example of neoliberal capitalism’s persistent need to supplement its re-organization of social life. Increasingly, this reorganization has meant the re-regulation and commodification of feminized labor as paid employment (a trend that – as feminist scholars have widely noted – has been mistakenly taken as tantamount to women’s justice). Housed within the lesbian narrative, waged and unwaged feminized labor appears in the novel as freedom in double-form: first, through wages, and thus independence from a male breadwinner; and second, as the counter-hegemonic participation in affective attachments beyond the heterosexual family model. This deregulation of feminized service labor – performed by a range of newly sexualized individuals in the burgeoning service economy of the 1950s and early 60s – constitutes an important yet under-scrutinized front of the historical formation of U.S. lesbian identity.

Market deregulation intersects historically with the tail end of what scholars have called the “unquiet decades” of labor feminism that began to take shape in the late-1940s and continued throughout the 1970s (Nelson Lichtenstein 136). Excavating this “missing wave,” Dorothy Sue Cobble challenges standard narratives on U.S. feminism by contending that such accounts have largely overlooked women’s vital role in fights over waged labor. More than just participants, she argues, the two million or so women who unionized by the mid-50s engaged in heated debate over labor reform that recognized the
“double day” that most wives and mothers had to work – the first part for pay, and the second in the home (Lichtenstein 122). These women opposed the “equal rights legal strategy” touted by supporters of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA),\(^{10}\) as the actualities of their lives did not cohere with the image of the liberal, unencumbered subject envisioned by the amendment’s proponents (Lichtenstein 7). This history, which documents feminist doubts that equal access to work would achieve equality writ large, presents significant implications for reading mainstream writings of the period that sought avenues for lesbian legitimacy.

As with the expansion of industrial production, which imposed new ways to compress time and space to profit from laborers’ physical capabilities, so too does the service industry harness the human capacity of personal affect as the newest frontier under capital deregulation. My use of deregulation invokes elements of what Teresa Brennan has called “bioderegulation.”\(^{11}\) For Brennan, bioderegulation works in tandem with economic deregulation, naming processes through which, increasingly, “the ruling economy requires the sacrifice of human life” to produce its surplus value (19). As market freedom’s evolving hegemony produces new technologies to speed up and/or replace human labor entirely, workers must adjust their lives and biological systems accordingly. Bioderegulation, Brennan explains, thus “erodes the internal constraints protecting the body” (19). What appears culturally and historically as women’s increased freedom of mobility, Brennan argues, is in actuality a reflection of the negotiated terms for the bioderegulation of domestic labor under neoliberalism. Thus, “what went underrecognized in Marx’s critique [of the ideology of freedom],” she points out, “is
just how much ‘freedom’ means ‘mobility’” when it comes to extracting care in the interest of capital (Brennan 105).

The airline and casino industries featured in the novels I read represent historical sites of innovation that increasingly relied upon the undervalued labor of their female workers’ mobilized capacities of care and attentiveness traditionally relegated to the domestic reproduction of the workforce. True to the discourse of deregulation, this participation appears as the premise for lesbian self-actualization: thus, the critique of heterosexuality encoded in the lesbian romance plot becomes the occasion to fetishize service labor as the opportunity for rebellion and personal freedom. As deregulation ideology shapes the refusal of heteronormativity’s regulatory script in *Twilight* and *Desert*, so too does it real (yet subordinate) a critical perspective on the unrestricted commodification of affective labor. In what follows, I briefly analyze the convergence of de/regulation discourse and lesbian fiction through Jeanette Foster’s 1956 discussion on “sex variant women” in literature. In so doing, I aim to contextualize Christian’s novel alongside an emerging critical awareness of the problem with work when it comes to writing lesbian identity.

**Mapping Sexual Regulation in Early Lesbian Literary Critique**

In 1956, Vantage Press published Jeannette H. Foster’s *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, a meticulously researched 350-page critical review ranging from Sappho to Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt*. Perhaps because it was the first volume of its kind, commercial response was initially modest. Nonetheless, as Joanne Passet remarks in her biography on Foster, *Sex Variant Women* eventually became a touchstone for a
generation of burgeoning lesbian thinkers including Barbara Grier, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Lillian Faderman (199–201). In the years following its publication, the title was even referenced in lesbian pulp fiction, such as Valerie Taylor’s *Return to Lesbos* (1963), where it appears on a character’s bookshelf – an insider’s tip to the reader about what was likely to happen next (Taylor 156). As Barbara Grier recounts in the Afterword to Naiad’s second edition of *Sex Variant Women*, “there was no way of knowing then that this book was destined to become a best-seller in a cult sense” (355).

Beyond its sub-cultural status, the publication of *Sex Variant Women* reflects a broader historical shift within lesbian-themed popular fiction: up to the time of Foster’s writing, the majority of pulp authors had been heterosexual men marketing their fiction mostly to other men for shock value. By the mid-1950s, however, lesbian writers had entered the literary scene in large enough numbers to pull the genre in a different direction. These “insurgent re-writings” comprise an aspect of lesbian pulp that transformed it into a site of political and cultural struggle with increasingly public stakes (Yvonne Keller 401). In this context, *Sex Variant Women* captures a significant critical lesbian perspective on a sub-genre that was, in 1956, still in its formative stages.

Critical discussion of *Sex Variant Women* has usually followed two tracks: while some studies have focused on its handling of the particular texts Foster reviews, others have been concerned with aspects of the book’s production history, such as the turbulent circumstances surrounding its first publication and the details of Foster’s research and writing processes. What these scholarly treatments have largely overlooked, however, is the extent to which *Sex Variant Women* operates as a theoretical text – one that offers a trenchant analysis of human sexuality and introduces conceptual and political problems.
that are not commonly associated with historical accounts of lesbian social critique of the mid-1950s. For instance, lesbian political groups of the mid-50s is usually characterized through its debates over visibility and self-presentation, its emergent differentiation from male homophile groups, and its establishment of a social alternative to bar culture. By comparison, Foster’s perspective is largely unique.¹⁷

The text’s most philosophical remarks appear mostly in her introductory and concluding commentary. In these sections, Foster counters the social stigma of sexual variance by detaching feelings such as satisfaction, love, and empathy from their commonsense grounding in a strictly heteronormative framework. Her intervention is meaningful, then, in that it portends sexual deregulation as a form of social reproduction that can prosper through networks of feeling rather than biological kinship. Foster’s concluding claim details an affectively open system of sexual relations, this time concerning marriage and motherhood, specifically:

It should also be said, and underlined, that marriage and motherhood, despite the frequent failure of the one and the heavy burdens imposed on women by the other, appear more ultimately satisfying to the majority of women than other emotional experiences, and are certainly more beneficial to society. They are therefore the goals toward which personal and social effort should be directed, and obstacles to their success should be minimized. To what extent is variance such an obstacle and how pernicious is it in other respects? (348)
Here, “Marriage and motherhood” are satisfactions whose affective magnitude overrides their inevitable drawbacks. Crucially, Foster does not label marriage and motherhood as heterosexual, per se: that is, these satisfactions are not derived from the regulatory schema of heterosexuality, but from the relationships, themselves. What she suggests, then, is that marriage and motherhood are on the verge of needing heterosexuality to a far lesser extent than heterosexuality continues to need them: perched at the precipice of fading sentimental attachment, heterosexuality has reached a precarious stage, with or without the “obstacles” that sexual variants pose. These insights express a correspondence between social reproduction and variant sexuality – categories that heterosexual regulation had hitherto kept ideologically distinct. In contrast to the divide between variance and heteronormative reproduction imposed by religious and scientific thought, the relationships themselves reveal these boundaries are actually porous.

Foster then turns her attention to variant literature “of the current scene” to lament the absence of realistic portrayals of lesbians at work. If surviving as a female sexual variant without a male breadwinner means having to make ends meet through a litany of “ordinary and unromantic jobs,” Foster wonders, then why the dearth of representation when it comes to “the relation of variant experience to gainful employment” (346)? “In general,” she adds, although lesbian fiction portrays variant protagonists in paid employment,

these positions have served only as realistic backdrops for action which did not impinge upon them. In less than half a dozen cases has variance interfered with earning capacity…This meager proportion, especially at
the level of mere risk, does not reflect “things as they are” according to factual evidence in psychiatric literature, and the failure of variant fiction to come to grips with this aspect of reality is a count against it. It is also a waste of one fertile potential source of dramatic tension. (347)

Foster’s concluding observation cuts to the heart of late pulp’s turn away from the melodrama that defined its earlier stages and toward storylines that reflected an increasing awareness of labor as a way to represent lesbian conflict. In this light, I consider early lesbian representations of employment as harboring “dramatic tension” of a different sort, that is, tension that re-casts the relations of production, feeling, and sexual identity into a context that establishes continuities and discontinuities between paid and unpaid forms of gendered labor. These new sites of conflict proliferate once the deregulated subject of the service industry becomes the desiring subject of sexual deregulation. It is therefore fair to say that lesbian labor appears in ways that Foster prefigures but does not fully develop. The novels that follow Sex Variant Women interrogate the compromised freedoms that emerge in the wake of deregulation’s totalizing promise. Thus, while there is little doubt that variant women were indeed highly at risk and often terminated from their employment, Edge of Twilight and Desert of the Heart remain skeptical of a lesbian subject whose opportunity for sexual deregulation requires the fragmentation of her labor through the regulatory frameworks of neoliberal modernity.
Edge of Twilight: In Service of American Exceptionalism

*Edge of Twilight* follows the story of Val, a seasoned and single New York City-based flight attendant working the shuttle route from New York City to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Early on, she meets her soon-to-be female love interest, Toni, who is temporarily filling in for another sick attendant. The novel concludes with the women’s decision to keep their relationship intact, albeit private at work.

Speaking back to the nationwide glamorization of the flight industry that was in full swing by the 1950s, *Edge of Twilight* represents in vivid detail the less-elegant and downright exhausting side of airline service work. At the same time, Val’s work constitutes the occasion for her own sexual self-discovery. In this regard, the novel’s premise taps into the already-existing cultural fantasy that saw the 1950s airline industry as a symbol of liberalization and personal freedom that leverages the loosening of sexual norms against the drudgery of the job. The weights and measures the narrative employs to that end, however, meet their limit when Val is tasked with managing the biorhythms of her passengers – relatives of the Puerto Rican workers who comprise the newest historical wave of migration to the U.S. and whose labor constitutes one aspect of neoliberalism’s re-regulation of bodies and lives. *Edge of Twilight* is therefore a text that curiously charts individual sexual deregulation within the wider framework of U.S. economic globalization.18

The first time we encounter Val, she is preparing for another overnight shift at work. The narration follows her meticulous routine from the shower to the mirror, where she studies her body, “the sort of body that other women envied…and most men desired” (4). We are granted some back-story as “she remembers how the directress at Stewardess
Training School had made such a point of insisting that the girls should always, but always, wear panty girdles when in uniform,” and that “Val had deliberately flouted the edict, as in time she’d learned to ignore most of the other rules that weren’t worth a damn in actual flight work” (4). If our expectations remain faithful to the lesbian pulp script, we know that sooner or later Val will assert her lesbian desire. This opening scene makes use of its readership’s assumptions, then, as the push and pull between duty and desire establishes Val’s position at the twilight boundary between convention and defiance. The girdle remark introduces one of the novel’s guiding themes – a discernable tension between one’s individuality and the rules of an industry that relies upon the gendered disciplining of its workers.

Val’s attention to her own self-care and time management, manifests as a component of idealized sensibility that foreshadows the zone of affective management on the job. Whereas, early in her routine, Val steals moments to gaze at her own reflection, threads of self-governance weave their way into the scene, telling her to “snap out of it…time’s a-wasting. Time and too many other things” (4). Echoing the tone of her airline job – work that extracts one’s affect for surplus value – in the space of her home, the narration’s use of free indirect discourse provides a formal register for the self-managerial fragmentation Val has internalized.

Val’s interiority in this manner resonates with the wider process of her sexual self-discovery. The description continues to unfold in an erratic rhythm of fits and starts:

With practiced efficiency she finished dressing. She put on a white nylon slip, wriggled into the blue skirt of her uniform, still so warm from the
pressing that it clung to her slip momentarily with static electricity. She put on a blouse, its starched form standing off from her full breasts so that it gave an illusion of décolletage against her tawny smooth skin. She got into her jacket, slanted her regulation hat at the correctly casual angle and pinned it in place. (6)

With ritualistic fervor and “practiced efficiency,” Val’s self-gazing progresses into managed femininity as she takes inventory of the many parts that will make up her working whole: nylons, blue skirt, blouse, jacket, and hat. The matter-of-fact procedure is textured by Val’s efforts to make it all appear effortless throughout the working day as she makes a mental note to tilt “her regulation hat at the correctly casual angle.” The conflicting connotations of “regulation” and “casual” reveal an element of Val’s work that is invested in the image of rules being broken, albeit within circumscribed limits.

The narration’s gritty behind-the-scenes opening drains the iconic flight attendant persona of its romantic intrigue at the same time as it conforms to the consumer’s expectation that these workers indeed put effort into the services they provide. Val augments her appearance for her customers’ enjoyment and consumption, revealing her service persona as a form of value-accumulating drag, where heterosexual gender performance and wage labor intersect. The boundaries between self-expression and marketized value decompose as the gendered performance that is being disclosed becomes inextricably linked to those affects associated with femininity that Val must consciously enhance as a part of her job. In short, Val’s preparation is intertwined with gender’s performative function, which, this scene acknowledges, is all part of the job.
When Val first encounters her love-object, Toni, at the airport, her bewilderment unfolds in the register of her affective capacities, whereby, to her dismay, she is unable to manage her own visceral response:

Toni, she noticed, was joking with the rest of the company personnel. It seemed to Val that she was trying too hard to be likeable, forcing herself to play an alien role.

Val struggled to push down a nagging irritation. She often allowed first impressions to guide her, but never rule her as they were doing now. Why does she upset me so? She wondered. It can’t be that I’m jealous of her just because she’s attracting a little of the men’s attention…it was ridiculous to think that this girl could possibly evoke any such emotion in her – especially over a few men who meant nothing. (12)

Toni’s seemingly overwrought attempt to “be likeable” conflates the emotional demands of service labor with heterosexual desire so that affective compliance with one (service labor) affirms the normative behaviors of the other (heteronormativity). Val’s failure to negotiate her own negative reaction to the scene is told to us in both registers—that is, through her inability to manage her affective response, as well as confusion over the object of her desire. To put it another way, Val’s frustration is mediated through her position as a stewardess, which overwhelms her when her desire exceeds the emotional norms the job requires. In this sense, the novel suggests that sexuality takes shape both inside and outside the sphere of service work. Toni’s opacity disturbs the line between
normative and variant sexuality, but nonetheless remains organized and bound by the rules of her profession. Suggestively, it is Toni’s dexterity that titillates Val in the first place as she remains mystified by both Toni’s and her own behavior. Toni’s airline persona thus becomes a hindrance for Val when it becomes the only rubric by which to interpret her.

In a broader sense, this scene of gendered disorientation speaks to an industry-wide shift in hiring that had been underway since the conclusion of World War II, when airlines sought to transition from being wartime to civilian companies. A major part of this campaign entailed a rapid hiring increase of female airline attendants, constituting a new paradigm that also recalibrated the specific duties workers were expected to perform.¹⁹ As historian Phil Tiemeyer explains, for instance, pre-war attendants were required to have nursing degrees so they could be useful in cases of medical emergency. By the early 1950s, however, “any focus on nursing skills reinforced just how dangerous even routine air trips could be. Public relations departments therefore preferred to highlight stewardesses’ regard for passengers and their sexual availability” (Tiemeyer 20).²⁰ The transformation of the U.S. airline industry’s image from a war craft to a domestic space exemplifies one of the terrains wherein U.S. corporations collaborated with national interests to reestablish U.S. enterprise within a lexicon of freedom and prosperity divorced from the previous decade’s violence. The flight industry’s recruitment of devalued feminized labor therefore buttressed a postwar iteration of American exceptionalism reliance upon the democratic vision of the United States as the world’s living room.
Edge of Twilight details its own version of this context in Val, whose past reflects the normative values coincident with American postwar modernity writ large. Val’s Scottish father and Spanish mother comprise her “Scotch and tequila” background (11). Determined to escape her parents’ “strict Latin” upbringing, Val flees her religious household to take a job at the airline. The novel thus posits one’s entrance into the labor force as the remedy for cultural regulation. Val’s story exemplifies the coding of regulation as a remnant of the cultural past, while deregulation provides a tabula rasa for the present and future. Within this teleology, forms of regulation that accompany service work, such as the regulation of affect, remain unrecognizable as another horizon of social management. Rejecting the cultural but not the economic power establishment, Val is the right kind of subject for deregulation’s economic and social trajectory. As a positive expression of deregulation’s image of freedom, Val’s emerging lesbianism is thus prefigured within a lexicon that can be coherently absorbed into a neoliberal framework. And yet, at discernable moments, the novel must struggle for this cohesion. It is here that another story begins to form.

The narrative continuity between Val’s sexuality, deregulation, and wage labor begins to unfurl when she is at work serving her clientele, “the bargain-rate passengers [who] only made such trips occasionally” (16). In a manner that appears largely tangential or even irrelevant to the central story, the narrative occasionally pauses to describe a handful of airline passengers, all of whom are Puerto Rican. To dwell upon the little information we do get about these passengers, however, is to excavate details that the novel symptomatically leaves unexamined—the re-regulation of individuals who constitute the material basis of deregulation ideology. But first, a little history.
By 1959, a set of policies labeled “Operation Bootstrap” defined the primary economic relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. Most fundamentally, Bootstrap’s initiatives enabled U.S. agribusiness to spread its manufacturing plants to Puerto Rico. Promoted as a mission to stimulate the Puerto Rican economy for the benefit of its inhabitants, Bootstrap ultimately catalyzed the privatization and consolidation of Puerto Rican resources and enhanced U.S. corporate expansion. The coordinated initiative by U.S. agribusiness to set up shop in Puerto Rico (or, as the New York Times characterized it in 1958, to act as “pioneers” [“Puerto Rico Aims at Food Price Dip: Government Seeks to Spur New Crops and Reduce Need for Imports”]) was originally touted as the solution to the island’s limited export economy and thus as a blueprint for the territory to attain self-sufficiency. In reality, however, the resulting restructuring of the Puerto Rican economy forced its inhabitants to migrate to America for work. In sum, Operation Bootstrap modeled an early example of how public and private U.S. entities would, under the auspices of deregulation, collaborate for decades to secure global control over the flow of labor and capital. By the time of Twilight’s publication, its economic and social effects were underway.

Paula Christian’s novel therefore depicts a confrontation between two forms of deregulation -- Val’s sexual exploration on the one hand, and her passengers’ forced economic migration, on the other – which, when set side-by-side, present obstacles for Val’s sexual deregulation to be rendered in a cohesive manner. Whereas, initially, Val’s self-management as a service worker operates in contrast to the novel’s evolving depiction of sexuality as that which exceeds the affective demands of service work, different circumstances emerge within the confines of the airplane’s cabin. There, Val’s
affective labor is no longer set in contrast to her sexual desire. Rather, Val’s workplace demeanor becomes increasingly absorbed by anxieties over her passengers’ bodily movements and functions.

What begins with Val’s recitation of standard airplane procedure (she advises Toni to load up on extra sets of “burp bags” as this will “save [her] trouble later on”) fuses seamlessly to a restless obsession over passenger mobility. “Always somebody wanted to move,” Val observes, “one reason was as good as another for keeping things in constant disorder.” The litany of images Val conjures—the “tidal wave” of passengers creating a “human bottleneck” (16) and the “several babies” who were either “crying or whimpering” (17)—is expressed in the familiar lexicon of anti-immigrant panic. These passages are revealing in a number of ways, perhaps most obviously as language that still persists in nationalist discourse today. Most pertinent to this analysis, however, is that Val’s paranoid disposition redirects her to serve an ideology that invites subjects to identify along some axes but not others. As the novel demonstrates, Val’s ability to enjoy the relative loosening of norms associated with her work as a flight attendant relies upon her limited perception of a much larger context. As someone whose work is devalued, Val occupies a location similar to that of her passengers in the globalized workforce. Ironically, it is only when Val is in close proximity to these travelers that the narrative must supplant this structural reality with her nationalist fervor. Such moments of tension, which employ cultural stereotypes as their release valve, resonate with the ways in which the reaction to Operation Bootstrap’s failure took shape in U.S. public discourse.

Similar to Val’s use of cultural difference to displace economic reality, U.S. policymakers who had launched Operation Bootstrap lamented the wave of Puerto Rican
migration to the U.S., accusing them of becoming “an obstacle to economic
development” for the U.S. (Laura Briggs 164, 165). Sentiments such as these were part of
a larger rhetorical strategy on the part of U.S. politicians and policymakers, whereby
Puerto Rican culture was framed as pathological. Moreover, as historian Laura Briggs has
documented in her extensive study of U.S. imperialism and women’s health in Puerto
Rico, the discursive shift from economics to culture was disproportionately acted out
upon women’s bodies and through measures to sterilize, penalize, and otherwise manage
their reproductive systems (Briggs 165). In addition, the emphasis on cultural pathology
couraged policymakers to apply sociological methodologies to economic problems,
thereby avoiding actual assessments of Puerto Ricans’ “relationship to labor or the means
of production,” a development that foreshadowed the Moynihan Report’s approach to
Black families only six years later (Briggs 178).

The interactions detailed in *Twilight* evince the insidious nature of the “culture-of-
poverty thesis,” which, as Briggs explains, “had the benefit of separating the problem of
… poverty from labor and housing markets, rooting it instead in sex and marriage” (178).
This historical backdrop enhances our understanding of how the novel constructs sexual
deregulation to leverage the discourse of cultural pathology in order to validate Val’s
lesbian identity. As mentioned above, Val’s flight attendant persona is incrementally
supplemented with modes of management that depict cultural animosity as one of the
job’s integral features. When Val attempts to calm a passenger shaken by unexpected
turbulence, she:
sighed, loosened her belt, stood up carefully and walked slowly forward
toward the passenger as he stepped into the aisle. She relaxed to let her
body rise and fall with the motion of the ship. When she reached him she
spoke in brusque firmness, ordering him to sit down and remain down.

“But I have to use the bathroom, señorita,” he protested.

“I’m sorry, but no one leaves his seat until that sign goes off—
comprende? Now, sit!” Each word was punctuated by the staccato
turbulence which forced Val to sway and bob to remain upright and which
helped to rock the passenger back to his seat.

“But, señorita, I’ll urinate in my chair!”

“Would you prefer to crack your head in the lavatory?” She glared
at him to add emphasis. He shrugged his shoulders and crossed his legs,
undoubtedly cursing her under his breath for another crazy, unsympathetic
American. (25)

Val’s proficiency here establishes her authority as a service worker at the same time as it
instantiates a hierarchical relationship to her passenger based upon national belonging. In
one sense, we might read this maneuver as a repudiation of the stereotype of the
lascivious homosexual: Val’s position as flight attendant provides a model of
homosexuality in which emotional control and sexual deregulation can co-exist within
one plot. By the same token, it is the rehearsal of U.S. imperial discourse that enacts such
a distinction in the first place. The novel thus reflects a historically specific cultural value
that remains insidiously attached to Val’s affective labor – one that, perversely enough,
underscores sexual freedom at the same time as it legitimizes US imperial power.

Importantly, in a historical period that saw the hyper regulation of some laboring bodies, Val’s lesbian deregulation is what appears to situate her as being outside of the economic paradigm of globalization, even as her actual labor within it demonstrates otherwise.

The novel’s idealized version of deregulation via lesbian desire, depicted as possessing the power to interrupt and mediate—indeed de-regulate—Val’s otherwise overregulated work life, does not remain exclusively attached to Val. What begins as sexual deregulation combines with the aircraft’s romantic symbolism to once again suture the divide between Val and her passengers. In a liminal meditation somewhere between wakefulness and sleep as Toni naps beside her, Val muses:

> It seemed as though the plane was suspended on an invisible wire, and only the moon moved, bobbing up and down at irregular intervals. The overall atmosphere gave an impression of unreality: there was no earth with people struggling to unknown ends, no beginning, no finish – just an incomprehensible void, interminable, awesome. Passengers and crew alike awaited an event something to startle them all back to reality, to tangibility, to relive them from this vacuum. (21)

Val’s dreamy ramblings visualize the airplane as a suspended capsule, detached from the worries of the everyday world. The narration’s brief, uncharacteristic meandering into this abstract “unreality” suspends all things “tangible” to blur the demarcation between the passengers and the crew, the over-regulated labor of the stewardesses and their
desires, unleashed from heterosexual regulation. The airplane is a democratizing, idealized space. There is an odd, momentary connectedness between Val and her passengers, one that appears to be drawing an equivalence between Val’s trajectory toward sexual self-discovery and the passengers’ own journeys, which the novel suggests maybe be resolved in a similar frame. The narration collapses Val and her passengers within a common continuum of progress toward freedom: quite literally, it condenses sexual and economic deregulation as the ethereal moment of suspended subjectivity unites Val’s narrative with those of her passengers. In this moment, the escapist fantasy of airline travel is disclosed through the lexicon of free-market egalitarianism, where individuals exist in a “vacuum,” temporarily free from “people struggling to unknown ends.” The fantasy demands we witness these figures as sharing a common trajectory, yet belies the notion that the promises of sexual deregulation can remain unhindered by the divisions we witness earlier. Despite the actual conditions that tie both Val and her passengers to their re-regulated roles, the narration strives here to suggest the opposite by absorbing both parties into an established vision of national belonging and freedom. In sum, deregulation’s ideological coherence depends upon either the erasure or re-narrativization of those subjects who deregulation will continually disenfranchise.

What begins as a critique of heterosexual norms as they organize the value-accumulating infrastructure of the service industry morphs into a journey of self-discovery that deregulates sexuality while rewriting the emotional terrain of sexual variance in the same lexicon as workplace self-management. The narrative of economic deregulation as U.S. progress unsettles the modernizing promise of sexual freedom, rendered through the passengers’ momentary yet tenuous inclusion in the storyline. Edge
of Twilight’s narrative adjustments, which aim to quiet the specter of capital’s
deregulating violence, thus continue to shape an emergent cultural lexicon that would
find new promise in the American bootstrap fantasy as it pertains to late-capitalist sexual
identity.

Poised at the intersection of proto-queer and labor feminist interventions on
feminized labor, sexual subjectivity, and neoliberal growth, Edge of Twilight represents
lesbian service workers as bifurcated subjects caught between being on and off the clock,
paid and personal feeling, self-management and self-discovery, service and intimacy.
Employing capacities that can also be directed inward toward an idealized notion of self-
care or personal freedom, these women depict an arena of struggle where negotiations to
settle, re-work, or transcend the divide also form the basis for early claims on lesbian
individualism imposed by neoliberal arrangements of value accumulation. Sexual
freedom, then, is conflated with the deregulation of the subject’s capacities to the point
where the effects of service work – the insidious way in which affective labor has no
boundaries – appear as personal freedom and self-discovery.

Enterprise and Lesbian Kinship in Desert of the Heart

As with Edge of Twilight, Jane Rule’s Desert of the Heart (1964) examines forms of
deregulated sexuality that pose unintended consequences for the working subject of
attentive labor. Whereas Edge of Twilight relies on free market ideology’s intersection
with national fantasy to suture the divide between sexual and economic deregulation,
Desert of the Heart interrogates deregulated sexuality through overlapping logics of
enterprise, which both reinforce and belie deregulatory culture’s ever-fragile coherence.22
The novel traces the emerging romance between Evelyn Hall, a California college professor who travels to Reno for a divorce, and Ann Childs, a Reno casino worker residing at the guesthouse where Evelyn stays throughout her visit. The stylized prose, which jumps between Evelyn’s and Ann’s points of view, is as expansive and intense as the desert setting that sweeps in and out of the narrative frame. We follow the women through shifting landscapes – from the casino of Ann’s employment to wide open stretches of Nevada desert – concluding with Evelyn and Ann’s tenuous but tender union.

Within this context, Reno represents a cultural frontier where issues of regulation and deregulation center on a number of social and economic issues. Starting at the beginning of the twentieth century, questions about how to regulate the city’s gambling industry was a galvanizing debate among its residents (Alicia Barber). Oftentimes, the question was to what extent the onus should be put on the self-regulation of the gambler versus the establishment (Barber 107). Reno was also famous for having the most lenient divorce laws in the country in the first half of the twentieth century. This was a detail that contributed greatly to its economic growth, as women from around the country would need to take up residence in the city for a minimum of six weeks in order to legitimate their divorces. By and large, then, although Reno did not see the same kind of linear deregulating measures applied to the airline industry, it was a city whose cultural and economic life was constantly in flux along the determining axis of regulation and deregulation. My study therefore starts from the premise that sees this historical dialectic absorbed into specific aspects of Desert of the Heart’s lesbian subject positions. The novel’s engagement with enterprise is depicted most conspicuously in Reno’s casino economy where most of the action is set, though it also operates more symbolically.
through individual characters who comprise the novel’s model for alternative sexuality and lesbian kinship.

*Desert of the Heart* is also a novel about social reproduction from a lesbian standpoint that extends the feminist argument for viewing nonwage care work as a site of surplus accumulation. My reading, which contextualizes lesbian reproduction within the story’s wider setting of Reno as a town built from the casino business, attends to the novel’s depictions of the unmet needs created the wake of enterprise. As a worker, Ann is vital to Reno’s casino economy. Ann’s caring labor inside and outside of Frank’s Club where she works and her search for kinship within this framework reveal her reproduction as worker and as lesbian to be both a sign of and supplement to Reno’s deregulated economy. My analysis of lesbian social reproduction extends the feminist insight into the private family’s intimate relation to the market. Kathi Weeks elaborates the arguments of Maria Dalla Costa and Selma James on this point: “the ideology of the family performs a kin of mopping-up function, enabling us to accept the legitimacy of the wage system despite its shortcomings by encouraging us to imagine that it can provide for those capable of living up to its norms of family form and responsibility” (Weeks *The Problem with Work* 121).

Neoliberal deregulation taps into cultural aspirations toward nonconventional, nonheteronormative kinship in ways that re-code and mask its relation to capital’s requirement for supplemental, devalued affective labor. As the casino’s deregulated enterprise pulls every strand of Reno’s social life into its orbit, Ann’s attentive labor outside of the casino functions to corroborate sexual deregulation through the deregulation of her labor, which becomes re-absorbed into the narrative as lesbian
Sexual deregulation in the form of nonheteronormative kinship reaches its crisis point in moments where Ann confronts the hidden limits of the casino as an economic enterprise, which invariably require the fixed yet flexible compliance of its workers in exchange for the casino’s regulation of Reno’s inhabitants.

*Desert of the Heart* is in many ways a literary counterpart to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which made its critical point in part through a differentiation between domestic and paid forms of labor. Read together, Friedan’s and Rule’s writings document, respectively, second-wave feminist and lesbian critical engagements with the working subject-as-enterprising subject. The enterprising subject is one that rests upon a late-capitalist ideological distinction between “enterprise” and “labor.” Most importantly, as Franco Berardi reminds us, enterprise is a concept predicated upon the invisibility of industrial relations in late-capitalist value production:

In its capitalistic meaning, the word enterprise acquires new nuances, although it never loses its sense of free and constructive action. These new nuances all pertain to the opposition of labor and enterprise. Enterprise means invention and free will. Labor is repetition and executing action. Enterprise is an investment of capital generating new capital, thanks to the valorization that labor makes possible. Labor is a wage-earning service that valorizes capital but devalues workers. (77)

Berardi’s framework explains the late-capitalist notion that enterprise – as a category connoting creativity and growth as capital produces more capital – is detached from its
concrete foundation in labor, thereby obscuring the material conditions upon which enterprise is established. As he suggests, not only does this mystification compartmentalize capital’s material basis, but it also eclipses the very nature of capital, rendering invisible its perpetual need to expand to new markets and territories. In this light, enterprise names an ideological development that masks capital’s most insidious precepts.

While Berardi begins his analysis with the digital industry of the 1980s, Betty Friedan’s (1963) “left-conservatism” (Nancy Holmstrom 165) documents a similar mystification of labor at an earlier point. Published a year prior to Edge of Twilight, Friedan’s Feminine Mystique begins with the now-famous inquiry into “the problem that has no name” to take aim at the limited possibilities for women exemplified in “the domestic routine of the housewife” (Friedan 30). Friedan articulates particular forms of women’s work outside the home – sometimes phrased as “creative work of her own” – as the primary means through which the trapped woman may come to “know herself as a person” (344). As she claims, “if a job is to be the way out of the trap as part of a life plan, it must be a job that she can take seriously as part of a life plan, work in which she can grow as part of society” (345).

The enterprise in which Friedan is most interested is an enterprise of self-care and personal development through paid work of a certain caliber. Notably, Friedan calls this process a way for women to realize their full “capacities” as human beings. Framing capacity as the ability for personal growth, The Feminine Mystique emphasizes the affective component of labor as something that is achieved through a feeling of satisfaction and is only operationalized once women enter into waged work outside of the
home. In one respect, then, Friedan’s argument recognizes that such capacities, while constituting a form of labor, are nonetheless commonly unwaged (as in unpaid housework). At the same time, once these labors are valued in wage form, Friedan’s logic reframes them as the means for a woman’s self-realization. In so doing, she overwrites her own tacit but crucial understanding that domestic care work and paid labor constitute two sides of the same coin in both the production of surplus value and the devaluation of feminized labor.

With its near-militant heterosexual worldview, *The Feminine Mystique* appears on the surface to have little in common with *Desert of the Heart*, published the following year. Much as Friedan describes, however, the service labor Ann performs in the casino reflects the reorientation of her feminized capacities via the free market, even as value outside of those environs remains obscured. As I will discuss below, Frank’s Club produces Ann’s caring capacities as entities to be developed through the market rather than those always at risk of being used up by it. Framed in self-affirming terms evocative of Friedan, Ann’s service labor-as-enterprise illustrates Riccardo Bellofiore’s insight regarding the nature of “the command of capital over labor [to] assume a semblance of a control of workers over themselves. The valorization of capital can masquerade as the self-valorization of labor” (109). While it is likely that the particular kinds of labor represented in *Desert of the Heart* would have been left out of *Feminine Mystique*, it is nonetheless instructive to consider Friedan’s ideas as posing uneven but sometimes surprising points of entry for a writer such as Rule.

To that end, the casino’s role as a place of reproduction establishes the novel’s overall line of argument as it pertains to non-heterosexual motherhood both within and
beyond the workplace. Scholarship on Desert of the Heart from the early 1980s on has taken up various aspects of the novel’s “subtle subversion” of heterosexuality through unsettling psychoanalytic categories, surrender of poetic voice to deviant desire, or promotion of alternate, lesbian non-reproductive models of maternity.23 Critical acknowledgment of failed biological kinship in Desert of the Heart is important, but reading these moments apart from Ann’s attentive labor at the casino only tells half of the story. An examination of Desert of the Heart’s rendition of biological kinship in conjunction with Ann’s work reveals one of the novel’s overlooked, yet key, problematics: that is, non-procreative kinship’s contradictory significance as something that is not only allowed but increasingly mandated as an effect of the casino industry’s broadening regulation of Reno’s economic and social existence. In this light, Ann’s ability to perform the duties of the non-biological caregiver reveals the exacerbation of social need under deregulated enterprise, which requires Ann’s inattention to the causes that demand her supplemental care for those who have been disinherit ed from Reno’s main enterprise. In these moments, the novel’s depiction of Ann’s maternal role at work constituting an alternative to blood-line kinship is both initiated by and articulated through the regulatory framework of the casino.

These developments follow the logic of deregulation writ large: Ann’s formerly regulated care work at the casino increasingly becomes flexible beyond its domain. In one example, Ann is assigned to be the relief worker at Frank’s for the night, a job, which requires her to rotate from station to station and take over as each of her co-workers takes their break. Even though it was a “foul job,” Ann is willing to take it because, as her boss tells her, Ann is “the easiest [employee] to move” (93). Part of the foulness of the job
entails the requirement that Ann “sacrifice her own time off” if her co-workers’ breaks run long. As Frank’s flexible surrogate for the evening, Ann carries her change apron “like a fetus in its seventh month, careful to lift and turn the weight as if it were her own flesh” (94). The image calls on readers to register its irony obliquely through Ann’s lesbianism, which the text takes for granted as excluding her from biological motherhood: instead, Ann’s closest proximity to motherhood is through her capacity as a caregiver at, and attentive supplement to, the casino’s operation.

   Even more poignantly, however, the passage positions Ann as the subject of maternity without a signified object of care: like the change that flows into and out of her apron, her attention is exhaustively disseminated throughout the whole of Frank’s Club. Her labors model a form of deregulated care, par excellence, because her caring is defined by her a requirement to remain flexible and accommodating toward whatever needs arise in the moment. What is invoked here, then, is not a portrayal of Ann’s propensity for nonconventional motherhood, but the casino’s ability to absorb the affective and figurative trappings of conventional motherhood within its own regulatory schema. The fact that Ann’s exploitation might register as the former and not the latter pivots on her identity as a lesbian and the supposedly sympathetic notion that Frank’s allows her to exhibit her motherly tendencies, regardless.

   Ann’s off-the-clock activities are similarly infused with a logic that blurs the line between corporate and conventional care. She invites Evelyn to participate in her charity work, which involves sending commodities overseas to children in Korea, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Greece, adding that, “it’s the easiest and cheapest way to have children I know” (70). In a reversal of the invisible labor of the casino, it is Ann’s charity work
wherein the market of goods and exchange is most concretely rendered. As with Val, Ann’s role as the deregulated supplement to global economic disparity hinges on a wider American fantasy as the world’s manager. In this vein, deregulated sexuality emerges in Desert of the Heart via the intricate logic by which Ann establishes her own unconventionality by embracing commodified motherhood. More than her labor at the casino, the novel suggests, it is the objectification of Ann’s labor capacity as mother that grants her a certain type of freedom to enact her alternative motherhood in a variety of contexts without feeling beholden to any of them for too long. Ann explains further, “with all the surplus children in the world – they’re being dumped in India and China – I figure motherhood should become a specialized profession” (70).

Her comment, which reiterates a common fantasy of the enterprising American subject in relation to the comparative overpopulation on the other side of the globe, relates to another example of Ann’s deregulated maternity. After her shift, Ann stumbles upon a couple of children long after the last movie has let out. As we come to learn, this is not a rare occurrence in Reno; parents often lose track of time while they gamble. And the free movie was only a recent improvement from the days when children would stay locked in a car for most of the night (76). Luckily, Ann spots them just in time to prevent the “movie matron,” who has already waited several hours beyond her shift, from locking them out. Ann stridently takes over, offers the children a Coke, and assures them their temporary caregiver was “just grumpy” (76). When parents finally arrive, Ann feels “rage rising in her throat like nausea” and wonders to herself what it is that compels neglectful mothers to eventually return: “having swelled and ripened to your appalling birth,” Ann reasons sarcastically, “she has to love you. If she has eaten off your arm or your leg, if
she has consumed you altogether, you must understand…she has needs of her own” (76). Ann’s grotesque vision echoes the earlier depiction of her change apron at Frank’s. In this instance, the physical relationship between mother and child is put in reverse: motherhood is stripped down to the raw calculus of bodily need where the debts accrued from the pains of childbirth are repaid in the convoluted and contradictory forms of emotional coercion and emotional neglect.

In this picture, Ann’s intervention appears as a surplus of emotional care free from the established rules of biological social reproduction. Ann’s assessment nonetheless remains confined by her own position as a worker at Frank’s who is increasingly tasked with providing stopgap assistance to manage the social and economic violence (to remember Teresa Brennan’s concept of bioderegulation), that Frank’s and other casinos have wrought. Ann’s handling of the casino’s deregulated fallout depends up on the flexibility of her feminized labor, which – once again – is re-regulated as a supplement to mask the destructive ripples that fracture the social world surrounding the casino. In this context, Ann’s earlier comment about surplus children in India and China is a strange projection of Reno’s social crisis onto foreign regions.

*Desert of the Heart*’s representation of deregulated enterprise manifests in two interrelated sites, the first being Frank’s Club, which generates and regenerates most of Reno’s capital and relies on the flexible care labor of women to do so. The second is Ann’s evolving lesbian subject position as a self-made outcast of heteronormative regulation. From the outset, enterprise is established as the rational alternative to socially sanctioned convention. The novel’s opening paragraph professes:
Conventions, like clichés, have a way of surviving their own usefulness. They are then excused or defended as the idioms of living. For everyone, foreign by birth or by nature, convention is a mark of fluency. That is why, for any woman, marriage is the idiom of life. And she does not give it up out of scorn or indifference but only when she is forced to admit that she has never been able to pronounce it properly and has committed continually its grossest grammatical errors. For such a woman marriage remains a foreign tongue, an alien landscape, and, since she cannot become naturalized, she finally chooses voluntary exile. (5)

In *Desert of the Heart*, conventions do not change as much as become obsolete in and of themselves as a language increasingly divorced from a stable referent in social reality. Marriage, conventionality’s most ubiquitous artifact, is both a “foreign tongue” and “an alien landscape” that one is free to abandon. Marriage’s alternative, phrased as self-imposed “exile,” is not chosen “out of scorn or indifference,” but through a process of self-confession that reveals an incompatibility with regulation from the start. Enterprise emerges here in the subtext, siding with self-exile as the answer to social conformity. Framed in these terms as the enterprising Westward pioneer, social exclusion does not provoke social struggle. To the contrary, it manifests as one’s destiny, the means to inaugurate her personal journey toward a new frontier. Those who have chosen self-exile litter the landscape in *Desert of the Heart*, populating the casinos, the arid desert, and the courthouse that issues quickie divorces.
Ann’s own exile is rendered in similar terms: as an employee of Frank’s Club, she is at home in the world of the nonconventional, as well as the beneficiary of its enterprising logic. For Ann, Frank’s rejection of conventionality is most vividly wrought in its rejection of normative morality, where “at least here [customers] knew the odds” (22). Ann’s reasoning that, in Frank’s defense, “no university published the odds against learning, no hospital the odds against surviving, no church the odds against salvation,” extends the casino’s logic of risk to the entirety of Reno’s civic life. Her observations encapsulate one front of the novel’s engagement with deregulation, wherein the immediate experience of freedom in one regard – here, the experience of gambling and the chance to risk and win money – is invariably, albeit rigorously, structured by “odds” that in reality are vastly more predictable than the naked eye can discern.

What is so perplexing, then, is not Ann’s recognition of the casino as such (“here, anyway, people weren’t being fooled,” she reasons), but rather her judgment of its conditions, which are rendered ambiguously at best. Ann’s inscrutability here belies a complex allegiance to the casino’s way of doing things. There is something redeeming about Frank’s for Ann, even if its “honest advertising” in the form of state-mandated signage is, as she admits, “all a public relations stunt.” This is because Frank’s offers Ann a fantasy unavailable to her via social conventionality: even if the casino’s odds are stacked against its customers, the very possibility that one can imagine otherwise – is encouraged to imagine otherwise – is enough for her as an alternative to morality’s cultural regulation of social life.24

Casino enterprise thus exceeds conventionality. Ann’s recognition of Franks’s relative honesty functions as a rebuttal to a moralistic gaze, which would just as happily
do away with homosexuality as it would gambling. In this respect, Ann’s subject position resonates with the totalizing world of Reno’s casino culture where enterprise is presented as the pluralistic, neutralizing replacement to old-fashioned morality. If the casino is the site of moral ambiguity, then Ann is the subject whose identification within this setting enables her to legitimize her own “voluntary exile” against blanket condemnation. The processes of regulation and deregulation that circumscribe her subject position as exile, as worker, and as lesbian are coded in cultural terms that both loosen and secure her activities. The coding of the casino’s unconventionality is one instance. Located on the margins of conventionality, the casino nonetheless enforces house rules that set the odds from the start, regulations that truly matter in the last instance, even if Ann does not recognize them as such.

For Ann, the casino encapsulates both exile and enterprise – the manifestation of an entirely new order of production and reproduction without origin. Notably, it is this feature that Ann emphatically describes to Evelyn in defense of the club. Ann wants Evelyn to “appreciate not the fact but the meaning of Frank’s Club”:

Frank’s Club was the answer to the poverty of the land…without a mine to its name[, i]t invented its own. The casinos were Reno’s gold mines, but synthetic and perpetual, correcting the flaw of nature…they could support not only the town but the scattered population of the state…It was a sound economy which exported nothing but advertising and imported human beings at their own cost to feed the inhabitants. A perfect kingdom, based on nothing but the flaws of human nature…And this was the economy,
obscured only by a confusion of other minor enterprises, of thriving civilization everywhere in the world…It was extraordinary how other industries could create the illusion of value, the hallucination of salvation through products as meaningless as automobiles and cosmetics, text books and cameras…[The casino] was the purest activity of civilized man. They had transcended the need for a product. (182)

Transcending earlier industries whose commodities merely passed on the “illusion of value,” Ann tells Evelyn, the casino is a sign of growth that has progressed beyond the need for the illusion. She explains Frank’s ultimate meaning in terms of the longstanding lexicon of progress, capitalizing from those “imported human beings,” who, “at their own cost,” are free to gamble and revel in the monetary circulation induced by the “flaw[s] of human nature.” A symbol of how capitalizing on the deregulation of life begets further deregulation, Frank’s produces profits that exceed its own boundaries, sustaining far more people than ever before.

What this description conspicuously leaves out in its fantasy of fathomless reproduction is Ann, herself, the laboring conduit at the center of the casino’s accumulation of wealth. Her attention to the “meaning” of Frank’s –fueled by an endless and lawless circuit of reproduction – in lieu of its “facts” relies upon the evasion of her own labor within system. The elision of Ann’s labor is symptomatic of her desire to imagine herself as a participant in this seemingly unconventional reproduction. For Ann, the casino’s transcendence of “the need for a product” is exactly what obscures her affective labor as a value-producing component in the casino’s economy. Of course, the
“illusion[s] of value” represented by the supposedly outdated model of commodity production have not disappeared at Frank’s; they remain located within Ann, herself, a fact that she cannot detect. In part, then, Ann’s description of the casino reiterates the conflation of moral ambiguity and value accumulation mentioned above, whereby resistance to cultural mores gets re-routed through the supposedly neutral zone of free market enterprise. While the casino is a space where moral hypocrisy is demystified as such, the same cannot be said for value, even though Ann desires otherwise. Ann’s conflation of moral transcendence and the deregulation of value outlines the terms of her sexual deregulation, which masks her attentive labor through a narrative of personal development.

When Evelyn makes her first trip to see Ann at work, the casino becomes a force that pulls into its orbit relationships originally developed beyond its walls. Watching Ann work the floor, Evelyn is pleasantly surprised, and allows her delight to supersede her judgments that had delayed her visit up until now. Indeed, Frank’s Club becomes the place where, ironically enough, Evelyn sees Ann “at home,” watching the “changing expressions on Ann’s face the fragments of concern, amusement, doubt, and authority her job required” (175–6). Evelyn’s observation replaces the expansive desert landscapes that had been the scene of their budding romance with the casino as their new space of mutual connection. The moment registers as almost grotesque, then, as Frank’s once again becomes a determining social force, this time, morphing into a “home” of a different sort – a home Evelyn’s and Ann’s desire – validated by Evelyn’s eventual, almost uncontrollable, urge to profess their relationship in public. Evelyn’s reorganization of the “fragments” of Ann’s emotion at face value makes the transformation even more
unsetting, as Evelyn demonstrates a heartbreaking propensity to see Ann much in the same way her customers do day in and day out.

Thus, what begins with Ann’s supplemental labor masked as non-heterosexual kinship veers strikingly close to the club’s subsumption and rearrangement of that which had hitherto remained shielded from its effects – Ann and Evelyn’s affection for one another. Later on, after Evelyn’s visit, “their conversation [becomes] fragmentary” and “crude with desire or elaborately incoherent with the last brilliance before sleep” (184), much like the emotions Evelyn gleans from Ann’s face. In the context of a community that is rather indifferent to Ann and Evelyn’s lesbian romance, these episodes reveal an underlying conflict that cannot be resolved through social acceptance alone. The romance of the casino comes to a halt when Ann and Evelyn can finally go no farther within the world it manages. In this, the casino has reached its limit as the supposedly neutral, morality-free zone of personal enterprise without a price. It is this confrontation that leads *Desert of the Heart* toward the argument for a new vision of morality that, while stripped of its monolithic religious sanctimony and sentimentalism, must nonetheless simultaneously rebel against the particularizing solution of personal enterprise. If Ann’s struggle demarcates the limits of enterprise, Evelyn’s tumultuous guilt over abandoning her old life for a new one with Ann seeks a revised moral framework that implies the need for a different sort of social code.

Toward those ends, in her final meeting with her divorce attorney, Arthur Williams, Evelyn is confronted with a vision of the casino that does away with the equivocations established earlier. Arthur explains that he and his wife moved to Reno twenty years ago because the desert was good for his wife’s health. Now, as a part of the
casino culture, he says, “we’re just like the Germans who turned a blind eye to the exterminating of the Jews because we stand by and do nothing about these Buchenwalds of our own” (206). Evelyn is initially disgusted by Arthur’s confession and bewildered by his acknowledgment of his complacency. Her repulsion turns to empathy, however, when he discloses that he and his wife simply lack the resources to seek a life elsewhere. Like her own husband who she originally scorned for his inability to find work, and even like herself, she has to admit, Arthur and his wife are beholden to an order that exceeds the simple recourse of personal intervention.

When Evelyn returns to Frank’s for the final time, she experiments with the same kind of reasoning as Ann, acknowledging that “the Club encouraged moderation” and that at least, “Frank’s Club felt a particular moral responsibility to its employees” in the pamphlets that “Ann brought home” (210). Evelyn eventually comes to another conclusion, however, that

the evil must be in the fact of private enterprise. [Frank’s] made money…if she could accept this place as a microcosm, no better and no worse than any other, simply representative, she could as easily rationalize the last vestige of her private morality into meaninglessness. And she wanted to. Her fear was that she could not accept this world, that she could let Ann go. (210)

Evelyn finally acknowledges the fundamental incongruity between the moral relativism Frank’s provides and the ability for her love to flourish, unconventional or not. In light of
her previous conversation with Arthur, Evelyn’s “private morality” is a longing for a new universality of right and wrong that would not punish her for loving Ann, and might also – in another time and place – have allowed her to forgive her soon-to-be ex-husband’s paralyzing debt and mental anguish (47).

Finally, Evelyn reasons, “Ann could not argue for the Club. And she would not argue against marriage” (212). In this acknowledgment, the narrative shatters the earlier binary tension it established between conventionality and moral relativism. Doing away with the binary reveals the need for a new set of standards that acknowledges nonheteronormative kinship within a wider framework of social need. In the end, of course, Desert of the Heart does not so much name a new model of anti-enterprise morality so much as it documents the enduring need for homosexual narratives to recognize the inadequacy of the models of labor and love that currently exist. Evelyn’s decision to stay in Reno with Ann for “an indefinite period of time” (222) is, by the end, a familiar refrain mocking the ritualistic divorce proceedings where plaintiffs must misleadingly attest that they intend to remain residents in Nevada “indefinitely.” In this final utterance, however, Evelyn’s words are also an acknowledgment that she and Ann’s life together will not stand as a finished product against the conventional model outlined at the novel’s outset. Rather, their endeavors track an ongoing rejection of the lures of willful enterprise, of “getting caught in your own reflection” (221), and the tentative acceptance of a new form of risk that refuses to escape entirely from the world as it is.

Conclusion
As *Edge of Twilight* and *Desert of the Heart* demonstrate, early neoliberal lesbian subjectivity depended upon forms of affective regulation and social reproduction already in play in this period. In their professional labor and desire, Val’s and Ann’s affective capacities are de- and re-regulated, flourishing most when these women come into close proximity with deregulation’s disenfranchised others. In *The Feeling of Kinship*, David L. Eng describes “queer liberalism” as “a product of late capitalist rationalization [that] functions as a supplement to capital, but in a desexualized, repackaged, and contained form.” Eng continues, “we might say that neoliberalism enunciates (homo)sexual difference in the register of culture – a culture that is freely exchanged (purchased) and celebrated (consumed)” (30). For Eng, homosexual difference and neoliberalism are complicit to the extent that – as recent consumable TV and fashion phenomena demonstrate – “queerness” has become an “aestheticized lifestyle predicated on choice” and consumerism (29–30). As this chapter has argued, however, sexual difference under neoliberalism extends beyond these claims, which largely view its supplemental properties as “contained” and primarily operational on the side of consumerism. Christian’s and Rule’s representations of late-capitalist lesbian identity go beyond the commodification of homosexual difference. In their documentations of deregulated sexuality, we see lesbianism as a supplement to late-capitalist expansion through the lens of value production and those affective forms of labor at work in a system of exploitation with a vested interest in the versatile, non-contained capacity freed up at the intersection of sexual and economic deregulation.

My readings of *Edge of Twilight* and *Desert of the Heart* locate a point where lesbian identity’s supplemental operations entail more than cultural capital in
neoliberalism. Indeed, these novels suggest that sexual deregulation’s contemporary ideological force is an extension of a historical development within and adjacent to the formalized extraction of attentive labor required by the deregulated service industry. Christian and Rule reveal is a historical juncture where the contradictory promises and pitfalls of professional self-management and enterprise are enacted and made legible through their overlap with the freeing up and re-regulating of lesbian identifications and desires. To read *Edge of Twilight* and *Desert of the Heart* historically, then, is to remain skeptical and ever vigilant of modernity’s promise, which increasingly requires the implementation and erasure of flexible laboring and desiring subjects to make good on its guarantee of freedom. In what follows, I track contemporary culture’s absorption of this complex history.

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1 As a term that gives form to freedom in the economic dimension within neoliberalism’s own lexicon, however, deregulation has been embraced more cautiously by other theorists skeptical of the widespread and uncritical adoption of deregulation as an explanatory concept. Leo Pantich and Martijn Konings, for instance, point to a danger in “the tendency to analyze the financial dynamics of the past decades within the terms of that era’s hegemonic self-representation” (68). In other words, for Pantich and Konings deregulation, like freedom, is a concept that comes with its own ideological baggage that may limit more than expand systemic accounts of neoliberal culture.

2 The unquestioned premium put on the concept of “freedom” demonstrates, for David Harvey and others, a social value whose essence reflects the systemic machinations of global neoliberal enterprise at large in which capital was being unleashed from state
regulation (A Brief History of Neoliberalism). See also Lauren Berlant’s The Queen of America Goes to Washington City, and Jodi Dean’s Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies. In A Brief History of Neoliberalism, Harvey offers a clear-cut definition of neoliberal deregulation as a combination of anti-governmental and pro-business measures that included “everything from airlines and telecommunications to finance [and] opened up new zones of untrammeled market freedoms for powerful corporate interests” (26).

While Harvey’s definition describes markets in the 1980s under the Regan administration, he also points to the ways in which, starting decades earlier, U.S. corporations “awash with surplus capital” began to make parts for commodities “almost anywhere in the world – preferably where labour and raw materials were cheaper [so that] capital now had access to the whole world’s low-cost labour supplies” (Enigma of Capital 16).

3 For other examples of this literature, see Torreska Torres’s Women’s Barracks (1950); Patricia Highsmith’s The Price of Salt (1953); and Ann Aldrich’s We, Too, Must Love (1958).

4 For more on the Mattachine Society’s expulsion of communist members, see John D’Emilio’s. Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities.

5 See, for instance, Meg Wesling’s article “Queer Value,” which argues for a value-producing element of queer performativity within waged labor that evades alienation.

6 I refer here to David Harvey’s framing of uneven development, which “acknowledges the power and importance of certain processes that are specifiable independently of each other but which can and must be brought together in a dynamic field of interaction. This implies the construction of arguments about how the web of life and accumulation by
dispossession through expanded reproduction work together and how the dynamics of political and class struggles power continuous changes in capitalism’s uneven geographical development” (*Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* 76).

7 For more on the relationship between sexual identity and labor, see Kevin Floyd “Making History: Marxism, Queer Theory, and Contradiction in the Future of American Studies” *Cultural Critique,* and *The Reification of Desire*; and Rosemary Hennessy *Profit and Pleasure* and *Fires on the Border.*

8 The unquestioned premium put on the concept of “freedom” demonstrates, for David Harvey and others, a social value whose essence reflects the systemic machinations of global neoliberal enterprise at large in which capital was being unleashed from state regulation (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism*). See also Lauren Berlant and Jodi Dean. Harvey offers a clear-cut definition of neoliberal deregulation as a combination of anti-governmental and pro-business measures that included “everything from airlines and telecommunications to finance [and] opened up new zones of untrammelled market freedoms for powerful corporate interests” (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 26). While Harvey’s definition describes markets in the 1980s under the Regan administration, he also points to the ways in which, starting decades earlier, U.S. corporations “awash with surplus capital” began to make parts for commodities “almost anywhere in the world—preferably where labour and raw materials were cheaper [so that] capital now had access to the whole world’s low-cost labour supplies” (*Enigma of Capital* 16).

9 For more on alternatives to mainstream narratives on the history of women’s movements in the U.S., see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement:*
Workplace Justice and Social Rights in America and Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas To Exploit the World.*

10 The ERA was originally written by Alice Paul in 1923 when it was introduced in the Congress for the first time. In 1972, it passed both houses of Congress and went to the state legislatures for ratification.

11 See Chapter 6 in Hennessy’s *Fires on the Border,* which argues for an expanded application of Brennan’s concept for theorizing affective value in late capitalism.

12 My focus on these specific industries as sites that recruited and mobilized feminized affective labor is not intended to overlook the historical fact that U.S. capitalism has depended for centuries on the exploitation of multiple other forms of devalued or unvalued women’s labor (domestic workers and nurses, for example). On the contrary, the airlines and casinos demonstrate the growing formalization of women’s labor exploitation that is devalued in new industries precisely because of this history (see Encarnacion Guitérrez-Rodríguez).

13 1956 was also the first year of *The Ladder,* another early publication to feature critical engagements with lesbian literature.

14 Ironically, as Lillian Faderman has suggested, the moralistic, “cautionary tales” male authors produced actually allowed pulps to circulate without being regulated by censorship (*Odd Girls* 146).

15 See also D’Emilio *Sexual Politics*; Susan Stryker, and Stephanie Foote on the history of authors and audience in lesbian print culture.

16 See Keller; Grier’s “Afterword”; and Passet.

17 See D’Emilio *Sexual Politics* and Faderman *Odd Girls.*
For scholarly accounts of the airplane-as-democracy in U.S. culture, see Phil Tiemeyer’s study in *Plane Queer*.

See Tiemeyer, *Plane Queer*, which presents an extensive and compelling study on the historical processes of the feminization of the U.S. airline industry. See also Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* and Kathleen M. Barry, *Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants*. Over the past several decades – from Hochschild’s famous sociological study on emotional work to Barry’s more recent feminist history – the flight industry has presented a rich site for scholarship across a variety of fields. While harboring a range of critical commitments, these studies have largely taken up the gendered and racialized aspects of the field, perceiving the advent of air travel as a social microcosm illustrative of a wider cross-section of postwar American social conflict. To that end, this scholarship presents differing perspectives with regard to the actualities of flight attendants’ labor as compared to the cultural sensationalism that surrounded it in the postwar epoch. While Hochschild emphasizes the emotionally draining aspects of the work, Barry’s historical study observes that “on closer inspection, the history of flight attendants in the United States is a story in which glamorization and organization, and femininity and feminism, uniquely shaped the efforts of a cultural elite among working women to claim greater respect for an archetypal ‘women’s job.’ Stewardesses…relished their celebrated popular identity, but also unionized,” *Femininity in Flight*, 1. Extending Hochschild’s study on deep acting in airline work, sociologists Steve Taylor and Melissa Tyler examine emotional work’s relationship to the reification of sexual difference through the ways in which airline management “assume[s] that women workers in particular can accomplish this ‘discretionary’ aspect of the job,
utilising skills which they supposedly possess by virtue of their sexual difference from men: capacities which are deemed to derive from women’s ‘Otherness’” (91). Although Taylor and Tyler discuss gendered labor primarily within a heterosexual frame, their one mention of a lesbian flight attendant is an illuminating example of sexuality demarcating a personalized, private sphere at work as a bulwark against complete corporate compliance:

One female flight attendant in particular suggested that she was able to use her lesbian identity as a strategy for resisting organisational identification and the wholesale manipulation of her feelings and identity; as a means of distinguishing between her own (private) sexuality and her (public) heterosexualised organisational role: “It’s good to be able to put on an act all of the time. I do it to protect myself from it. Keep myself immune to it” (Taylor and Tyler 90).

20 Set within the wider context of neoliberal business expansion, the growth of the airline industry forms a site of value production where postwar U.S. desires to revise its national image met up with service labor’s capacity to be harnessed toward those rebranding efforts. As Tiemeyer explains, in workplaces geared toward these younger women – with airline stewardesses as a prime example – employees were expected to provide precisely the type of emotional work required of good wives and mothers. Serving meals and drinks, looking after sick passengers, soothing the nerves of worn-out businessmen, and changing dirty diapers – all done with boundless charm and alluring feminine beauty – made the stewardess’s role an ideal proving ground for marriage and motherhood. The stewardess had become a counter-example to Rosie the Riveter for the 1950s, an image
of white feminine strength and working prowess that mainly reinforced a woman’s conformity to the traditional roles of wife and mother and did not challenge the male privileges of higher wages and stable long-term careers (Tiemeyer 43).

21 For a different perspective on Puerto Rican migration patterns to the United States in the late-1950s to the mid-60s, see Jorge Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*. Duany counters the traditional scholarly narrative on Puerto Rican migration that “assumed that it was a permanent relocation of low-wage labor from the periphery to the core of the capitalist world system” (Duany 210). Instead, he explains, contemporary Puerto Rican migration is best visualized as a transient and bidirectional flow…part of a large-scale, two-way traffic of labor, capital, goods, and information that accelerated after World War II” (212–3).

22 As one of neoliberalism’s foundational tenets, enterprise generally denotes the positive expression of deregulated capital’s expansive potential. A dexterous term to be sure, enterprise filters through cultural and economic lexicons as a descriptor of individual personalities or, more neutrally, the broader processes of business expansion.

23 See, for instance, Elaine T. Hansen’s examination of “nonprocreative motherhood” where Hansen claims,

as Ann and Evelyn come together in the plot, their respective childlessness is revalued. In tandem they represent the possibility of maternal feelings and experiences, detached from procreation, no longer exclusively or essentially defining their womanhood but nevertheless critical to the complex drives and choices that sustain their relationship (40).
Hansen argues that the novel’s rendering of the successful lesbian nonprocreative form challenges heterosexual convention through the failure of biological reproduction, since “those women [in the story] who try to care for children to whom they have given birth seem doomed to fail and suffer” (Hansen 46).

See also Marilyn R. Schuster, “Strategies for Survival: The Subtle Subversion of Jane Rule” and “Inscribing a Lesbian Reader, Projecting a Lesbian Subject.”

See Allan Sears, who explains the “shift toward market-oriented hedonism” as a part of the limited “moral deregulation” that has come to efface more trenchant forms of queer political activism (102).
Introducing: Telephone

In March 2010, Lady Gaga’s music video Telephone premiered on E! News to an audience of 833,000 viewers (Hampp and York). The following morning, record-breaking viewer traffic crashed vevo.com, the YouTube affiliate that hosts the video on its website – it had received four million views in under twenty-four hours. Directed by Jonas Akerlund, who shares co-writing credit with Lady Gaga, the nine-minute project takes its viewers on a tour through a selected history of cinematic camp with Gaga as its wayward conductor. The video’s opening scenes detail a gritty women’s prison where Gaga is held as its star captive. Eventually Beyoncé, her partner in crime and romance, bails Gaga out of jail. In the remaining minutes, the two propel down a southwest highway, exact murderous revenge on Beyoncé’s abusive boyfriend, commit mass homicide at a roadside diner, and drive off into the sunset in Thelma and Louise fashion.

Scholars, journalists, and pop culture bloggers from a range of fields wasted no time in debating Telephone’s titillating details once it went public. The glut of cultural references and provocative imagery presented them with a plethora of critical entry points. Lurking in the margins of the general discussion was the question of how seriously we should take Telephone in the first place, a concern that has plagued camp since the beginning. For some, the video’s over-the-top stylistics were not consistent with Gaga’s stated aim for her project to be a commentary on contemporary American
consumption of all kinds—of commodities; of normativity; of mediated fame, not to mention the bodies produced and required for fame’s machinery (Barnes).

These goals notwithstanding, it is tempting to view Gaga’s role in the video as an analogy for deregulated capitalism writ large. The video’s arc documents the process of her body becoming increasingly unfettered from the regulatory spaces of prison and surveillance that contain it. As we move from scene to scene, we witness Gaga’s entrepreneurial capacity to reinvent her persona with a new outrageous costume each time. With Beyoncé’s help, she becomes chaotically mobile, wreaking all kinds of havoc on whatever environment she inhabits, but in a cheeky, stylized manner that we are entreated to celebrate. In sum, Telephone seems to exist proudly in an amoral universe of its own design and professes an ethics that celebrates personal freedom made all the more exuberant by the destruction left in its wake. But this is only a partial reading.

What this assessment leaves out is the extent to which Telephone’s unruly queer subject depends upon the simultaneous absorption and deflection of a particular history of queer critique. Unquestionably, Gaga’s work overall is in conversation with a variety of histories, including those of film; cultural, industrial, and non-industrial production; and the formal mode of queer camp. We see these references in Telephone as well. The video draws upon a host of historical allusions in its performance of de-regulated queerness. It does not construct and endorse deregulated sexuality; rather, it dramatizes deregulated queerness’ confrontations with the normative forces of a cultural past. Moreover, it defines its queer subject – Gaga – in terms of this struggle with the normal and wrestles with the question of how to think historically while thinking queerly.
Two years after *Telephone*’s release, queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam wrote *Gaga Feminism*, wherein he evoked Lady Gaga as a modern day model for an outrageous brand of feminist politics. Gaga feminism, he explains:

> is not about sisterhood, motherhood, sorority, or even women. It is about shifting, changing, morphing, extemporizing political positions quickly and effectively to keep up with the multimedia environments in which we all live and to stay apace of what some have called “the coming insurrection.” Here and now, our reality is being re-scripted, reshot, re-imagined, and if you don’t go gaga soon, you may wake up and find that you have missed the future and become the past. (29)

The personal dexterity that Halberstam describes is provocative when considered historically within the larger trends of neoliberalism, which requires its labor force to be increasingly available according to the shifting demands of the market. As David Harvey explains, neoliberal deregulation is not a transparent system of rules and principles, but is in fact defined by its of-the-moment flexibility and ability to respond to power:

> The evidence suggests, moreover, that when neoliberal principles clash with the need to restore or sustain elite power, then the principles are either abandoned or become so twisted as to be unrecognizable. (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 19)
In sum, the U.S. deregulated economy bolsters itself by accumulating capital from the global margins and maintains its power to do so by establishing or breaking the rules as it goes along. On the cultural front, the deregulated sexual subject is fetishized as a persona whose knack for “shifting, changing, morphing, extemporizing political positions quickly,” requires she push attendant relations of production and reproduction out of view.

Halberstam’s contention is noteworthy for its reasoning that the restrictive categories of “motherhood” and “sisterhood” are the barriers to realizing this flexibility. “Sisterhood” and “motherhood” denote subject positions structured by layered and complex networks of formal and informal forms of reproductive labor. Set within gaga feminism, however, they represent the regulatory signifiers of normative culture. Halberstam’s gaga feminism deregulates our attachment to these signifiers, which is to say promotes embracing the “shifting, changing, [and] morphing” circumstances of the times in which we live. This proposal, however, misunderstands the fact that flexibility and adaptability are in themselves already gendered components of a history that depends upon exactly a gendered structure of reproductive labor.

The contradiction between emergent flexibility and residual structures that I just gestured toward is a historical consequence of neoliberal deregulation ideology. The contemporary appearance of this contradiction in popular culture and critical theory, as well as its connection to a mid to late twentieth-century history of queer identity and labor, examples of which I detailed in earlier chapters, is my focus here. Accordingly, I take Lady Gaga as a cultural example of the deregulated subject position in millennial neoliberal culture. This subject position has its equivalent in certain strains of scholarly
discourse that tends to privilege spectacle in the cultural sphere as a political method. In listing the five main tenets of gaga doctrine, Halberstam says it himself: “gaga feminism is outrageous” (28).

Writing nearly twenty-five years earlier, Teresa Ebert called on feminist scholars to be wary of “the logic of the outrageous.” For Ebert, this is a politics that “works by titillating, eroticizing, enthralling, and seducing” the viewer to the point where it becomes difficult to “suspend critical judgment so as not to interfere with the pleasure of the experience” (“The Politics of the Outrageous” 13). To be seduced by the logic of the outrageous is to give oneself over to the spectacle and ignore the structuring forces that come to delineate commonsense assessments of a given cultural artifact. Ebert’s diagnosis of the appeal of the outrageous foregrounds its historical relation to new metrics being implemented by cultural criticism, whereby the value accorded to the pleasure of experience coincided with the eclipsing of labor and the value accorded to men’s work over women’s. To allow for this shift in critical practice to go unchecked, Ebert admonishes, “erases the entire history of women’s labor, denying the reality that patriarchy is built on the exploitation of women’s productivity” (13).

At the time of her writing, Ebert was lamenting the recent publication of Camille Paglia’s Sexual Personae, a book whose indeed outrageous and incendiary claims put it in a category of its own. Nonetheless, Ebert’s main critique continues to speak to today’s queer theory, wherein the lure of the outrageous depends in part upon the marginalization of certain forms of reproductive labor. Extending these claims, I want to think about Lady Gaga as a figure who is not so easily put in the same category that Halberstam establishes for her. Rather, Gaga’s engagement with camp pushes us to consider how her work plays
upon what I call the alibi of interpretive immediacy, which invokes the outrageous as an
ur-site that provides its audience with clues for how to read its history, even as its
stylistics appear to be doing otherwise.

In what follows, I will examine the deregulated queer subject as it has continued
to gain critical purchase through and across two cultural registers: theoretical debates
taking place in mostly academic venues, and popular culture. The deregulated queer
subject emphasizes personal freedom and social mobility as key features of an emergent
tolerance for queerness as a stance antithetical to heteronormativity. Whereas the novels
of chapters one and two made service labor an integral site for crafting their new sexual
subjects, I argue here that the deregulated sexual subject’s absorption into mainstream
culture was accompanied and enabled by the erasure of those earlier entangled histories. I
read these mediations principally through Lady Gaga, who represents this deregulated
sexual subject as it is shaped by the repression of a queer history that nonetheless
resurfaces in surprising ways.

I will explore two modes in which the contemporary deregulated sexual subject’s
representation is mediated by the repression of its labor history. The first mode is in the
form of what I call queer deregulation theory, which is theory from the past decade that
over-invests in queer as a category of individual liberation. Most importantly, and as I
will detail further in the next section, queer deregulation theory is a method of critical
inquiry that defines itself in opposition to histories that aim to convey the structural
relations between culture and political economy. The second mediating mode I examine
is camp – a traditionally queer artistic style whose postwar development in the U.S.
evolved in critical relation to expanded modes of commodity production, consumerism,
and popular culture. Fundamentally, each of these modes negotiates the repressed history of affective labor that – while constitutive of the subjects discussed in previous chapters – recedes into the margins of contemporary cultural texts. Queer deregulation theory and camp are also oppositional: camp’s established capacity to disclose particular cultural histories refutes queer deregulation theory’s antipathy to history. Implicit in my examination, then, is an argument for highlighting and claiming camp’s enduring significance as a form of cultural critique that gains new traction as a countervailing logic when deployed in neoliberal contexts. In its contemporary form, camp becomes the repository for the displacement of the idea of history, and invisible labor, itself. As such, it charts a counter-logic to the repression of history that deregulated sexuality mandates.

In order to flesh out how these opposing mediations operate, I turn to Lady Gaga, the performance artist who has attained fame and acclaim in recent years for her enthusiastic engagement with the mainstream hallmarks of both political and artistic gay popular culture. Gaga’s work documents the central opposition between camp and deregulated queer subjects. I pay particular attention to Gaga’s deployment of camp in the widely popular 2010 music video Telephone because it exemplifies deregulated queerness’ ambivalent relationship to historical thinking. I argue that Gaga’s camp, while often misread as derivative of well-established forms on post-industrial consumerism, offers a critique of neoliberal forms of labor and value. As such, it functions as a receptacle for cultural memory in which the history of non-industrial relations reappears in her work both as nostalgia and campy excess. At its most incisive, the neoliberal deployment of camp aims to account for the invisibility of invisible labor and maintains a critical lineage that chafes against queer deregulation theory. To convey these effects
more concretely, I offer an extended account of deregulation theory as professed by Lee Edelman and Halberstam, who, to different degrees, reify queerness’ aspirations toward individual freedom detached from historical and social contexts. I then touch briefly upon camp’s critical past in order to theorize its contemporary usefulness as a lens for analyzing deregulated sexuality’s repression of its own labor history.

**Deregulated Queerness in Theory**

Queer deregulation theory rehearses some of the more ideologically seductive aspects of neoliberal thought – namely, the premium put on individual flexibility and politics as personal innovation. Accompanying this premium is the subordination of historical thinking. To varying degrees, Lee Edelman’s *No Future* and J. Jack Halberstam’s *Gaga Feminism* interrogate historicity’s normative limitations to queerness’s unruly, socially-disruptive potential – a potential, they argue, that is undermined by reproductive futurism (Edelman), and an outmoded feminist narrative (Halberstam). On one level, these ideas reflect queer theory’s foundational skepticism concerning the uses of historical narrative for its own critical potential. My focus on Edelman and Halberstam in this regard is not meant to ignore the ways their anti-historicism jibes in some respects with the field’s roots; rather, I want to highlight the effects of what seems to be the myopic yet influential embrace of one conceptual thread. Each thinker posits a binary opposition between queer and historical methodologies: at one end, history is posited as the residue of retrograde thinking that continues to confine queerness within a normative trajectory of social progress. At the other end of the binary, queerness reflects the potential to unmake and remake reality by maintaining its incompatibility with historical paradigms that are
invested in understanding history as relations of social reproduction. In short, this equation reflects a critical stance that problematically situates forms of social production under the heading of normativity – specifically heteronormativity.

As a methodology that in part defines personal freedom through a critique of normativity, queer theory dovetails especially well with deregulation logic. In Edelman’s case, this central impulse against normativity extends into an argument against queerness’ compatibility with the social, in general. Queerness, he contends, is fundamentally anti-social, as well as anti-political. Its irreconcilability with American politics derives, in his view, from the fact that political discourse revolves around the notion of futurity. As such, the figure of the child comes to occupy the symbolic intersection of conservative and liberal political discourse, a harmony, Edelman contends, that is an extension of and dependent upon the sanctity of a heteronormative reproductive framework. Taken together, these components comprise a galvanizing system of social thought that Edelman terms *reproductive futurism*.

Edelman’s critique of reproductive futurism is primarily informed by Lacanian models of desire and drive, which conceptualizes social relations in purely linguistic and psychological terms. *No Future* re-deploys Lacan’s concepts to represent political identification as the imagined, but perpetually unattainable, object of desire – an illusion that is sustained only by the social imperative toward future-oriented thinking. Politics and history are primarily narrative entities for Edelman, and for him both obscure the very “oblquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality” (6). In this framing, political discourse reinforces an imaginary relationship between the subject and the desired object. Edelman explains: “politics, in opposing itself to the negativity of such
a drive, gives us history as the continuous staging of our dream of eventual self-
realization by endlessly reconstructing, in the mirror of desire, what we take to be reality
itself” (10). In other words, political discourse provides the codes and structures that
limit, or domesticate, what would otherwise be unruly, illegible, and therefore potentially
disruptive drives. Accordingly, history constitutes a normative narrative that reflects back
to us and reinforces the fantasy of gradual social progress.

It is this notion of historical progress, he argues, that keeps us reaffirming the
same social logics that uphold the fantasy of self-realization time and again. To break out
of the cycle, Edelman says, requires an ultimate refusal to invest in any system,
whatsoever, to the extent that it organizes social thought toward collective notions of the
political good. He conveys this utter negation of the social in a crescendo of anti-
sentimentality:

Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively
terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor,
innocent kid on the Net; fuck Law both with capital ls and with small;
fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as
its prop. (29)

Against the constraining social order that upholds these symbols, Edelman continues, is
“queerness,” which is “irreducibly linked to the ‘aberrant or atypical,’ to what chafes
against ‘normalization’”:
As a particular story, in other words, of why storytelling fails, one that takes both the value and the burden of that failure upon itself, queer theory, as I construe it, marks the “other” side of politics: the “side” where narrative realization and derealization overlap, where the energies of vitalization ceaselessly turn against themselves; the “side” outside all political sides, committed as they are, on every side, to futurism’s unquestioned good. (7)

Edelman thus endows queerness with an “empty, excessive, and irreducible” quality that stands to “figure the radical dissolution” of the symbolic order that bolsters reproductive futurism (27; 16). Queerness “undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a jouissance that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed” (24–5).

To view Edelman as a prime example of queer deregulation theory is not to quibble over his sentiments against sentimentality, but rather to emphasize that his theory reproduces queerness as a fetishized object whose value is defined strictly in terms of its ability to remain free of social and historical conditions. In so doing, No Future simply frames queerness in the terminology of neoliberal discourse, which benefits from ignoring or denying the actual contexts of reproduction that structure what is possible for social life. In Edelman’s articulation, queerness is the unfettered answer to political correctness; it provides the reason to reject social systems, as it constitutes the logical extension of freedom at any cost. It is not therefore the specific function of queerness so much as its potential as an uncontainable force that, in Edelman’s hands, and despite his
insistence on undoing identities, nonetheless reinforces queerness’s compatibility with neoliberal imperatives, a queerness that promotes newness without history. Edelman’s argument thus exemplifies the cautionary tale that camp in its fundamentally parodic and historically aware commentary on cultural norms warns against – the alibi of interpretive immediacy that seduces the audience.

Halberstam’s *Gaga Feminism* is more optimistic than Edelman about future-oriented thinking, even as it remains skeptical of particular historical narratives. Gaga feminism’s methodology devotes attention to representation, flexibility, and a celebration of the outrageous. In so doing it is in keeping with a broader ambivalence on the part of many queer theorists who disavow or aim to reconcile many of the foundational tenets of queer thought with the influential and hegemonic definition of freedom in neoliberal times.

For Halberstam, Lady Gaga exemplifies “a symbol for a new kind of feminism” (xii). By all accounts, Gaga’s feminism is, like Edelman’s queer, deeply rooted in poststructuralist precepts. It is a feminism, Halberstam explains, “of the phony, the unreal, and the speculative, a monstrous outgrowth of the unstable concept of ‘woman’ in feminist theory” (xiii). In language that molds gaga feminism with the entrepreneurial image of deregulated sexuality, Halberstam claims, “this feminism is about improvisation, customization, and innovation” (xiv). Gaga feminism is embodied individually through personalized gestures and modes of thought. It “is not something to which you will subscribe . . . you will not vote for it,” Halberstam explains. “Instead, it is something you will do . . . something to be” (26). Halberstam’s schema frames gaga
feminism as enterprise, a method of self-branding that offers a spin on what some have viewed as the consumer-driven tendencies of Gaga’s political perspective:

When Lady Gaga wears a meat dress or five-inch heels, she does so to call attention to the whimsy of personhood, the ways in which we all need to see each other anew, find new surfaces, name those surfaces differently, and confuse the relations between surface and depth. (26)

Halberstam’s emphasis on style as rebellion, as well as the confusion of surface and depth, seem to resurrect the third-wave feminist imperative, which largely targeted the cultural sphere as its terrain of political engagement. As I will explain further in the next section, Halberstam’s vision of the outrageous, powerful feminist seems to be, in part, precisely what Gaga’s camp puts into historical relief.

Gaga feminism derives its ability to adjust according to the changing current of a given cultural moment. Oftentimes, this amounts to a savvy appreciation for digital media environments, as well as an abiding skepticism regarding narratives that disseminate from the mainstream culture industry. By the same token, and by looking in the margins, Halberstam finds plenty of examples in popular culture that embody his vision for gaga feminism. The book is replete with examples from mumblecore films, which document the failure of upper-middle class heterosexual white masculinity, for instance. Halberstam also draws inspiration from SpongeBob SquarePants, a cartoon character who embodies the rearrangement of distinctions between gender, sexuality, species, and adulthood categories to the point of rendering each one absurd. In short, Halberstam looks to culture
for a reflection of normativity’s failure, as well as for hints on how we might one day envision a different society in its wake.

Historical narratives in *Gaga Feminism* often surface in the form of caricature, entrapped by top-down generational interchanges and delivered to us in reified chunks of popular knowledge:

> While most conventional histories of feminism are content to trace out waves of feminist thought and action that develop along the lines of social-movement histories, located in decades of action and legislation, and that emerge within or between distinct ethnic communities of women, *gaga feminism* charts very different territory and tracks a version of feminism that will not settle for clichéd accounts of women striking out for independence and becoming powerful in the process. (xiv)

As is the case for Edelman, the *idea* of history lands here in the form of discourse and a very particular one. In the case of *gaga feminism*, history is encapsulated in a story of liberation defined against the stultifying effects of the history of generational influence. In contrast to Edelman’s view of history, Halberstam cultivates an “anarchic sense of time” that runs against the moralizing and shame-fueled top down model of “generational exchange” that transmits conservative social norms from one generation to the next (xxiv, xxiii). In this version of history, the figure of the child stands as the model rebel subject. As Halberstam describes children,
they inhabit different understanding of time, and experience the passing of time differently. They also seamlessly transition between topics that adults would ordinarily not connect in polite conversation (turtles and sex, for example); and often, they place the emphasis differently than adults might by making questions about sex and gender as important or as inconsequential as questions about animals, vegetables, and minerals.

(xxiii)

As the deregulators of meaning and syntax, children embody a purity defined by a status untouched by the trappings of adult regulation. As Halberstam put it, “the pre-socialized, pre-disciplined, pre-restrained anarchic child comes at the world a little differently than the post-shame, post-guilt, post-recognition, disciplined adult” (xxiv). In this respect, the figure of the child for Halberstam is the inverse of the figure of the child for Edelman who rejects the child on the same grounds. Edelman’s child is problematically represented as an unspoiled canvas upon which society will always and erroneously project its hopes. Halberstam’s child is likewise aspirational and uncannily also an unspoiled canvas but one from which society has a lot to learn. Notably, in order to make either case, the child – and by extension, the family – is apprehended solely as a cultural entity. This is the common ground that queer deregulation theorists share. Like its economic counterpart, cultural deregulation theory has an interest in overlooking the fact of social reproduction in order to achieve its own ends, so much so that even the child can be remade into a cultural artifact.
Halberstam’s understanding of the family as a function of cultural choices rather than as a historically structured relation of social reproduction distorts many of his later recommendations when it comes to acknowledging uneven divisions of labor as a feature of gendered social relations. Engaging at length with Arlie Hochschild’s analysis of the second shift and women’s domestic labor, Halberstam explains:

A gaga feminist would claim that while divisions of labor do not need to be fifty-fifty or even sixty-forty, they do need to be acknowledged and chosen. In other words, people can make whatever decisions they choose about who does what in the home; some women will cook more, some men may do more laundry, some feminine partners may want to be more career oriented, some masculine partners may want to spend more time with children. But like all aspects of a partnership, roles must be negotiated, sorted through, agreed upon rather than divided according to some divine, mysterious, and increasingly impractical plan. (61)

Here, the family is represented as existing in a vacuum, unaffected by the larger governmental and economic forces that determine the choices people have such as the ability to afford childcare; to work for a livable wage (let alone breadwinner earnings); or any of the other multitudes of circumstances that are decided by powerful interests in the political and economic sphere but are felt most sharply in the home. This view is conditioned by the evacuation of a history that can account for the systemic devaluation of domestic labor, not to mention a host of other variables that are thoroughly detailed by
Hochschild but left out of Halberstam’s equation. Instead, gaga feminism conceptualizes
the division of labor as a problem that need not look for its solution beyond negotiations
between freely choosing individuals within the home.

Halberstam’s emphasis on choice, negotiation, and agreement appears to conceive
of the family unit as a small marketplace where partners are on equal grounds both within
and beyond the private enclosure of their home. This conception reflects Angela
McRobbie’s observations on the new and not-so-new pressures put on the family as
neoliberal measures continue to reap resources away from the public sector:

With. . . the slimming down to the point of extinction of a range of family
services, the expectation is that the family steps forward to look after itself
and to inculcate the right kinds of self-responsibility. . . while at the same
time financially mopping up those costs which in the past would have
been at least partially covered by the state. (131)

In light these claims, Halberstam’s promotion of choice in the division of domestic labor
helps to explain his perspective on the child, which he endows with a kind of queer,
deregulating potential that he argues will resonate beyond the home, even as we are
required to consider both the child and the home within an ahistorical context. Along
slightly different lines, it is not a far stretch to wonder if Halberstam’s idealistic treatment
of the child might also be interpreted as a class specific imaginary in a historical epoch
where childcare and other public services continue to be privatized, accessible only to the
wealthiest segments of the population.
Notably, Halberstam is keenly aware of the extent to which gaga feminism and the child-centered politics it advocates risks falling into a “neoliberal concept of difference and uniqueness” (141). He explains this potentially compromised stance, however, by asserting that “gaga feminists want to uncover bigger political prizes than splendid individualism” (141). This is the note that *Gaga Feminism* concludes on, with the caveat that although it is not necessarily clear how these “bigger political prizes” might be realized, the methodologies revealed through Gaga and others orient us in the right direction toward those goals.

I find Halberstam’s thinking particularly compelling because it rehearses a conundrum at the heart of arguments that pit themselves against the normative constraints of historical narrative. As Halberstam demonstrates, these theories seek to embolden queer methodologies even as they remain aware of the risks of resorting to neoliberal ideologies of difference and individualism. In a different context, Frederic Jameson has posed this problem as a defining aspect of postmodernism’s “disappearance of a sense of history,” instantiated in part through the artistic mode of pastiche, which professes “the fragmentation of ‘me’ into a series of perpetual presents” (11–2). Halberstam’s argument for gaga feminism might be considered a postmodern proposal for a politics of pastiche that promotes the representational aspirations of popular culture. In so doing, he recasts relations of social reproduction (that enable the child to be) into cultural production’s own image.

In reading Halberstam’s gaga feminism as postmodern in this sense, I am suggesting that the question Jameson raised regarding postmodernism and consumer capitalism over thirty years ago is all the more relevant to queer theorizing today. Once
“we have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism,” he claims, “the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic” (12). If much of queer pop cultural production has become conscious, more or less, of the overlap between freedom and the free market, then Gaga’s camp reveals one contemporary example where we see queer deregulation theory self-consciousness played out. That said, I want to consider the ways in which historical sense, as well as queer theory’s ambivalence toward it, features in Gaga through her neoliberal rendition of camp and the representations of labor therein. In contrast to queer deregulation theory, camp does engage the historic and material dimensions to the cultural artifacts it presents. In the next section, I explain how camp registers this tension uniquely as a style that discloses its queer history under the pretense of forgetting it.

**Why Camp?**

Camp illustrates one cultural response to historical booms in mass production and, by extension, the rise of new forms of consumerism. In this regard, camp’s hallmark aesthetic excessiveness is both conditioned by and a response to the various excesses born from postwar industrial overproduction. Through its method of recycling and recoding the vestiges of bygone tastes, camp draws attention to cultural production’s material components as well as to the cultural side of material relations. As such, to use Andrew Ross’s gloss on Althusser, camp tracks, not “spontaneous responses to real social conditions,” but the “imaginary relation to these conditions” (20).
I turn to camp as a representational idiom that takes as its premise popular culture’s material roots in relations of reproduction. It is a formal system that recognizes the social power of popularly received cultural codes without positing those codes as an immediate interpretation of social life. Accordingly, camp reuses and recycles cultural material against that material’s historical, original signification; it is therefore a wrench thrown into economies of meaning that discloses their imaginary fabric. As Fabio Cleto says of camp, it is a “queer currency, a perverted form of production that surreptitiously ‘infests’ commodity culture and the bourgeois modes of production, pushing them to implosion – turning them into a spectacle” (306). Camp’s critical power derives from its ability to draw the spectator’s attention to the artifice of its surface, and it demands we think historically lest we miss the joke. In so doing, camp can summon us to recognize the labor that gets hidden from view with any fetishized cultural object. If “pop tries to disavow the traces of production behind its objects of attention,” explains Ross, “camp cultivates an attitude toward the participation of the producers, past and present” (321). If Halberstam and Edelman’s queer theory calls for the confusion between surface and depth, then, by contrast, camp’s queerness is enacted precisely as a critique of the surface as a way to disrupt our reified modes of apprehending the world.

In its demand for historical thinking camp joins together disparate histories and it is this joining that gives camp its critical purchase for my analysis here. Similar to Patricia Highsmith’s engagements with the gothic, Gaga’s use of camp introduces into her work a formal logic with a history that belies and exceeds the ostensible boundaries the narrative presents. It demands, in other words, that we consider wider contexts that are only referenced obliquely in the work itself. To that end, Gaga’s camp points our
attention toward the importance of reading beyond the immediate text set before us. The next sections detail Telephone’s deployment of camp style, which initially plays upon an Andy Warhol-like presentation of consumer goods. As I will go on to show, this cynical deployment meets up eventually with Gaga’s more experimental engagement with camp, one that mediates the excesses and losses that stem from the collision of history, labor, and deregulated sexuality.

**Camp and the Commodity in Telephone**

Among other things, Gaga’s music video Telephone is particularly striking for its well-documented and unabashed product placement (Hampp and York). In total, 11 different commodities appear throughout the course of the video, including Miracle Whip, the online dating service Plenty of Fish, and Virgin Mobile. Such appearances are not subtly woven into each scene, but to the contrary, routinely interrupt Telephone’s visual continuity as the camera lingers on one brand logo after another for multiple seconds at a time. It is all incredibly distracting at first. And yet, as products continue to shift in and out of view, Telephone teaches its viewing audience how to assimilate them into the rest of the story: the brands that first appear garishly out of place eventually settle into the visual narrative as another layer of the campy style that guides the video’s overall artistic vision.

Most of the products advertised in Telephone are either manufactured by an affiliate of Interscope Records (Gaga’s recording label), by corporations that are in pre-existing marketing partnerships with Interscope, or are products from Gaga’s own marketing line. Although Telephone presents an exaggerated case, the trend of having
brand names appear in music videos is one consequence of an increasingly decentralized mediascape that is not unique to Gaga alone. Whereas, in the past, networks such as MTV would blur product names whenever they appeared in music videos, the popularity of internet sites such as YouTube has ushered in a new terrain for advertisers (Christian). As more and more performers have begun to embrace the trend, however, no artist has blended corporate endorsements into her art as wholeheartedly as Gaga, a tactic that is arguably enabled by her employment of camp.

Predictably, Telephone’s product placement has been met with mixed reviews, depending on who is doing the reviewing. The pragmatic explanation, of course, is financial. According to Troy Carter, the CEO of Coalition Media group and the architect of Telephone’s endorsements, the proceeds from product placement funded a significant portion of the video’s overall budget. Skeptics abound who conjecture more may be at stake. Some have accused Gaga of “act[ing] as a proxy for our evolving attitude towards corporate institutions” (McNutt). Aymar Jean Christian of “Televisual” notes that the particular un-hipness of many of the products (Hewlett Packard; Miracle Whip) reveals a “corporate anxiety” about a diminishing consumer base in the younger generation for certain brands.

In defense of Telephone’s commodity cameos, Aylin Zafar of The Atlantic remarks:

Blogger and fans are crying product placement – which in the case of Miracle Whip, it partly is – but its inclusion is more likely an homage to Gaga’s greatest idol, who himself was a living, breathing piece of art.
Much like Warhol, she has as much a part in feeding into pop consumer culture as she has in making a statement against it. (12)

And indeed not all of the products featured in Telephone are paid sponsorships. The Diet Coke cans that appear early on as Gaga’s improvised hair rollers, for instance, were not sponsored by the Coca-Cola Corporation, but included as a homage to her mother, who used the same technique throughout Gaga’s childhood. The package of Wonder Bread also appears courtesy of Gaga, who claimed she wanted the recognizable branding to highlight the ironic contrast between American wholesomeness and the poisonous mass murder that takes place just after the bread’s cameo (Hampp and York).

These diverse explanations of Telephone’s campy product placement, suggest that the comparison to Warhol is easy, but also incomplete. While campiness is undoubtedly what the video invites us to see, there are many of the circumstantial differences between Gaga and Warhol. For starters, Warhol was not financed by the companies his work parodies. Nonetheless, Safar’s comparison of Gaga to Warhol, his observations demonstrate that the video’s appropriation of camp does go far to establish exactly the kind of reading that obscures the history of the actual corporations that are involved in even the most visually creative elements of the production. The images that are stylized with a campy veneer can cover over the social relations involved in turning a profit, relations which for workers are often highly regimented. And, as these things go, corporate involvement inevitably means less, not more, creative freedom.

Dyana Kass, the head of pop music marketing at Universal Music Group, explained it this way to Advertising Age:
We were trying to line up brands that were organic. There were natural pieces in there, like being in a kitchen, so those kind of scenes . . . just made sense for brands. But we always agree creatively, and get sign-off before we walk down the aisle.

In this regard, Telephone’s corporate partnerships clearly differ from Warhol’s artistic exploitation of brands and logos; and yet, the video relies upon our knowledge of camp’s history to push us toward interpreting these effects otherwise. Telephone’s endorsements therefore masquerade as queerly camp, revealing – even as they conceal – corporations’ innovative zeal to discover new cultural landscapes to monetize.

Hidden from view in these stylistic translations and mistranslations is camp’s history as a form of critique predicated upon its capacity to offer a view of social relations by reframing history through irony. Camp’s ironic encapsulation of social history is its defining feature as opposed to deceptively similar forms such as kitsch. Andrew Ross reminds us that camp embodies its “historical association with a power that [is] now spent” (312). He goes on to cite other examples, such as “the Stars and Stripes, and Americana, [that] by contrast, could only be kitsch, because its serious intentions [are] still the historical support of a culture that holds real imperialist power in defining the shape of foreign cultures” (312). Beyond directing attention to history, then, camp also reorients cultural codes toward a more accurate view of power, past and present. In so doing camp’s critical heft is made the responsibility of its audience, who is charged with the task of reading codes in a manner that requires historical knowledge. In other
words, camp announces itself as a text in need of reading, and thereby raises the question of why anything that first appears as immediately knowable should not require the same treatment. In this sense, Gaga’s camp harbors an imperative that would have us reconsider Edelman and Halberstam’s framing of queer. Camp’s queer is not merely a reading of culture, but a method for how to connect the seemingly outrageous to a larger set of social processes its exaggerations allude to.

In the case of Gaga’s product placement, we can read two campy things that are happening at once: first, the actual *essence* of the advertising – that is, the actual profit being derived through product placement – is indeed obscured in the product’s representation. This effacement happens through the detachment of campy style from camp’s history. Campy style subordinates its critical leverage to the ironic terms of its logic. The audience is thus cued to read the advertising ironically and not literally. Second, and perhaps more germane to the point, is the reading made available once we see camp’s historical purchase. This form of camp seems to have something to say about the status of the commodity as a nostalgia-producing artifact in the postwar US economy. The commodity’s seeming incompatibility with *Telephone*’s otherwise anti-establishment message resonates queerly in each scene. And this is precisely the place where Gaga’s camp eventually lands to do its campy business. Its representational success depends upon the commodity form appearing in her work as an anachronism, an artifact of a bygone industrial age, albeit a historically cathected one. In this vein, the video registers a kind of nostalgia for products that once occupied the spectacular imagination in earlier eras of neoliberalism’s hegemony. On the other side of this nostalgia is the spectacle of sexual deregulation embedded in the service economy of late capitalism, a cultural logic
that the video discloses in its final scene. This sexual deregulation that the video both references and endorses is hemmed in, we might even say, “re-regulated,” by corporate concerns that the video uses to reference the queer artistic genealogy of camp. Remembering Jameson for a minute, we might be tempted to add that the artistic detachment of camp from its political origins in *Telephone* contributes to a form of cultural and historical amnesia. The video’s conflation of camp and genuine product placement might even seem to suggest that the sphere of the symbolic – including camp – is drained of its critical leverage vis-à-vis consumerism. However, I am suggesting that *Telephone*’s excessive treatment of commodities – and by extension, commodity production – does not rest ultimately in cynicism or nostalgia. Rather, its campy anachronism subtly suggests history’s persistent claims upon the contemporary. In precisely this sense, camp crucially contributes to the video’s overall vision of a world not without history, but one whose inhabitants exist in tension with a variety of historical codes. In other words, a world mediated by deployments of camp.

**Dialectics and Deregulation Theory**

Not all deployments of camp render the same effects. Rather than professing a clear method, as Halberstam might argue, Gaga’s camping queer excesses in *Telephone* signals ambivalence regarding the uses of history, awareness of the problem of interpretation, and the contending values placed upon queer critique in the age of deregulation. Through the host of recycled cultural detail its campy performance conjures, the video challenges members of its viewing audience to confront their own historical and political location. The conspicuous product placement constitutes part but not all of this challenge.
The video’s finale discloses a surprise twist when Gaga and Beyoncé, escaped from prison, drive to a roadside diner and end up poisoning its road-weary patrons. The video’s bookending of prison and service work registers awareness of the relationship between prison as a place that traps dispossessed poor white, black, and Latino women and the service industry as the only alternative for the same population. In this light, the mass poisoning the two conduct at the diner serves as a form of delayed retaliation against the prison, albeit one that nonetheless invites a view of the diner as a kind of extension of the prison.

The camera takes us into the diner’s back kitchen, where Gaga and a few of her dancers mix up a batch of toxic ingredients to serve Beyoncé’s ex-boyfriend. Although the initial plan was to poison only him, we soon learn that the toxin-laced pancake syrup is (perhaps accidentally) distributed to the entire diner. Seconds later, a series of close-up shots document the patrons falling one-by-one face-first into their respective meals. As the last face falls, Gaga and Beyoncé – clad in improvised Wonder Woman garb – join the ensemble at the center of the restaurant in a final synchronized victory dance. The camera punctuates its steady documentation of the performance with indiscriminant close-ups of fallen patrons – a middle-aged man, a teenage girl, the abusive ex-boyfriend, a dog. In this scene, the video seems to be giving both Edelman’s anti-sociality argument and Halberstam’s third wave feminism a campy revision. Appearing alongside other nostalgic artifacts, the queer subject of negativity and the outrageous feminist become part of the same historical timeline.

What starts as a formulaic revenge plot turns into a seemingly random killing spree. In a sequence Edelman might appreciate, the scene documents the undoing of
politics. We witness a targeted act of rebellion dissolve into a politically illegible moment. As such, the scene dramatizes a confrontation between two versions of queer politics, that is, one version expressed in the form of direct action, and another that envisions queerness, not as politics, but as form – the negation of the political through moments of social indecipherability. In the latter version, the specific revenge plot is beside the point. Rather, it celebrates queerness’ anarchic and outrageous refusal of meaning. Even the poisoning’s aftermath denies any signification beyond the immediate fact that it took place. The poison, a tempting metaphor for the women’s sexuality, or queerness, or both, refuses any lasting consequence. It does not convert or agitate the diners – it simply makes them cease to exist.

That said, it is also too simplistic to contend that Lady Gaga’s video endorses a nihilistic or even non-coded version of queerness – a statement that would put her work safely in Lee Edelman’s camp. At the heart of this scene is not difficulty in interpretation, but the clear presentation of two distinct opposing stances. Gaga’s gestures during the scene establish the poisoning as both intentional and an accident: at one point, she mimes aiming and cocking a gun; at another, as diners fall, she puts her hand over her mouth in a look of either excitement or horror.

These tensions suggest that the video’s poisoning scene is a response to queer deregulation theory in the form of a dialectic engagement with nostalgia and anarchy, with rebellion that has a reified history, and ahistorical rebellion. Both acts are nonetheless susceptible to narrative, which is not merely a mark of the social mediation of historical time, but a mark of power. As Gaga and Beyoncé drive off into the desert sun, we flash to news reports that summarize what we have just witnessed as a “mass
homicide.” The original revenge plot, like Gaga’s getaway truck, recedes into the distance.

**Conclusion: Camping Deregulation**

Questions remain in the closing scenes, then, as to camp’s purpose in the video’s overall presentation of queerness. In earlier chapters, I examined the expanded postwar service industry as a historical development that, among other things, offered to writers a representative landscape where gay and lesbian characters were imagined primarily as self-managing and in control of their emotive and attentive faculties. These representations ran against public attitudes that saw homosexuality as a sign of unmanaged desire or psychological vulnerability. The service workers portrayed in earlier texts were represented as confronting the commodification of attentive labor at the same time as their emerging sexual identities took shape. Accordingly, these protagonists embodied their sexual liberation in the same terms that narrativized the self-regulating, self-fashioning arbiters of their labor. Accompanying this model of literary protagonist, however, came the tacit entrenchment of liberal discourses that tied freedom to one’s ownership of labor. Thus, as the historical conditions for market and labor deregulation took effect, the representation of homosexuality embraced deregulation (both cultural and more broadly social) as a banner logic that challenged social norms, even as it bolstered neoliberalism’s more insidious prescripts.

In Gaga’s updated rendition of the service industry, we observe similar ingredients, but a different outcome when *Telephone* applies its camp experimentation to non-industrial forms of labor and production. Against this backdrop, the video inverts and
reworks one main premise of traditional camp – the commodity’s role in provoking nostalgic feelings – to disclose the halo of history haunting consumer culture. In Telephone’s campy excesses it is the service worker’s relationship to her labor and not the consumer’s to a commodity that registers the affective remainder of deregulated sexuality’s subordination of history. The scene’s pulsating campiness inserts an artistic history that links queer critique to histories of labor and production. Circulating throughout a “home-style cooking” establishment symbolic of a folksy and decidedly heteronormative American past, the poison thus takes on the valence of an invisible but determinative force of queerness and labor, or – more to the point – a combination of the two: queerness as a form of chaotic labor, an entity that is increasingly deregulated as it is shorn from its historical origins within and beyond the text.

The mass poisoning reflects the cultural anxiety provoked by the inability to remain in control of how creative and critical acts circulate. By the same token, the histories unleashed by camp are conflated into a montage that suggests the service industry’s lost significance in early cold war representations. The restaurant’s symbolic embodiment of nostalgic Americana and heteronormativity is thus challenged through the resurfacing of its own place in this history.

At the same time, the specter of the historic conditions that shaped these earlier representations haunts Gaga’s re-staging. The poison’s dramatically destructive circulation inverts the excess value extracted from a long history of feminized labor, and in so doing speaks back to earlier renderings of service work. Telephone therefore represents labor through the dialectic interplay of historical and anti-historical forms as
campy excess mingles and meets up with the actualities of devalued service labor and the excesses it provides for the video’s deregulated economy of meaning.

To that end, the restaurant scene resonates with the video’s other themes, not simply as a rejection of heteronormativity, but as a form of queer exhaustion in a time of deregulated signs and submerged histories. Returning to the mandates of queer deregulation theory, we might think of the video as campily critiquing a kind of critical labor that queer deregulation theory has come to expect – the kind of “innovation” and “customization” Halberstam endorses in gaga feminism. Amid the energizing beat and flashy changes of scenery, there is a palpable naturalizing of exhaustion that haunts Telephone’s every scene. It laces each costume and each costume change. It emanates from the very stylistics that propels the story forward. It is self-conscious about the critical weight put upon its own aesthetic and the excesses borne from the overvaluation of queerness detached from context. It points to the limits of an argument that seeks to put queerness and anti-futurity into the same camp.
Chapter Four:
Countering Deregulation: Authorship as Collective Indebtedness
in Audre Lorde and Barbara Kingsolver

Introduction: Revising the Gay Bildungsroman

This final chapter considers counter-narratives to the queer subject of deregulation as represented in Audre Lorde’s and Barbara Kingsolver’s re-fashionings of the gay coming-of-age story. I read Lorde and Kingsolver together as writers whose works bookend the several decades of intensified neoliberal consolidation in the U.S. This period begins with Ronald Reagan’s presidency in 1981 (marked from the start as aggressively pursuing deregulation by his handling of the air traffic controllers’ strike that same year) and continues into the decade of intensified market deregulation following September 11, 2001. As texts that together occupy two ends of this timeline, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and *The Lacuna* (2009) disclose critical interventions that reflect distinct phases of the neoliberal social landscape. My analysis locates them within a continuum of literary rebellion – sparked by the Reagan administration’s rapid augmentation of neoliberal economic policies and evolving into the security state’s re-regulation of bodies and minds. In reading these texts side-by-side, we can gain perspective on the historically situated cultural fronts that counter-narratives of neoliberalism saw it necessary to engage.

One of the most striking features of Lorde’s *Zami* and Kingsolver’s *The Lacuna* is their disruption of the singular speaking subject of the traditional *bildungsroman*. Through a combination of formal and thematic experiments, Lorde and Kingsolver redefine the activity of storytelling in that genre by situating it within a history of
reproductive labor. Both *Zami* and *The Lacuna* de-individualize the singular narrator that the *bildungsroman* form presupposes, insisting instead upon a cooperative, mutually-generated understanding of the histories disclosed therein. Their literary constructions evolve through a theoretical lens that frames subjectivity as a relational entity produced through time by diverse forms of labor. In so doing, *Zami* and *The Lacuna* invoke a critical stance that views narrative individualism as the product of the negation of invisible labor. Moreover, their rejection of narrative singularity highlights the material forms of attention, cooperation, and care that get jettisoned from the traditional *bildungsroman*’s construction of its central protagonists.

By taking the *bildungsroman* as their principal template for revision, Lorde and Kingsolver confront the conventional subject of narrative and its links to the neoliberal construct of unencumbered, free individualism. Through strategies of collective authorship their rewritings re-script the free, individual, singular subject of the *bildungsroman*, who they demonstrate is inextricable from a history of reproductive labor. Furthermore, their re-narrations are pointedly addressed to the gay *bildungsroman*, and here the erotic is a crucial element in their revision. Detached from its narrow commonsense connotations, the erotic appears in both works as the politicized component of reproductive labor that late capitalism seeks to re-regulate in numerous ways.

Because they are addressing different historical audiences, each writer’s adaptation of the *bildungsroman* represents these common concerns to reflect specific developments in neoliberalism’s cultural impact. Lorde’s rendering of her childhood and introduction into 1950s lesbian culture charts moments of erotic re-regulation at the same
time as it expands our conception of the erotic to include the affective bonds fostered by collective endeavor. Her intervention in this regard emphasizes the erotic as a politicized entity. In defining it this way, Lorde challenged the (lesbian) feminist consensus of her moment, much of it articulated via psychoanalytic thought that idealized the erotic as the site of normative rupture.

Writing in the post-9/11 era, Kingsolver engages the erotic as a feature of a gay life story in a much more muted fashion, though it is no less integral to her overall project. Rather than appearing through the re-regulation of desire, the erotic is encoded in her literary form, which embeds the *bildungsroman* of one protagonist within the framing affective labors of a second narrator’s archival project. The novel’s central conflict gets expressed through its literary form as its experimental, collective narration must eventually contend with the individuating grammar of state discourse. Within this formal structure, Kingsolver’s erotic is affixed to the novel as a remnant of reproductive affiliations that, by definition, evade heteronormative reproduction, and professes instead the truly interdependent nature of all social life. Like Lorde’s rejection of the self-contained subject of psychoanalysis, Kingsolver’s intervention is one that charts the contradictory manifestations of freedom discourse as it attaches to and does violence to the individual laboring body of deregulation.

At the same time that Lorde and Kingsolver each engage and re-script the presuppositions of the coming-of-age story, their works also exhibit characteristics of historical fiction, a genre that is uniquely reflective about its own geographic and cultural location. Each addresses famous moments in early Cold War American history as well as the transformative effects these histories have on the intimate lives of their central
characters. Like the *bildungsroman*, historical fiction is a genre with a wide readership. As Jerome de Groot notes, “from its inception as a recognizable genre, arguably, the historical novel was an international form; indeed, its success on a transnational scale meant that the novel in general became predicated upon a kind of cultural translatability” (93). Accordingly, I read *Zami* and *The Lacuna* together as texts that remain skeptically aware of their own “cultural translatability,” as they borrow from and reconstruct several formal conventions in an effort to re-historicize their queer subjects. At the same time, it is difficult to lump *Zami* and *The Lacuna* into the same genre. *The Lacuna* is a work of fiction, and *Zami* a “biomythography,” a label that seems to refuse any categorization in terms other than its own. Given their differences, it may be most accurate to say that each text discloses a historical *narrative* that finds moments of critical leverage – akin to those in historical fiction – that use the past to comment on the present.

One element of the past they each highlight is the invisible labor behind authorship, a premise that posits authorship as a form of affective labor whose socially reproductive value was being eclipsed by neoliberal modes of identification. This feature of their work resonates with each author’s political past. By the late 1970s, transnational movements such as the Wages for Housework Campaign had found increasingly wider social contexts for voicing concerns over the feminization and exploitation of care work.\(^2\) My reading starts from the premise that the cultural effects of these social campaigns resonated in direct and indirect ways. While feminists such as Margaret Prescod and Wilmette Brown made their demands for waged housework, Lorde’s writings on the erotic disclosed energies such as love, intimacy, and anger as powerful capacities whose political potential is imbricated in labor relations that are increasingly being invested in
affects. Writing several years later in *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*, Kingsolver documents her deep ties to labor activism in the southwest. In another two decades and in a different genre, *The Lacuna* registers the importance of resurrecting the collective labor that brings subjects and narrative into being.

Lorde’s historical narratives return to the early Cold War to re-imagine a U.S. economy before the global upheaval of communist governments in the late-1980s freed up increasingly exploitable forms of labor worldwide. Kingsolver’s turn to the Cold War takes place in a time of resuscitated national surveillance and debates over a rising tide of immigration from Mexico. Their queer protagonists might therefore be understood as threshold subjects – coming into view at historical moments when capital’s absorption of new bodies, territories, and modes of accumulation was intensifying. Each text grapples with the uneven effects of late capitalism’s ability to accommodate within its expanding market subjects of gendered, sexual, and racial difference. Fundamental to this expansion is the reification of emotive capacities as markers of personal rather than objective circumstances. In sum, *Zami* and *The Lacuna* write against the fragmenting effects of free market ideology by upending the *bildungsroman* and disrupting a notion of authorship that typically assumes coherence between individuality, feeling, and identity. Like the political movements that initially gave rise to the popularity of the gay *bildungsroman*, these texts propose an authorship of aggregation whose origins as cultural production vastly surpasses the temporality of the narrative frame it deploys. In so doing, they contribute to a perspective that refuses to disconnect identities from the social relations that produce them. Moreover, the erotic, albeit coded differently in each
writer’s work, bears the historical trace of gendered labor at the brink of its erasure by postmodern critical discourses that are about to overtake both feminism and gay liberation in the academy and on the streets.

I begin with a close reading of “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde’s famous 1978 presentation at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women. As a statement that continues to hold a prominent place in queer, woman of color, and other critical canons, it has nonetheless remained under-theorized as a text that explicitly ties the “psychic labor” of gendered and sexualized experience to the structures of capital’s ongoing – and expanding – exploitative regime. I start with the speech’s theorization of erotic potential, a concept I apply in the following two sections to Zami’s formulation of communal authorship and its deployment of historical knowledge. In the chapter’s second part I extend the broad strokes of Lorde’s concept of communal authorship to Kingsolver’s The Lacuna, which deploys a similar notion in its refashioning of the queer subject’s historical relationship to liberal discourse. Taken together, these historical narratives reflect the terms within which contemporary writers on sexuality at two different phases of the neoliberal era both apprehend and write against deregulation’s cultural hegemony. Fundamentally, they provoke us to consider what happens when we re-insert into historical narrative the fact of reproductive labor as it contributes to heretofore-reified notions of political identity, literary authorship, and the activity of historiography itself.

The Erotic in Lorde’s Terms

Audre Lorde’s conceptualization of the erotic speaks to a historical and political reality that demands we consider feelings as capacities that may be used toward liberatory or exploitative ends. In this manner, “Uses of the Erotic” functions as a kind of roadmap for
how to rethink the erotic as an analytical category in which labor intersects with gender ideology. “As women,” she says, “we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge” (53). This distrust, Lorde explains, stems from the social codification of feelings, which falsely separates and dichotomizes “the sensual – those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us” (56). In confronting this distrust, “Uses of the Erotic” is an intervention into its cultural and political moment: one that seeks to explain the social forces that determine individuals’ access to their own bodily and psychic capacities. How those capacities are harvested and used within a given historical moment, Lorde says, has a direct impact on how women live their lives.

As Lorde understands it, the erotic is an internally nurtured “source of power” with untapped potential. For women, she claims, this potential has been distorted through two complementary ideologies working in concert: the erotic’s ascetic “suppression” on the one hand, and its over-sexualization on the other (53, 54). Despite its systematic regulation, the erotic nonetheless maintains its transformative promise through “the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53). The task is therefore to unlearn what we have been taught about how to conceive of the erotic and, in so doing, learn to recognize and use it as an embodied “source of power and information” with revolutionary possibilities (54).

One of the most compelling aspects of Lorde’s thinking here is her imperative for women to discern the authenticity of the erotic against the fallacy of “resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” socially attributed to it. Those feelings, provocatively reminiscent of psychoanalytic discourse, are “not native to me,” Lorde
claims, but are merely “supplied states of being.” She adds that, “in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness.” In its truest form, then, the erotic has the power to make one “less willing” to comply with one’s own oppression. This surrender of willing compliance might manifest as resistance that has in turn an affective component – anger. The erotic thus provides a paradigm for recognizing and embracing consciously an affective/emotive response, of which anger might be one of many, that comes from what one may already be able to intuit as systemic oppression. Lorde adds, “beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, ‘It feels right to me,’ acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge” (56). When the erotic is limited to circumscribed expressions, “within the context of male models of power,” we are forced to suspend, ignore, or otherwise misrecognize the legitimate anger that comes from sensing oppressions that cannot be explained through hegemonic modes of making sense (53).

Set in these terms, the erotic exemplifies concretely what Raymond Williams has described in what he calls a “structure of feeling,” social hegemony’s dynamic affect laden processes, which include:

in effect a saturation of the whole process of living….of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense…it is a whole body of practices
and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. (110)

Lorde explains gender oppression in terms much like Williams’s “substance of lived relationships” or “whole body of practices” that saturate our senses. For her, the systematic, heteropatriarchal exploitation of the erotic is a resource deployed against women in order to better govern their bodies and desires. Although it is “exercise[d] in the service of men,” within a patriarchal culture this exploitation robs even men of their potential as those same men are loath to “examine the possibilities of it within themselves” (54). Conceptualized in its gendered structural form, the erotic is Lorde’s name for an energy that embodies potentials as they are channeled under different social systems. Or, to put it another way, the capacity that Lorde calls “the erotic” occupies the affective dimension of what Williams calls culture, “the whole lived social process [that is] practically organized by specific dominant meanings and values” (54).

Lorde goes on to explain, “women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters” (54). She does not use the term “labor” here, per se, but her depiction of the erotic as both a “service” and a “life-giving substance” sound remarkably similar to depictions of emotional labor. To properly apprehend the exploitation of the erotic – something akin to being “psychically milked” – requires an appreciation for both its abstract and material properties. The material dimension of erotic exploitation is an extension of society’s inability to recognize and meet human need, and Lorde explains the erotic in precisely these terms:
The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need – the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment. (55)

Here, Lorde draws a direct connection between the alienation of the worker under capitalism and the fragmentation of erotic energies for that same worker. Capitalism thrives on the fragmentation of social life in order to sanction claims for profit as an unqualified social good and to rationalize what counts as need and who counts as being entitled to have such needs met. The fragmented erotic may take the form of sex, sustenance, or the hidden – and captured – value of a person’s psychic labor. In this vein, Lorde explains, “the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (54). Moreover, as an energy accompanying the human capacity to act and labor, the erotic is structurally and historically situated: its social significance varies according to its social context. In other words, the erotic has a history. Under capitalism, it is the remnant of exchange value, what escapes the accumulation of surplus value. In its revolutionary form, it embodies the potential for unalienated, cooperative human endeavor. Its critical orientation in this regard makes it distinct from the general category of affect. It is the measurement of a capacity to feel, set against capitalism’s innovative claims on that capacity for its own profit.
Lorde’s framing of the erotic in terms of “creative energy empowered” permits women to see their “deepest cravings” in terms beyond the alienated realm of labor and sexuality—terms that issue from an intrinsic demand for justice (57). “Once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives,” she says, “we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with the joy which we know ourselves to be capable of” (57). In other words, to accept the erotic is to be permitted to see and experience one’s being in de-fragmented terms. In such a state, happiness becomes an entitlement within all aspects of life.

The erotic propels this sense of entitlement against the grain of fragmenting cultural norms. Capitalism, however, benefits from maintaining an imaginary divide between work time and non-work time, even as it prospers from the actual conflation of the two in the embodied practices of daily life. Teresa Brennan vividly captures capitalism’s impact in this regard through her concept of biodiversity. Expanding on the claim that “the ruling economy requires sacrifice of human life in order to feel buoyant,” Brennan defines biodiversity as “the deregulation of biology,” which “erodes the internal constraints protecting the body at the same time as deregulation in the legal sense steals human time in the name of market freedom” (19). This time is stolen in many modes, she explains: through lengthened commutes to work; the psychological stress from increased paces of production; or the additional work an individual needs to perform to offset the gradual devaluation of her labor. The body’s efforts to adapt to deregulation require “dismantling the natural ‘rules’ which govern living things, rules which allow for replenishment both in humans and in nature” (33). Accordingly,
bioderegulation captures on micro and macro levels the biological consequences of the deregulated economy (21).  

Lorde’s theory prefigures some of the main contours of Brennan’s thought. In its most incisive form, the erotic is a “bridge” that belies the false “dichotomy” between “the spiritual and the political” in hegemonic thinking (56). To critically challenge the social and historical sites where the erotic undergoes re-regulation, then, is to identify and resist a form of bioderegulation in the register of feeling. If capitalism profits from the disintegration of boundaries between feeling and commodity, waged and unwaged labor, leisure time and time on the clock, then Lorde’s essay is a call for us to regard the erotic as a kind of historically-situated reclamation of a crucial human capacity and a barometer for reading systemic oppression. It is a legitimate source of wisdom regarding oppressions—one that helps us act upon “the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work” (55). To address the question implied by the essay’s title, then: the erotic becomes useful as a corporeal capacity that is individually felt, but it is also susceptible to fragmentation or regulation in materially consequential ways. In paying attention to how we think about and live the erotic – or, more pressingly, the narratives of power that the erotic might contradict or reveal – we better apprehend the hidden value derived from individual and collective capacities as they circulate to serve or sever existing social orders.

I want to highlight here the surprisingly close proximity of Lorde’s thinking on the erotic to Edelman’s anti-futurity argument and the distinctiveness of her thought. For Lorde, the erotic is at its most powerful when it refuses the hegemonic codes that give it a socially exploitable value. The erotic loses its radical leverage, she says, when it is
absorbed by the gendered, sexualized, and racialized terms she indexes throughout “Uses.” In a different context but with similar aspirations, Edelman is also invested in a force that evades the domesticating strictures of social codification. He labels this force “queerness,” as we know. By basing his analysis in a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of queerness’ anti-social significance, however, Edelman relegates the erotic to a singular plane of significance, which is the precise misstep that Lorde’s version of the erotic aims to correct. Even if he professes to do otherwise, Edelman relies on queerness’ potency as a rupturing symbol whose abject condition is dislocated from history and material life, including its own queer history, as well as the bodies that preceded its symbolic status. His denial of these relations contributes to the erasure of that history and the entrenchment of de-contextualized, unregulated queerness. In contrast, Lorde’s understanding of an erotic surplus is a materialist one, and therefore quite distinct from Edelman’s notion of surplus as the death drive or Lacanian Real in No Future. Lorde’s analysis of the erotic’s critical power demands that we see precisely how it is located in activity performed by – and as a feature of labor, also excessively beyond – the individual body. As such, we can apprehend Lorde’s theory as an early commentary that registers an erasure of human affective capacities from capitalist labor relations when the discursive critical turn taking root at the time of her writing is actually reiterating that erasure.

In sum, the erotic encompasses a material site of struggle that is both absorbed into and exceeds a range of identitarian discourses. From this perspective, the erotic is a capacity that attaches to sexual identity and relations of labor in ways made both obvious and obscured by the hegemonic social currents described above. The erotic’s structural relation to hegemonic cultural forms and its potential to intervene in them which Lorde so
deliberately delineates in “Uses of the Erotic” features in Zami’s formulation of collaborative authorship. In the next section, I identify some of the ways Zami incorporates the erotic into her representation of collaborative authorship, the collective experience of racism, and ancestral lineages discovered through inheritances of feeling and work.

**Framing Zami: Authorship and Hidden Labor**

One of Zami’s formally experimental features is the cluster of short sections that precede the text’s more traditional opening. Appearing sequentially as “Acknowledgments,” “Prologue,” and an untitled section, they operate in distinct but overlapping ways to re-script the conventional speaking subject of autobiography. One of the narrative strategies for doing so is to acknowledge authorship, and indeed all lived subjectivity, as collective indebtedness. Woven into Zami’s alternate openings are the tangible traces of this debt precisely to others’ service. In the “Acknowledgments,” the speaker makes an appeal to “live conscious of my debt to all the people who make life possible” (1). The section closes with another appeal, this time to “the other Belmar women who proofread my dreams; and others who I can not yet afford to name” (1). In her references to “debt” and affordance – and the acknowledgment that she may never know the limit to those who have contributed to her work – the speaker posits an entity that runs counter to the coherent, self-made subject of traditional autobiography. In this sense, the acknowledgments refute the notion of singular authorship, writ large: to recognize the open-endedness of one’s debt is to recognize the fact that one’s story is not the sole property of the storyteller, but a thread in a network that extends far beyond the purview of the listener.
Replacing the notion of singular authorship throughout the biomythography is the collective disposition of shared endeavor. The “Prologue” expands upon the theme of multiple authorship through its reference to the body and “a living representation of other life older longer wiser” (7). The figurative language here captures a paradox that links the materiality of text to life: though singular in appearance, the book, like the body, is the product of “other life” forces that belie the simplicity of its immediate appearance. The “Prologue” depicts the book as an object whose coherence counter-intuitively rejects the notion of authorial or subjective singularity, opting instead for the object’s potential to reveal its own history. The “Acknowledgments,” on the other hand, suggests a coherence of another sort, one achieved through the continuity of invisible social endeavor that brings lives – and stories – into being. To remain vigilant to energies that cannot always be seen or quantified is to make space for the erotic’s potential in its most generative form. In this light, Zami’s narration replaces conventional notions of authorship with an expanded consideration of authoring as productive and collective labor. How does Lorde also account for feeling as a vital part of that process?

Crucially, it is the erotic’s appearance in and through labor that depicts its more insurgent, de-fragmenting potential. Zami’s fourth and most conventional opening provides an example of “the root” of erotic power in its un-estranged form:

When I visited Grenada I saw the root of my mother’s powers walking through the streets. I thought, this is the country of my foremothers, my forebearing mothers, those Black island women who defined themselves
by what they did…they swing through the rain-warm streets with an arrogant gentleness that I remember in strength and vulnerability. (9)

The mothers described here echo the essence of “zami” from the book’s title, “women who work together as friends and lovers.” As women who “defined themselves by what they did,” they seem to exist in a time that predates defined identity categories (1). The vision is one that resists standard historical conventions. Instead, the speaker’s memory accounts for a history of a different sort – a scene in the landscape of the distant past. The slanted repetition of “my foremothers, my forebearing mothers” includes a slight variation that is then qualified. Whereas “foremothers” names these women as the speaker’s ancestors, “forebearing mothers” amends this naming to highlight the labor that is both implied and obscured by the first instance: not “forbearing,” but “forebearing.” The repetition has a cumulative effect so that time is not relegated to the past, but comes alive through the ongoing activity that, although significant to the present, began long before. In this sense, it is an activity that connotes both affective (forbearance) and physical (bearing) labor. The passing of time cannot be disconnected from the repetitions of the labors that track it. The speaker’s history is in fact a series of actions, a lineage of work and power.

Furthermore, the passage depicts memory in terms that defy a linear temporality. The speaker visits a place she has never been to, yet it feels like a return. The “arrogant gentleness” she observes in her foremothers is both new and old – she remembers and recognizes their disposition in her own body. This collapse of temporality, sensation, and recollection swirls around the narrative and comprises a significant feature of the erotic:
the felt sensation of one’s relationship, in the present, to particular features of the past. More specifically, to see – or to remember – one’s own activity as the product of accumulated reproductive labor is to instantiate an erotic, corporeal link to a history that would otherwise remain invisible, forgotten, and unfelt. The erotic is realized in the act of resurrecting – and making crucial to the present – this labor as biography.

In suturing the erotic to memory and to women’s undervalued labor, Lorde sets new terms for the history and the concept of authorship she seeks to disclose. Her historiography is one that charts the shifting dimensions of the erotic – what it has meant to her ancestors and how it has come to matter for her. The epistemology she engages here is a specifically black feminist one that acknowledges at its center the changing historical, geographic, and political conditions that determine the erotic’s expression. It is this expression that Zami documents as it enhances, structures, or is structured by the biomythography’s fleeting engagements with a range of histories and labors that in the process recast the commonsense understanding of experience.

In her influential essay, “The Evidence of Experience,” Joan Scott remarks, “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation […] but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced” (779–80). Scott posits that subjects come into being through the process of examining particular moments. In the process, these examinations become reified as knowledge and, eventually, “experience.” Provocatively, Scott suggests that it is not only the process of examination, but also – equally – the selection of what counts as worthy of such examination that contributes to the articulation of subjectivity.
Along similar lines, Lorde’s revision of the *bildungsroman* is structured in part by the formal interface between the African American coming-of-age story and the contemporary gay coming out narrative. In the first rite of passage, the narrative plays out the erotic’s re-regulation as integral to the repression of political outrage in the face of institutionalized white supremacy. In the second, the erotic appears as a network of feelings forged from labor, history, sensation, and intergenerational communion that gets fragmented into instruction on heterosexual conduct. Into the conventional benchmarks of the coming-of-age self-discovery narrative coming-of-age, the erotic irrupts, interrupting each scene’s coherent flow to underscore the deeply relational conditions under which we theorize experience.

In contrast to the “Acknowledgements” I cited earlier in which Audre celebrates her Grenadian ancestry, in each rite of passage we witness the young narrator’s initiation into particular identity categories as they are shaped by the narrative’s careful (and sometimes chaotic) management of the erotic, rather than its discovery. In this manner, the two scenes provide a layered articulation of the speaker’s evolving education: each rite of passage confronts the erotic as an experienced, regulated element of the shaping of her subjectivity.

Entwined in the story of the speaker’s personal growth is an account of the erotic as an increasingly coded and managed part of her experience. This formulation is not to be confused, however, with the idea that the erotic functions as a vague stand-in for childhood innocence that has been lost. Rather, in two complementary scenes—the visit to Washington, D.C. and the souse-making scene at home—we see the erotic encoded as loss of another sort. Most significantly, the juxtaposition between the two scenes sets up a
contrast of tropes. The visit to Washington, D.C. rehearses the traditional retelling of the tragic event when the African-American subject of autobiography must confront the fact of being black in America. Abutting this racial coming-of-age moment is a story about Lorde’s sexual coming-of-age which takes place in her mother’s home. In the visit to Washington, D.C., the erotic appears as the outrage against racial segregation that is tamped down and redirected toward civic-minded ends. In the second instance, the erotic linkages formed through intergenerational labor are siphoned off by codified lessons on heterosexuality. The two scenes – located in public and private spheres, respectively – function in tandem to de-fragment the erotic’s social reach. Together, they establish the erotic as a socially valuable, albeit malleable entity with transformative potential in multiple sectors of everyday life.

Zami’s portrayal of Washington, D.C. unfolds through the eyes of the narrator as a litany of contrasts between myth and reality, a confrontation that becomes an early impetus for her political engagement later on. The family makes its visit to “the fabled and famous capital of our country” during “the summer when I was supposed to stop being a child” (68). The moments leading up to the trip are filled with genuine awe, tinged with the restless sarcasm of a speaker who knows better in the narrative present. Before the family arrives in D.C., we learn of other mythic disappointments. Despite the train stopping in Philadelphia, the Liberty Bell is nowhere in sight. In addition, the train’s dining car, eagerly anticipated by the speaker because she “had read all about them,” was also off-limits: “you never could tell whose hands had been playing all over that food, nor where those same hands had been just before,” her mother says (68–9). As the narrator reveals in hindsight, her mother’s disdain was merely a thin disguise for the fact that the
car was for white passengers only. It eventually comes out that the trip itself was intended as a cover for the fact that Phyllis, the speaker’s older sibling, was excluded from her high school senior class trip for the same reason.

These and other moments illustrate Zami’s complicated rendering of myth as the distorted version of the erotic’s correspondence with historical knowledge. On the one hand, such as in the Philadelphia example, investing one’s feelings in mythic objects is depicted as the stuff of childhood naïveté, a developmental phase that is universal but temporary. On the other hand, in her enchantment, we witness another instance of erotic management as it scaffolds a citizenry’s fetishized attachment to national symbols. As the chapter unfolds, the young narrator’s attachments crumble as she learns the brutal extent of what her blackness means under Jim Crow. Nonetheless, she explains, her mother and father “handled” institutionalized racism as “a private woe,” as they “believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in america and the fact of american racism by never giving them a name, much less discussing their nature” (69). For her parents to cope with the “crushing reality” of everyday racism, in other words, requires a new narrative, one that either redirects or reconstitutes the emotive energies produced by institutional oppression. For the speaker’s parents, this reorientation of the truth amounts to the private denial and rationalization of the disappointments and disillusionments of systemic injustice.

The rage the speaker feels in this moment is as empowering as it is potentially alienating. “My fury was not going to be acknowledged by like fury. Even my two sisters copied my parents’ pretense that nothing unusual and anti-american had occurred” (70). The fact that her fury cannot be matched “by like fury” reveals with remarkable concision
the very nature of outrage against institutionalized oppression that relies upon
delegitimizing feelings of indignation. The speaker’s outrage – intuited, affectively
experienced, and boundless – is, by definition, irreconcilable with the social order that
produces it. The subversive power of such fury lies in its erotic defiance of the placid
logic that both masks and rationalizes white supremacy. And this is not insignificant. As
Lorde reminds us in “Uses of the Erotic,” to deny a fitting home for one’s outrage is to
insist on the possibility of a new order.

In the end, we learn, the speaker’s outrage finds its more muted expression when
she is “left to write [an] angry letter to the president of the united states all by myself”
(70). As Lauren Berlant has noted about this scene in Queen of America Goes to
Washington City, in addition to teaching about the realities of American racism, the
Washington, D.C. scene also provides a lesson on the management of feelings as a vital
force in upholding American mythology. The hegemony of this mythology is maintained
through public sites of national memory as well as the re-coding and re-direction of
(potentially) radical erotic capacity. Subtly, the speaker’s indignation shifts its register to
focus on the novelty of using her father’s office typewriter for the letter, “after [she]
showed it to him in [her] copybook diary” (71).

Immediately following the trip to D.C., we learn about another rite of passage –
the speaker’s first menstruation. In contrast to the relative brevity of the D.C. episode,
this second interlude is woven into broader childhood memories of making souse with
her mother in Harlem. After a lengthy and loving explanation on the details of souse
preparation, we learn that this is also “the last day I ever pounded seasoning for souse”
(74). We are left to fabricate an explanation for a temporal coincidence: why does the
biomythography represent this particular ritual as coinciding with the advent of the speaker’s period? In the absence of any explicit narrative connection between the two experiences, the erotic hovers, loosely binding the account of menstruation and of domestic chores to another earlier essay Lorde wrote about the erotic energies of sensual labor, history, and everyday work, a narrative that formed the basis for this chapter of *Zami*.

Originally titled “My Mother’s Mortar,” this version of the chapter first appeared in *Sinister Wisdom* as a stand-alone essay in 1979. Like this earlier counterpart, the version presented in *Zami* begins with an intricate meditation on the near mythical status of the mortar and pestle of her childhood. The prose’s exhaustive indexing of each detail conveys the laborious nature of souse production and the affective investments in the mortar as its central object:

The mortar was of a foreign fragrant wood, too dark for cherry and too red for walnut. To my child eyes, the outside was carved in an intricate and most enticing manner… I loved to finger the hard roundness of the carved fruit, and the always surprising termination of the shapes as the carvings stopped at the rim and the bowl sloped abruptly downward, smoothly oval but suddenly businesslike. (71)

Like her artful yet pragmatic Grenadian ancestors, the mortar evokes mystery as well as familiar comfort. To describe the tool is in itself a ritual, it seems: the narrator’s
enthusiasm is palpable as she recounts the “always surprising” shifts in shape and texture. In her hands, the mortar is an ordinary object made extraordinary.

The speaker recounts the mortar’s “heavy sturdiness […] this useful wooden object [that] always made me feel secure and somehow full; as if it conjured up from all the many different flavors pounded into the inside wall, visions of delicious feasts both once enjoyed and still to come” (71–2). Striking in its physicality, the tool is also special for qualities known only through a unique understanding of its history – the cumulative flavors and sensations embedded over generations. Like the body that harkens back to its forebearing mothers, the mortar is a testament to something beyond what its outward appearance suggests. Through the narration’s thick description, the object divulges a lineage of labor and love whose traces continue to speak. In this light, the instrument comes to represent the ideal and boundless unity of work and erotic enjoyment that Lorde celebrates in “Uses of the Erotic.” The speaker continues, “the anticipated taste of the soft spicy meat had become inseparable in my mind from the tactile pleasures of using my mother’s mortar” (73). Distinctions between memory and anticipation, work and satisfaction dissolve into sensuous gratification.

The narrative crescendos that transport Zami’s speaker to a world far beyond the walls of her childhood home stand in stark contrast to depictions of her mother, Linda Belmar, who rejects her daughter’s idyllic outlook. Whenever the request for souse was made, the narrator explains,

my mother would cut her hawk-grey eyes at me from beneath their heavy black brows…and she’d turn back to whatever it was she had been doing.
If she had just come from the office with my father, she might be checking the day’s receipts, or she might be washing the endless piles of dirty linen that always seemed to issue from rooming-houses. (73)

The matter-of-fact tone with which such tasks are depicted clashes with the soaring prose that precedes it. The speaker’s poetic rendering of the mortar is punctured by the actualities of Linda’s working life. In contrast to the rich and layered history realized in the act of making souse, the tasks that preoccupy Linda – the managing of receipts and the washing of sheets – are defined by their perpetual priority and impermanence. They define daily life, yet receipts get thrown away, and rooming-house linens are useful only to the extent that they appear unused to the next tenant. Viewed through Linda’s eyes, her daughter’s request for souse amounts to an untimely proposition, an impossible time-consuming task given an already full docket. Nonetheless, in this fleeting interaction between mother and daughter, the erotic bleeds into the drudgery of women’s everyday toil, the sensual yet challenging labor that refuses to depart from – and continues to frustrate – the present.

Following Linda’s interlude, the narrative quickly turns back to the souse and the speaker who is eager to pound the garlic. As the “thud push rub rotate up” refrain of the mortar and pestle heightens the erotic energies in motion, “all of these,” she notes transported me into a world of scent and rhythm and movement and sound that grew more and more exciting as the ingredients liquefied” (74). In the interplay of feelings brought about by the repetitive process, the erotic circulates as the amorphous energy generated by the unhindered collision between psychic and sensual forces. As with the
speaker’s feelings of rage in D.C., the energies summoned here exceed the confines of the task at hand. What is gained is not only a connection to one’s history, it seems, but also a vision of a sensual subject bound to the energies of women’s body and labor.

When the narrator starts her first menstruation in the middle of the scene, she becomes immediately embarrassed at having to endure the “nightmarish evocations and restrictions…verbalized by [her] mother,” predictably regarding sex (76–7). Comically, Linda admonishes her daughter to “watch your step and not be so friendly with every Tom, Dick, and Harry” (77). Even though the narrator does not have any male friends to begin with, the onset of menstruation produces relations in her mother’s mind that need not actually exist in order to be regulated. The codification of the erotic is expressed here as a form of loss, regardless of the speaker’s actual lack of interest in boys. Womanhood in this context entails the re-codification of the erotic to the exclusive realm of (hetero)sexuality, but what also is true—albeit less apparent—is the re-signification of energies that frame everyday life. In other words, to name and regulate the erotic in one realm (sexual relations) is to diminish its world-making potential in others (making souse).

In each coming-of-age scene, then, the erotic operates at certain times to transgress and other times to re-inscribe the fragmentation of feeling capacities into identity, political action, labor, and love. In Washington, D.C., that capacity surfaces as rage in the face of white supremacy. In its managed form, this rage is re-directed as anger that circulates within the family and in efforts toward civic political engagement. At home in Harlem, the un-coded pleasures embedded within and exceeding domestic work fragment into the social scaffolding of female (hetero)sexuality. Accompanying this
calculus, Linda demonstrates, is the historically specific demands for the increased efficiency of domestic labor in all of its forms – the demand of the here and now that is best met through the management of sensual life.

Zami counters the discourse of sexual deregulation by reinserting the systemic and historical connections between feeling, labor, and representation. Through the form of the erotic the text’s engagement with the affective labor of social reproduction reveals the points of antagonism between feeling and the re-regulating forces of everyday work. Importantly, however, the biomythography’s insistence on the determining effects of social structures does not foreclose expressions of the erotic’s transcendent potential. Rather, as I have shown, Lorde’s narrative employs erotic capacity as a conduit for other histories to emerge, disclosing insurgent modes of engagement and knowledge beyond the immediacy of experience. In this regard, Zami charts an important distinction between sexual identity as a regulated feature of social life and erotic knowledge in its multiple forms. It’s deployment of the erotic beyond the sphere of sexual epiphany – starting with its attachment to an inherited history of labor and the indebtedness that comes with inheritance – speaks of an alternative to the existing social order wherein such categories would not be so discrete.

Taking up a similar thread years later, The Lacuna also posits collaborative authorship as a counterweight to the individuating pressures on queerness by the coming-of-age narrative. It does this in part by examining restrictive social norms within a comparatively boundless political, economic, and geographical landscape that defines the neoliberal global economy. In the next section, I read Kingsolver’s deployment of collaborative labor in the gay bildungsroman as an important continuation of the
revisions *Zami* initiates. Looking at how *The Lacuna* re-scripts queer authorship, I examine the novel’s engagement with Cold War history through a narrative structure that focuses on paradoxical constructions of personal freedom to draw a line from Cold War to neoliberal forms of re-regulation. As in *Zami*, Kingsolver’s project begins at the site of labor to insist upon the enduring presence of social relations that remain out of immediate view. Though its expression is less direct than Lorde’s in *Zami*, the erotic comes into view through the novel’s formulation of collaborative authorship as a form of reproductive labor. Revising narrative convention in this way, *The Lacuna* seeks to make visible the forms of care that deregulation ideology endeavors to overwrite.

**Undoing Narrative Singularity in *The Lacuna***

Published in 2009, Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Lacuna* is a historical novel that charts the journey of Harrison Shepherd from his childhood in the 1920s to the height of the Red Scare in the early 1950s. Born in Mexico to an aristocratic Mexican mother and an American father employed by the U.S. federal government, Harrison grows up traveling back and forth between the two countries. As a young adult, he finds work as a cook for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, and, eventually, as a secretary for Leon Trotsky. Through letters, journal entries, newspaper clippings, and other textual material, we learn the details of Harrison’s work, his intimate friendship with Kahlo, and his various affairs with other men in the artists’ Mexico City compound. After Trotsky is assassinated, Harrison relocates to Ashville, North Carolina where he composes historical romance novels about Cortez’s invasion of Mexico. Eventually, the narrative makes its way to the proceedings of the House on Un-American Activities Committee in 1951. The last words
we hear from Harrison come in the form of a HUAC transcript that documents the reclusive protagonist’s painstaking trial in which his reputation is publically defamed.

*The Lacuna* weaves together several origin stories, among them that of American Cold War culture and U.S. nationalism and the relation of both to twentieth-century globalization. It is also an origin story of modern sexual citizenship from a transnational perspective. Connecting these interwoven threads is Harrison, whose life events unfold in the form of a queer *bildungsroman*. In attributing that label to *The Lacuna*, I want to point out that there is actually very little about the novel that centers on Harrison’s homosexuality. Indeed, had Harrison’s sexuality never been disclosed, one might argue that not much about the story would change. In spite of that claim, or maybe because of it, we might consider the narrative handling of Harrison’s queerness as muting other textual assumptions, motivations, or incoherences. Returning to the idea of form, I want to suggest that Harrison’s queerness operates in critical relation to the *bildungsroman*’s traditional function as a narrative of individuation. In this section, I will detail *The Lacuna*’s methodology for revising the gay *bildungsroman* through its attention to reproductive labor. Related to this generic revision is the novel’s disruption of the continuity between self-possession and authorship, which – like *Zami* – thereby expands the labor of authorship to sites of production beyond the immediate text.

Like most coming-of-age stories, narratives on gay identity employ a litany of tropes to document the progress of an individual’s journey toward self-awareness, social acceptance, and erotic knowledge. While singularity and authorship are generally conceived as synonymous concepts within narrative, *The Lacuna* presses us to consider them as divergent, a strategy that has ramifications for each of these tropes. The novel
consists predominantly of Harrison’s journal entries, and is therefore ostensibly written from his perspective. Nonetheless, the text does not contain one first-person pronoun – not one “me,” “I,” or “my” – until nearly halfway through the novel. Why these conspicuous omissions? On one level, the absence of first person pronouns pushes us to reflect upon what it means to identify – or not – as a subject in or of history. In refusing Harrison the first person, *The Lacuna* disrupts its protagonist’s identification with the story he tells and the *bildungsroman* convention. Detached from the formal signifiers of individuation that typically define any *bildungsroman*, Harrison himself is constructed around a kind of lacuna, maintaining the conceptual gap between singularity and something more, namely authorship and history.

When Harrison is charged with the task of keeping a meticulous daily written record of events for Frida to examine, his authorship becomes a form of attentive labor defined by the absence of its writing subject. Harrison writes, “This record of events will be submitted to Senora Frida for weekly inspections, or at any other time she requires, for purposes of security…According to her authorized instruction it is to harbor no opinions, confessions, or fictions. Its purpose is: ‘To record for history the important things that happen’” (150). The stilted awkwardness of these sentences is a common feature of the narrative voice in *The Lacuna* – one byproduct of omitting all singular pronouns. The entries challenge their reading audience, who – like Violet Brown who eventually discovers Harrison’s manuscript – must perform a kind of attentive labor by imposing order and continuity from the outside.

It is during this reporting mission that Harrison first expresses sexual desire for his associate, Van. We know this because Harrison reports: “Noted: that Sra. Frida, after
inspecting last week’s record of events, repeats her request that it remain objective, especially with regard to the secretary Van” (162). The note is significant to the story’s general arc because it is the first time readers receive confirmation of Harrison’s capacity for desire, homosexual or otherwise. By omitting any reference to himself, however, Harrison enacts a literal rewriting of the coming out trope. Rather than being the occasion for Harrison to claim individual subjection, the utterance only serves to reinforce his “objective” relation to the other mundane events that transpire. In a manner obliquely reminiscent of Zami, the erotic enters the scene as an entity unattached to any particular body and distinct from explicit sexual identification. Like the narrative voice that speaks without an identifying pronoun, it is an energy without particular form and therefore without social coding. In sum, while a conventional coming out narrative involves, implicitly or explicitly, a declaration of self-possession via sexual epiphany, The Lacuna resists conflating the two. Rather, Harrison’s feelings for Van are related in the form of anti-climax – the erotic is evoked at the site of sexual disclosure, but remains distinct from its narrator, more a feature of the work he performs than the feelings he obliquely recounts.

In contrast, The Lacuna’s climax pivots on a coming-out of a different sort, which dislodges his sexual desire from the individuating effects of narrative. Later, ensconced in North Carolina, Harrison receives a surprise from Frida. She has sent him the missing diaries he had previously assumed were lost forever in Mexico. “Likewise,” he writes in a letter to her, “the most important part of any story is the missing piece. What you gave me is everything. A self, the simple yo soy, I am. I am saved. I drowned, it seemed, and then came the light. Here I am” (277). Readers will notice that Harrison uses self-
referencing pronouns for the first time in this passage. The baptismal language reinforces an overall sentiment that, in the reclamation of his own narrative, Harrison has claimed his identity. By the same token, the affective payoff denied in the earlier, anticlimactic discovery of his feelings for Van registers here as overwrought. Rather than reinforcing at this point an idealistic conflation of self-narration and agency, however, the novel’s dramatic individuating moment, disassociated from sexuality, lays the groundwork for its interventions into the queer bildungsroman, which aim to re-imagine queer authorship as a cooperative endeavor.

Harrison’s climactic reclamation of the “I” foregrounds the novel’s re-staging of the infamous HUAC hearings that target him for his previous dealings in Mexico. As things develop, we come to see that it is Harrison’s identity as a U.S. citizen and not his homosexuality that appears to render him vulnerable to a federal investigation. In the exchange between Harrison and a Federal investigator, the conversation follows the absurdist logic of Cold War-style self-incrimination. The investigator tells Harrison he is going to “get a McFarland letter,” to which Harrison replies:

“Who is McFarland?”

“McFarland is nobody. But this letter is bad news, it would contain the actual charges. The higher-ups have intimated they are accumulating some pretty shocking evidence against you.”

“I see. Who is supplying this shocking evidence?”
“Mr. Shepherd, be reasonable. You know we can’t tell you that. If we allowed all the accused to confront their accusers, we would have no informants left. It would infringe on our ability to investigate.”

“Your ability to investigate. That’s the important thing.”

“Correct. In this day and age, we have a duty to protect the citizens. It’s a precarious business. People have no idea, and they should be grateful. You should be grateful, Mr. Shepherd.” (442)

Harrison’s earlier expressions of narrative self-possession combine with the discourse of U.S. citizenship and the contradictory forms of personal freedom defined therein. The investigator suggests that Harrison is a potential threat, at the same time regarding him to be the citizen-subject whose personal security is protected by such an investigation. What makes Harrison susceptible to such a turn of phrase is a central paradox: state protection brings with it the caveat that requires there to be something or someone you are protected from. At any moment, the narrative suggests, a citizen may constitute both, and to appeal for protection is to recognize the state’s capacity to inflict harm on those excluded from its doctrine (see Giorgio Agamben’s State of Exception).

The dialogue between Harrison and the investigator continues:

He shifted himself around to face me. “The thinking of the Communist is that no one who opposes him can possibly have any merit whatsoever. It’s a psychological illness. The Communist cannot adjust himself to logic.”
“That’s a point of view. But I was thinking of what you said about confronting my accuser. I thought the Constitution gave me the right to know the charges against me. And who was bringing them.”

Myers drained his coffee cup and leaned forward with a little grunt to set the cup on the table. We were nearly finished, I could tell.

“Whenever I hear this kind of thing,” he said, “a person speaking about constitutional rights, free speech, and so forth, I think, ‘How can he be such a sap? Now I can be sure that man is a Red.’ A word to the wise, Mr. Shepherd. We just do not hear a real American speaking in that manner.” (443)

Harrison’s own assertion of individual freedoms reveals him to be precisely the subject to whom rights do not apply. In a manner resonant with Agamben’s framing of homo sacer, it is only once Harrison has asserted himself to the state in the native tongue of constitutional rights that he becomes susceptible to its violence. Contrary to his previous state of non-subjecthood, Harrison’s appeal to freedom in the language of U.S. constitutionalism is exactly what produces his body as one disposable to the repressive powers of the U.S. state.

In addition to revealing the hypocrisy of security state discourse, the exchange is a critical intervention into deregulation ideology. Just as deregulation policy operates under the name of freedom to exploit and mask the re-regulation of its laboring bodies, so too does Harrison’s body become vulnerable to the structural violence of civil liberty. The investigator’s cynicism reinforces freedom as a script of the powerful and Harrison’s
citizenship a liability. The progressive narrative espoused by neoliberal freedom doctrine is thus recast to unveil the dexterous logic of exclusion and selection at its core. Framed in the paranoid lexicon of self-incrimination and coercion, *The Lacuna*’s portrayal of civil participation comes down upon Harrison’s physical body in the last instance, just as it does to the bodies of Audre Lorde’s family, who are made to physically absorb the ideological contradictions of freedom discourse and its exclusions in Washington, D.C.

Looking at the novel’s broader trajectory, what begins as Harrison’s narrated non-singular subjecthood concludes with his re-regulation under national authority. Importantly, these scenes dispel the notion that freedom is a disinterested concept. To turn to Teresa Brennan once again, neoliberal free market policy is upheld by a consensus that views freedom as both an ideologically neutral and unassailable social value. As such, neoliberal policies are regarded as impartial “description[s] of reality,” rather than the consolidation of state and economic interests (97). *The Lacuna*’s earlier narrative intervention, which highlights the disjunction between sexuality and subjectivity, inserts meaningful space between its representation of Harrison’s sexuality and the paradoxes of liberal discourse that script his impending demise. This distinction is maintained through the erotic, which, as the alternative to narrative singularity, remains adjacent to moments of sexual disclosure, and – as the final section will detail – becomes most vividly realized as an element of reproductive labor. As if to complete the vision that *Zami* initiates, here the erotic is not unregulated or re-regulated, but maintains its power as an uncoded, relational energy that runs counter to the individuating ideologies of neoliberal hegemony. In this sense, *The Lacuna* offers us a theory of sexuality that in its de-
individuated form, is distinct from those that would demand recognition by the state in the form of narrative and rights-oriented inclusion.

**Conclusion: The Erotic as Affirmation of Indebtedness**

In his discussion of the contemporary historical novel, Jerome de Groot examines the connection between historical fiction as a genre and “the postmodern crisis in historical writing,” which emphasizes “the ‘literariness,’” and therefore ultimate unknowability of, historical evidence. De Groot references the work of post-structuralist historians such as Hayden White and Linda Hutcheon, who are notable for their emphasis on the literary aspects of historical documentation. Their ideas have become so mainstream, de Groot surmises, that they have likely influenced “a resurgence of interest in fictional forms and the ways they represent the past” (112). In this regard, he explains, the postmodern historical novel prefigures the metafictional turn in postmodern historiography:

Historical novels are keenly interested in the interaction between what is “known” and what is made up, querying, for instance, the deployment of varieties of quoted “evidence,” which is often literary, therefore highlighting the innate textuality of history, to frame a persuasive narrative, and the use of the realist mode to present a story which is clearly fiction. All these are elements of the contemporary postmodern historiographic critique. Historical fiction points towards its own insubstantiality. (113)
Thus, de Groot explains, “the central paradox of historical fiction, the consciously false realist representation of something which can never be known,” is the earlier literary counterpart to later concerns in postmodern historiography. In short, he says, the historical novel has come to reinforce the main tenets of postmodern skepticism as defined by the fundamental disjuncture between representation and meaning.

At first glance, *The Lacuna* seems to reinforce the post-structural argument: the novel consists of a series of journals that are not disclosed to us by Harrison himself, but by Violet Brown, his housekeeper-turned-archivist. Brown’s “archivist’s note” sets into motion the novel’s sustained metaphor of the lacuna, the pervasive unknowability that weaves its way like a fine wire throughout the novel’s unfolding. She tells us that, although Harrison’s journals comprise the bulk of the narrative:

> the pages here previous came to me from his hand, to be typed and filed as ‘Chapter One.’ I took it for a book’s beginning. There was no call to doubt it…A few months afterward, he left off all intention of writing his memoir. Many were the reasons. One that he gave was: the next little notebook in the line had gone missing, his second boyhood diary, and he became discouraged of recalling what it contained. (229)

It appears as though the audience is being invited into a mystery: where could the second notebook have gone? Its disappearance, announced as it is from the outset, seems like a heavy-handed, if familiar, hint to readers that the history we are encountering is a partial one at best.
That mystery is subsequently put to rest, however, with the archivist’s pragmatic explanation that the missing journal in fact “turned up in a trunk of his things that had been stored many years in the home of an acquaintance in Mexico City” (30). In the remainder of the note, Violet Brown explains:

The common custom is to place a note such as this at a book’s beginning. Instead, I let his own Chapter One stand to the fore. He plainly meant it to be the start of a book. I stand behind the man, with ample reason in this instance. I had good years to learn the wisdom of it. My small explanations here are meant to introduce the remainder. I have set upon the whole of it certain headings, for organizing purposes. These I marked with my initials. My only hope is to be of use. (31)

What starts as the lure of the lacuna prompted by the missing journal actually reveals something else: the invisible hand that organizes the work. In this, the first of several archivist interludes, we witness the unveiling of the narrative’s outside – a detail that, had it remained invisible, would have been no less integral to the volume’s production. In effect, the archivist interlude might be seen in broader terms as the outside to the narrative form, writ large. Her actions and attentions fill the gap between Harrison and the textual material we are reading. Like the ancestors who precede Lorde’s biomythography, the archivist embodies the forms of care and attention that must be conjured directly lest they remain unknown. In this conjuring, the erotic surfaces as the connection and collection of labors through time, now made explicit, that will endure.
The novel’s conclusion returns to the same point. After the federal hearings have run their painful course and it is finally revealed that Harrison has fled to Mexico (for a little while we are lead to believe he has committed suicide), the novel references a version of nonheteronormative inheritance that, like Lorde’s, unfolds in the form of reproductive labor. In a section labeled “Afterword,” Violet Brown describes her work on Harrison’s papers as maintaining an inheritance: “People,” she says, “might want to look back on those who labored and birthed the times they have inherited. Maybe that’s wrong, and already we’ll be a graveyard of weeds they won’t want to visit. You, I mean to say. The times you have inherited. I wonder that: who be ye?” (507). As if in conversation with Zami’s “Prologue,” these closing remarks speak the other side of the author/ancestor relation. Her plaintive tone registers a need for her labors to remain relevant through the passing of time and onset of decay. Her self-correction, switching from “they” to “you,” reveals a difficulty in imagining direct access to the audience who will inherit her work. In her struggle to envision that future, and the tenacious acknowledgment that the produce of her labors will outlive her own body, we glimpse the erotic.

Composed several years after Harrison’s supposed disappearance, Brown’s closing remarks constitute the novel’s attempt to fill one of the many thematic and formal “lacunae” texturing its earlier sections. The Afterword opens with a clipping of Harrison’s obituary, which is subsequently contradicted when Brown explains his undercover relocation to Mexico. In this sense, the section is the capstone of the novel’s guiding thesis: that histories, like self-narratives, are partial forms, and that – oftentimes –
as Brown herself has said in so many words, the missing piece can be the most significant part.

Without denying the novel’s claims in that regard, I want to highlight another aspect of *The Lacuna*’s titular extended metaphor – the lacuna as a part of conceptualizing historiography as a form of reproductive labor. Within this formula, the lacuna is not so much a hole in a story being told, but an analogy for the larger fissures between arenas of labor and the ways of seeing – the narratives of commonsense – that obscure them. To put it in slightly different terms, the lacuna points to the hitherto unspecified but always potential disruption of a system that relies upon its own narrative coherence in order to enact its violence. As in the federal investigation above, the lacuna is the grain of contradiction in deregulation’s attachment to freedom discourse. Contrary to de Groot, it does not push us to question the reliability of narrative, but rather to be aware of and interrogate how narrative works, albeit imperfectly, to obscure the social fissures of exploitation.

The lacuna of the novel’s title thus does not amplify the ambivalence of history in the vein of White and Hutcheon; rather, it demarcates the space of contradiction that is often though not always overwritten by ideology. In its material form, the lacuna is the paradox of a deregulated economy that relies upon bodies for labor as it continues to push those same bodies further from view. If the historical novel is the produce of human lineage, *The Lacuna* resists a reified, heteronormative rendition of what it means to consider oneself the product of that lineage.

By the novel’s end, Harrison has come full circle. Taking up a new identity in Mexico, he has bequeathed his materials to Violet Brown for safe keeping. For the time
being, she will be the one to “labor and birth the times” she has “inherited” from him. In Brown’s taking up of Harrison’s story, *The Lacuna* undermines the heteronormative model of inheritance to reveal a history of shared relations, of openings, to borrow from the novel’s title. Returning to Edelman finally, Lorde and Kingsolver’s narratives suggest that if futurity is problematic, it is not because it affirms heterosexist networks of reproduction, per se. Rather, futurity-as-tied-to-conventional reproduction obscures the alternative, non-teleological ways to locate belonging – ones that challenge neoliberal ideals of individuality, privacy, or self-possession. A radical view of the future relies upon an understanding of past, present, and future as the common property that is – as conditions dictate – dispossessed and recuperated down the line by those who may not know us. Still, they recognize the parts of a longer story in what gets left behind.

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1 Most readers who are familiar with *Zami* will notice that my close readings do not focus on the many lesbian characters and encounters that make up the bulk of Lorde’s biomythography. My omission of these moments is not meant to ignore the text’s main purpose, which is to tell the story of Lorde’s early experiences as a lesbian, but rather to make connections among some of the disparate and seemingly self-contained details in the work. In this way, I hope to reframe *Zami*’s central lesbian narrative by pulling from aspects of her work that have not received nearly the same degree of critical attention. For scholarship that considers, more pointedly and in myriad ways, *Zami*’s lesbian focus, see Marilyn R. Farwell (1988); Katie King (1988); M. Charlene Ball (2001); Sarah E. Chinn (2003); Lori I. Walk (2003); Megan Obourn (2005); Antje Lindenmeyer (2006); and Monica B. Pearl (2009). For more on Lorde’s writing within the lesbian feminist
canon, see: Ruth Ginzberg (1992). For more on Lorde and woman of color feminism and queer woman of color theory, see Deborah K. King (1988); Roderick Ferguson (2003); Rachel A. Dudley (2006); Mariana Ortega (2006); Jennifer C. Nash (2008); and Sharon P. Holland (2012).

2 For more details on this history, see Silvia Federici (2012).

3 See “The Uses of Anger,” Audre Lorde’s 1981 keynote presentation at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference where she mentions her disgust at the NWSA’s de facto exclusion of Wilmette Brown and other activists of Black Women for Wages for Housework. For general overview of Wages for Housework’s transnational expansion from the UK to the U.S. and Africa, see Kathleen Hendrix (1985). The article also mentions Margaret Prescod’s presentation on wages for housework at the National Women’s Conference in 1977.

4 See David Harvey’s *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. As Harvey notes in his recent examination of the 2008 financial crisis, neoliberalism’s expansion depends upon its ability to recruit increasingly cheaper forms of labor. Neoliberalism instantiated its hegemony when the integration of communist nations into the global economy led to the freeing up of billions of third-world workers: “primitive accumulation did not end with the rise of industrial capitalism in Britain in the late eighteenth century,” Harvey reminds us, “in the last thirty years…some 2 billion wage labourers have been added to the available global workforce, through the opening up of China and the collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe” (58).

5 For more on bioderegulation and its implications for theorizing the materiality of affect in the deregulated economy, see Rosemary Hennessy (2013).
For more on this scene as it pertains to public space, sentimentality, and national belonging, see Lauren Berlant (1997).
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