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# Out of Time: Queer Temporalities in the Works of Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and Langston Hughes

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

OUT OF TIME: QUEER TEMPORALITIES IN THE WORKS OF MINA LOY,  
DJUNA BARNES, AND LANGSTON HUGHES

By

Lauren Riccelli Zwickly

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2016

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OUT OF TIME: QUEER TEMPORALITIES IN THE  
WORKS OF MINA LOY, DJUNA BARNES, AND  
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Out of Time: Queer Temporalities in the Works  
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Focusing on texts by Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and Langston Hughes, this dissertation examines the temporally situated body as a gendered, sexed, and racialized site of contestation through which dominant ontological modalities are challenged and ultimately destabilized. This transgressive politics takes the form of an interrogation of the heteronormative time-table that constructs, regulates, and disciplines subjective ontological progress. Specifically, these texts challenge the notion that legibility is produced through a triad of progressive temporal phases: the adolescent/early adult direction of sexuality towards the heterosexual union, normative marriage and family-based kinship bonds, and finally the transmission of cultural values, norms, and beliefs through the figure of the child. Barnes, Hughes, and Loy all provide textual examples of queer child figures, transgressive sexual identifications, and non-traditional kinship bonds that resist and reject the strictures of the “chrononormative.”

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## Introduction

Broadly speaking, the purpose of this project is to place modernist critique in dialogue with contemporary queer theory, in particular theories of queer experience that attempt to account for temporality and its regulatory effects on the body. Temporality has increasingly become a major focal point within queer critique and there are now numerous ways of theorizing queer time. In this project I look specifically at how texts by Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and Langston Hughes challenge and destabilize notions of the “chrononormative,” the idea that there is a temporal component to heteronormativity, that it is indeed built and supported through the implementation of heteronormative timetables that construct, regulate, and discipline the scheduled progress of lived, bodily experience for both female and male subjects in a modern, Western setting. Within the poetry and prose of these three authors I examine the temporally situated body as a gendered, sexed, and racialized site of contestation through which these dominant ontological modalities are challenged and ultimately destabilized. These texts all resist the notion that legibility should be produced through a triad of fixed temporal phases: the adolescent/early adult direction of sexuality towards the procreative, heterosexual union, the construction and maintenance of marriage and family-based, normative kinship bonds, and finally the transmission of cultural values, norms, and beliefs through the figure of the child. Barnes, Hughes, and Loy all provide textual examples of subjects who queer this notion of temporal normativity: characters who reject traditional heterosexual, procreative unions, form non-traditional kinship structures, and child figures who either fail to embody a legible, childhood innocence or instantiate the inter-generational

transmission of beliefs, values, and ideas that challenge the stability of the heteronormative.

Thus, my project largely concerns itself with the ways in which these texts manifest resistance to the regulatory, disciplining forces of the chronormative, the idea of heteronormative ontological progress, the notion that subject positions are constructed as legible through their participation in these kinds of progressive, planned time-tables. For the normative subject (i.e. the *legible* subject) “heteronormativity” does not merely describe socially acceptable, heterosexual desire. Rather, it delineates a complex field of relations, identifications, practices, beliefs, and values that together form the matrices of acceptability that mark bodies as legible or illegible. Temporality’s role in this system is crucial in that normative temporal boundaries function as regulatory powers: The now familiar distinctions between child, adolescent, and adult construct specific temporal zones and culturally we associate each zone with a particular set of developmental tasks, normative life experiences, and acceptable goals. Although this system of temporal organization might feel “natural,” that what is really at work here is a process both of normalization and of regulation. Temporality is mobilized in service of adherence to a set of (inherently heteronormative) group values: Cohesion is created through shared participation in a set of pre-selected, temporally marked experiences. Queer temporality thus identifies subjects, texts, and practices that challenge such notions of heteronormative time. It highlights queer figures who, because of their refusal to follow these kinds of ontological schedules, appear illegible. These are queer children, adolescents/adults marked by intra-sexual desire *or* desire that is directed outside of

dyadic, procreative, state-sanctioned unions, and queer subjects who look for kinship bonds other than those constructed for them through traditional, blood-based relation.

Elizabeth Freeman, in her text *Time Binds*, notes the importance of chrononormativity to the aforementioned kind of normalizing politics of temporality, arguing that, particularly since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, temporality has been mobilized as both an organizing and a regulatory principle to modern, heteronormative societies. She notes the way that “regulatory forces come to seem like somatic facts,” constructing the subject through temporal outlines such as clock time, schedules, the calendar, and the eight hour work day (Freeman, *TB*, 3). She argues that chrononormativity is ultimately a function of what she terms “chronobiopolitics,” the manipulations of time that “convert historically specific regimes of asymmetric power into seemingly orderly routines” (4). The result of this “asymmetric power” is that heteronormativity emerges as legible (and is thus prioritized) and queer deviations from normativity emerge as *illegible* and are thus read as failures. Thus it is from Freeman’s understanding of temporality’s relation to normativity that I draw my own way to conceive of the politics of queer time: If chrononormative structures bind the subject to experiences of ontological hetero-reproduction, then queer time’s potentiality is to free them.

Within each chapter of this project I examine a series of texts by one modernist author and clarify the ways in which this writer constructs textual resistance to each particular phase of the chrononormative timeline. Sexuality is perhaps the most obvious site of queer critique and although I begin each chapter with an in-depth analysis of the function of sex and desire in the texts I am examining, my focus is necessarily on the

ways that sex and desire function as targets for the regulatory powers of the chrononormative. I am specifically interested in the ways that these authors illustrate figures whose sexuality develops outside of the boundaries of the legible. While in most cases it is same sex desire that marks this legibility, I also locate queerness within experiences of desire and sexuality that do not support that procreative, dyadic, heterosexual union that can be sanctioned by the state.

Following the progress of the set of temporal phases targeted by chrononormative regulation, I next examine the ways in which these texts queer kinship relations. Although the kind of traditional, blood-based kinship structures that dominate social relations in the west have the appearance of biological legitimation, these kinship structures are, according to Levi-Strauss, artificial. They are societally constructed models of relation superimposed onto the subjects that they organize (Rubin, 480). The notion that subjects are organized first into these basic family units is, however, a deeply ingrained organizing principle in the West and these kinship structures function as the first and perhaps most important site of the social construction of heteronormativity: It is first through the family system that the individual learns to be legible within a social field. Thus, this kinship system, as an important piece of various matrices of legibility, also functions as part of an important power structure that jettisons the transgressive at the same time as it embraces the normative. For the queer subject coming into being within the web of the traditional family structure, its regulatory force can be experienced as a distinct kind of harm and one of the most important areas of recent queer discourses has been the elucidation of the ways in which the queer subject looks beyond these blood-based systems of kinship relation and attempts to re-form such kinship structures in new,

transgressive ways. The queer family system, although it provides the kind of supportive, bolstering social grouping that traditional families, at their best, also construct, does so without relying on blood-based relation *and* the construction of normative social values. The queer family is thus supportive and affirming in that it doesn't exclude queer subjects based on their illegibility within broader, heteronormative systems of social organization.

Although a large part of the focus of recent conversations regarding queer time has been the way that chronobiopolitics regulates and disciplines the adult body, the figure of the child has become an increasingly important area of critical inquiry. I argue that this child figure functions as a key bridge piece within the chrononormative timeline, that it is through the process of inculcating children into normative beliefs, values, and practices that ensures heteronormativity's passage from one generation to the next. Contentious as some of his points may be, Lee Edelman's explication of "reproductive futurity" forms a critical site of analysis within my project. Edelman argues that Western culture prioritizes childhood and the figure of the child because the importance of the child lies in their potentiality for the transmission of heteronormative cultural values, beliefs, and modalities of ideation. It is through children that current cultural norms are propelled forwards into future generations and so the value of the child is its ability to reproduce these norms. Thus, the working, normative social order becomes "about" the transmission and preservation of the very values that underpin it. Rather than focusing on the present, we become fixated on the kind of futurity that, retroactively, supports the kind of (repressive) cultural values that allow for the continued dominance of heteronorms. Edelman sees this process as a manifestation of a kind of fetishistic fixation of sameness: There is a desire to replicate the dominant cultural conditions of the present,

to instantiate only those values and beliefs which support a hierarchical order which prioritizes the legibility of the heteronormative subject position.

Edelman argues that, in service of this reproductive futurity, childhood becomes a critical site for the regulation of sexuality and the creation of the heterosexed subject. The child's innocence is understood to be under constant siege; vulnerability, censorship, and regulation become key descriptors of childhood and because of the child's role in the transmission of cultural values, protecting the child is tantamount to "protecting the future," to safeguarding the dominance of the heterosexual matrix of legibility. Edelman argues that the queer figure has the potential to shatter this system of reproductive futurity, that (and this is where I begin to take issue with his argumentation) queerness is *not*, as most of his contemporaries would argue, a process of becoming, an illustration of the fluidity of subject position, or a set of contingent, shifting points of identification. Rather, Edelman understands the importance of queerness solely as the potential to disrupt the normative social order. Obviously this idea is not without issue: To argue that the singular value of queerness is what he terms "the anti-social thesis" is to discount a range of lived, queer experiences. However, his conceptualization of reproductive futurity is not only a critical lens through which to understand the creation and replication of social norms, but also opens up discussion of the possibilities of *queer* futurity. Jose Esteban Muñoz, writing (in many ways) against Lee Edelman, argues that queerness *is* futurity. He conceptualizes queerness as a sustained critique of the present, as a drive towards a future, and its attendant models of futuristic collective possibility, in which normativity's dominance is diminished. Where Edelman sees the figure of the queer child

as the destroyer of the social field, Muñoz sees a queer potential for the creation of new kinds of social fields, new ways of experiencing collective order.

My first chapter examines constructions of resistance to the chrononormative in a series of poems by Mina Loy. Unlike Djuna Barnes and Langston Hughes, Mina Loy's work has not received much attention from readers wishing to situate her within a history of gay and lesbian writing. Indeed, Loy herself did not identify as gay nor does her work contain explicit representations of same sex desire. However, Loy's work has garnered attention from scholars engaged in queer critique, most notably Mary Galvin, for the way in which her pieces engage in a political project very much interested in resisting the dominance of heteronormative social organization. The way that Loy's writings can be said to embody a "queer" project is in the extent to which they construct an alternate female subject position, one which isn't always already defined by the traditionalized roles of virgin, mother, and wife. This "site of discursive re-signification" frees the female subject from the heteronormative project of heterosexual marriage, procreation, and childrearing within a mother/father/child family unit (Butler, 21). Putting this idea of discursive re-signification into dialogue with the chrononormative timeline, Loy first crafts a series of representations of female sexuality that free it from its ties to marriage and reproduction within the boundaries of marriage. Within "Virgin Plus Curtains Minus Dots," "Three Moments in Paris," and "Songs to Joannes," Loy depicts female subjects who experience desire that does not have, as its goal, legible heterosexual relationships. From here I move on to the ways in which Loy's writing evidence queer notions of kinship, most notably her re-structuring of the family unit through the removal of the figure of the father/husband. Loy, in "The Effectual Marriage" and "Parturition"

imagines the possibility of a mother/child dyad as the organizational principle for kinship relations, arguing that women should not need male figures for the construction of families. Moving forward through the chrononormative timeline, Loy then crafts a series of representations of queer child figures, subjects who resist the role of transmitter for heteronormative values. Although this chapter examines constructions of queerness that are more abstract than each of my subsequent sections, Loy forms a critical piece of this project: Her writings instantiate the dis-utility of chrononormativity as an ontological organizing principle and illustrate the extent to which it is possible for the female subject to engage in alternate modes of identity production and queer becoming.

Djuna Barnes' novel *Nightwood* is the next object of critique within my project although this chapter departs from the one on Loy in that it examines queerness not necessarily as a site of discursive re-signification, but rather as a space of fluid coming into being where subjectivity can be understood to be a process of becoming, undergone in absence of an interest in legibility. The figures in *Nightwood* illustrate the way in which mutability governs identity; they are ever becoming, ever shifting from one role to another. Additionally, they depict the dis-utility of sex and gender as sole identity categories, representing subjectivity instead as a complex series of intersections rather than a fixed set of qualities and identifications. Barnes' representations of queer sexuality perhaps best instantiate this. Essentially the story of a series of failed love affairs, *Nightwood* is populated by characters who, although they actively engage in acts of same-sex desire, resist being defined only by their homosexual orientations. *Nightwood* represents kinship in a similarly complex manner, depicting characters who move back and forth between different positions within a kinship system, at times seeming to

function as mothers and at times as children. Additionally, Barnes imbues her female characters with an agentic ability to take control of their own kinship positions, allowing for a female participation in such structures that resists the Rubin/ Levi-Straussian assertion that women within kinship structures lack agency, that they function as gifts exchanged between men (Rubin, 44). Moving on to the figure of the child, Barnes again focuses on fluidity, constructing a series of figures of queer children who resist traditional notions of childhood innocence and legibility.

Langston Hughes represents another kind of resistance to the chrononormative in large part because of the way in which his writings emerge against the backdrop of race in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. I argue that his work constructs a powerful site of resistance to the “Uplift” ideology that dominated discourses of African American identity politics in the wake of the Great Migration. Uplift was a series of ideas that sought to elevate perceptions of black subjectivity at a time when black and white communities were beginning to come into greater contact as a result of an increase in black populations in northern metropolitan areas. Essentially a project of assimilation, Uplift attempted to construct a version of black identity that closely mirrored that of the white middle classes. Its matrix of acceptable values and behaviors included Christian affiliation, a Protestant work ethic, and a strong focus on the kind of traditional, heteronormative family unit that is also important within the chrononormative system. Although at its heart Uplift’s goal was to allow for greater inclusion of black communities into a larger American populace, it also constructed a markedly rigid series of norms and legible identity positions. It marked transgressive bodies as illegible and in so doing effectively cut them off from acceptability. Hughes, in his representations of

deviations from the type of identity construct favored by Uplift, allowed for black subjectivity to function in a more complex, fluid manner. His writings suggest that agency and acceptability *can* be found in deviations from the norm and that to be black in America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century shouldn't have to necessitate such strict adherence to white, middle class values.

Not unlike Djuna Barnes, Hughes used his writing as a site of signification for homosexual bodies. He constructed characters who openly represented transgressive sexual identifications and engaged in relationships marked by same sex desire. From sex workers to drag queens to queer adolescent figures, Hughes crafted a panoply of identifications that deviated from the kinds of traditional, heteronormative, rigid points of identification that Uplift would have deemed legible. Through these figures Hughes resisted the notion that black identity must conform to white standards in order to be acceptable in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. His moves in regards to kinship structures were similar in that through short fiction pieces such as "Cora Unashamed" he provides his readers with alternate models of kinship. He constructs families that do not resemble the traditional mother, father, child triad and also do not abide by racist notions of race and sexuality that would have outlawed interracial relations. Continuing to work against uplift in his depictions of childhood and adolescence, Hughes constructs queer adolescent and child figures who, even as young people, seem marked by queer identifications and desires. In so doing he seems to suggest not only that queerness begins in childhood, but also that the figure of the queer child represents an alternative to the kind of traditionalized passage of heteronormative values, beliefs, and practices that Uplift, and indeed the chrononormative ideal, would prioritize. These queer children and adolescents

very pointedly resist a politics of normalization and through the way in which Hughes contrasts them with their traditional, Baptist, Uplift-oriented families and social groupings we can see his project of broadening subjective possibilities emerge.

Thus each author constructs a distinct version of queer resistance to the chrononormative as an organizing principle both for individual subject formation and larger societal patterns of being. Although alike in this broad project of rupture, Loy, Barnes, and Hughes each suggest their own discrete definitions of queer transgression: Loy positions queer as whatever force or matrix of forces stand most in opposition to normative structures. Barnes represents queerness as a fluid process of becoming that forms and re-forms subjects complexly, ignoring the rigidity of traditional identity constructs and identifications. Hughes in turn uses queer positionality to write against the dominance of uplift ideology and to suggest that there is room within constructs of black subjectivity for multiple kinds of transgressive identifications. We thus have, from these three writers, not only a portrait of queer rebellion against the strictures of normative time, but also a portrait of the potentiality of queer subjectivity that itself resists monolithic categorization. There does not exist *one* queer, modern subject; rather these writers suggest a panoply of such figures, each in their own way acting a version of queer resistance that allows for new kinds of ontological frameworks to take root and develop, illuminating the ways in which chrononormativity is destabilized and ultimately ruptured by transgression.

## Chapter 1

### Futurism x Feminism: Mina Loy's Queer Politics of Disruption

Both Djuna Barnes and Langston Hughes are often examined for their representations of same sex desire and homosexual subject positions. Both within bodies of scholarship devoted to gay and lesbian studies and more recent conversations within the field of queer theory. Mina Loy might seem an odd inclusion, then, in this project because her prose and poetry do not directly engage with or represent same sex desire. By beginning with a chapter on the queer politics of Mina Loy, my aim is to first give a nod to the work that has already been done within the field of queer theory elucidating the way in which queer intrusions abound even within ostensibly “normative” texts and second, to provide an account for the way in which this set of texts that narrates heterosexual relationships engages strongly with a politics of disruption whose goal is a break from the strict, normative project of subjective legibility. My argument is that Mina Loy's work is indebted to a set of ideas and a modality of ideation that are rooted in (what we now identify as) a markedly queer positionality. Careful analysis of Loy's poetic collections “Futurism x Feminism” and “Songs to Joannes,” and “Compensations of Poverty” allows Loy's writing to emerge as a queer site of resistance to the kind of hetero-normative timetables that regulate and discipline “normal” ontological progression, even as it also can be said to engage in a *feminist* political project.

Although Loy's body of work does articulate a markedly anti-heteronormative position, Loy's works do not contain explicitly drawn homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> Thus, unlike Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein or other Modernists who self identified as homosexual, her works aren't rendered queer by a particular gay/lesbian identity politics. What allows for Loy's inclusion in a queer canon or counter canon is rather the extent to which her writing instantiates a kind of transgression politics of disruption to fixed, paradigmatic hetero-norms. Although Loy does not outline a specific set of same sex identifications, her work does repeatedly indict many aspects of compulsive heterosexuality and, more importantly, the dominance of systemic hetero-normative social organization.

Although theorists across the field of queer theory use and define the term in multiple ways, "queer" as it applies to Mina Loy's writing can be understood as a space of critique, a discursive category, a site of resistance to the project of hetero-normativity. Rather than narrating a specific set of homosexual sex acts, queer encompasses a range of behaviors, subjectivities, and ideologies that stand in direct opposition to normativity's regulatory force(s). More so than a point of identification, it is a position in relation to what has been deemed societally "normal." It is, as David Halperin defines it, "not some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it refers. It is identity without essence*" (Halperin, 63). This is how we should understand the functionality of queerness in Loy's writing. It is a force, a position, a modality of ideation. It is the creation of a counter-history and a

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault outlines this process of categorization in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, noting the way in which what had formerly been understood as homosexual acts came to be re-conceptualized as homosexual identity: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault, 43).

counter-historical figure. It is what Eve Sedgwick describes as “an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made to (or *can’t be made*) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick, *RR* 8). Applying these kinds of characterizations of queer to Loy’s writing, we find that, in spite of the self-given feminist moniker, Loy does create a body of work that disrupts pre-existing categories of gender and sexuality, that resists quotidian regimes of the normal, that deconstructs normative subjectivity, and that creates queer models of kinship that stand in opposition to the traditional hetero-normative family unit. Thus, rather than constructing an explicitly queer set of characters in the sense of descriptions of homosexual acts or identifications, Loy crafts a set of texts that are rendered queer by a disruptive, transgressive politics and by the extent to which they become a discursive space through which Loy critiques both a normalizing heterosexual project and the idea of normative gender performance.

One of the most central aspects of Loy’s queer politics is the extent to which she argues *against* participation in traditional, patriarchal structures of power.<sup>2</sup> Loy envisions a female subjectivity that is divorced from a necessary relationship with men, a female figure who is self-sufficient, and a politics of maternity that removes the role of father from the basic family unit. Rather than urging women to “find their place” within normative social relations, Loy suggests that women remove themselves from them and

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<sup>2</sup> Janice McCloughlin, Mark E Casey, and Diane Richardson, in their introduction to the collection *Intersections between Feminist and Queer Theory* note feminism’s interest in a politics that aims “for resonance with global struggle and the intent to participate in the state, political, and economic arenas” (3). This is a primary distinction, for these authors, between feminist and queer theories: queer politics are spaces of disruption, feminist projects tend to focus more on inclusion and equality.

engage instead in a process of transgressive self-formation that does not aim for any kind of legibility; the kind of subject position Loy suggests necessarily refuses to conform to socially constructed notions of what is acceptable or intelligible. What Loy creates in the wake of this rupture is not a new set of rigid strictures or a new “definition” of femininity, but rather an open space, a web of possibility of the kind to which Sedgwick, years later, would refer to her in her conceptualization of the idea of “queer.” Loy’s method then is to construct a subject position that isn’t so much a “this” as it is a “not that.” In other words, Loy seeks not to re-delineate a fixed notion of female subjectivity, but rather to highlight the matrix of possibilities that are opened up when traditionalized understandings of femininity are shattered.

Thus, Loy depicted a definite disruptive politics of *illegibility* through her writing and one of the most striking manifestations of her socio-political ideation is the way in which her works, by virtue of this engagement with illegibility, are in dialogue with temporality and with issues that, at their core, can be understood as the problematics of queer time. Loy was well aware of the strictures of the type of hetero-normative time that are at the heart of contemporary debates on queer temporality. In both her manifestos and her poetry she constructs the female body as a site of resistance to the regulatory forces of what Elizabeth Freeman has termed chronormativity and the larger, more wide-reaching structure that is chronobiopolitics. Rooted in Foucauldian concepts of bio-power, chronobiopolitics describes the way in which the regulatory forces of bio-power operate in relation to time. It is the way that not only bodies, but *temporally situated* bodies are managed and controlled through the forced naturalization of the state-controlled time-

tables put in place to govern aspects of lived experience from work to domesticity, from recreation to procreation, from childhood to adulthood. It is:

“the use of time to organize individual human bodies towards maximum production,” “a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches inculcate what the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls “hidden rhythms” forms of temporal experience that can seem natural to those whom they privilege. Manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time” (Freeman, 3).

Additionally, chrononormativity dictates “teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childbearing, and death and its attendant rituals” (Freeman, 4).<sup>3</sup> Loy engages directly with these aspects of the chrononormative through her depiction of a series of negotiations between the subject and her temporal plane that critique the heteronormative ideas of managed and directed sexuality, the prioritization of marriage and normative kinship bonds, and the child as a figure of heterosexual innocence. Thus, although Loy fails to outline a specifically homosexual alternative to a culture of compulsive heterosexuality, the way that she indicts the dominance of *hetero-normativity* places her within the camp of queer cultural critique.

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<sup>3</sup> Although the term chrononormative is Elizabeth Freeman’s, Michel Foucault outlines the extent to which bio-power is inextricably bound up with ontological timetables in the “Deployment of Sexuality” section of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. He specifically identifies the way that bio-power functions in relation to time to manage sexuality, marriage and kinship bonds, and cultural expectations for both parenting and the figure of the child. (Foucault, 119-124).

What Loy rebels against in her writing is the privilege of the hetero-normative, the extent to which it, as a system, defines intelligibility in western culture. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner define it. The hetero-normative is constructed:

“through scenes of intimacy, coupling, and kinship; a historical relation to futurity is restricted to generational narrative and reproduction. A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness, embedded in things and not just in sex, is what we call hetero-normativity. Hetero-normativity is more than ideology or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture. It is hard to see these fields as hetero-normative because the sexual culture straight people inhabit is so diffuse, a mix of languages they are just developing with pre-modern notions of sexuality so ancient that their material conditions feel hardwired into personhood.” (Berlant, Warner, 318-9).

Thus, although she doesn't specifically create an alternate, homosexual mode of resistance to the dominance of the hetero-normative, Loy *does* argue, through her constructions of an explicitly queer temporality, against the way in which heterosexuality constructs a social field in which hetero-norms become the standard framework of legibility.

Explorations of sexuality form what is perhaps the greatest focal point of Loy's body of work; she interrogates sex and intimacy consistently throughout her career as a writer and visual artist. Her sexual politics can be read through the lens of queer temporality precisely because of their radical positionality, because her writing evidences an understanding of female sexuality in which it functions as a site of transgression, of disruption. Loy felt as though sex was the only way in which men and women could come together and find any kind of understanding, that sexual desire was part and parcel

of *both* female and male sexuality, that men and women should be allowed free, fluid sexual connections unfettered by the confines of the hetero-normative marriage bond. As important as she thought intimacy was, she didn't conceive of it as the basis for romantic relationships or for the parental bonds to which romantic relations (in normative, Western societal structures) give rise. She did not see sex as part of a traditional, ontological timetable or as a mere support system for marriage and hetero-reproduction. For Loy, sexuality was a point of connectivity, a "naturally" occurring bodily drive, and a means to construct a fluid, free-flowing subjectivity. The fact that her project was so interested in divorcing sexuality from romance and marriage aligns her with ideation regarding queer time in that she is attempting to remove sex from any kind of hetero-normative ontological framework. For Loy, sex does not have to be a part of a chronobiopolitical imperative. Rather, it can function as an experience important solely for its ability to provide pleasure, although Loy would have been explicit about the importance of it being accessible to all individuals regardless of gender; *both* men and women should have the same opportunity for the experience of free sexuality.<sup>4</sup>

Her views on marriage and kinship interweave with her understandings of sexuality in that, in spite of having been married twice, she remained opposed to marriage during the course of her entire adult life. She argued through her writing that the primary kinship unit should be mother and child, rather than mother, father, and child. She did not think that marriage could function as a positive site of subjective growth or becoming for

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<sup>4</sup> Here again Loy expresses what seems to be a Foucauldian argument about sex and sexuality. Foucault notes the way that sexuality is managed and contained within and by the family unit, the way that "the sexuality of adolescents and children is problematized and feminine sexuality medicalized." He argues that there is a tendency to keep sexuality "under close watch and to devise a rational technology of correction" (Foucault, *HoS*, 120).

men or women and was of the opinion that children should come into being as the result of a rational, conscious choice on the part of the mother and a moment of sexual connection between the mother and a man of her choosing. This re-conceptualization of the family unit not only interrogates normative family structure, but also argues for its complete dissolution. The way that Loy suggests we re-structure familial bonds queers the family unit and in arguing for this kind of re-negotiation of kinship, Loy places herself in a decidedly queer camp. She doesn't suggest more paternal participation, more equanimity of role or duty, or increased opportunity for women outside of the home. She jettisons the paternal figure entirely and proposes a kinship unit that consists only of mother and child. In so doing, she effectively dislodges family from its place within a larger, structural system of patriarchy and hetero-norms.

Loy's lack of ease with traditional kinship systems does seem to place her within (what would become) a tradition of queer, or at least gender-based critiques of the way in which kinship structures impose order on societal systems. Writing in response to Levi-Strauss, Gayle Rubin notes: "kinship is explicitly conceived of as an imposition of cultural organization upon the facts of biological procreation. It is permeated with an awareness of the importance of sexuality in human society. It is a description of society that does not assume an abstract, genderless human subject" (42). Thus, far from being innate, structures of kinship are in actuality societally constructed, written onto bodies, and enacted onto differently sexed and gendered bodies in markedly different ways. Rubin goes on to note the ways in which kinship relations oppress and subjugate women, and indeed makes the argument that such relations are based entirely upon an "exchange of women" that places them on the level of material objects (44). More specifically, she

argues that according to a Levi-Straussian model, women function within kinship relations as gifts (45).<sup>5</sup> Thus, when Loy re-structures the immediate family that forms the most basic kinship unit within a society, the move that she makes is to not just free women from an oppressive, patriarchal structure, but to *humanize* them, to elevate them above the level of gift. This massive kind of shift amounts to a huge assault on the very systems that both produce legible subjectivities and govern societal relations.

This, then positions the child as an always/already queered figure, growing up as it would exterior to a hetero-normative space and outside of a chrononormative timeline. She creates the figure of the child against this queer backdrop and in doing so argues for the figure of a child as a site of queer potentiality, capable of carrying something other than a hetero-normative set of values forwards into the future. Thus, Loy works here *against* the kind of understanding of the figure of the child put forth by Lee Edelman who would argue for the child as a construct embodying a “fetishistic fixation on hetero-normativity, an erotically charged investment in the sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (Edelman, 21). In *Loy’s* writing, the child is always already a site of disruption and rupture. Her early poetry about childbirth and her later poems that feature queer children evidence her investment in the idea of the child queered by her family structure and the queer cultural transmission that can result from such a set of experiences. Seen as a triad, Loy’s queer understandings and representations of sexuality, kinship bonds, and childhood very clearly function outside

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<sup>5</sup> Gayle Rubin is not the only theorist to read Levi-Strauss through this lens. Luce Irigaray also notes the ways in which women are exchanged within patriarchal systems of societal organization and makes similar arguments against the utility of such systems of relation because of their inherent gender and sex-based inequalities (170-191).

of the boundaries of any kind of chrononormativity and form a set of queer assaults on traditional structures of hetero-sex and hetero-reproduction.

It is in large part due to her interest in dismantling hetero-normative, patriarchal social practices that Loy, in spite of her self-styled feminist moniker and depictions of heterosexuality has been read alongside lesbian-identified, Modernist writers such as Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein. Indeed, Mary Galvin argues for Loy's inclusion in this queer counter-canon of Modernism "because of her deconstruction of the paradigm she found to be one of the most persistent forms of oppression" and because "her work comprises a powerful critique of traditional love and romance as a textual creation of phallogocentric discourses" (8). In her poetic works that engage specifically with issues of sexuality, we see exactly the kind of dismantling project that Galvin identifies. Uncomfortable with the extent to which normative sexual expression becomes an oppressive force for its female participants, Loy constructs a poetic indictment of traditionalized female sexuality. "Virgin Plus Curtains Minus Dots," published in 1915, crafts a mini-narrative about would-be brides denied marriage for lack of dowries. The curtains, referred to in the title reflect one of the key stakes of this poem: an understanding of sites of domesticity as spaces of confinement *and* the co-construction of domestic space and the female body as analogs. Virginia Koudis notes the "locked" state of the house at the beginning of this poem: Arguing a correlation between locked houses and virginity, she isolates a connection between the "virgins" and "curtains" of the poem's title (Koudis, 32). That women, material objects, and domestic space would be so closely aligned gestures towards Loy's understanding of sexuality as what Galvin terms "a form of mental control and a sociological reality" (68). Indeed, "houses hold

virgins/the door's on the chain" are the first lines of the piece; the first image Loy provides is one of confined, contained sexuality (Loy, 21). Domesticity becomes an oppressive force, one that traps women into traditional, patriarchal narratives of subservience, marriage, and relegation to the space of the home. It is noteworthy then that in this poem, ostensibly "about" virginity and marriage, the first mention of both of these states of being (each the only legible option for women at different stages of life) should make reference to confinement.

It is also important to note that we first meet these virgins in the third person, we do not so much hear from them as hear *about* them and even in the following stanza when Loy does give her virgins a voice, she emphasizes their passivity, their immobility contrasted with the dynamic movement of their would-be suitors: "See the men pass/their hats are not ours/we take a walk/they are going somewhere" (Loy, 21). Passivity is a traditionally feminized position; Women's bodies have historically been "trained to deference, subjected to a finer discipline" than their male counterparts (Bartkey, 82). Loy's poem reflects this inequality, and in this stanza, not only are the *men* granted a mobility denied to the women, but their further role division is evidenced by gendered clothing items: the men's hats. Hats are worn *outside* of the home, men wear hats to "go somewhere" as they do in this piece of the poem. This gendered discrepancy continues in the following lines: "Men's eyes look into things/Our eyes look out" (Loy, 21). The male gaze penetrates whereas the female gaze, immobile, merely "looks out" at the world from within its gendered space of confinement, reflecting the extent to which

traditionalized notions of female passivity gain and maintain cultural dominance through repeated performance.<sup>6</sup>

Domesticity amounts to more than a spatial confinement, it also locks women into a temporal order that supports a patriarchal normalizing project of hetero-reproduction and traditional marriage. Elizabeth Freeman identifies domestic time as a regulatory fiction constructed for purposes of naturalizing, in the home space, the mechanical temporality of the factory. She argues that the figure of the “angel in the house” that “miraculously keeps order” allows patriarchal, capitalist systems of social organization to be internalized, to be learned “at home” and then replicated in the public space of the working sphere: “In other words, middle class femininity became a matter of synchronic attunement to factory rhythms, only with the machinery hidden” (Freeman, 39). The idea that the spaces of home and family naturalize “un-natural” behaviors and practices in order for those behaviors and practices to be internalized and reproduced in public spaces has been much discussed in contemporary queer theory, most notably by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their essay “Sex in Public.” Berlant and Warner argue that “heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy,” meaning that hetero-normativity is produced “at home,” through the kinds of intimate relations that create and sustain subjectivity and kinship (Berlant, Warner, 317). They go on to note the ways in which “family values” and hetero-normative practices, learned through marriage and family, support broader cultural norms, restrictive political ideologies, and the “constellation of practices that

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler extensively outlines the way that gender norms are normalized through complex processes of sedimentation and replication through performance in her 1990 text *Gender Trouble*. It is Butler’s understanding of performativity that I am working with in this chapter.

everywhere disperse heterosexual privilege as a tacit but central organizing index of social membership” (Berlant, Warner, 319). Part and parcel of this constellation is the way in which women are traditionally relegated to the space of the domestic and expected to model this kind of ontological passivity to subsequent generations of daughters. These ideas help to illuminate the sex/gender politics of “Virgin Plus Curtains” in the attention that it pays to the ways in which domesticity creates legible female subjectivity through oppression and confinement. The virgins in this poem are almost entirely asexual (I say “almost” because the intrusion of sexuality in this poem, although brief, is important and will be dealt with shortly.) and that asexuality, along with their aforementioned passivity is part and parcel of their identification, of their virginal status. Thus the home not only confines Loy’s virgins spatially, but also outlines their experiences of subjectivity and the ways in which they are allowed to “be in the world”, specifically in their social and kinship spheres. Thus, the focus on domesticity’s relationship to subjectivity (most markedly in terms of sexuality) is a way in which Loy represents the kind of restrictive, regulatory force that temporality becomes in the lives of women. Loy also pays attention to the ways in which temporality *itself* is managed *for* women, the way that it is mobilized in service of the hetero-normative time-table, of the measurable ontological progress that becomes the sole path to female legibility. The third stanza evidences this second kind of engagement with issues of temporality in its representation of time as it pertains to marriage and delay:

“A great deal of ourselves  
 We give to the mirror  
 Something less to the confessional  
 The rest           to time  
 There is so much     time

Everything is full of it  
Such a long time” (Loy, 21).

This stanza pays direct attention to the idea of managed temporality, specifically within its final four lines. The repeated use of the word time creates a marked emphasis on temporality and Loy stresses the extent to which female subjectivity is given over to time. It illustrates the way that marriage governs the female time-line and how, at each phase of life, women are organized and managed by the roles, behaviors, and activities that correspond to certain temporal phases. This repetition also allows the poem to formally gesture towards the way in which such managed, directed time is lived for women who enter into traditional marriages: the repetitive slowness constructs a sense of tedium; there is “so much time” and the extra space Loy inserts into this and other lines emphasize that. Virginity might function as a state of privilege for the young and marriage plays a similar role for the adult woman, but for women who experience these two states, the lived character is far from positive. Through her manipulation of form in this piece Loy alerts her reader to the dullness of domestic life and the difficulty of adhering to such normative temporal organization.

Moving forward in the poem, “Giving to the mirror” suggests the interest in appearance and presentation that dominates adolescence and early adulthood, trapping women into vanity in service of presenting an attractive body to potential suitors. That “Something less” is given to the confessional suggests an interest in the associations between sex and sin, that female sexuality should remain tied to marriage and reproduction. Part of female subjectivity in these lines seems to be devoted to the

construction of an appealing body and the other part to managing and containing that body's experience of sex and sexuality. The repetition of the word time coupled with the formal character of this stanza's final lines creates a sense of tedium, of the dullness of life when its progression is always already defined by externally constructed, heteronormative phases. It suggests a certain lack of interest and excitement at the prospect of so much time spent within the confines of the domestic sphere.

Thus far Loy has engaged in a critique of virginity and of the way in which normative marriage polices and regulates female sexuality, and it is this kind of indictment that has allowed Galvin and others to read her texts as sites of queerness. The final stanzas, however, do evidence a distinct, queer potentiality, a kind of coming into being that casts off the strictures and confines created by the male gaze and by larger, patriarchal systems of social organization. There is a distinct transition between the fourth and fifth sections of the poem during which the virgins transform from passive, feminized bodies into female subjects who are acutely aware of the nature of their confinement. In the fourth stanza Loy's virgins "whisper," "squeak," "faint," and "flutter" (Loy, 22). All of these actions are characterized by the extent to which they represent a traditionally constructed femininity and by a kind of hushed passivity. There isn't any attempt here at a greater meta-awareness of the complex inter-relations of oppression and female sexuality. However, the subsequent stanza evidences a marked shift in perception, awareness, and meta-cognition, one that belies normative understandings of femininity and a perceived dualism of mind and body:

"We have been taught  
 Love is a god  
 White            with soft wings

Nobody shouts  
 Virgins for sale  
 Yet where are our coins  
 For buying a purchaser.  
 Love is a god  
 Marriage expensive  
 A secret well kept” (Loy, 22).

The first line, “we have been taught” emphasizes the extent to which female sexuality has traditionally been constructed from the outside, through the male gaze. This newly represented self-awareness further manifests in the line “virgins for sale” which makes explicit the connection between virginity and capital that has hovered around this poem from its beginning. At this point, we understand *that the virgins understand* that the stakes of their sexuality extend beyond measures of purity, that in addition to being constructed as chaste subjects, they have a monetary value. That this is a “secret well kept” further supports larger, generalized indictments Loy makes of both marriage and normative sexuality because she admits here that not only is this system oppressive, patriarchal, and supportive only of its male participants, but also that its aims and goals are occluded: The virgins aren’t supposed to be aware of the precise stakes of their status as possessions, as objects. Of course, women’s bodies have a long history of being understood exactly in that way, and in depicting a burgeoning sense of awareness of “self-as-property,” Loy begins to move beyond patriarchal, externally-driven constructions of female subjectivity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rose Weitz, in her essay “A History of Women’s Bodies,” argues pervasive gender inequality has, at its core, these very issues of female embodiment, that the way in which women have historically been seen as property underscores the ways in which male and female bodies are “read” differently (Weitz, 4-6).

This new-found awareness becomes a kind of critical first step in a process of becoming that frees the female subject from her traditionally constructed limitations and allows for a textual rupture that comes in the form of the intrusion of a bolder, un-fettered expression of sexual desire in the subsequent stanza: “Some            behind curtains/throb to the night/Bait            to the stars” (Loy, 23). “Throb” is not only a sexualized verb, but it is also the most active, dynamic, sexual signifier of movement that we have seen attributed to the virgins. This is the first and only instance of embodied desire and thus it is a critical early mention of the kind of un-fettered female sexuality that will come to characterize much of Loy’s poetry. It is interesting that this initial loosening of traditional moral strictures happens during the nighttime, for the night is often figured as a site of queer potentiality, as a time of disruption and undoing. Loy will continue to construct nighttime in such a way, and indeed her next set of sexuality poems have, as part of their title, a distinctly temporalized nod to nighttime as a site of undoing.

This disruptive potentiality of a queer nighttime appears in other early examples of Loy’s poetry, notably in the “One O’clock at Night” section of “Three Moments in Paris.” “Virgins Plus Curtains” represents the problematics of an externally managed adolescent/early adult female sexuality whereas “Three Moments” depicts an unproductive, unsuccessful heterosexual union, presumably between an unmarried pair of adults. Although temporality becomes an issue part-way into the “Virgins” poem, the stakes of the temporal in “One O’clock at Night” are immediately evident because its title is itself a temporal descriptor. This is an hour of the night during which the conforming, normative, married couple is at home in bed and so there is an always/already sense of transgression in this piece. However, the poem forecloses the possibility of union even in

this non-normative, dyadic coupling and does so through a set of lexical maneuvers that construct a relationship between queer time and gender. In the early lines of this poem, sleep is figured as a marker for traditionalized femininity, the sleepiness of Loy's female protagonist emblemizes the way in which female subjectivity is constructed as unaware, un-intellectual, and affective rather than cognitive. The woman in this poem, speaking to her lover notes "I sleepily sat on your chair beside you/leaning against your shoulder" (Loy, 15). She is initially characterized by her somnolence, by her bodily proximity to the poem's male figure rather than through any kind of a verbal interaction with him. For he is speaking, pompously, "arguing dynamic decomposition," and (at least at first) Loy doesn't give any indication that her woman is paying any attention to her lover. However, when his voice becomes "deafening," and he wakes her up, her comprehension of his argument is instantaneous and it is in that moment that she ceases to have romantic feelings for him:

"But you who make more noise than any other man in the world when  
you clear your throat  
Deafening     woke me  
And I caught the thread of the argument  
Immediately assuming my personal mental attitude  
And ceased to be a woman" (Loy, 15).

Thus, Loy relates the female figure's awakening process using a distinctly temporal register. Nighttime then has a doubly disruptive power in this piece, not only does it allow for an illegible couple to move freely in the open, but it also allows for a heightened feminine awareness that belies traditional understandings of the limitations of female subjectivity. In this poem, not only is a kind of public face given to a transgressive

relationship, but also Loy continues to depict female figures rejecting the kinds of gender roles and acceptable experiences of sexuality imposed upon them by men.

Returning briefly to the beginning of the piece, the first two lines “Though you had never possessed me/I had belonged to you since the beginning” place the poem within two distinct registers, the personal and the broader, socio-historic experience of female subjectivity(Loy, 15). We should read the first line as Loy’s speaker’s comment about her own relationship with the poem’s male figure. She’s noting that he, in particular, has never been able to own her or define her subjectivity. The second line speaks to the idea of “woman,” historicized femininity in the context of its particular socio-cultural field and web of kinship relations. When Loy writes that this woman had belonged to man “since the beginning” she is speaking to the idea of female subjugation throughout history. This allows for the poem tell both an individual account of subjectivity and make a larger set of claims about oppression and the female subject; it broadens the stakes of Loy’s argument. It also creates space for the kinds of rhetorical moves Loy makes in the first section of the poem, for the way that she depicts the construction of normalized male and female subjectivity. Although the speaker of this poem is female, the bulk of the first few lines is devoted to her observations of her male companion. Thus the poem starts with a series of reflections on masculinity that are meant to echo the way in which the masculine is traditionally privileged over the feminine. Loy depicts the male protagonist in this poem through language that reflects both a complex understanding of the problematics of the myth of the masculine and a direct indictment of it:

“And your careless arm across my back      gesticulated  
 As your indisputable male voice      roared  
 Through my brain and my body  
 Arguing dynamic decomposition  
 Of which I was understanding nothing  
 Sleepily  
 And the only less male voice of your brother pugilist of the  
 Intellect  
 Boomed      as it seemed to me      so sleepy  
 Across an interval of a thousand miles  
 An interim of a thousand years” (Loy, 15).

The first adjectival descriptor Loy assigns her male figure is “careless.” From there she moves on to note the roaring of his voice and (sarcastically) its “indisputable” quality. This is a loud, brash man who appears pleased with the sound of his own arguments, but if we remember the way Loy has fused the personal and the historical at the beginning of this piece we’ll understand not only that this male figure represents the impossibility of romantic love for the poem’s female protagonist, but also that he is an instantiation of the prioritization of a more generalized, historic “male voice.” Traditionally it is the masculine that not only gets more air time, so to speak, but that also drowns out its female counterpart. Given this male speaker’s booming, roaring, brash tone, Loy presents a male figure who, in spite of his vocality, does not seem, in tone, to match the kind of intellection he seems to be pretending to in terms of the content of what he’s saying: Although this man sees himself as intellectually superior, he seems instead to merely be loud.

Loy moves from an exploration of masculine subjectivity to a depiction of the kind of process of coming into being that allows the female subject access to a less monolithic, more complex set of identifications. Again, we see evidence of both an individualized narrative and a broader gesture of disruption in that Loy's poem details the specific, gendered self-liberatory process of one woman, but also, in its representation of traditional masculinity coupled with modern femininity crafts an argument about an unequal potential for re-delineation: Men do not seem to be capable of modernizing, but female figures do. Although this female figure begins the poem in sleepy half-awareness, the second image Loy presents of her gestures towards the kind of disruptive coming into being that allows her character to reject her heterosexual union: "As your indisputable male voice    roared/Through my brain and body/Arguing dynamic decomposition" (Loy, 15). What is most notable about this series of images is the position of the word "brain" in relation to "body." Loy lists the brain first and in so doing dismantles dualistic constructs of subjectivity that align the brain with the masculine and the body with the feminine.<sup>8</sup> This is the first step depicted in the outlined process of renegotiation that allows the female figure in this poem to reject the hierarchical positionality that inheres in heterosexual relationships. Although initially "sleepy," when first we see this woman begin to wake up, we understand that she does so *first* with her brain and only secondarily with her body. She rejects her lover first through intellection and only then through physicality: "And I caught the thread of the argument/Immediately assuming my

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<sup>8</sup> The dualistic understanding of a self divided between brain and body, intellect and intuition, and cognition and affect is most often associated with the philosophy of René Descartes and has been the target of a wide body of criticism in both 20<sup>th</sup> century continental philosophy and a range of Feminist theories, largely because of the way in which the mind has traditionally been coded masculine and the body feminine. One of the most prolific among these critics is Maurice Merleau-Ponty who outlines an alternate model in his own writings on the mind's relation to the body (Toadvine, Ted. Ed. *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*. 5-41).

personal mental attitude/And Ceased to be a woman” (Loy, 15). As soon as she manifests a degree of cognitive awareness of her lover’s argument there is a direct sense in which she ceases to present the set of subjective limitations that define and delineate normative femininity. Within the space of the heterosexual relationship of this era, the figure of “the thinking woman” is not legible. That she is willing to occupy this space of illegibility is a sign of the kind of queer disruption outlined by theorists such as Sedgwick, Warner, and Halperin and of her positionality within a queer counter-canon, as noted by Mary Galvin and others who include Loy with other queer modernists. Loy goes on to describe “woman” (in the traditionalist sense) as “animal” and “understanding nothing of man/But mystery and the security of imparted physical heat” (Loy, 15). This further sediments a perceived antipathy between normative femininity and cognition. She is “animal,” interested in nothing other than “the security of imparted heat.” It is this kind of relationality, the embodied lack of mental acuity that Loy rejects through her micro-description of one female subject in this poem. Coupled with the broader rejection of a gendered prioritization of the male voice and the masculine position within a patriarchal hierarchy that Loy instantiates through a macro-description of “woman” and “man” as historical subjects, Loy thus rejects multiple levels of the romantic, heterosexual relational model.

At the poem’s end, Loy returns to the masculine. Her female figure notes: “Anyhow, who am I that I should criticize your theories of plastic velocity” Her male protagonist then utters the line (in quotations) “Let us go home. She is tired and wants to go to bed” (Loy, 16). Loy’s tone here is, of course, sarcastic and once again we see an indictment of traditionalized masculinity. Far from understanding that his lover’s recent

epiphany will soon (if it has not yet already) end their relationship, he incorrectly assumes that she's missed the thread of his conversation. Loy's female figure is aware of this misinterpretation, thus her snarky remark about velocity and the quotation marks around this last final line. We see then a poetic re-telling of the idea that men and women can hope to come together only through the sexual act, that the patriarchal, misogynistic norms that define and delineate the heterosexual relationship and thus also female legibility are oppressive to female subjects. Loy clearly asserts here that the prioritized model, for women, should be to *remain* illegible, to speak, to understand, to inhabit both body and mind. Loy rejects not only legibility, but also the kind of chrononormative project that dictates sexuality's expression and direction, that funnels it towards the heterosexual, the marital, and the procreative. In rejecting this relationship, Loy might not be explicitly making a move towards queer sexuality, but she is, however, consciously moving away from a field of norms and guidelines that delineate legible hetero-normative relational modalities.

Loy's "Love Songs," a series of stanzas written mostly in 1915 and published later as "Songs to Joannes" narrates a retrospective analysis of a heterosexual love affair by its female partner. Noteworthy about this piece is not only the way that it conceptualizes romantic love, but also its repeated, frank descriptions of sexual acts. The choice to speak so freely about sex and sexuality is a clear product of the kind of thinking Loy put into her Manifesto, her assertion that "there is nothing impure in sex" (Loy, Ed Conover, 156). The "Love Songs" explores a female sexuality unfettered by notions of chastity, purity, and innocence and depicts a modality of sexual subjectivity that allows women to experience and appreciate themselves as sexual beings, but also recognizes the

limitations of sex and sexuality particularly as they pertain to the potentiality of male/female relationships. “The Love Songs” foreclose the possibility of heterosexual connection through romantic love, calling into question a hetero-normative project of dyadic romance, marriage, and procreation. Loy’s critique of romantic love is “not limited to a critique of the values of conventional society alone. In subsequent poems, Loy focuses on how these paradigms of heterosexism remained one of the most persistent forms of oppression even within the so-called sexual revolution of the day” (Galvin 71). Thus, Loy’s “Love Songs” express a tension between female sexual freedom and the limitations that kind of participation entails. This tension manifests in a variety of forms; we see a tension between romantic love and its foreclosed possibilities, a tension between the physical experience of love and mental or cognitive awareness/analysis of it, a tension between the idea of a cold, futuristic subjectivity and the embodied, physical self, a tension between raw memory and objective analysis, and a tension between the masculine and the feminine themselves. Because this poem does function as “a powerful critique of romantic love and romance as a textual creation of the phallogocentric discourse,” what we are mostly left with upon reading this piece is a sense of love’s failures, and yet a deeper critical analysis reveals a complex series of negotiations that attempt to situate the speaker in a place not only of greater freedom, but also of greater understanding (Galvin, 71).

A series of fragments, this poem charts a failed love affair. Privileging ambiguity and a lack of resolution, Loy’s narrative forecloses the possibility not only of romantic love, but also for the kind of hetero-normative inter-subjectivity that it, according to social norms, makes possible. Rather, the failure of this relationship becomes a

springboard for an individualized process of coming into being, one that prioritizes the female subject: her experiences and her analyses of them. The poem begins with a series of sexual images that narrate a sexual encounter:

“Spawn of Fantasies  
 Sitting the appraisable  
 Pig Cupid     his rosy snout  
 Rooting erotic garbage  
 “once upon a time”  
 Pulls a weed   white   and star-toped  
 Among wild oats sewn in mucous-membrane

I would an eye in a Bengal light  
 Eternity in a sky-rocket  
 Constellations in an ocean  
 Whose rivers run no fresher  
 Than a trickle of saliva” (Loy, Ed. Conover. 53).

The first line of this poem suggests creation, although the following lines evidence that what *has* been created isn't productive for the female speaker. The “pig cupid” references both the kind of unappealing male figure Loy creates in “Three Moments in Paris” *and* male genitalia, thus in one image Loy both contests a hetero-normative project of romance and re-iterates her point that “there is nothing impure in sex” (Loy, Ed. Conover, 156). In order to dismantle hetero-normativity, Loy writes about it in frank, almost vulgar language. That this male, pig cupid figure “roots around” in “erotic garbage” gestures towards futuristic indictments of sentiment and this is an instance in which we see Loy grappling with a futuristic understanding of the body as machine, divorced from affect. However, because of the explicit bodily imagery in this section of the poem, we also see evidence of a tension between that kind of mechanized view of embodiment as well as an

unappealing representation of sex and romantic love. Loy goes on to describe the moment of orgasm: “eternity in a sky rocket,” and yet, as was evidenced by the first line of the poem, nothing is really created here. There is no romantic union, no understanding, no potentiality for a functional model of inter-subjectivity. Physical pleasure, perhaps is represented, but Loy doesn’t seem to focus on that and in fact, the stanza ends with an image of fragmentation: “coloured glass,” a recurring descriptive term throughout her poetry, Loy uses it to indicate a collage type remembrance of fractured love affairs past and to gesture towards the idea she presents first in her manifesto, that men and women never fully come together as cohesive partners outside of the temporally limited moments of sexual acts, that they are always in some way fragmented.

The next two fragments in this series spend equal time on indicting the normative relationship and representing free sexuality, but also hint at the production of queer time:

“To the casual vulgarity of the merely observant  
 More of a clock-work mechanism  
 Running down against time  
 To which I am not paced  
 My finger-tips are numb from fretting your hair  
 A God’s door-mat  
 On the threshold of your mind” (Loy, Ed. Conover, 54).

Virginia Kouidis notes here that in the second poem, “The I is out of step with the loved one’s world clock mechanism,” and that “biological time” dominates this series of images (Kouidis, 68). I would add to that, arguing that biological time *attempts* to dominate these images, that the reason the “I” Kouidis identifies is so “out of step” is precisely because of the failure of biological time to produce a functional model of heterosexual relationality, one in which the female participant can freely experience

subjectivity. Loy notes her narrator: “Running down against time/to which I am not paced” and then in the next stanza: “We might have coupled/In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment”(Loy, Ed. Conover, 54). The phrasing here textually replicates the hurried pace of the sexual act, and yet it also seems to gesture towards the state of being “out of step” that Kouidis identifies (67-70). It is a temporalized state of being in which the subject fails to progress along a normalized timeline on which the romantic relationship functions as a kind of touchstone, marking legible ontological progress. Therefore what Loy is indicting here is not only the way in which hetero-normativity employs romance as a tool of experiential oppression, but also the way in which such relationships trap female subjects into particular ontological trajectories, marking for them what is the only intelligible course: marriage and reproduction. Loy contests this notion throughout the entire course of her Love Songs, arguing that romantic love does not produce a functional model for women, that the management and direction of their sexualities towards these kinds of relationships is experienced as a kind of harm; in making these sorts of arguments Loy then directly assaults hetero-normative models of sexual and social organization.

Loy’s assault on traditional experiences of female sexuality takes place largely in poems that represent the kinds of relationships meant to result in marriage and reproduction. Moving forward through the chrononormative timelines, Loy addresses kinship through narratives of domesticity and of motherhood. Other than her engagement with sexuality, these two thematic subtexts have been of the most interest to scholars of her work. Tara Prescott, Aimee Pozorski, and others have noted Loy’s fraught relationship with maternity and indeed it is easy to read the proliferation of house/home

imagery in both Loy's early poems as domestic spaces constructed as metonymic representations of the female body. Loy's interest in these issues, of course, is part of a broader critical project that calls into question the practice of privileging a hetero-normative temporality, for as Jack Halberstam notes in *The Queer Art of Failure*, "the deployment of the concept of *family* whether in hetero or homo contexts, almost always introduces normative understandings of time and transmission" (Halberstam, *QF*, 71). Loy writes against these "understandings of time and transmission" primarily through her sustained critique of domesticity and of what Elizabeth Freeman terms "domestic time," or the calendrical framework ascribed to family life, through which such patterns of existence become legible sites of hetero-normative reproduction (39). Loy's hostility towards normative kinship then takes the form of an indictment of the primary space of kinship bonds in a Western cultural field, the immediate family group of (married) mother/father and their children. Because the dyadic, heterosexual, procreative pairing that produces this family unit is the direct result of the kind of managed, directed sexuality that Loy writes against in both her poetry and prose that address issues of sex and sexuality, we can see her criticism of normative kinship as an extension of her critique of normative sexuality. The development of legible kinship bonds becomes the second step in a project of chrononormative life management and Loy chafes against it as much she did the idea of a contained female experience of sex. Loy's criticism of normative kinship relations most often takes the form of a noticeable erasure of men. Loy's maternity poems, particularly "Parturition" evidence an alternate model of kinship: Loy argues that heterosexuality fails to produce any kind of meaningful relationship between the sexes, because the sexual act itself is the extent to which men and women

can hope to come together, Loy argues that the traditional family unit bears revision. She asserts that mother and child, on their own, should be allowed to form their own primary kinship unit.

Broadly speaking, “The Effectual Marriage (or the Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni)” satirizes a typical, heterosexual marriage and although it borrows from Mina Loy’s own relationship with Giovanni Papini, Loy makes a typical argument (for her) that constructs the textual female body as a stand-in for a more universal experience of femininity. There is a sense in which Loy writes from her own experience, but there is also a sense in which she calls into being a female protagonist for her mini-narratives that is meant to reflect and represent what it is to experience gender and sexuality from a broader, embodied, female perspective: She is speaking to the idea of “woman” as a historical subject. The first stanza of the poem immediately evokes the feminine through an image of house and home: “The door was an absurd thing/Yet it was passable/They quotiediennly passed through it/It was this shape” (Loy, Ed. Conover, 36). We see here an exemplar of the domestic imagery that is so prevalent in Loy’s work and because this poem has, as its subject, a heterosexual marriage, we understand the relationality between that imagery and the female body: There is a way in which passing through the door in this stanza connotes a kind of passage *into* female subjectivity. This poem is a textual representation of embodied, female experience and as we enter through the door we also move subjectively inwards, so to speak. The use of the word “quotiediennly” is also important in that it gestures towards the kind of lived, daily experience that when repeated for the course of a lifetime becomes the temporal framework for our most basic kinship relations. What Loy describes in this poem then is not the extra-ordinary, but the

mundane, exactly the kind of “domestic time” that Elizabeth Freeman identifies in her writings on queer temporality and female sexuality.

In addition to engaging with the idea of normative time as an organizing principle for domesticity and the heteronormative household, this stanza also, through its formal qualities, engages in a project of critical commentary. Of the four lines of this stanza, the one containing “quotidiennely” is the only that does not flow smoothly. Indeed, “quotidiennely” renders its line clumsy, awkward even. “Daily” might have been a more elegant sounding (if less erudite) choice, but I would argue that “quotidiennely” serves a critical purpose: Its very clumsiness speaks to the difficulty with which this narrator participates in the trappings of daily, heteronormative family and marriage life. What should be, by virtue of its traditionality, an “easy, natural” experience for this poem’s female narrator, is rendered awkward and difficult by the extent to which she manifests a rebellious spirit and an awareness of the adverse affects this “effectual marriage” has upon her subjective experience. This word feels clumsy in order to emphasize how difficult Loy’s female figure finds marriage. Another noteworthy formal moment in this stanza is the repetition of passable/passed. As with the use of the word quotidiennely, this moment of word choice seems deliberate. The repetitive tone in this set of lines recalls and gestures towards the repetitive nature of daily, domestic existence. The moments that make up a typical day in this or any household are governed and defined by the extent to which they are repeated according to particular patterns and schedules. Every day at a certain time, certain chores must be attended to. Meals must be prepared in time for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Loy’s repetitive language brings to mind the monotony of this kind of domestic pattern, but also gestures towards a larger project of norm

formation: it is through this very process of repetition that such domestic patterns become normalized and come to seem “natural.” Thus, in addition to gesturing towards monotony, these lines also give some account for the way that women’s gender roles become sedimented into cultural consciousness. This kind of formal alignment with the thematic content of the text typifies modernist writing, both poetry and prose. The experimentation with form that modernist writers were so interested in was meant to illustrate a relationship between craft and content and develop a movement whose interest in new ideas could be in some way matched by the *way* that writers chose to express them.

Moving ahead to the third stanza, Loy continues to depict her “effectual marriage,” and further represents the extent to which it (marriage) constructs problematic hierarchies, repressive structures, and distance between its participants:

“In the evening they looked out their two windows  
 Miovanni out his library window  
 Gina from the kitchen window  
 From among his pots and pans  
 Where he so kindly kept her  
 Where she so wisely busied herself  
 Pots and pans            she cooked in them  
 All sorts of dialogues  
 Some say            that happy women are immaterial” (Loy, Ed. Conover, 36).

Noteworthy in this stanza is the gendered division of spaces and the way in which material objects represent these divides. Miovanni, the poem’s male figure, looks out the window of his library, and Gina out of her kitchen. Loy often pokes fun at the dualistic association between masculinity and the mind (This kind of indictment of dualism is important, for example, in the “One O’clock at Night” section of “Three Moments in

Paris.”) and so Miovanni’s masculinized space becomes the library, a repository of canonical, phallogentric knowledge. Gina’s space is the feminized, domestic kitchen, and yet it is interesting to note that the pots and pans in this kitchen, the material representations of femininity, belong not to Gina, but to Miovanni. This is meant to emphasize the inherently unequal hierarchical character of marriage, the extent to which men own everything in the relationship, even their partners: The pots and pans (and indeed the home itself) correlate with Gina, with the feminine and so to assert that these items are Miovanni’s possessions is to argue that marriage constructs a space in which masculinity has a kind of ownership over femininity. Although these are material items, Loy has self-consciously constructed an analogous relationship between the body and such objects and so there is a definite way in which this text suggests that marital ownership has a necessarily embodied characteristic, that the female body is also figured traditionally as a piece of male-owned property. We see further evidence of this in the line “He so kindly kept her.” Through *this* image Loy crafts a vision of marriage as a kind of confinement. Not only is Gina and Miovanni’s relationship a hierarchical system in which Gina necessarily occupies the lowest position, but it is also a space of containment in which Gina’s movements are regulated and limited.

In the subsequent stanza Loy makes use of this gendered imagery to illustrate a point about sexuality that she first argues in her Manifesto, that male/female connectivity is possible only through sex, that romance, relationships, and the quotidian fail to produce any kind of unification or connectivity between the sexes: “What had Miovanni made of his ego In his library/What had Gina wondered among the pots and pans/One never asked the other/So they the wise ones eat their suppers in peace” (Loy, Ed Conover, 37).

In this stanza Loy directly connects the masculine ego with a gendered space and she also reiterates the connection between femininity and the domestic. Additionally, she illustrates the lack of connectivity in this relationship, for Gina and Miovanni do not share their thoughts or their experiences with each other. This most certainly harkens back to the Manifesto, to her assertion that men and women do not fully form productive bonds with one another. Because Loy expressly discusses that failure in terms of marital bonds/relations in this poem her indictment of normative kinship bonds, of marriage and nuclear family comes further into light. This can be read as part of a feminist project of resistance to unequal marital hierarchies and because Loy does not explicitly come up with a queer alternative we perhaps can't quite read this poem from an entirely queer perspective. And yet, because of the strength of Loy's criticism of hetero-normative timelines and existential patterns in this piece, we *can* read her poem as both an indictment of normativity and as a possible breeding ground for Loy's subsequent engagement with issues of queer kinship.

Overall, this poem suggests that a hetero-normative project of marriage and the construction of legible kinship bonds is experienced as a distinct kind of harm by the female subject. This kind of negative critique makes frequent appearances in Loy's work and becomes part of the critical positionality that allows Mary Galvin and others to read her work as part of a queer counter-canon, but it none the less fails to put forward a queer, alternate kinship modality. We know from Loy's manifesto that she argued for a queer restructuring of the immediate family unit, and yet the furthest Loy takes that idea in her poetry is the notable absence of male figures in her poems on maternity and motherhood.

After setting up her unease with normative kinship through poems such as “The Effectual Marriage” (and indeed others such as “The Door of the House” and sections of “Songs to Joannes”) Loy, somewhat tentatively, posits a queer model largely through gaps and erasures. “Parturition,” her most noteworthy piece on motherhood, is one such poem. Ostensibly a representation of the experience of childbirth, Loy makes only one brief mention of men during the course of the poem. On its own that is perhaps not enough evidence from which to derive a model of queer kinship, but read through the lens of “The Feminist Manifesto” which explicitly outlines a queer kinship structure that removes the patriarch figure from the primary family unit, “Parturition” does build a case for a queer re-delineation of marriage.

Tara Prescott notes the extent to which pregnancy and labor remained hidden during both the Victorian and Edwardian eras and argues that poems like “Parturition” function transgressively in their frank portrayal of an experience that is explicitly tied to the body (196). In writing and publishing such poetry, Loy brings an embodied experience of motherhood into the field of public discourse, arguing that women’s issues should not be erased from such person-to-person discussions, but also that they are worthy of *scientific* examination. This process of calling attention to lived, female experience seems part of an obvious feminist project of inclusion and Loy’s utilization of scientific language complicates dualistic ideas that conceived of scientific discourse solely as the province of the masculine: In using such language to describe a uniquely feminine experience, Loy asserts the co-presence of mind and body within a specifically female sphere. Tara Prescott cites the poem’s title as evidence of this scientific lexicon, but the language of the poem itself also contains a fair amount of scientific imagery(197).

Of childbirth, Loy writes: “On infinitely prolonged nerve-vibrations/Or in contraction/To the pin-point nucleus of being” (Loy, Ed. Conover, 4.) “Nerve vibrations,” “contractions,” and “nucleus” are words to describe labor borrowed from science and in using them Loy constructs childbirth as a legitimate target of scientific inquiry and observation, subverting a hierarchical understanding of labor that both occludes the experience of childbirth and deems it unworthy of real scientific interest or inquiry.

As she does in most of these early poems, Loy constructs her female figure as a kind of textual yet embodied universal. She re-examines various facets of experience through a feminine lens, eliding the presence of any kind of masculinity (Prescott, 198). Through these kind of representations she posits the superiority of what many scholars have identified as a specifically Bergsonian understanding of “absolute” vs. “relative” knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Absolute knowledge derives from a process of entering into an object, knowing it “from the inside.” Relative knowledge occurs through mobility *around*, rather than into an object and in positing that *knowing* about childbirth requires having actually experienced it, knowing it from the inside.<sup>10</sup> We can see evidence of this in lines such as “I am the centre/Of a circle of pain/Exceeding its boundaries in every direction” (Loy, Ed. Conover, 4). Loy’s speaker’s expertise comes from lived experience, from being *at the center* of her experience.

In addition to positing woman as the center of usable, lived experience, Loy also uses “Parturition” to test her male-less marriage model. There is but one mention of men in this poem: a man runs up a flight of stairs, presumably to visit his lover while his wife

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<sup>9</sup> Suzanne Zelano discusses Loy’s Bergsonian influences in depth in her essay “Altered Observations of Modern Eyes’: Mina Loy’s Collages, and Multisensual aesthetics”

<sup>10</sup>Bergson outlines the differences between absolute vs. relative knowledge in particular in *The Creative Mind* (170-185).

(the poem's speaker) gives birth: "The irresponsibility of the male/Leaves woman her superior Inferiority/He is running upstairs" (Loy, Ed. Conover, 5). Many close readings of these lines take into account biographical detail from Mina Loy's life, asserting that Loy had her husband Stephen Haweis in mind when she penned "Parturition."<sup>11</sup> However, if we listen to Loy's assertion that the female figure in this poem is *not* Loy, that she isn't any one woman in particular, but rather a universal "woman," we can easier evade the trap of reductionism that comes from strictly biographical textual interpretations. Then, we can understand "Parturition" as a descriptor of a more generalized femininity, and read this brief instance of masculine intrusion for what it is: a representation of the disutility of a male presence in the mother/child dyad.<sup>12</sup> In fact, there isn't actually any evidence to suggest that this male figure *is* the father of the speaker's child. If we understand the speaker to be a generalized "woman" then we can read this male presence as generalized "man," and through such understandings interpret Loy's representation of masculinity, of its lack of a presence, as an argument for the possibility of lived female experience that does not include men.

Within the space of this poem, Loy thus constructs a kinship unit that does not include a male figure. In this way, she once again resists hetero-normative notions of gender, sexuality, and family that, through their preservation of patriarchal power, replicate systems of relational oppression that fix women into positions of powerlessness. That this poem is so concerned with the experience of women is an obvious nod towards a feminist positionality, but that it specifically questions the need for men and women to

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<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Burke makes this argument in *Becoming Modern* (55-56).

<sup>12</sup> Tara Prescott in particular argues that "Parturition," rather than merely giving poetic narrative voice to Loy's own experiences, crafts a portrait of "woman" as embodied, historical subject (202).

form bonds *at all* outside of their shared sexual experiences creates a model of kinship that calls into question the legitimacy of heteronorms and asserts the legitimacy of what would have previously been understood to be *illegible* patterns of familial relation. Again, we see in Loy a tension between a feminist project and a burgeoning queer positionality, but the very presence of that tension merits analysis: Loy doesn't argue that women and men should have equal space or power within a heterosexual relationship. Rather, her position is that women should be free to occupy *illegible* positions, that they should be allowed to reject hetero-normative, marriage-based relationships entirely.

The child functions as a kind of bridge figure within the span of the chrononormative timeline: If we see adulthood as the normative progression beyond adolescence, then childhood not only provides the *first* piece, the pre-adolescent period, but also the *final* piece, for it is through the experience of parenting that the cultural values, beliefs, and practices of one generation are passed on to the next. This process, which Lee Edelman terms "reproductive futurity," has everything to do with heteronormativity, with legibility, and with the transmission of intelligible subjectivities from one era to its inheritors (Edelman, 1-4). Without heterosexual union, without reproduction, this process of transmission would be impossible and for this reason both parenting and childhood occupy similar positions of importance within the chrononormative time-table. Loy's views on parenting and childhood were complex, and because we know through Carolyn Burke's biography and Loy's letters that children were an unwanted, unplanned part of her life many critics have read her creative work through a biographical lens. A prime example of this would be that Loy's first marriage, at age 21 to Stephen Haweis was the result of a pregnancy. Indeed she was four months

pregnant on the day of her wedding. He was absent when she gave birth to their first child and that absence seems to be reflected in poems such as “Parturition” (Burke, 95). And yet, in her Manifesto Loy argues that maternity can be a positive, usable subjective experience for women, and so perhaps we should read her poetic critiques of motherhood with the same eye for conflict and nuance as we do her pieces that engage with issues of gender, sexuality, and kinship. Loy does make an explicit argument *for* the importance of parenting, and yet she also crafts child figures who belie traditional notions of childhood innocence. Just as she writes female figures who resist normative constructions of gender and sexuality and would-be wife figures who resist the hetero-normative project of marital union, Loy’s textual children resist the notion that children are innocent, enjoyable to care for, and a way to transmit cultural values to future generations. Indeed, as we have seen in Loy’s representation of queered temporality in regards to sexuality and kinship, Loy doesn’t suggest that hetero-normativity *should* be passed on, let alone figure the child as the site of transfer. We have to then ask ourselves, in Loy’s temporal model, what is it exactly that is being transmitted? What set of values, beliefs, and methods of ideation does Loy seem to want to preserve and replicate? The answer to this question lies precisely in Loy’s demonstrated resistance to the chrononormative, in her textually documented discomfort with the notions that female sexuality should be managed, contained and directed towards marriage and that marriage and traditional family kinship bonds should be the necessary goals of adult life. *These* are the re-written, radical, re-envisioned cultural practices that Loy would pass on.

The first textual evidence of this ideation regarding the child and cultural transmission is “Parturition” which has already been discussed in regards to its statements

about kinship and family. Because it is ostensibly a poem about birth, about the act of bringing a child to life, it also has bearing on Loy's idea formation as it pertains to childhood and the process of reproductive futurity. Tara Prescott, in her close reading of "Parturition," notes that the mother figure in this poem does not occupy a normatively gendered position: "She is hardly the flustered, weak mother-to-be stereotyped in turn of the century culture. She is no "tame thing" and through her labor experiences the most extreme form of intensity" (Prescott, 201). We can see evidence of this from the poem's very beginning, in the lines "I am at the centre/Of a circle of pain/Exceeding its boundaries in every direction" and then again in the sixth stanza's "Pain is no stronger than the resisting force/Pain calls up in me/The struggle is equal" (Loy, Ed. Conover, 4). Although in the midst of one of life's most physically painful moments, Loy's speaker experiences a level of resistance that matches, in strength, the immensity of the pain that she feels. This physical resistance then becomes an analog for the extent to which Loy's female figures construct other, less tangible but still embodied forms of resistance: resistance to containment, to marriage, to normativity. In this way Loy sets up labor, the act of birthing a child, as the starting point for a modality of resistance rather than a project of adherence to and replication of normative values. What is birthed in this poem is not only an actual (although textual) child, but a child figure whose very existence predicates itself on struggle and indeed thus functions as a "resisting force." Thus, the figure of the child in Loy's writing is an always already queering presence.

Moving forward to Loy's textual representations of the child itself, we see more evidence of Loy's queer figuring of children and childhood. The imagery that Loy uses in "Parturition" to describe the baby is drawn from the world of insects and animals. Her

speaker imagines “a dead white feathered moth/laying eggs,” “a cat/with blind kittens,” and “a small animal carcass/covered with blue-bottles” (Loy, Ed. Conover, 6-7). These images are far from what we expect in a typical poem about childbirth. Loy’s unwillingness to describe the baby in human terms gestures towards a broader unease with the idea of the child as a normative site of transmission. Noteworthy also is the fact that both of these images of childhood prominently feature disability and decay. Those representations of decline work against the idea of birth and *regeneration* and complicate notions of childhood that construct it as a space of innocence.

“Babies in Hospital,” another early poem that represents the figure of the child, has been read as a “meditation on sexual difference” (Burke, 187). However, it is also an instantiation of the kinds of early childhood formulations of sexuality and gender identity that are of interest to contemporary critics of queerness and childhood. The poem critiques both the regulatory fiction that is childhood innocence and the ways in which troubled gender and sexual norms are passed from one generation to the next and legitimated through those instances of passage. Part of the poem Loy devotes to description of a female child and part to a male and Loy’s voice retains the caustic, satiric tone of “The Love Songs” and “Three Moments in Paris.” However, in her textual depiction of the male child figure, we do see a hazy kind of queerness emerge: one that positions this child already, even at an early age, as a sexual being. Such representations fly against “dominant narratives about the child: children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions” (Bruhm, Hurley, xi). Thus, again in Loy’s writing we see a tension between critique and the alternate modality, queerness and feminism co-existing, and a push-pull relationship between legibility and its opposite.

Loy's description of the female child notes her "shrunk limbs/and ample sex" (Loy, Ed. Conover. 24). This description makes two related pieces of commentary on female gender/sexuality: The "shrunk limbs" gesture towards traditional understandings of embodied femininity as a site of diminished capacity, passivity, and inaction. The "ample sex" speaks to women's status as sexual objects and also to the notion of a subjective potentiality limited to motherhood and the ability to produce children. Loy goes on to describe this girl as; "Having filched/The Atrophied/Woman-smile of your mother" (Loy, Ed. Conover, 24). Again we see a critique, this time one of the benefits of motherhood. Loy paints a picture here of motherhood as a space of difficulty and is honest about the ways in which the experience of parenting detracts rather than adds to the lives of women. The fact that her language recalls stealing, that she uses the word "filched" and describes the mother's smile as "atrophied" suggest that Loy resists notions of motherhood as the apex of feminine identity and that, much in the way that she criticized the prioritization of virginity, she'd also like to indict not only the extent to which motherhood is constructed as the only legible option for adult women, but also the cultural practice of silencing voices who would like to problematize the notion that maternity is a categorically rewarding experience. Loy begins her description of the young boy with the lines:

"Hail to you  
 Bad little boy  
 Lying  
 In bound beauty  
 Of only a broken leg  
 And thank you  
 For throwing  
 Your bricks on the floor

For the third time  
 And the snake  
 You gave me  
 For the thermometer” (Loy, Ed. Conover. 25).

“Hail to you” certainly evokes the kind of sarcasm Loy often employs, as do “bad” and “little” as descriptors. These word choices call to mind notions of the “boys will be boys” mentality that Loy so clearly wants to indict. That this child is hospitalized due to a broken leg, an arguably gendered injury, (for legs are broken outside, during the kind of rough play from which “shrunkened limbed” girls are barred) is an instantiation of Loy’s discomfort with the ways in which gendered differences are “passed on” and understood (falsely) to be innate.

This imagery largely functions to build Loy’s critique of gender and doesn’t seem to overtly represent queerness per se, but the following stanza does depart from traditionalized notions of gender and childhood in its description of early, male sexuality:

“Delightfully male  
 Already gallant  
 You smooth the mackintosh  
 For Elena to sit on beside you  
 Her fragility  
 Being irresistible for you  
 You are very wise  
 Precocious coquette  
 Who never learnt to talk  
 To look at him” (Loy, Ed. Conover, 25).

Here we see a burgeoning sexuality that, because of the age of these children, does not read as legible within any kind of normative framework. In order to be legible children

must occupy an always already position of innocence and reflect a lack of sexual awareness. The children in this stanza are already demonstrating actions based on internal sexual urges and therefore do not read as legible within a hetero-normative framework. If we read this poem to be largely a lament for successful reproduction of hetero-normative values through the figure of the child, then this moment of early sexual experience functions as a queer rebellion against the normative.

In addition to the way that this poem engages with the type of transgressive, childhood sexuality that Kathryn Bond Stockton and others have targeted in a series of discussions surrounding queer childhood and the figure of the queer child, the formal character of the lines themselves also seems to speak to a distinctly childhood temporality, gesturing towards another instance of Loy's interest in lived time as it pertains to the ontological timeline: The attention span of the child can be short and children often jump quickly from one activity to another. The truncated character of these lines seems to recall that and in Loy's brief descriptions of these children and the way that she moves swiftly from one observation to the next replicates a child's temporality.

These early poems are not Loy's only engagement with queered childhood and the problematics of futurity. The later poem "Ephemerid" from the *Compensations of Poverty* series, written in the 1940s, also presents a queer child figure, perhaps even more explicitly so than pieces she wrote during the early years of her career. However, in spite of the 20 odd years that passed between the writing of "Parturition" and the publication of "Ephemerid," the poems share several critical features, most importantly their use of insect imagery to describe their child figures. An ephemerid is biological terminology for

a mayfly although the “ephemerid” that the poem’s title refers to is, in fact, a young female child. Initially this girl is described *as* an insect:

“Low in the shadow  
of the El’s  
arboreal iron  
some aerial, unbeknown  
eerie-form  
of dual mobility  
having long wing, an unbelievable  
imp-fly soars  
trailing  
a horizontal gauze;  
trudges, urges  
crouches  
its knees’ apexes, a roach’s” (Loy, Ed Conover, 116).

Although Loy later reveals: “the illicit insect/is only/ a little girl”(Loy, Ed. Conover, 117). Again Loy has consciously replaced childhood subjectivity with that of a lower-ordered being. Additionally, insects suggest a sped-up process of reproduction. The life-cycle of a mayfly in particular is a mere 24 hours and so in crafting the mayfly as an imagistic analog for a little girl Loy seems to be articulating a particular, queer timeline for childhood that does not quite map onto what would be a normative pre-adolescent ontological progression. If the “lifespan” of this figurative childhood is only 24 hours and the child figure’s progress happens at an increased rate, then the child is necessarily robbed of the period of innocence that usually is ascribed to the young. The child’s actions in this poem support that idea, for the ephemerid/girl is alone, wandering through the city pushing “ a doll’s perambulator” (Loy, Ed. Conover, 117). That this girl is by herself on the streets of Manhattan suggests a kind of premature adolescence or

adulthood; “innocent” children don’t wander the city alone and so this child emerges as a queer figure in its demonstration of an extra-normative timeline. This child is outside of domestic space, and when we consider that children (and indeed women) are in general relegated to sites of domesticity, this girl’s unprotected meanderings through the public, potentially dangerous city streets figure her as a kind of temporally inappropriate intrusion into adulthood. Like the boy in “Babies in Hospital” this child is old beyond her years. Whereas “Babies in Hospital” engaged, at least in terms of its male child figure, with what a chrononormative timeline would deem premature sexuality, this poem suggests a kind of premature or illegible exit from intelligible gender identity, for the girl is outside of the home, outside of the boundaries created by domestic space and certainly in her case domestic time.

Mina Loy thus emerges as a complex and often-times contradictory figure whose work articulates a series of negotiations between shifting understandings of female sexuality and feminine gender performance. Although Loy came of age during the very beginning stages of the feminist movement and identified as a feminist writer, her writing also evidences a desire to unpack what it would mean to be both an autonomous woman and an embodied site of challenge to a system of societal organization that is at once patriarchal and deeply beholden to paradigmatic heteronorms. Her arguments against marriage, traditional family structures, and a contained female sexuality all align her with figures from her era who wrote against the strictures of compulsive heterosexuality, and yet her adherence to dyadic, heterosexual sex has caused some scholars to come just short of identifying her writing as queer. Perhaps she does occupy a position that falls somewhere between these two poles, and yet I’d argue that when read through a queer

lens, her body of writing forms an important site of transgressive illegibility that, even when read contemporarily, calls into question the dominance of the hetero-normative.

## Chapter 2

### “Bow Down”: Djuna Barnes’ Queer Nights

Djuna Barnes’ original title for what would come to be published as *Nightwood* was “Bow Down” and although after selecting and rejecting several more titles Barnes chose *Nightwood* instead, “Bow Down” does seem to embody several of the novel’s key thematic subtexts: Captured in the phrase “bow down” are gestures towards movement and descent, sexuality and abasement, temporality and fluidity. Each character in this text “bows down” before someone, something, or some set of internal mechanisms and the text’s narrative structure mirrors this action of bowing down in its representation of a series of gradual undoings and ontological descents. And yet, Barnes ultimately used *Nightwood* instead, in so doing foregrounding the transformative role of a queer nighttime within her story. Night in this novel is a time of transgression, of unraveling, of queer, sexual coming into being. Similar to the way that Mina Loy makes use of the trope of the night in her poetry to exemplify a transgressive process of queer sexual identification, Barnes uses night as an organizing principle for her narrative of queer desire and betrayal. In each case, we see nighttime functioning as a time of undoing: For Loy, nighttime undoes the heteronormative trappings of quotidian existence and for Barnes, nighttime undoes not only these normative structures, but also, through its function as a site of queer potentiality, undoes the strict modalities of identification that fix subjects into discrete identity categories. Night is a time of loosening, of increased

mobility. The freer movements of the characters at night embody a fluid, queer sexuality, a process of becoming rather than a stable, fixed set of identities. Queer nighttime thus becomes a space of both literal and figurative potentiality within the text of *Nightwood*.<sup>13</sup>

Quite a bit of scholarship on *Nightwood* wrestles with various understandings of and meanings for night in this text. Most critical readers identify points of connection between nighttime and sexuality or between the characters' experience of night its potential to undo their sovereignty; they examine the way that queer nighttime alters individualized subjectivity and becomes the point of origin within a series of degenerative, subjective shifts. Susanna Martins argues that nighttime is the novel's "central metaphor for the unconscious" (113). Teresa de Lauretis understands the night as "a figure for sexuality as a traumatic, unmanageable excess of affect leading to abject degradation" (120). Each of these scholars in her own way crafts an understanding of this text that constructs night as a primary metaphor for the way that temporality and sexuality become bound up inextricably with one another. This establishes a kind of dual register for this novel, with sex and time becoming twin driving forces, relational and contingent. We know that the night is a space of undoing, but we also know that that undoing has everything to do with sexuality, and more specifically, with queer sexuality.

That nighttime functions both as a temporal descriptor and a time of subjective undoing within this text is important in that it illustrates a particular way in which normativity and tradition become dismantled through resistance to the chrononormative.

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed the idea of night as a time of undoing is well represented in literature and in using nighttime in such a way in this novel, Barnes places her writing in dialogue with texts such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and, in terms of other modernist works, Thomas Mann's 1924 novel *The Magic Mountain* which depicts its own version of the transgressive potentiality of the nighttime in its illustration of a chaotic celebration of *Walpurgis Nacht*.

In this way, the novel formally represents its primary thematic subtext and its numerous moments of temporal manipulation (meaning the ways in which time in the novel is alternately truncated and elongated, how some very brief encounters are given page after page of description while other, longer periods of time pass textually within just a few short paragraphs) instantiate a larger project of rebellion against the chrononormative as a device of social regulation and disciplinary control. Ery Shin notes this novel's "temporally disjointed style," arguing that Barnes purposefully manipulates the novel's temporal character, that her practice of stretching and compressing moments of narrative is meant to formally represent the kind of thematic deviations from the norm that hold such a centric place within the framework of this text (120). Indeed, as Carolyn Allen points out, the actual events that this novel describe are narrated within the space of about ten pages; however, the story is told and retold from multiple points of view (24-26). Brian Glavey takes this argument one step further, arguing that Barnes, through such temporal manipulations, "refuses normative temporality" (754). Elizabeth Freeman argues that these kinds of temporal manipulations form a critical point of engagement within the modernist movement, noting: "the figure of damaged time also became the symbol of late nineteenth century decadence and modernism" (Freeman, 7). Freeman argues that the quintessential representative of this kind of "damaged time" is none other than the "hybrid animal/child/lesbian Robin Vote" who is one of the primary subjects of *Nightwood* (7). Following this line of argumentation we can understand this novel as a direct rebellion against the management of subjectivity into ordered, disciplined phases of life: The refusal that Glavey outlines is of the same sort defined by Elizabeth Freeman in her writings on the way that queer time resists the strictures of the chrononormative and

indeed Freeman identifies *Nightwood* as an exemplar for this type of temporal disruption. Thus, *Nightwood*'s formal refusal of normative temporal progress becomes a kind of mirror for the way that its characters refuse to be governed by societally dictated notions of legible ontological progress and we can see the ways in which this novel begins to suggest the importance of undoing, both as an internal, individualized process of re-negotiation of self *and* as a broader project of dismantling various constructs of the normative.

Thus, the process of temporal undoing within this text showcases mutability, fluidity, and flux, the swift rate at which subjects change, grow, shift, and are alternately bowed down to and forced to bow down before their others. Felix, Robin, The Doctor, and Nora shift back and forth between genders, sexual identifications, positions of dominance and ones of passivity, satisfaction, desire, happiness, and despair. Rather than occupying fixed, static constructs of identity they are, at all times, shifting and fluctuating between varied points of identification. Thus, they call into question the very notion of identity, instead they present us with an alternate modality of subjectivity: the idea that the individual is ever changing, ever in flux, engaged in a constant, life-long process of coming into being. Rather than functioning solely as an actor or illustrating a kind of subjectivity that is always already proscribed and dictated, Barnes's characters instead represent a kind of simultaneity. They alternately act and are acted upon; they illustrate the ways in which subjectivity is an ever-evolving process of becoming rather than a fixed identity that must be discovered and maintained. This idea of simultaneity, of selfhood as being alternately agentic and acted upon is one of the primary focal points of Judith Butler's collection *Senses of the Subject* and she argues that it is this kind of back

and forth, relational motion between the self and others that forms and re-forms the “I” (2). She notes that “norms, conventions, institutional forms of power, are already acting prior to any action I may undertake, prior to there being an “I” who thinks of itself form tie to time as the seat or source of its own action. My point is not to make a mockery of such moments in which we understand ourselves to be the source of our own actions we have to do that if we are to understand ourselves as agentic at all. The task is to think of being acted on and acting as simultaneous, and not only as a sequence” (6). We see this relational motion at work within all of the relationships in this text and part and parcel of Nora, Robin, and Dr. Matthew O’Connor’s demonstrated processes of coming into being then becomes navigating this making/remaking process through which they are shown to be both agentic and acted upon by one another.

This representation of fluid identities and identifications is perhaps its greatest contribution to a canon of queer modern texts. In that it represents homosexual subjectivity as a space of mutability it resists notions of same sex desire, dominant in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that looked upon it as a tragic flaw. Lesbianism was thought to be a kind of inversion, where women adopted masculine performance and presentation or as a way to re-work dysfunctional mother/daughter relationships: one member of a lesbian dyad would enact a maternal role and the other take on the character of the child. That *Nightwood* textually resists these kinds of problematic identity constructs and instead represents queerness as a space of possibility, flux, and change allows it to work against damaging stereotypes and illustrate a positive, working model of queer identification and desire.

That each of the primary characters in *Nightwood* represents some version of queer identification is also important, for through that deviation from the normative we can also understand this novel as a project of exploring *queer* becoming. The bodies we meet in *Nightwood* instantiate “the deconstruction and fluidity of transient identities” (Richardson, 3). They illustrate an understanding of queerness as fluidity, as a “form of movement” (Cohen, 75). Rather than just figuring homosexuality as a fixed, stable identity category, Barnes crafts queerness as a state of being in constant flux. Additionally, that Barnes depicts multiple versions of queer subjectivity adds further richness and complexity to representations of coming into being in that it constructs such forms of queer becoming as varied, multiple, and complex: There is no one, monolithic construction of queer identification. Rather, Barnes gives us a series of queer characters who themselves undergo multiple, heterogeneous processes of coming into various versions of selfhood. Thus, the construction of queer coming into being that is marked by flux and fluidity functions as a primary thematic organizing principle within this text and the way in which these kinds of ideas inform smaller, specific representations of queer sexuality, kinship, and childhood become more and more apparent as the novel’s narrative unfolds.

Queer sexuality is perhaps the novel’s most overt focal point, and its frank representation of same sex desire has long placed this novel within a canon of queer modernist texts. That Barnes depicts both male and female characters whose queerness is a critical point of identification is one of *Nightwood*’s most obvious instantiations of a refusal to adhere to chrononormative ontological guidelines. Nora, Robin, Jenny, and Dr. Matthew O’Connor all represent different processes of queer becoming and directly

challenge the dominance of compulsory heterosexuality through the ways in which they participate in same-sex relationships. Moving forward through the progression delineated by chrononormativity, the novel also queers kinship structures both through the way it represents normative kinship in a state of decline and through the manner in which it restructures kinship: it suggests that kinship bonds and the roles that they outline are fluid, the characters in *Nightwood* perform, at different times in the novel, different kinship roles. Robin and Nora are both alternately figured as mothers and children and Dr. Matthew O'Connor, one of the text's other primary mother figures, is biologically male. *Nightwood* opens up the world of kinship relation, allowing mutability rather than blood relationships to dictate familial positions and in so doing provides an alternative to the kind of normative kinship bonds that it, especially at the novel's beginning, suggests are in a state of disintegration. Lastly, *Nightwood* presents both Guido and Robin as queer figures of childhood and adolescence. Although Guido seems at first to embody normativity, Barnes would like to suggest that Guido is queered through disability, rendered illegible through his failure to perform the kind of normative, heterosexual masculinity seen as desirable within a matrix of legible traits that reproductive futurity would like to see passed on. Robin emerges as a kind of masculinized tomboy figure and through each of these representations Barnes suggests that the final piece of the chrononormative timeline is, in the world of *Nightwood*, shown to be subject to a fluid queering force.

Sexuality and its attendant issues have long been central to scholarly conversations about Djuna Barnes' work. *Nightwood*, because of its overt depictions of queer subjectivity and same-sex relationships has been read through a sex/gender lens by

nearly every critic who has examined it. The way that *Nightwood* highlights such transgressive sexualities establishes it as an exemplar of a “queer” modern text and marks it as a critical cultural product within a burgeoning tradition of queer fiction. I would argue that *Nightwood* constructs queer sexuality with an eye towards the mutable, depicting queerness as fluidity rather than as a fixed identity category that can be summed up by words such as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “homosexual.” This kind of shift away from rigid, fixed categories of identity allows queerness to be understood as a complex process of coming into being rather than a stable set of identifications. *Nightwood* thus anticipates several critical contemporary understandings of queerness, ways of conceiving queer subjectivity as becoming rather than as the politicized identity categories of gay or lesbian. For example, Cathy Cohen, in her essay “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” argues that “queer” seeks to “replace socially named and presumably stable categories of sexual expression with a new fluid movement among and between forms of sexual behavior” (75). Thus, in this way, fixed, rigid conceptualizations of subjectivity give way to an understanding of sex and gender that allows for the “open mesh of possibilities” that Eve Sedgwick identifies in her own writings on queer subjectivity (8). Diane Richardson also constructs queerness in this way, citing it as a way to approach subjectivity that has the potential to “disrupt and denaturalize sexual and gender categories in ways that recognize the fluidity, instability, and fragmentation of identities and plurality of gendered subject positions (22). Lastly, Judith Butler understands queerness as a space of discursive re-signification, as “a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” (21). Within all of these ways to approach queerness, we see fluidity emerge

as a commonality. Each of these critics defines queerness as a space of movement rather than of rigidity, an opportunity for an understanding of the self that frees it from fixed categories of identity and the self-determinism that inheres in them. In addition to the idea of queerness as fluidity that these definitions all share, what also emerges is the power that queerness has to dismantle binaries of both sex and gender. Thus, queerness opens up a series of possibilities, it deconstructs previous understandings of same sex desire, and it allows “queer” to function as an evolving, fluid, mutable discursive space. When examined through *this* lens, *Nightwood* then becomes not only an important document within a tradition of texts that represent homosexual relations, but also an exemplar of an understanding of queerness that liberates it from earlier discourses of same sex desire *as it pertains to identity politics*. Indeed, much of the older scholarship on *Nightwood* argues that it relies upon stereotyped, problematic constructs of queer identity, that it constructs representations of tragic inverts, homosexual men and women doomed to unhappiness by their transgressive sexual predilections. I would like to push back against those readings, arguing instead that, by virtue of its representations of fluidity and its depictions of queer temporal resistance to the chrononormative, *Nightwood*, in fact, subverts and revises these kinds of fixed notions of queer subjectivity and emerges as a text very much interested in queer time and queer coming into being. I offer readings of each of *Nightwood's* central characters that illustrate the way that Barnes uses the figures of Nora, Robin, and Dr. Matthew O'Connor to subvert precisely the kind of stereotypes early scholars of Barnes' work felt that they were representing, that to read *Nightwood's* cast of characters in such a way is reductionist and misses

deeper layers of identification that actually reveal Barnes' characters as complex sites of queer becoming.

During the 80s and 90s, *Nightwood* was of interest to a range of scholars exploring what they termed gay and lesbian or homosexual issues. Same-sex desire was understood as a manifestation of a homosexual subject position and the critical work done on *Nightwood* at this time reflects an interest in explicating how exactly this text engages with that type of identity construct. Contemporary responses to the way that same-sex desire was understood during this era of scholarship tend to make the argument that the terms "gay" and "lesbian" necessarily engage in a kind of identity politics that rigidly fixes both identity and sexuality into stable positions, allowing sexuality to entirely define subjectivity in a way that ignores fluidity and processes of change that inhere in ontological progress. Rather than categorizing subjects into hetero or homosexual positions, contemporary queer theory seeks to understand and elucidate identity as a process of coming into being. Thus "becoming" defines who we are as subjects rather than any given, fixed set of qualities or characteristics. This places *Nightwood* in an interesting position then because it was, for many scholars (and indeed for many years) an exemplar of the very kind of identity politics that contemporary critics find so troubling. Many of *Nightwood's* early critics focused on the ways in which it seems to reproduce a highly problematic set of gender/sex characteristics that embody a markedly stereotyped understanding of what it is to experience same-sex desire. Much of the early writing on *Nightwood* focuses on three particular ways of interpreting same-sex desire among women: figuring the lesbian couple as mother and child, figuring *one* of the members of a lesbian dyad as an invert and the other a traditionally feminized woman,

and figuring the homosexual subject as a degenerate, an individual doomed to decline by their transgressive sexuality. Carolyn Allen argues that Barnes's text figures Nora and Robin as *both* a mother/child pair and an invert (masculinized)/feminized dyad (179). Miriam Fuchs argues that Dr. Matthew O'Connor is an "unhealthy healer," rendered so by virtue of his failure to perform legible masculinity within the context of a medicalized sphere of knowledge and influence (125-6). Michel Frann notes the controversy over Djuna Barnes's own pronouncements about her sexuality, claiming that she was not a lesbian, that she "just loved Thelma" (53). He reads this biographical information into her writing, arguing that she herself was uncomfortable with her sexuality and that something in this self-hatred comes through in her work, that her problematic representation of same sex desire stems from her own hesitation to identify as a queer woman. However, more recent critics of *Nightwood* have found that the text actually performs a careful series of interrogations of these binaristic, heteronormative representations of the "perils" of same-sex desire. Lissa Schneider notes Barnes's "parodic and destabilizing" criticisms of both masculinity of femininity, arguing that in interrogating the fixed, normative constructs of the masculine and the feminine as distinct, separate subjectivities, Barnes effectively critiques the male/female binary (65). Susanna Martins notes the way in which Barnes "takes on the radical task of deconstructing seemingly fundamental binaries: male/female, mind/body, culture/nature" (110). Thus, we see a shift towards understanding this text as a rejection of binaristic constructs of gender and sexuality and also as a representation of gender and sexuality as fluid, ever-changing spaces of becoming. Examining the principle characters in the novel, Nora, Robin, and Dr. Matthew O'Connor, we see individual identity as a complex, shifting series of intersections rather than as a fixed

position that can be defined by categories such as “gay” or “lesbian”, “masculine” or “feminine.” Rather, these characters shift, change, grow, and evolve over time both because of their internal ways of processing their experiences *and* through inter-subjective relations with one another. These characters might, in one particular relationship, occupy a higher position hierarchically, but then when placed into another relationship with its own discrete power dynamic, find themselves in an entirely different place in relation to their partner. Similarly, masculinity and femininity are shown to be fluid: Figures such as Matthew O’Connor perform both masculine and feminine roles, switching from one to the other as he interacts with a varied cast of characters. From all of this movement Barnes creates the sense that queerness *does not* merely refer to homosexual subject positionality. In this way Barnes not only disrupts the notion of compulsory heterosexuality, but she writes against the idea that identity is a state that the individual must discover, achieve, and then inhabit for the course of a lifetime.

Although we seldom hear her speak, Robin Vote is ostensibly the subject of this novel.<sup>14</sup> The events of the story unfold around her and she is central to each relationship that Barnes focuses on.<sup>15</sup> What is at greatest stake to Robin and certainly one of her most critical sites of identification is her sexuality and she functions as an important novelistic

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<sup>14</sup> Monika Faltejskova argues a similar point, noting that: “Robin Vote, the central character of the book, hardly speaks or appears in the book. She is the absent centre of *Nightwood*” (120). Indeed, Nora does function as the text’s “absent centre” and even though she says so little, it is her inter-subjective relations with the novel’s other characters that form the basis for not only the novel’s narrative, but its primary thematic interests as well.

<sup>15</sup> I would argue that Dr. Matthew O’Connor is the true protagonist of this story. He is the primary source of its knowledge, the individual who connects each character to one another, and the figure whose voice is given the most air-time within the narrative. However, the events of the novel *do* unfold around Robin and so her importance to the actual story places her perhaps within a more centric, if not more important position.

exemplar of the broader issues surrounding sex and sexuality that this novel grapples with. Within Robin, we see a female subject who embodies both masculine and feminine traits, a woman who resists traditionalized notions of what it is to be female through not only her free, open participation in multiple sexual relationships, but also through her queer positionality, through her refusal to be defined as wife and mother and through the way in which her actual sense of self does not match the identity projected onto her by various manifestations of an external gaze. At every turn, Robin resists the chrononormative, positioning herself within a queer alternative to traditional notions of temporality and ontological progress. Additionally, Robin is ultimately unsatisfied by sex and sexuality and this resistance to be defined by her sexual orientation constructs a larger argument about the dis-utility of sexuality as a viable identity category. Thus, in every way, Robin illustrates the kind of fluidity/queerness that is the most at stake in this novel.

When we first encounter Robin she is marked by her sexuality, by what seems like passivity, and by the extent to which our introduction to her is filtered through the gaze of the text's other principle characters, in this case her soon-to-be husband the false Baron Felix Volkbein. Barnes describes her:

“On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms, and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds, which seemed to have been forgotten, left without the usual silencing cover, which, like cloaks on funeral urns, are cast over their cages at night by good housewives, half flung off the support of the cushions from which, in a moment of threatened consciousness she had turned her head, lay the young woman heavy and disheveled. Her legs, in white flannel trousers, were spread as in a dance, the thick-lacquered pumps looking too lively for the arrested step. Her hands, long and beautiful, lay on either side of her face” (Barnes, 37-8).

Barnes describes Robin, in this scene, as reminiscent of a Rousseau painting, seeming to “lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room” (40). She is certainly represented as an exoticized other, surrounded as she is by palm trees, flowers, and birds.<sup>16</sup> We see her thus at a distance and this allows us to understand that, even to those who would claim to love her, there is an always already lack of understanding borne out of a perceived dissimilarity: To Felix, Robin is an exotic, foreign creature. He projects this understanding onto the real Robin and in so doing fails to see her for who she really is, fails to see her as a complex subject with faults, desires of her own, and individualized characteristics. Indeed, one of the novel’s most famous descriptions of Robin is found immediately after this first scene. Barnes writes:

“The woman who presents herself to the spectator as a “picture” forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger. Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person’s every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory; as insupportable a joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth; as the unicorn is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey. Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers” (41).

Shari Benstock notes that in this description we come to understand the way in which Robin has always been “prey” to the gaze of the men she meets and enters into relations

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<sup>16</sup> In addition to the exoticization that is at work in this passage, Barnes seems to foreshadow Robin’s own refusal of the role of mother. She notes the “unseen” and “forgotten” birds, left uncovered in their cages by the lack of “good housewives” (40). Robin is associated with these “forgotten” birds by virtue of her name and thus this initial characterization perhaps provides textual clues in regards to the relationship she is to have with Felix, the person observing her during this moment of narration. Felix might not see Robin in this instant as anything more than a passive object of desire onto which to superimpose his own notions of feminine sexuality, but we, as readers, are given a glimpse of a truer version of Robin’s character.

with (255). That Robin functions as “an infected carrier of the past,” to Benstock, suggests that she has become an embodied reminder of these past instances of having been preyed upon (255). I would also argue that, evident in this description, is Robin’s having been “preyed upon” not merely physically, but also in the form of having been misunderstood, having had other lives and identities superimposed onto her own. That women such as Robin become “reduced to reminders of forgotten pasts” seems to also categorize the way she is viewed in this scene by men such as Felix, men who, rather than understand Robin as an individual, thrust upon her their own memories and always already notions of what embodied femininity should resemble. Since this is the first time Felix meets Robin and we come to know her first through his gaze, we can understand the extent to which her subjectivity seems to be externally constructed. Barnes gives us *only* Felix’s thoughts about her, Felix’s impressions of her. She is seemingly docile, immobile, asleep. She appears to us as the exoticized other of the jungle scenes of Rousseau; she also is imbued with a kind of passivity traditionally linked to the feminine. And yet, even within this apparently passive representation, there are subtle clues that belie the traditionalized construct of a docile femininity: The positionality of Robin’s body is odd, given her gender and class status. She is sprawled out over the surface of the sofa, legs akimbo; she is open and taking up a fair amount of space. Body positionality and its relation to gender is a critical component of much recent feminist discourse and Sandra Lee Bartkey in particular writes about the way that the female body is expected to perform in space, arguing that men are free to take up as much space as they want while women are taught to shrink themselves, to fold their arms and legs inward and to project the kind of diminished size and stature that does not threaten the continued dominance of

male power.<sup>17</sup> She writes that women are supposed to “take up little space,” to “make themselves small and narrow and harmless,” to be trained to “expression of deference” (83). In contrast to this traditionalized preference for small, non-threatening female bodies, Robin *does* take up space; she doesn’t diminish herself or make herself appear shrunken. Additionally, Barnes described her, in the first scene, as “heavy,” another adjective not traditionally associated with normative femininity (38). Both the position and size of her body, the way that she occupies space work against what we would expect from a female form. This is indicative of the text’s larger project of dismantling binaries, for even in this initial scene during which it would seem as though she is being constructed and consumed by a male gaze, there are aspects of her personality that belie tradition. Here, she represents a fluid movement between the masculine and the feminine. In spite of being observed by a seemingly “panoptic male connoisseur,”<sup>18</sup> Robin functions a site of bodily resistance to patriarchal constructions of the feminine. Already, in spite of the extent to which Barnes notes others’ attempts to externally construct her subjectivity, Robin illustrates rebellion against the way that femininity is externally disciplined and managed. The way that, in spite of her passivity, she also embodies a subversive female masculinity allows us to read her as a transgressive instantiation of resistance to traditional notions of contained, protected, passive female sexuality. Many

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<sup>17</sup> Chimamanda Adichie makes a very similar argument, describing the way that “We teach women to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller” She argues that there is a correlation between gendered ways of being embodied in space and other areas of women’s experience of being in the world, arguing that this smallness of stature corresponds to the kinds of cultural expectations placed on women, that they “can have ambition, but not too much” (Adichie,14).

<sup>18</sup> Bartkey also, in the essay on the politics of the female body in space, discusses the way in which women’s bodies are constantly on display for a “panoptic male connoisseur” This male gaze delineates, defines, and disciplines the female body in such a way that women’s bodies are always already up for male consumption. Robin’s initial scene, at first, might seem like a perfect illustration of this concept, and yet the masculine positionality of her body allows us to understand the ways in which she rebels against this kind of always already male consumption (86).

accounts for such instances of female masculinity view it through the lens of sexual deviance, arguing that masculinity is inextricably bound to male identity (Halberstam, 46). In this way, even the subversive nature of *female* performance of masculinity works to shore up masculinity's association with the experience of being male: If the only women who embody masculinity are also engaged in same-sex relationships with other *women*, then there is something in their performance of the masculine to suggest that they are miming the performance and presentation of being male in order to engage in romantic and sexual relationships with members of the female sex. This is in line with the idea of the invert, the notion that lesbianism can be reduced to a desire to embody the opposite sex.<sup>19</sup> Robin, in this initial characterization, does something to work against these kinds of notions, presenting as she does (at least at this time) a heterosexual body. As the target for Felix's romantic interest and his would-be wife, we don't initially read her as a lesbian figure and her subsequent same-sex relationships, although they problematize this initial heterosexual presentation, don't fully place her within the realm of the homosexual. Thus, Robin initially performs masculinity without expressly embodying inversion. She moves back and forth fluidly between masculinity and femininity in the same way that she traverses multiple points on a spectrum, at the one end of which is heterosexuality and the other end is same-sex desire. This kind of fluidity does not just mark Robin as a complexly constructed exemplar of queer coming into being, but it suggests a certain power dynamic that we see over and over again in the course of this narrative: Masculinity doesn't just signify maleness, it:

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<sup>19</sup> Jack Halberstam, citing Havelock Ellis, notes the popularity of the "lesbian as invert" model around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and argues that strict, binaristic accounts for sexuality were an attempt to create order out of what was increasingly seen as "a bewildering array of sexual activity" (47).

“inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family. Masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the trafficking in women, and the promise of social privilege” (Halberstam, 2).

Thus, Robin’s performance of female masculinity recalls the power and privilege of the male position within society and does something to signify and even foreshadow her own elevated position within the power dynamics of multiple romantic relationships. This power that Robin wields then becomes one of her more subversive qualities: that she, a woman, occupies a traditionally male position within a series of sexual dyads dis-aligns her from passive femininity and moves her even further from the docile vision of femaleness that we see (through Felix’s eyes) at the beginning of this novel.

Looking further at Robin’s motion within the text there is even more evidence to support her role as an embodiment of a fluid, queer sexuality that transgressively embodies masculinity and also, in turn, resists direction towards traditional, heterosexual, procreative unions. We have already seen the way in which her initial characterization, although it might initially suggest passivity, does gesture towards a kind of complexity that belies traditionalized notions of what it means to inhabit feminine subjectivity. Her subsequent movements build upon that early portrait of her and we thus continue to see Robin as a site of transgression and resistance. She does, after her first scene, consent to a heterosexual marriage with Felix and she even bears his child. However, neither of these traditional roles for women suits her and very soon after being trapped into marriage and motherhood, we find Robin straying. One week after giving birth, “Robin took to wandering again. To intermittent travel from which she came back hours, days later,

disinterested” (Barnes, 52). Although Robin has just become a wife and mother, she neither experiences a sense of devotion to her husband nor a feeling of maternal duty. Leaving Felix at home with their son, Robin wanders the city alone and, although Felix might not have direct evidence of this, has multiple, extra-marital sexual encounters. Although several scholars have argued that this is part of Barnes’ overall sense of homosexual shame, that Robin’s inability to maintain a relationship is indicative of some greater experience of non-normative sexuality as decline or degradation, I’d argue that it compliments the bodily description Barnes gives of her initially, that it actually adds to the complexity of Robin’s depicted subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> What we saw initially of Robin was that the way that her body inhabited its surrounding space gestured towards a kind of non-traditional female masculinity and her movements in this next scene support that first reading. Robin here is figured in a markedly masculine way: leaving home, wandering, and cheating on her partner. Her post-birth actions fit a masculine subject position and so once again Barnes combines the masculine and the feminine within the figure of Robin. Rather than representing adherence to norms, she instantiates a rebellion against chrononormative ontological organization: For women, chrononormativity is supported in large part by “synchronic attunement” to the schedules and calendars of domestic, middle class home life (Freeman, 39). Elizabeth Freeman argues that this kind of calendric ontological organization has everything to do with the management of the routines and habituations that make family life appear to function smoothly, without interruption, and seem so naturalized that they “produce the effects of timelessness” (40). Thus, Robin’s refusal to maintain this kind of home coupled with her rebellion against

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<sup>20</sup> Shame is a common focal point within scholarship on Djuna Barnes’ body of work. Both Shari Benstock and Julie Taylor see it as one of *Nightwood’s* central thematic subtexts (Benstock, 187), (Taylor, 111).

the routines and schedules of normative domesticity produce a distinct turning away from heterosexually organized, chrononormative domestic living. Thus, her performance of female masculinity, her adoption of a traditionally masculine mobility means that she does not fulfill the female role of maintaining the domestic sphere and thus her masculinity, although it has its basis in a gendered way of being, has an effect on her role as female head of household and thus her sexuality (in so far as the role of wife and mother is bound up with female sexuality.) She resists the heterosexual union that has been thrust upon her, the dyadic relationship model, motherhood, and the broader heteronormative organizational system that outlines the importance of each of those subjective experiences.

Robin's masculinist leanings continue to manifest in her subsequent relationships so that even after she leaves Felix and engages in a homosexual romance with Nora, she finds herself in a role not traditionally assigned to women. While living with Nora, Robin begins to wander again, to stray from their shared home, participating in illicit encounters with other women and men. In describing this slow process of cleaving herself from her romance with Nora, Barnes notes: "her thoughts were themselves a form of locomotion" (65). Within this description we see the way that Robin's interior subjectivity functions as a mirror to her external actions and behavior. She is wandering not only with her feet, but also in her mind. This kind of dual agency is complex and it allows us to read Robin's wandering as purposeful: She doesn't just walk the streets of Paris without aim, there is a trajectory to her movement and its direction is away from Nora. Although Nora herself doesn't understand Robin's wanderings, Robin does not engage in these kinds of movements without purpose. Thus, Robin has more agency than we might initially think;

her behavior is more purposeful than it might initially seem. She moves from heterosexual to same-sex relationships, inhabiting different kinds of sexual identifications, and in each case she illustrates a kind of agentic identification that belies how she is seen by those around her.

Thus Robin contains both masculine and feminine characteristics, illustrating a kind of fluidity that marks her as a queer subject. Although this representation of fluidity is important within the landscape of this text, Robin also, through the way in which she is embodied, presents a larger picture of sex, sexuality, and the dis-utility of sexual orientation as a primary way to derive subjectivity. Foucault's assertion that the homosexual "became a species" in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is astute and indeed in many modernist texts that deal with same-sex desire, we see a working through of what exactly this homosexual identity looks like, how it is experienced and embodied.<sup>21</sup> This is part and parcel of why so much early scholarship on *Nightwood* focuses on the figure of the lesbian or the "invert," and it is also perhaps the reason that so much of that scholarship makes the argument that Barnes's text problematizes homosexuality, depicting it as degradation or decline. I'd argue that the way the novel represents fluidity belies this kind of construction, but also that Robin's demonstrated lack of happiness with sex and sexual relationships itself is an argument against sexuality as an organizing principle for identity. Rather than thinking of same-sex desire as resulting in an expressly homosexual subject position, *Nightwood* encourages us to see same-sex desire as merely *one* point of identification, one half of one intersection that is itself only one such apex of many in any

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault outlines this idea in *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, arguing: "homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43)/

given subject. Robin is so dissatisfied with romantic relationships precisely because women are taught to define themselves primarily through them. Jumping back to Mina Loy's texts we can remember the way in which women are defined, prior to marriage, through virginity, and after marriage through their relationship to their husband, we understand that for "modern" women such as Robin, heterosexuality, marriage, procreation are meant to contain all that she is as a subject. Robin's lack of interest in these things then suggests that she'd like for other intersections, other points of identification to serve as subject markers in a way that heteronormative, chrononormative systems of social organization do not allow for. She is unhappy with Felix, with Nora, and with Jenny. Each relationship results in Robin withdrawing back into herself, wandering, leaving. Thus, it is clear that Robin wants to define herself in ways other than her sexual and romantic connections. Barnes notes that "two spirits: love and anonymity" are at work in Robin and this is why she leaves Nora (60). Thus, we have direct textual evidence that her desire to be part of a dyadic relationship is only one piece of what drives her; there is also an equally important impetus to resist being part of any kind of romantic pairing. This itself is a method of resisting the heteronormative imperative because, even though her relationship with Nora is rendered queer by its lesbianism, the dyad *itself* is a normative relational construct and so in Robin's resistance to that form of sex and romance we see a queer turn away from traditional modalities of relation. When Nora goes to the Doctor and asks: "tell me everything you know about the night" she wants him to provide for her some account of why Robin leaves her, why she goes out into the night to engage in sexual relationships other than theirs (86). What she fails to realize is that it isn't just sex that interests Robin, but an escape from the confines of a

relationship that necessarily limits her subjectivity in the same ways that her marriage did. Robin's identity is defined most markedly in terms of her sexual identifications and each partner she has illustrates this problematic, external subjective construction. Her desire to wander, to cheat on her partners emerges as an attempt at self-definition, an attempt to construct an identity matrix that extends beyond romantic inter-subjective relation.

Although Robin is ostensibly the novel's principal character, it would be more descriptively accurate to argue that she instead functions as a kind of point of origin around which the other subjects in the novel are organized. Robin seems to be a critical driving force within *Nightwood*, but it isn't her voice that we hear; she doesn't deliver the text's most important messages and mediations. The true voice of *Nightwood* is that of Dr. Matthew O'Connor, a physician whose medical qualifications are dubious and whose work assisting with both births and abortions places him within the feminized sphere of the gynecological. This is important, this feminine placement, for many of his other individual characteristics also suggest a traditionally feminine subjectivity. Although in terms of biological sex Matthew is male, his gender identifications are more complex. He often dresses as a woman, wears cosmetics, and makes the claim that he: "never asked better than to boil some good man's potatoes and toss up a child for him every nine months by the calendar" (Barnes, 98). Indeed when we first meet the doctor he is surrounded by the *accoutréments* of femininity: "some twenty perfume bottles, almost empty, pomades, creams, rouges, powder boxes and puffs. From the half-open drawers of his chiffonier hung laces, ribands, stockings, ladies' underclothing and an abdominal brace, which gave the impression that the feminine finery had suffered veneral" (Barnes, 85). In his own way, The Doctor, like Robin, embodies both the masculine and the

feminine, although not a traditionalized construct of either. I would argue that Barnes' use of a gender-bending man as the novel's central voice is itself a critique of patriarchy for although the real wisdom imparted in the text comes from a man, it is a *feminized* man, a man who cross-dresses and presumably has sexual relations with other men. What is at stake in the figure of Matthew O'Connor is not only a deconstruction of the male/female gender binary (that we also observe in Robin), but also a critical inquiry into dualistic modes of understanding that locate epistemic potentiality within the sphere of the masculine. That Dr. O'Connor, the novel's primary purveyor of knowledge, occupies a position (ever-shifting) somewhere *between* the masculine and the feminine re-positions that epistemic potentiality within a more feminized space.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the doctor both subverts gender binaries and effectively queers the novel's epistemic productions. His is the sole voice of reason within this text and it is his advice that the various characters who have the misfortune of falling in love with Robin Vote seek out when they find that the object of their affections can't be bound by the confines of a romantic relationship. It is the Doctor who explains to Felix and to Nora the nature of Robin's transgressive sexuality and it is interesting to note that the wisdom he imparts to them contains nods towards a meta-understanding of the workings of queer time.

In the "Watchman, What of the Night" chapter, Nora goes to see Matthew and asks him to tell her everything he knows "of the night" (86).<sup>23</sup> Of course, the question she

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<sup>22</sup> Each of this novel's principal characters is feminized somehow. Felix certainly doesn't embody traditional masculinity, nor does his son Guido. Robin's two lovers, by virtue of their passivity, are also coded feminine at times, and Robin herself embodies a kind of complex gendered duality that contains both femininity and masculinity.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, this conversation takes place at "about three in the morning" and so we have another

is really asking in this interchange is about Robin; she wants to know what it is that causes her lover to stray, why the nighttime has the effect of drawing Robin out into the world and away from her. She fails to understand what it is about their relationship that Robin finds so dissatisfying and she believes that there is something about the nighttime that causes Robin to change, to become a different person, to wander. The Doctor's response is a critical piece of this text and bears no small amount of weight on Djuna Barnes' choice of a title, for in spite of the numerous moments of abjection and descent, this idea of a queer or queering nighttime is a critical central driving force within this novel. Barnes notes that the night is Dr. O'Connor's "favourite topic," "one which he talked on whenever he had a chance" (86). This is important, for it shows the extent to which the Doctor functions as a mouthpiece for the novel's central thematic subtexts; what Matthew is about to tell Nora is an outline of how the nighttime undoes the quotidian trappings of the chrononormative. He begins with the assertion:

"Well I, Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt-Dante-O'Connor, will tell you how the day and the night are related by their division. The very constitution of twilight is a fabulous reconstruction of fear, fear bottom-out and wrong-side up. Every day is thought upon and calculated, but the night is not premeditated. The bible lies the one way, but the night-gown the other. The night: Beware of that dark door"(87)!

In this passage the Doctor reveals an understanding of the night as a time of queer undoing. He notes the "thought upon" and "calculated" nature of the daytime, recalling the way that the day functions as a signifier for normativity, a temporal organizer that, through routine, allows populations to "feel coherently collective" (Freeman, 3). Through the shared routines of daytime hours, normative, quotidian experience is defined, delineated, and performed. This is why the Doctor argues that the night stands in such

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stark opposition to the day: it is at night when these systems are in danger of becoming unraveled. He notes that the night is “not premeditated,” it is not subject to the strict, scheduled, calendrical organizational practices that govern the daylight hours and so it amounts to a period of (potential) temporal loosening. This is all within the context of Robin’s wandering and sexual transgression and so we understand the night as a threat to the safety of the domestic home and the basic relationship dyad. The night has the power to undo the normativity of the daytime, but Dr. O’Connor also notes the way that it alters subjectivity: He goes on to explain to Nora that there are individuals who, once unleashed into the night “can never again live the life of the day. When one meets them at night they give off, as if it were a protective emanation, something dark and muted. The light does not become them any longer. They begin to have an unrecorded look” (101). These “profligates” whose transgressive sexuality sets them apart from those more closely bound to normative ontology and temporal progress must necessarily spend their lives outside of the strictures of traditional social norms. Their nighttime activities separate them from those bound to daytime routines not only while they are out after dark, but then also ever after. The Doctor argues that they become a different class of people entirely, that there’s something in their deep, subjective nature that becomes permanently changed because of the nighttime and his cautionary advice to Nora is that it is difficult to love such individuals. To do so puts one in danger of being emotionally dismantled, of losing sovereignty. He tells Nora: “let a man lay himself down in The Great Bed and his ‘identity’ is no longer his own, his ‘trust’ is not with him, and his willingness is turned over and is of another permission” (Barnes, 87). The larger argument at work in their conversation then is that the night is a space of queer undoing, but that it undoes not only

the kind of chrononormative social organization that dictates legible ontological progress, but also that it dismantles and re-arranges subjectivity.<sup>24</sup> Lost within that process are both the profligates and those who would love them and this grand shake-up is a kind of “unbearable” set of conditions: Through these queer, sexual experiences individuals both lose something of themselves, but also experience new forms of self knowledge (Edelman, Berlant, 8). It is precisely through this “matrix of relation” that Nora and Robin find themselves both undone and re-fashioned (Butler, *SS*, 9). Relationality is “not an integrated and harmonious network, but a field of potential disharmony, antagonism, and contest” It is a series of opportunities for the “I” to be both broken and re-configured (Butler, *SS*, 9). Nora’s pain and heartbreak are the result of this kind of loss of sovereignty, but she and the Doctor, through this conversation, construct a new modality of understanding of the night, queer sexuality, and subjectivity. That so much of the Doctor’s advice to Nora amounts to an attempt to get her to understand the workings of queer temporality is important and it does at least partially explain the novel’s title. Night becomes a key for not only the characters of this novel to understand one another and themselves, but also for the Doctor to convey to *Nightwood*’s readers the importance of night to the particular model of queer temporality that Barnes constructs through this novel.

Although *Nightwood* focuses much more on sexuality, romance, and the relationships of Robin Vote, it also articulates several different types of kinship formations; the text both illustrates the decline of traditionalized kinship structures and

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<sup>24</sup> My use of the term sovereignty and the idea of sex as a site of both loss of self and potentiality for new forms of self knowledge comes from Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman who outline this set of ideas in *Sex: Or the Unbearable* (3-8).

constructs a model of queer kinship that, although not based in blood relation does form the kind of cohesive series of social bonds and support structures observed in normative family systems. Because the novel begins with an account of Felix's kinship history we can understand the importance of kinship to the story; the very first narrative Barnes relates in *Nightwood* is one of familial relation. Additionally, the connection Felix's family has to a declining aristocracy also places the novel in dialogue with larger conversations about the shifting socio-political frameworks that were defining and re-defining European society during the turn of the century. Thus, we can understand the way that this novel dismantles kinship structures as both central to the micro-world of *Nightwood* and also as an assault on the dominance of kinship relations as they govern society as a whole.

The novel thus begins with an awareness of the importance of kinship structures, but also with an eye for the ways in which such relations are often experienced as a distinct harm. The normative kinship structures on display in this novel are troubled, fractured, and unhappy. Through Barnes' depictions of Felix Volkbein's family history we can see immediate evidence of the way in which such normative familial structures support both chrononormativity as it relates to individual subjectivity *and* the larger chronobiopolitical project of organizing populations. We can see the effects of inter-generational cultural transmissions that, in the case of this particular family, are meant to instantiate a set of aristocratic values and modalities of ideation that, through passage from one generation to the next, both unite family members to one another and allow for the physical and non-physical characteristics to be passed on. Writing about the functionality of kinship, Elizabeth Freeman notes: "Purposefully the fulcrum, between

the biological and the social, the cyclical and the historical, family is the form through which time supposedly becomes visible, predominantly as physical likeness extending over generations, but also as natural likeness in manner or orchestrated simultaneities occurring in the present” (Freeman, 31). Thus, the commonalities of family members are what is supposed to survive from generation to generation, but within the Volkbein family we do not observe that process of cultural transmission in the most positive of lights. The first character we meet in *Nightwood* is Hedvig, mother to Felix, the novel’s “false baron.” Well into her 40s by the time she gives birth to her son, she dies immediately after naming him:

“Early in 1880, in spite of a well-founded suspicion as to the advisability of perpetuating that trace which has the sanction of the Lord and the disapproval of the people, Hedvig Volkbein—a Viennese woman of great strength and military beauty, lying upon a canopied bed of a rich spectacular crimson, the valance stamped with the bifurcated wings of the House of Hapsburg, the feather coverlet an envelope of satin on which, in massive and tarnished gold threads, stood the Volkbein arms, gave birth at the age of forty-five, to an only child, a son, several days after her physician predicted that she would be taken” (3).

Her husband, Felix’s father, had “gone six months earlier,” and so Felix begins his life parentless, his only link to his forbears a set of paintings that he (wrongfully) assumes to be likenesses of his mother and father (9). The Hapsburg crest visible on Hedvig’s bed curtains, although a false claim to an aristocratic position, establishes the interest this novel has in dismantling traditionalized notions of family, kinship, and class-based cultural transmission. For Felix is, at the start of *Nightwood*, presented as the last of a dying lineage. That the story of how Felix fits into such a traditionalized system of kinship relations is bracketed on either end by the story of a woman (for it begins with Hedvig and ends with Robin who, although she bears Felix a child, Guido is not destined

to carry on the family name.) foregrounds the role of women within kinship structures and adds to the importance of femininity in this novel, already emphasized by the extent to which Barnes feminizes both her text's principle characters *and* the text's primary modalities of epistemic production. The world of *Nightwood* is very interested in the experiences, both intellectual and embodied, of the feminine. Thus, it makes sense, within the space of this novel, that Barnes also approaches her engagement with issues of kinship and its relation to the chrononormative through the lens of the feminine.

The relationship between kinship structures and gender has been a critical focal point both within sociological inquiries into various formations of familial relationality and to scholars who examine gender and sexuality. Gayle Rubin's now famous essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" is perhaps the most pertinent to *Nightwood*. The sociological underpinnings of Rubin's essay are taken from Claude Levi-Strauss's authoritative text *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* and from several key writings of Sigmund Freud. Although they have the appearance of biological legitimation, western kinship structures are, according to Levi-Strauss, artificial. They are societally constructed models of relation superimposed onto the subjects that they organize (Rubin, 480). Indeed, Rubin too notes the artificial nature of kinship relations, arguing: "to anthropologists, a kinship system is not a list of biological relatives. It is a system of categories and statuses which often contradict actual genetic relationships" (41). What we can take from these assertions is the idea that, much like gender or compulsory heterosexuality, normative kinship structures are a complex, deeply-ingrained series of

social fictions.<sup>25</sup> The idea that the most important, the most centric social bonds we form are based in blood relation is a human construction and not a biological fact calls into question the primacy of such structures within our culture and leaves them necessarily vulnerable to reorganization: if blood-based kinship structures are a social fiction, then that they be replaced eventually by other, equally constructed systems is perhaps an eventuality and certainly a possibility.

What Gayle Rubin adds to this argument that is so critical to contemporary conversations on gender/sexuality and also to *Nightwood* as a cultural product interested in sex, gender, and kinship is the way that traditional systems of kinship relation are inherently oppressive to the women who enter into them. Rubin argues that western kinship relations are characterized by an intrinsic misogyny, that they necessarily subjugate the women who enter into them at the same time that they support and construct multiple layers of patriarchal benefits to their male participants (34-43). Women function within these systems primarily as mothers and wives; they are always already relational and contingent, valued for their connections to men and children rather than for any kind of individualized or gendered potentiality outside of a maternal/caregiving role. Thus, kinship systems emerge as both socially constructed and rooted in systemic patriarchy and so Barnes' (and indeed others') interest in foregrounding alternative kinship systems brings up an important conversation about sex, gender, and their relation to family. That such traditional systems and the female oppression which underpins them are located "within social systems rather than biology"

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted here that Levi-Strauss looked at kinship structures worldwide, basing his arguments on commonalities that he found within a multitude of different cultural and social configurations, not just within Western cultures.

seems to indicate their vulnerability, their openness to revisions, and in the case of Djuna Barnes and *Nightwood*, those revisions decidedly come in the form of queering forces (43).

The first such force within the space of *Nightwood* is Robin herself. Gayle Rubin notes women's passive roles within traditional kinship systems, that they are exchanged between men and defined by their exchange value (43-45). We have already seen how Robin's construction resists traditional notions of female passivity and her queering role within the kinship systems on display in this novel bolsters that initial characterization: Through her sexuality and gender performance she instantiates an embodied assault on chrononormative sexual management and direction, but now we also see her as a figure capable of dismantling normative kinship bonds and illustrating queer alternatives to them. The second exemplar of queered kinship Barnes depicts again recalls the texts representation of queer sexuality in its attunement to flux and fluidity: Both Rubin and Levi-Strauss note the importance of motherhood to sex, gender, and kinship and Barnes depicts maternity in an interesting and unusual manner in this novel: as a fluid role. Nora, Robin, and Dr. Matthew O'Connor are all at times figured as mothers within the text and in shifting back and forth between queer women and a cross-dressing, gender-bending character who, although he is at times figured in a feminine way, is still biologically male, Barnes queers motherhood, arguing that it is a complex state of being characterized by fluidity rather than fixity. Thus, Barnes reveals kinship to be a space open to the queering potentiality of role shifting and role reversal, a site of potential female empowerment rather than oppression. Through such queered kinship formations Barnes constructs a model of kinship relationality that resists oppression, patriarchy, and female passivity.

Levi-Strauss argues that within traditional kinship systems, marriage functions as “the most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious gifts” (Rubin, 43). In her discussion on the bearing this kind of gift exchange has in relation to patriarchy, Gayle Rubin also notes Levi-Strauss’s assertion that, within this system, exchange value, more so than any other attribute, defines the role of women. Because of their exchange status, the gift of a woman is “not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship” (44). What this means is that, in exchanging women, men extend and expand their kinship structures. A woman is given from her father to her husband and because women are always the gifts and men always the givers and receivers, Rubin argues that “the relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation” (45). The female passivity that inheres in this system marks women, becoming another identificatory site through which women are characterized by a distinct lack of power. Part and parcel of female participation in normative kinship structures then is passivity and it becomes even more evident how patriarchal, how misogynistic traditionalized kinship relations are. Robin Vote, already a character resistant to traditional, passive constructions of gender and female sexuality, continues to resist passivity through her role within the Volkbein family structure. Robin functions as a site of resistance within this novel by virtue of her refusal to remain within the role of wife and mother. Although “exchanged,” she willfully leaves the Volkbein family and becomes an instantiation of a feminine recovery of agentic power. Additionally, the child she gives birth to is, by virtue of mental disability, doomed never to reproduce and she thus effectively ends Felix’s family line.

The importance of the family structure that Robin undoes within this narrative is established early on, for *Nightwood* begins with a depiction of normative kinship. Indeed, it is in a state of decline and this representation of familial relation structures as sites in need of revision and critique establishes the kinship/gender intersection as a critical point of inquiry in this story. In the ever-shifting field of principle characters it is, at this point, Felix who seems to be the narrative's primary subject. It is Hedvig, Felix's mother whom we encounter first and the novel begins with the story of Felix's beginnings. But, we soon find out that both Hedvig and Felix's father, of dubious aristocratic lineage, do not live long enough to act as parents to their young son and so we understand Felix as a character born into a set of kinship relations that is characterized by hazy, questionable pretensions to aristocracy and a marked state of descent. This demonstrated decline becomes another instance of downward trajectory that is so common in this novel and there is a sense in which Felix would like to "bow down" before a great and historic lineage, yet instead is rendered abject by a series of generational failures. Through the Volkbein family Barnes satirizes aristocracy and the tradition of classed, European bloodlines, noting that: "from the mingled passions that made up his past, out of a diversity of bloods, from the crux of a thousand impossible situations, Felix had become the accumulated and single---the embarrassed" (Barnes, 11). Felix "claims" the title of baron and Barnes details his "obsession for what he termed Old Europe: aristocracy, nobility, royalty"(11). Thus within the world of *Nightwood*, kinship, as seen through the lens of the aristocratic is a mere object of ridicule. It has run its course and any modern nostalgia for it seems as out of place as Felix's obsessive interest in the past.

Thus, Robin, through her marriage to Felix enters into a landscape of decay and through her rejection of motherhood and eventually even her role as wife, manages to dismantle what little is left of the Volkbein family tree. Through her infidelity and her unwillingness to remain in her marriage, Robin leaves Felix diminished, but she also queers Felix's kinship structures through her child, the mentally deficient Guido. Guido, the would-be heir Robin provides to Felix is disabled and this representation of disability can be read as a kind of queering of kinship through the extent to which disability functions outside of a matrix of legible subjectivities. Although aristocratic and male, Guido is rendered illegible by this disability and thus through him, Robin has queered the Volkbein family line. Additionally, when examined through a futurity/potentiality lens for the ways in which he can function in service of a reproducibility of culture and, in large part, hetero-normatively constructed culture, Guido represents a particular kind of stoppage: What is most important to Felix, and was to his parents before him, was the aristocratic (although perhaps false) traditions of the Volkbein family. Felix's interest in Robin, although surely also romantic and sexual, is one framed by Levi-Strauss and Rubin's discussion of exchange: he wants her as a wife and mother; he wants to extend his family line through relation with her. Felix believes that in Robin he has found the perfect "gift" and yet not only does she leave him with a child who will not pass on the family name, she leaves their marriage and in so doing undoes both the larger kinship structure of the Volkbein family tree *and* the smaller, primary kinship group of the basic family unit. Another way to frame this conversation would be to examine what happens to legibility when it comes into contact with disability. There is a way in which disability, through its lack of privilege, through its functionality as a site of oppression, forms an

illegible subject positionality and in giving birth to a child who, rather than being a legible heir to the Volkbein family tree and passing on the kind of classed, gendered values that a young son of the upper classes should, Robin creates a child who is marked by illegibility. Thus, she's cut off the family tree in that her child instantiates an unintelligible subject position and this becomes another way in which Robin queers the relational matrix she is surrounded by.

Thus, Robin is the character who ultimately brings the Volkbein family tree into a state of decline and becomes the text's embodied assault on the dominance of normative kinship structures. That she is a woman is critical because using a woman to undo these kinds of chrononormative relations allows for kinship's most oppressed group (women) to re-assert a kind of control and dominance denied to them by systemic patriarchy. Robin resists her own passivity, but also illustrates the ways which women can, through refusal and non-participation, wrest back power from structural oppression. Robin appears to fail as both a wife and a mother, but we must look at these instances of non-success as acts of resistance rather than failure. If Robin can be said to fail in her non-participation in normative kinship relations, it is failure in the form of an act of resistance and denial, a refusal that "allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods" (Halberstam, 3). Seen through this lens, failure as an act and Robin's failure in particular can both be figured as decisive choices to remain illegible. Refusing the wife/mother roles within a kinship system constructs Robin as an illegible woman and in *actively* seeking out those kinds of refusals Robin argues for the legitimacy of remaining illegible. Additionally, that

failure/refusal/illegibility paves the way for the creation of non-normative, queer kinship systems that resist patriarchy, do not oppress their participants, and allow for a kind of fluid shift between roles that mimics the fluidity with which this novel characterizes other aspects of subjectivity, in particular gender and sexuality.

Robin's resistance to performing the wife/mother role recalls Mina Loy's depictions of mothers who re-delineate the traditional family unit and in its place construct a mother/child dyad. Although Robin's model of resistance is ostensibly different in that she rejects motherhood entirely, we do see a similar project of re-working kinship systems so that they favor the women who enter into them *or* choose to leave them. Thus Robin, once again, becomes a way for Barnes to "critique the place of women in Western society".<sup>26</sup> This is only part of *Nightwood's* project of queering normative kinship bonds, however. Barnes also illustrates, through the mutability of her principle characters, that kinship roles can be characterized by fluidity. Normative kinship systems fix relational positions, rigidly defining roles such as "mother" and "father." *Nightwood* seems to re-work those kinds of constructions, instead crafting characters who move in and out of particular kinship roles. Where this kind of fluidity seems most overtly figured in relation to kinship bonds in *Nightwood* is in the text's depiction of motherhood. Motherhood is the most critical way through which women participate in structures of kinship and mothers are among kinship's most rigidly defined and policed members. Because of this and because of the inherent gender inequality of

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<sup>26</sup> Shari Benstock argues that "all of Djuna Barnes' work can be read as a critique of the place of women in Western society" 242. Her observation is pertinent in relation to this novel's engagement with issues of queer kinship because, similar to Loy, her presentations of alternate modalities of familial relation function as an attempt to open up increased space and possibility for women, to suggest that there exist ways of being and becoming other than those bound by tradition, and to construct queer alternatives to participation in oppressive, patriarchal organizational structures.

kinship structures, mothers become the most interesting point of focus for an analysis of queer kinship within this novel. Although Robin is this text's only actual mother, Barnes figures Robin, Nora, and Dr. Matthew O'Connor as mothers at various points during the story. This is interesting in light of his biologically male identity and also when we take into account the fact that, in addition to figuring Nora and Robin as mothers, Barnes at times figures them instead *as children*. That is the crux of this novel's queer depiction of motherhood: that the mother figures in this novel are figured *alternately as both mothers and children*. For this reason, Nora and Robin both can be examined through the lens of kinship and also for the ways in which they function as sites of queered childhood figures. Indeed, there are multiple examples within *Nightwood's* body of scholarship that would like to identify, within the Nora/Robin relationship, a specific mother figure. Susanna Martins in particular argues that their relationship supports the kind of traditionalized understanding of inversion that figures one member of a lesbian dyad as a kind of stand-in mother figure (117). It might be more illuminating, in light of this text's interest in fluidity, to read it as "re-figuring classic stereotypes of lesbian desire" (Allen, 121). We have already been introduced to Robin as a queer mother figure, to the ways in which she shatters and revises normative kinship relations, her resistance to, herself, performing a traditional mother role, and the fact that she slips back and forth fluidly between a mother and child positionality at various times during this text.<sup>27</sup>

Nora also moves back and forth between mother/daughter roles and although she seems child-like at times during her interactions with both her lover Robin and Dr.

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<sup>27</sup> When we do see Robin as a mother she is beyond reluctant; it is clear that she has no interest in motherhood after telling Felix that she did not want their son Guido she slaps him in the face and leaves him for the last time (Barnes, 53). This is the last time we see Robin interacting with her child and indeed in subsequent passages of the novel in which she functions as a mother figure, it is Nora who takes on the role of child.

Matthew O'Connor, she also takes on a maternal role, most markedly in her social position and during the moments in her romantic relationship when their internal hierarchies and power dynamics undergo shifts, re-positioning the two women in relation to one another. At times Nora seems to wield more power than Robin, but there are moments, many of them in fact, during which Robin seems to take it back

When we first meet Nora it is in her salon; her house functions as a creative home for the writers and artists living in Paris during the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and she takes on a role reminiscent of Gertude Stein or Mabel Dodge Luhan, providing a matriarchal presence to a group of artists and writers. Barnes notes that Nora's is the "strangest salon," that its members were poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love; for Catholics, Protestants, Brahmins, dabblers in black magic and medicine" (55). She thus sits at the head of a table of misfits and in the coming together of this assemblage of individuals who don't seem to belong anywhere else we begin to see Nora as a kind of queer mother figure; her salon places her in the role of artistic/literary matriarch. However, it isn't only her position with a specific social circle that characterizes her as such a mother figure. Her emotional characterization also supports this reading: "Nora had the face of all people who love the people, a face that would be evil when she found out that to love without criticism is to be betrayed. Nora robbed herself for everyone; in capable of giving herself warning, she was continually turning about to find herself diminished" (57). This description recalls the kind of unconditional love given by mothers to their children and that Nora is positioned in such a manner speaks to the ways in which she does perform the role of mother within this text. That she does not have an actual child and that she herself is sometimes also figured as a child

constructs a queer version of maternity that once again challenges the kinds of patriarchal, aristocratic, genealogy based systems of kinship that Barnes initially sets up as being traditional or normative. Indeed, she continues to function as a mother during the disintegration of her relationship with Robin, for Robin's increased wanderings, her nightly forays out of their marital home form a kind of metaphor for the way that children leave their mothers, gaining maturity and independence by degree. Barnes notes that "in the years that they lived together, the departures of Robin became slowly increasing in rhythm" and in this heightened mobility we see evidence of Robin's childlike positionality; she is accessing adulthood and a more fully developed sense of self through gaining independence from her mother (64). And yet, because of the shifting power dynamics and role changes during this text they do not remain fixed in a kind of problematic, dyadic inversion. Robin and Nora alternate back and forth between mother and child states and we are thus able to read them and the kinship roles they perform as sites of fluidity rather than stagnation.

Although biologically male, Dr. Matthew O'Connor's cross-dressed presentation and transgressive sexuality both feminize his character, positioning him as a kind of "third sex" figure who embodies both feminine and masculine traits.<sup>28</sup> In spite of his place of power within medical/psychiatric sphere of influence, his complex, problematized presentation of masculinity renders the doctor unreadable as an outright embodiment of patriarchal rule. Although he is positioned as a knowledgeable parental figure, I would argue that he is better read as a mother figure within the novel's queer assemblage of sometimes-children and so, like Nora and Robin, he can be examined, at

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<sup>28</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that both Matthew and Robin are "third sex" figures who are positioned, because of their performance of both femininity and masculinity, as misfits (35).

least in part, through a matriarchal lens. Gilbert and Gubar, terming O'Connor a "parodic prophet," note his participation in a tradition of male witch doctors and shamans who draw a distinct kind of visionary power through performance of the feminine. Through cross-dressing, "the use of female medicinal crafts and even self-castration," these gender bending male/female figures attain a kind of power not accessible to normative men (361). This is important when *Nightwood's* inclusion of a gynecologist figure is placed into the context of a series of societal shifts contemporary with the Modernist period. This was a time during which the figure of the male gynecologist was on the rise. Although initially seen to be invading a body of knowledge reserved for women, the entrance of men into the world of childbirth effectively re-located feminized sites of knowledge within a male sphere and allowed men to occupy positions of power both within medical discourse and a traditional marketplace (Kautz, 80-82). Such figures became increasingly commonplace in Modernist literature and so Dr. O'Connor's cross-dressing becomes important in that it re-locates medicalized knowledge of the female body *back within the feminine*. Because we can't quite read Matthew as a male figure, because he instantiates a disruption in male dominance of epistemic production, we also now see him as a site of reclamation of a body of knowledge long housed within the female sphere (Kautz, 88). Michael Davidson notes that it was the doctor who delivered Nora and argues that this role in her birth allows us to read him as a mother figure rather than as a normatively gendered male gynecologist (215). Indeed his conversations with her character during the "Watchman, What of the Night" chapter certainly seem to bolster this reading in that his conversation with her concerns love, romance, and loss. This focus on relationships recalls the kind of advice mothers give to their daughters during times of

romantic loss. He is performing a markedly gendered role in this section of the novel and the way that this illustrates the fluid nature of gender divisions does more to dismantle the kinds of male/female binaries that Barnes seems to object so strongly to within the space of this text. That those binaries come into question through a figure who embodies both male and female subjectivities, effectively challenges “easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of “female” and “male” (Garber, 10). When Nora initially comes to him it is because she is heartbroken over Robin’s nocturnal wanderings,; she doesn’t understand why Robin is dissatisfied with their relationship. That Nora goes to a male figure for advice normally dispensed by a mother gestures towards a breakdown of normative kinship bonds instantiated by the history of the Volkbein family tree at the beginning of the novel.

In the case of *Nightwood*, discussions of kinship and discussions of the child as a site of cultural transmission become necessarily interwoven because of the way that Barnes figures her characters alternately as mothers and children. Images of children and childhood abound in *Nightwood* and because they are so bound together with the novel’s representations of sexuality and kinship, they are characterized by the same kind of fluidity and movement. The normative child is both the first and final piece of the chrononormative timeline in that the figure of the child represents both the beginning of life and the vessel through which present-day values are transmitted to the next generation. We have noted the importance of the mother within a Levi-Straussian kinship model and also the ways in which the maternal figures in *Nightwood* are alternately figured as mothers *and* children. Nora and Robin slip in and out of such roles, at times embodying the maternal and at other times representing troubled, queer figures of

childhood. This kind of fluidity constructs a model of queer relationality in which roles are not marked by fixity, but rather shift and change. In addition to the way that Nora and Robin are both established as child figures, the novel also depicts one actual, biological child: Guido, Robin and Felix's son. Much in the way that *Nightwood* first illustrated the decomposition of normative kinship structures through its representation of the Volkbein family, this text uses the figure of Guido to illustrate the collapse of normative childhood. At first glance, Guido seems to be the archetypal embodiment of normative childhood and yet, reading deeper into his character it becomes increasingly apparent that he instead represents the queering of the child. Robin too, in her moments of child-like representation, instantiates an embodied, queer adolescence and through both of these representations Barnes depicts a queer version of childhood that resists both the first and final piece of the chrononormative timeline. Indeed, this novel's other primary engagement with queer childhood is Dr. Matthew O'Connor's demonstrated understanding of the workings of futurity and we find, in one of his final monologues, an explication of both futurity and its queer alternative.

Guido is the character who, in a traditional representation of modern childhood, would be associated with normativity, with innocence, and with the kind of futurity that Lee Edelman identifies in *No Future*. Edelman characterizes the figure of the child as "immured in an innocence seen as continuously under siege" and argues that this figure of childhood innocence "marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism" (21). Thus, there is something in the innocence that seems to inhere in the figure of the child that bolsters a heteronormative project of value

and beliefs transmission. Guido embodies this traditionalized innocence and his position as a (sort of) aristocrat instantiates him as a figure of a particular set of classed values too, for his class position forms an important intersection within the matrix of identifications Felix would like to pass on to future generations through him. However, much like the other characters who populate this novel, Guido's status is troubled and his position is problematized. We come to understand that Guido actually embodies a version of childhood that is markedly queer. Barnes notes:

“This child, if born to anything, had been born to holy decay. Mentally deficient and emotionally excessive, an addict to death; at ten, barely as tall as a child of six, wearing spectacles, stumbling when he tried to run, with cold hands and anxious face, he followed his father, trembling with an excitement that was precocious ecstasy” (Barnes, 114-15).

Dr. O'Connor, earlier in the text proclaimed madness to be “the last muscle of aristocracy,” and we can see how Guido embodies this statement (Barnes, 44). If we think about heteronormativity in terms of physicality rather than as just a matrix of racial, class, gender/sexuality identifications, Guido begins to seem a little less normative. He might instantiate a privileged set of gender and class positions, but, as we noted in discussing the way that Robin Vote seems to queer the Volkbein family kinship structure, Guido's physical characteristics and disabled status push him outside of a matrix of legibility: Guido is queered by disability. He is sickly, lacking in robust health, unintelligent, and further even from traditional masculinity than his father Felix. That he requires spectacles is interesting in light of the positionality of the figure of the child that could be said to be, in a both figurative and literal sense, “forward looking.” That so many of his features fall under an umbrella of disabilities is also interesting because of the way in which disability is so often demonized, represented as a physical manifestation

of various states of decline and disorder. If the embodied representation of aristocratic futurity is characterized in this way, we can see that Barnes is making a particular case for the decline of traditional models of both childhood innocence and the process of normative cultural transmission associated with the chrononormative. Additionally, she seems to be reproducing a problematic understanding of disability; we see Guido largely in terms of his disability. Other than the distance he represents from an able-bodied norm, his character is left largely undeveloped.

During a subsequent conversation with the Doctor, Felix reveals that the child Guido, to him, represents and embodies something of his (sort of) former wife Robin: “She is with me in Guido. They are inseparable, and this time, with her full consent” (Barnes, 125). Of course in this exchange we can see further evidence of the extent to which many of the principle characters in this text (Felix, Nora, Jenny) attempt to define and discipline Robin Vote, for he sees his son, her child as his final attempt to contain the woman who was incapable of remaining with him. And yet, there is another set of ideas at stake here also for in setting up Guido as a surrogate for Robin he imbues this child with a necessarily backwards-looking character. Through Guido Felix is able to turn towards the past and although he might characterize it otherwise, remain fixed in a former temporality. This seems to recall Robin herself who, as the “infected carrier of the past” is characterized as always already backwards-looking. If the normative child can be understood to be a figure of forwards-looking, future-oriented potentiality, then Guido’s association here with Robin doubly removes him from the space that the normative, future-looking child must occupy.

Felix notes at one point that Guido's physical body too reminds him of Robin, his "slight neck" recalling that of his mother when Felix first knew her, years earlier (Barnes, 115). Thus we know that for Felix, his son in some ways embodies the mother and another line of association has been drawn between Robin and Guido. This is not the only instance, however, in which Robin is connected to children or to more abstract notions of childhood. Most often, however, Robin is figured as the child of either Nora Flood or Jenny Petherbridge. It is these kinds of characterizations that have caused critics such as Susanna Martin to argue the novel as a site of traditional, problematic representation of same-sex desire as a mother/child relationship (117). There are certainly instances in which Robin is figured as such, in particular in relation to Nora Flood:

"I saw her always like a tall child who had grown up the length of the infant's gown, walking and needing help and safety; because she was in her own nightmare. I tried to come between and save her, but I was like a shadow in her dream that could never reach her in time, as the cry of the sleeper has no echo, myself echo struggling to answer; she was like a new shadow walking perilously close to the outer curtain and I was going mad because I was awake and seeing it, unable to reach it, unable to strike people down from it; and it moving almost un-walking, with the face saintly and idiotic" (154).

In this passage we can see that Nora figures her love for Robin as a parent/child relationship and her attempts to love Robin seem to be little more than a desire to control her. These characterizations do lend themselves to the mother/daughter readings, and yet I would argue that because of the role fluidity, because Robin and Nora are characterized as *both* mother and daughter figures, we have to instead read this engagement with childhood as a gesture towards queer fluidity rather than a problematic construct of a lesbian relationship with a mother/daughter dynamic. What's important here is not that

Robin seems in this instant to be figured as Nora's child, but rather that she is *alternately* figured as mother *and* child and that Nora too undergoes these same instances of flux.

It is also interesting to note the extent to which this novel characterizes Robin as a tomboy figure, embodying both masculine and feminine characteristics. Her masculine clothing has already been noted, but the doctor also, in a late conversation with Nora characterizes Robin as a "prince/princess" figure, setting her up as an embodiment of both a male and female child (Barnes, 145). Additionally, that Nora describes herself as "Echo, struggling to answer" recalls the myth of Echo and Narcissus (154). Echo falls in love with the beautiful *male* figure of Narcissus, but Narcissus loves only himself. We can certainly read Nora and Robin into this story or at least understand how Nora could see a reflection of Narcissus in Robin, and in borrowing this mythic male figure as a lens through which to view her lover, we find another instance in which this text figures Robin as a tomboy figure. Being that the tomboy represents a biological female who performs masculinity, she becomes a figure of queer childhood and so Robin instantiates a particular model of the queer child and adolescent. Judith Halberstam argues that the tomboy is a more acceptable queer child figure and that examples of this kind of androgyny abound in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. Halberstam claims that to be a tomboy is less transgressive than, say, a figure like the Doctor whose gender-bending goes in the other direction. I would agree with Halberstam on this point because it does seem, within the space of this particular text, that Robin is less transgressive than the cross-dressing doctor who wears women's clothing and women's makeup, and yet it is important to note that by Halberstam's definition, the tomboy *does* none the less function as a queer child and thus we can read Robin as such a figure (Halberstam, *Curiouser*, 200). Indeed we can see

evidence of this kind of tomboy construction in Nora's description of Robin's free time activities:

“Sometimes, Nora said, she would sit at home all day, looking out of the window or playing with her toys, trains, and animals and cars to wind up, and dolls and marbles and soldiers. But at the time she was watching me to see that no one called, that the bell did not ring, and that I got no mail nor anyone hallooing in the court, though she knew that none of these things could happen. My life was hers. Sometimes if she got tight by evening I would find her standing in the middle of the room in boy's clothes, rocking from foot to foot, holding the doll she had given us, our child, high above her head as if she would cast it down, a look of fury on her face” (Barnes, 156).

We see further depictions of the tomboy characterization in this passage, but also yet another representation of Robin as a troubled child figure. There is an awareness of sexual tension contained within this passage, for Robin wants to monitor Nora's contact with other people and Nora admits that her life belongs to Robin, and so in this moment Robin functions as not only a child figure, but one possessing an adult sexuality.

Additionally, we see Robin slipping between the roles of mother and child, interacting with the doll who she herself has termed the “child” of her relationship with Nora. That she mistreats this doll/child is no surprise given her unwillingness to be mother to Guido, but it should also be noted that to figure a child as a kind of mother is itself markedly queer for it is a kind of temporal disjuncture, propelling the child forwards into an adulthood for which it is not ready. The kind of fluidity that we see in this text allows Robin to both function as mother and child and for that reason we have a representation of a (sometimes) child figure who herself has a child of her own.

The novel's final refusal of normative models of futurity as they intersect with childhood comes from Dr. Matthew O'Connor. In his last conversation with Nora Flood he tells her:

“What is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl? It was they who were spoken of in every romance we ever read. The girl lost, but what is she but the prince found? The prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace, neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan. We love them for that reason, we were impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers, the sweetest lie of all, now come to be in boy or girl for in the girl it is the prince, in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince and not a man. They go far back in our lost distance where what we never had stands waiting, it was inevitable that we should come upon them for our miscalculated longing has created them; they are our answer to what our grandmothers were told love was and what it never came to be; they, the living lie of our centuries. When a long lie comes up sometimes it is a beauty, when it drops into dissolution, into drugs and drink, into disease and death, it has at once a singular and terrible attraction” (146).

In this passage Matthew critiques the construction of normative ontological timelines and the extent to which it is done so through the cultural myths we are “impaled on” as children. He describes princes, white horses, and other mythic figures through which gender and heteronormativity are constructed, noting, in agreement with Edelman, that these kinds of constructs are nothing more than fictions, they are ideas that “we never had.” So he argues here that we are inculcated into chrononormativity and heterosexuality through myth, through the stories we tell to children and the cultural values that we construct through those acts of narration. We learn how to order our life experiences and how to construct normative timelines. But he also notes the extent to which this process is flawed, that it so often does not actually correspond to lived experience. Thus in this passage he both comes up with an account for a societal attempt

to organize populations through adherence to the chrononormative, but also gives a nod to why those populations might not always find it a usable organizing principle.

*Nightwood* has been seen to engage in a problematic politics of identification that critics long argued constructed transgressive sexuality as a space of decline, decay, and degeneration. A stereotyped tragedy of same sex desire has been read into this text and problematically stereotyped representations of the figure of the lesbian have been assigned, by various critics, to both Nora and Robin. The solution to this problem lies both in the way that the novel suggests a utility to undoing, a politics of relation that values the experiences of shattering and losses of sovereignty that these characters undergo, and in the way that it does, in fact, attempt to re-script the stereotypes that many early critics found rampant in the text. Rather than merely reproducing tragic homosexual subjects, mother/daughter lesbian relationships, and the idea of inversion, this novel instead resists the kinds of binarism that inhere in those characterizations. Gender and sexuality are feminized in this novel with all characters, even the male ones, seeming to embody both femininity and masculinity. Felix and the Doctor, each in their own way, perform versions of alternative femininity and Nora and Robin both seem to embody several key masculine characteristics. Additionally, the novel, most markedly through the character of Dr. Matthew O'Connor, produces a queer alternative to normative timelines that illustrates the fluidity of queer sexuality, fluid structures of kinship that resist tradition, and a representation of childhood and futurity that denies the dominance of normative transmission.

## Chapter 3

### Against Uplift: Langston Hughes, Queer Sexuality, and the Politics of Black Respectability

A spectrum of transgressive sexualities from heterosexual sex that refused to limit itself to the spaces of marriage and reproduction to queer same sex desire characterized and defined Harlem during the inter-war period. A wide range of individuals, among them both public figures and private citizens resisted the trappings of normative time and traditional existential patterns. And yet for many years there was a resistance to the idea of examining the Harlem Renaissance through a queer lens or indeed even bringing into the open the queer sexual identifications and practices of many of the period's main writers and artists. This is of course partially the result of the kind of heteronormativity that has long governed American society and yet, the politics of race also play a key role in the erasure of Harlem's queerness. To understand the stakes of queer time within Hughes' work, it is essential to frame Hughes' engagement with issues of sexuality and sexual transgression against the backdrop of a politics of Black respectability termed "uplift ideology" that aimed to re-locate black subjectivity within the boundaries of the middle class.<sup>29</sup> The historical period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Second World War was a great time of flux within African American communities in the United States. This was the time of The Great Migration, when African Americans poured out of the rural South and into the large, urban centers of the North. Cities like St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York saw their Black populations soar and

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<sup>29</sup> Even Higginbotham notes the role of the Black Baptist Church within a broader movement of social reform, arguing: "the politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations" (187). At the heart of this movement was the desire to model a newly formed urban, Black subjectivity after the values, beliefs, and social practices of the white middle classes.

African American cultural patterns underwent a series of massive shifts as a result of these relocations: “African American populations in urban centers multiplied so rapidly that black people became culturally and politically visible in unprecedented ways” and “the production and reproduction of the meaning of race itself was used as a symbol for popular understandings of character or value and its relevance to African Americans idea of who they were and how they fit into society all became more complex” (Chapman, 5,6). Thus, in increasing numbers Black Americans found themselves living in close proximity to and even within traditionally white communities. These kinds of geographical and societal shifts sparked a series of cultural transformations as African Americans sought new, more centric positions within modern American society.

At this time in the northern metropolises, an assimilationist movement sprang to life and, bolstered in large part by the Black Baptist Church, a broad, cultural interest in the re-signification of the black body moved to the forefront of African American public discourse. In large part these subjective (individual) and cultural (identificatory) changes sought to combat stereotypes that defined black subjectivity in terms of its “associations with insatiability and excess”, to move away from prevailing, externally constructed notions of Black subjectivity that defined it as “inappropriate, maladapted, and underdeveloped: primitive” (Abdur-Rahman, 10). Attempting to counteract these stereotypes and the prejudices that they engendered, uplift ideology sought to elevate black subjectivity through performance of what was, at its core, a set of values characterized by both their Eurocentric, middle class positionality and in terms of their regulation of gender and sexuality, their heteronormativity. The critical pieces of the uplift project were conventional morality, strict adherence to Christian codes of behavior,

a strong work ethic, and the prioritization of the traditional nuclear family. The prevailing attitude at the time amongst supporters of uplift ideology was that the closer urban African American subjectivity could move towards these white, middle class values, the less prejudice Black Americans would experience as a result of being perceived as deviating from societally defined norms of behavior and conduct. Although this was an important re-negotiation of black subjectivity in the reconstruction era and it did shift mainstream perception of black identity further away from the problematic, primitivistic constructions that dominated public opinion at the time, it also amounted to a rather problematic white-washing of black identity; it bolstered support for assimilationist identity politics as well as constructed African American subjectivity in such a way as to discourage deviation from rigidly defined norms through strict policing of both gender and sexuality. Essentially it sought to define black subjectivity in terms of the heteronormative, to lay “the foundation for the necessary disavowal of black queers in dominant representations of the African American community” (McBride, 71). Thus, uplift constructed a matrix of legibility that excluded any kind of transgressive identification or queer sexuality. A large part of the cultural work of Langston Hughes and others, then, during the Harlem Renaissance became a collective push back *against* uplift ideology, a desire to broaden the definitions of black subjectivity in America, especially within the space of the metropole. Thus, representations of transgressive sexuality emerged in the 1920s and 30s as critical sites of contest not only against the politics of respectability, but also against monolithic notions of minoritarian subjectivity that sought to redefine blackness along rigid, fixed lines of identification that were exclusionary, patriarchal, and heteronormative. Langston Hughes and other Black writers

worked to construct alternate understandings of Black subjectivity by engaging in “a critique of normalizing narratives of racial and sexual identity” (Vogel, 5). They effectively wrote resistance against the assimilationist project of uplift and “expanded the literary and performative possibilities of blackness and sexuality through the enunciation of alternate modes of thought, feeling, and existence” (Vogel, 5). Thus, Hughes poetry and prose function as a site of critical importance both within a Black, Modernist literary canon and a project of narrating the lives of queer peoples of color in America.

There are several short poems from Hughes’ *Montage of a Dream Deferred* that concisely instantiate the particularity of this relationship between transgressive sexuality, uplift ideology, and queer time. “High Low” and “Dive” in particular encapsulate Hughes’ interest in questioning both the assimilationist politics of uplift and the way in which adherence to normative temporal modalities itself becomes a distinct form of social control. “High Low” exemplifies one of the major tropes in Hughes’ writing: heteroglossia. Hughes often adopts voices other than his own and/or multiple narrators in his written work, in this way speaking from multiple, shifting points of view. The central voice of “High Low” is not a stand-in for Hughes or an embodiment of sexual or gendered transgression, but rather of one of uplift’s proponents. Its tone is castigatory, an indictment against the kind of stereotypical identifications that uplift sought to erase from African American subjectivity. The poem’s speaker begins with the lines “God knows/We have our troubles, too-/One trouble is you” (Hughes, Ed. Rampersand, 411). The speaker goes on to describe the ways in which this “you,” (referring to a “low culture” Black subjectivity) fails to adhere to a series of uplift-proscribed moral and behavioral codes. Hughes writes:

“

You talk too loud  
 Cuss too loud  
 Look too black,  
 Don't get anywhere  
 And sometimes it seems  
 You don't even care  
 The way you send your kids to school  
 Stockings down  
 (not Ethical Culture)  
 And the way you shout out loud in church  
 (Not St. Phillip's)  
 and the way you lounge on doorsteps  
 Just as if you were down South  
 (not at 409)  
 The way you clown  
 The way in other words  
 You let me down  
 Me, trying to uphold the race” (Hughes, Ed. Rampersand 412).

Noteworthy in these lines is a distinct refusal to adhere to the strictures of middle class morality and behavior. The “you” of this poem manifests a series of identifications that separate them from rather than align them with a politics of black, middle class respectability. Also of note, however, is the way Hughes engages with temporality.

Elizabeth Freeman, in her explications of what she terms “domestic time” notes the ways in which domesticity produces normative bodies (40-45). Adherence to strict codes of morality, scheduled time, education, and family oriented socialization allows for the production and reproduction of normative culture. Deviations from these kinds of managed temporal patterns then produce queerness and Hughes’ “you” instantiates that queerness in several key ways: The subjects of this poem “cuss too loud” and “lounge on doorsteps.” This represents a freed, transgressive sexuality that refuses to relegate itself to

the institutional space of marriage and the physical space of the home. Lounging on doorsteps and swearing loudly calls to mind images of men who, rather than being at work, are sitting outside cat-calling women. The use of the word “lounge” illustrates a certain laziness and the “cussing” implies an inappropriate lack of mannered speech. Uplift aimed to introduce black Americans to the type of work and family oriented life that characterized the white middle classes and it would have been socially inappropriate for a middle class man to act in such a manner. This transgressive expression of sexuality was perhaps the most obvious way to fight against the politics of respectability, for sexuality was one of the key battlegrounds on which the newly emerging black middle class defined itself. Heteronormative, managed sexuality was “one of the primary measures by which the middle class differentiated itself from the working class” (Chauncy, 253). Whereas working class sexuality was allowed freer expression, middle class norms strictly regulated gender and sexuality, outlining a matrix of legibility that excluded such free, transgressive performances of sex and sexuality.

The subjects of this poem send their children to school “stockings down,” illustrating a refusal to instill a normative value system (as it pertains to dress and hygiene, two of uplift’s primary targets) in their children. Additionally and perhaps most importantly, they “don’t get anywhere,” they resist forward motion. This line refers not only to spatial movement, but also temporal. The speaker is dismayed that the “you” of the poem steadfastly refuses to make progress, they refuse to be uplifted, propelled forwards into the kind of teleological, ontological positionality that will elevate them up to the level of those whose class position allows them participatory status in the kind of chrononormativity Freeman outlines in her discussions on temporality and normativity.

Thus, this poem instantiates what it is exactly that Hughes is writing against, the social movement to which his work is meant to provide a distinct kind of queer counter-force.<sup>30</sup>

Another poem from this collection, “Dive” illustrates that counterforce, the queer, sexualized, transgressive voice that provides an alternate set of identificatory points that construct subjectivity in opposition to the politics of respectability. This poem effectively “critiques the racial and sexual normativity of uplift ideology” (Vogel, 3). It is a short piece, but in its six few lines it manages to encapsulate the intersection between transgressive sexuality and temporality that Hughes explores in his depictions of a black subjectivity that refuses to be ordered, managed, and contained within the bounds of the chrononormative:

“Lenox Avenue  
by daylight  
runs to dive in the Park  
but faster...  
faster...  
after dark” (407).

At work in these lines is a sort of half-hidden gesture towards transgressive sexuality.

That the poem’s movement picks up after dark, increasing in speed is a representation of the kind of free, “fast” sexuality that defines the space of Harlem and that this happens to an even greater extent *after* dark establishes the night-time, much as it was for both Mina Loy and Djuna Barnes, as a temporal marker for queerness. Much has been written about

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<sup>30</sup> This phenomenon has been observed in more than one Harlem Renaissance author. James Smethurst notes: “If we take normativity to be a major concern of modernism and bohemia in the US from early 20<sup>th</sup> century onward, then, as with the representation of divided or fragmented subjectivities, black writers were, because of their peculiar position in the US, in the vanguard” (Smethurst, 186).

the way in which Harlem itself, as a space, instantiates modern, sexual transgression, and yet it is important to note also the role of temporality, the role of the nighttime in the construction of Harlem as a distinctly queer space.<sup>31</sup> The implication in this poem is that the daytime, quotidian activities of Harlem take on a new form at night, that sexuality and subjectivity interweave, that the character of the city becomes altered, queered by an expression of the kind of limitless sexuality that uplift would like to manage and contain. This is evident also in the rhythm of the lines: They gain speed as the poem progresses and that tone mirrors the “faster” imagery Hughes employs, bolstering an image of Harlem that foregrounds its “fast,” free-moving sexuality: As nighttime continues to unfold within this poem and Hughes constructs a portrait of the after-hours temporality that was so strongly associated with transgression, vice, and same-sex desire, the increase in speed itself alerts the reader to the text’s stakes of queer sexuality. This is another clear instance in which the modernist project of matching form to thematic content emerges. Hughes uses this increasingly fast tone to convey a sense of sexual transgression to his readers. “Fast” has long been synonymous with hyper-sexual and Hughes gestures towards this connection through form as well as content here.

Additionally, the way that Hughes describes Lenox avenue, one of Harlem’s main arterials, diving into the lush vegetation of central park calls to mind images of penetration and we can thus read Harlem as an intrusive sexual force entering New York

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<sup>31</sup> Both James DeJongh and Kevin Mumford write extensively about space and its relation to sexuality. Writing about Harlem specifically, DeJongh notes: “In its racial transformations, Harlem had become the embodiment of an idea, for by its very existence Harlem posed a challenge to contemporary limits and cultural terms within which personal being for both blacks and whites were imagined and defined” (15). Mumford, in his explication of the concept of the “interzone,” argues that once sexuality is freed from the space of the home, once it is visible (queer sexuality in particular) it is able to move more to the center and gain a greater cultural foothold. (78-81).

City's other neighborhoods and areas. Harlem then functions not only as a space of transgression, but as a site with the transgressive potentiality to transform New York as a whole. Thus this poem suggests a new kind of subjectivity: It illustrates the way in which Harlem, as a metonym for individual identity, undergoes a kind of subjective transformation as a result of sexual transgression. This poem uses the space of Harlem to gesture towards the kind of embodied transformations that Hughes proposes as alternative sites of black identity to those created by uplift.

These two poems, when read alongside one another, gesture towards a critical project within Hughes' larger body of work: The use of queer temporality as a rebellion against the prevailing politics of respectability that sought to redefine black subjectivity in terms of uplift ideology and social assimilation. Each piece specifically represents temporality and when read as a pair they illustrate both uplift *and* its alternative. The "you" of "High and Low" depicts rebellion in the realms of sexuality, kinship, and parenting/values transmission and the identifications constructed through "Dive" illustrates the way in which subjectivity in Harlem can transform itself based on a collective turning away from the politics of respectability. Indeed the word "dive" itself seems to evoke a sexual register, gesturing towards a host of sexual acts that uplift would have deemed illegible. These themes echo time and time again within Hughes' poetry and prose; in both his early and later works we can see distinct rebellions against the way that chrononormativity dictates sexuality, kinship relations, and the functionality of the child as a site of cultural transmission.

The intersection between sexuality and time instantiated within these two poems recurs throughout Hughes' work, both in his poetic pieces and his autobiography. "Café 3

a.m.” is one such poem and is an important exemplar in particular because of its overt representation of queer sexuality. Often depictions of queer sexuality are half-hidden within Hughes’ written works. They are obscured by partial erasures and seem to have been crafted with a kind of ambiguity that makes queer readings exercises in strong argumentation. In order to explicate what is queer about them, one has to first prove the very presence of queer elements. “Café 3 a.m.” however brings same sex desire into the forefront, depicting Harlem’s queer nightlife in such a way as to suggest both the presence of a queer subculture and that subculture’s temporal arrangement. The queer denizens of Harlem that Hughes depicts in this poem pronounce their queer sexuality openly within a public space, and yet their presence in such a place is made possible by the late hour of the night in which they appear. There is a sense in which these queer Harlemites own the streets only during the late, after hours temporality associated with the liminal.<sup>32</sup> This representation gestures towards the underlying reason that temporality is as important as spatiality in discussions about Hughes’ work: It is not just the space of Harlem that renders queer subculture possible, but also the specific after-hours temporality during which the strictures of the chrononormative become loosened. Although to some extent Harlem itself is a space that instantiates sexual transgression, it is the nighttime Harlem that opens up an arena of possibility for the free performance of queer sexuality. The poem’s first stanza directly makes mention of a stereotyped understanding of (male) homosexual subjectivity: “Detective from the vice squad/With

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<sup>32</sup> Shane Vogel notes the way in which “Afterhours time and space shaped the emergence of a modern gay and lesbian community” (112). He argues that the Harlem nighttime functions as “a historical mode of temporality that reorganizes the normative temporal order upon which logics of familial reproduction and capitalist productivity are constituted and maintained” (112).

weary sadistic eyes/Spotting fairies” (Hughes, Ed. Rampersand, 406). We see an overt representation here both of male sexuality and its connection to temporality. Because we observe these homosexual men first through the eyes of the *vice* squad we can read them as sex workers and their after-hours presence on the streets gestures towards the way in which participation in such liminal economies (sex work) is relegated to a late night temporality. Hughes notes the “Sadistic” gaze of the police officers and because of this word choice and its connection to the (certainly transgressive) queer practice of sado-masochism, there is some question as to whether or not the gaze of the policemen is desirous or sexualizing in addition to being disciplinary. There is a way in which these officers could be engaging in their own moments of queer desire even as they are policing the illicit activities of Hughes’ sex workers. Thus, again we have an imagistic representation of the threat of queer desire: Not only does this moment of sexual transgression have ramifications for the black community, but it extends itself outward as well into the white community that borders Harlem, instantiated here by the police officers. That they characterize the sex workers as “fairies” is also important, given the extent to which this pejorative characterization reveals an anxiety about traditional masculinity: for men to be perceived as “fairies” means that in dress, presentation, and affect they deviate from normative, hegemonic notions of what it means to be masculine in America. Thus, these male sex workers represent not only a threat to normative heterosexuality, but also to masculine gender presentation. That Hughes employs figures who are black, engaged in sex work, not traditionally masculine *and* homosexual amounts to a distinct kind of rebellion against uplift in that it combines three separate sites of transgression, constructing an individual who because of his positionality at the

intersection of all three functions as a heightened site of resistance to the kind of social control that targets sexuality and race. We know that uplift ideology sought to elevate Black subjectivity to the kind of position occupied by the white middle classes, and we also know that sexuality was, at the time, thought to be relegated to the space of the home. Kevin Mumford argues that queer sexuality within Harlem was especially dangerous because of the way in which it brought black sexuality, queer sexuality, and even interracial sexual activity into the public sphere. These displays then sought to unseat and unsettle the strict division between public and private that the politics of black respectability/uplift constructed in reference to sex and sexuality (73-75). Thus, Hughes' depiction of queer, black sexuality was important in terms of degree: it instantiated a multi-faceted, multi-located kind of rebellion that assaulted traditionalized notions of race, acceptable sexual expression, and the dominance of compulsory heterosexuality. Although Hughes' queer, Black sex workers are undoubtedly marginal, operating beyond the boundaries of legibility, there is a way in which these kinds of rebellion, far as they are from the center, are perceived socially as harbingers of moral decline even within centralized, normative, legible positions. Jack Halberstam notes the extent to which social change happens first on the edges of societies, that in order to observe early rebellions against strict social norms, one must "look to the margins" (Halberstam, *GF*, 2). Kevin Mumford too notes this kind of phenomenon although he ties it specifically to the space of Harlem, arguing that writers such as Hughes chose to represent Bohemian space (like Harlem) because it was there that queer sexuality (and also interracial sexual acts) were the most open, that within Harlem and the Village one could observe the strongest, most overt rebellions against uplift (78-9).

Sexuality was one of the most important focal points of uplift ideology in large part due to the way in which managed, contained sexuality was a key target of regulatory power: Heteronormative bodies were bodies that functioned within a matrix of legibility. Transgressive bodies were not. That it be important *in particular* for Black bodies to emerge as normative has much to do with the history of oppression and stereotype in regards to black sexuality. Within the transatlantic cultural space that fostered the triangular trade, Black sexuality has long been associated with licentiousness and transgression. Although initially these kinds of overtly racist stereotypings were the product of colonial oppression, the burgeoning field of sexology, around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, further solidified cultural associations between racial and sexual otherness. In this way, both racial and sexual deviations from the norm became pathologized and were increasingly constructed as linked discourses.<sup>33</sup> Valerie Rohy describes this phenomenon, noting “Among these was the rhetoric borrowed from evolutionary science to equate sexual backwardness to racial backwardness, the rhetoric, that is that sexologists used to define homosexual identity by analogy with blackness and primitivism.” (2,3). Thus, early sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Kraft-Ebbing, in their attempts to understanding sexual deviance, constructed analogs between such gender/sex transgressions and (what they conceived of as) a similar set of subjective deviations as they pertained to race. If heteronormativity was understood one kind of center, a site of social legibility, whiteness was thought to be its racial counterpart.

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<sup>33</sup> Siobhan Somerville discusses the linked discourses of racial and sexual otherness extensively, arguing that “negotiations of the color line shaped and were shaped by the emergence of notions of sexual identity and the corresponding epistemological uncertainties surrounding them” (3). She notes that “it was not merely a historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either “homosexual” or “heterosexual” emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between “black” and “white” bodies” (3).

Thus, white heterosexuality functioned as a regulatory norm and as such, deviations from either whiteness or heterosexual subject positions amounted to dangerous instances of centrifugal movement. Thus blackness and queer sexuality were a part of the same discourse, used in service of defining each other. This is why Siobhan Somerville and others have, in their analyses of turn of the century black culture, relied on concepts such as Borden's "genderracial," a way of understanding the connection between race and the kinds of sex/gender systems that regulate sexuality and gender identification in various social fields. The notion "genderracial" identification sees race and gender as co-constructing, interpenetrating forces and argues that within histories of minoritarian subject formation, race and gender are always already linked, used to define and delineate one another (335).

This idea of the genderracial informs this poem, for it allows us to see the way in which racial and gender/sexual deviance are co-constructed and defined externally, in this case by the poem's police officers. Indeed we first see Hughes' Black sex-workers through the gaze of the vice squad and thus there is a way in which the reader seems to be encouraged to see Black same sex desire through the eyes of this (presumably white) officer. And yet, in large part due to Hughes' heteroglossic form, the poem also encourages readers to see these men through another, more understanding set of eyes. It works to "dispel stereotypes" through the next stanza's construction of queer, black subjectivity in which Hughes notes that in spite of the fact that "some folks" see these men as "degenerates," "God, nature/or somebody/made them that way" (Borden, 339). In this the final line of the poem Hughes articulates an understanding of sexuality that allows for the possibility of same sex desire as essential, internal. That it is possible that

“God” or “nature” created queer subjectivity gestures towards a way of understanding same sex identification outside of a matrix of deviance, transgression, and the illegible. Thus, Hughes both illustrates the extent to which an external gaze attempts to fix black, queer subjectivity as a pathologized site of deviance *and* the process of subjective re-delineation that allows for more nuanced, complex understandings of identity which broaden the matrix of acceptable sex/gender identification.

Thus it is in large part due to form that Hughes is able, in this poem, to instantiate a rebellion against the hetero and chrononormative. Because of the heteroglossic construction of the poem through which we hear from multiple voices, we understood the way in which subjectivity is able to form and reform itself, to broaden black identity beyond the bounds of both the primitive (“degenerate”) and the uplift-defined, respectable identitarian construction that would indict the “fairies” of this poem for their sexuality and their participation in marginalized economies of sex work. Within this one poem Hughes thus presents his readers with a black, queer sexuality rendered possible through the queered temporality of nighttime Harlem and also encourages them to see this open, same-sex desire as an acceptable option within a range of burgeoning Black subjectivities, thereby resisting monolithic identity constructions that uplift identity politics sought to dictate. The twin registers of queer sexuality and queer time share a centric position within this poem and through it Hughes’ project of resistance becomes increasingly visible.

This interest in sexuality and time becomes a critical sub-text within Hughes’ work and it is a key focal point even in his prose pieces. His autobiography, *The Big Sea*,

contains a chapter entitled “Spectacles in Color” which gives an account of a popular drag ball that took place yearly in Harlem:

“Strangest and gaudiest of all Harlem spectacles in the 20s and still the strangest and gaudiest, is the annual Hamilton Club Lodge Ball at Rockland Palace Casino. I once attended as a guest of A’Lelia Walker. It is the ball where men dress as women and women dress as men. During the height of the New Negro era and the tourist invasion of Harlem, it was fashionable for the intelligentsia and social leaders of both Harlem and the downtown area to occupy boxes at this ball and look down from above at the queerly assorted throng on the dancing floor, males in flowing gowns and feathered headdresses and females in tuxedos and box back suits” (Hughes, *TBS*, 273).

The texture of this description is important in that it describes, to some extent, the kind of spectacle that was also of interest to writers engaged in the “slumming” literature that Phillip Herring identifies. Hughes’ use of the word “queerly” and his illustration of gender-bending costumes could be found in the work of authors much less interested in the humanity of their subjects, but Hughes not only imparts a certain dignity to the ball guests, but also subtly engages with issues of the gaze and slumming itself: He notes that it was “fashionable” for the “intelligentsia and social leaders” to look down upon the ballgoers from elevated theatre boxes and in this representation we come to understand that *Hughes* understands the extent to which this kind of transgressive gender representation was itself a spectacle. It was trendy for those who were “in the know” to attend and observe this ball and we thus understand queer sexuality/gender presentation to be always/already mediated and constructed by an external gaze.

This event had been a tradition in the neighborhood since 1869. Although its heyday was in the 1920s and by the early 1930s it had approached something near mainstream, drawing crowds no longer just from the neighborhood, but also from the

white middle classes outside of Harlem (Chauncy, 257). While it might seem odd that an event featuring female impersonators was a fixture on the Harlem social scene as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is important to remember Harlem's historical position as a space of social and sexual deviance. The neighborhood had long been associated with sex work and it was often the custom of local police officers to look the other way. While they didn't refrain entirely from interfering in the neighborhood's marginal sex economies, they were responding to mainstream attitudes that would have wanted such vice districts localized outside of the white community. Harlem provided just such a space (Chauncy, 249). Because of this willingness on the part of authorities to allow crime to go unpunished and unprosecuted, all kinds of illicit sexual activity happened within the space of Harlem with more freedom than it might have in other areas and it was not uncommon to see acts of gender bending such as cross-dressing even on the street in the neighborhood, especially during the 1920s and 1930s. However, as with many other performances of divergent sexuality (as we have observed already in "Café 3 a.m.") such performances were often relegated to the late night hours (Chauncey, 259). The Hamilton Lodge Ball, however, brought such acts of gender defiance into a more public space and as such the event became a kind of face for the liberated, queer sexuality made possible by the socio-historical conditions of turn of the century Harlem. That Hughes would include the Lodge Ball in his autobiography makes sense when his work is analyzed through the lens of race/sexuality and when we understand his writings to be part of a larger project of shining a literary light on queer sexuality. However, Hughes' mentions of drag are important not only because of the way that they depict the visibility of one form of queer performativity, but because of the nature of female impersonation itself and what kind of

implications it had for black, male sexual identity in the modern era. The drag ball (and indeed cross-dressing itself as an everyday cultural practice in Black Harlem) wasn't transgressive just because it suggested homosexuality, but because of the way in which it formed a direct threat to a still developing sense of what it meant to perform black masculinity: "A womanish acting man became a special threat to working class black men because their masculinity was under constant challenge by the dominant white ideology" (Chauncey, 253-4). In the years following the civil war black masculinity was forced to undergo a series of complex negotiations, attempting to assert itself as a viable position in the face of a majoritarian, white populace who were uneasy with the idea that black males could occupy positions of power. A large part of uplift's project was to construct a version of black masculinity that could place the black male in a patriarchal place at the head of the black family structure, but in order to inhabit such a position so black men had to perform a rigid, heteronormative subjectivity that was above reproach and beyond transgression. The black female impersonator became an assault against this normative, black masculinity/sexuality in that it suggested that being black and male did not necessarily mean that an individual was heterosexual and/or traditionally masculine. Thus, in terms of a project of chrononormativity, the female impersonator comprises a direct assault against the idea of normative sexuality in particular against the way in which adolescent and early adult sexuality was directed towards the heterosexual and the procreative. For Hughes to engage with this transgressive practice, to give it space and voice within his body of written work is a gesture towards the same kind of awareness that we saw in "Café 3 a.m.," an understanding of black, male sexuality as something other than a monolith, a space of possibility that can and should include *more* than merely

traditional kinds of identifications. He was effectively “composing alternative narratives of race and sex” (Vogel, 4).<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Hughes was criticized for these kinds of representations even by other members of his literary cadre. Other black authors, in an attempt to forge a new kind of “serious” black authorship, were displeased with Hughes’ depictions of campy, Black, cross-dressing men for what they perceived as a “feminized” black body, “an unacceptable representative of black leadership and strength” (Moore, 499). Thus, Hughes’ depictions of the feminized black, male body were especially dangerous and especially indicative of a particular set of rebellions against chrononormative constructions of sex and sexuality because they struck at the very core of what it meant to be black and masculine in early 20<sup>th</sup> century urban America. The way that the feminized, male, black body served as a threat to traditional notions of black masculinity is a much-discussed phenomenon within scholarship on race and sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance (and indeed also in subsequent periods of African American literary production.) David Ikard, in his work on Black masculinity notes:

“While it should go without saying that black men are no more or less homophobic than white men, their racial subjectivity as men radically alters the stakes of their masculine negotiations. Given that society continues to treat heterosexual white middle-class manhood as normative and black manhood by comparison as deviant and pathological, the blind pursuit of normalcy and respectability for black men in the (white) public domain renders them complicit in the very discourses of power—including heteronormativity—that sustain the status quo. But this complicity is complicated to identify and root out because even though black manhood, like all gender identities, is socially constructed, it nevertheless informs and, in some instances, dictates how black men, particularly those with limited education and resources, are treated in almost every facet of society. “ (61).

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<sup>34</sup> Another element of rebellion against the heteronormative that shouldn’t be ignored is the way in which camp, a critical component of the drag show, itself functioned as a space of resistance. David Halperin notes camp’s function to “resist the power of that system from within by means of parody, exaggeration, amplification, theatricalization, and literalization of normally tacit codes of conduct—codes whose very authority derives from their privilege of never having to be explicitly articulated and thus from their customary immunity to critique. I’m thinking of codes of masculinity for example” (Halperin, 29).

That Ikard notes the inter-relation of social construction and race relations is important, because it hits at the very core of Uplift's project: to amend and alter the way in which black subjectivity was socially constructed in such a way as to align it more closely with an identitarian politics deemed acceptable by a middle class, white populace. Speaking solely in terms of Black *masculinity*, this meant constructing a version of a Black, male subjectivity that adhered as strictly as possible to white, centric normativity.<sup>35</sup> Thus the Lodge Balls (in particular their threat to Black masculinity) became a key target of the coterie of Harlemites who espoused Uplift ideology and in choosing to write about the cross-dressing that took place at them as a way to recover identificatory complexity, Hughes made a case for the utility of re-working prevailing, notions of Black subjectivity as it pertained to gender and sexuality. These kinds of constructions of normative Black identity become a compulsory, cultural monolith and Hughes' interest in dismantling it becomes an important site of queer rebellion within his work. Through his portrayals of the Lodge Ball, cross-dressing, and a more open, fluid notion of Black identity, Hughes encourages his readers to see transgressive identifications as something other than seedy or marginal.

Hughes was by no means the only author to narrate the experience of transgressive gender and sexual identifications. There was, at this time, a whole sub-genre of "slumming literature" that offered readers a window into the lives of those living on the margins of society. However, in most cases these texts actually encouraged

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<sup>35</sup> Ikard also notes: "Though race, gender, and sexuality are social inventions designed in large part to control and police bodies and, by extension, to make the value system of the dominant group (in this case, elite white men) synonymous with normalcy, the real and material consequences of being raced, gendered, classed, and sexualized mean that most black men experience these invented categories as social realities rather than social fictions" (65).

viewing their subject through a problematic, othering lens: “Slumming literatures were designed to comprehend and codify social contact across borders segregating social classes, including classes based on ethnicity, race, capital, gender deviance, and in due time, sexual identity” (Herring, 5). Herring argues that although this kind of literature was largely problematic, there were “a handful of U.S. writers and artists in the first half of the twentieth century who queered the popular genre, turned the slumming narrative against itself, used it to manipulate homosexual identifications and frustrated the compulsion to reveal underworld sexual knowledge” (3). Hughes’ efforts to bring the Lodge Ball into the public eye in order to broaden the parameters of Black subjectivity rather than depict it as a kind of underworld spectacle, together with Djuna Barnes’ depictions of after-hours Paris nightlife, because of their interest in subverting the problematic constructions of the slumming genre then emerge as efforts to rework both the genre itself and the subjective understandings that it engendered. Rather than relying on stereotyped depictions of liminal sexualities, they instead crafted complex portraits of fluid identities that resisted monolithic constructions. By bringing the Lodge balls out into the open and using slumming literature to reconfigure notions of the legible black body, Hughes allows such queer practices to become markers for complexity rather than pity. In so doing, Hughes resists the tendency to reduce and flatten difference within various experiences of Black identity. He “aggressively challenged status quo notions of black humanity, pointing out-among other things- that the double consciousness thinking that propels (elite) blacks to sanitize the funkiness of their lived experience in white eyes is itself dehumanizing” (Ikard, 66-67). Hughes’ “argument about *unsanitizing* blackness for the sake of white acceptability clears a space for seeing “deviant” sexualities and

eroticisms as constitutive of black's complex humanity and not markers of racial shame or pathology" (Ikard, 67). Thus, representing the Harlem Lodge Ball as a site of complexity effectively re-works transgressive sexual identification and re-fashions it as a space of possibility.

Sam See also notes the queer stakes of Hughes' focus on the Hamilton Lodge Ball, arguing that the Ball encouraged contact between heterosexuals and homosexuals, people of color and whites, and those on opposing sides of normative gender identifications. In so doing, it became "Harlem's most representative metonym" (799). See sees this metonym arise in multiple places within Hughes' body of work, arguing that Hughes employs it as part of a larger queer project of dismantling normativity produced not only by Uplift, but also by a larger majority of writers active in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s. Collections such as *The Weary Blues* illustrate multiple kinds of drag and the crossing of lines of color, gender, class, and sexuality. Drag becomes "an aesthetic of visual crossing" (800-801). This creates a series of ambiguities as narrators shift, adopt different voices, engage in various acts of drag and crossing. In fact, the speaker not only remains un-gendered, but s/he claims racial multiplicity also, in so doing crosses both lines of gender and race.

Sam See is not the only critic to identify the trope of the ambiguous speaker in Hughes' writing. Christina Schwarz also notes this phenomenon, arguing that in many of Hughes' poems, in particular in the collection entitled *The Weary Blues*, there is a marked ambiguity in terms of sex and sexuality (73). Some of the pieces seem as though they could be written about heterosexual relations, and yet the reason they are so easily read as

heterosexual poems is that we assume that the speaker is female. Hughes adopts a female voice or even an un-gendered one and because of this the writings seem to concern themselves with an erotics of normativity. However, I would argue that even when Hughes does adopt an ambiguous or un-gendered voice, there are other textual clues that align the poems more closely with queer sexuality. “Young Sailor,” “Desire,” and “Ma Man,” all from *The Weary Blues* collection are three such pieces. Each poem constructs sexuality in a distinct way, each poem features an ambiguous narrator, and yet each can be read as a queer text because of the way that it engages with issues of same sex desire and queer time.

Many of the pieces in this collection feature sailors. Hughes himself spent time as a sailor (indeed the beginning of his autobiography *The Big Sea* takes place on an ocean going vessel) and so the subject was a familiar one. However, it should be noted that the figure of the sailor is often a marker for same sex desire and homosexual subjectivity, both as a literary trope *and* more specifically within the works of Langston Hughes (Schwarz, 76). Sailors spend the bulk of their time with groups of other sailors, other men and the relationships that tend to come to the foreground in texts where they serve as primary figures are markedly homosocial if not explicitly homosexual.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the most important acts of relation for the sailors who populate Hughes’ works are affective and formed with one another rather than with members of the opposite sex. Sedgwick notes the tendency for these bonds to be characterized by homophobia and yet she also notes the way in which such bonds are not formed outside of the realm of desire

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<sup>36</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines “homosocial” as a word that “describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with “homosexual” and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from “homosexual.” In fact it is applied to such activities as male bonding which may, as in our society be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality” (1).

(2). In addition to the murky sexualities represented by the figure of the sailor, the sea also functions as an important exemplar of transgressive fluidity. Indeed it appears in both this text and others as a site of loosened regulations, open possibility, and blurry boundaries (Schwarz, 78). Also present in these poems, however, is a sense of unregulated time, a series of deviations from the traditional ontological roadmap that governs both daily life and its long-term progression. Hughes' sailors and other male figures of desire resist the chrononormative in the same way that Mina Loy's mothers and Djuna Barnes' queer female figures (both traditional, cis-gendered women and trans figures) did. Hughes effectively creates a portrait of same sex desire resisting chrononormativity, but in this case, the figures presented are male. The first stanza of "Young Sailor" reads:

"He carries/His own strength/And his own laughter/His own today/And his own hereafter/This strong young sailor/Of the Wide Seas" (62).

Images of the sailor and of the sea are important in this section of text and we can see the beginnings of evidence of Hughes interest in the figure of the sailor as an emblem of desirability. Schwarz argues that these sailor figures represent, for Hughes, objects of sexual desire and we can see in Hughes' glowing description of this sailor evidence in support of Schwarz's argument. This sailor is strong, laughing, capable. His attractive, agentic subjectivity seems desirable and through Hughes' description of him we can come to understand why for so many years within scholarship readers argued that Hughes often adopted a female voice: In crafting sexualized, attractive male figures Hughes seemed to be constructing a picture of sexuality and desire and unless we read that desire as queer, these poems seem to call to mind a female voice. However, I'd argue that if we

do allow for a queer reading, then Hughes focus on male desirability can be read as a representation of same sex desire and the poems themselves thus depict a queer subject position.

Also at work in this stanza is a certain resistance to the chrononormative, for the figure of the sailor carries not only strength, but “his own today/and his own hereafter.” Here, the sailor constructs his own individualized experience of the temporal, shapes his own ontological progress. Coupled with the desirability of the sailor’s physical body, this gestures towards a queer resistance to normative time. The sailor is a figure who exists on the margins of the traditionalized social order. He is not a part of a normative family structure and for him sexuality is not procreative and often not heterosexual. The sailor’s todays and hereafters are comprised of non-traditional, non-procreative, non-linear sexuality and social organizations and they are, as Hughes notes, “his own.” He thus seems to have a markedly agentic potentiality to construct his own individualized experience of time; he isn’t bound to normative, pre-determined structures and timetables. The way that work on merchant vessels dictates its own particular lifestyle that resists the traditional, home-bound 8 hour workday schedule seems to support the idea of the figure of the sailor constructing his own, potentially queered experience of temporality and ontological progress. The figure of the sailor doesn’t live by traditional rhythms.

The subsequent stanza only further cements this kind of characterization. Hughes writes:

“What is money for?  
To spend he says  
And wine?  
To Drink

And women?  
 To Love  
 And today?  
 For joy  
 And the green sea  
 For Strength  
 And the Brown land?  
 For laughter  
 And nothing hereafter" (62).

The sea imagery in this stanza exemplifies Christina Schwarz's notion of the ocean as a site of unbridled, unrestricted possibility. If the sea is a space where limitations fade and the boundaries between queer and straight become blurry, then the fact that the figure of the sailor draws his strength from these waters gestures towards the idea of a subjective identification built upon queer possibility. Additionally, we see further evidence of the sailor figure's refusal to adhere to normative ontological development in his insistence on living in the present moment. Money, wine, women, and joy are all derived from the present, from an interest in the ephemeral. We do see the presence of heterosexuality in this piece, but as Sam See, Christina Schwartz, and others have noted, Hughes often included images of the heterosexual alongside queer ones and additionally that because homosexuality was so recently understood as its own discrete identity category, the presence of heterosexuality in his work doesn't preclude same sex desire.

"Desire" is another such ambiguous poem, even more so than "Young Sailor" however, because neither of its figures is gendered:

"Desire to us  
 was like a double death  
 Swift dying  
 Of our mingled breath  
 Evaporation  
 Of an unknown strange perfume  
 Between us quickly

In a naked room” (105).

Ambiguity is one of the key stakes of this poem, the fact that it refrains from gendering either of the partners in the depicted sexual relationship questions the notion of binarism itself. It deconstructs the sex/gender binary in its refusal to name a male or a female partner and in so doing it suggests that sexed divisions themselves do not dictate the experience of love, sex, or desire. In many cases, writing about desire works from a gendered perspective, identifying what it means to experience love and sexuality from either a female or a male perspective. This poem does not follow that model and its alternative modality functions as a roadmap for Hughes’ larger pattern of constructing ambiguously sexed/gendered protagonists. Hughes argues through these kinds of constructions that there isn’t a male way or a female way to experience desire. Thus, there is more fluidity present in works like this, more of a sense that sexuality itself is fluid, that it is mutable. (Schwarz,7). What is foregrounded is the interaction itself, not the gender performance or sex of the parties involved.

Temporality also plays a key role in this piece, most obviously in the idea of the “double death.” The “mingled breath” is the first to die and we can read this as a metonym for the sexual experience itself. Desire, love, sex, they are ephemeral in this piece. They fail to produce anything larger. The way that sexuality functions within a *normative* system is as a kind of catalyst for marriage and procreation, thus the stakes of sexuality are the creation of something lasting, either a marital bond or a child. The value of the sexual act itself lies only in its productive capability. In this particular piece, the sexual relationship creates *only* a feeling of loss, of “death.” While the first death can be read as the death of the sexual act, the second death is that of the “unknown strange

perfume” created by the union of the poem’s two figures. Thus this poem suggests that even the remnants of the experience are left behind in some way also. The poems’ figures no longer have access to them once the experience has ended.

“Ma Man” also presents a version of queer sexuality and the way that it seems to suggest a female speaker allows it to function as an exemplar of that trope within Hughes’ broader oeuvre. One of the more interesting facets of Hughes’ use of a female voice is the way that it feminizes the narrative voice within each poem. It imparts a kind of passivity on them that is not a traditional aspect of any kind of masculinity. The poem’s first stanza reads:

“When ma man looks at me  
He knocks me off ma feet  
When ma man looks at me  
He knocks me off ma feet  
He’s got those ‘lectric shockin’ eyes an  
De way he shocks me sho is sweet” (66).

Noteworthy in this portion of the poem is the speaker’s self-conscious awareness of the male gaze. The poem does seem to suggest a female speaker although I’d argue that it does so only because of the dominance of compulsory heterosexuality. We read this speaker as female because their partner is a man. There isn’t, in fact, any textual evidence to suggest that said speaker is a woman. Once again, ambiguity reigns in this piece. Although it is unclear whether the speaker is male or female, we do know that this speaker is him or herself, acutely aware of the male gaze. S/he constructs subjectivity through his/her relationality to the poem’s male figure. This coupled with the images of being knocked off of his/her feet, looked at, and shocked by the male figure’s eyes construct a portrait of passivity. S/he is the object of all of these kinds of male attention and in constructing his speaker in this manner, Hughes is depicting a passive

characterization. Because, as Borden, See, and Schwartz, and others point out, we can read this figure as male, then we have an example of Hughes constructing a passive, feminized male subjectivity. The male objects of desire in his poetry tend towards the hegemonically masculine, the “manly” and so we have Hughes crafting not only multiple types of male sexuality and subjectivity, but also showcasing male on male relationships in which one of the partners resists traditionalized notions of male identity. Hughes’ speakers have distinct voices and through those voices distinct kinds of agency and through imbuing those characters with voice and agency Hughes suggests that to be male *and* feminized or passive is to perform a viable version of masculinity. He is broadening the definition of what it means to be male, resisting the notion of monolithic subjectivity.

Yet another way in which this poem constructs resistance is through form.

Hughes wasn’t writing only against mainstream (majoritarian) notions of sex and gender, but against the way in which uplift ideology borrowed those strictures in the way that they constructed “viable” black subjectivities. Both jazz and blues were seen as manifestations of lower class black culture, in no small part because of their depictions of free sexuality and blurry gender divisions, and so for Hughes to employ jazz and blues forms within his poetry would be a way to directly challenge the notion of respectability that dominated the literary field in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Borden 337). The second stanza reads:

“He kin play a banjo  
 Lordy he kin plunk plunk plunk  
 He kin play a banjo  
 I mean plunk plunk plunk  
 He plays good when he’s sober  
 An better better better when he’s drunk” (67).

In this stanza we can see the kind of lexical repetition that would have characterized both jazz and blues pieces of the time and this instance of borrowing from these two musical traditions signifies a representation of low culture that uplift ideology would have been very guardedly attempting to distance itself from. A large part of that distance was caused by the sexualization of such music and this poem also exemplifies that thematic interest in free sexuality. Thus the formal components of jazz as well as its thematic structure support Hughes' queer product of dismantling monolithic constructs of identity dictated by Uplift ideology.

Queer Theory's interest in alternate models of kinship relation, although recent, has become especially important to discourses that examine sexuality, race, and ethnicity as relational, intersectional, and co-constitutive.<sup>37</sup> From such an intersectional perspective, the kinship structures of minoritarian subjects are read through a different lens than are those of their majoritarian counterparts. This is because of the experiential differences between kinship circles that reflect the racial/ethnic position of the hegemonically dominant groups and those kinship circles whose racial and ethnic backgrounds classify them as "other."

The immediate family of mother/father/child(ren) is the smallest traditional kinship unit and the most basic site of socio-cultural transmission; from our immediate families we learn the beliefs, values, and ways of being in the world that allow us to

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<sup>37</sup> Intersectionality denotes "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions" of lived experience for subjects representing various, diverse groups within any given social field (Crenshaw, 1244). The stakes of Intersectionality as a tool for analysis are a more nuanced, complex representation of differing groups of people that allows for multiple sites of identification to interact and co-construct one another. For example, although middle and working class Black women might share a racial position, their class disparities result in markedly different embodied experiences of being female in 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

function within culture and society. For the majoritarian subject, family is the smallest social grouping that reflects a larger societal sphere. If contemporary American society can be said to be a space in which white, heteronormative, Christian values maintain a certain hegemonic dominance, families that reflect that model of normativity seem to mirror the norm and in so doing maintain positions of cultural privilege.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner explicate this process in particular as it pertains to sexuality in their essay "Sex in Public," noting the way in which public ideals of decency, morality, and sexual normalcy reproduce first, and perhaps most successfully, within the space of the family (311-317). So, how does this process of norm replication and sedimentation happen differently within the minoritarian family circle? The same socio-cultural transmissions occur; the same processes are at work. However, race and/or ethnicity form a critical intersection that is experienced differently than it would be in a majoritarian household. In addition to responding to the demands of the majoritarian culture, the minoritarian subject also learns a different and often stronger kind of group cohesion. This is because the broader social field, the one made up of mostly majoritarian subjects, is often hostile to its minorities. To grow up a minoritarian subject attempting to meaningfully come into being is to encounter a series of pre-determined, externally constructed stereotypes of what it means to be a subject of color in contemporary society. Thus there is a sense in which minoritarian identity formation happens in opposition to those negative external constructions of subjectivity. So, for the minoritarian subject, the first and foremost network of cultural support is the family and often times the family functions as the *only* such network of support. Where the majoritarian subject can identify both with their family circle and with the broader socio-

cultural field that produces them, the minoritarian subject might look *only* to a much smaller group for both subjective and inter-subjective identifications.

This means that the stakes of immediate kinship bonds are necessarily higher for minoritarian subjects and the strength of those kinship bonds is increased. Thinking about all of this in terms of a queer critique, we can see how a queer, majoritarian subject could, if their immediate, traditional kinship structure is hostile to them, break away from it and have at least the possibility of finding a support system external to their own family, a community which will reflect their racial, ethnic, and class positions. For a queer minoritarian subject, to break with one's immediate family has a different set of ramifications, for it is entirely possible that outside of their immediate family circle, the socio-cultural field in which they find themselves will *not* reflect their particular, intersectional position. This means that "disinheriting ones' biologically given family is a near impossible task considering how blood ties often prove invaluable" (Rodriguez, 325). Additionally, the values of the minoritarian culture itself oftentimes discourage, much more so than in majoritarian cultures, breaking family bonds. Gloria Anzaldúa notes the importance placed on "the welfare of the family, selflessness, and humility" and the extent to which these virtues render it almost impossible to leave one's family group (40). And yet, for queer-identified subjects, seeking a queer counter-family can be a critical part of a process of queer becoming and thus for the minoritarian subject seeking an alternate kinship structure might be necessary, but it is inherently more difficult than the process would be for a queer subject whose race/class privilege place them in a more centric position.

These tensions between minoritarian subjectivity, kinship structures, queerness, and a hostile, hegemonically dominant central culture are evident in the work of Hughes and other African American modernist writers and the hostility towards queer sexuality inherent in Uplift ideology was also leveled at alternative ways of organizing kinship relation within the black community. In the same way that Hughes used his poetry and prose to construct broader definitions of black subjectivity in terms of gender and sexuality, we can see evidence that his writing is also interested in loosening the strictures that Uplift placed on acceptable family structures.

The goal of uplift was a centrifugal cultural movement that would align black subjectivity more closely with the values of the hegemonic center. Thus, for many black families of the time, there was a greater imperative to police behaviors, to make sure that the black body would emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a site of legibility. This is because during the period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Second World War, new ideas about race developed in tandem with new ideas regarding sex and sexuality. Race and sexuality were increasingly policed using the same kinds of rhetoric and ideation. Racial and sexual deviance from the norm were seen as analogs and Uplift sought not only to place the black body within an acceptable racial subjectivity, but also to ensure that it performed a normative sexual orientation and identity. This dual discourse of race and sexuality has become an increasingly large field of study, although Siobhan Somerville's work in particular highlights the way that: "negotiations of the color line shaped and were shaped by the emergence of notions of sexual identity and the corresponding epistemological uncertainties surrounding them" (3). Because of the way that miscegenation was perceived as such a threat to the norm and heteronormativity at

the time was so interested in race, there is a growing interest in contemporary scholarship in queer readings of early 20<sup>th</sup> century representations of interracial sex (Baldwin, 796-8).

Thus, Langston Hughes' representation of queerness and kinship are interesting because of the way that race intersects with both sexuality and the function of the family. Many of Hughes poems deal more explicitly with sexuality and with Harlem as a space of transgression, but within Hughes' short stories and novels there is a marked interest in the minoritarian family. Kate Baldwin argues that Hughes' interest in conceiving of alternate modalities of home and family arose from a trip he took to the Soviet Union. It was there that he was exposed to kinship structures that weren't based in blood relation, but rather in connected groups of workers (Baldwin, 797). Seeing these alternate kinship structures allowed Hughes to think through the way that queer subjectivity alters kinship relation and the resulting collection of stories, most of which are collected in *The Ways of White Folks* explores different manifestations of queer kinship. What is perhaps of greatest interest in many of these stories is the way that queerness, quite literally, has the loudest voice. It is the queer figures and characters who are the most vocal and what is constructed in these pieces is the sense that minoritarian identity can broaden to include queer subjectivities. In "Cora Unashamed" Hughes depicts deviations from normative kinship and a kind of queer subjectivity that uplift would seek to inhibit. He illustrates a process of identity formation that resists the idea that the main goal of adult life is adherence to traditional modalities of kinship affiliation and depicts characters breaking free and engaging in processes of queer becoming that deviate from tradition.

The short story "Cora Unashamed" narrates the life of a black domestic worker charged with the care of a white family. She cooks their meals, cleans their house, and

raises their child, even breastfeeding the young girl for her mother. She herself has a child, although it is out of wedlock and with a white man. In spite of the social illegibility of remaining unmarried after giving birth to a baby, Cora has no apparent interest in either marrying him or allowing him to perform any paternal duties. Additionally, Cora remains steadfastly unaffected by the other way in which this union and its resulting child manifests social unintelligibility: she is “unashamed” as the story’s title suggests, of the fact that she has had a relationship and a child with a white man. Both interracial unions and mixed-race children were marked by illegibility and social scorn at this time, but Cora is so “unashamed” that she even attempts to integrate her child into the white family whom she cares for, blending together her own non-normative mother/daughter kinship unit in with theirs.

This re-configured, father-less family unit should remind us of Mina Loy’s own re-workings of the immediate family grouping, for Cora and her daughter form the same kind of dyadic, queer structure that we observed in early 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry and prose of Loy: Cora too seeks to reconfigure the kinship structure, to removed the father and be left with a mother/child dyad. Additionally, both the illegitimacy and interraciality of Cora’s daughter further mark both her reconfigured kinship structure and her child with illegibility. Within a heteronormative, patriarchal social system of organization, Cora, her family, and her daughter do not occupy intelligible positions. And, most importantly, Cora is “unashamed” of all of this. She constructs this queer family with intentionality and her agency within this story is derived from that series of transgressive deviations from *both* norms of sexuality and race.

However, it is also important to read Cora against the backdrop of one of African American literatures most common tropes, the “Tragic Mulatta/Mulatto” figure who embodies the illegibility of both interracial sex and the mixed race subject. That Hughes would employ such a figure must be read as an engagement with that trope and, just as he did with sexuality, Hughes uses Cora to write against the inherent tragedy of the tragic Mulatta. He wants us to see her as an attempt to rework and revise the inherent stereotyping of that archetype. Rather than functioning as a representation of failure, Cora invites Hughes’ readers to see interracial unions as a site agency and potentiality.

After Cora’s child dies from whooping cough, Cora takes increasing responsibility for the white daughter, Jesse, and as this girl ages Cora becomes her primary caregiver and something of a surrogate mother. This further cements her queer status, for Cora becomes a second maternal figure within Jesse’s family. Again we have a blending of sex/gender and race and again we observe the character of Cora altering a family structure, creating an alternate modality of kinship that deviates from the expected. So we see a distinct queering of the normative family structure, for in this surrogate mother/daughter relationship, Cora introduces an interracial element. She isn’t legible as Jesse’s mother by virtue of her race, and yet Hughes asks us to read her as a mother figure. Jesse too has a forbidden relationship that results in a pregnancy, but not a marriage. Her partner is Greek and although to contemporary readers this would not seem to be an instance of interracial desire, we have to read this story within the context of its own time. Many of the first waves of immigrants to the United States were from Northern and Western Europe. These British, German, and Scandinavian populations resettled, became assimilated, and began to perceive themselves as American. Successive waves of

Immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe then arrived and because of both phenotypic and cultural differences they didn't often have the racial status of their Northern and Western European counterparts. Quite simply they were not perceived as white. There's an assimilatory practice of white-washing that happens as each successive generation gains a greater foothold within majoritarian culture and so perhaps now a Greek character would read to a contemporary reader as white, but in the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jews, Italians, Greeks and other Southern and European ethnic groups were not quite white enough to be seen as acceptable marriage partners for the daughters of Americans from more established communities. Thus, Jesse's relationship with this Greek man is illegible, is transgressive, and must be read as interracial. Because of the illegibility of such unions, the family forces Jesse to have an abortion after which she dies from grief. The official story of her death leaves out the abortion, but at her funeral Cora speaks out, telling everyone of the family's poor treatment of their daughter.

At stake in this story is a representation of the sex/race inter-relation that supports Somerville and Baldwin's claims that miscegenation instantiates a kind of queer threat and the depiction of Cora who effectively queers motherhood within a complex kinship structure. Additionally, it is Cora who has the final word within this piece, Cora whose behavior (and hers alone) is sympathetic, and Cora who provides the most insight within the world of this text. Through the character of Cora, Hughes depicts the intersectional struggle of the black female body within a repressive kinship structure. Cora engages in two critical and relational border crossings: traditional vs. transgressive female sexual expression and the black/white color line. Kate Baldwin argues that miscegenation is used textually to interrogate boundaries, to illustrate the porosity of borders, and to

instantiate a specific kind of queer production, one in which a subjectivity is produced that, because it is mixed race, is not legible within a system of traditional racial identification (797). While it might seem odd to read the child of a heterosexual encounter as a queer intrusion into the space of the normative family, we have to remember that, as Siobhan Somerville points out, the politics of race and sexuality have always been interwoven, specifically within discourses that speak to African American bodies(2-5). The normative family *is* heterosexual, but it is also white and so the presence of a mixed race child is an instance of queer deviation, and Cora, because she in multiple ways effectively re-structures this family along less traditional lines is a textual embodiment of Hughes' interest in resisting uplift through the depiction of queer family.

Although much of Hughes' work engages with issues of same sex desire it often does so in a hidden way; homosexuality becomes the subject of erasure. This is certainly true in Hughes' poetry, with pieces like "Café 3 A.M." standing out *because* of their overt mentions of same sex practices, but it is also true of his prose writing. His short stories and novels tend to contain the same ambiguously narrated stories of love and friendship, the same portraits of male on male camaraderie, and the same nods to transgressive sexuality that resisted uplift-but without actual, overt depictions of homosexual acts or homosexual figures. There are, however, several pieces that do openly depict queer childhood and adolescent sexuality (Moore, 493). One such short story "Blessed Assurance" tells the story of a queer adolescent boy and in this representation we can see a model of adolescent development that queers the notions of normative childhood, futurity, and heterosexual cultural transmission.

From the very first lines of “Blessed Assurance” we come to understand that Delmar, the protagonist of the story, is a homosexual adolescent. His same sex orientation is no small source of unhappiness to his father and the fraught nature of that relationship is just one of the several key stakes of this piece. In that the story depicts queerness as an intrusion into the normative family structure we can see an engagement with issues of queer kinship, and yet there is more at work than just that: Delmar’s father is worried that his son’s queerness is an inherited trait, that it was passed down from his mother’s side of the family, the product of a bad gene: “Did the queer strain come from *her* side of the family? Maternal grandpa had seemed normal enough. He was known to have had several affairs with women outside his home—mostly sisters of Tried Stone Church, of which he was a pillar” (Hughes, *SS*, 231). Delmar’s father worries that it was either his wife’s unfaithful grandfather or her insistence on “saddling him” with the effeminate name Delmar that has produced queer, deviant sexuality and an effeminate gender presentation in his son (231).<sup>38</sup> Thus, John seems to blame his wife for Delmar’s queerness. He doesn’t think it can have come from his side of the family and since the mother had insisted on the “queer” name Delmar John’s father is sure that one of her forbears is responsible for his son’s deviance and transgressive sexual and gender performance (231). Thus, John’s worry is that queerness is an inherited trait, that it passes from generation to generation, marring the otherwise upstanding, respectable nature of his family’s line. What this speaks to is the fear the feat that, rather than upright,

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<sup>38</sup> Another interesting aspect of this portion of the text is the association between transgressive heterosexual desire and queer subjectivity. Delmar’s father assumes that the grandfather’s tendency to have sexual relationships outside of his marriage is something of a slippery slope that ends in same sex desire and implicit in this kind of ideation is an awareness of the relationship between sexuality and race. That relationship is precisely why scholars like Somerville argue that miscegenation should be read as an act of queer desire (23).

Christian values and respectable practices, what is being transmitted inter-generationally by this family is an inherited deviance.

The protagonist of this story, Delmar, grows up in a Black home that, although conventional in its social organization, is marred by divorce. Delmar has one sister, Arletta, a father named John, and a mother who has absented the family to pursue a relationship with an “uncouth rascal” who owns a Cadillac, properties in multiple cities, and would be deemed unrespectable in the eyes of Uplift’s proponents (232). The action of the story centers around Delmar’s participation in the choir of his local Baptist church although a critical subtext is Delmar’s father’s narrated disapproval of his son’s queerness. The first lines of this piece are John’s, he notes that his son is “unfortunately turning out to be a queer” and Hughes goes on to add that this was especially vexing to John because “colored parents always like to put their best foot forward” and John feels that “negroes have enough crosses to bear” (231). Thus, in the very first paragraph of this piece we have a nod to the ideas of uplift and the politics of respectability. John is troubled by his son’s queer sexuality, but is especially upset because of the way that race and sexuality intersect; he wants for his son to embody a traditionally masculine, black male subjectivity and so Delmar’s queer sexuality has ramifications both within a politics of sexuality *and* a politics of race.<sup>39</sup>

John further narrates Delmar’s queer gender performance in the following pages, noting that his son is too sweet, too well behaved: “No juvenile delinquency, no stealing cars, no smoking reefers ever. He did the chores without complaint. He washed dishes

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<sup>39</sup> Marlon Moore notes the importance of traditional masculinity to black, male subjectivity: “the feminized man is generally an unacceptable representative of black leadership and strength” (496). Delmar, because he embodies a feminized set of characteristics is rendered unacceptable within a matrix of legible subjectivity.

too easily, with no argument when he might have left them to Arletta. He seldom pulled his sisters hair. They played together, Delly with dolls almost as long as Arletta did” (232). It is evident in John’s description that Delmar violates the ideas he has in his head about masculinity and youthful identity construction. There’s evidence of a “boys will be boys” mentality that would excuse some degree of wildness in the child, but only so long as the bad behavior would fit within the confines of hegemonic masculinity. He also notes Delmar’s preference for flashy clothing and his disturbing (to John) interest in fashion as a form of individualized expression. He finds the glasses that Delmar chose for himself “too feminine” and is afraid his fellow students will think he’s “a sissy” because of his effeminate, carefully put together presentation (232). He criticizes the delicate way Delmar smokes cigarettes and teases him for crying “like a woman” (233). John ties all of these fears to issues of race and racialization in that he is aware of the kind of uplift mentality that would like to see black subjectivity aligned with the values of the white middle classes. These fears are compounded by Delmar’s relationship with his mother and stepfather, a rakish, rule-breaking dandy who owns flashy cars and questionable properties in multiple cities. Delmar looks up to this man and a large part of the issue with that closeness is not just that the step-father is a figure who embodies divorce, but that he also represents sexual transgression. Thus, Delmar’s affinity for the stepfather aligns him with the sexual margins of society rather than with the upstanding values put forth by the black Baptist church.

What we know of Delmar’s mother is important to John’s understanding of his son’s queerness, because she too has proven herself to be a figure of sexual transgression. That she leaves her family *and* that her new romantic partner is a man who himself works

against uplift marks her as a deviant and we can see a link between her transgressions and her son's. It is this kind of deviance that John worries his son has inherited and so we can understand the stakes of this inheritable queerness as an anxiety about cultural transmission. What John would like to pass on through his family is the set of values in line with the politics of respectability, church going, morality, strength of character, heterosexuality, et cetera. However, because his wife and his son have strayed so far from these kinds of constructions of individual and group identification what is actually being transmitted is (what John perceives of as) queer deviance.

Thus, what is at stake in the characterization of Delmar in this story is the same kind of subjective broadening that we saw in earlier Hughes pieces; he represents black subjectivity in a complex manner that belies monolithic constructions of self and identity, allowing his readers to get glimpses of multiple possibilities of what it means to be a black subject in modern America. Delmar rebels against notions of hegemonic masculinity that box men in and require them to perform a hegemonically masculine subjectivity that is strong, moral, and heterosexual.

One of the other key stakes of this story is Delmar's performance in the choir of their Baptist congregation. Church congregations like this one were the architects of uplift ideology and so we can read this setting as the most emblematic of the project engaged in service of the politics of uplift and black respectability. Delmar initially suggests that this choir perform jazz pieces; this should be read as a direct intrusion of the kind of loosened, liberalized moral subjectivity that would have been associated with the space of the cabaret and the streets of Harlem. Jazz would have been entirely antithetical to traditional religious music and the extent to which it was connected with transgressive

sexuality meant that church leaders and goers alike were firmly opposed to its burgeoning dominance as a cultural form associated with black communities. Although Delmar's idea is rejected, he still manages to perform a queer role within this church congregation. The piece chosen for the choir is a choral version of the biblical story of Ruth. On its own that would be a perfectly acceptable choice and yet it is Delmar, not a female member of the choir, who sings Ruth's part. Although the choir director himself argues that this choice is based on Delmar's superior singing abilities and the lack of "projection" that the choir's female members have, Delmar's father is not the only congregation member to be chagrined by this choice (234). During Delmar's performance the choir director faints and in spite of Delmar's father's enraged cries of "Shut Up!" Delmar continues to sing (235). Amongst the chaos of the attempts to revive the fainting choir director, Delmar's clear soprano continues to be heard, rising alone above the congregation and we are reminded of the final moments of "Cora Unashamed" in that the queer voice is given center stage and Hughes represents a queer vocality that undeniably displays more agency than the normative grouping that surrounds it. And it is important that in each case, the queer speaker is surrounded by a group, a ritualistic gathering. In the case of the Cora story, she is at a funeral and in this piece, a church service is depicted. Both of those gatherings are critical sites of transmission within normative culture. In choosing to queer these particular spaces, Hughes instantiates a kind of queer rebellion that is not interested in traditional, normative values.

For Delmar, his family, and his congregation, the stakes of queer cultural transmission are particularly high, especially as this act of queering occurs within the black Baptist church, the primary cultural institution through which Uplift ideology

operated on black populations. What we see happening then is exactly what John feared so keenly at the story's beginning: Delmar proving himself to be an embodied site of queer cultural transmission who himself will pass on the queerness that he inherited. The public face of this family is now one of transgression and fairly overt queerness and John's frantic repletion of the phrase "Shut UP!" is a cry for a restoration of a kind of normalcy that Delmar doesn't seem to embody.

The clear connection between respectable black subjectivity and the Baptist church is of particular importance because it illustrates Hughes' desire to construct black subjectivity *against* the strictures of uplift and the politics of respectability and that he does so, in this case, through a youthful figure illustrates a kind of queer potentiality for queer cultural transmission that locates increasing possibility in future generations. Delmar illustrates a kind of "queer horizon" which "interrupts" straight time, locating a positive, agentic possibility within the prospect of a queer futurity (Muñoz, 32). Although Delmar's father's primary worry is that through Delmar, his family will pass on a set of queer values, politics, and beliefs, what we can see through the way that Hughes' gives Delmar the story's final voice, is that Delmar *will* pass on this set of queer values, but that contrary to John's worry, this act of transmission is one of courageous rebellion. Delmar is young and what he passes on to future generations is the potential for new possibilities, a broadening of gender/sex identifications that allows for the possibility of a queer, black, male subjectivity. His voice brings this potentiality out into the open and thus what Delmar transmits is the potential for same sex desire, transgressions from the norm, and alternate kinds of identifications to exist, perform, and thrive in the open.

Thus, for Hughes the politics of queer resistance to the chrononormative are always already linked to the experiences of the racialized, Black body in modern American culture. Reading his work through a temporal lens allows for an increased depth of understanding that reveals the importance of time as well as space. Through multiple forms of writing ranging from non-fictional autobiography to the poem, Hughes reveals the ways in which the queer, Black subject can resist uplift through a refusal to maintain the kind of orderly, scheduled ontological progression that marks legible subjectivities.

## Conclusion

In order to put these modernist texts in dialogue with a series of very recent queer interrogations of temporality I have had to think through the specific ways that these writings, authored at the turn of the last century, can provide meaningful additions to conversations that largely focus on the intersection of queer temporality and contemporary cultural production. Many of the theorists whose work I draw upon in this project examine issues of queer time largely in relation to current television and cinema. Jack Halberstam, for example, uses the film *Dude, Where's My Car?* in a notable queer, temporal critique and Elizabeth Freeman begins her text *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* with a discussion of the 2002 Nguyen Tan Hoang video *K.I.P.* Thus, there seems to be a rather solid relationship between queer temporality and the here and now. However, to argue that queer theory's only utility lies in explicating the present moment would be more than misleading for queer critique's interest in past lives, narratives, and histories is at this point also well established. Carolyn Dinshaw, whose work examines the ways in which various queer histories "touch" one another across time, outlines her own methodology in terms of what she terms a "queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now. Such an impulse extends the resources for self-and community building into even the distant past" (1). Writing against discourses of alterity, Dinshaw thus notes the way in which these early texts represent sexualities and communities that, although not labeled as homosexual, nonetheless depict

queer identifications and practices that can also be found in current cultural products. Although Dinshaw's work focuses on the medieval period's various intersections with the contemporary, I would argue that her interest in these "touches" can illuminate connections between other historical periods as well and ultimately shed light on the ways in which analysis of modernist textual production enriches contemporary discussions of queer temporality.

Thus, the idea of queer theory illuminating the past is itself not new. In terms of my own project and larger questions about modernism's relationship to queer temporality, Elizabeth Freeman provides the basis for what I would argue is a strong point of connection between turn of the century texts and analyses of queer time. Although she is, as I noted, certainly interested in queer temporality and the contemporary cultural product, she also articulates a specific instance of "touch" between queer time and the modern: She notes: "the figure of damaged time also became the signature of late-nineteenth-century decadence and modernism" (7). With this assertion she hits upon perhaps the best case for queer time's inclusion in modernist scholarship: Today, various discourses of queer temporality seek to interrogate and restructure the chrononormative project. In this kind of critique of linear time we can see a marked similarity to the way in which modernism itself, as an artistic movement, worked to critique the linearity of traditional narrative forms. Both discourses then share an interest in a similar project of undoing. Modernist writing sought to formally disrupt traditional narrative form and pacing in service of a broader thematic project of exploring the way that forces such as modernity, the industrial revolution, urbanization, and the First World War altered and disrupted traditional patterns of the temporal and ontological. Theories of queer time in turn seek to

explicate the way in which queer subjects and queer experiences can disrupt and rupture the ways in which normative time functions as a regulatory force in service of the heteronormative. Thus, the bringing together of these two discourses seems fitting and I would argue is a promising direction for research in the area of queer time.

I've noted here that Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and Langston Hughes all construct versions of queer resistance that push back against the dominance of the chronormative timeline and of compulsory heterosexuality and that their literary projects not only anticipate the kinds of conversations about queer temporality that we are increasingly seeing within academic discourses, but also add to those discourses because of the way that modernist writing, both thematically and formally, engages with a project of interrogation and rupture similar to the that of theories that account for queer time. Although, as I have also noted, contemporary cinema seems to have been the primary target of queer temporal critique thus far, there is a recent an interesting example of a contemporary cultural product that engages with issues of queer temporality and both represents the present and reaches back to a modern past: *Carol*, the film version of Patricia Highsmith's 1953 novel *The Price of Salt*, narrates a successful although fraught love story between two women during the early post-war period in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. That the text was written just after the later works by Mina Loy and Langston Hughes that my project examines places it within their time period and canon, but that the filmic version of this piece was only just released also anchors it within a contemporary cultural moment and it can thus be read as a kind of bridge piece between the past and the present.

*The Price of Salt/Carol* is undoubtedly engaged in a project of resistance to the chronormative. The narrative focuses on a pair of protagonists: young, department

store worker Therese who is unhappily and somewhat unenergetically engaged in a traditional, heterosexual relationship with a man who, try as he might, is not quite right for her and the older, sophisticated Carol, who is trying to disentangle herself from her own, also unhappy traditional relationship, in this case a loveless marriage to a man with whom she has one small daughter. The two begin a romance after meeting in the store where Therese works and after a protracted road trip across the western United States, are broken up by the nastiness of obscenity charges threatened by Carol's husband only to be reunited at the novel's end, at which point they (presumably) begin to cohabit in Carol's new, New York apartment, both also now engaged in meaningful careers. Each woman specifically rejects a heterosexual relationship in favor of their lesbian union and because we have that pair of juxtapositions Highsmith leaves us with a strong sense of rupture, of turning away from the normative in favor of queer bonds. Since Carol ultimately chooses to leave not only her husband, but her daughter as well, we also get a strong sense of re-structured kinship. Carol lets an apartment for the both of them and this shared domestic space only strengthens Highsmith's depiction of this new, queer kinship bond. Indeed Carol's other closest "family" member is a woman who, part childhood friend and part lover, also serves as godmother to Carol's child. This queer triad of Carol, Therese, and Abby seems to suggest that the healthiest, most affirming kinship bonds can be between three women *and* can result from the rejection of one woman's child, the rupturing of one of the most important bonds within traditional, blood-based systems. The child is rejected entirely in favor of the queer here and now between Therese and Carol (Carol had to give up her child in order to live with Therese) and in no way does Highsmith depict any of these events tragically. We are to read the end of this novel as a success and indeed that

positivity was a large part of what made this novel so scandalous to readers during the mid-century.

That this, modern cultural product turned contemporary through its 2015 filmic release depicts both modernist literary production and queer temporal rupture represents an instance of “touching across time.” There is a way in which the film version can be said to “touch” its textual predecessor, but also and perhaps more importantly, the film version’s 2015 release date illustrates a “touch” between the kinds of contemporary cinematic products of interest to Halberstam, Freeman, and others and the modern era of literary production. That this joining together of discourses of modernist cultural production and queer time has begun to manifest in popular culture as well as academic discourse points further towards its cultural importance in this present moment and seems to create an even stronger argument that the connection between modernism and queer time is a strong one and should be an important new direction in literary and cultural studies.

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