KINGDOM of INK

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Loops of Abstraction: Contextualizing Gay History and Historiography

Tyler Jacobson

Premise:
Being gay is… complicated.

Gay experiences are having a moment. From the formalization of queer studies within academia, increasing representation within media, and political successes such as the legalization of same-sex marriage, the gay identity has emerged into common public knowledge in the twenty-first century. But what exactly does it mean to be gay? Depending on who is asked, responses will vary in intensity, however it appears uncontentious to assert that gay identity in the twenty-first century is tethered somehow to homosexual desire and activity, and is frequently additionally gendered as male or masculine. Yet even this seemingly tautological definition falls apart when examined more closely. Jane Ward's investigation of homosexual activity between self-identified straight men found that in several communities—from college fraternities to biker gangs—select performances of homosexual activity are in fact often used specifically to assert and affirm identity.[1]

I approach the question of what it means to be gay with an interest in how diverse stakeholders have considered that question. At the level of common knowledge—presuming a heterosexual baseline—gay identity is ambiguously linked to homosexual desire, though not always through a direct causal relationship. I will proceed to refine and redefine my scope four times through a series of loops, moving from this common knowledge to a basic history of gay landmarks, a scholarly history of Harry Hay, and a theoretical history of sexuality itself before a final loop intervening in the politics of what can and should be considered relevant to considerations of gay identity and historiography. Each of these levels I also connect to distinct communities. Where the averageheterosexual has little interest in gay history, gay men and

1 Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

gay activists are more invested in representing and re-presenting the historic figures and events of their community, especially considering the historical oppression of the group. Scholars and historians tend to place greater emphasis on a specifically-defined object of analysis, informed by the conventions of their academic discipline. While I abstract unique characterizations of gayness and gay identity at each level, I hold that at every stage, the political stakes tied to that identity claim inform the knowledge produced.

Loop 1: Basic History

Being gay means to combine homosexual activity with a political identity characterized by social oppression.

Social oppression has crafted the production of the common narrative of gay history. The general shape of this narrative begins with homosexuality condemned to an underground scene until the Stonewall Riots brought the political momentum of the civil rights movements of the 1960s to the defense of homosexuals, who found a public advocate in Harvey Milk through the 1970s. AIDS would ravage the community in the 1990s, while the 2000s focused on the debate over whether same-sex marriage would be legalized. Same-sex marriage became the cause célèbre of gay politics, functioning as the locus of debates over the meanings, oppressions, and privileges entailed within gay identity. Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade observed that within this discourse, the legalization of same-sex marriage was promoted not only as symbolic of acceptance of queer people within society, but also as the mechanism by which to mitigate their lived oppressions. Access to healthcare, legal residency applications, and kinship status—specifically with regard to hospital visitation and inheritance rights—were all promoted as the stakes of the social acceptance of queer people to be achieved through the performative legalization of same-sex marriage.[2] Brought into public discourse via a number of state initiatives culminating in a 2015 Supreme Court decision in favor of same-sex marriage, gay rights cemented a public understanding of the gay experience as inextricably linked to an identity as an oppressed social minority.

Film production during this time corroborated this basic historical narrative of the gay experience. The 2008 Oscar-winning biopic *Milk* brought more explicit attention to the life, activism, and eventual assassination of Harvey Milk, lauded as one of the first openly gay elected officials in American politics. Opening with archival footage of police raids of gay bars, *Milk* frames Milk's

2 Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, "Building an Abolitionist Trans & Queer Movement with Everything We've Got," in Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex, (AK Press, 2011), 17-19.

advocacy in relation to the political stakes of gay rights; gay men were literally fighting for their lives. [3]Film production has also been eager to memorialize the Stonewall Riots as the first major event of the modern gay rights movement. Perhaps most significant of these films was the 2015 *Stonewall* directed by Roland Emmerich and written by Jon Robin Baitz, which replaced the black trans identity of Marsha P. Johnson to focus instead on a marketable young white male protagonist. While the movie itself flopped under the acknowledgement that gay men have a long history of co-opting the activism and experiences of queer black folk, the 2015 *Stonewall* in fact proved hugely influential in positioning the Stonewall Riots within American gay history, if ironically. In the wake of the film's release, lists of films and resources to watch *instead* of the film flourished, drawing attention back to more historically responsible productions.[456]

Through the narratives established by gay activism and film production, the meaning of the gay identity is inextricable from the history of social oppression experienced on the basis of homosexual desire. However, this history ignores the presence of gay activism prior to Stonewall—particularly that of the Mattachine Society founded by Harry Hay. Hay tremendously complicates narratives for several reasons. With relation to Harvey Milk, Hay both predated and outlived Milk, and he had a tumultuous history of unashamedly controversial activism throughout his long life.[7] However, if readings of Hay are fixed to the specific moment of Mattachine's foundation in the 1950s, a different historical narrative emerges. As will be analyzed by Daniel Hurewitz, a gay history including Harry Hay in some ways loses the political urgency of the focused on Milk and the Stonewall riots, yet such a narrative also offers unique insights into the implications of the gay identity espoused by Milk, as it was in fact Hay who first dictated the vision of what it would mean to be publically gay.

Loop 2: Scholarly History

Gayness is an ideology of political solidarity among homosexually active men propagated specifically by Harry Hay through the Mattachine Society in the 1950s, fashioned after the racial activism in Los Angeles at the same time.

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3 *Milk*, directed by Gus Van Sant (2008; Focus Features), film.

4 Natalie Turco-Williams, "Five Gay Films to Watch Instead of Stonewall," Dazed Digital, September 25, 2015.

5 Mariah Rocker, "29 Movies About LGBT History to Watch Instead of "Stonewall"," *Quist*, August 6, 2015.

6 Mary Emily O'Hara, "7 Films that Tell the Real Story of the Stonewall Rebellion," *The Daily Dot*, August 8, 2015.

7 Michael Bronski, "The Real Harry Hay," *The Phoenix*, October 31, 2002.

While the basic history level of analysis is events-driven, scholars engaging in more rigorous historical practice reveal a more interesting net of influences that have worked to determine the shape of mainstream gay identity. In *Bohemian Los Angeles: and the Making of Modern Politics*, Daniel Hurewitz interrogates how Americans have come to equate sexuality with one's personal, essential authenticity. Hurewitz challenges the very naturalization of this essence, pointing out that "the very notion of a self or an identity—let along an interior self that you can find—are the products of a distinct cultural and intellectual history."[8] Yet if the authentic self is a constructed and modern development, then its epistemological origins must be traceable. Through a comprehensive analysis of the occupants of Edendale (now Echo Park, Los Angeles), Hurewitz is able to then locate the incorporation of sexuality as indicative of personal essence to the first half of the twentieth century. Comparing the biographies of famed female impersonator Julia(n) Eltinge and notorious gay rights activist Harry Hay, Hurewitz observes that the links between sexual activity and personal identity had shifted markedly between Eltinge's prime in the 1920s and 1930s and Hay's debut in the 1950s. He notes, "while both Eltinge and Hay had sexual affairs with men, Eltinge resisted any efforts to suggest that those affairs revealed some fundamental truth about who he was. By contrast, the handful of men that gathered with Harry Hay in 1950 for the initial homosexual rights meeting came to agree that their interpersonal sexual and emotional desires—their lusts and affections for other men—were central to, if not the centerpiece of, their personal identity."[9] As Mattachine was perhaps the first sustained organization of homosexual men as a politically coherent and visible group, this belief by Hay and his companions in the centrality of sexuality to their personal identity would then prove foundational to both outside perceptions and self-perceptions of what it meant to be gay.

Throughout *Bohemian Los Angeles*, Hurewitz establishes that the gay scenes of 1930s and 1940s Los Angeles were characterized primarily by gay bars and cruising sites, both of which were consistently monitored by police eager to enforce the standards of contemporary moral campaigns. The sexuality of the time was therefore conditioned by the omnipresent threat of police retaliation against homosexual activity, causing considerable feelings of isolation and loneliness. Against this isolation then, Hurewitz notes that Mattachine "aimed to offer "a consensus of principle around which all of our people can rally and from which they can derive a feeling of 'belonging.'" That is, Mattachine would offer a path out of the isolation of experience into the

8 Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles: and the Making of Modern Politics*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 5-6.
9 Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, 8.

solidarity of community."[10] This idea of belonging—of communal membership—thus brought individual desire to the core of a communal identity. As Hurewitz characterizes, Mattachine desired to facilitate a novel "camaraderie *about* sexual desires that was not constituted by those desires."[11] Nevertheless, due to Hay's integral participation in the founding meetings of Mattachine, his personal visions of what a public gay identity should look like deeply informed the identity publicized by Mattachine. And for Hay, the harassment homosexually active men endured at the whims of antagonistic police was the top political priority for the new society. The conception of homosexuals as "an oppressed social minority" was thus central to Hay's activism through Mattachine, shaping how those who found the vocabulary to articulate their homosexual identity through Mattachine would view themselves and their compatriots. [12]

Mattachine first formed itself by another name: the CCOE. Before coming out as an organization of homosexuals, the CCOE joined other Los Angeles activist groups in speaking out against police entrapment of Mexican Americans. [13] After Mattachine debuted publically under that name, it then claimed that "the false arrests of homosexuals differed "not one iota" from the trumped-up charges used against Mexican Americans or African Americans throughout the city."[14] However, Hurewitz cautions his readers against viewing Mattachine "simply as a response to the state-led tactics against homosexually active men and women," despite the centrality of the issue of police brutality to Mattachine's enacted activism. Instead, through the scope of *Bohemian Los Angeles*, Hurewitz shows that Mattachine, having been formed in the hills of Edendale, drew heavily off of its members' local connections to other activist groups in the neighborhood—specifically artists and the regional communist party. Hay himself had been an active Party member, and Hurewitz observes that his influence on the rhetoric of Mattachine in claiming homosexuals as "our people" came directly from concurrent Communist activism on behalf of the "Negro people" and the "Jewish people."[15] Consequently, the local tradition of racial activism in the Los Angeles hills proved integral to how Mattachine would fashion itself as a society meant to promote brotherhood amongst a socially oppressed minority.

Due to this early but visible activism by Mattachine, historians of gay consciousness rightly position Hay as perhaps the first father of the mainstream

10 Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, 250.
11 Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, 254
12 Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, 255.
13 Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, 231-232.
14 Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, 260.
15 Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles*, 250.

gay consciousness inherited by homosexuals in the following years and decades. While accounts of homosexual life predating Mattachine exist, historians such as Hurewitz attest that it was characterized by secrecy, in large part due to the militant policing of sexuality throughout the early twentieth century. However, Mattachine's outspoken presence determined what it meant to be openly and publically homosexual, and their specific vision—informed deeply by Harry Hay's leadership—characterized sexuality as a central component of one's personal identity and authenticity. The politics of Harvey Milk addressed in the basic historical level above thus were profoundly informed by Hay's vision.

Loop 3: Theoretical History

The essential sexuality popularized by Harry Hay reflects a point within the wider trajectory of sexuality, as created and normalized at the turn of the twentieth century.

Hurewitz's scope in *Bohemian Los Angeles* is focused geographically on the city and on the development of an emotion-based politics of identity. Consequently, the history of the development of sexuality itself falls outside the scope of his project. Yet when anchored by the question of what it means to be gay, the history of sexuality becomes crucial for understanding the legacy of Hay as contextualized by Hurewitz. In this third loop of abstraction, I turn from scholarly history to theoretical history, focusing on the histories of sexuality provided by Hanne Blank and Jonathan Ned Katz.

For almost all of its history, homosexuality has been defined as half of a dyad, paired with heterosexuality. With this in mind, Hanne Blank observed scholarship's obsession with documenting homosexuality as ironic given the dearth of research on what in fact constitutes the heterosexual norm against which homosexuality is constructed. Consequently, in the first chapter of her book *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality*, Blank traces the full etymology of the term, emphasizing several shifts in meaning. While Karl Maria Kertbeny can claim the first ever usage of "heterosexual" as a term, the first to publish heterosexuality as a term was Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, in the seminal 1886 work *Psychopathia Sexualis*.[16] This is of course not to say that sexual behavior was not discussed prior to the late nineteenth century, yet Krafft-Ebing's work is widely acknowledged as responsible for the introduction of a new sexual vocabulary into the public consciousness. Blank notes two motivations in Krafft-Ebing's writings. First of all, in line with prior proto-sexologists and a post-Darwinian interest in taxonomy, "Krafft-Ebing's interests did not really lie with the sexually typical or the heterosexual, but again

16 Hanne Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 9, 18.

with the heterodox, the outlier, and the sexual "deviant."[17] Secondly, this interest in deviance was not meant for a popular market—Krafft-Ebing titled the book in Latin and wrote the more scintillating contents also in Latin to discourage voyeuristic readers—but rather with the courts in mind. In the introduction to the first edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Blank observes that Krafft-Ebing positions his intention in the work as hoping it would be "of aid to the judges and legislators compelled to issue rulings in cases of sexual misconduct."[18] From the very coining of the term then, heterosexuality and homosexuality were implicated in state efforts to regulate sexual behavior through the courts. Rather than being introduced as terms for self-identification, heterosexuality and homosexuality were coined in order to publish sexual deviance, symptomatic of the policing of sexual behavior that would continue through the twentieth century, eventually sparking the creation of Mattachine.

What Blank finds most significant about Krafft-Ebing's work in *Psychopathia Sexualis* is a grudging concession that the sexual instinct was not limited by the cultural sanctions on legitimate (procreative) sexual activity. Instead, through the encyclopedic documentation of sexual deviance in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the sexual instinct came to be understood more popularly as encompassing both reproductive potential and erotic desire.[19] Heterosexuality was initially cast as a pathologic condition, alongside homosexuality as well as newly coined terms such as sadism, masochism, and fetishism, all established as deviations from a purely procreative sexual norm. Krafft-Ebing's "heterosexuality" thus would now likely be cast as nymphomania, as it referred to an excess of erotic desire. The commercial success of *Psychopathia Sexualis* thus served to bring sexuality overtly into public discourse, with a newfound understanding of erotic desire disarticulated from legitimized procreative sex.

Despite the success of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the book was not the sole progenitor of sexuality as a term. Blank observes that a year prior to the English translation of Psychopathia, American James Kiernan had understood the hetero- prefix as meaning both rather than different. Consequently, the first published usage of heterosexual(ity) in English would have corresponded more closely to the modern bisexual(ity).[20] Blank goes on to document continued diversity among various dictionaries regarding the proper referent of heterosexuality—both the 1901 edition of *Dorland's Medical Dictionary* and

17 Hanne Blank, *Straight*, 18.
18 Blank, *Straight*, 18.

19 Blank, *Straight*, 19.
20 Blank, *Straight*, 20.

the 1923 Merriam-Webster *New International Dictionary* sided with Kiernan's usage of the term in contrast to Krafft-Ebing's formulation. Nevertheless, it was the Havelock Ellis who in 1915 receives Blank's credit as the first to use heterosexual in the meaning it has carried into the twenty-first century. Per Blank, Ellis used heterosexual as shorthand "for a type of relationship between male/female pairs that simultaneously included the ennobling emotion of love, the potential for procreation, and the experience of erotic pleasure. While no conclusive evidence exists that claims Ellis was personally responsible for the propagation of this definition, the endurance of the characteristics he cites proved integral towards the perceptions of homosexuality—especially the pairing of emotional love and erotic pleasure.[21] The popularity of the ideas of Sigmund Freud helped to fix this understanding of normative sexuality within the American consciousness by World War II.[22] Between the development of these definitions, the influence of Freudian sexual theory, and a re-assertion of traditional gender roles and performance in the wake of World War II, heterosexuality was re-positioned as normative. Homosexuality, however, received no such cultural sanction and remained tied to notions of deviance, and crucially, subject to policing by the state.

While Blank's history of heterosexuality is illuminative regarding homo- and heterosexual ideology via etymology, Jonathan Ned Katz's investigation of the transformation of pre-Victorian sexuality into a modern sexual economy proves integral to destablizing the idea of contemporary sexual consciousness as inherent human nature. Katz notes that between 1820 and 1860, normative manhood and womanhood were not asserted by performances of sexual desire but rather the opposite—by distance from lust, as idealized by a purity advocated within literary and religious texts. Contemporary stigma and taboo surrounding masturbation in this period corroborate this paradigm, which sought to partition erotic desire as antithetical to propriety. [23]

Nevertheless, a massive social shift over the late nineteenth century conspired to couple sex and love as a coherent unit. Katz credits this shift to a multitude of factors, but principally a shift in the family from producer to consumer unit, a new ethos of pleasure, and rise of medical authority with the professionalization of doctors. On the first point, Katz notes that "from being an instrument primarily of work, the human body was integrated into a new economy, and began more commonly to be perceived as a means of consumption

21 Blank, *Straight*, 20.
22 Blank, *Straight*, 31.

23 Jonathan Ned Katz, "The Invention of Heterosexuality," 232.

and pleasure."[24] Additionally, this new centrality of consumption practice to identity thus also prompted a reimagination of the acceptability of erotic pleasure, leading to the development of "a commoditized culture of pleasure" by the end of the nineteenth century, when Krafft-Ebing was documenting the sexual deviance that would comprise *Psychopathia Sexualis*.[25] Katz additionally observes that late Victorian medicine—newly established as a legitimate and authoritative field—found doctors eager to normalize sexual activity.

Between Katz and Blank, sexuality itself can be positioned as a phenomenon originating within the radical social changes of the late nineteenth century. Sexuality, both homo- and hetero-, was developed as a vocabulary by which an explosive popularization of sexual practice could be regulated in court. Nevertheless, as cultural changes normalized the pairing of emotional love with erotic desire, the idea of having a sexuality became depathologized and normalized within early twentieth-century attempts for individuals to position themselves as average. Homosexuality may not have been destigmatized directly, and yet it is not the *choice* of sexual object but rather the *choosing* of a sexual object that became central to twentieth century U.S. identities. With this history in mind then, the history of Harry Hay and Mattachine articulated by Daniel Hurewitz can be understood more profoundly. Hay's dream of an identity tethered to sexual desire and characterized by social oppression, rather than being visionary, fits cleanly within this narrative history of sexuality. Homosexual activity, characterized as sexual deviance, had been policed by the state consistently throughout the nineteenth century, and yet Hay's conception of the centrality of his sexual essence can be traced as a novel development occurring over the turn of the century.

Loop 4: Relevance Politics

The shape of gay identity in the twentieth century has been profoundly influenced by histories outside of the domain of gender and sexuality.

What emerges from the combined histories of Hurewitz, Blank, and Katz is an understanding that history is rarely determined linearly. Instead, a whole host of factors combine in unanticipated ways to articulate the specific versions of ideas that pass into history. Consequently, in order to fully explore the nuances of an idea, one must sometimes step outside the intuitive disciplinary boundaries of a field. With regards to the history of gay consciousness and identity, I propose in this fourth loop three analyses from outside of gender and sexuality studies

24 Katz, "The Invention of Heterosexuality," 233.
25 Katz, "The Invention of Heterosexuality," 233.

that indeed proved profoundly determinative of the shape of gay identity in the twenty first century, mini-loops that each offer surprisingly salient insights towards the question of what it means to be gay.

I begin with Hurewitz's argument that the idea of an interior authentic self that can be found is a modern idea. Hurewitz, already dealing with a project of extensive scope, does not reach beyond the turn of the twentieth century in analyzing the origins of the philosophic self. However, the narrative of classical liberalism credits John Locke with the development of a radically new theory of self-possession, by which an individual possesses their own identity, and by which consequence an individual has the right to then determine that identity. As summarized by Brenna Bhandar, "Locke's theory of consciousness and identity, as elaborated in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, focuses on the ability of man to appropriate (to himself) recollections of his own thoughts and sensations."[26] Through this formulation, Locke rendered man's mental emotional landscape as a form of property. Bhandar additionally observes that property is most often conceptualized through an "ownership model," wherein ownership confers an absolute right to an owner to do as they please with their property.[27] In Locke's time, this radical idea conflicted with territorial claims over man's identity from the church as well as the state. However, as the survival and normalization of Lockean liberalism demonstrates, the idea of self-possession would ingrain itself within the European psyche and canonize itself within regimes of human rights. Returning to Hurewitz's history of Harry Hay then, Lockean self-possession is revealed as the root pre-condition for Hay's belief in an essential interior sexuality that he could claim as his own, inalienable personal authenticity. Therefore, while Locke does not speak to sexuality, and while his works are claimed primarily by philosophy, Lockean self-possession would in fact prove to be deeply determinative for the realization of twentieth-century U.S. identities.

In a second mini-loop, I explore how Hanne Blank's history of state regulation of sexual activity in the Victorian period is complemented handily by Ellen Samuels' metaphor of the fantasies of identification that emerge during the same period. Within her book by the same name, *Fantasies of Identification*, Samuels observes that "in the mid-nineteenth century a crisis began to emerge within modern nations regarding the identifiability and governability of the individual bodies making up their bodies politic."[28] This crisis emerged in

26 Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 168.

27 Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property*, 19.

28 Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*, (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 1.

the wake of the industrial revolution and its consequent mass urbanization, prompting radical shifts in the composition of the urban public. As industrial accidents changed an individual's ability status in an instant and the gradual mixing of races through migration patterns rendered an increasingly diverse population, Samuels observes that what she calls "fantasies of identification" emerged in an effort "to definitively identify bodies, to place them in categories delineated by race, gender, or ability status, and then to validate that placement through a verifiable, biological mark of identity."[29] The development of fantasies of identification thus contextualizes Krafft-Ebing's drive to document and classify forms of sexual deviance within a wider Western concern for the legibility and governability of bodies.

Samuels' fantasies of identification also significantly contextualize the motivation for Blank's project in *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History* of Heterosexuality. Blank observes an academic obsession with non-normative sexualities that increasingly seeks legitimacy through claims on the body. [30] Samuels seems to almost directly respond to this observation, noting that "fantasies of identification have never really been about science. They are about culture, about politics, about the rule of law and the unruliness of bodies." [31] Consequently, "rather than science being used to undermine fantasies of identification, the fantasies are increasingly taking over the realms of science."[32] Understood through Samuels' analysis, the search for a gay gene and other markers of sexuality documented by Blank are shown to be fantasies of identification through which cultural views on gay essence—informed by both Lockean self-possession and the outspoken activism of Harry Hay—attempt to legitimize their authority through the language of science.

A third, more direct mini-loop further explores Jonathan Ned Katz's claims on the role of capitalism in shaping the ideology of homosexuality through John D'Emilio's in-depth analysis of the same topic. Where Katz must for reasons of space refer only in passing to "the transformation of the family from producer to consumer unit" as well as a novel relationship between consumers and pleasure, D'Emilio takes a closer focus on the mechanics motivating this moment of social change.[33] Contrasting the social landscapes of colonial and Victorian America, D'Emilio observes that during the prior time, "survival was structured around participation in a nuclear family," due to the necessity of labor required to produce basic needs such as food and clothing prior to the

29 Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 2.
30 Blank, *Straight*, xx–xxii
31 Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 186.
32 Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*, 191.
33 Katz, "The History of Heterosexuality, 233.

development of local markets.[34] Consequently, regardless of an individual's erotic preferences, economic constraints precluded the imagination of a life removed from heteropatriarchy. By contrast, D'Emilio notes that "by the mid-1800s, capitalism had destroyed the economic self-sufficiency of many families, but not the mutual dependence of the members" through the development and widespread implementation of systems of wage labor and commodification.[35] The effect of this shift was that "the family took on new significance as an affective unit, an institution that produced not goods but emotional satisfaction and happiness."[36] For D'Emilio then, the feelings of romance and desire for kinship claimed as natural by twentieth-century gay consciousness are preconditioned by the social changes wrought by the rise of capitalism over the nineteenth century. D'Emilio does not dispute the presence of homosexual erotic desire over a longer period than century prior to his writing, but he is wary of a gay revisionist approach to history that projects peculiarly twentieth century forms of desire onto past figures with radically distinct subjectivities.

These mini-loops combine to obfuscate the disciplinary boundaries of the history of sexuality, attesting to the complexity of identity as an object of study. In many ways, John Locke, nineteenth-century politics, and the influence of capitalism on family structure hardly seem relevant to the study of twentieth-century sexuality. And yet the study of gender and sexuality has from its first disciplinary moments struggled to establish the relevance politics of the field. Writing in 1994 near the birth of queer theory within the field of women's studies, Judith Butler witnessed a movement that sought to divide and partition the experiences of sex-gender into two fields: women's studies would continue to claim propriety over gender as a social construct, whereas the newly formed lesbian/gay studies would account for sex and sexuality as related to physical bodies. As Butler herself summarizes, this movement sought to claim that "the kind of sex that one *is* and the kind of sex that one *does* belong to two separate kinds of analysis: feminist and lesbian/gay, respectively.[37] Taking the side of Natanya Rubin, Butler scoffs at approaches which claim that gender or sex are "only or best understood in the context of" the fields that claim them.[38] Instead, Butler claims that given the oppression experienced by women and queers and queer women, "politically, the costs are too great to choose between feminism, on the one hand, and radical sexual theory, on the other. Indeed, it may be

34 John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, & Sharan Thompson, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 104.
35 D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," 103.
36 D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," 103.
37 Judith Butler, "Against Proper Objects. Introduction," *Differences* 6, no. 2-3 (1994): 4.
38 Butler, "Against Proper Objects," 10.

precisely the time [...] for feminism to offer a critique of gender hierarchy that might be incorporated into a radical theory of sex, and for radical sexual theory to challenge and enrich feminism."[39] If then at the most basic levels, the meaning of gay identity is constituted by the experience of social oppression, then attempts to ameliorate the lived experiences of gay-identifying individuals will therefore benefit from coalitional, transdisciplinary thinking.

Conclusion:

Being gay is… still complicated.

If anything has been learned through these four loops of abstraction, it is that sexuality is a complicated subject. The answer to what it means to be gay is contingent upon the political stakes held by whomever responds. That the answer can venture so far outside the ostensible topic of sexuality proper attests to the critical density of the term. Yet queer theorists are no strangers to this density, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coins as a "Christmas effect." In the same way that Christmas has come to symbolize an amalgamation of social meanings within a single monolithic term, so too have "family" and "sexual identity" come to presuppose concordance between a wide array of elements that perhaps ought not to be collapsed together.[40] As a sexual identity, Sedgwick would observe that being gay is presumed to entail harmony between one's self-identified biological sex, gender, and orientation; the self-identifications of one's preferred partner along those same axes; the public acceptance of those self-identifications; one's procreative choice; one's preferred sexual acts, erogenous zones, fantasies, and sexual power dynamics; one's role models and one's primary locus of emotional bonds—each of which additionally presupposing other constraints of alignment.[41] In her own life, Sedgwick has observed "an interest in *not* letting very many of these dimensions line up directly with each other at one time"; her sexual identity thus has not proceeded to dictate an unduly large proportion of her life experiences.[42] Acknowledgement of the density of expectations held of gay identity through Sedgwick's metaphor of the Christmas effect can prove fruitful towards a freer exploration of identity no matter one's stakes in claiming gay identity. Intellectually, such disarticulation facilitates more precise insights into the complicated meanings of gay identity, and on a personal level, the same move facilitates greater freedom of identification to the authentic self, regardless of the historical positioning

39 Butler, "Against Proper Objects," 15.
40 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in Tendencies, (London: Routledge, 19944), 4-7
41 Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 7.
42 Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," 6.

enabling that authentic self to be conceived.

However, if there is one cautionary tale that emerges, it is that gayness and the ever-expanding acronym of LGBTQIA++ is that the increased recognition of sexual identities as constitutive of an individual's personal and inalienable authenticity in fact has also produced an increased discomfort with the idea of fluidity. As Jane Ward questions, "if heterosexuals' erotic possibilities are broadened by a gay rights movement that celebrates the fluidity of sexual *behavior*, what about the effect of the movement's stance on the immutability of sexual *orientation*?"[43] Ellen Samuels would answer Ward by asserting that sexuality itself has developed into a fantasy of identification, in which one's sexual performance is expected not only to reflect some facet of their intimate authenticity but also to be traceable to some incontrovertible bodily marker. However, as traced by Hurewitz, neither such legibility nor such causality has always been present through the history of identification and self-identification of the gay identity. What it means to identify as gay in the twenty-first century is informed by a particular collection of influences that inform how gayness is both performed and perceived—gayness is not transcendental. Consequently, as debates over what it means to be gay extend to include lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, and other queer identities, there is reason to be cautious of how these categories are constructed. As Judith Butler would attest, rigid lines commit epistemological violence against those who live between, amongst, and beyond the margins. Perhaps, in order to best respect and accommodate those who live in such third spaces of identity, we must cultivate an acceptance of the complexities of the human experience.

43 Ward, Not Gay, 40.

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Hashtags against the Hydra: Challenges of Virality for Digital Resistance under Late Capitalism

Tyler Jacobson

As social activism has come to face the challenges of the postmodern world, digital natives have developed novel forms of resistance to oppression. Social media platforms have enabled new forms of connectivity, consequently facilitating new modes of activism. The primary advantage of digital activism has been liberation from the constraints of location—resources and interest can now be mobilized and channelled faster and through more complex networks than ever before. Hashtags have been key to this improved virality. Hashtags allow for posts to be hyperlinked under shared terms, which in turn improves the visibility not only of the salient content, but also of the popularity and social momentum of that content. When turned towards causes of social justice, this use of the digital is referred to as "hashtag activism."

Nevertheless, with overuse hashtag activism has become a pejorative label for superficial, performative resistance. All too often, movements supported by a hashtag experience disproportionately low support relative to their digital popularity in terms of physical, social, or cultural changes. But while it is true that hashtag activism may not on its own suffice to enact social change, the utility of this novel digital tactic should not be constrained to traditional evaluative models. If we realign from the dominant results-based mode of thinking to a more ecologically-focused approach, the perceived efficacy of hashtag activism can be dramatically improved. Rather than being a Herculean hero in itself, hashtag activism is more accurately described as merely an initial component of more complex strategies of resistance required to address the hydra of increasingly complex forms of oppression of the postmodern world.

Hashtag activism works by allowing for the quantification of the momentum of social movements—the more a hashtag is shared and reposted, the stronger the public sentiment in its regard. Hashtag activism must also be

localised as a phenomenon primarily within capitalist democratic contexts. The popularity of a hashtag thus can thus exert pressure through two primary axes. With regard to capitalism, popular hashtags represent market preferences. A viral hashtag campaign can secure a brand's reputation when consumers tag who they wear, such as #nike or #adidas. However, hashtags have also become a preferred way to organize boycotts, as happened with #boycottnike and #burnnike, popularized after Nike endorsed the polemic Colin Kaepernick. With regard to democractic ideals, the popularity of a hashtag also manifests the will of the people. Functioning as an informal vote, hashtags such as #stopasianhate and #NoDAPL have indicated popular support of various social causes. Hashtag activism can therefore be summarized as a tactic of mobilization appealing to the ethics of democracy and of capitalism to prompt action through quantifiable social pressure. The pejorative associations of "hashtag activism" have followed the failures of popular hashtag campaigns to affect real-world political and legislative actions. However, I argue that this dynamic relies on too simple a view of activism—one in which a single agent fights against a single problem. Instead, the messy nature of oppression in the postmodern world under late capitalism calls for a more nuanced analysis.

The causes espoused by hashtag activism can typically be categorized within one of three labels: the cultural (#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter), the corporate (#BoycottNike, #noDAPL), or the global (#BringBackOurGirls, #ClimateChange). As documented by many scholars, the cultures and corporations of the 21st century have become decentralized, and they are therefore less sensitive to the pressures of all kinds of activism, not just the digital. While some have praised digital activism for itself decentralizing—thereby learning from the shortfalls of the figure-led movements of the 1960s—this analysis is less often applied to the equal diversification of oppression, which has taken the form of the mythical Lernaean Hydra. Within this metaphor of the hydra, any individual instance of hashtag activism is helpfully conceptualized as a single swipe of Hercules' sword. When activism is able to achieve its ostensible goal, one can consider a "head" of oppression to be severed. Yet in the classical myth, the hydra regrew ever more heads unless the wound was cauterized by Hercules' helper Iolaus. In the same way, hashtag activism is capable of achieving meaningful but impermanent action unless accompanied by radical social change. And as Michelle Alexander argues in The New Jim Crow, the regrown ideology is often more insidious than its predecessor.

The nature of the hydra's regeneration varies by issue but stems from the fact that both corporations and cultures of the 21st century are founded in complex social webs. Attempts to boycott companies are stymied by transnational globalization, through which a select few companies have

wrestled near monopolies over entire industries, rendering them nearly immune to consumers' and advocates' attempts to shift demand at the local or even regional level. Oppressive cultural norms are similarly protected by ideological state apparatus—noted by Antonio Gramsci to be remarkably resilient despite changes in their cultural manifestations over time. Against these defenses, hashtag activism only wields its aforementioned appeals to democratic and capitalist ideals based via popular support. The social awareness that hashtag activism generates is a necessary precursor to political action, and it is mechanically able to do so quite well due to the mechanics of virality. However, problems arise when hashtag activism is expected to also be able to exert forms of influence better achieved through other forms of resistance.

An unlikely precedent for this examination comes from Jacques Rancière's musings on art. In contemplating the efficacy of art, Rancière notes that critics of the mimetic tradition hold to an antiquated expectation from classical times that art should function as an ethical "magnifying glass, inviting spectators to view the behaviour, virtues and vices of their fellow men and women in the form of a fiction" (143). Underpinning this expectation is the logic that "what the viewer sees... is a set of [semantic] signs… that will engender resistance," a model Rancière dubs "the pedagogical model of the efficacy of art" (143-144). By this logic, the representation of circumstances through art then prompts the common man to align his behavior with a common set of ethics. Such also seems to be the expectation of the awareness campaigns characteristic of hashtag activism. If the ethics of a case can be convincingly argued—as attempted by the #NoDAPL campaign—the witnessing public will shift their behaviour accordingly, thus applying the social pressure necessary to achieve the change. Yet by the 18th century, this assumption had been called into question by critics such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As summarized by Rancière, "the problem with representation," for Rousseau, "is not that it is evil as such, but that it entails a separation between doing and seeing" (145). In the same way, the representation of oppression through awareness campaigns only rarely manages to bridge the very same separation between seeing and doing that it facilitates. Positivist logic notes that awareness almost always must precede action, yet the expectation that awareness consequently leads to action ignores the critical separation noted by Rousseau and Rancière.

If the primary strength of hashtag activism is its efficiency in generating awareness due to the mechanics of internet virality, the ineffectiveness of awareness in producing pressure on corporations and cultures in the 21st century must equally be acknowledged. Take perhaps the two most famous examples: #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. In these cases, hashtag campaigns

successfully raised awareness of sexual violence against women and state-sanctioned violence against African Americans. Analysis through social psychology provides reason to optimistically presume that the prevalence of these two hashtags provided sufficient environmental priming to prompt cultural identification with narratives of victimhood (Jacobson), thus prompting non-negligible outpourings of support for the salient demographics.

Nevertheless, the metaphorical hydra was merely beheaded, not slain, by these efforts, and the root causes of misogyny and racism were not directly or sufficiently challenged in the wake of the campaigns—Iolaus was not able to cauterize the wound. In other examples, #BringBackOurGirls was widely successful in raising awareness of the presence of Boko Haram as a terrorist organization, yet the campaign lacked any follow-up by which to incentivize governments to intervene in West Africa. Popular demand and appeals to ethics similarly meant little in the attempt to block construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline with #NoDAPL. Given the lucrative prospects of the pipeline and the impossibility of Americans to extract themselves from the systems of profit supporting the oil industry, #NoDAPL could only rely on appeals to ethics, which have proven increasingly ineffective as late stage capitalism and transnational corporate interests come to speak only the language of profits.

In addition to the limitations on its efficacy, hashtag activism is limited in the topics it can successfully address because it is dependent upon the conventions of internet virality. In order to gain viral momentum, a hashtag must espouse a cause that is sympathetic and yet does not too strongly challenge the foundations of the global hegemony. Consequently, inspirational stories about charitable acts for the homeless can garner significant support through platforms like GoFundMe, yet significant challenges to the economic conditions that lead to homelessness have not been witnessed since #OccupyWallStreet, which failed for the same reasons as #NoDAPL; it could not leverage its social pressure meaningfully upon the class elite—Hercules' sword could not pierce. The issues of greatest concern within academia are similarly absent from the viral landscape, as complex issues such as the exploitation of the Global South cannot be condensed with integrity into a single hashtag. The issues of global import that do manage to go viral again tend to be superficial, as with the reduction of pollution awareness down to #SkipTheStraw.

#SkipTheStraw and its variants emerged from a concern over the effect of plastics on ocean ecology, riding on the momentum of 2014's Proposition 67 in California, which banned the distribution of single-use plastic bags in the state. The anti-straw movement was strongly motivated by a viral video of the

removal of a plastic straw from a sea turtle's nose first published in August of 2015 (currently with more than 34 million YouTube views at the time of writing). Nevertheless, according to the Ocean Conservancy, straws and stirrers only account for approximately 2.5% of the trash collected by coastal cleanup efforts, and only twice that amount of plastic bags collected. Both types of items are however are significantly outnumbered by bottle caps (8%), bottles (11.5%) and cigarette butts (13.7%; TIDES), yet the virality constraints of hashtag activism only allow for straws to be targeted and acted upon due to a unique constellation of cultural and media factors.

A significant cause for the success of straw bans in America comes from the promotion of an action that is both individual and minimally inconvenient. Milo Cress—credited as among the first to encourage a straw ban as a 9-year-old in Vermont in 2010 (Basu)—was first inspired to reduce straw waste when he noticed drinks in a local cafe were being served with straws that were being removed unused, therefore wasted. Along this tack then, hashtag activism has tried to harness collective individual actions to tackle other global environmental issues. In response to the 2018 edition of what seems to now be a perennial panic report on #ClimateChange, CNN both tweeted and published an article on individual actions that could be taken to help meet carbon emission goals, such as reducing meat consumption and utilizing public transit (Miller). Other news sources were quick to join the bandwagon emphasizing individual action through reduced meat consumption—British newspaper The Guardian alone published at least seven separate articles on the subject in the last quarter of 2018. However, critics of such optimistic propositions countered with a study demonstrating that just 100 corporations were responsible for over 70% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Griffin), a reality which renders individual action statistically ineffective in the shadow of corporate policies. Advocates of individual vegetarian efforts did not account for the fact it is not meat consumption that drives agricultural carbon emissions, but rather meat production. And while consumer demand can influence producer supply within simple capitalism models, the demand itself can and has been regularly manipulated by corporate interests since at least the 1980s (Prashad). Activism in the name of reducing global agricultural emissions must additionally account for factors such as food waste and the cultural preference for visual plenty in grocery stores within a recognition that individual and even collective actions are absorbed by transnational capitalism. By this point, the hydra has grown so many heads that the individual activist begins to lose track of them all, and the task of resisting oppression seems to indeed become Herculean.

Despite digital activism's inability to slay the hydra of postmodern

oppression on its own, there remains reason to continue beheading the beast. When combined with fundraising efforts, awareness campaigns can redirect significant resources to areas in need. One of the first viral hashtags, the #icebucketchallenge, which challenged people to have ice water dumped on them to mimic the symptoms of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also encouraged participants to donate towards ALS research. This campaign combined individual humorous prompt (having ice dumped on you) with a minimally inconvenient proposed action (donating funds) in the name of a sympathetic cause (research of a rare disease). When the ALS Association received over $100 million in donations (more than 36x its average for comparable times in previous years), the campaign's impact far surpassed the charges of superficiality generally leveled at hashtag-based activism. On a smaller scale, hashtag campaigns have also been orchestrated to resist other forms of oppression, with several notable examples resisting patriarchal ideology regarding expectations for women's bodies. #EffYourBodyStandards and #BreakingTheStereotype, for example, have championed the body positivity movement, encouraging participants to not just passively consume hegemonic ideology idealizing thin women, but to actively shape the discourse and imagery of women's bodies through posting their own photos.

In the end then, hashtag activism must be approached with a degree of optimistic skepticism. It is neither as blandly superficial as its critics contend, nor as revolutionary as its advocates hope. By the mechanics of its positioning within late capitalist democracies, its primary efficacy is in generating awareness and education, not in prompting radical social change. But this does not warrant a dismissal of hashtag activism—Iolaus could only cauterize the wound after Hercules's sword had done its work. A more optimistic interpretation of hashtag activism might celebrate its cut, by which the public consciousness may have the opportunity to more permanently behead the hydra through additional forms of activism.

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Overdetermined Accumulations: Towards an Understanding of the Power of Creative Writing

Tyler Jacobson

Over the course of the 20th century, the humanities and social sciences have developed from being merely descriptive disciplines towards having an increased interest in conducting emancipatory interventions. With an ethical imperative to use the knowledge derived from their research towards ameliorating the circumstances of those they have studied, these projects have given rise to the scholar-activist, who has dreams for practically applying their social research. But while the topics and applications of scholarship in the humanities have expanded, knowledge production across these disciplines has widely constrained itself to a single prose mode, that of the research paper. Additionally, demonstrable behavioral change has been relied upon as the viable unit by which to assess the impact and value of a project—research is more effective if it changes more minds, and can be considered failed if cannot convince its audience.

In this paper, I contend that holding demonstrable behavioral change as the sole unit of evaluation for project efficacy in the humanities neglects to account for the subtle scale at which creative writing operates. From the vantage of overdetermination, which complicates intuitive cause-and-effect correlations, I posit that the overdetermination of language itself warrants an adjustment of the scale used to evaluate the social impact of a text. Through an analysis of the writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, I propose the aggregate as an alternate unit of analysis that might complement traditional frameworks while allowing for greater flexibility of scale. Ultimately, by registering the communicative phenomena of the act of reading at new scales, I will argue that such an adjustment allows for literacy of the academic work already being accomplished within non-academic texts.

From institutional resources for research projects to the financial stability of faculty tenure, the university provides many of the material conditions of possibility for scholarship to occur. Yet this productive symbiosis carries with it certain institutional biases. Significant among these biases is the demand for scalable, reproducible knowledge, reflecting the western university's origins in the natural sciences. The deterministic logic underpinning such research is notable for its efficiency, asserting the presence of intuitive cause-and-effect relationships even within complex phenomena. Breaking down analyses into fundamental units in this way also lends to ease of publication, contributing to the explosive growth of academic journals in the latter half of the 20th century.[1] However, the journals have not simply been passive instruments of knowledge dissemination; by contrast, key figures in the mid 20th century reoriented academic publishing into a staggeringly profitable enterprise with the power to influence what research projects are considered viable undertakings. In the 1970s, "impact factor" became a central concern of journal editors. As reported in Stephen Buranyi's genealogy of the contemporary publishing oligarchy, "*where* you published became immensely important" at this time, with the effect that "almost overnight, a new currency of prestige was created in the scientific world."[2] The most prestigiously curated journals like *Cell*, *Nature*, *and Science*—whose editorial preferences favored flashy research promising big results—thus established significant influence over the directions in which scholarly production evolved in the subsequent decades.

The institutional influence of capitalism cannot be understated here: with the consolidation of ever-more journals across all academic disciplines under a select few profit-oriented publishing bodies, there is reason to not exempt the curatorial biases of the journals themselves from the same analytical rigor they demand of the research published within them. Buranyi's own analysis—significantly published as investigative journalism in *The Guardian* rather than as a journal article—characterizes the result of these trends as follows: "These days, given a choice of projects, a scientist will almost always reject both the prosaic work of conforming or disproving past studies, and the decades-long pursuit of a risky "moonshot", in favour of a middle ground: a topic that is popular with editors and likely to yield regular publications."[3] Economically, this is a safe decision, and an important choice for the scholar looking to secure the publication count necessary to sustain the material conditions of possibility of their work (i.e. by meeting tenure assessment and productivity standards). Yet

1 Stephen Buranyi, "Is the Staggeringly Profitable Business of Scientific Publishing Bad for Science?" *The Guardian*, June 27, 2017.

2 Buranyi, "Staggeringly Profitable Business."

3 Buranyi, "Staggeringly Profitable Business."

it is in the accumulation of these individual decisions that gaps in the collective body of scholarly knowledge are liable to emerge. The results-oriented ethos of mainstream academic publishing favors projects designed to trace clear lines of causality coupled with actionable proposals for change or advancement. However, complex objects of study in unclosed systems do not always lend themselves so easily to this demand for deliverables.

Take as an example Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. The matsutake mushroom thrives in forests disturbed by human activity and has become a highly-prized commodity on the global market. However, Tsing finds that the particularities of matsutake complicate many attempts to analyze the economies and ecologies in which it is found. The growing conditions of the mushroom are elusive, and despite international efforts, matsutake have never been successfully cultivated. Additionally, as the fruiting bodies of complex fungal networks, matsutake mushrooms subvert common expectations regarding units of difference. Fungal networks challenge assumptions on how to define an individual organism—a single fungal body may contain several genetic signatures simultaneously. Ironically then, while DNA sequencing technology has allowed for greater precision in identifying different species of fungus, the application of that technology in this case simultaneously "undermines confidence in the species as the basic category for understanding kinds."[4] For Tsing, the quest to understand matsutake dislocated the very units of measurement used to identify them. Through consultation and comparison with Japanese matsutake researchers, Tsing came to understand that objects of study can resist analytic frameworks. By consequence, units and kinds must be regarded not as transcendental, objective categories, but rather "as frames that must be continually questioned to retain their use. [. . .] Kinds are always in process because we study them in new ways. This makes them no less real, even as they seem more fluid and beckoning of questions."[5] The ability of the object of study to call analytic frames into question becomes supremely pertinent when applied back to considerations of how the value of a project of scholarship is determined.

Within the social sciences and humanities, the preferred unit of evaluation is the capacity of a project to provoke demonstrable behavioral change that is also traceable through a line of causality. In simpler words, research projects and interventions are most valuable when it can be shown that they change minds. For most purposes, this deterministic framework

4 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Princeton University Press (2015), 231.
5 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 231.

proves to be conveniently practical. However, as shown above with matsutake mushrooms, complex phenomena can also defy capture within the units of determinism—those being cause and effect. For scholars in cultural studies and philosophy, the framework of overdetermination has helped to circumvent some of these complications. Theories of overdetermination have worked to complexify models of causality by acknowledging that even a determinant cause may not have even been in play within the specific causality of a given phenomenon. As articulated within Vincent Lyon-Callo's application of overdetermination to analysis of the causes of homelessness, this approach is "not simply a matter of finding the key determinant or adding more determinants. Rather, the challenge is in understanding how social situations like homelessness cannot be delinked from the overlapping interplay of material, historical, psychological, ideological, and other aspects of society that are woven together and not easily untangled into one or several determinants."[6] By changing the unit of analysis from determinant to influence, complex objects of study like social phenomena can be represented with greater fidelity, and this additional nuance allows for the imagination of novel solutions that might have previously escaped consideration.

For Lyon-Callo's own analysis of homelessness, acknowledging the complexity of an overdetermined phenomenon warranted a reframing of the issue as a whole. Rather than addressing the determinants of individual cases of homelessness, Lyon-Callo ponders the effect of reconceptualizing homelessness "as just one aspect of a larger web of discursive processes."[7] While analysis at this structural level provides no material relief to the targeted population, Lyon-Callo emphasizes that the complexity of the problem demands collaboration between a variety of approaches. His suggestion is not meant to displace more pragmatically-oriented strategies, but rather to participate in the construction of a new discursive environment within which the foundational assumptions surrounding homelessness (specifically, that homelessness is ubiquitous) have been shifted. In this way, Lyon-Callo's proposal is profoundly informed by his background in overdetermist theory. Rather than searching for the mythical right way to solve the problem of his object of study, his intervention is modest: "different understandings make different entry points for activism and social policy possible and desirable, which would lead to different sorts of interventions that would have different impacts upon the world. Approaching

6 Vincent Lyon-Callo, "Homelessness as Violence: Bad People, Bad Policy, or Overdetermined Social Processes?" in *Knowledge, Class, and Economics: Marxism Without Guarantees*, ed. Theodore Burczak, Robert Garnett, and Richard McIntyre, *Routledge* (2018), 441.

7 Lyon-Callo, "Homelessness as Violence," 448.

the problem in that way could help move us beyond the no-win debate of how to divide up limited supplies" among populations in need.[8] By changing perspectives, this approach to problem solving alters the unit of what can be accepted as change, thus radically broadening the scope of solutions that might be considered viable. This adjustment of scale—looking for influences rather than determinants—proves tremendously impactful towards articulating complex phenomena such as the social work accomplished by literature.

Ta-Nehisi Coates rocketed to fame as one of the most prominent critics of race in present-day America due to his prolific output as an author. It is easy to characterize Coates as an influential author, whether by critical acclaim garnered by his writing, by his status as a *New York Times* bestselling author, or just by even the sheer volume of his publications. Coates' brand has been characterized by the integration of rigorous scholarship into reader-friendly digital essays, as most famously published within *The Atlantic*. Coates gained an initial following for his thought-provoking work as well as his direct engagement with the comments sections of his Atlantic blogs. "The Horde," as his following was affectionately known, grew rapidly as Coates continued to publish hundreds of entries per year, and this popularity allowed Coates to write as a guest contributor in other outlets such as *The New York Times*. By the time "The Case for Reparations" came out in June of 2014, Coates already wielded significant celebrity, and the award-winning essay only cemented his fame.

Literary critic Howard Ramsby II observes that Coates and his publishers were able to capitalize on his success through accumulative advantage: "His early years as a journalist begot him opportunities to become a blogger and journalist for The Atlantic, which in turn begot him a large following, which also begot him publishing opportunities with Spiegel & Grau and Marvel Comics, which, combined with various other factors, gave him more than 600,000 followers on Twitter."[9] Shrewd advance marketing of Between The World and Me ensured its commercial success,[10] topping the New York Times Best Seller list for the first three weeks of its publication in August of 2015.[11] Coates' next book, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, also landed on the Best Seller list upon publication in October of 2017, nestled between entries from household names Bill O'Reilly and Hillary Clinton.[12] Coates' first adventure into book-length

8 Lyon-Callo, "Homelessness as Violence," 448.
9 Howard Ramsby II, "The Remarkable Reception of Ta-Nehisi Coates," African American Review 49.3 (2016), 202.
10 Ramsby, "The Remarkable Reception," 199–202.
11 https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2015/08/16/hardcover-nonfiction/
12 https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2017/10/22/hardcover-nonfiction/

fiction, *The Water Dancer*, similarly debuted at the top of the Fiction Best Seller list upon release in October of 2019.[13] These sales have been paralleled by critical acclaim and celebrity endorsements for Coates' work—Oprah Winfrey even chose *The Water Dancer* as the text with which to relaunch her book club.[14] By these metrics, Coates is easily recognized as an influential author. But how might the actual social impact of his texts be measured?

Coates' books all tackle the issues of race in the United States from distinct vantages. Between the World and Me is an epistolary narrative from Coates to his son, explaining the traumas of the black American experience. We Were Eight Years in Power is a collection of Coates' most influential essays, including "The Case for Reparations." The Water Dancer is a fiction set in the antebellum period exploring the emotional effects of slavery and family rupture on the black psyche. Of these books, We Were Eight Years in Power speaks in the language and rhetorical structure most familiar to scholarship. The efficacy of Coates' arguments within the anthology might be evaluated with the same technical criteria used to grade essays in a university classroom, yet this measurement does not actually reveal whether the text has had a demonstrable social impact on American society. The critiques of literary studies can similarly explore the work operating within Between the World and Me and *The Water Dancer*, uncovering the social messaging veiled within the characters and plot structures, but once again, these analytic frameworks account only for the textual object, not for its social legacy. Psychology and sociology might offer techniques to attempt to quantify the influence of the books upon their readers, yet isolating the impact of any one text within a given reader's discursive environment and social context is a daunting, if not impossible, task. Measurement in these fields also tends to rely upon the observation of demonstrable behavioral change, yet one might dare to call the capacity of the unit of analysis itself into question here. Perhaps the search for evidence of a book's impact asks the wrong questions to approach the actual work accomplished by the text. Yet adjusting the framework of the analysis, altering the unit of what might be recognizable as change, may in fact prove illuminatory towards this goal.

Conveniently, Coates has been candid about his choices as an author. During the publicity circuit for *The Water Dancer*, Coates discussed certain advantages granted by creative writing compared to his short-form

13 https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2019/10/13/combined-print-and-e-book-fiction/

14 Anna Ben Yehuda Rahmanan, "Oprah Winfrey Selects 'The Water Dancer' by Ta-Nehisi Coates As First Pick For New Book Club," Forbes, September 23, 2019.

argumentative essays. Coates observed that reactions to his deeply-researched nonfiction projects like "The Case for Reparations" would reduce the works to their titles, and the discourse prompted by those pieces was "more reacting to something that was maybe briefly related to the writing but wasn't the writing itself." Coates to explain that in contrast, with creative writing "you gotta actually read the book to have something to say about the book."[15] *The Water Dancer* is positioned by its author as a work of fiction set in the antebellum period that seeks to highlight the emotional tolls of family rupture suffered under slavery, yet that message is not conveyed by its title, which refers instead to the magical powers possessed by its protagonist, Hiram Walker. By comparison, "The Case for Reparations" struggled to free itself from readers' preexisting attachments to the discourse around reparations, despite the strength of the article's actual argumentation. As a novel, however, *The Water Dancer* resists the simplifications of headline culture because the problematics of the text are presented in a manner distinct from Coates' nonfiction essays.

Within creative writing, topics are often not explained explicitly but are rather narrated, which means that concepts are encountered enmeshed within the particularities of the plot, even as analysis distills generalizable concepts from the text. To recognize the work performed within a novel then, the scale of the fundamental unit of communication must be changed from discrete semantic signifiers (i.e. words) to accumulations (intra-, inter-, and meta-textual relationships). This is not a matter of choosing a smaller or larger scope, but rather shifting the axis of analysis away from the words themselves. Accumulations themselves are an overdetermined unit—they can be recognized by the presence of plurality but have no substance of their own. Much like the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, the essence of the accumulated load depends entirely on the composition of its components. When Coates' nonfiction essays such as "The Case for Reparations" are abstracted as accumulations of arguments towards a persuasive or educative goal, the unit of communication (the individual fact) can still be traced down to individual words or phrases. However, within creative writing, the substance of the accumulation may be only tacitly present within the text.

Take as example a scene from *The Water Dancer*, in which Thena speaks to Hiram before they are taken from the fields to reside in the master's house:

"Hiram, I know how much you see. And I know that even though we all have to handle

15 Hannah Giorgis, "What Ta-Nehisi Coates Wants to Remember," *The Atlantic*, September 29, 2019.

the brutal ways of this world, you have handled them better than some of your elders. But it's bout to get more brutal," she said.
"Yes, ma'am."
"White folks come down to say your days in the fields is over, that you going up top. But they ain't your family, Hiram, I want you to see that. You cannot forget yourself up there, and we cannot forget each other. They calling us up, now, you hear? Us. [16]

A basic literary analysis understands that in this passage, Thena is warning Hiram to not forget his roots. While Hiram—who is the mixed-race son of the plantation owner and a slave mother—has received favor, Thena urges him to not be seduced by whiteness Thena also makes a claim that family is not determined by kinship, but is rather a relation established upon emotional ties, a theme explored throughout the rest of the novel. Thena's speech also observes a precarity of identity, reflected in her anxiety that Hiram not forget his personal identity (as black) nor his relational identity (as a sort of adopted son to her).

But while this analysis emphasizes the topic of racial allegiance, the traditional vocabulary of racial positioning is absent from the original text. The presence of blackness in the passage cannot be found at the level of the word, but is accumulated through context (the prior and succeeding content of the novel) as well as implication (such as the contrast implied by Thena's reference to "white folks"). The following paragraph comes the closest to naming blackness, but once again only implies blackness as Thena claims "We have our own world down here—our own ways of being and talking and laughing, even if you don't see me doing much of neither."[17] Both "we" and "down here" imply membership within the community of black slaves on the plantation, but do so only through metonymy and context, rather than the semantic definitions of the words themselves. Recognition of how meaning occurs at scopes beyond verbal semantics allows for acknowledgement that language itself is overdetermined.

The meaning of a text cannot be atomized down to the semantics of individual words and phrases; rather, adjusting the unit of analysis allows for recognition that meaning is constructed across multiple scales simultaneously. Analytic tools tend to specialize in deciphering a specific scope, from the careful attention words and themes practiced by literary deconstruction to the considerations of meta-textual phenomena explored by affect theory. The overdetermination of language allows for the juxtaposition of competing interpretations; the novel becomes a Foucauldian heterotopia.[18] The meaning

16 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer*, One World (2019), 21.

17 Coates, *The Water Dancer*, 22.

18 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Misckowiec, *Diacritics* 16.1, (1986),

of the text is thus not the cumulative sum of its parts (as a multiple deterministic approach might claim), but rather is fluid, shifting as diverse elements slide in and out of salience within any given reading. Understanding the units and scale of the work in play within creative writing in this way allows for a broader conception of the work accomplished within the novel as well as a new lens to consider how those effects may manifest as change within readers.

When read in this way, Coates' novels *influence* readers rather than *determining* reactions. Because behavioral change is overdetermined by the content as well as the context of the reading, the unit of observable change may be occasioned by a determinant argument within the text, or it may also be the accumulation of smaller trace influences, or even both of these simultaneously. It hardly bears asserting that different readers will have different understandings of a given text, but as Lyon-Callo reminds, "different understandings make different entry points for activism and social policy possible and desirable, which would lead to different sorts of interventions that would have different impacts upon the world."[19] Consequently, encounters that stymie factual argumentation may yield to the subversive effects of fiction, but the accumulations through which fiction exerts its force may not be legible if the value of reading is limited to evaluation of the arguments extracted from the text.

Within the writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, the move from factual essay to creative fiction with *The Water Dancer* was a deliberate attempt to work through this dynamic. Interviewed by Stephen Colbert to explain the power of fiction, Coates establishes a distinction between arguments of fact and arguments of myth, in which facts cannot be disentangled from the stakes invested in their belief. Consequently, no degree of intellectual rigor or primary source evidence could render Coates' essays convincing to those with a topical aversion to his claim, as referenced previously with Coates' stated disillusionment with headline culture. However, rather than viewing such arguments as lost causes, Coates changed scope to realize that "what they were actually resisting was not the facts, but the implications of the facts."[20] What Coates then refers to as an argument of myth might be framed as a discourse with a larger fundamental unit. However, rather than trying to overcome disagreements by assembling ever more forceful arguments with higher stakes, as might be observed in the debates sparked by his nonfiction essays, Coates uses *The Water Dancer* to shift

22–27.

19 Lyon-Callo, "Homelessness as Violence," 448.

20 Ta-Nehisi Coates, interviewed by Stephen Colbert, "Ta-Nehisi Coates: Works of Fiction Can Communicate Real Facts," YouTube video, 2:36–2:41, posted by "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," September 25, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cswUI9a0nFI.

the scale entirely. Through its own accumulation of traces, *The Water Dancer* then participates in an accumulation of discursive traces that may (or may not) result in change on the part of the reader. However, the dynamics of this phenomenon are missed if demonstrable behavior is the sole unit of analysis for social change—such is the equivalent interrogating only the qualities of straw itself rather than the accumulative load that broke the proverbial camel's back.

This analysis of the phenomena occurring within the novel is not meant to replace more traditional frameworks premised upon cause-and-effect models. Rather, it is meant to complement those analyses by revealing additional dimensions of work being performed. In doing so, a parallelism might be drawn between the complexity of work accomplished by non-academic textual forms and the complexity of analysis aspired to by traditional academic scholarship. Overdetermination also provides a framework by which to understand that while the study of influences complements the study of determinants, both may be active or absent simultaneously within a given object of study depending on the lens applied to it. However, considering the overreliance on direct factual frameworks within scholarly discourse, this project has aimed to reclaim the legitimacy of the academic work already being accomplished by non-academic texts and artforms. Calling the units of analysis into question allows for a greater openness to alternative forms of knowledge production and literacy, and it is possible that this form of imagination may help move us towards the innovative approaches required to address the complex social problematics of the humanities.

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