

TRANSGRESSIVE UTOPIAS: DESIRE, PERVERSION, AND RESISTANCE IN THE
WORK OF SAMUEL R. DELANY, J.G. BALLARD, AND JOANNA RUSS

by

Nathan Singleton, B.A.

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Committee Members:

Graeme Wend-Walker, Chair

Robert Tally

Rebecca Bell-Metereau

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I. INTRODUCTION

The intersections and parallels between the works of Samuel R. Delany, J.G. Ballard, and Joanna Russ – three very different writers associated with late-20th-century science fiction – are rarely discussed, and perhaps understandably so; a cursory glance yields little evidence of shared themes or concerns beyond their nominal (and sometimes loose) classification within the genre of science fiction. And yet, a closer look reveals that each of these writers' works, in addition to being stylistically informed by the modernist impulse toward experimentation, are all concerned with the radical project of revealing heteronormative boundaries as mere constructs imposed on negative space, and in their writing seek to establish a sexuality unbounded by normative limits.

The term “transgressive,” when applied to sexuality or art, necessarily presupposes the existence of boundaries which can be transgressed. These boundaries may take shape as normative behavioral limits or standards of morality, and as such form a discursive framework within which any behavioral modalities that deviate from these boundaries are labeled abnormal, perverse, or obscene. However, given the absence of an epistemic “outside” from which a totalizing, authoritative viewpoint could perhaps allow us to see what is and is not normal, we are forced to conclude with Freud that “the pathological character in a perversion is found to lie not in the *content* of the new sexual aim but in its relation to the normal” (253). That is, no sexuality is inherently transgressive or perverse; it is only so in relation to a limit. A side effect – or possibly the principle effect – of the heteronormative boundaries that delimit the practice and expression of sexuality in western culture is the defining of heterosexuality first and foremost by what it is not. In other words, the space within heteronormative limits is always and necessarily marked by the absence of the queer.

Following Foucault's epistemology of sexual definition and orientation (including his remarks concerning the "invention" of homosexuality), Eve Sedgwick has amply demonstrated that heterosexuality as a marker of identity followed the marker of homosexuality as a way to christen the leftover blank space on the other side of the boundary not delimited by the marker "homosexual." Sedgwick insists that a binary system that delineates subjects as either hetero- or homosexual is irreparably flawed and fundamentally problematic, asserting that "these impactions of homo/heterosexual definition took place in a setting, not of spacious emotional or analytic impartiality, but rather of urgent homophobic pressure to devalue one of the two nominally symmetrical forms of choice" (9). This homo/heterosexual distinction is what creates the normative discourse in which what constitutes "normal" behavior is whatever is left after delineating what is "abnormal." As a result of seeking to establish heterosexual practices as the norm (and therefore valorizing those practices over all others as ontologically superior), heteronormativity encodes heterosexuality as a sexuality of reduction – a filtered, censored, and "erased" sexual space, a blankness at the center of proscribed boundaries, outside of which the perverse, the transgressive, and the queer run riot.

The boundaries constructed around this space are in large part linguistic, and this is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the rhetoric of sexuality and desire as expressed in literature. Commenting on this rhetoric in his essay "Preface to Transgression," Foucault writes, "Essentially the product of fissures, abrupt descents, and broken contours, this misshapen and craglike language describes a circle; it refers to itself and is folded back on a questioning of its limits – as if it were nothing more than a small night lamp that flashes with a strange light, signaling the void from which it arises and to which it addresses everything it illuminates . . ." (44). For Foucault, the language of transgression is inextricably bound to its limit, but elsewhere

he suggests that this limit can in fact be undone; while maintaining that “the limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess,” he admits that “transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance, to find itself in what it excludes” (34). Mobilizing Foucault’s description of transgressive language to engage with texts designated (questionably or not) as queer consequently suggests that any queer text is also a transgressive text (as “queer” denotes that which lies outside heteronormative limits), and as such creates the conditions for the potentially emancipatory dissolution of those limits.

Of course, categorizing certain texts as “straight” and others “queer” is inherently problematic, and yet it is precisely by examining the contours of this suspect distinction that we might illuminate the workings of discursive heteronormativity. Texts commonly considered “straight” are often notable for their absence of sexuality, an absence which assumes heterosexuality, which is to say characters are assumed to be straight unless explicitly shown to be otherwise. This absence of sexuality in characterization is assumed to be heterosexuality by the reader as a result of the text being produced and read within the broader cultural discourse that sets heterosexuality and its concomitant gender roles as the normative limit. In opposition to this, texts deemed “queer” often showcase explicit manifestations of sexual desire (both queer and straight). This suggests a de facto sex-negativity within the dominant heteronormative paradigm; in other words, it is possible to describe a discourse that values and promotes heterosexuality both in and of itself and against other sexualities as a fundamentally sex-negative discourse. By contrast, queer texts foreground queer sexuality and desire and therefore affirm sexuality *in toto*, including, perhaps paradoxically, heterosexuality. By foregrounding this sexuality, queer texts take us past the squeamishness and sex-negativity of heteronormative discourse.

A queer black writer of science fiction, pornography, and literary criticism, Samuel R. Delany has highlighted the sex-negativity of heteronormative discourse in both his fiction and criticism, as well as constructed various visions of queer sexual utopias. Other scholars have explored the ways in which Delany's queer sexuality intersects with his identity as an African American man (e.g. Jeffrey Allen Tucker's book-length study *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity and Difference*), and much more can and will be said about the topic; this paper will focus primarily on his exploration of nonnormative sexuality. Delany has written extensively on the genre and claims that science fiction is uniquely suited to the task of forming a discourse of resistance to normative mythologies (in the Barthesian sense of the term), as science fiction writers are "freed from the strictures of the probable, left to soar in the byways of the possible, not bound by the concept of universal human nature" (*The Jewel Hinged Jaw* 143). The possibilities of the genre enable Delany to imagine worlds in which the heteronormativity familiar to the contemporary reader simply does not exist, and instead proposes an alternative sexual discourse that welcomes and includes those sexual outlaws otherwise relegated to the margins, those outside the boundaries of heteronormativity. Chapter One will examine the ways in which Delany's novels *Dhalgren* and *Trouble on Triton* lampoon and castigate heteronormative discourse and highlight how his later work *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* advances his vision of a queer, counternormative sexual utopia by way of a Derridean destabilization of hierarchical binary notions of gender and sexuality.

J.G. Ballard – suburban single father, arrow-straight, white, and British – pursues a very different tack in his assault on heteronormativity. Much has been said about Ballard's dystopian bent, and he has been accused even by some of his admirers of being primarily a prophet of doom. However, Warren Wagar sees a different tendency at work in his fiction, asserting that "in

Ballard's transvaluation of the traditional Western wisdom, even dystopias are utopian" (54), and it is this transvaluation in Ballard's work that contains its most liberatory possibilities. In his 1971 novel *Crash*, Ballard marries the postmodern dystopic impulses of his earlier book *The Atrocity Exhibition* with an attempt to expose the boundaries of heteronormativity as constructs that foster the savage behavior they supposedly exist to suppress, following Freud's assertion that "the injurious influence of civilization reduces itself in the main to the harmful suppression of the sexual life of civilized peoples...All who wish to be more noble-minded than their constitution allows fall victims to neurosis; they would have been more healthy if it could have been possible for them to be less good" ("Civilized' Sexual Morality" 185-91). *The Unlimited Dream Company* is the novel in Ballard's oeuvre that can most easily be read as utopian, while still being an orgy of transgression and perversion. In this book, the messianic and utopian potential implied in the transgressive sexuality of *Crash* is brought to the forefront of the work and realized in the hallucinatory visions of Blake, the aptly named narrator. Chapter Two fuses the Freudian/Lacanian death drive with Herbert Marcuse's erotic utopian impulses to reveal Ballard as a writer more in tune with the possibilities of counternormative sexual utopias than previously thought.

Queer feminist theorist and science fiction writer Joanna Russ' work is notably different from Ballard's and Delany's in that comparatively little ink is spilled in graphic descriptions of sexual acts – although some ink *is* spilled, and where and why is important to her vision. Female sexuality and its expression plays a central role in Russ' fiction and theoretical work; Russ's depiction of lesbian sex, especially in her landmark novel *The Female Man*, was revelatory at the time of publication given its context in the traditionally male-dominated and androcentric discourse of science fiction. Her later work *Extra(ordinary) People*, a collection of loosely-

related short stories, anticipates the theoretical discussions of gender constructionism and the then-emergent field of queer theory, mining territory similar to Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* – and predating it by several years. Chapter Three engages with the psychoanalytic and linguistic perspectives of Luce Irigaray to highlight the ways in which Russ's novel *The Female Man* is an example of Irigaray's theory of feminine writing in practice, before turning to a discussion of how the short story "The Mystery of the Young Gentlemen" critiques gender essentialism and anticipates the "turn towards theory" of third-wave feminism, revealing Russ as a writer who advances a vision of a politically radical and counternormative sexuality anchored in a demand for recognition of woman as unbounded by heteronormative and heteropatriarchal limits.

Taken together, the works of Samuel R. Delany, J.G. Ballard, and Joanna Russ form a chorus of counternormative resistance, demonstrating that queer sexuality and its expression is always already revolutionary, always against, always in spite of, always declamatory, and never perfunctory. In their transgressive texts, these radical writers draw attention to the illegitimate and arbitrary nature of the limits they push, and their work thus becomes a "mark" or a "stain" on the negative space at the center of heteronormative discourse, revealing a surplus of desire, a spilling over the borders of normative limits.

II. CHAPTER ONE

Samuel R. Delany's prismatic body of work defies easy categorization. His earliest books (*The Jewels of Aptor*, *The Ballad of Beta-3*, *The Fall of the Towers*, *Empire Star*, *Babel-17*, *The Einstein Intersection* and *Nova*, all published in rapid succession in the 1960s) are firmly ensconced within the literary ghetto of science fiction, but the 1970s see Delany begin to play with the conventions of this marginal genre, and it is in marginal spaces – both literary and sexual – that he will remain for the rest of his career. Although overt traces of antinormative sexuality crop up in his early work, it is in the novel *Dhalgren* that we begin to see what is perhaps the central concern of Delany's work foregrounded; that is, the exploration of marginal social and sexual practices, and the ways in which those practices, by virtue of being “unspeakable,” inform and in some respects shape the contours of heteronormativity:

The unspeakable is, of course, not a boundary dividing a positive area of allowability from a complete and totalized negativity, a boundary located at least one step beyond the forbidden (and the forbidden, by definition – no? – *must* be speakable if its proscriptive power is to function . . . Rather it is a set of positive conventions governing what can be spoken of (or written about) in general. (Delany, *Shorter Views* 61)

Dhalgren maps the socioeconomic and normative boundaries of a major American city in the wake of an unnamed and perhaps unknown apocalyptic event, and examines the ways in which those structural limits can change in such a wake, revealing in the course of that change their constructed, fictive nature. Over the course of the narrative, the protagonist Kid examines his own relation to those boundaries, and in so doing makes advances toward dissolving them. The book is almost an encyclopedia-as-puzzle of its author's assertions and obsessions; like Susan Sontag, Delany is truly interested in everything, and his polymathic brilliance is on full

display in *Dhalgren*. In the process of writing about this “everything” and sifting through the margins of contemporary society, what will become the central preoccupation of Delany’s future work – marginal sexualities – begins to take shape, as will be seen in works of cultural theory like *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). Delany’s next book *Trouble on Triton* (1976) refines and narrows the concerns of its predecessor while functioning as a progression and extension of that text’s chief concerns, this time in the much more conventional SF setting of a city on the titular moon of Neptune in the 22nd century. With its cast of transgendered characters representing myriad different types of sexual expression – all in a sexually libertarian society that encourages, facilitates and celebrates those differences – *Triton* is principally concerned with epistemologies of the boundaries of gender and sexuality in contemporary society, and with how these boundaries shape our ways of thinking and living. Delany interrogates and rewrites those boundaries in the context of what Darko Suvin has referred to as the “cognitive estrangement” of science fiction in order to foreground their constructed nature and thus problematize and subvert them. By casting the protagonist Bron – who exhibits heteronormative (including homophobic and transphobic) attitudes – as an anomalous and problematic character within a society that celebrates sexual freedom, Delany makes our prevailing heteronormative discourse appear by turns neurotic and ridiculous. After his subsequent foray into the sword and sorcery genre via semiotics in the *Return to Neveryon* (1979-87) series, Delany returned to SF with *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984), another text in which he seeks to problematize and subvert the boundaries of heteronormative discourse – this time through a deconstruction of the heteronormative binary oppositions implicit in language itself. The book shows us a universe light years away from ours, in which our understandings of sexuality have been deconstructed, unmoored, and problematized beyond recognition in order to create a “radically sexual and

polymorphous utopia” (Freedman 157). The events in the text take place many thousands of years in the future, in a galactic civilization consisting of a federation of over 6,000 planets. An incredibly diverse array of species – many of which recognize more than two sexes – call the federation home, and even though the reader is aware they have traveled deep into SF territory, the now familiar battles over gender essentialism and heteronormativity slowly come into focus over the course of the narrative. By eroticizing gender and foregrounding the erotic as something polymorphous and multivalent (through techniques like the aforementioned cognitive estrangement of science fiction), *Stars* seeks to explode binary understandings and radically reorient our perception of gender, sexuality, and desire.

In many respects, *Dhalgren* is a departure from Delany’s earlier novels. The events take place in a fictional American city called Bellona, a stand in for both New York and San Francisco, the cities where much of the novel was composed (Wood 137), and in which some kind of apocalypse seems to have taken place. No one in the city seems to know what caused it – rumors of a Charles Whitman-like shooter and a plane crash abound – only that *something* happened: “This was back at the beginning. Things were a hell of a lot more confused then. A lot of buildings were burning. And the weather was something else. People were still trying to get out. There were a hell of a lot more people here. And they were scared” (*Dhalgren* 72). This is opposed to the more rote SF environment of some unspecified distant future; indeed, the back cover copy of the most recent trade paperback edition refers to it as “American magical realism.” Delany himself seems to shrug off the genre distinction as irrelevant or trivial: “I never saw any *serious* controversy over whether or not *Dhalgren* was SF . . . to me it seemed a much more modest argument – between the people who didn’t like the book and the people who did” (*Silent Interviews* 35-36). Indeed, one could argue that in *Dhalgren* any and all nods to conventions of

the science fiction genre are so much window dressing, and what the book is actually concerned with extends far beyond the confines of science fiction.

Delany has written that “if the book makes any social statement . . . it says that the complexity of ‘culture’ functioning in a gang of delinquents led by some borderline mental case is no less and no more than that functioning at a middle-class dinner party” (*Silent Interviews* 36). Given this, it is immediately apparent that the author is above all concerned with normative structures; by asserting that there is functionally no difference between the aggregate of manners, behaviors and gestures described as “culture” (and here it is important to take Delany to mean both “culture” in the anthropological sense of the word as well as its more commonplace meaning of something like “sophistication”) in a group of hoodlums (marginal, nonnormative) and a group of middle class friends at a dinner party (normative), Delany is in effect asserting that normative structures are merely discursive ways of thinking about culture, constructs that have no ontological basis outside the cultural modes of discourse they inhabit.

In his casting of a “borderline mental case” as his protagonist, Delany is echoing Foucault; in *Madness and Civilization* (1961) Foucault points to the plasticity of social boundaries around the insane, and how the remapping of those boundaries happened along pathways occluded by dominant discourses. Prior to the mid-17th century, the insane were not placed alongside the poor and the criminal; however, as with the inhabitants of those categories, the mad supposedly do no work, and in their idleness contribute nothing to society:

It is not immaterial that madmen were included in the proscription of idleness. From its origin, they would have their place beside the poor, deserving or not, and the idle, voluntary or not. Like them, they would be subject to the rules of forced labor. In the

workshops in which they were interned, they distinguished themselves by their inability to work and to follow the rhythms of collective life. (57-58)

In other words, it is the inability of the insane to work that proscribes them to specialized confinement. If madness itself actually refers to anything truly differential, it is not “because the madman comes from the world of the irrational and bears its stigmata; rather, it is because he crosses the frontiers of bourgeois order of his own accord, and alienates himself outside the sacred limits of its ethic” (*Madness* 58). That is, to be mad is to cross the discursive boundaries of normativity; madness is merely counter to sanity *as sanctioned by bourgeois order*, and neither term has any delimiting meaning per se. If this is true, then indeed, Delany’s middle-class dinner party is no more or less “normal” than a street gang led by a mad man.

And who is this (possibly) mad man? It is in the protagonist of *Dhalgren* – referred to variously as The Kid, Kidd, and Kid – that we see an embodiment of Delany’s first steps in his fiction toward developing a counternormative vision of queer sexuality that is both bold enough and theoretically grounded enough to distort, defy, and destabilize the boundaries of heteronormative discourse. The novel famously opens in mid-sentence with the line “to wound the autumnal city” (*Dhalgren* 1), and after a brief but disorienting and oblique passage of first-person prose poetry, the narrative voice shifts to third-person, and we encounter the as-yet-unnamed Kid as he is making his way to Bellona. On the outskirts of the city, he encounters a mysterious naked woman, and they immediately have sex, which is described in detail: “With her fingertips she moved his cock head roughly in her rough hair while a muscle in her leg shook under his. Suddenly he slid into her heat” (*Dhalgren* 3). With this passage Delany is establishing that this is a book that explicitly foregrounds sex, even if it cannot be reduced to being primarily *about* sex. After the encounter, we learn that Kid cannot remember his name, and his female

companion appears to transform into a tree. Jeffrey Allen Tucker notes that Kid's "possible madness and unstable memory, which inform the novel's fragmented representation of events, suggest an unusual type of mind" (59); Kid's subjectivity, we might say, is a mirror of the text itself. Whether or not this transformation (or the entire scene, for that matter) is meant to be read as an actual occurrence or mere hallucination within the imagined world of the novel is never revealed, and it is with this ambiguity, coupled with the opening paragraph's fragmented poetry, that Delany draws attention to the fact that this novel harbors no pretense of any fidelity to realism.

Linguistic acrobatics of the first few pages notwithstanding, *Dhalgren* quickly settles down (at least until its last section) into a more or less conventional narrative in terms of formal technique, and thus the reader can fairly easily follow the adventures of The Kid/Kidd/Kid as he wanders through the nightmarish world of Bellona, gaining notoriety first as a poet and then as the leader of a street gang called the Scorpions. Throughout these wanderings, Kid explores the limits of his own sexuality as both an eager participant and cool observer, theorizing a sex radicalism beyond the margins of normative behavioral codes – a project made possible by the dreamlike environs of Bellona. Jean Mark Gawron has commented on Kid's initial inability to discern the structure of boundaries in Bellona, but "nevertheless, such boundaries do exist; they have merely changed form radically" (161). As we shall see, navigating the sexual boundaries of Bellona requires a social acuity and flexibility far beyond that required by our own heteronormative boundaries.

Shortly after arriving in the city, the Kid meets Tak Loufer, and has a brief, casual sexual encounter with him. It is immediately apparent from Tak's physical description that he resembles what came to be referred to as a "bear" in gay subculture, and as the first person that Kid meets

in the city, establishes Bellona as a place outside the boundaries of proscribed heteronormativity: “His engineer’s boots . . . sounded like dropped sandbags . . . The worn cycle jacket was scarred with zippers. Gold stubble on chin and jaw snagged the street light. Chest and belly, bare between flapping zipper teeth, were a tangle of brass hair” (*Dhalgren* 17). After inviting Kid back to his place, he casually asks Kid to relax and take his clothes off; Kid “had known what was coming since he’d accepted the invitation in the park. Another time, he would have had some feelings about it He tried to think of something to say, couldn’t, so unbuttoned the three buttons, pulled the tails from his pants” (*Dhalgren* 48). This suggests both a familiarity with cruising etiquette and a heterosexual apprehensiveness about the encounter on Kid’s part, implying that while he may be experienced with gay sex, it is not his preference. After a few more mock protestations – “Look, I’m awfully dirty, man” (*Dhalgren* 49) – Kid relents, and while receiving what appears to be a mechanical but efficient blowjob from Tak, Kid recalls his encounter with the mystery woman in order to come: “Think of her, it would be easy A memory of blowing leaves suddenly became hair moving from her face He gasped at the welling heat, and came. A moment later Tak raised his head, grunted, ‘Yeah’” (*Dhalgren* 50). This suggests that Kid is heterosexual by inclination, and yet he seemingly has no problem engaging in sexual practices outside of heteronormative limits. His affair with Tak is fleeting, and he rejects him later in the course of the narrative, but this encounter serves to illustrate what a sexuality that ignores or pushes back against heteronormativity looks like, and in the pages to come, where it will lead.

Later, Kid meets Lanya Colson, and the description of the first time they have sex is markedly different from the passage detailing his night with Tak:

His chin, wet and unshaven, slipped against her throat. He remembered how she had sucked his thumb before and, taking a curious dare, opened his fingers and thrust three into her mouth. The realization, from her movement (her breaths were loud, long, and wet beside him, the underside of her tongue between his knuckles hot), that it was what she had wanted, made him, perhaps forty seconds after her, come. (*Dhalgren* 105)

While the language is frank, explicit and heavy with sensory detail – as it is in describing the tryst with Tak – there is a palpable sense of desire here, of movement, of thrust, of heat, all of which are lacking in the encounter with Tak. This is confirmed afterwards when Lanya asks Kid, “Who do you like better in bed, Tak or me?” (*Dhalgren* 106), revealing that Tak had told her that Kid had been “cooperative. But basically a cold fish” (*Dhalgren* 106). Kid admits that he likes her better, which seems to establish that at least his sexual inclination (if not his behavior) is firmly within heteronormative limits.

The seemingly fixed nature of Kid’s sexuality is revealed to be illusory with the introduction of the character of Denny. Around fifteen years old by Kid’s estimation, Denny unmoors any readerly assumptions about Kid’s lack of interest in gay sex, as we can see in an exchange between the two as Kid is taking a bath in the Scorpions’ house, and Denny intrudes. Kid has an erection, and the reader knows it was prompted by a woman who has just exited the bathroom, but Denny is not aware of this: “Denny gestured. ‘What you got a hard-on for?’ ‘Your scrawny ass hanging over the back of your pants.’ ‘Yeah?’ Denny grinned. ‘Be the best piece you ever had’” (*Dhalgren* 238). While this is partially only playful sexual bravado on Kid’s part, his future relations with Denny reveal Kid to be anything but disinterested in gay sex.

Additionally, Denny notably exhibits characteristics outside the limits of what is considered psychologically normal; he offers to give Kid a blowjob in broad daylight on a city street, which

prompts Kid to think “this kid is a fucking nut” (*Dhalgren* 387). Later, after sex with Kid, Denny notes that his hand is covered in his own semen, prompting him to ask Kid what he should do with it. Kid responds that he should eat it: “‘That what you usually do?’ ‘Yeah.’ Denny looked back up at the ceiling and put his fore knuckle in his mouth, turned his hand to lick his heel” (*Dhalgren* 392). Denny asks Kid if he does it as well, to which Kid responds “no” and tells him “You just looked like somebody who might” (*Dhalgren* 392). It is also worth noting that Denny’s signification of recalcitrant antinormative sexuality is redoubled by his status as “jailbait,” which speaks to Delany’s project in *Dhalgren* of pushing back against as many normative parameters as he can.

Denny’s characterization as a bit “off” and perverse is noteworthy in that it coincides with his queerness, pointing to homosexuality’s designation by the American Psychiatric Association at the time of the book’s writing as a mental illness. Indeed, Delany finished *Dhalgren* in 1973, the same year homosexuality was removed from the DSM. Because of this, the novel can be read as both witness to and a part of the discursive shifts taking place around human sexuality in the 60s and 70s. As the character of Denny illustrates, a critical component of Delany’s outspoken embrace of marginalized sex practices is his rejection of the pathologizing of homosexuality. During his voluntary tenure in a psychiatric hospital in 1964, ostensibly for suicidal thoughts – although Delany himself has written in his autobiography *The Motion of Light in Water* that “I didn’t want to kill myself. Nothing in my life specifically dissatisfied me – making the compulsion even more unnerving!” (333) – Delany crystallized his thinking on his own relationship to normative sexual boundaries. In a session of group therapy, Delany acknowledges – performatively, for the benefit of the homophobia of some of his fellow patients – that his homosexuality is a problem, that he is open and responsive to being “cured.” One of

his interlocutors admits to having his own homosexual experiences in the past, but that was all behind him now, and perhaps Delany could look forward to a similar outcome. However, something in the exchange engenders a realization of sorts in Delany, and he responds, “No, I don’t think so. First off, I’ve been going through it ever since I was a kid. And, second, I don’t want it to stop. I like it too much . . .” (*Motion of Light* 403). This realization – this refusal to stop engaging in sexual practices outside the limits of normative discourse – is the pivot on which *Dhalgren*’s primary arguments about sexuality turn.

At this point, it is worth turning briefly to another novel that Delany wrote concurrently with *Dhalgren*, although it was not published until 1995: *Hogg*. Delany calls *Hogg* an angry book, written in advance of the Stonewall riots: “It was written by a twenty-seven-year-old black gay man who was as furious and as outraged by the sexual condition of the country as any of those black queens back on Waverly Place” (*Conversations* 121). Adam Roberts has noted the flatness of tone in which the narrator of the book describes various sexual atrocities, calling attention to the “precise and careful tone of the writing, the leveling of affect that rendered ‘straightforward’ sexual encounters on exactly the same level as let’s say, a father sexually abusing his child and so on” (*Conversations* 120), and it is this flatness that contributes to the horrifyingly unnerving quality of the narrative, which centers around the exploits of a truck driver nicknamed “Hogg” and contains descriptions of graphically explicit, deplorable brutality of every conceivable kind – a world of Sadean pornographic depravity that could be seen as heterotopia’s dark mirror. In the midst of this, Hogg – who, as a rapist, pedophile, and murderer, is a caricature of what the more alarmist strands of mainstream American culture claimed homosexuals were actually like at the time the novel was written – waxes philosophical on the topic of so-called “normal” sexuality, and its relation to sanity:

I think I ain't never met a normal, I mean *normal*, man who wasn't crazy! Loon crazy, take 'em off and put 'em away crazy, which is what they would do if there wasn't so many of them. Every normal man – I mean sexually normal man, now – I ever met figures the whole thing runs between two points: What he wants, and what he thinks should be. Every thought in his head is directed to fixing a rulestraight line between them, and he calls that line: What *Is* On the other hand, every faggot or panty-sucker, or whip jockey, or SM freak, or baby-fucker, or even a motherfucker like me, we *know* . . . that there is what we want, there is what should be, and there is what is: and don't none of them got anything to do with each other unless . . . we make it. (*Hogg* 150-51)

Jacques Lacan would concur; cautioning against the impulse to determine what constitutes a normal or healthy subject in psychoanalysis, he says, “To unthinkingly bring in the idea of a normal anything in our praxis – whereas we discover in it precisely to what degree the so-called normal subject is anything but normal – should arouse in us the most radical and the most assured suspicion as to its results” (*Transference* 319). In other words, in human behavior (sexual or otherwise), there is nothing “normal.” As Delany says, “Among the tasks the novel attempts is to mark out a discursive field in which, by the end, the reader can no longer even *say* the words “normal” and “abnormal” without putting them in quotation marks, ironizing them, or somehow or other placing them *sous rature*” (*Making of Hogg* 264-65).

The tasks attempted by *Hogg* are obviously related to and contribute to the presence of Denny in *Dhalgren*; there is even a character named Denny – a teenaged psychotic sexual deviant who goes on a murderous rampage – in *Hogg's* gang of miscreants, who may or may not be the same Denny we encounter in *Dhalgren*. After an initial sexual encounter between Kid and

Denny in a threesome with a girl, they eventually go to bed with Kid's girlfriend Lanya, and the three form a triadic relationship. At this point in the narrative, Kid's bisexuality is more or less established, but the amorphousness of that distinction is foregrounded again when he relies on straight fantasies in order to reach orgasm while getting head from Denny: "If I'm starting to have to fantasize girls in order to come with guys, maybe I'm not as bisexual as I keep telling myself" (*Dhalgren* 682). Again, Delany is pointing to the ways in which sexual practices and psychosexuality color outside the lines of discursive boundaries, and uses this triadic relationship to explore and navigate the uncharted waters of a sexuality lived in the margins – perhaps even proposing it as a model of utopic, counternormative sexual practice. We see this at work in an exchange between Kid and Lanya recorded in the first person by Kid himself in "The Anathēmata: a plague journal," the final section of the novel, in which they map the constellation of love formed by their triad with Denny. Speaking to Lanya about their overlapping and diverging feelings for Denny, Kid says, "Denny, I think, is the first Denny you've ever known. For you, he's unique – whereas for me . . . there're many, many of him floating around Now for me, you're the irreplaceable one" (*Dhalgren* 682). These are uncharted relational waters – the three lovers have ventured far off the heteronormative map, and are improvising their erotic lives as they go. Kid concludes by saying, "Hope it works. I like you two. I want you with me. Just don't let me start taking either one of you for granted" (*Dhalgren* 683). This warmth of affect is noticeable earlier, in a moment when the three of them are together: "Heads together, arms locked around one another's backs, Kid said, 'This is comfortable'" (*Dhalgren* 513). This threesome feels "right" to Kid, as if all is as it should be, despite being completely at odds with the proscriptions of heteronormativity, violating as it does the injunctions toward monogamy, heterosexuality and coupledness. In presenting this

arrangement not only in a positive light but as a matter of course, a sexual-meaning-making as business-as-usual in the city of ashes called Bellona, Delany is foreshadowing the sexual heterotopia of Tethys in his next novel, *Trouble on Triton*, depicting what life might look like if the Kid/Lanya/Denny triad comes to represent an actual discursive break with heteronormative limits.

In *Trouble on Triton*, Delany returns to the genre of science fiction that some allege he abandoned with *Dhalgren*; set in the 22nd century on a distant moon of Neptune, no one would mistake the novel for anything but a space opera. The setting of the book – in its spatial, temporal, and textual distance from our own world – allows Delany to highlight the constructed nature of heteronormativity in ways that are only implied in *Dhalgren*. This, of course, is made possible by the cognitive estrangement effect of the language of science fiction, and to the extent that *Dhalgren* takes place in “our world,” the more effectively the constructed nature of heteronormativity is concealed by the language employed – and thus the behavior of the citizens of Bellona is able, at least to some extent, to shock. Delany turns this on its head in *Trouble on Triton*; indeed, the only character who consistently shocks is the protagonist Bron, who in some respects is Kid's opposite – an example of gendered heteronormativity, and as such serves as a critique of our binary systems of gender and sexuality.

Bron is not a sympathetic character; he is a smug, self-satisfied, narcissistic, and emotionally tone deaf heterosexual man who desires a submissive heterosexual woman. Bron is a native of Mars, and he discovers that on Triton, this desire is an anomaly; as the subtitle of the novel – “An Ambiguous Heterotopia” – implies, the boundaries of sexuality are constructed around the differences of sexuality in society, rather than as proscriptions delineating normal and deviant behavior. In other words, the structures of society help citizens connect with partners that

they may potentially find mutual satisfaction with; this applies to family and kinship structures as well, with allowances made for multiple-parent enclaves and housing co-ops of single people with every conceivable predilection. Additionally, sexual reassignment surgery – for anyone, for any reason – is a commonplace. As for family planning, almost everyone on Triton chooses to get an injection which renders them sterile, and if one decides at a later date to procreate, one must take a pill that will activate fertility for the time the pill is administered, rendering fertility a default “off” switch, rather than the default “on” of our biology. Interestingly, as Bron’s love interest The Spike points out, “With it set up this way, less than twenty percent of the population chooses to reproduce In the satellites we try to dissolve that hierarchical bond between children and economic status Earth is so famous for – education, upkeep, and social subsidy – so that you don’t have the horrible situation where if you have *no* other status, there’s *always* children” (*Triton* 12). This passage foregrounds the problems implicit in the heteronormative cult of the nuclear family and the futurism of a society structured around child-rearing that Lee Edelman astringently points to in his book *No Future*; Edelman condemns heteronormativity’s “fatal embrace of a futurism so blindly committed to the figure of the Child that it will justify refusing healthcare benefits to the adults that some children become” (29) and insists that “the Child as futurity’s emblem must die” (31). Delany may not go that far, but the procreative arrangement on Triton is nevertheless a radical counternormative rebuttal of the heteronormative injunction to reproduce.

All of this is to say that society on Triton has completely decentered and destabilized heteronormative proscriptions as the prevailing sexually delimiting constructs. And yet, for someone like Bron, mutual satisfaction is difficult to come by on Triton, as he desires “to be a patriarchal male in a binary system in which men are human and women are not” (Pearson 462).

A caricatured embodiment of the heteropatriarchy, Bron is driven to desperation in his inability to find an erotic counterpart on Triton and seeks sexual reassignment surgery to become a woman. As Wendy Gay Pearson notes, “Ironically, he hopes in the process to insure the survival of the ideological principle of masculinist heterosexism” (461); alas, in the libertarian heterotopia on Triton, Bron’s perversion is exceedingly rare, and she fails to find a partner as a woman just as he did as a man. Pearson continues by noting that the novel “engages in a form of cultural critique that is dependent on a heterotopian dismantling of the apparent naturalness of the social ordering predominant at the time it was written” (464). Citing Chan, Hetherington and others, Pearson emphasizes heterotopia’s meaning as a different social ordering, in the Foucauldian sense of the term, rather than meaning something akin to postmodern utopia (464), and asserts with Chan that we should read *Triton*’s heterotopia with this distinction in mind. Delany himself has said that he does not see the society on Triton as utopian, and furthermore that he doubts SF “*can* be really utopian” (*Shorter Views* 323). However, as he freely admits, “clearly I think its social system represents an improvement on our own” (323), and in the same interview concedes that one could call the heterotopia in *Trouble on Triton* “designer utopia,” which is to say “Everyone on Triton decides on her or his personal utopia” (341), although he does emphasize that this is in contrast to utopia per se. Nevertheless, it is clear from this that Delany intends to foreground the aspects of Triton’s society that are most different from our own – that is, the discourse around sexuality and its practice – as at least quasi-utopian.

Earl Jackson Jr., commenting on the intersection of science fiction and representation of marginal sexuality, writes that

the adaptation of science fiction to deviant strategies of representational practice resonates . . . with the histories of gay male oppression and resistance. The choice of a

noncanonical genre such as SF as the preferred form of expression is itself a rejection of the values of the dominant society, similar to the rejection of high cultural seriousness foundational to gay camp sensibility . . . (Jackson 93)

He goes on to say that “science fiction offers unique modes of conceptual, rhetorical, and didactic expression, in its independence from mimetic faithfulness to the world as it is” (95).

Delany – whose interest in semiotics, structuralism and deconstruction is well documented – has written that “science fiction is – as are *all* practices of writing, as are *all* genres, literary and paraliterary – a way of reading” (*Silent Interviews* 273). That is, science fiction is not an object out there in the world, with attributes that define it; it is more like an event of meaning production that happens between the text and the reader during the process of reading as a result of the expectations the reader brings to the text, including discursive assumptions about what science fiction is. More specifically, Delany avers elsewhere that science fiction literalizes “all sorts of sentences that would be nonsense if they appeared in any other mode of discourse . . . like ‘Her world exploded.’ That’s just a cliché in mundane fiction, but in a science fiction novel it could mean that a planet, belonging to a woman, blew up” (*Occasional Views* 21). An aspect of what we could consider the emancipatory potential of this way of reading is implicit in what Delany is proposing here; he is pointing to science fiction’s ability to destabilize normative discursive uses of language, such as those language practices that delimit notions of gender and sexuality and trap the reader in normative notions of sexual behavior.

In the following exchange between Bron and the object of his desire – an itinerant actress and theater director known as The Spike – we see science fiction’s destabilizing potential at work. Here Bron represents the heteronormative values that we recognize as the dominant discourse in our own culture, but on Triton render him an outlier – while The Spike speaks for

the “common-sense” viewpoint of Triton’s heterotopia. Speaking about this heterotopia, Bron says he is “not happy in the world I live in” (*Triton* 98) and complains that “they make it so easy for you – all you have to do is know what you want . . . if you’re gay, you find a gay co-operative; if you’re straight, you go find yourself one of the male/female co-operatives” (99), to which the Spike responds, “I’ve always thought the division we use out here of humanity into forty or fifty basic sexes, falling loosely into nine categories . . . ” (*Triton* 99) makes it easy, more or less, for one to get in where they fit in. That The Spike begins her response with “I’ve always thought” – or possibly, in other words, “It seems normal to me” – showcases the strangeness of the linguistic capabilities of science fiction at work, pointing to our habitual blindness to the constructed nature of sexually normative categories and conventions, presuppositions that obscure the multivalent modalities in and through which humans organize boundaries around sexuality. Bron is a stand-in for heteronormativity as a discourse of sexuality defined not by what it is but by what it prohibits – by everything outside its limits: “Somewhere in your sector or in mine . . . there it is: pleasure, community, respect – all you have to do is know the kind, and how much of it, and to what extent you want it. That’s all . . . But what happens to those of us who *don’t* know? . . . Decide what you like and go get it? Well, what about the ones of us who only know what we don’t like?” (*Triton* 104) Here we see Bron’s refusal of sexual satisfaction at its most adamant, and because we have allowed ourselves to become interpellated by Triton’s heterotopic sexual mores, it seems delusional and neurotic; and yet, he is simply outlining the boundaries of the heteronormativity in our own discourse that are typically invisible us. When Bron recounts a conversation in which he asks a group of men if he can sleep with one “their” women, The Spike reacts accordingly: “*his* women? *Her* men? In fact you didn’t even *say* the second one; I wonder if that’s significant? – just sounds like a vision

from another world!” To which Bron replies, “I am from another world – a world you’re at war with” (*Triton* 106). The Spike is commenting on how strange she finds Bron’s use of possessive pronouns; it is almost as if she thinks he’s crazy.

In *Trouble on Triton* Delany succeeds in upending the normative behavioral boundaries that he began to destabilize in *Dhalgren* through Kid, Lanya and Denny; in Triton’s heterotopia-as-designer-utopia, we not only get a glimpse of what a radical decentering of normative sexual conventions might look like, but also come to view the discourse of heteronormativity as a discourse of negativity, defined by what lies outside its limits – and how counter to human flourishing those limits often are. When Bron says he is from another world, of course he means Mars, but we can take this exchange to indicate the war between acceptance of difference (what we might call sex positivity today) and traditional values that seek to naturalize constructed normative modes of sexual behavior as normal and all others as deviant. This war will reach its apotheosis in Delany’s next work of science fiction, *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand*.

The narrative of *Stars* centers around the love affair between a freed slave named Rat Korga (the name “Rat” being an acronym for “Radical Anxiety Termination,” a psycho-medical procedure that mentally-ill citizens of the planet Rhyonon can elect to undergo to help them assimilate into society through slave labor) and an International Diplomat (or “ID”) named Marq Dyeth. Marq learns of Rat’s existence through the presciently named “Web,” an organization that controls and regulates the dissemination of information in the galaxy; Rat is the sole survivor of his planet’s destruction, and he is also, according to the Web, Marq’s perfect erotic object, and he is Rat’s – a sexually perfect match. Over the course of the novel, the two men meet, have sex, and explore Marq’s home Dyethshome on the planet Velm, and Delany uses

these and other events in the narrative as devices to stage a deconstruction of gender, multiculturalism and the discourse of desire as manifested in the English language.

How does Delany go about staging this destabilization of gendered heteronormativity? In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida famously questions the historical subordination of writing to speech in Western thought and argues that binary oppositions in language imply a hierarchy of values. As Christopher Johnson summarizes it, the discourse of Western civilization assumes “speech is the guarantor of presence and of authenticity, whereas writing represents artifice and absence, the alienation and deferment of presence” (5). The sociocultural ramifications of this hierarchical binary opposition in language are perhaps no more readily apparent than in the binary “man/woman,” and this distinction is further complicated by the tenuous and problematic correlation between biological sex and socially constructed gender, as Judith Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*: “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice” (6).

We can see a similar hierarchical binary opposition at work in so-called queer literature. Within the heteronormative discursive framework of Western literature, characters are presumed to be straight unless explicitly shown to be otherwise – heterosexuality is a neutral, invisible orientation, not unlike whiteness. Expanding on this phenomenon, novelist Brandon Taylor comments that, in writing fiction, “One must do work in order to explain why a character is queer or else it is seen as an extraneous fact, a superfluous detail, a distraction” (Taylor). His expression of frustration in trying to navigate between the binary of writing charged “issue fiction” and a more neutral (and thus heterosexual) narrative makes the problem clear:

As it was conveyed to me, the highest virtue in art was a simulation of the colorless, genderless white heterosexuality insisted upon by my peers, and if I was to become a

good writer, I would have to make my stories as transparent as glass, as devoid of the charge of queerness as possible. I would need to write away from the legibly queer or else, directly into its tropes. I felt trapped. It felt impossible.

The author does not need to go to any lengths to demonstrate a character's straightness; it is an assumption brought to the work by the reader, an agreement of literary conventions between reader and writer.

How, then, can a producer of fictional texts best go about avoiding, transcending, or subverting these readerly expectations and discursive assumptions? In *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, Delany once again turns to the linguistic possibilities of science fiction. Mary Kay Bray notes that the "text of this novel seems devised . . . to modulate its readers' consciousness, directing their attention to moments which prompt key associations, then dissolving it to re-prompt it again in different frameworks" (18). The most notable (and semantically destabilizing) way the book does this is through its reordering and shifting of meaning in the male/female binary and its associated pronouns: in "Arachnia Standard," an expanded and modified version of English that is common to a large part of the federation of planets (Rat's home planet Rhyonon being a notable exception), all individuals of all species refer to one another as women, and use the attendant pronoun "she." The exception to this is when the speaker finds someone sexually attractive, in which case the object of desire is referred to using masculine pronouns. "Male" and "female" refer to anatomical sex, not gender, and as such are distinguished from "man/woman," "he/she," and "him/her." Unaware of what is happening in the language of the text, the reader encountering the book for the first time is likely to miss the first occurrences of this shift. As the disorientation and confusion mounts, the reader will backtrack through the novel, and a careful reread of certain passages will yield an

understanding of the radical work at play in the language, a way of reading that Bray refers to as “recursive” (18). Early in the novel, readers confront this distinction, foregrounded in Marq’s recounting of a chilling encounter with a professional killer and sexual sadist named Clym. In the first person, Marq recounts a conversation he has with Clym about various cultural and work-related subjects, using masculine pronouns throughout to refer to Clym. At this point in the novel, the reader is not aware of how Arachnia Standard has reordered gender constructs, and most likely does not notice anything out of the ordinary in the use of “he” and “him”; after all, Clym is male. However, the reader *is* aware, from the first mention, that Marq is attracted to Clym: “I question now if it *was* desire that first made me notice . . . him” (Delany, *Stars* 82). Over the course of the ensuing interaction, Marq discovers Clym’s rather outré sexual taste, and his attraction vanishes, and suddenly Clym is a “she.” Marq is disturbed by Clym’s sexual advances/threats, and after asking him if his appetite is related to his line of work, the following exchange occurs: “‘Though my sexuality is not part of my psychosis, they have been integrated carefully by some very clever people.’ She moved one and another finger (and from then on, ‘she’ was the only way I could think of her) against my carotid” (*Stars* 91). At this point, assumptions about gender in the narrative are destabilized. The reader has been collaborating with Delany thus far to create and visualize a world that, by virtue of being science fiction, requires the abandonment of many assumptions about the “real” world; in this sense, science fiction as a way of reading requires a significant amount of work on the part of the reader. In deconstructing the gender binary in the English language, Delany has taken this approach one step further. The result does not make for easy reading, and as the novel progresses the reader is made aware of just how cognitively ingrained the gender binary in language is, and indeed how

so much of what and how we think is dictated by conventions of language. We think what we hear/say and read/write, rather than the obverse.

The principal conflict in these novels – the conflict between those who would naturalize the boundaries around normative sex practices, and those who would destabilize them – reaches its clearest representation in *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand*. As Delany makes clear throughout the novel, the deconstruction of gendered language is a necessary and given feature of the utopian society that he is sympathetic to. We see what this utopia might look like in civilizations under the influence of the Sygn (Velm), as opposed to those of the Family (Rhyonon). Both groups could be read as something like political parties writ galactically large, with the Sygn promoting difference, tolerance, and multiculturalism, and the Family as a sort of quasi-fascist advocacy group for something like the “good old days,” a golden age in the past when cultural stability was maintained as a result of conformity to norms. In the time-present of the novel, the Sygn is the more powerful of the two, but the Family is nevertheless quite popular; after pointing out the Derridean connotations of the word “Sygn” and the obvious nod to “family values” of the other faction, Carl Freedman notes that “the Family is a far from insignificant force, and its ahistorical, totalistic identitarianism remains . . . a very real threat” (159). Marq’s home planet of Velm, under the influence of the Sygn, is peaceful, advanced, and sophisticated, with a degree of sexual openness and personal liberty that is difficult to imagine for readers on present-day Earth. By contrast, Rat’s home planet of Rhyonon, controlled by the Family, ignores the conventions of Arachnia Standard and employs gendered language much like our own planet, and is host to various Earth-like practices like sexual bigotry and the slave trade; Rat, of course, is a freed slave. The planet undergoes something called “Cultural Fugue,” a planet-wide cataclysmic event of which Rat is the sole survivor. The implication is clear: Delany points the

way to utopia, foregrounding the pivotal role of language in that utopia, as well as showing us a possible (probable?) outcome of insisting on the “naturalness” of binaries of gender and sexuality.

In *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, Delany illuminates how language dictates our thought, expectations and assumptions, and by destabilizing this mechanism, he keeps us constantly unmoored from our habitual notions of sexuality and gender, thus making us aware of their mobility and fluidity. In deconstructing readerly notions of gender, Delany produces a text that foregrounds a sexual desire beyond considerations of straight/gay and male/female binaries. In doing so, he lays bare for the reader the issues of sexual orientation and gender, revealing them as constructs produced by sociohistorical forces, rather than “natural facts.” As a sustained experiment in narrative, the effect is necessarily confusing and disorienting; it is also revolutionary.

III. CHAPTER TWO

While perhaps no other writer working in SF has written as extensively or as explicitly about transgressive sex practices as Samuel R. Delany, it is nevertheless not him but one of his contemporaries who is most notorious for creating what David Pringle has referred to as “pornographic SF”: J.G. Ballard (Wilson 83). Ballard is best known as the author of *Crash*, a novel that is either a paean to or caution against symphorophilia, depending on the reading. The novel’s plot is threadbare, and like much pornography, it essentially functions as a platform on which the author can stage multiple obsessive and repetitive sexual acts. The narrator (named “James Ballard” in a Baudrillardian wink from the author), a producer of television commercials, is involved in a serious collision in which the driver of the other car dies. As “Ballard” convalesces, he notices in himself a new and strange erotic fixation on the accident, and soon becomes sexually and socially involved with other survivors of car crashes (including Dr. Helen Remington, the wife of the man who died in the collision with him), eventually being drawn into the orbit of the deranged “hoodlum scientist” (12) known simply as Vaughan. Vaughan espouses a philosophy of orgasmic liberation in death-by-car-crash, and kills himself in an attempt to stage a head-on collision with a limousine carrying Elizabeth Taylor. The novel chronicles either “Ballard”’s descent into sexual deviance and violence, or emancipation from the neurosis of late modernity via what he terms a “benevolent psychopathology” (124) – again, depending on the reading.

Despite Delany’s own preoccupations with marginal sexuality and paraphilia, D. Harlan Wilson maintains that while “many authors have written what qualifies as science fiction erotica or soft porn . . . nothing has approached the singular hardcore aesthetic of *Crash*” (89). Ballard himself has argued that, like Delany, most of his post-1960s fiction cannot be strictly classified

as science fiction. Wilson refutes this, claiming that his books are “unequivocally science fictional inasmuch as they explore the relationship between technology and humanity, cognitively estrange readers, and effectuate novums” (72). *Crash* certainly fits this bill, and it is certainly pornographic; however, as previously noted, it is difficult to determine what a definitive reading of *Crash* might look like, and indeed if anything approaching that reading is possible. Oneiric and libidinal, Ballard’s novels lend themselves easily to competing and contradictory readings. As Duncan Bell writes, “Deliberately ambiguous and open-ended, Ballard’s extraordinary fiction can bear the weight of endless interpretation” (958), and maintains that the political can be read into or out of Ballard, depending on the perspective of the reader. Ballard himself seems to delight in this ambiguity; the prevailing critical consensus of his work tends to take him at his word that he is in no way advocating for the extreme transgressive behavior detailed in his fiction, and yet he admits that “someone who puts up a road sign saying ‘dangerous bend ahead’ is not inciting drivers to speed up, though I hope that my fiction is sufficiently ambiguous to make the accelerator seem strangely attractive” (*Metaphors* 412-13).

In this ambiguity lies a reading of Ballard’s work that celebrates and foregrounds the emancipatory potential of counternormative sexual practices. And despite proclamations of Ballard’s liberalism or even conservatism – proclamations well-documented by Duncan Bell and others – his work remains profoundly radical and transgressive, with a catalytic power of its own that transcends its author’s intentions and perspectives (as ambiguous as they may well be). W. Warren Wagar claims that all of Ballard’s fiction is, in fact, utopian, writing that “Despite his reputation as a cold-blooded anatomist of disaster and violence, he is in fact a visionary, a postmodern utopographer. His landscapes are heavens . . . in Ballard’s transvaluation of the traditional Western wisdom, even dystopias are utopian” (54). As we saw in the last chapter,

Delany's pornographic novel *Hogg* illustrates that without psychological pathways along which the so-called sexual deviant can advance in a way that will allow him or her to thrive sexually or socially, the heteronormative boundaries of our society manufacture the monstrous behavior that its proscriptions are constructed to limit. Although the sexual pathology exhaustively detailed in Ballard's *Crash* advances like a car rolling downhill toward the orgasm-death of the car crash – and as such is not exemplary of any sexuality that can be construed as life-affirming – the sexual practices of Vaughan's followers can perhaps be seen as counternormative (and thus potentially emancipatory) pathways along which deviants can possibly thrive. For Wagar, "Ballard's intent is clear . . . Vaughan's heroic attempt to fly; the respectful onlookers, awed by the logic and beauty of his death; and the dabs of semen forming a constellation in the new zodiac of the lovers' minds – all these are metaphors of transcendence, of a rapture beyond words" (62). Nevertheless, both Ballard and most of his critics agree that the practices in the book are unequivocally pathological, symptomatic of what Ballard called the "death of affect" in response to the psychosocial effects of late modernity and capitalism on the human subject, and its tone of pessimistic, almost retrograde Freudianism – which of course played a large part in the psychoanalytic community's pathologizing of queer sexuality in the first half of the 20th century – makes *Crash* read like an exercise in lurid nihilism.

After elaborating and riffing on this nihilism in his next two books (*Concrete Island* and *High Rise* – sometimes considered with *Crash* as part of a thematic trilogy), Ballard shifted gears somewhat with *The Unlimited Dream Company*. A hallucinatory, elliptical novel that tells the story of a possibly insane man who steals a small aircraft, crash lands in the London suburb of Shepperton (where Ballard resided for decades), and turns it into an orgiastic, Edenic sexual utopia via unexplained (and possibly imagined) shamanic and/or godlike powers, *The Unlimited*

Dream Company is both more hermeneutically ambiguous than *Crash* and less pessimistic. Like that earlier work, the book examines the polymorphous perversity that underpins human sexuality, but in ways that diverge from the pathological undercurrent so pervasive in *Crash*. As such, *The Unlimited Dream Company* can in some respects be read as a refutation of heteronormativity's pathologizing impulse – despite the possibility that Ballard may in fact be sympathetic to this impulse, given his (potentially) problematic politics. Nevertheless it is a book that destabilizes the proscriptive functions of normative limits, not unlike Delany's *Dhalgren*.

Delany refers to his pornographic novel *The Mad Man* as a “pornotopic fantasy,” and stresses that sexual events in that book “could never happen for any number of surely self-evident reasons” (*The Mad Man* ix); that is, every situation in the narrative has the potential to become a sexual situation, and indeed probably will become a sexual situation, and to the extent that this narrative place (topos) does not reflect reality, it is by default fantastic. This obviously applies to his novel *Hogg*, discussed in the previous chapter, and in this regard *Crash* is certainly a pornotopic fantasy as well, as almost every detail of the book orbits the transgressive thrust of its motivating concerns – concerns that, at least superficially, do not reflect reality as we experience it. However, Ballard's pornographic writing in *Crash* differs substantially from Delany's, and this may be a result of Delany's Foucauldian perspective, a perspective largely lacking in Ballard's worldview. Steven Shaviro avers that Delany's writing denies and ignores limits placed on sexuality, and as such, “its intensities are never presented as transgressive; the entire tradition of pornographic transgression, which stretches from Sade to Bataille and beyond, and which is often echoed in the naively liberationist rhetoric of much commercial porn — holds no interest for Delany, and in fact is something that his books explicitly critique” (Shaviro). As we have seen, Delany's antinormative strategy in his fiction is to problematize the very existence

of norms; Ballard, on the other hand, is clearly placing himself in the tradition of Sade and Bataille, in drawing as much attention to norms as possible in order to more flagrantly violate them.

David Pringle, Andrzej Gasiorek and others have noted the pronounced presence of and commentary on the Freudian concept of the death drive in *Crash*; Gasiorek points out that the obsessive conflation of orgasm with death-by-car crash reveals the sexual acts in the book “disclose a drive to dissolution, which suggests that sex is no longer operative here but rather an instinct for death” (91), but then goes on to concede that the novel “exhibits a kind of counter-narrative that tries to conceive the wound as the source of redemption, tries to imagine how, out of this disaster, the world might be recreated, and nowhere is the text more ambivalent than here” (91). Additionally, Samuel Francis has extensively and exhaustively discussed the sadomasochistic sexuality running throughout the text (and there is counternormative potential in this reading), but comparatively little has been said about the potential for the deviant sexuality detailed in the book to be read as a destabilizing strategy capable of unraveling and diffusing normative power, and while this reading is admittedly problematic given the descent of the characters into psychopathic violence, its counternormative potential should not be ignored within the context of a full consideration of the place of sexuality in Ballard’s fiction; in *Crash*, Ballard makes his first attempt to queer all human sexuality with a totalizing, all-encompassing polymorphous perversity.

The book opens at the climax of the story, and from the outset Ballard immediately sets a tone of both queer sexuality and an inversion of normative sexual affect. After informing the reader in the first sentence that “Vaughan died yesterday in his last car crash” (*Crash* 1), the narrator informs us that talking about the “last crash” was the only time Vaughan was ever

“calm,” and he “talked of these wounds and collisions with the erotic tenderness of a long separated lover” (*Crash* 2). By conflating “crash” with “calm” and “wounds and collisions” with “erotic tenderness,” Ballard has immediately thrown the reader into a narrative space in which discursive ideas around what constitutes a normative affective position regarding sexuality are provocatively and categorically violated; the reader is in Ballard’s fantasmatic pornotopia now, and will need to find their sea legs quickly if they are to make it through the novel. In the next few sentences, the narrator describes his relationship with Vaughan: “. . . he half turned towards me, so that his heavy groin quietened me with its profile of an almost erect penis. He knew that as long as he provoked me with his own sex . . . I would never leave him” (*Crash* 2), foregrounding an unequivocal and radical queer component of the novel’s sexuality; whether this queerness is valorized or pathologized is a conundrum we will return to later. As the narrative continues, “Ballard” continues his remapping of human sexuality, repeatedly casting his and Vaughan’s vision in liberatory terms, e.g. the “ecstasies of head-on collisions” (*Crash* 4) giving way to a “new sexuality born from a perverse technology” (*Crash* 7), and bluntly literalizes the death drive as his summation of Vaughan’s vision: “In his mind, Vaughan saw the whole world dying in a simultaneous automobile disaster, millions of vehicles hurled together in a terminal congress of spurting loins and engine coolant” (*Crash* 9), echoing Freud’s assertion that “the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts” (626). Freud’s theory of the death drive hypothesizes that all life harbors an “instinct to return to the inanimate state” (*The Freud Reader* 613), which complicates theories that privilege self-preservation over all other instincts (or drives): “The hypothesis of self-preservative instincts, such as we attribute to all living beings, stands in marked opposition to the idea that instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death. Seen in this light, the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of

self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes” (613-14). Accordingly, Vaughan’s dream merely makes conscious what is unconscious (i.e. repressed and thus symptomatically neurotic) in the sexuality of late modernity.

“Ballard”’s growing attraction to Vaughan and his ideas can be traced to the event of his accident, as he admits that “This obsession with the sexual possibilities of everything around me had been jerked loose from my mind by the crash . . . The crash between our two cars was a model of some ultimate yet undreamt sexual union” (*Crash* 21). This is symptomatic of Freud’s notion of “traumatic neurosis” (*The Freud Reader* 607-610), and for our purposes it is worth mentioning Lacan’s elaboration on this trauma in the concept of the “encounter with the real” (*Concepts* 53), in which “the real . . . [presents] itself in the form of that which is *unassimilable* in it – in the form of trauma” (*Concepts* 55). The operative word here is *unassimilable* – that is, the trauma of the real contains that which cannot be signified or “assimilated” into the symbolic order, i.e. spoken or written. What can be signified is always already fantasmatic, and according to Lacan, fantasy “is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary” (*Concepts* 60) – in this case, trauma. This mirrors “Ballard”’s attempts to make sense of his affective position in relation to his own trauma, as he says “the crash was the only real experience I had been through in years” (*Crash* 30), alluding to his awareness of the fantasmatic nature of phenomenological experience. His perception of this “new sex” is “ultimate yet undreamt,” and he highlights the central role of language in his and his wife’s increasingly transgressive fantasies, insisting that “these descriptions [of our elaborate fantasies] seemed to be a language in search of objects, or even, perhaps, the beginnings of a new sexuality divorced from any possible physical expression” (26). By describing the kernel of this new sexuality as impossible (and existing objectively at the point where language fails) “Ballard” is approaching

the real, where Lacan locates jouissance – a concept described by Mari Ruti as a “kind of unmediated enjoyment that we would experience as unbearable” (*Singularity* 16), which the pulsion of the drives is forever pushing us toward. In this intricate interplay of drives and desire, jouissance is typically mediated by symbolic (normative) interventions that recalibrate the trajectory of desire toward objects that will not threaten the survival of the subject; in *Crash*, “Ballard” and Vaughan are attempting to free jouissance of these mediating interventions, or perhaps even create the conditions for a reconfiguration of the symbolic order by way of a sustained and traumatic engagement with the real.

This engagement manifests in the language of “Ballard”’s sex with his wife Catherine in their car. The perverse eroticism of the act – and according to “Ballard”’s logic, a sex act is successful to the degree that it is perverse – is largely contingent on its ability to be represented in language. He describes this encounter in graphic detail: “My hand moved around the outer curvature of Helen’s thighs, feeling the open zip of her dress. As these razorlike links cut my knuckles I felt her teeth across my ear. The sharpness of these pains reminded me of the bite of the windshield glass during my crash” (*Crash* 68). He continues in this vein at length, and the language is precise and vivid while also cold and surgical; he juxtaposes descriptions of body parts (using terms like “vulva,” “penis,” “anus,” “perineum” – never slang or obscenities) with “open zip,” “razorlike teeth,” “dead machine” (Catherine’s diaphragm), “angular control surface,” and draws frequent comparisons between the human body and the interior of a car: “The plastic laminates around me, the colour of the washed anthracite, were the same tones as her pubic hairs parted at the vestibule of her vulva. The passenger compartment enclosed us like a machine generating from our sexual act an homunculus of blood, semen, and engine coolant” (*Crash* 69). Even if, by using medical terminology in place of more commonly-used vulgar terms

for genitals, Ballard succeeds in leveling affect, he does not succeed in de-eroticizing sex, as often claimed by critics; rather, it is precisely the language of the text and the naked perversity of its setting that gives the scene its erotic charge – laid bare and defamiliarized through a cool, surgical terminology. “Ballard” is rereading, rewording and ultimately rethinking human sexuality via this new vocabulary, informed by a “benevolent technology” (*Crash* 69), and it is “Ballard” – not the author – who succeeds.

As the narrative continues, “Ballard” makes a point of cataloging the ways in which this new sexuality violates heteronormative conventions: “Strangely, our sexual acts took place only within my automobile. In the large bedroom of her rented house I was unable even to mount an erection, and Helen herself would become argumentative and remote, talking endlessly about the more boring aspects of her work” (*Crash* 71). In some respects this mirrors the frustrated and doomed queer attempt to conform to compulsory heterosexual modes of behavior, and brings into high relief the neurosis generated by sexual repression that is symptomatic of heteronormative expectations. “Ballard” achieves this mirroring effect through the fetishization of the automobile as the master key to antinormative or queer sexual practices, rhapsodizing that “these twisted instrument binnacles provided a readily accessible anthology of depraved acts, the keys to an alternative sexuality” (*Crash* 87). Whether intentionally or not, the presence of the automobile in all of the sex acts (both queer and straight) in the novel as the principle erotic object destabilizes the straight/queer binary in heteronormative discourse, and precludes this binary from harboring its delimiting power; the car is the erotic object *par excellence* that, as we will see, renders questions of a straight/queer, either/or sexual orientation irrelevant. According to the author, the elements of queer sexuality in *Crash* serve to “show a world beyond sexuality, or, at least, beyond clear sexual gender” (*Metaphors* 189).

Soon after his initiation into this “new sexuality,” “Ballard” becomes fixated on Vaughan in an erotically ambivalent way. He notices Vaughan’s “thighs and hips . . . [it was] almost as if he were trying to force his genitals through the instrument panel of the car . . . buttocks forcing themselves together . . . I was suddenly tempted to reach forward and take his penis in my hands, steer its head to the luminescent dials” (*Crash* 77-78), but maintains that “however carnal an act of sodomy with Vaughan would have seemed, the erotic dimension was absent. Yet this absence made a sexual act with Vaughan entirely possible” (*Crash* 90). It is difficult to say with any certainty exactly what “Ballard” means here; in Lacanian terms, he could perhaps be suggesting that a queer sex act with Vaughan would approach an engagement with the real, in that this sex would somehow be “beyond” sex, that is, beyond signification within any normative framework. More likely, however, is the possibility that “Ballard” is attempting to rationalize and deny his own emergent queer desires, revealing himself to be still tethered to heteronormative modes of thinking sexuality. He says sex with Vaughan would not be erotic, and yet every mention of Vaughan is accompanied by explicit, erotically charged language loaded with queer desire. During one sex scene, Catherine asks “Ballard” to detail a sexual fantasy of Vaughan, which he claims is “more for Catherine’s benefit than my own” (*Crash* 104), and the very fact that he feels compelled to point this out suggests that the obverse is probably true. He goes on to say, “Although stirred by the idea of intercourse with Vaughan, it seemed to me that I was describing a sex act involving someone other than myself. Vaughan excited some latent homosexual impulse only within the cabin of his car or driving along the highway” (*Crash* 104). However, at this point in the narrative, “Ballard” has made it abundantly clear that any sexual object, man or woman, fails to excite him unless a car is involved, suggesting that these rationalizations are symptomatic of his fear of crossing the boundary between homo- and heterosexual sex.

Of course, “Ballard” continues to explore his “new sexuality,” and it is revealed that the sex he eventually has with Vaughan functions as the climax of all the other previously detailed (mostly) straight sex acts in the book, thus potentially and retroactively categorizing the novel as a “queer text.” “Ballard”’s attraction to Vaughan is alluded to more frequently and with rising intensity as the narrative moves forward, and the effect is increasingly erotic: “I looked down at his semen-stained trousers, excited by this automobile marked with mucus from every orifice of the human body . . . his long thighs, hard hips and buttocks . . . The deviant technology of the car-crash provided the sanction for any perverse act” (*Crash* 123). Again, it is the car that makes this new antinormative sex possible, and allows “Ballard” to transcend heteronormative binary constructs of sexual orientation. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out the constructed nature of any homo/heterosexual distinction, effectively illustrating that it is difficult to define a person as “straight” or “gay,” which consequently marks all sexed beings as at least somewhat queer. If this is true, then “Ballard”’s car crash and subsequent exploration of behaviors that heteronormative discourse would designate as deviant or transgressive can be understood as emancipatory, a dissolving of internalized normative constructs that mire the subject in neurotic repression; his newfound queerness is coterminous with this newfound freedom, and his sexual union with Vaughan is the apotheosis of this emancipation, which allows him to finally embrace his queer sexuality; as he says after having sex with Vaughan, “A profound sense of calm presided over my body, composed partly of my love for Vaughan, and partly of my feelings of tenderness towards the metal bower in which we sat” (*Crash* 184-85). This illustrates that repression creates the conditions for the transgression of normative limits – as well as showing how a sexuality that explodes those normative limits and

marries itself to the prevailing technology of late capitalism is an actualization of radical freedom that realizes in its perverts a more complete humanity.

Ultimately, as this new sex necessarily ends in death, it cannot be construed as emancipatory, despite a trajectory that moves along queer/utopian pathways. Almost immediately following the consummation of “Ballard” and Vaughan’s queer relationship, the events of the book devolve into psychopathic violence, represented primarily by Vaughan’s repeated attempts to murder “Ballard” and Catherine by running over them in his car. Of course, the reader has known since the first page that Vaughan dies in a spectacular accident; his dream was to have a head-on collision with a limousine carrying the actress Elizabeth Taylor, and in the process of attempting to carry this out, “his car jumped the rails of the London Airport flyover and plunged through the roof of a bus filled with airline passengers” (*Crash* 1), and in a literalization of the death drive, this grisly end has been conflated with the final and perfect orgasm in Vaughan’s deranged fantasies since before “Ballard” met him. Tellingly, this reprisal of the well-worn cliché that queer sex ends in madness and suicide may point to an impulse of latent heteronormativity in the text, which precludes its counternormative potential. Recall that in his autobiography *The Motion of Light in Water* Delany asserts that the impulse for this cliché finds its source in cultural discourse, not in lived experience; after reflecting on the ways he experienced queer sex as life affirming while essentially internalizing the societal designation of homosexuality as a mental illness when speaking in therapy during his internment in a psychiatric ward, Delany wonders where the things he said in therapy about his queerness came from. In answer, he surmises that

They’d come from a book by the infamous Dr. Edmund Burgler I’d read as a teenager that had explained how homosexuals were psychically retarded and that told how

homosexuals were all alcoholics who committed suicide. They had come from the section on “Inversion” by Krafft-Ebing in *Psychopathia Sexualis* . . . Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* . . . André Tellier’s *The Twilight Men* . . . Jean Cocteau’s *The White Paper* . . . André Gide’s *The Immoralist* . . . (405)

Of course, in his fiction Delany has gone on to counter this discourse by writing places such as Bellona, Triton, and Velm, where this discourse, with its heteronormative limits, simply does not exist – and this makes his fiction function as a discursive break through which new and antinormative modalities of thought can potentially allow for a remapping of boundaries in our own discourse. Although the embrace of the perverse fetishization of automobiles in *Crash* is shown to function as the key to a radical counternormative strategy of therapeutic transgression capable of emancipating the subject from the neurotic sexual repression engendered by the heteronormative discourse of late modernity, the text fails to provide more than a glimpse of a thriving antinormative sexual space, hobbled as it is by the heteronormative injunction to frame any novel of queer sex as cautionary. *Crash* is almost utopic; if Bellona is a city where marginal sexual practices and perversions are met with a toleration bordering on an indifference that, in the absence of norms, does not recognize those practices as antinormative, *Crash* describes a sexuality that, in order to thrive, needs sexual proscriptions in order to have limits to transgress; that is, the crossing of a line is a precondition of getting off. Given this, Ballard appears to be both pointing out the boundaries of normativity as repressive as well as pointing out in himself an inability to imagine a world without or beyond those limits, revealing a heteronormative conservatism beating at the heart of his radical text.

In *The Unlimited Dream Company*, Ballard returns to the themes he took up in *Crash* – this time with even more moral ambivalence toward his subject matter. As mentioned above,

Ballard himself has positioned his writing as cautionary while at the same time hinting that he hopes the reader might find the perversities he details at least somewhat attractive, but the descent into violence and death in *Crash* ultimately makes clear that the counternormative sex practices in the book are not meant to be taken seriously as potentially emancipatory. *The Unlimited Dream Company* lacks any such easy distinction; while the novel is brimming with polymorphous perversity, insanity, violence, and destruction, it defies facile interpretation as cautionary or pessimistic, lending itself rather to a wide array of multivalent readings.

Interestingly, the book is underrepresented in Ballard scholarship; D. Harlan Wilson, citing Ballard, calls it “fictional autobiography” (111), and writes that the novel is “particularly interesting if we think of it as an expression of [Ballard’s] own inner space – an adventure through the unconscious suburb of the ‘real’ man” (101); Gregory Stephenson has attempted to read the narrative from a Jungian perspective of religious transcendence; Andrzej Gasiorek sees the novel as “a tribute to the ‘naïve’ vision of the Douanier Rousseau and the Surrealist imagination that celebrated the *madness* presupposed by its grand project of worldly re-enchantment” (134); and as previously noted, W. Warren Wagar reads the book as utopian, but in the context of Ballard’s entire oeuvre being read as such, including *Crash*. However, unlike that novel, the events detailed in *Unlimited* do not ultimately lead to violent death, but rather to something actually resembling liberation from bourgeois conventionality – including heteronormativity.

Like *Crash*, *The Unlimited Dream Company* opens in the last part of the story; the narrator – named “Blake” in a transparent nod to the visionary poet – stands amidst the wreckage and ruins of Shepperton, which of course is also the setting of the events in *Crash*. From the outset, the scenic elements and setting of *Crash* are firmly in place: In addition to Shepperton,

the architectural markers of late capitalism – car-parks, shopping malls, filling stations, appliance stores, etc. – fill the landscape of the text. Helicopters circle above, and the town appears to be abandoned except for a large population of birds. As with *Crash*, the reader is once again at the mercy of an unreliable narrator, but almost immediately we are aware that, unlike “Ballard” in *Crash*, Blake is delusional, and may have suffered a psychotic break with reality. Recounting his young adulthood, Blake reveals that he felt that he is only himself when he is not, and not himself when he is: “Even in being myself, I was acting a part to which someone else should have been assigned. Only my compulsive role-playing, above all dressing up as a pilot in the white flying suit . . . touched the corners of some kind of invisible reality” (*Unlimited* 11). He recounts an incident inspired by a book of anthropology in which he “tried to have an orgasm with the school’s most cherished cricket pitch” (*Unlimited* 12), and reveals in himself traits that betray a strong tendency toward narcissistic grandiosity: “Since early adolescence I had been certain that one day I would achieve something extraordinary, astonish even myself. I knew the power of my own dreams” (*Unlimited* 12). These portents culminate in Blake stealing an aircraft after almost accidentally killing his girlfriend in a strange, half-remembered psychotic episode, about which he says, “So began my real life” (*Unlimited* 14). He promptly crashes into the Thames river near the London suburb of Shepperton, and from here the events of the novel take a surrealistic turn; Blake insists the he never lost consciousness during the crash, but from this point on it is unclear if we are to read the remainder of the narrative as straight or as the hallucination of a dying man (a third reading suggests that the entire text is a hallucination).

Ultimately, which of these readings is the “correct” one is irrelevant to what Ballard appears to be doing: setting up a potential madman as a visionary authority who, by dint of his own freedom from normative standards of mental health (not unlike Kid in Delany’s *Dhalgren*),

holds within himself the power to enact counternormative strategies with potential to engender radical psychic and social transformation. He does this, of course, through sex, and a marked increase in his sexual appetite coincides with his arrival in Shepperton after his crash-landing. Writing about surrealism in art, Ballard suggests that “as Dalí has remarked, after Freud’s explorations within the psyche it is now the *outer* world which will have to be eroticized” (*User’s Guide* 88), and in keeping with the creeping surrealism of the text the reader begins to see an obsessive, repetitive cataloging of the narrator’s perverse sexual desires. Unlike “Ballard” in *Crash*, however, Blake’s sexuality is immanent, transcending the earlier novel’s preoccupation with penetration and localized fetishism; As we will see, Blake fertilizes Shepperton rather than fucks it, drawing on metaphors of nature in a way that both defamiliarizes and destabilizes normative presuppositions concerning sexual desire, and this distinction is a key to the polymorphous perversity of the book. Ruminating on his attraction to the doctor Miriam St. Cloud, Blake says:

She flicked the dirt from her nail on to the grass, as if returning to the park part of that bountiful nature welling up ceaselessly through her pores . . . I knew that she cured her patients with poultices of earth and spit, rolled together in her strong hands and warmed between her thighs. Infatuated with her smell, I wanted to mount her like a stallion taking a meadow-rich mare. (*Unlimited* 29)

The animalistic sexuality is of course obvious here, but equally important is the emphasis on dirt, spit, and earth, as will be revealed later in the text. Blake soon discovers the townspeople believed him dead, and witnessed his resurrection – as Miriam St. Cloud tells him, “You *died* . . . ! And then came alive again!” (*Unlimited* 34), cementing in his mind the pansexual messianic role he will play for the citizens of Shepperton. It is clear that this pansexuality includes queer

sex, as Blake is sexually drawn to men as well as women (and, eventually, the elderly, children, animals, flowers, and the earth itself), most notably Stark, the manager of the amusement park: “I visualized his handsome mouth locked against my own, strong teeth cutting my gums. In many ways Stark resembled a muscular, blond-haired woman. I felt attracted to him, not by some deviant homosexual urge . . . but by an almost brotherly intimacy . . . with his thighs and shoulders, arms and buttocks” (*Unlimited* 44). Like “Ballard” in *Crash*, Blake is clearly in denial about his queer sexuality here – especially given the limits that his sexual desires transgress: “I was gripped by the same powerful but indiscriminate sexual urge that I had felt for all the people I had met in Shepperton since my crash, for Stark, for the blind child and the young doctor, even for the priest” (*Unlimited* 48), and later, “I would stay in this small town until I had mated with everyone there – the women, men and children, their dogs and cats . . . cattle . . . deer . . . flies . . . and fused us together into a new being” (*Unlimited* 64).

A critical component of Blake’s messianic power that runs parallel to his sexuality is his identification and obsession with aerial flight, which often serves as a metaphor for liberation in Ballard’s fiction. Blake’s arrival in Shepperton coincides with the unexplained arrival of thousands of exotic birds, and together with Blake these birds signify the emancipatory potential of pansexual perversion for the people of Shepperton. Blake sees himself as their savior, tasked with a “reordering of reality in the service of a greater and more truthful design, where the most bizarre appetites and the most wayward impulses would find their true meaning” (*Unlimited* 106). Father Wingate, the town priest, recognizes this in Blake, and conspires with him in his religious impulses, telling Blake, “I’ve felt that it’s not you who are alive but we here who are dead,” and welcomes Blake’s polymorphous perversity: “For all we know, vices in this world may well be metaphors for virtues in the next. Perhaps you can take us all through that doorway,

Blake” (*Unlimited* 79). For Father Wingate, Blake embodies the means by which humanity can transcend itself – that is, take flight – through the destabilization of normative conventions via the orgiastic, pansexual religious ecstasy bestowed upon the inhabitants of Shepperton by this new messiah. Again, as he did in *Crash*, Ballard is giving the reader a glimpse of a world on the other side of normative sexual limits – limits that must be violated in order to truly see. As Blake’s namesake avers, “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” (Blake 35).

Later, Blake makes good on his ambitions, and transforms himself into some kind of pagan god who fertilizes the town with his sexual potency. Seemingly everywhere, Blake leaves traces of life; flowers even grow from the ground where he spills semen. By foregrounding this pansexuality (in the literal sense of the word – Blake has sex with everything), Ballard is valorizing antinormativity, and with it a total abolition of boundaries, an evolution of humanity toward a visionary new, and it is easy to hear the utopian impulse implicit in Blake’s observation of the liberated townspeople: “As they strolled arm-in-arm down the suburban roads, smiling unselfconsciously at each other, I was sure that they were naked, not because they felt a sudden wish to expose their bodies, but merely because they had become aware that they were clothed” (*Unlimited* 168). Blake describes his creation of this utopia as he sprouts antlers and begins mating with the deer in the streets of the town: “Our reflections bucked in the plate-glass windows among the pyramids of cans and appliances, the tableaux of dishwashers and television sets . . . My semen splashed the windows of the supermarket, streamed across the sales slogans and price reductions” (*Unlimited* 115).

It is clear from this passage that Blake recognizes that heteronormative sexual conventions often function in late modernity as capitalism’s libidinal long arm of the law, and therefore his violation of those conventions represents a triumph of antinormative sexuality over

commerce and consumerism. In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse harbors similar utopian impulses, and shares the suspicion that a sexuality unmoored by normative limits could yield potentially emancipatory results. Marcuse is critical of the performance principle's stifling of the pleasure principle, maintaining that "while the rule of the performance principle was accompanied by a corresponding control of the instinctual dynamic, the reorientation of the struggle for existence would involve a decisive change in this dynamic . . . A new basic experience of being would change the human existence in its entirety" (143). For Marcuse, civilization has reached a point in which the sexually repressive function of the performance principle – which was necessary in building civilization after an initial "struggle for existence" – is no longer necessary, at least not in the way that it is employed in modernity, in order for civilization to continue to flourish. Blake, as a pansexual pagan messiah, recalls Marcuse's vision of Orpheus and Narcissus in opposition to the Promethean (i.e. productive) impulses of civilization, impulses he conflated with the performance principle; He posits that "The Orphic and Narcissistic experience of the world negates that which sustains the world of the performance principle" (150). Marcuse hoped this vision would free humanity from the repressive aspects of civilization, and goes on to say that under the influence of an Orphic/Narcissistic Eros, "the things of nature become free to be what they are . . . The song of Orpheus pacifies the animal world, reconciles the lion with man. The world of nature is a world of oppression, cruelty, and pain, as is the human world; like the latter, it awaits its liberation. This liberation is the work of Eros" (151). This "oppression, cruelty, and pain" for the residents of Shepperton manifests in bourgeois conformity to sexual norms – and Blake is clearly their Orphic Eros.

Although it is debatable – depending on one’s reading – whether or not Blake actually liberates the people of Shepperton (Holliday reads Blake as a paranoid, megalomaniacal fascist who eventually destroys them), the religious connotations and mythic undertones in the narrative strongly suggest reading *The Unlimited Dream Company* as a novel of teleological emancipation. Blake is eventually forsaken by the townspeople and dies a second time, but he makes it clear that, like a perverse Christ, he died for them, as he says “I knew that they were happy at last. Strangely, I was glad to have given myself to them, to have passed on those qualities lent to me by the birds and the snakes and the voles . . . in the same way that the universe had twice lent my life to me,” and goes on to assert his deity status: “I was their mother and father, they had passed through me, born from my aerial flesh” (*Unlimited* 205). Blake is humanity’s salvation from the repressive civilization that Marcuse critiques, and like Christ, he is also resurrected – although his resurrection is imbued with an avowedly queer pansexuality; as Blake narrates, “People crowded around me, their hands on my body, on my legs, massaging my thighs, lifting my scrotum . . . My loins came alive in the hands of the young man who held my penis. His semen recharged my testicles. ‘Blake . . . ! Open your eyes!’” (*Unlimited* 206). The book ends on a note of triumphant optimism, as Blake envisions a future in which the salvation he brought to Shepperton will take flight across the world, rhapsodizing, “I saw us rising into the air . . . our ascending flights swaying across the surface of the earth . . . celebrating the last marriage of the animate and inanimate, of the living and the dead” (*Unlimited* 220). Here, Blake can perhaps be seen as the inverse of Vaughan in *Crash*, the visionary Erotic counterpart to Vaughan’s psychopathic Thanatos. Blake shares with Vaughan a sense of megalomaniacal messianism; however, where Vaughan ultimately failed in his attempt to marry sex and death, Blake succeeds in becoming an Erotic messiah, capable of transforming the stifling

heteronormativity of bourgeois suburbia into a pansexual utopia. Commenting on Ballard's complicated relationship to Marxism and the left, W. Warren Wagar avers that "Although Ballard's utopias, one may contend, are mystagogic and escapist and even decadent, they *are* utopias, and utopias of a post-capitalist landscape in which technocrats and tycoons alike would be out of work" (67). And with the antinormative sexuality valorized in *Crash* and *The Unlimited Dream Company*, one can add the agents of heteronormativity to this list of the terminally unemployed.

IV. CHAPTER THREE

Thus far we have examined the ways in which marginal/nonnormative sexualities are foregrounded in the texts of two science fiction writers with radically different perspectives and agendas. Samuel R. Delany is of course an African American gay man, and this perspective necessarily informs and influences the ways in which his work engages with the multivalences of human sexuality, whether straight, gay, or otherwise. Delany has been called a “sex radical” (Diaz), and in addition to the sexually explicit texts discussed here, his work in pornographic literature is extensive, and his own experiences with anonymous public sex and paraphilia are well documented in his autobiographical and critical work. As previously mentioned, in working to normalize the radical sex practices of gay men, Delany’s writing conjures discursive spaces in which heteronormativity is elided or simply does not exist. J.G. Ballard, on the other hand, is avowedly straight. In his own words, “I’m no member of the ‘homintern,’ but a lifelong straight who prefers the company of women to most men” (*Metaphors* 189), and even though *Crash* and *The Unlimited Dream Company* foreground a radically nonnormative vision of sexuality replete with queer desire, this sexuality is always already in a state of alterity in relation to its creator, and as such the creator (whether intentionally or not) highlights the normative boundaries he is violating. In other words, Ballard’s texts, although radically transgressive and sexually counternormative (and thus potentially emancipatory), originate from the center of heteronormative discourse, reflecting as they do the heterosexual and masculine subjectivity of their author – by his own admission a sexually conservative man.

The work of Joanna Russ is not often mentioned in the same breath with other works of transgressive literature (including those by Delany and Ballard), whether those specifically categorized as science fiction or otherwise. Her reputation as a radical feminist is well

documented, and was the subject of much controversy and scorn over the course of her career in the male-dominated realm of SF. Less has been said about the foregrounding of queer sexuality in her texts; as Lee Mandelo points out, “The criticism and recollection of Russ’s work today tends to focus on her feminism to the exclusion of sexuality: it’s as if we still think the ‘l’-word is a negative thing to apply to a scholar and writer, or to her work” (Mandelo). While bearing in mind the work of Mandelo, Jeanne Cortiel and others, it is the relative lack of critical engagement on this level that makes it necessary to contextualize Russ’s work as queer, transgressive, and defiantly sexually counternormative, rather than “merely” political. As such, Russ’s texts resemble those of Delany and Ballard that resist heteronormativity’s pathologizing impulse, and they do so in ways that are critically absent from the work of those writers – originating as they do in the subjectivity of a radical queer feminist. As we have seen, Delany’s work (e.g. *Trouble on Triton*) certainly overlaps with and complements the concerns of feminism and lesbian sexuality, although given the preeminent role that gay male sexuality plays in his texts, it would be inaccurate to call Delany a “feminist” writer; indeed, according to Delany himself, even though “the reapportionment of power between the sexes – women and men – [is] the most politically important job of all the possible liberatory projects . . . most of my personal energies now go into addressing the power imbalances between gay men and straight society” (*Occasional Views Vol. 2* 331). For his part, Ballard mostly ignores the crucial role that feminism plays in any strategies of resistance against heteronormative discourse, even given his professed reverence for women – revealing how firmly entrenched in the perspective of the white heterosexual male he is, despite his work’s transgressive power. Russ’s work fills this lacuna in the texts of Delany and Ballard, and reading her alongside these two allows for a larger and more complete image of foregrounded queer sexuality as a counternormative strategy of resistance to

heteronormative discourses of power to develop. While her work is not usually considered pornographic, it does foreground and problematize sexuality in ways that demand attention; as such, her work operates in ways that parallel the workings of the more explicit works of Delany and Ballard. In *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts*, Russ writes that “There’s no such thing in a male-dominant culture as ‘acceptable pornography,’ no matter what rules it follows” (*Magic Mommas* 13), before going on in the same book to say, “Maybe some women can tell the difference between pornography and erotica at a single glance. I can’t” (55) and later shares her enthusiasm for K/S slash fiction, which she refers to as “pornography written 100% by women for a 100% female readership” (79). While sympathetic to the concerns of the feminist anti-pornography movement of the 1980s, Russ is ultimately skeptical; she compares this movement to the mostly women-led 19th-century Temperance movement, and suggests that while it was true that a direct corollary could be drawn between the abuse of alcohol by men and domestic abuse, “By pinpointing Demon Rum as the central issue, reformers could avoid the real (and dangerous) ones like women’s position in marriage and women’s lack of economic autonomy, thus keeping a crusader’s self-respect while avoiding a radical’s punishment” (*Magic Mommas* 63). Here, Russ is affirming her radical bonafides as well as refusing to assume a reductive position on pornography, asserting herself as a writer willing to think through the problems of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and queer sexuality in revolutionary and transgressive ways.

In her seminal work on Russ’s fiction, *Demand My Writing*, Jeanne Cortiel suggests that “lesbian sexuality provides a space in which the woman’s body is freed from male proprietorship and the debasing meaning attached to her by patriarchal discourse” (10), and when Russ writes sex, this is precisely her goal. After gaining notoriety as an important new voice in SF with the

stories she published in the 1960s – culminating in the publication of the novel *And Chaos Died* – Russ published the work for which she is still best known today, *The Female Man*. Described by Gwyneth Jones as “an antifiction, with all its fictive effects vivisected” and being populated by “only one character, the writer, deconstructed” (68), the book dispenses with linear narrative and moves in and out of the perspectives of four different versions of the same character:

Jeannine, a librarian who lives on Earth in the present day (1975); Joanna, a feminist who lives in America on an alternate Earth in which the Great Depression never ended, and who “transforms” into the titular female man; Janet Evason, an emissary from an all-woman utopian planet called Whileaway; and Jael, an assassin from yet another alternate Earth on which men and women have decamped into segregated societies that are perpetually at war. The lives of these characters overlap, and the novel traces these interactions and uses them as a platform to explore gender and sexual politics, and highlights the necessity of a radical queer feminine sexuality as a component of those politics. Russ foregrounds the sexuality (and sex) of the characters in order to resist, transgress, and transcend the masculine parameters placed around female sexuality in heteronormative and patriarchal discourse.

After closing out the 1970s with a handful of stories and two more landmark works of feminist SF (*The Two of Them*, *We Who Are About To...*), Russ made an interesting incursion into Butlerian gender deconstruction in the story “The Mystery of the Young Gentleman,” collected in the book *Extra(ordinary) People* as part of a larger SF narrative. The story deals with the performativity and indeterminacy of binary gender roles and the complicated correlation (or lack thereof) between these roles and their attendant associations with sexual orientation, and points to the utopian possibilities unlocked in the destabilizing of these constructs – which, as we have seen, is exactly what Delany is up to in *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*. In this

story, Russ not only foregrounds female sexuality in order to explode heteronormative limits around the erotic, but also confounds and problematizes readerly notions of gender, and in so doing affirms the transgressive power of queering binaries of gender and sexuality as a counternormative literary strategy.

Russ was highly critical of psychoanalytic theory; in *What Are We Fighting For?*, she writes that it

contains no clear account of what distinguishes normal behavior from pathological. In general, it uses (quite uncritically) concepts that originated in physical medicine and that make sense when applied to notions of illness as an invasion from outside the organism by viruses, bacteria, poisons, or trauma but make much less reliable sense when they're broadened out and fuzzied up to include behavior or emotions. (51)

She goes on to refer to psychoanalysis as a “mess” and asserts that “any theory set up so that it *cannot be disproved* . . . is lousy theory” (*What Are We Fighting For?* 56). Andrew Butler concedes that Russ is “right to be suspicious about psychoanalysis, given its deeply problematic situating of women within Freud’s sexual and psychic schemes” (143) before launching his own psychoanalytic reading of her work alongside Hélène Cixous’s “The Medusa’s Head.” Invoking Lacan and Kristeva, Butler writes that “The female child, defined as a lack because always already castrated, cannot enter comfortably into the Symbolic Order as a male child could, and has to retreat into pre-Symbolic babble, into what Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic, or what might be referred to as an *écriture féminine*, feminine writing” (144), and notes how Russ bristles at this concept, despite her own writing being an example of what Cixous is asserting. Indeed, Butler sees strong parallels in the work of Russ and Cixous, and equally strong parallels can be drawn between Russ’s work and that of psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray. In *This*

Sex Which is Not One, Irigaray elucidates her own take on feminine writing, and illustrates dialectically how the basic discoveries of Freud in fact undermine the phallogentric parameters of normative female sexuality – parameters that Freud himself established: “It is not a matter of toppling [Freudian theory] so as to replace it . . . but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an ‘outside’ that is exempt, in part, from phallogentric law” (68). Russ resists this law in *The Female Man*, in terms of both content and style. Samuel Delany maintains that “Any extended consideration of Russ’s works without a section devoted to style would be as radically incomplete as such a consideration of the works of Pater, Nabokov, or Joyce” (“Joanna Russ and D.W. Griffith” 186), and it is her style that makes *The Female Man* work as an example of Irigaray’s theory of feminine writing in practice. On the subject of the ontological locus and value of the feminine in heteronormative (phallogentric, patriarchal) discourse, Irigaray suggests that “the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal” (78). In other words, the goal of feminine writing is not to grant equality to the feminine within masculine, heteronormative discourse; the goal is to “work at ‘destroying’ the discursive mechanism” (Irigaray 76), i.e. the patriarchy. As Russ herself avers, “Culture is male . . . the society we live in is a patriarchy. And patriarchies imagine or picture themselves from the male point of view. There is a female culture, but it is an underground, unofficial, minor culture . . . Both men *and* women in our culture conceive the culture from a single point of view – the male” (*To Write* 81). Irigaray’s feminine writing is interwoven with feminine pleasure, which is always already “elsewhere” in masculine discourse, and she maintains that granting discursive representation to this pleasure is a radical act: “Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its

own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations. And so what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure” (77). For Irigaray, writing feminine pleasure is an affront to the logic of common sense, that is, what is within the normative limits of permissible thought, speech, and writing. Russ would concur, and highlights specifically the problem of representation for queer feminine sexuality – a problem encountered by gay male sexuality as well, as seen in Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* – but one redoubled by its total lack of male sexuality: “What is crucial about woman/woman eroticism is that it (much more than man/man eroticism) stands completely outside both the heterosexual institution and the way human sexuality itself has been viewed and controlled by patriarchal societies . . . One of the things this means is that we are forced to talk about female sexuality in general in an alien vocabulary” (*To Write* 170). *The Female Man* – in its difficulty, complexity, and queer sexuality – is an attempt to push back against this “common sense,” or as Irigaray puts it, to write “in such a way that linear reading is no longer possible” (Irigaray 80).

In the first sentence of *The Female Man*, one of the four “J”’s, Janet Evason, introduces us to Russ’s all-female utopia: “I was born on a farm on Whileaway” (*The Female Man* 1). Jeanne Cortiel notes that “second-wave” utopias like Whileaway owe a debt to previous feminist separatist utopias (e.g. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*), but “one aspect crucially distinguishes the ‘second-wave’ utopias from earlier texts, that is the way in which sexual relations among women become central for these utopian visions’ political momentum” (97). That is, Russ’s novel has emancipatory potential precisely to the degree that it foregrounds queer sexuality. There are no men in Whileaway, having all died decades before the events of the novel take place, and this utopia functions as a laboratory in which Russ experiments with the

imaginative capabilities of the genre. Life on Whileaway is described in detail; government, work (“no Whileawayan works more than three hours at a time on any one job” [53] a condition reflective of Russ’s own Marxist inclinations), education, family, etc. are world-built to an impressive degree, and, in the absence of men, it is of course notions of family and sexuality that prove to be the most interesting deviations from heteronormative convention. In enumerating aspects of Whileawayan culture, Russ writes, “No Whileawayan marries monogamously. (Some restrict their sexual relations to one other person – at least while that other person is nearby – but there is no legal arrangement),” and points out that Whileawayans have a “reluctance to form a tie that will engage every level of emotion, all the person, all the time” (*The Female Man* 53). Reproduction happens through an advanced form of in vitro fertilization, and the (all-female) children are taken from their mothers at age five to begin their education in a quasi-militaristic environment; as such, the citizens of Whileaway lack the sentimental attachment to the parent-child relationship prevalent in our own heteronormative culture. In the absence of men, all sexual relationships are of course queer and free of legal entanglements, as previously mentioned, and by highlighting this, Russ is cementing the place of sex as an integral component of any strategy resistant to heteronormative limits. Furthermore, as Gwyneth Jones points out in Russ’s description of utopia, “we glimpse how the removal of binary *gender* (more significant, even, than the removal of the sexual threat that men present) is transforming human beings, in a society where reproduction is technological and humanity is no longer ‘natural,’ into benign creators and curators of the natural world” (63).

It is not difficult to ascertain that here Russ is conflating the possibility of utopia with the abolition of monogamy and the nuclear family – or is it only the character of Janet who is doing so? According to Jones, the four narrative “J” voices in the text – Janet, “Joanna,” Jeannine, and

Jael – “*are not independent entities*. The novel’s séance-like structure of competing voices is fiction laid bare: every viewpoint character a strand ‘blurring in and out’ in the twisted braid of the author’s mind” (59). In other words, this mosaic of voices are all Russ, and the structure of the novel is both obscuring and foregrounding this, subverting the reader’s phallocentric demand for linear narrative. The novel’s resistance to interpretation (by who? Phallocratic authority?), its refusal to play by the rules of conventional narrative, and its insistence on writing *away* from the phallocratic center of discourse all serve to exemplify how it functions as a bomb meant to, as Irigaray puts it, “[destroy] the discursive mechanism.”

Later in the novel, Janet has moved in with a nuclear family on Joanna’s Earth, and as an emissary of queer utopia, sets her sights on liberating Laura Rose, the tomboyish teenage daughter of the family. Laura tries and repeatedly fails to negotiate the narrow limits of femininity within heteronormative discourse, and despite her impulses, continues to suffer from internalized oppression: “I’ve never slept with a girl. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t want to. That’s abnormal and I’m not, although you can’t be normal unless you love men. To do what I wanted would be normal, unless what I wanted was abnormal, in which case it would be abnormal to please myself and normal to do what I didn’t want to do, which isn’t normal” (*The Female Man* 68). Of course, Janet moves on her with Whileawayan disregard for Earth’s normative conventions, and the two have sex, culminating in Laura’s first orgasm: “Laur was in over her head. She had learned from a boy friend how to kiss on top, but here there was lots of time and lots of other places . . . Janet found the little bump Whileawayans call The Key . . . and with the sense of working very hard, Laur finally tumbled off the cliff. It was incompletely and desperately inadequate, but it was the first major sexual pleasure she had ever received from another human being in her entire life” (*The Female Man* 74). As Irigaray shows above, this

highlighting of a specifically feminine pleasure is in itself a radical act, and according to Jones the “lesbian sex scene was astounding for its time, and undoubtedly a factor in *The Female Man*’s success” (62). However, it is worth noting that the scene ends in discord; the sex act gives Laura a glimpse of life outside heteronormative limits, but she is unable to shake her shame and internalized oppression: “There is no excuse for putting my face between someone else’s columnar thighs . . . They’ll be doing it with the dog next” (*The Female Man* 74). Here Russ is perhaps lamenting the difficulty of resisting heteronormative discourse, and that discourse’s conflating queer sexuality with any and all forms of perversion. Eventually, Laura succeeds in (mostly) resisting the discourse, moving to New York and blossoming into a “cheerfully bloodthirsty young lesbian” (Jones 64).

Despite her enthusiasm for sex, Janet refers to romantic love as a “dreadful intrusion, a sickness” (*The Female Man* 75), and details her own falling in and out of love with Vittoria, who eventually becomes her wife – but not, however, her exclusive sex partner, as previously noted. In portraying Whileawayans as highly sexual yet averse to romance, Russ is overturning normative stereotypes about female sexuality, e.g. the old saw that women are primarily interested in love and will trade sex to get it, while men have a voracious sexual appetite that will compel them to profess their love in order to get sex. Not so on Whileaway; Janet details the “end” of her love for Vittoria with chilling distance: “Whileawayans do not like the self-consequence that comes with romantic passion and we are very mean and mocking about it . . . I felt it leave me two and a half months later, at one particular point in time: I was putting a handful of cracked corn to my mouth . . . I felt the parasite go. I swallowed philosophically and that was that” (*The Female Man* 79). Surprisingly, the couple married *after* the end of love, indicating that marriage and this “sickness” have been successfully teased apart on Whileaway.

Of course, Janet is having a sexual affair with Laura at this point, and imagines what her wife is up to now in a tone notably free of any trace of jealousy or entitlement, portraying an open sexuality unbound by heteronormative limits: “Vittoria is whoring all over North Continent by now, I should think. We don’t mean by that what you do, by the way. I mean: good for her” (*The Female Man* 79).

It is not until Part 8 that the reader is properly introduced to Jael Reasoner, the assassin from an Earth on which men and women have divided into strictly segregated societies – “Manland” and “Womanland” – that are locked in a state of perpetual war. The relation between the sexes on this alternate version of earth are possibly meant to mirror our own; women sell male babies to Manland, which are then raised and trained to be soldiers in the war effort – an obvious nod to the complicity of mothers in feeding the United States war machine (*The Female Man* was published in 1975, indicating that the writing of the novel probably coincided with the last days of the Vietnam War). After Jael expertly dispatches a prominent and powerful man from Manland, the novel moves on to its strangest sex scene, replete with the icy language and sadomasochist undertones of Ballard’s *Crash*. Jael keeps, as something between a sex slave and sex toy, a being called Davy captive in a pen; she refers to him as a “lovely limb of the house” and recalls that “the original germ-plasm was chimpanzee” (*The Female Man* 199), indicating that Davy is perhaps ontologically situated as some kind of clone. She goes on, “His consciousness – such as it is and I am willing to grant it for the sake of argument – is nothing but the permanent possibility of sensation, a mere intellectual abstraction, a nothing, a picturesque collocation of words” (*The Female Man* 199). In describing the sex act between Jael and Davy, Russ again turns normative convention on its head, as Jael is clearly in control, and likes it that way: “Little Davy was half-filled by now, which is a sign that Davy wants to be knelt over . . . I

rubbed my nipples over his mouth, first one and then the other, which is nice for us both . . . I made him come by slipping a finger up his anus: convulsions, fires, crying in no words as the sensation was pulled out of him” (*The Female Man* 197). Referring to Davy as “little” removes just enough masculinity to minimize him as a threat while allowing him to retain his status as a sexually potent object of desire – and objectify him is exactly what Jael does: “He’s very beautiful, my classic mesomorphic monster-pet” (*The Female Man* 197). Jael teases Davy with her body parts, and critically, makes him come by penetrating him, inverting the heteronormative narrative of masculine penetration/dominance being exclusively the purview of men, as well as playing with sadomasochistic notions of dominance, violence, and power.

Obviously, this passage is problematic; how to read Davy’s sentience and agency, or lack thereof? Difficult to be sure, but it is possible Russ is merely throwing masculine ideas about sexual potency back in the face of the patriarchy, and in doing so highlighting the impossibility of describing an autonomous feminine sexual agency in a way that heteronormative, androcentric discourse finds acceptable. As Jael puts it, “Those who were shocked at my making love that way to a man are now shocked at my making love to a machine; you can’t win” (*The Female Man* 200). Writing on the undercurrent of violence present in “S&M” pornographic fiction, Russ suggests that sadomasochistic fantasies “may be a kind of half-way house *out of* violence rather than into it . . . male fantasies of [sadomasochistic] violence . . . are attempts to partly undo the violence in the ‘respectable’ part of the culture, where violence has been *substituted* for sexual enjoyment” (*Magic Mommas* 91). Strangely (or not), here Russ echoes Ballard’s words on sex and violence in the media: “needless to say, I think there should be more sex and violence on television, not less. Both are powerful catalysts of social change, at a time when change is desperately needed” (*User’s Guide* 5). This scene is intended to be shocking and problematic,

and within the larger context of the novel serves to complicate the normative expectations the reader brings to the text, and this shows how effective (and indeed, necessary) depictions of radical, nonnormative sexual acts can be as a counternormative resistance within the prevailing discourse of heteronormativity.

More than any of her other works, *The Female Man* illustrates the ways in which Russ employs her own idiosyncratic version of *écriture féminine*, apparent when the “J” voice who shares her given name says, “You will notice that even my diction is becoming feminine . . . I am writing in these breathless little feminine tags, she threw herself down on the bed, I have no structure (she thought), my thoughts seep out shapelessly like menstrual fluid, it is all very female and deep and full of essences . . .” (*The Female Man* 137). “Joanna” has transformed into a “female man,” and as Susan Ayres asserts (citing Monique Witting’s concept of a literary “war machine” that serves to destroy the conventions of patriarchy), “Russ’s war machine succeeds by reappropriating language” (22). Through the mouthpiece of “Joanna,” Russ is calling attention to the criticisms leveled at feminine writing by androcentric culture, as well as reappropriating and valorizing those criticisms for her own ends.

Although radical and transgressive, advancing as it does a liberatory vision of queer sexuality, *The Female Man* is in some respects dated by its being a product of and situated within the essentializing tendencies of 1970s second-wave feminism. However, by the early 1980s, Russ’s thinking on gender and sexuality was evolving in interesting and challenging ways, moving beyond essentialist modalities; in the short story “The Mystery of the Young Gentleman,” we see a deconstruction of gender that predates the pathbreaking work of Butler, Sedgwick and others that would appear a few years later. Feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow cautions against gender-essentializing biological determinism, noting that such

essentializing not only reinforces patriarchal norms, but also that “expectations and theories of gender difference often cloud, delimit, and threaten to occlude our vision” (90). She allows that these theories are sometimes useful in highlighting differences of experience between subjects socialized as normatively “male” and “female,” but ultimately serve to oppress rather than liberate. The problem of reconciling the goals and injunctions of feminism with a queer theory that presupposes a conceptualization of gender as variable and indeterminate is an old one, but it is worth noting that in this story Russ is outlining and problematizing this issue before it became central to theoretical debate, which shows that the problem is older than theoretical discourse might suggest. Veronica Hollinger asserts that “Mystery” and stories like it function as “strategic intersections between feminist theory and queer theory,” and for her, that this story is not contemporary “serves to emphasize the fact that sophisticated inquiries into gender issues are by no means new to science fiction, even if our theoretical representations of these issues have not always kept pace with the fiction” (23). Indeed, as Jeanne Cortiel puts it, “Russ activates narrative possibilities offered by science fiction as a genre which allow these texts to use and simultaneously counteract the essentialism inherent in the materialist feminist position” (170). “The Mystery of the Young Gentleman” – which, along with the other four stories in *Extra(ordinary) People*, constitutes Russ’s final forays into the genre of SF – critiques the gender essentialism in second-wave feminism as well as anticipates the “turn towards theory” of radical feminism later in the 1980s.

“The Mystery of the Young Gentleman” tells the story of the titular character’s journey aboard a seafaring vessel from London bound for New York in the year 1885. The narrator – under the assumed name Joseph Smith – is escorting a young girl, Maria-Dolores, an urchin rescued from a life on the streets in Barcelona, to a utopian community in the mountains outside

of Denver, and it is apparent from early in the narrative that both Smith and Maria-Dolores are endowed with ESP that allows them to intuit the thoughts of the people around them. The story is told in epistolary form to someone in the utopian community as a missive announcing Smith's impending arrival. As the events in the story unfold, the reader gradually becomes aware that this "gentleman" is quite mysterious indeed. The pair are traveling as father and son, but Smith must correct Maria when she calls her "*Mamacita*" (*Extra(ordinary) People* 64), suggesting that Maria thinks (knows?) Smith is a woman – thus destabilizing Smith's gender for the reader within the first few paragraphs of the story. Smith continues, writing of the other passengers on the ship and on the necessity of maintaining a low profile, as well as performing one's role, highlighting the performativity of social interaction. Of course, this includes gender as well, and Smith, emphasizing the importance of not giving oneself away, says, "One must be careful, speaking; it's too easy to answer questions that haven't been asked" (*Extra(ordinary) People* 66). By now the reader is fairly certain Joe Smith is a woman masquerading as a man; in addition to the attention to keeping a low profile, Smith makes a few barbed swipes at heterosexual-love-as-panacea for the single woman when chatting with a married woman on the ship, commenting on the woman's perceived need for "that dull, perpetual, coerced lack she has been taught to call 'love,' which a gentleman's arm, a gentleman's face, a gentleman's conversation, so wonderfully soothes. It's a deadly business" (*Extra(ordinary) People* 68). Russ's view of heteropatriarchal connubial bliss should be familiar by now, and the fact that this "gentleman" is espousing the same view is a strong indicator that Smith is not a man.

Is Smith, then, a woman? Later, when talking to Maria-Dolores, our narrator indicates that this problem may not be so easily resolved for the reader, and in fact may only get more complicated: Maria asks,

“Well, can I dress like a man?”

“Like this?” (pointing to myself) “Of Course.”

She says, being a real pest, “I bet there are no women in the mountains.”

“That’s right,” I tell her. (She’s also in real confusion.)

“But *me!*” she says.

“When you get there, there will still be no women.”

“But you – is it all *men?*”

“There are no men. Maria-Dolores, we’ve been over and over this.”

She gives up, exasperated. Her head, like all the others’, is full of *los hombres y las mujeres* as if it were a fact of nature . . . (*Extra(ordinary) People* 70)

While this passage only further complicates the gender of the narrator, it begins to clarify what is at work in the story: a deconstruction and defamiliarization of the notion of gender as a “fact of nature,” and over the course of the next few pages, the same thing will happen to the identity of heterosexual orientation. As Hollinger maintains, “heterosexuality as an institutionalized nexus of human activity remains stubbornly resistant to defamiliarization” (24). We have already seen how Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* resists and challenges this institutionalization, and in this story, Russ adds her voice to the chorus of resistance. After Smith has several interactions with a doctor on board the ship, Smith infers via psychic ability that the doctor (knowingly referred to as “Bumble,” as in “bumbling blindly in the dark”) has pinned Smith as an “invert,” which of course means that Bumble thinks Smith is a queer, effeminate man, since he has been introduced to Smith as a “gentleman.” Addressing this gendered thinking, Smith says “the division is so strong, so elaborate, so absolute, so much trained into them as habit, that within reasonable limits they see, generally, more or less what they expect to

see, especially if one wears the mask of the proper behavior” (*Extra(ordinary) People* 73). Smith is writing to a fellow telepath, and the “they” referred to here is presumably the rest of us, i.e. the reader. The doctor takes an interest in “outing” Smith, and even plans “to bribe the steward to find out if there are women’s clothes in my steamer trunk” (*Extra(ordinary) People* 77). By doing so, the doctor inadvertently reveals that it is in fact clothes – something one can take on or off, something one performs in – that determine gender, not anatomical sex or sexual orientation, thus undermining the tenets of his own heteronormative, patriarchal thinking.

From here, things get even more interesting; in an effort to avoid being outed, Smith, in keeping with the theme of performativity, insinuates and pantomimes the signifiers of femininity in order to convince Bumble that s/he is a woman, and it works: “I do nothing. I say nothing. I don’t have to, you see, I have only to smile, all sex in my smile. He will do it all himself, from ‘My dear girl, why didn’t you tell me!’ to ‘But you mustn’t walk alone, oh dear, no, you mustn’t go alone to your cabin!’” (*Extra(ordinary) People* 84). Here, the implication is that we, as agents of heteronormative discourse, construct the gendered identity of others fantasmatically; that is, the gender of the other exists in our perception of the other, not in the other per se. According to Smith, we see what we think we see – or are enculturated to see. What follows is an amusing, awkward sex scene, recounted by Smith with acerbic glee, culminating in a manual orgasm for Bumble: “I whisper ‘Shoot me!’ and he spends himself freely over my hands and my second-best pair of evening trousers” (*Extra(ordinary) People* 85). Smith continues to toy with Bumble, and when Bumble asks Smith if s/he could shed the masculine clothing (now that they are alone) for “something more natural” for a lady, Smith replies “It’s all costume” (*Extra(ordinary) People* 86) – reiterating for both Bumble and the reader the indeterminacy and performativity of gender. Smith then slides back into the role of “gentleman” in order to convince Bumble that he has just

had sex with a man, and furthermore that they were seen together by others. After an initial panic, he insists – to himself and to Smith – that Smith is a woman, in order to shore up his own fragile sense of heterosexuality, but Smith is unrelenting, and eventually convinces him:

“A woman pretending to be a man who pretends he’s a woman in order to pretend to be a man? Come, come, it won’t work! . . . Where’s the sense to it? No, there’s only one possibility, and that’s the truth: that I have been deceiving nobody, including you, but that you, my poor dear fellow, have been for a very long time deceiving yourself” (*Extra(ordinary) People* 88).

But is the “young gentleman” Joe Smith in fact, despite what s/he claims, “a woman pretending to be a man who pretends he’s a woman in order to pretend to be a man?” At this point, it is not possible to be sure; rather, it seems that with this story Russ is illustrating that above all else, gender is in the eye of the beholder, and by the time we encounter this exchange between Bumble and Maria-Dolores, the conceptualizations that underpin the terms “man” and “woman” have successfully been destabilized:

“But do you know,” says Bumble unexpectedly coherent, “what a man *is*, child? Do you truly know?”

“Yes, of course,” says Maria-Dolores in genuine surprise. Then she looks interested.

“Why? Don’t you?” (*Extra(ordinary) People* 90)

Of course, in the last sentence the reader discovers that the “young gentleman” is actually a “not-so-young lady” (*Extra(ordinary) People* 92), but by then it has ceased to matter. Much like Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, “The Mystery of the Young Gentleman” destabilizes and defamiliarizes readerly assumptions of gender binarism, and in so doing reveals both the constructed nature of those preconceptions as well as how mired in those preconceptions we are.

The literary effect of “The Mystery of the Young Gentlemen,” like *The Female Man* before it, is radically counternormative, and cements Russ’s place alongside Delany and Ballard as a science fiction writer who foregrounds nonnormative sexuality as a strategy of resistance to the prevailing heteronormative discourse. As we have seen, Delany contends that the generic conventions of science fiction position its literary possibilities in ways that are unavailable to the writer of realist fiction – limited as realism is by the dimensions of observable reality it is assigned to reflect. Delany uses these possibilities to envision spaces in which heteronormativity is itself marginal or non-existent; Ballard points to the utopian potential implicit in the very act of transgression; and Russ foregrounds the necessity of exploding the androcentrism that undergirds heteronormative discourse. To read the three alongside each other is to bear witness to the urgency of a fiction that foregrounds radical and queer visions of sexuality as an essential component of counternormative resistance.

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