

Strategies of Deviance

STUDIES IN
GAY MALE
REPRESENTATION



Earl Jackson, Jr.

THEORIES OF REPRESENTATION
AND DIFFERENCE

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DEVIANCE

Studies in Gay Male Representation

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Indiana University Press

Bloomington and Indianapolis

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

- Jackson, Earl, date
Strategies of deviance : studies in gay male representation / Earl Jackson.
- P. cm.—(Theories of representation and difference)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-253-33115-3 (cloth : alk. paper).—ISBN 0-253-20950-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Homosexuality, Male—Psychological aspects.
 2. Homosexuality in literature.
 3. Homosexuality in motion pictures.
 4. Gays—Identity.
 5. Gay men—Psychology.
- I. Title. II. Series.

HQ76.J3 1995

306.76'62—dc20

94-38370

1 2 3 4 5 00 99 98 97 96 95

*To Bo Huston,
who should be here.*

Scandalous Narratives

AT THE TURN of the century, when the word "homosexual" was coined, even personal recognition of homosexual desire placed the individual outside of social networks, rendering the subject an internal exile within the realization of his/her secret.¹ E. M. Forster's Maurice represents a man who became aware of his "difference" in a time when its disclosure would mean ostracism and imprisonment. "By pleasuring the body Maurice had confirmed . . . his spirit in its perversion, and cut himself off from the congregation of normal man" (*Maurice* 214). The enforced secrecy at this time (Forster himself permitted his novel to be published only posthumously, nearly sixty years after its initial composition) does not allow Maurice's discovery of his difference from "normal man" to foster an alternative social subject. The transgressions of taboos are disseminated and adjudicated through the structures of "scandal" which serves to punish the transgressors and consolidate the nontransgressive community as a "we." The Oscar Wilde trial was only the most infamous in a series of terroristic scandals in Britain which served these regulatory functions, examples of Victor Turner's "social dramas" which bring to communal attention "certain contested aspects of social behavior and through the conflict allow individuals 'to take sides in terms of deeply entrenched moral imperatives and constraints, often against their own personal preferences'" (Ed Cohen, "Legislating" 192). In the social imaginary of Wilde's, Symonds's, and Forster's Britain, "the homosexual" was an abstract medico-legal category; homosexuality was represented in the social symbolic in narratives of "gossip" or newspaper articles whose lacunae were the zero-morphs of the "unspeakable crime" they named in their failure to name, they signified in their refusal to signify.

Scandal was a social narrative (or a threatened social narrative) that served as a repressive prophylactic discursive potential in its suppression of homosexuality, subtending the dominant heterosexual solidarity effected through the transitive identification with homosexuality as a "not us" in Simon Watney's analysis of the homophobic deployment of the "homosexual body."² In post-Stonewall cultural activism, we find another possibility of a communal force in the identification of the subjects with the scandal itself. Gay male narrative, in its localization of a specific range of male experience and its appeal to its own community, operates within and against the social logic of scandal, deriving

the possibilities of countercultural identifications from a dialectical embrace of those specters conjured and sublimed in these institutions of heterosexual aversion. Robert Glück writes of his interest in "scandal's defining of boundaries . . . what is inside and what is outside" as "one way a community organizes itself, tells itself its story about what is forbidden and expected." Glück's appropriation of scandal as a mode of expression instead of a means of suppression allows him to contest the "community tenet that homosexuality does not exist verbally" (Glück, *Elements* 15). Similar strategic rearticulations of "scandal" are discernible in the work of virtually all the writers associated with "New Narrative," writers "loosely united behind our distrust of established mechanisms of narrative fiction" (Cooper, "Sex Writing").³

The "New Narrative" developed from the San Francisco-based writers' workshops Robert Glück conducted through Small Press Traffic in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The writers most closely identified with "New Narrative" are Glück, Bruce Boone, Dodie Bellamy, Kevin Killian, Dennis Cooper, Camille Roy, Sam D'Allesandro, and Michael Amman, not all of whom are gay, and many of whom came to writing with established relations to either poetry or the visual arts. Bruce Boone coined the term "New Narrative," while he and Glück initially formulated the principles that could describe the intellectual and creative tendencies evolving within Glück's workshops. Their theorizing was framed by two major considerations: the effects of the writers' nonnarrative artistic practices on their narrative form, and a response to the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ poets, the most influential school of writers in San Francisco at that time. Boone and Glück shared the $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ poets' suspicion of the master narratives of the dominant society, but instead of "deconstructing" stories into their linguistic components, they wanted to recon-textualize storytelling in terms of its countercultural potential.⁴

Like Samuel R. Delany, the New Narrative writers are interested in the dynamic tension between the two columns of social life and desire that constitutes the subject (Delany, *Motion* 29-31, 60-71 and passim; "Column"). The subject in New Narrative writing is a psychosomatic materiality that is historically realized but not reified, a multiply articulated and articulate intertext whose own signifying practices shift the terms of its identities. New Narrative strategies often traverse and trespass the psychical and generic boundaries of cultural pleasure and bliss. It is in these unauthorized territorial divides that the New Narrative writers typically inscribe their scandalous subjectivities. Glück and Killian, for example, frequently model texts on the peculiarities of pornographic film and photography to structure the transgressive interplay of the real and the fictional, extradiegetic and intradiegetic, and the specular and the narrative.

It may be that the pornographic apparatus in actual practice and in metaphoric or literal appropriations into other cultural forms (such as narrative)

constitutes the most intimate and adaptable means for the representation and exposition of the peculiarly photogenic trajectories of desire and identification in gay male sexual subjectivity. In his short story "Workload," Robert Glück demonstrates the value of the pornographic apparatus as a structuring device for gay male subject processes. This is a first-person account of masturbating while looking at a photonovella about "three horny clerks," Larry, J. T., and Sean. At first Sean merely looks on as Larry fucks J. T. This situation models the intradiegetic reader-text relation on traditional film spectatorship structures. The narrator identifies with Sean as surrogate voyeur, whose "tilted gaze" he compares to "a peephole in a pillow book" (253). The narrator's erotic attention is directed to J. T., the object of Sean's look and Larry's penetration. When Sean joins in, the scene loses its interior distance, and the narrator's attraction to J. T. merges with a steadily increasing identification with him.

It's J. T.'s excitement and I need to borrow as much of it as I can. I need to witness his excitement and I need to be him, the one whose excitement is witnessed. His image provides access to both sides of the sexual proposition. The lack of that circuitry is masturbation's drawback; jacking off resolves tension but it exacerbates the imagination's need to witness and be witnessed. The only recourse is to trick myself into believing my body is an object by dramatizing masturbation, with mirrors, with contraptions say, to provide the effect of a keyhole or proscenium arch, a window, so to speak, a photo, in other words. (254)

The narrator's shift in identification from Sean to J. T. does not indicate a conscious rejection of the "mastery" the voyeuristic position of his identification with Sean had afforded him, because within the intersubjectively narcissistic functions of the vicissitudes of the scopophilic drives, voyeurism does not retain the heteroaggressive/defensive meanings it holds for the anaclitic subject.⁵ In fact, the advantages of the latter identifications made explicit in the above-quoted passage indicate some of the reasons for the different psychical and political inflections of voyeurism in this context. The narrator (a narcissistic exhibitionist) uses J. T. as part of his fantasy operations of a self-specularization anathema to anaclitic subjects exemplified by Sartre's peeping tom. The image of J. T. provides a focal point in the narrator's phantasmatic positioning of himself within the visual technology of the intentional spectacle—"mirrors" and "contraptions" that restage the narrating subject in an internalized "keyhole or proscenium arch," a "window" or "a photo." The specular modes of representation provide the circuitry for the narrator's fantasy necessary to confirm his own position as (sexually objectifiable) sexual subject.⁶

The identification with J. T. intensifies as the narrator imagines J. T.'s feelings looking at the very photonovella in which he appears. Instead of identifying with the "profilmic" surrogate voyeur, the narrator reimagines his proflmic

object of desire (J. T.) as that object's extrafilmic self, who becomes a fellow spectator of his own objected image. The narrator therefore identifies with a J. T. that exists within the exhibitionist's fantasy of "seeing oneself seeing oneself" (pace Lacan). The narrator "watches" J. T. assess the photos of his own ass. "He sees his ass and mentally nods in recognition as though a secret has been divulged. . . . A reality based on glamour and distance impresses him, he's excited by the photo and this is erotic for me; he wants to be alone with it to scrutinize and love as he loves something nameless inside himself" (255).⁷ One of the phrases embedded in the last sentence reveals intricacies and interanimations of desire and identifications that are quintessential to a gay male sexual subject: "he's excited by the photo [of himself] and this is erotic for me." The narrator imagines the object of his desire sexually aroused by an image of himself, and his sexual excitement (and its cause) is erotic for the narrator.

In "Sex Story," Glück interrupts his initial narrative of a sexual experience with his ex-lover Brian with a section of a porn novel, *Fresh from the Farm*, by Billy Farout. While in "Workload" Glück uses the apparatus of visual pornography to articulate intrapsychic processes of the sexual subject, in "Sex Story" he uses porn pulp fiction as a means to relate his subject position as writer to the larger social contexts and to the emergent community he represents. Through pornographic representational traditions, Glück expresses a subject resistant to the abstraction of "universalism" imposed by modernist reading protocols. Of course, in embracing his particularity, Glück also seeks to avoid a reified subject position of the psychologically unique individual, the fully interior "I." He therefore needs a representational mode that can bracket or quote recognizable types without faithfully reproducing them. Both satire and caricature serve these purposes, but "are often used more effectively by conservatives who believe in their community . . . than by those of us who want to change society structurally, people who were not located in an expressive community until very recently" (Glück, "Caricature" 19). Pornography is particularly suited for this, both because of its historical centrality to "our" community and because of its similarity, noted by Dennis Cooper, to contemporary art, in the tendency of pornography to forgo "the traditional notion of subject, relying instead on a display of purely aesthetic components" (Cooper, "Square One" 82).

Pornography therefore represses the psychological depth models Glück also means to avoid.

In its social typology, pornography shows character systems in a pure form. The characters have little or no psychology, they act as a function of the plot. . . . Yet pornography is transgressive. It sets up these character systems in order to tear them down. . . . Types go hand in hand with narrative. Even the mention of a type, the cowboy, the detective, the travelling salesman . . . carries

with it a narrative. . . . Narrative pleasure derives from the accuracy and imaginative use of given material, like the medieval concept of *matière*. Only in this case, the *matière* will be the lives of members of the community, the life of the community itself. . . . In this light we can see the personal histories and journals of movement writers as extensions of this idea of type, where the writer offers him/herself as an example of the community, at the same time retaining a separate individuality. From my point of view, this is the happiest solution to the over-psychologized I. ("Caricature" 20-21)

Kevin Killian's texts, generally speaking, bear a more elliptical relation to traditional pornographic genres than Glück's or Cooper's, in that he rarely "quotes" from actual porn texts or films. His texts do, however, contain the same degree of explicit sexual material, but usually in more idiosyncratic contexts than provided by the scripting structures porn represents. Nevertheless, Killian is concerned with the way popular media contour and confirm subjectivity, and in that he shares a postmodernity with Glück and Cooper, but his personae are more liable to understand their selves via David Bowie or Hayley Mills than Jeff Hunter or Billy Farout. Even so, Killian is a principal example of the adaptation of "porn character systems," and some of what Glück writes about porn is readily applicable to Killian's work: "The brilliance of this writing lies in its juggling of systems. . . . This kind of pastiche generates a great energy. But all these systems have quotation marks around them embracing and disclaiming at the same time" (ibid. 24).

The localization of male bodies and specifications of desires in New Narrative writings also reflect affinities with the antitheological severance of the penis from the phallus in gay male porn films. As I have written elsewhere, pornography can aid in "disengag[ing] gay male sexuality from the phallogentrism of dominant culture by clearly differentiating the *political and social overestimation* of the penis-as-phallus in heterosexual phallogracies, from the *erotic investment* in the penis among gay men," in that "gay male porn demystifies the penis by situating it within the supersaturation of its communal visibility" and its outrageous availability. The porn film makes public record of the "real scandal" of gay male sexuality: "the playful use of the penis among men resolves the contradictions within phallogentric logic that must remain unresolved for the myth of phallic primacy to remain operative. In other words, if penises become 'toys for boys' they are thus at once affirmed (and delimited) within lived experience and jettisoned from the transcendence of the ever non-present phallus" (Jackson, "Explicit" 147). In less utopian (and more sophisticated) engagements with the contradictions of gay male sexuality within phallogentric ideology and its aftermaths, Dennis Cooper and Robert Glück use—in very different ways—visual pornography to explore how melancholia generates desire and conditions both private and public fantasies.

Gay male narrative, then, can be a practice through which the gay male subject actively (even if only implicitly) disengages his sexuality from the phallocalocratic libidinal economy; in other words, the gay male narrator can write from an embodied subject position, whose relation to male bodies affirms the male body as one of two possible sexual morphologies, and whose desiring relation to other male bodies does not ineluctably provide an avenue through which the penis becomes theologized as phallus.⁸ Such a narrator at once relinquishes the transcendence of the phallus and the unmarked position of absolute truth, through the ongoing acknowledgment of the specificity of his body, his desire, and their epistemological consequences and possibilities.

love guaranteed by knowledge—a narcissism which allows the subject to fit into a harmonious relation between self and social order, but in the psychoanalytic account—the subject's narcissistic relation to the self is seen to *conflict with and disrupt* other social relations" (Copjec 60).

5. Scandalous Narratives

1. In an essay about his college days before "coming out," Robert Glück describes the isolation of the pre-scandalous, closeted self: "I had a secret. . . . The secret did not allow me to live in my group. I was alone. I had no world—just the despicable pink satellite of my body, and in outer space there is no moral life or camaraderie, just self preservation" ("Marker" 20).
2. As Simon Watney puts it: "In the register of object-choice, the homosexual body inescapably evidences a sexual diversity that it is its ideological 'function' to restrict. . . . The 'homosexual body' would thus evidence a fictive collectivity of perverse sexual performances, denied any psychic reality and pushed out beyond the furthest margins of the social. This, after all, is what the category of 'the homosexual' . . . was invented to do in the first place" ("Spectacle" 78–79). For useful comparisons with the ideological uses which developed around "madness" and its representations, see Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 13–17, 35–37, 82–84, and passim.
3. The major works from this school include Bruce Boone, *My Walk with Bob*; Kevin Killian, *Sly and Bedrooms Have Windows*; Dennis Cooper, *Safe*, *He Cried*, and *Closer*. Cooper's recent statement on "New Narrative" seems paradigmatic: "If there is such a thing as New Narrative writing, it seems to me to be less a strict movement of writers with a program or a marketing ploy, than it is a collection of writers, not all of us gay, by the way, loosely united behind our distrust of established mechanisms of narrative fiction—that is: basically outmoded devices having largely to do with plot, and used in such a laissez-faire, gratuitous style by most of the published practitioners of contemporary lit, gay and straight, young and old, male and female, new and established" (unpublished talk at the panel "Sex Writing and the New Narrative," Out/Write Conference, San Francisco, February 1990). Heterosexual writers included in this group are Kathy Acker and Michael Amnasan (Abbott 39–55).
4. The information in this paragraph is distilled from personal conversations with Robert Glück and Bruce Boone.
5. See my discussion in chapter 4.
6. This need operates on the same phantasmatic principles as the dynamics of the narcissistic exhibitionist described in chapter 4. This story bears a relation to its "heterosexual" counterpart, "Hiding in the Open," in which "Bob" masturbates to porn in a sperm bank. The former is narcissistic, the latter analitic. The tension between the two is parallel to the tension I described in chapter 4 between Almodovar's films *Law of Desire* and *Matador*.
7. Compare Cooper's musing on porn star Jeff Hunter's apotheosis in the film *Kept after School*: "Never again will his face be as gripped by what's deep in his body but slipping from his possession" ("Square One" 83).
8. In his short story "Violence," Glück addresses this question by relating and then reflecting on the stakes of an argument at a Berkeley cocktail party regarding the use of "phallus" as a generic metaphor for power (*Elements* 92–93).
9. "I think in my work there's always been a sort of terror about sex. The desire for sex that you could have with someone you objectify but the terror of having to deal with a real person. . . . Sex is a really scary thing, you've got to choose your partners carefully, and what to do. . . . I always think the sex in my books is so unsexy, because they're nervous about

each other, and it's so much about just wanting to get something out of this body they're with and some idea they have about this person. [And since AIDS] it's just a general terror that's come over sex. And I think it's reinforcing that in my work" (qtd. Meyer 64).

10. "Square One" was originally published in *Soup: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. Bruce Boone, no. 4 (1983): 70–72. When I quote a passage that appears only in that version and was not included in the later version, printed in *Wrong*, it will be cited as "Square One" (*Soup*).
11. "An audience made up of men like me has surrendered its collective will to a filmmaker's. Like a cheap spaceship prop in an old sci-fi flick, a grungy theater scattered with hopeful, upturned faces seems to speed toward its destination—giant bodies composed of light" ("Square One" 83).
12. Freud, "Fetishism" and "Splitting"; Mannoni 175–80; Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure."
13. Even people with "real" sex lives often prefer the numb and numbing refuges of the world without consequences provided by pornographic media: "The life pornography pictures is ordered. . . . Doug wants to live in this one-dimensional world. . . . If someone he fucked died he'd never hear about it and if he did the word wouldn't compute or feel real to him. He'd be involved in his latest orgasm, face drawn so tight nothing else could get under" (*Safe* 84–85).
14. The Dylan quotation, from "The Gates of Eden" (*Bringing It All Back Home*), which also refers to the "object-meaning," is used again parodistically in *Closer* (5).
15. The only major symptom of melancholia as Freud describes it that is not directly evident in Cooper's narrative personae is the tendency to berate the self as morally inferior ("Mourning" 246–48). A desiring subject in Cooper's texts does, however, tend to disregard his corporeal self as a meaningful part in any sexual encounter. In other words, these subjects never wish to see themselves as objects of desire. The "Dennis" narrator of *Frisk* states that sexual reciprocation makes him "very uncomfortable," noting that his tricks "must pick up on my tastes right away, since they almost never want to explore me. They just lie back, take it from me. . . . Usually I don't notice my body. It's just there, working steadily. I wash it, feed it, jerk it off, wipe its ass, and that's all" (50).
16. John "subtracts from" his subjects by defacing their drawings (*Closer* 4). "In porn a director can only add or subtract from what exists outside his control—attractiveness" ("Square One" [*Soup*] 71).
17. Or the clue David—despite himself—in *Closer* gives the reader of the origin of his rock star delusion: "Once upon a time I was a little boy. I rode my bike constantly. I wandered everywhere, bought stuff, sang songs to myself. I stopped in a mall. This man came up to me. He was an A & R man for a big record company. He told me I was amazing. I said okay and we went back to his house. He tried to fuck me. I bled all over the place. Then he showed me the door and said, 'Thanks for being so well designed, kid'" (*Closer* 37).
18. Other characters also assess their bodies' attractiveness in the mirror, attempting to see it as others do: Mark in *Safe* (41) and Julian and Henry in *Frisk* (13, 16–17).
19. During George's first encounter with Philippe, he envisioned it as an exploration in a mineshaft in a Disneyland western fantasy geography (50). When examining his wounded anus for its "charm" to Philippe and Tom, he compares the swollen opening to the "painted mouth" of "Injun Joe's Cave," a Disneyland ride whose entrance always gave him "goose bumps" (90–91). The macabre cross-hybridization of child's play and horror in Disneyland becomes clearer when comparing the boys with the adults. George's Disneyland LSD hallucination is strangely similar to a vision Philippe has as he explores his own murderous feelings toward George. George's trip: "Over his head, a Milky Way of skulls snapped like turtles" (88). Philippe's vision: "Philippe lay in bed imagining George's death. . . . The world he saw rang with percussion. Skeletons snapped" (106).