

Write, Paint, Dance, Sex
Queer Styles/American Fictions

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Susie Asado. Sweet sweet sweet sweet tea. Susie Asado. Enunciate it slowly and let the S's roll off your tongue. And again. Susie Asado. Sweet sweet sweet sweet tea. Susie Asado. We could say that, for Gertrude Stein, sexuality is the letter S. In the poem *Susie Asado*, of which these are the first two lines, the verses unfold like an S coiling around the tongue.¹ The poem, itself shaped like the letter S, curves in and out and around like a form of sensory realism. Yes, Stein was fascinated by Matisse, Picasso, and other modernist experiments with Cubism, fragmentation, and collage. But this poem, and her work in general, evoke more of what sexuality feels like than many detailed realist descriptions do. Sexuality, Stein reminds us, is not an essence, a content, an identification, or a singular noun; it is more like the simultaneity of a shape, a sound, a taste, a visual and haptic experience, a melody, a dance, a shifting aesthetic practice – ineffable, tangible, both. Embracing Stein's embrace of the letter S, sexuality is, we could say, a style.

Inspired by the rhythm and movement of a flamenco dancer Stein had seen perform in Spain, "Susie Asado" and its companion piece "Preciosilla," both published in 1914, have a lot to tell us about queer style, about what it means to paint with words, about the sexiness of sound, about the erotics of organic and inorganic life worlds that Dana Luciano and Mel Chen have variously described as the queerness of "the non-human fold" and the affordances of "trans/material attachments."² Stein produces any number of superimposed verbal planes to create a space of perception not as a form of organized consciousness or logical sequence but as an overlap of patterns and images, sounds and rhythms, textures and grains, what Stein herself describes as "a continuous present and using everything and beginning again."³

Thus "Preciosilla": "Lily wet lily wet while. This is so pink so pink in stammer, a long bean which shows bows is collected by a single curly shady, shady get, get set wet bet."⁴ The invagination of language Stein

performs is less a rendering of a lily as reducible to a clitoris (the long bean), surrounded by pubic hair (the curly shady), in the act of coming (get set wet bet), than it is a demonstration of the *clitoral*, of or pertaining to a set of queer, specifically lesbian, sensations. The poem makes use of the play of language as a vehicle for estranging us from and bringing us closer to the erotic variability of words. Simultaneously a deliberate transgression of the boundaries of the human – lilies becoming bodies becoming arousal – and a queer meditation on how words, natural objects, and bodies rub on, and against, each other, thus generating new forms, these poems encapsulate some of the tactics of queer studies in general – a practice that Stein designates in her coinage of the verb “to exstate” in “Preciosilla”: to extract language from itself, to make language ecstatic.

In “A Sketch of the Past,” Virginia Woolf describes such heightened moments of pleasure as instances of affective comprehension that emerge to counter the emotional and social numbing of the modern world. The routine tasks we perform in everyday life are “not lived consciously,” but instead are embedded in “a kind of nondescript cotton wool.”⁵ At other times though, both banal and extraordinary, we experience an intensity of feeling that can be understood through the language of aesthetics: “The whole world is a work of art; we are parts of the work of art. We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself” (72). For Woolf, our realization of our lives as a work of art is a moment when we catch a glimpse of and receive inspiration from our entanglement with the otherwise opaque and muted surfaces of everyday life.

And so, in Woolf’s short story “Kew Gardens,” we are privy to a view of desire from the perspective of a snail, itself situated in the lush corporeality of a summer garden, slowly sliming its way through “tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface.”⁶ A man and a woman walk by the garden where the snail moves, and the woman, Eleanor, is stirred to remember a startling kiss.

Imagine six little girls sitting before their easels twenty years ago, down by the side of a lake, painting the water-lilies, the first red water-lilies I’d ever seen. And suddenly a kiss, there on the back of my neck. And my hand shook all the afternoon so that I couldn’t paint. I took out my watch and marked the hour when I would allow myself to think of the kiss for five minutes only – it was so precious – the kiss of an old grey-haired woman with a wart on her nose, the mother of all my kisses all my life. (57)

What is queer about this moment is not reducible to the life-changing arousal one woman experiences when kissed by another, nor even to the ostensibly exceptional fact that the kiss was from an older, wart-nosed woman. Rather, it is that the kiss produces such significant agitation, is so exquisite and *catalytic*, that it seems to mark the origins of Eleanor's sexuality, a moment akin to what Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, describe as "the subject's constitution by and attachment to varieties of being undone."⁷ In "Kew Gardens," snails and humans and flowers and plants and lips on flesh merge into the shapes and colors of the natural world in such a way that also merges theme with style, where the content of desire is dissolved into and thereby made over by aesthetic form. In the story, Woolf treats words as painters treat paint, constructing a network of human interaction through associations of tone, color, and hue, offering us textures of language over plot. Objects, animals, people are transformed into interactive forms, and our knowledge of them as readers becomes dependent on the senses. Color words – the repetitions of red, blue, and yellow – open an optical space of perception and invite imaginative, rapturous response.

This is all to say that sexuality and its attendant forms of desire, love, relationality, and non-relationality (human and nonhuman both) can be considered along the lines of Stein's letter S and Woolf's color palette as a series of still unfolding styles, consisting of counterintuitive reading, temporal disjuncture, the performative, narrative interruption and suspension, non-closure, negativity, ambivalence, affective intensity, color, texture, syntax, and tone that make up the queer literary domain. Since its inception, queer studies has defined itself as a critical practice consisting of imaginative interpretative acts, ones intent on exploring how sexuality and sociality map onto one another, on enacting a reading practice of and for unpredictable impulses and methods that operate against normative and normativizing life narratives, and ultimately on working to expand the networks of kinship, feeling, friendship, love, and desire that can be thought and read in the first place. In this sense, queer methods of reading were never about marking a fixed sexual or erotic practice. Its methodological innovations have imagined and continue to imagine queer sex and sexuality in ways that eschew traditional narrative teleology and finite definition, redirecting historical, formalist, and political interest to the social energies of a text that unfold in different directions, what Arthur

Rimbaud legendarily describes as “*dans tous les sens*” (calling upon all senses, hinting at all meanings, going in all directions).⁸

Interpretive Acts and Strategic Misreadings

To think about queer style is to pay attention to the literariness of queer narrative – its tones, textures, and literary techniques – but also to emphasize the relationship between literature and the social world, between aesthetics and politics. It is to approach queer literature from a different angle of vision than the space of fixed identity or objective historicity. Queer studies and its generation of queer readings of cultural texts can instead be understood along the lines of what, in a different context, Ariella Azoulay calls “potential history” in which “the reconstruction of unrealized possibilities, practices, and dreams that motivated and directed the actions of various actors in the past” becomes possible.⁹ In the context of queer temporality, this is akin to what Elizabeth Freeman refers to as “erotohistoriography” – “the centrality of pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, in queer practices of encountering and documenting the past” – and what Peter Coviello designates “the untimely” – the ways desire circulates in nineteenth-century American fiction that does not anticipate the medico-juridical taxonomies of sex at the beginning of the twentieth century but, rather, consists of a series of unpredictable forms of sexual intimacy, same-sex attachment, and erotic possibility.¹⁰ And so Jordan Stein, in his reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*, does not dwell on the more obviously gay bits of the story such as Coverdale and Hollingsworth’s homoerotic exchanges or the tense polyamorous love quadrangle among Coverdale, Hollingsworth, Zenobia, and Priscilla but on a moment of narrative suspension when Coverdale’s scopophilic penchant for peeping into Zenobia and Priscilla’s back window is interrupted by a waiter serving him a sherry-cobbler. For Stein, this interruption is a mark of the narrative’s queer style that, in the absence of a fixed discourse on homosexuality, “provides the basis for a characterization of *Blithedale* as a queer novel before ‘homosexuality.’”¹¹

Hawthorne’s novel, of course, is only one of any number of texts one could turn to when tracing a genealogy of queer theory’s literary objects and the styles they engage. In American literature, certain authors have for some time now given shape to queer literary studies: Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Henry James, Claude McCay, Willa Cather, Jean Toomer, James Baldwin, and Nella Larsen have all been taken up in the work of Mae G. Henderson, Michael Moon, Charles I.

Nero, Betsy Erkkila, Michael Warner, Eve Sedgwick, Jonathan Goldberg, Peter Coviello, Heather Love, Michael Snediker, Siobhan Somerville, Dwight McBride, Dana Luciano, and other major contributors to the field. As a result, we have become privy to the homoerotic intimacies of Sarah Orne Jewett's spinsters and Walt Whitman's cruising poetics. We have taken succor from the styles of queer refusal and resistance in Emily Dickinson – "I'm Nobody! Who Are You? Are you – Nobody – too? Then there's a pair of us!" – and Herman Melville – in which Bartelby's famous response, "I prefer not to," has become a hallmark of queer negativity. We have noted Willa Cather's queer allusions ("the tan velvet on the collar" of Paul's Wildean overcoat, where he placed "an opal pin in his neatly knotted black four-in-hand, and a red carnation in his buttonhole") and Hawthorne's explorations of how the erotic is not what funds an easy queer sociality but, ultimately, what gives the lie to the nation form, caught up as that form is in the mutual entanglements of projective identification, the absent presence of desire, and the prohibition on sex.¹² We could also dwell with no small amount of erotic glee on the ending of Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* in which, when the lesbian lothario and main protagonist Dame Evangeline Musset dies and her body is cremated, "all had burned but the Tongue, and this flamed, and would not suffer Ash, and it played about on the handful that had been she indeed."¹³ The tongue as both a sexual organ and an organ for speech that refuses to burn at the end of Barnes's work appears as a queer leitmotif in the frame narrative of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Are Watching God* as well when Janie sits on the porch recounting her travels to her "kissin' friend" Phoebe, thus forging the narrative's final couple as one between women, and Janie avows, "Mah tongue is in mah friend's mouth."¹⁴

Aesthetics and Politics

One of the things we learn from this body of work is that if desire can be seen as existing at the root of the organization of the social, then the aesthetic mediations of sex and sexuality can't be dismissed so easily as the "merely cultural."¹⁵ Queer theory's interest in literary style is an interest in working through what kinds of relations between people can be figured. There is thus an ethical urgency about queer theory that is directed at the damage that sexual prohibitions do to people, but also at how literary form is crucial in confronting the various ways the social fabric does not unravel evenly. With particular emphasis on the dissonant effects of race on sexual

experience, the work of Sandra Soto, Sharon Patricia Holland, David Eng, Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, Jose Muñoz, and many others has argued for a queer analysis of the discursive relationship between racialization and sexuality in poetry, fiction, and cultural performance.¹⁶ “Can work on ‘desire’ be antiracist work? Can antiracist work think ‘desire?’” Holland asks.¹⁷ Maybe, but only if we continue to grapple with the social and historical contingencies of “desire” and “pleasure” and their locations in nonuniversal, nonautonomous domains (as Holland also suggests). Toward this end, in *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race*, Abdur-Rahman analyzes African-American literary depictions of black sexuality in order to illuminate how the erotic operates at the center of understandings of race in US culture. Tracing how African-American writers work to disavow the constraints of white heteronormativity, Abdur-Rahman moves from literature portraying white acts of aggression on black bodies to literature that explores forms of black desire (as well as the simultaneity of both). Abdur-Rahman thus reveals how narrative form aids us in confronting the racialized sexual tensions at the heart of the American national imaginary.

Along these lines, in key texts such as the slave narratives written by Harriet Jacobs and Fredrick Douglass we can trace the emergence of a black Bildungsroman. This is a specific narrative form that does not simply reread late eighteenth-century authorized conventions in which an individual’s maturation requires their eventual acceptance of the values of their social world. Rather, it is a narrative form that must contend with the specific ways the sexual is fundamental to constructions of blackness in the acquisition and maintenance of white power in the US, necessitating a depiction of how the protagonist of the black Bildungsroman must engage in a narrative-long struggle with both sexual violence and sexual autonomy. In Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example, Linda Brent must survive and escape from an unremitting context of sexual endangerment (the sexual violence of Mrs. Flint’s nightly intrusions as much as Mr. Flint’s relentless coercions) toward a possible sexual freedom. The harrowing narration of “the trials of girlhood” that unfolds, as Hortense Spillers and others have discussed, structurally maps how the black women’s body under slavery, far from being marked in terms of gender or sexuality, is forced into availability for the projections of white male and female violence alike.¹⁸ Jacobs’s account of this endangerment and the possibility of escaping it thus requires different modes and styles of narration capable of recording the different sensory and sexual orientations to the world experienced by slaves as a result of the brutalities of dispossession.¹⁹

Understanding the aesthetic and social unfolding of this structure of what Roderick Ferguson terms “racialized sexuality” calls for an exchange between critical race theory and queer studies at the level of form as well as other styles of resistance – which means grappling with the myriad ways class, race, gender, and sexuality are shaped and reshaped in and through a number of overlapping, mutually informing histories, including racial capitalism, settler colonialism, the sexual politics of empire, and the dynamics of social reproduction and epistemic familialism.²⁰ As Cathy Cohen suggests, the political analysis of queer theory is damaged at its core if it cannot account for the interactions and mutual determinations of class, race, gender, and sexuality, not as a set of issues one “supports,” or topics and populations one includes in a conference session, political rally, or anthology, but as intertwined historical, aesthetic, and political formations.²¹ In this vein, queer styles of narrative pleasure and resistance are not reducible to aesthetic forms and poetic structures but need to be understood in relation to the various national, racial, gendered, classed logics they also inhabit. In this sense, too, in Gertrude Stein’s poem “Susie Asado” sexuality is also a race. Read through the interventions of queer of color critique, Stein’s poem, while working to move beyond the mandates of body and identity, nonetheless turns to a Spanish flamenco dancer as the impetus for its queer desires. This points us toward both Stein’s specific appropriation of racial culture and, more largely, the often invisible racial structures of modernism.²² It also underscores the point I have been making about how something like queer style is never not politically imbricated.

Limits of Radical Worldmaking

What does this mean about the uneven democratizations of queer possibility? For Whitman, as scholars from Moon to Coviello suggest, sexual union figures the utopian possibilities of civic union. Expressing his polyamorous democratic vision through writerly experiment (parataxis, incantatory repetition, enjambment, assonance, consonance, and an almost drunken use of alliteration), Whitman endows male–male desire with the power to “make the continent indissoluble” by virtue of “the love of comrades, / With the life-long love of comrades.”²³ Both in the “Calamus” poems and throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman places ebullient and vigorous faith in writing as the means to fashion a queerer and thus more just world. For Whitman, queer love, and even more an ethics of queer care, just might have the power to end slavery.

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside,
 I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
 Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsey and weak,
 And went where he sat on a log, and led him in and assured him,
 And brought water and filled a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet,
 And gave him a room that entered from my own, and gave him some coarse
 clean clothes,
 And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness, And
 remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;
 He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and passed north, I had
 him sit next me at table . . . my firelock leaned in the corner.²⁴

In the context of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which authorized local governments to seize anyone thought to be an escaped slave and imposed penalties on those who aided their flight, Whitman imagines a scene of affectionate care between himself and a male runaway slave in defiance of the law. Both here and throughout the poem, Whitman refuses traditional syntactic arrangements of time, space, and people, opting instead to make nonhierarchical connections between and amongst them through his much-noted use of parataxis – the infinite addition, the thousand-comma sentence – in which no subordination between clauses and phrases can be said to exist. By doing so, he delineates the possibilities of cross-racial affinity infused with the vibrancy of desire akin to the love of comrades articulated in “Calamus.” And yet. The act of queer love depicted here is such an intensely embodied consecration, an act stylized as much by an imagined and celebratory male capacity to nurture as by the relentlessness of the white male gaze, so tender but also so reifying as he makes visually manifest the slave’s “sweated body and bruised feet,” “his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,” all the while, oh so fearlessly keeping his rifle in the corner. Is this, we might sincerely ask, an act of queer love or a white savior narrative? Does it sketch out the contours of a decidedly antiracist practice of intimacy or reinforce the sexual objectification of the black male body? All of this? Whitman’s vision is at once a queer world-making practice and a will to visualization working to frame the other’s legibility.²⁵ The point, I think, would not be to use the latter critique to indict and dismiss the former practice as much as to grapple with the co-occurrence of each and, correspondingly, to think about how the former practice doesn’t exist without the latter in Whitman’s articulation. Following Soto’s understanding of “reading like a queer,” it means directly engaging with, rather than trying to bracket or disentangle, a narrative’s fundamental contradictions.²⁶

We also read like a queer when we attend to the difference style makes. What happens when we consider sexuality in aesthetic rather than

identitarian terms? If style in literature is the element that describes the ways that the author uses words – from word choice to syntactical arrangement to tonal variation to sentence structure – to produce moods, meanings, and sensations, then attending to what is queer about style (to what is provisional, experimental, strange, intervening, difficult, performative) makes queerness less constrained by historical discourse and sociological fact, more open to practice, change, and transformation – more possible.

Queer Style and the Genres of Heterosexuality

Focusing on style means more expansive possibilities for criticism. Looking at texts not usually considered “queer” (either by authorship or content) provides particular affordances for how queer methods of reading for style help pry open a text to its own internal sexual imaginings. For example, in his short story “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” Stephen Crane, perhaps unwittingly, takes up the gauntlet thrown down by Whitman to forward the argument that the imposition of the modern regime of heterosexuality, indeed, ruins everything. “The Bride” can be read as much as a comic send-up of the logic of heteronormativity as a political commentary on how the same logic founds the violence of settler colonialism. As Mark Rifkin argues, one of the ways the process of settler colonialism simultaneously asserts and disavows itself is through the establishment of the conjugal couple form and its naturalized claim to property.²⁷ In “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” this plays itself out comically via the marriage plot. The first chapter begins in the space of a train – flagrant symbol of encroaching modernity – with Jack Potter and his new bride travelling west from San Antonio, Texas, where they have just been married, to the unsettled region of Yellow Sky. “Whirling onward with such dignity of motion,” the train that carries “the newly married pair” thus equates marriage with the threshold of modernity as both plow their way headlong into the unconstructed West, figured in the story (not to mention the American imagination) as an extralegal space.²⁸ In the second chapter, the focalization shifts and we are now with the men of the town as they gather for a drink at “The Weary Gentleman’s Saloon” and wait for Jack Potter to return. Soon after, they find that they must lock themselves in the bar because they hear that Scratchy Wilson is on a drunken tear, pistols flaring and looking for a fight. In chapter 3, the narrative focalization shifts once again as Scratchy Wilson, “the last one of the old gang that used to hang out along the river here,” enters the scene (320). We now follow the

narrative action from his point of view and thus come to inhabit the rough and rugged character of masculinity that he represents. He lusts so heavily for a fight that “the cords of his neck straightened and sank, straightened and sank, as passion moved him” (321). And not just any fight, but one with his beloved adversary, Jack Potter: “he moved in the direction of his desire, chanting Apache scalp-music” as if “on the war trail” (322). Placing Scratchy within native discourse, coupled with the story’s scattered references to the presence of Mexicans (such as the two “Mexican sheep-herders who did not talk as a general practice in the Weary Gentleman’s Saloon”), binds him to a settler narrative of coercive disappearance, in which his desire presents itself as in excess of or located somewhere beyond the dynamics of the law and the state that Jack Potter, as the Town Marshall, represents (318). Scratchy’s presence testifies to prior contexts of Native and Mexican inhabitation of Texan land and simultaneously, or in fact as a result, functions as the story’s site of queerness. This queerness comes to the fore in chapter 4 when Scratchy finds the object of his desire in the figure of Jack Potter: “The two men faced each other at a distance of three paces. He of the revolver smiled with a new and quiet ferocity” (323).

Scratchy soon discovers that their romance has been displaced by Jack Potter’s new bride. “Married!” Scratchy Wilson shouts uncomprehendingly, “Married?” “No!” Noticing the bride standing by Potter’s side for the first time, he was “like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world.” “I guess it’s all off now,” Wilson shrugs, and then sadly, slowly walks away, making “funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand” (324). Like the perennial sands of time dropping through the funnel of an hourglass, Scratchy Wilson’s retreat signals that the temporality of the modern is the time of heterosexuality. Melancholy sets in as Scratchy discovers he is not the story’s vital pulse but a figure of the racial and sexual past, a sign of what has been lost, affectively, historically, spatially, sexually. The story of his defeat is a sustained meditation on heterosexuality and the marriage form that consolidates it as “The Bride” so precisely comes to allegorize the marital couple’s elevation to the status of a racial and sexual norm.

The modern regime of sexuality is thus identified not only by “the feminization of American culture” indicated by the bride’s presence, but also by the heterosexual contract with the feminine. In many ways, then, the narrative’s sexism (its horror at the presence of the female body) is also its queerness. The bride’s entry into Yellow Sky redefines, even repudiates, male–male relations, and this is what makes Scratchy so sad: “I guess it’s all over then.” The West is a space of male homosocial *and* homoerotic unconstraint – and the discourse on heterosexuality has disciplinary effects.

It marks a shift from the logic of masculine violence to one of decorum in the presence of ladies. This is simultaneously a shift away from the queer gunplay that Scratchy Wilson has a history of enjoying with Jack Potter and toward dyadic monogamy.

Ultimately, this is a profoundly Foucauldian tale about the modern implantation of the legitimate heterosexual couple. The melancholic ending laments the passing of male–male desire as heterosexuality establishes itself as the new order. The strange use of chapter breaks in the short story form (four such breaks in a nine-page tale) allows Crane to refocalize the narrative from multiple angles of vision. These chapter breaks interrupt the teleology of the narrative as an otherwise straightforward marriage plot and thereby act as a formal manifestation of the temporal and structural disorientations of modernity that the married couple also ushers in. At the same time, the use of chapters unsettles – cuts into, breaks up – both the narrative of settler colonialism and the implantation of white heterosexuality that supports it. On this reading, Crane’s story can be understood as queer less because it features two men in desiring attachment to one another (though it does this too) but by way of its manner of narration, its queer style. Instead of the narrative unfolding from what Gérard Genette calls “zero focalization” (through the narrator’s voice alone), it unfolds through the perspective of particular characters in a pattern of shifting focalization until it comes to reside with Scratchy Wilson.²⁹ It is ultimately through Scratchy Wilson’s vision that the reader sees, which has the significant effect of cuing us to the potential of the narrative’s nonnormative alliances. The result is a less sympathetic and totalizing narrative of the inevitability of modern sexuality and the episteme of the family that enables geopolitical usurpation and racial violence than one that, instead, opens up a discussion of how these forms get constructed in and by narrative. Rather than captivating the reader with the marriage plot, it makes visible that plot’s structural perversity.

The obstinacy of heterosexuality as a genre of being that binds selfhood to society takes center stage in the work of Henry James as well. This is because James’s queer style involves the formal conjuring of heterosexuality as a narrative impasse. He does so by unsettling the narrative emplotment of heterosexual romance with what we might think of as a form of queer narrative nonclosure. For Kevin Ohi, James’s queer style is figured by his disorienting narrative temporalities in which a character’s consciousness is continually out of sync with the experience it records.³⁰ We can see a similar temporal play in James’s refusal of narrative closure, specifically in the deliberate ongoingness that his endings imply (more often than not of

suffering, stuckness, ambivalence, and other affective microclimates of desire) – whether it is Isabel Archer’s refusal to share whatever “straight path” she imagines for herself at the end of *Portrait of a Lady*; Kate Croy’s inscrutable final line in *Wings of the Dove* (“We shall never be again as we were!”); Strether Lambert’s mystifying (and for the most part unstated) decision to return home in *The Ambassadors* instead of remaining in the space of art and queer love with which Parisian life provides him; the closing lament of *The Bostonians* that, as a result of Verena Tarrant’s decision to run off with Basil Ransom, “it is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last [tears] she was destined to shed”; or – well, I could go on.³¹ James eschews the kinds of coherence narrative closure affords, instead demonstrating how the imperative for closure has the tendency to wrap itself up in a coercive and false sense of heterosexualized stability. If the consolidating forms of the heterosexual romance and the marriage plot all promise to resolve the narrative crises of sexual confusion, wayward pleasure, bad object choice, and adolescent play, in James we are treated to the more agonizing ambivalences of, and thus more expansive possibilities for, love and desire. To ask of his narratives *how* they end – whether or not we should consider them tragic or triumphant – is to ask precisely the wrong question because it assumes that experiences of love and desire do end. Love objects and other sites of sexual desire may fade into the past, but do they disappear without a psychic or material trace? “We shall never be again as we were!”: not because we were once comfortable and assured in our desires but because desire, love, and other modes of being-in-relation are as constitutively uncomfortable and uncertain as they are interminable. We shall never again inhabit that fantasy of ourselves that never was, for now we know it to have been a fantasy. This makes the supposition that there can be an “after” queer studies somewhat incomprehensible. From a Jamesian perspective, we could ask: Can queer desire be contained within a teleological narrative of beginnings and ends? Can ways of reading it? If, as readers, we crave a stable, simplified version of James’s, or any, novelistic world as one way to simplify and stabilize the relations we have in our own, this wish for a resolution is precisely what James mirrors back to us and then refuses by confronting us with a narrative that insists – through its presentation of provisional and impoverished forms of perception, its exhaustive use of the prepositional clause as a way to mime the slow rhythms of thinking, its temporal discontinuities – upon the impossibility of an ending. In these writerly practices, these resolute

attachments to irresolution, James shows himself at his most queer. To refuse the closure of the marriage plot is to refuse the time of heterosexuality. To embrace the structural and temporal vicissitudes of the narration of desire is to open up the categories of sexuality to greater, more multiple possibilities for attachment, intimacy, and sex.

Dancing Queens

If narrative irresolution and nonclosure gives us James at his most queer, we also find in his work an instance of queerness at its nadir when, in the novella *Daisy Miller*, Winterbourne discloses that he hates to dance. "It's a pity these rooms are so small; we can't dance," Daisy Miller effuses to her moralizing counterpart. "I am not sorry we can't dance," Winterbourne returns; "I don't dance."³² Bright, vivacious, and defiantly in violation of the norms of feminine sexual propriety, Daisy Miller disagrees, and it is this moment of unbridled attachment to dancing and other pleasures like it that garner her all sorts of social judgment, not least of which comes from the character that finds his desire for her so unbearable: Winterbourne himself, shown up by James most scathingly at the moment he discloses his disapproval of the dance floor. "Of course you don't dance; you're too stiff," replies Daisy as she flounces off. For José Muñoz, we might recall, "dance is an especially valuable site for ruminations on queerness and gesture." Muñoz continues, "Queer dance is hard to catch, and it is meant to be hard to catch – it is supposed to slip through the fingers and comprehension of those who would use knowledge against us. Rather than dematerialize, dance rematerializes. Dance, like energy, never disappears; it is simply transformed."³³ Like James's narrative nonclosures, dance is another queer style, one that points us away from a critical timeline of before and after and toward the "ephemeral trace," which is to say the style, of the queer.

Might we revisit, for a third time, Stein's poem "Susie Asado" through this lens? By concentrating on the rhythms, gestures, and movements of flamenco, is it possible to steal back the dance form from modernism's appropriations? "Susie Asado which is a told tray sure. A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers."³⁴ Functioning within both visual and aural registers as an image of a dancer and the sound of dance, Susie Asado is, to be sure, an object of lesbian desire, a treasure ("tray sure"), but also a series of movements ("A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers"). By conjuring the visuality and aurality of flamenco, a dance that makes use of

palmas (handclapping), pintas (finger snapping), and rhythmic stamping to express intense emotion and sexual intimacy, the dance can be said to exceed the words on the page that attempt to capture it.³⁵ Virgil Thomson's famous musical composition for "Susie Asado" not only confirms how the poem lends itself to music, but also how we cannot fully engage the poem's words referentially, only elusively through the sensory forms they evoke. Such an interpretation might allow the traces of flamenco in the poem to hold greater sway, to foreground the ways pleasure is summoned in and through the relationship between the utterance and that which surpasses it. We can, in this way, glimpse the poem's materialization of sensory relations that link the reader to the dance as an aesthetic event that bears with it the traces of queer desire and racial expression at the intersections. Of course, this is a strategic misreading along the lines of what Muñoz names "disidentification" – a mode of reading that does not identify with a text's ideology or only reject it but, rather, rereads the text according to one's own willful projections and pleasures and, as an effect, transforms it.³⁶

How does this help us to imagine the significance of queer style within the discipline of queer studies? To be sure, the literary works adumbrated throughout this chapter offer an array of queer intimacies and attachments between women and between men, but they also invite readers to explore literary styles that reveal themselves as queer in myriad other ways: through narrative structure, poetic technique, genre transformation and reinvention, temporal distortion and resistance, and, as such, continuously renovate the very question of the potential of literary style for articulations of queerness. Just as significantly, these works and the ways of reading them I have gestured toward outline the multiple and capacious styles of queer literary criticism, styles that enable a reader to turn, again and again, to the same short poem and read its queernesses differently each time, queer styles that advocate improvisation, openness, renegotiation, and, above all, a willingness to be wrong. While there are many modalities of queer studies deserving of criticism, at its best it stands to be corrected, open to polyamorous dialogue and sensuous provocation, it aspires to participate in criticism as *Daisy Miller* might but *Winterbourne* never would; that is, it aspires to dance. In alliance with the inversions of queer style, then, permit me to end with where I could have begun, with an epigraph from Prince, who has taught us this all along: "Somebody say dance (dance), music (music), sex (sex), romance (romance). Everybody say dance (dance), music (music), sex (sex), romance (romance)."³⁷

Notes

- 1 Gertrude Stein, "Susie Asado," in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage, 1990), 549.
- 2 Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?," in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, special issue *Queer Inhumanisms*, ed. Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, vol. 21, nos. 2–3 (2015): 183–207.
- 3 Gertrude Stein, "Composition as Explanation," in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage, 1990), 511.
- 4 Gertrude Stein, "Preciosilla," in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage, 1990), 550.
- 5 Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," in *Moments of Being* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985), 70.
- 6 Virginia Woolf, "Kew Gardens," in *Monday or Tuesday* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), 55.
- 7 Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or The Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 6.
- 8 See Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
- 9 Ariella Azoulay, "Potential History: Thinking through Violence," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 39, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 548–74.
- 10 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xxiii; Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
- 11 Jordan Alexander Stein, "The Blithedale Romance's Queer Style," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* vol. 55, nos. 3–4 (Winter–Spring 2009): 211–36.
- 12 Willa Cather, "Paul's Case," *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, 7th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 234. On Cather see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others," *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 88, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 53–72; Jonathan Goldberg, *Willa Cather and Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); and Michael Trask, *Cruising Modernism: Class and Sexuality in American Literature and Social Thought* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003). In addition to Jordan Stein and Coviello cited above, on Nathaniel Hawthorne, see Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, And Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and Elizabeth Freeman, *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
- 13 Djuna Barnes, *Ladies Almanack* (Windsor Locks, CT: Martino Publishing, 2016), 84.
- 14 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 6. Also see Carla Kaplan, "The Erotics of Talk: 'That Oldest Human Longing' in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *American Literature* vol. 67, no. 1 (March 1995): 115–42.

- 15 See Judith Butler, "Marxism and the Merely Cultural," *New Left Review* vol. 227, no. 1 (January–February 1998): 33–44.
- 16 See Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); and Sandra Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). For the two field-changing collections on blackness and queer studies see E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) and E. Patrick Johnson, ed., *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 17 Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 3.
- 18 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 44.
- 19 See Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 156.
- 20 Roderick Ferguson, "Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality," *Social Text* vol. 23, no. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2005): 84–100.
- 21 Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* vol. 3, no. 4 (1997): 437–65.
- 22 See David Eng, "The End(s) of Race," *PMLA* vol. 123, no. 5, Special Topic: Comparative Racialization (October 2008): 1479–93.
- 23 Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Prose*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Pelligrini, 1996), 134.
- 24 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: The Original 1855 Edition* (New York: Dover, 2007), 27.
- 25 This is akin to what Christina Sharpe describes as "the intimacy of violence" in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 26 Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer*, 17.
- 27 Mark Rifkin, *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
- 28 Stephen Crane, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," in *The Great Works of Stephen Crane*, ed. James B. Covert (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 313. All subsequent references cited parenthetically in text.
- 29 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, [1972] 1980), 186.
- 30 Kevin Ohi, *Henry James and the Queerness of Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
- 31 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 636; *The Wings of the Dove* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 533; *The Bostonians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 435.

- 32 Henry James, *Daisy Miller* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 88.
- 33 José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 65, 81.
- 34 Stein, "Susie Asado," 549.
- 35 See Michelle Heffner Hayes, *Flamenco: Conflicting Histories of the Dance* (New York: McFarland, 2009), 53.
- 36 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 37 Prince, "D.S.M.R." 1999 (Warner Bros. Records, 1982).