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Normality and queerness in gay fiction

In 1955 the British journalist and playwright Peter Wildeblood explained in *Against the Law*, an *apologia pro vita sua* he wrote after serving a prison sentence in HM Prison Wormwood Scrubs for homosexual offences, that society should tolerate good homosexuals like himself, but not 'the pathetically flamboyant pansy with the flapping wrists ... corrupters of youth, not even the effeminate creatures who love to make an exhibition of themselves'.[1] Wildeblood's argument for tolerance works by opposing a notion of decent homosexuality, which he believes should be legitimized, to demonized constructions of homosexuality – the elderly predator, the effeminate queen – from which he distances himself. This kind of opposition is precisely the kind of gesture challenged by 'queer' theory and activism.

Although 'queer' became popular as a category in American lesbian and gay politics and scholarship in the early 1990s, the conflicts the term addressed have a long history in lesbian and gay culture. Formerly a term of abuse, 'queer' began to be used by lesbians and gay men to describe themselves. Used as a self-description, queer re-emphasized the dissident and subversive potential of gay and lesbian identities, and embraced elements of sexual culture, such as drag, fetishism, sadomasochism and cruising, which mainstream lesbian and gay politics were seen as disavowing.

In the United States, the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s aimed to present lesbians and gay men as decent, well-dressed and professionally respectable citizens in order to make political progress. Groups like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis believed that they needed 'to accommodate themselves to a society that excoriated homosexual behavior', and 'impressed upon their gay constituency the need to adjust to normative standards of proper behavior'.[2] Yet these organizations were often challenged by more militant gay men and women who 'insisted that society had to do the adjusting', and who vocally criticized the movement leadership for attempting to enforce gender conformity.[3] Organizers of demonstrations in this period often insisted on strict dress codes: participants

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were required to dress in conservative clothing perceived as appropriate to their gender, dresses for women, suit and tie for men.[4]

The gay liberation movement of the 1970s, while reacting against the anodyne image of the homophile movement, was divided between those who thought gay activism should work pragmatically to achieve particular goals, and those who saw homosexuality as valuable in that it radically questioned the social structure and worked against strictures of gender conformity and the privileging of the monogamous couple.[5] Debates were waged, and continue to be waged, not only about what lesbian and gay culture consists of, but also about how this culture should present itself. In 1980 Edmund White described tensions between the politics of normality and the politics of queerness in gay politics. White called the 'political choice' between assimilation and radicalism 'a central disagreement ... a question of principles as much as tactics'. Assimilationists, whom White considered the 'majority', believe 'that most gays are essentially like straights save for the seemingly disturbing but actually neutral matter of affectional preference ... Gay subculture ... is merely defensive, a ghetto created by prejudice and likely to dissolve once gays are integrated into the mainstream.' (The views White deftly outlines found full expression in two jeremiads of the 1990s, Bruce Bawer's *A Place at the Table* and Andrew Sullivan's *Virtually Normal*, both of which rather too neatly demonstrate how the affirmation of normality can also involve the repudiation of queerness. Sullivan and Bawer seem almost to have been invented by the queers they don't want to dine with.[6]) On the other hand, White claimed, 'Radical gays deplore almost everything about this approach. As a strategy, it is dangerously wrong.' Whereas assimilationists, by insisting on the virtual normality of lesbian and gay identities, worked 'at the price of disowning the more bizarre elements in the gay community', radicals 'might say we are only as strong as our most exposed flank ... It does no good to disown questionable elements in gay life; we must defend them.' According to White, 'radicals have no desire to see gays normalized and turned into useful members of the system as it now exists. They believe that gays can serve as a vanguard of a liberation movement that might transform American society into something better, more humane, more equitable, less repressed.'[7]

The AIDS epidemic gave new urgency to these debates, and activism began to challenge assimilationist lesbian and gay politics more aggressively. In March 1990 the activist group 'Queer Nation' was founded in New York. Queer Nation grew out of ACT UP (the Aids Coalition To Unleash Power), the radical, wonderfully effective and theatrical protest organization formed in 1987 with the specific aim of raising awareness of AIDS and challenging homophobia and government inaction.[8] Queer Nation continued ACT UP's

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agenda of fighting heteronormativity and homophobia, but also challenged the affirmation of normative gay and lesbian identities at the expense of other, more troubling affiliations such as S/M or transgender. Queer political activism insisted on the importance of a coalition of oppositional and unstable differences, rather than the single, reifying difference of homosexual and heterosexual. If the concepts of 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' were used to demarcate individual identities and, concomitantly, distinct groups of individuals, 'queer', a term which is intrinsically relational (opposing itself to 'normal'), worked to blur the clarity of all dividing lines, and to emphasize the strangeness and instability of sexual identities.[9]

The queer of activism quickly migrated into the academy, and the early 1990s saw a number of foundational works in the new discipline (or anti-discipline) of 'queer theory'. In 1993, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Tendencies* characterized the present as 'a QUEER time ... the moment of Queer'.[10] Queer theory forged alliances between the new pluralism of queer activism on the one hand and post-structuralist or postmodern critiques of identity on the other. Sedgwick characterized queer theory and politics as 'antiseparatist' *and* 'antiassimilationist', 'relational, and strange' (xii). Queer theory aimed to preserve the radical potential and anger of queer activism, and to avoid what it perceived as the stultifying straitjacket of lesbian and gay identities. It wanted to protest against discrimination on the basis of sexual identity, even though it was suspicious of identity categories, which, as Judith Butler claimed in her influential essay 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' (1991), 'tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression'.[11] For Sedgwick, while queer could 'denote, almost simply, same-sex object choice, lesbian or gay', the term was exciting in that it worked 'outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all', dimensions such as 'race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality' (8–9).

The term's expansiveness and ambiguity – what Michael Warner calls its 'deliberately capacious way' of suggesting 'how many ways people can find themselves at odds with straight culture'[12] – are both strengths and limitations. In his work on queer theory, Lee Edelman says that he takes 'queers' to be beings who are 'stigmatised for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates'.[13] These ways of thinking about queerness can make it difficult to see who might mobilize under the sign of queer. To be unqueer, how many such mandates do you need to comply with? To be queer, do you need to resist one, some, several or all such mandates? And how much, and how often, do you need to be stigmatized? Will it be sufficient to be at odds with the Pope, or with Evangelical pastor Rick Warren? (As the character Fritz drawls lugubriously

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in Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*, 'Eventually we're all queer.'[14] We are getting used to this.) When queer is thus defined, it is unclear just who can lay claim to, or repudiate, a queer identity. In aspiring to embrace a range of oppositional identities, 'queer' can ignore the ways in which some marginalized sexual identities and behaviours are more marginalized, and discriminated against, than others. It can also ignore the extent to which queerness is dependent on context: a monogamous gay couple might seem quaintly normal in London's Soho, but dangerously queer in rural Yorkshire.

This single, umbrella term was overdetermined and over-worked, has acquired some of the monolithic status it aimed to resist, and lost some of the subtlety of other articulations of the politics of sexuality, such as that advanced by Gayle Rubin in her 1984 essay, 'Thinking Sex'. Rubin identified what she called 'hierarchies of sexual value – religious, psychiatric and popular', which separated 'good, normal, natural, blessed' sexuality from that which was perceived as 'bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned'.[15] Rubin identified the multiple ways in which these hierarchies worked, opposing approved and proscribed behaviours and sexualities according to a set of binary oppositions (see Table 1).

Note that the opposed terms in each pairing do not necessarily exclude each other: an individual might, for instance, enjoy sex alone, in pairs *and* in groups. Rubin's schema might help you generate for yourself a tally of points showing how blessed or damned you are (though it fails to account for individuals who are not very interested in sex at all, or, say, for bisexuals, who might be both heterosexual and homosexual, or neither). Add up your blessed points, dear reader, and add up your damned, to arrive at two scores out of twelve. What you do with your test result is up to you.

Table 1

heterosexual	homosexual
married	unmarried
monogamous	promiscuous
procreative	non-procreative
non-commercial	commercial
in pairs	alone or in groups
in a relationship	casual
same-generation	cross-generational
in private	in public
no pornography	pornography
bodies only	manufactured objects
vanilla	sadomasochistic

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Whether sexual identity is conceived of as stable or mobile, this array of oppositions suggests ways in which individuals are neither wholly queer nor wholly normal. A radical politics of sexuality might be one which challenges hierarchical thinking and the stigmatizing of 'damned' sexualities, but does not require that those making these challenges should themselves identify with these damned forms. Such a politics would separate the impossibility of leading a life of virtuous normality or absolute queerness from the possibility of broadly challenging hierarchies of sexual value, regardless of the extent to which one's own identity is queer or normal, and from the further possibility of working on specific sexual agendas, such as the legal status of particular sexual acts, the recognition of bisexuality, HIV/AIDS activism, the bullying of kids perceived to be 'queer' (whether 'gay' or gender-dissonant), the rights of sex workers, or the rights of same-sex couples (immigration, inheritance, access to health care, parenting). Just as the limitations of the opposition between homosexual and heterosexual can obscure the plurality and specificity of these agendas, so too can the utopian embrace of queerness. As Leo Bersani wrote in *Homos*, 'It is not possible to be gay-affirmative, or politically effective as gays, if gayness has no specificity.'[16]

Post-Stonewall lesbian and gay fiction, while showing some affinities with queer politics and theory, is difficult to classify as either assimilationist or antiassimilationist. It depends on what books you read, and how you read them. Fiction tells stories; readers respond. 'Yes – oh, dear, yes – the novel tells a story,' as E. M. Forster has it (his campy isolation, with commas and dashes, of 'dear' gives his claim an air of worldly resignation which belies the wit and great pleasures of his own story-telling).[17] Yet stories told in the pages of published fiction (a small and privileged minority of stories) were, until the last decades of the twentieth century, only rarely stories of 'lesbians', 'gay men' or 'homosexuals'. Some of those novels which did tell lesbian stories and gay stories openly were either prosecuted (Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*) or not submitted for publication (Forster's *Maurice*, which was published posthumously). Many novels – Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, André Gide's *The Immoralist*, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, the novels of William Burroughs or John Rechy – tell inspiring stories of same-sex desire, but characters in this diverse group of books rarely experience their same-sex desire as 'ordinary'. If queer theory opposed the assertion of normative gay and lesbian identities, then it rarely needs to reproach fiction written before modern queer politics – before the politics of 'coming out' which began in 1969 shortly after the Stonewall riots[18] – for its presentation of queer normalcy. (Even Forster's Maurice, that most suburban and conventional of homosexuals, has a cross-class relationship and has to flee to some vaguely located greenwood.)

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The tension between assimilationism and queerness which characterizes gay and lesbian culture has not resulted in two stories – a story of the normal gay man or lesbian as opposed to the story of radically perverted queers – but in a plurality of stories. If you read Dennis Cooper's *The Sluts* (2004), for instance, you will find described a world of violent sex with hustlers whose clients post reviews online for other potential clients to read.[19] Characters in novels by Alan Hollinghurst, like *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988), *The Spell* (1998) or *The Line of Beauty* (2004), enjoy adventurous sex lives but are in most respects conservative rather than radical; cruising and sex in these novels are forms of entertainment, pleasurable diversions rather than acts of resistance.[20] The gay man of Hollinghurst's fiction does not confine his sex life to monogamous couplehood, but in other ways he is an establishment figure, wanting to resist the status quo only when the status quo is hostile to homosexuality.

Even those novelists who might be understood as assimilationist are involved in a process of re-making, exploring ethical situations and the difficulty of relationships rather than showing how relationships survive or fall apart to the extent that they conform to, or resist, a pre-existing set of rules or values. Consider the case of David Leavitt, a writer whose humour and irony remind me of E. M. Forster. April, the lesbian folk singer in his novel *Equal Affections* (1989), writes a song called 'Living Together', which celebrates the relationship of her young brother Danny and his lover Walter.[21] Danny and Walter, both lawyers, commute to New York from Gresham, New Jersey, and are members of the town's 'Gay Homeowner's Association' (24), which meets at the Unitarian Church and discusses how homophobia affects their lives. (Mady Kroger knows that the lady who looks at her in the supermarket is thinking, 'What a dyke' (24).) Here is how April introduces her song at gigs: 'Sometimes I think the most political thing a gay man or woman can do is to live openly with another gay man or woman' (25). And her song tells how Danny and Walter have renounced a life of bathhouses and bars for one of lace curtains and commuting:

> *After the years of the baths and the bars*
> *And the one-night stands in the backseats of cars*
> *And the nights we spent with so many different men*
> *It feels so good to come home to you again.* (24)

Leavitt juxtaposes April's song with a novelistic glimpse of Danny and Walter:

> So: what was it really like, their living together. Danny and Walter are sitting in the living room on a Sunday afternoon, their pants round their ankles, having just watched *Bigger in Texas* on the VCR. (25)

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The folksong idealizes, but Leavitt's novel shows a couple of unequal affections ('If equal affection cannot be, / Let the more loving one be me', is Leavitt's epigraph, from W.H. Auden's poem 'The More Loving One'), a couple negotiating sexual boredom. If Danny thinks that the baths and the bars are April's invention, neither of them 'having ever done more than dip his toes in the great, cold, clammy river of promiscuity' (25), his perceptions of Walter are naïve. Walter has secret plans: he wants to 'find someone else – someone fresh and young, as Danny had once been' (78). He has a further secret, a secret life (why else would he be called Walter?[22]) led on computer chatrooms, a world in which men with queer monikers – 'Hot Leather', 'Teen Slave Master', 'don, 17', 'New York Jock', 'Sweatpants' and 'Bulstrode' – arrange to meet each other, or fantasize with each other while typing with one hand (79–80, 133). Bulstrode's pseudonym suggests the world of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a world in which married life is fraught with difficulty and conflict. Another work from F.R. Leavis's 'great tradition' of fiction makes its presence felt in *Equal Affections*: Danny's mother, Louise, watches *Women in Love* on cable (presumably Ken Russell's film, scripted by Larry Kramer), and fantasizes over memories of her affair with Tommy Burns, whom she loved more passionately than her husband Nat, a computer scientist. Leavitt gently reminds us that marriage, in English fiction, is critiqued as much as it is celebrated, and his queer characters, no less than the characters of George Eliot or D.H. Lawrence, have to negotiate a world whose guidelines may be inadequate and whose forms may need to be re-created. A gay or lesbian identity is something both given and questioned, fixed and provisional, and so it is both different from and similar to a straight identity, or even a Jewish or Christian identity. Danny's father Nat is having an affair with another woman; and Louise, his mother, dying of cancer, is considering changing faith, abandoning Judaism for Catholicism. And April, who has no interest in Catholicism, has gotten pregnant using a turkey baster and sperm donated by her tall, good-looking gay friend Tom Neibauer. (Hearing this news, Danny is ready with a helpful question: 'has he had an AIDS test?' (129).) Nat, Louise, Danny and April do not form a family which exiles its queer members (if it did, not much of a family would be left), but a family involved in a complex dance (to use a metaphor from Leavitt's first collection of stories, *Family Dancing*) which demands great flexibility from the dancers.

'We're here, we're queer, get used to it,' was Queer Nation's most celebrated chant, a slogan which raises a question about the very future of queerness. If the slogan is successful, how queer will we be once our auditors have acceded to our demands? Leavitt's fiction portrays an America in the process of getting used to queerness. On 31 May 1982, *The New Yorker*

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published Leavitt's short story 'Territory' (Leavitt was only twenty; this was a remarkable debut). The magazine had begun occasionally to publish stories with gay themes in the late seventies – one notable example is Ann Beattie's brilliant story 'The Cinderella Waltz',[23] a minimalist *What Maisie Knew* in which a little girl copes admirably with a life consisting of weekdays with her mother and weekends with her father and his male lover. Leavitt's story, however, was notable for the specificity with which it described the specialized sexual culture of American gay urban communities. If anyone in 1982 were to walk thirty or so blocks south and a couple of blocks west from *The New Yorker*'s offices on Manhattan's West 43rd Street, they would have encountered the commercial gay scene of Greenwich Village, the 'West Village', centring on Christopher Street, with its bars, saunas (or 'bathhouses'), sex-shops, pornographic cinemas, S&M clubs, gay bookstores, gay restaurants, and a sexual ambience so cruisy that the street itself was a place of close encounters of the intimate kind, a place where you could depend on the kindness of strangers. In *States of Desire*, Edmund White called Greenwich Village 'the gay ghetto . . . the epitome of gay sex the world over' (265). White gave generous, intimate and explicit portraits of New York institutions like the St Mark's Baths (a gay bathhouse) and the Mine Shaft (a gay sex club), and described a milieu in which 'Sex is performed with strangers, romance is captured in brief affairs, friendship is assigned to friends. In this formula, one notices, the only stable element is friendship' (287).

This world and its formula, however, were not customarily represented in the elegant upper-middle-brow pages of *The New Yorker*, in its cartoons, attractive covers (often delightful pictures of Manhattan), its event listings, or, indeed, its writing. Neil, the 23-year-old protagonist of 'Territory', is aware of the erotic potential of 'the scene', but thinks of 'bathhouses and back rooms, enemas and poppers, wordless sex in alleyways' as 'dangers' to be avoided, dangers nevertheless identified for the prestigious magazine's readers.[24] Neil and his lover Wayne visit Neil's mother in her comfortable Northern Californian home, with its swimming pool and its obligatory shirtless and nameless Chicano gardener, just right for drooling over while catching rays. Wayne is Neil's 'lover of ten months and the only person he has ever imagined he could spend his life with' (4), and this is the first time Neil has brought a lover home. Although the gay scene is mentioned, the territory of Leavitt's story is that of domesticity and coupledom.

Leavitt's story, however, does not innocently or unwittingly disparage the erotic territory explored so boldly by gay writers of the 1970s in works such as Larry Kramer's prurient and censorious satire *Faggots*, or Andrew Holleran's rapturous but melancholy *Dancer from the Dance*, two novels

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published in 1978. Instead, it signals an awareness of where it stands in relation to an urban gay commercial scene and posits that relationship in generational terms. Homosexualities inhabit many 'territories', and these territories relate to each other knowingly, sometimes pleasurably, sometimes anxiously. Four years earlier, when Neil was nineteen, he attended a Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco. Travelling to the city by train the previous evening, he meets Luis, 'a dark-skinned man wearing bluejeans and a leather jacket', a man with a 'thick mustache' (15); he intends to spend only a night with Luis, but this night grows into a year. Luis accompanies Neil to the parade, and in the morning light he 'looked older ... more likely to carry diseases' (15). Neil thinks to himself that 'Luis possessed the peculiar combination of hypermasculinity and effeminacy which exemplifies faggotry' (16). On the parade they meet Neil's mother, who is supporting the Parade as president (natch) of the 'Coalition of Parents and Gays' (16). Neil hopes Mom won't meet his butch but also femme dark faggot friend, and when Luis introduces himself and shakes Mrs Campbell's hand, 'wanted to warn his mother to wash it, warned himself to check with a V. D. clinic first thing Monday' (17). The gap between Neil and Luis can be read in many ways. Is this liberal WASP embarrassed by being linked with Latin Luis, whom he would more comfortably think of as a gardener than a lover? Is the sexually timid youngster made anxious by the older man's sexual experiences, warned against in the pamphlets his well-intentioned mother would distribute to the leather- and denim-clad patrons of San Francisco's 'Bulldog Baths' and 'Liberty Baths' (8)? (According to Randy Shilts, the Bulldog Baths was the 'largest gay bathhouse in the world', and 'something of a legend in sexual circles'.[25] The Bulldog Baths and the Liberty Baths, along with San Francisco's twelve other gay bathhouses, were all closed by law in 1984 in response to the AIDS epidemic.[26] In New York, health officials closed the Mine Shaft and St Mark's Baths late in 1985.[27])

For any reader familiar with American gay culture at the time this story was published, however, Neil's discomfort with Luis would be all too clearly legible. Neil is embarrassed by being seen with a 'clone' – a man adopting a rigid gay style made up of moustache, toned body and a recognizable sexual uniform, the staples of which were blue jeans, tight t-shirts or plaid flannel shirts and the leather jacket. The clone was, among other things, one of the recognizable – not 'closeted' – faces of gayness, which Neil was supposedly marching to celebrate. But Neil, we are told, 'was never proud', and is ashamed of his Luis, whom he takes 'a year to dump' (17).

Neil and Wayne want a life in which they can move from New York to the suburbs and back, cross boundary lines, move between territories. In the 1970s, the erotic city was often seen as antithetical to the suburbs, small

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towns and the country; the emerald city was where one headed to escape these intolerant spaces. Andrew Holleran opens *Dancer from the Dance* with two 'circuit queens' discussing, in an epistolary exchange, the possibility of gay fiction. 'Gay life fascinates you', one writes, 'only because it is the life you were condemned to live. But if you were a family man going home on the 5:43 to Chappaqua, I don't think you'd want to read about men who suck each others wee-wees!'[28] Neil is embarrassed by such men precisely because his mother has read about them and has TMI (too much information) about what they do; he shudders when he recalls his 'brief and lamentable' experience of the dangers of the gay urban scene, he 'winced at the thought that she knew all his sexual secrets' (8). A mother who accepts her son's homosexuality might also be a mother who has some influence over his adult sexual life. To Wayne's criticism that 'You have this great mother, and all you do is complain. I know people whose mothers have disowned them', Neil replies that 'Guilt goes with the territory' (26). The dream of gay liberation, to remake human relationships without reference to prior heterosexual models, founders in Leavitt's story not because of intolerance, but because of an acceptance which comes with strings attached. The freedom and melancholy of desire give way to the constrictions and bonds of love.

Whereas the characters of Leavitt's fiction avoid what they think of as 'the late-night, cigarette-reeking prowl of the city', a 'rank garden . . . with its brief yet intense gratifications' (*Equal Affections*, 109), Edmund White's writing – both his fiction and his non-fiction – has always celebrated sex, and has never restricted sex to the confines of a relationship. 'We thought having sex was a positive good, the more the better', the narrator of *The Farewell Symphony* (1997) tells us, recalling his life in the 1970s. 'We wanted sexual friends, loving comrades, multiple husbands in a whole polyandry of desire. Exclusivity was a form of death – worse, old hat.'[29] If White celebrates the 1970s, he also imagines and designs the new hats required to chart the ethical and emotional territory of AIDS with great sensitivity. In 1977 *The Joy of Gay Sex*, which White co-wrote with his therapist Charles Silverstein, claimed that 'Gay couples are in an advantageous position for devising new relationships that truly suit their needs.'[30] Living with HIV and AIDS intensifies the need to devise new relationships, just as it makes this devising more difficult.

In White's *The Married Man*, the central character, Austin, a 49-year-old American writer living in Paris, is not married. It is 1989, and Austin is HIV-positive and has already lost several friends to AIDS. Austin meets Julien – the eponymous 'married man' – a young Frenchman who has separated from his wife and is about to be divorced. The title is a tease, making us ask whether Austin too is 'married' in any way. Meeting Julien and forming a relationship with him are processes which throw ethical questions in Austin's

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way, questions which are not answered in existing statute books, etiquette guides or even by the precedent of common practice. When, for instance, should Austin let Julien know of his HIV status? Before they form a relationship? (But how do we know when a relationship is formed?) Before they have sex? (If one is having 'safe' or 'safer' sex, does one need to tell every sexual partner one's serostatus?) What obligations does Austin have towards his ex, Peter, who lives in New York but whom Austin had promised 'he'd take care of . . . if he ever came down with AIDS'?[31] Should Austin also explain this prior obligation, or commitment, before getting involved with Julien?

White's novel doesn't give us any clear answers to these questions. Rather it shows its characters making up the rules as they go along: the rules are provisional, improvised, pragmatic, negotiable. Austin hadn't considered the possibility of Julien himself being positive: how could a 'married man' come into contact with a 'gay' virus, a 'gay' disease'? But a doctor, concerned by some of Julien's health problems, angers Julien by suggesting that he should be tested. Julien tests positive, and his symptoms – some unusually persistent acne, a stubborn cough, a susceptibility to flu, a wart on his penis that won't go away – suggest that he may have been positive for some time. Soon Austin, seropositive but asymptomatic, a 'slow progresser', finds himself with a partner and an ex both suffering from AIDS. Austin hopes that Julien and Peter will not be jealous of each other, will allow him to give them both his care and affection.

Austin's hopes are dashed when Peter and Julien fall out with each other in Mexico, where the three men are holidaying together. Regarding himself as 'a product of the unpossessive 1970s', Austin had 'always thought gay men shouldn't pair off in little monogamous units' (100). So he is shocked to find that Peter and Julien's mutual antagonism forces him to make a choice between them. Peter expresses the situation harshly, in terms Austin objects to. When he tells Peter that 'one of you has to compromise and adjust a bit', Peter comes back: 'So it should be *me*, I guess, who adjusts . . . since he's your boyfriend and he's *schtupping* you' (152). Peter's 'I guess' is significant, as there do seem to be some rules of priority, but the three men can't agree on them. Just as Leavitt portrays generational differences in attitudes towards promiscuity, White contrasts the older Austin's commitment to open relationships with the two younger men's views on emotional commitment within relationships. Austin feels that the situation is so difficult because Julien 'had bad, heterosexual values. As the new wife he, Julien, assumed he had the right to insist that Austin never talk to the ex-wife, Peter, much less shower the castoff with attentions and presents. Only heterosexuals could be so cruel; among male homosexuals friendships ruled supreme' (170–1). Yet what authority can Austin appeal to, in order to identify and evaluate homosexual

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and heterosexual values, or to learn what to do if one's multiple husbands or wives do not get along with one another? The 'polyandry of desire' White celebrates in *The Farewell Symphony* proves difficult to realize in *The Married Man*.

Austin reaches for an identity – the idea of a homosexual identity – to help him to evaluate the situation, but *The Married Man* (like queer theory) disrupts attempts to connect identity with values. Questions such as whether gay couples should holiday with one or more exes, or how we care for those who are ill, are questions fiction can pose with great eloquence, as fiction enables the reader to inhabit the situation. And fiction can be valuable not because it answers such questions, but because it leaves them as problems for the reader. There are no consensual answers; this is the way we live now.

If Austin's notions of appropriate gay or homosexual values are challenged by the demands of caring for two loved ones with AIDS, he doesn't consider that he can turn to queer theory for any answers. Queer theory has an unflattering cameo role in the novel. In 1990 Austin returns to the United States to take up a position teaching the history of French furniture at Brown University. His reunion with his *patria* is less than joyful. He finds himself at odds with the values enforced by his employing institution. Some of Austin's female students regard his views on women and history as offensive (131). Another student, hoping to learn about the semiotics of furniture – how to 'deconstruct' a chair or two – drops Austin's course when he learns that Austin is more interested in how furniture is *constructed* (161). Austin's absence from the United States during the 1980s has made him unaware of political and theoretical developments in the American academy. One of Austin's colleagues explains that the most harmful theory is that which

> touches on feminism or queer theory.'
>
> 'I never needed to *theorize* about being queer,' Austin said, batting his eyes.
>
> 'Don't for a moment imagine that the fact you actually are queer gives you a leg up . . . the idea that their professor is a sexually active being amounts to an admission of rape or at best sexual harassment.' (162)

Austin's rebuttal might be taken as the glib remark of someone who embodies the kind of unreconstructed male gay identity queer theory set out to critique, and Austin's (presumably straight) friend's concurrence seems just as unreconstructed. But to dismiss this dismissal is to miss a serious point White is making. Queer theory regards queer as subversive of authority, but here it is equated with academic authority, an authority which Austin's queer or gay *life* subverts. Whereas queer theory is often understood as celebrating the disturbing power of sexuality to undo identity, this fictional exchange posits 'queer' as something so *theoretical* that it evades the actual sexed and

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sexual body, so that it is hostile to, firstly, a man identifying as 'gay' but not seeing his gayness through the enabling lens of queer theory, and, secondly, an older gay man with a sex life. A similar complaint has been made in a more academic context by Leo Bersani, in his book *Homos*, where he discusses a process he calls 'de-gaying gayness'. 'Queer', Bersani notes, 'repeats, with pride, a pejorative straight word for homosexual even as it unloads the term's homosexual referent . . . For oppressed groups to accept the queer label is to identify themselves as being actively at odds with a male-dominated, white, capitalistic, heterosexist culture . . . This generous definition puts all resisters in the same queer bag – a universalizing move I appreciate but that fails to specify the sexual distinctiveness of the resistance.'[32] More recently Bersani has written that 'Queer intellectuals are curiously reticent about the sexuality they claim to celebrate.'[33]

Bersani does not say so in quite so many words, but he suggests that part of the reason 'queer' has been so successful within the domain of literary studies is that its amorphous radicalism, its deconstructive deferral or questioning of actual sexual identities, enable one to keep one's eyes averted from the shaming and shameful spectacle of gay men having sex. And while there is a large body of literary writing – gay fiction since the 1970s – in which men are represented as having sex with each other, queer theory has paid this writing surprisingly little attention.

In *The Married Man*, Austin behaves in ways which show little respect for the differences between 'gay' and 'queer'. He has lots of sex with men, not only with his partners but also with men he meets cruising. He and his French lover Julien suffer from the absence of legal recognition of gay relationships: they are seriously inconvenienced because Julien has no rights to reside in the US as Austin's partner, and has no entitlement to medication under Austin's health insurance policy. How retrograde, unchic and unqueer of Austin to think of himself as possessing a 'gay identity' (rather than seeing his queerness as subversive of identity), and to be so normatively masculine as to be bored by drag, even though he enjoys camp telephone calls with his younger friend Gregg, the Daughter who chides Mother Austin as an 'old Stonewaller' and a 'shameless hussy' (47). On the other hand, Austin's cruising, his casual sex with a variety of partners and his *penchant* for sadomasochism all seem to make him queer enough. Austin seems unaware that some queer theory has explained that the acceptability and legitimization of same-sex partnership necessarily accompanies the demonization and legal mistreatment of those who like more casual sex. (Michael Warner, in discussing the 'ethics of queer life', attacks marriage as 'the central legitimating institution by which the state regulates and permeates people's most intimate lives'.[34]) Austin mothers, looks after, shelters and enables his lover Julien and his ex-lover

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Peter, and takes dearly beloved basset hound Ajax for walks, all of which seem to make him regressively complicit with family values (not heterosexual or homosexual values) such as mothering, caring, sharing and planning for the future – even though Julien and Peter both die. (Ajax and Austin live.)

Since the 1990s, the term 'queer' has come more and more to be used just as a synonym for gay, and has increasingly been used in connection with male gays rather than lesbians. And just as the term has lost its radical edge, lesbian and gay politics, particularly in the United States, have become increasingly preoccupied with questions of partnership and marriage. *The Married Man*, by showing how a 'subculture-oriented gay' (Bruce Bawer's term[35]) is disadvantaged by the absence of recognition of gay partnerships, also suggests ways in which debates around partnership do not need to conceive of marriage as a lifelong, monogamous or exclusive relationship. Rubin, in 'Thinking Sex', advanced the concept of 'benign sexual variation',[36] but it has proved difficult for lesbian and gay culture to accommodate both those gay men and lesbians who want to form long-term relationships, or to have children, and those who do not want their sexuality to be confined to such relationships, or to form these relationships. I wonder, however, if the opposition between the family and queerness can be sustained. As families get used to queers, queers find they are getting used to the queerness of family.

NOTES

1. Peter Wildeblood, *Against the Law* (1955; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 13. For a full and stimulating account of the Montagu trials, which imposed prison sentences on Wildeblood, Michael Pitt-Rivers and Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, see Patrick Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996).
2. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 108–9.
3. Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 108. For accounts of dissent within lesbian and gay communities, see D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 114.
4. Duberman, *Stonewall*, 111–12.
5. For accounts of these tensions within gay liberation, see Duberman, *Stonewall*, 215–80, and Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971; London: Allen Lane, 1974), 109–51.
6. Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality* (New York: Knopf, 1995). For a remarkably lucid account of gay conservatism of the 1990s, see Paul Robinson, *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
7. Edmund White, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (New York: Dutton, 1980), 295–6. Further references are given in parentheses.

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8. An excellent account of ACT UP is given in Douglas Crimp, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1990).
9. See Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) for a lucid discussion of queer theory and politics.
10. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), x–xi. Further references are given in parentheses.
11. Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Subordination', in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13–14.
12. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 38.
13. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 17.
14. Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939; London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), 296.
15. Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin, eds., *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.
16. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 61.
17. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), 45.
18. See Duberman, *Stonewall*, and David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2004).
19. Dennis Cooper, *The Sluts* (2004; New York: Carroll and Graf, 2005).
20. Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (London: Penguin, 1988), *The Spell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004).
21. David Leavitt, *Equal Affections* (London: Penguin, 1989), 24. Further references are given in parentheses.
22. *My Secret Life* is the title of an eleven-volume work of frank (gay, straight and other) pornographic memoirs written by 'Walter' and published in a private edition over a number of years in the 1880s and 1890s. For many years commercial publication of *My Secret Life* was banned; it is now available in a cheap edition from Wordsworth Classics.
23. Ann Beattie, 'The Cinderella Waltz', *The New Yorker* (29 January 1979).
24. David Leavitt, 'Territory', *Family Dancing* (1984; London: Penguin, 1986), 8. Further references are given in parentheses.
25. Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1987), 23.
26. John Brigham, 'Sexual Entitlement: Rights and AIDS, the Early Years', *Law & Policy*, 16:3 (1994), 256.
27. Joyce Purnick, 'City Shuts a Bathhouse as Site of "Unsafe Sex"', *The New York Times* (7 December 1985).
28. Andrew Holleran, *Dancer from the Dance* (1978; New York: Plume, 1986), 14.
29. Edmund White, *The Farewell Symphony* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 246–7.
30. Charles Silverstein and Edmund White, *The Joy of Gay Sex* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 115.
31. Edmund White, *The Married Man* (2000; London: Vintage, 2001), 10. Further references are given in parentheses.
32. Bersani, *Homos*, 5, 71.

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33. Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 32.
34. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 96.
35. Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, 35.
36. Rubin, 'Thinking Sex', 15.

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