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"FRANTIC FUN AND HIGH SPIRITS": NAVIGATING THE URBAN OBSCENE IN PETER ACKROYD'S *QUEER CITY*

Abstract

An atmosphere of uneasy reservation still pervades debates concerning sexualities and gender identities that do not fall in line with social norms and codes of propriety. Imagining a subject outside the discourse of heterosexuality remains an act fraught with incertitude, suspicion, and even fear: how does one write a narrative that runs counter to the self-preservation of society? How does one describe performativities and ways of being apparently inimical to the propagation of life itself? Long regarded through the lens of obscenity and vice, queerness is still not freed from the shackles of its uncertain past. There are few solid concepts to ground enquiries into the matter, and modern notions can scarcely articulate queer bodies extemporaneously, without investigating the convolutions of each moment in time. Peter Ackroyd adds another dimension to his research: that of geography, the space of London, the city wherein paradox is met with paradox, harbouring its own visions of oddness, eccentricity and deviant desire. This paper strives to analyse the Ackroydian framing of gay London, its history and its language, aiming to show how his perceptions contribute to the discussion surrounding this increasingly relevant topic. I bring up the framing of a dual London, a city of ribaldry and obscenity, through various interpretive frames, from queer theory, philosophy and sociology, to the history of pornography, in order to support my claim that Ackroyd's work recasts London as more than the capital of Empire: a space where the obscene is granted its own ontology. Relying on literature, language and various cultural institutions, this essay delves into the porous, interdisciplinary nature of queerness as envisioned by the British author.

Keywords: queer, embodiment, performativity, history, London

Obscenity and Queerness: The Preliminaries

Resorting to dictionaries to make sense of such concepts as profanity and obscenity is, according to Adams (2016: 20) a futile pursuit. According to the author, they are purposely vague, eschewing "one-to-one correspondences;" they are essentially context-dependent, never rooted in any long-lasting fixity. It is our task as language users to "negotiate what counts as profanity or obscenity" if we are to "maximize expressiveness and minimize social alarm" (Adams, 20). Against dictionary definitions of obscenity as those items which are "offensively indecent" or otherwise "horrible, offensive, or morally repugnant," Adams draws a hypothetical spectrum along which indecency and obscenity are both milestones to be reached and notions meant to confuse each-other, evincing a great degree of overlap (Adams, 26). Obscenity, furthermore, as any other facet of language, is subject to diachronic change and social emplotment. In this vein, vulgar language was used as a marker of social class in early modern times, ubiquitous in the speech of workers and purportedly absent in the wealthier strata of society (Adams, 42).

Both the "offensively indecent" and the "morally repugnant" are present in Ackroyd's account of queer history. But despite the deleterious silence that would threaten it, Ackroyd asserts that it has

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"never stopped talking" (Ackroyd, 2018: C1). He gives the Latin name for it, the "*peccatum illud horribile, inter christianos non nominandum*," the "horrible crime not to be named among Christians." His analysis of related concepts, all equally vague, support his idea of a fluid nature of (homo)sexuality. Of sodomy, that "catch-all term that could mean anything or everything," he ascribes a kind of universal applicability, valid, ever since the eleventh century, for "heretics and adulterers, blasphemers and idolaters and rebels," or any individual who, by and large, transgressed against social norms. Similar names for homosexual men included, in the eighteenth century, "indorsers," "backgammon players," "gentlemen of the back door," all of which are sufficiently suggestive on their own. The obscenity of the sexual acts themselves are euphemised and made a subject for laughter and jibes, but they indicate the fundamentally unspeakable actions occurring privately—or not so privately, as Ackroyd writes—between persons of the same sex.

The nineteenth century saw an increase in euphemisms such as "earnest," "musical," "theatrical;" the twentieth century invented terms that are, perhaps, more readable: "pansy," "nancy boy," "pervert," "bone-smoker:" These are just a few. Ackroyd's interpretation of the rich lexical field surrounding the concept of homosexuality shows the imaginary power at work behind some of the more creative terminologies: heterosexual curiosity works alongside heterosexual repulsion, and the two appear eminently interconnected. The means for discourse are there; the subject has never been quenched. Where society changes, language follows suit, and nowhere is this clearer than in the diachrony of English and its rich repository of words relating to non-heterosexual attraction(s). There are notions which still ring familiar—sodomy, after all, is still a bugbear influencing discourse—and perhaps to say of a man or a woman that they are sodomites is less shockingly offensive than other more distasteful expletives, but obscenity, in its vagueness, grants sufficient leeway for us to decide what is obscene on a case-by-case basis. Ackroyd proffers just some of the more common names, creating a history that illustrates the linguistic and cognitive flexibility behind them. The interest in the absolutely *verboten* appears to withstand the whims of history, and with the elusive figure of the homosexual, each individual age had to produce its own ways to conceptualise, delineate, ostracise and deride, ranging from the religious to the downright salacious, in order to frame the Other. Where mismatched embodiments manifest—effeminate men, masculine women, or any deviation between the two poles—language comes to the fore to name them. Ackroyd himself notes that all these linguistic artifices rise and fall in their specific time, varying in degrees of obscenity.

"Queer's a queer word," write Bennett and Royle (2005: 187). To be queer is to be well within the realm of the "odd, singular, quaint," to move in spheres where "ideas of strangeness, sickness and homosexuality" abide. The connection between oddness and homosexuality, weirdness and same-sex attraction, is what amounts to the "perceived queerness of queers" as a "self-defining and identifiable group" pitted against a largely heterosexual society championing heteronormative ideals (Bennett and Royle, 2005: 188). The authors are not blind to efforts to reappropriate/reclaim the word within a lexical domain populated by the "arguably effete term 'gay' " and the "cheerless 'homosexual' " queerness is reframed through "pride and celebratory self-assertion" as well as "singularity and difference" against an overwhelming social pressure that seeks to quell it. Historically, there have been many queer authors, from "Marlowe, Shakespeare, the debauchee Lord Rochester," to later writers expounding upon the "experience of homosexual desire," such as Algernon Swinburne and Oscar Wilde (Bennett and Royle, 2005: 189). What is more, queerness can be adopted as a reading mechanism: "queering the narrative," the authors suggest, is "thinking through its linguistic and conceptual slippages" inside the discourse of "otherwise bland, monolithic certainties of heterosexuality" (Bennett and Royle, 2005: 191). Queerness is wherever "slippages" exist: wherever hints at something that defies the norms of straight stability can be discovered. Time, a driving force in human life, shapes existence fundamentally: Freeman (2010: 3) asserts that time binds. What is meant by binding is the transformation of "naked flesh" into "socially meaningful embodiment." The principle is chrononormativity: the regulation and constraint of human lives in temporally delineated chunks, "schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches," by those who hold power. It would seem that chrononormativity is in collusion with heteronormativity, in that society uses time in order to ensure its own continuation through cycles of "reproduction, childrearing, and death" (Freeman, 2010: 4). If heteronormativity is the modus operandi of self-preserving societies, chrononormativity buttresses heteronormativity's directives: life must always go on, but in order for life to have any semblance of cohesion or internal logic, it must be divided and neatly arranged, slotted into beginnings and conclusions; any

temporal deviations—and, by extension, sexual—must be averted for fear of losing stability and meaning. Preordained rhythms become a target of queer readings, and the highly ritualised strictures of biology and social life are dismantled, reduced from their status of immutable and intangible fixity. Marriage, for example, the courtship mechanisms preceding it, and the subsequent creature comforts of projected domesticity engender the cyclicality of reproduction, a prime ground for such interventions. If gender is toyed with, if sexual norms are laid bare and inverted and subverted, then so too are the temporal monoliths that lend shape to ontological stability. The world seen through this lens no longer abides the panopticon's imperatives, crowning itself as transgression. Gender and sexuality are the point of origin, the articulatory site where chinks and fissures in discourse are sought, exploited. This type of reading goes beyond the written word, stretching out into the performative domain of lived experience. It is a strategy that does not limit itself to textual exegesis; rather, it looks for signifiers that feign immutability, bent on proving them wrong.   Queer temporalities, closely linked with modernity, attempt to jolt these reliable rhythms and the usual safety of self-perpetuating cycles, insisting upon a "fractured time," which Freeman claims is different from the "highly gendered, sacred time of antebellum domesticity." Queer readings are steeped in "interruptive archaisms" and "flickering signs," as per Freeman, that reveal the socially constructed dimensions of temporality.

Ackroyd reads the word "queer" in a similar way: it "signifies defiance and a refusal to use Karl-Maria Benkert's clinical neologism" (Ackroyd, 2018: C1). Homosexual, with its dry, medical tones, is a term Ackroyd uses just as much as queer, despite some differences. Indeed, queer can also cover notions of gendered transgression: being queer can mean, among other things, "being beyond gender," identifying in ways opposite to one's gender assigned at birth. His statement that "queer people stream out of space and time" reflects Freeman's ideas of homosexuality being a wrench thrown into the works of heteronormative dicta. Reproductive needs and the greater good cast aside, non-heterosexuals may pursue pleasure –furtively, and in many historical cases, illicitly— for the sake of pleasure. Their ontology, freed from the burdening imperatives of procreation and marriage, allows them to function in ways that run counter to those endowed with systemic power. "The queerer the better," Ackroyd asserts. London's Roman beginnings, for example, describe a dubious sexuality, engendered between "master and slave," between "man and boy." Political underpinnings are easily observable in this sexual exchange. The author remarks that the non-penetrative partner was bereft of political agency, and that only penetrative partner held power in society. The same goes for conquered warriors, whose fate it was to be raped at the hands of the Romans. Between two men of the same social status there could be no same-sex love, for it would have been considered "undesirable and worthy of censure," as it was unproductive and unsupportive of the continuation of the city state and its members. However, Ackroyd claims that censure could not in any way wipe out rampant desire, and that the infamies of homosexual intercourse were still carried out in secret, in lupanaria, brothels and bathhouses. Essentially, to examine its social functions is to perform a double reading: there is ritualistic homosexuality, performed as an exercise of social power, and there is, for the lack of a better term, homosexuality proper, manifested in physical union wherever attraction arises between individuals of the same sex, irrespective of their roles in society.

These overlapping synchronies are of prime interest to the historian of sexuality, and Ackroyd's contrastive analysis makes a solid point: it is a desire both ancient and modern, manifesting itself despite purported prohibition. Paradoxically, discussing historian Minucius Felix's grim observation that "homosexuality was 'the Roman religion,' " the author states that it must have been "an admirable activity [...] no doubt as common in London as in Rome" (Ackroyd, 2018: C2). The pillared Hermes, with his visibly turgid member, was a tell-tale sign of Roman London's affinity for all things phallocentric; rather humorously, Ackroyd blames the "modesty of classicists" for ignoring just how important a cultural object the penis was in pre-Anglo-Saxon times. The image is fairly consistent: deviant or not, homosexuality found ways to permeate all social strata, itself no more a modern invention than the city of London itself, with its sprawling geography, harbouring sexualities of all kinds, visibly or invisibly.

Obscene Bodies, Transgressive Selves

Turner (2008: 17) firmly establishes the interdependence of bodies and needs. "Impairment, malfunction and displeasure" arise wherever needs are ignored, but what of the needs that strike one as "destructive and anti-social?" What of "self-flagellation, homosexual rape, torture, plunder and pillage," around which philosophy has constructed distinctions: between "good and bad pleasures, between real and false needs?" There is a misunderstanding between needs and desires, Turner opines. Need can be satisfied, whereas desire, being "its own object," cannot (Turner, 2008:18). The aversion to sexuality within Christian asceticism is well-known; the threat of pleasure seeking to undermine Christianity's mechanisms of control pushed men of the faith away from the sexual dangers present in the "profane world of everyday society" (Turner 19). The body was no longer a locus for sin, but "its very cause." Later on, within industrial capitalist society, a world of "bipolar oppositions" between "body and soul, the body and mind, matter and spirit, desire and reason," new conflicts are shaped: "asocial passions" are to be subdued by spirit; certain whims are to be abandoned for greater social integrity (Turner, 2008: 25). Modern theories of sexual liberation, erstwhile tools against such grossly articulated oppression, ignore the commodification of sex. The case of pornography is telling, conflictual: on the one hand, it leads to the "commercialization of sexual relationships;" on the other, it urges a "critical reflection of power and dominance" (Turner 27). Each coin, then, has its flip side, and every attempt to solve the dialectic of desire and restraint only produces further dialectics.

Making a case against framing pornography as "aesthetic failure" and "psychological immaturity," Hunter et al. (1993: 36) bring to light pornography's "more local, technical and contingent" origins removed from "some great dialectic between fantasy and experience." There are similarities, the authors write, between the rise of pornography as a genre and the institution of spiritual confession. Enmeshed within a field of "regulated practices, controlled techniques, and constrained discourses," confession presupposed, historically, a minute and painstaking description of sinful fantasies, very easily "transposed into the pornographic register". A prime ground for lustful imagination, spiritual excoriation gave way to a "profane delectation of erotic detail" (Hunter et al., 1993: 37). Concerning the shift in seventeenth century European philosophy, Jacob (1996: 157) notes a mechanization of bodies which led to a simplification of the flesh ". Atomised, stripped of their appearances and qualities," bodies became mere "matter in motion" whose interaction was guided by physical principles. Pornography homed in on this, producing "unprecedented narrative and discursive forms" in a social arena that refused previous divisions of "corps and corporations" and other collectivistic institutions (Jacob, 159). Individuals met as individuals, conducted business as individuals, and copulated as such: they were "prostitutes, booksellers, or what the age called sodomites" for whom pornography represented a new-fangled curiosity, and for whom personal interests and the laws of "bodies in motion" functioned similarly to the movements of atoms in natural science.

Embodiment—being in a body, having a body—is always bound to the shaping of self-identity. Budgeon (2003: 35) theorises that this process is marked by "fluidity and indeterminacy," and that bodies themselves are more than simple representations of identities: they are events, no mere "natural foundation or passive surface upon which meanings are inscribed" (Budgeon, 2003: 36). Seeing bodies this way erases the dichotomous boundaries of "mind/body, subject/object, reason/emotion and culture/nature," and it is a "deeply political" pursuit. The body ceases to be subservient to the mind; instead, it takes on a new sense of agency. There is a shift, in Budgeon's own words, from meanings that bodies receive to actions that bodies carry out, the "transformations and becomings" they endure (Budgeon, 2003: 50). Embodiment, articulated in a "multiplicity of sites, knowledges and processes," is thus reconfigured as productive, rather than representative. Garland-Thomson (2009: 17) writes on the structuration of vision. "We stare at what interests us," she says, and nothing is more interesting to us than novelty. The capricious nature of staring leads to our becoming accustomed to the subject of our vision. But the crucial contradiction is that the "extraordinary excites but alarms us," whereas the "ordinary assures but bores us." Craving surprise, we secretly seek out the transposition of that surprise into something commonplace, something that does not terrify us (Garland-Thomson 19). There is an "ocularcentric" quality to the modern world; we attempt to "produce endless images" in order to make sense of the universe: vision, "manipulative, liberating, rapacious, pornographic, gendered, or dominating," guides all our endeavours.

The story of Rikener, the transvestite homosexual prostitute, came to light in 1394. Caught in the act, performing "that detestable, unmentionable and ignominious vice" (qtd. in Ackroyd, 2018: C5), he tells the officials how he was trained in his art and how he took to such profane habits:

> It is a queer story, with friars and nuns paying for different types of intercourse with the no doubt attractive and presumably effeminate youth. He was libidinous but was he homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, or all of them at once? Once again the categories do not apply. Sexuality was a fluid, infinitely malleable and indefinite condition. It permeated the streets of London like the smell of pies and sweetmeats. The case ended inconclusively, and no further action seems to have been taken. Did the officials of the Guildhall simply not know how to proceed? Only the Church courts, in any case, could try offences of sodomy. (Ackroyd 2018: C5)

This is the queer body, unfettered, flitting between sexualities, defining itself through an obscene praxis, in ignominy and ridicule, always a subject for repression and legal violence. Ackroyd's selection of such narratives illustrates that although homosexuality as concept had not been invented yet, there were always systems of signification that bear certain similarities. We are enjoined, despite whatever comparisons we might feel compelled to draw, not to see them as ancestors to modern sexualities. Sure enough, the physical act remains the same—the kinetics of mechanised bodies—but the interpretive frames that allow us to contextualise it differ from age to age. Deviant selves were hotly pursued by law, be it civil or religious, because they were profane, obscene, revolting. Ackroyd reads Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, with its tales of "debaucheries, catamites, boy-things, pederasts, sodomites," as an attempt to discredit religious figures, long suspected for their deviant habits, removing them from their hiding places and displaying them for the diseased individuals that they were.

"Suspicion and rumour" were the ways in which Londoners operated when it came to queer people. Their endless freedom in playing with gender presentation, in experimenting with others of the same sex, was a threat to spiritual and moral integrity. They were unstable, ever-changing, unpredictable; queer men and women thronged. "The crowd itself could be a sexual experience," Ackroyd claims. "You could see, and be seen, by many others, with the delight of the gaze or the shared look" (Ackroyd, C14). Clearly, the gaze was not always benign: the instrument of surveillance, it was used by men with power to subdue the perilous novelty of social aberration and to restore peace to the multitudes.

The Ackroydian framing of homosexuality is done within the dichotomy of desire and punishment, lust and its chastisement. Tracing its history after Christianity's arrival during the fourth century, Ackroyd draws a clear picture of what the clergy would do after its rule was established. "The shadow of the church fell across Londinium," he writes. Despite the fact that its influence had not yet reached its summit, internal workings assured that fitting censure would soon be inflicted upon those guilty of "sodomitical activity" (Ackroyd, 2018: C2). Whereas Anglo-Saxon laws did not mention it, Christianity began regulating same-sex intercourse, avoiding the "slightest tolerance" for its inherent sin. Curiously enough, the Church did not shy away from the intricacies of the act, in a way that, for example, passive sexual partners were seen as more socially harmful than the active: Ackroyd mentions certain Christian codes absolving the active "man" from all his guilt, blaming instead the young "boy," the "temptor and instigator," for swaying the virtuous Christian from his rightful path. In other cases, homosexuality is defined pathologically, echoing the long tradition wherein it is compared to other illnesses of the body. "He has great sexual desire, and a great deal of sperm, which is not moved," is what an eleventh century medical text states (qtd. in Ackroyd, 2018: C2). The antidotes are "sadness, hunger, sleeplessness, imprisonment and flogging." Deprivation, the cessation of desire, is the only cure. To abstain from pursuing the course of the body is to stay true to the true needs of the spirit; excess joy was to be tempered through "seriousness or gravity."

Too much frivolity, ensconced deeply in the flesh, was the root of spiritual corruption. Law, however, would eventually turn against religion. Henry VIII's attacks on Catholicism, on the "monks and friars of London" implicitly, would see the passing of the Buggery Act in 1533. In order to consolidate his power, Henry VIII rendered Catholicism "the other,' the shadowland, the source of treason, sin, crime and sickness" (Ackroyd, C5). Accusations of sodomy were once again used as political instruments meant to silence, subdue, and disempower. But there were also those who resisted such

threats, among whom seventeenth century John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, whose "profane and reckless career" revelled in the obscene and pornographic (Ackroyd, C9). Familiar with "all the vices of London," he is rumoured to have been the author of *Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery*, wherein sodomy and buggery are celebrated, taken for national values and enshrined as virtues. Other literary titles, such as John Garfield's *The Wandering Whore* (1660), are cited by Ackroyd as detailed descriptions and encomia of same-sex desire, openly circulated and explicitly worded. The mechanised and synchronised movements of bodies are recorded and shown to the world for what they are: self-perpetuating, unremitting desire. Ackroyd links all these works, suggesting a tacit metatextuality, a continuity that groups together all obscene writers in their curiosity for the hidden and the profane. The city of London, welcoming such wanton excess, was the hub throughout which obscenity ebbed and flowed.

The Deixis of Queerness: History, Geography, and their Junction

History can be conjured but briefly, and one must be ever on the lookout. Walter Benjamin (1968: 255) likens the past to "an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized," disappearing before it can be seized. "Every image of the past," he writes, not regarded through the lens of a present concerned with safeguarding it "threatens to disappear irretrievably." Should these images be ignored or cast aside, a universal danger arises, "that of [these images] becoming a tool for the ruling classes," armed with their own controlling directives and propped up by oppressive ideologies. This status quo, which Benjamin terms a "state of emergency," can never be affected: it is "not the exception but the rule" (Benjamin, 257). Vigilance and concerted efforts are required in order to write histories of subaltern populations. The problematic nature of a history of sexuality is discussed at length by MacKinnon (1992: 117). If history is even in part motivated by sexuality, then it stands to reason that sexuality itself must have roots in historical contexts. She reads Foucault's notion of such a history as being "a history of pleasure and seeking it, of repression and derepressing it," wherein the "impelled, compelled, wanting, grasping, taking, mounting, penetrating, thrusting, consummating" are social forces enmeshed in their own version of intercourse; sex begets history. Sexuality, an ever-shifting construct, abhors static essentialisation: it depends on how "desire is defined, how pleasure is got, who does what to whom," ergo, power plays and dominance. It maps the "rise and deployment of the desiring subject," his struggles in historicizing and contextualizing pleasure and pain (MacKinnon, 119). However, we are granted a history replete with glaring silence. "We forget about the meaning of what is not there, not known," MacKinnon reminds us, "maybe even not knowable" (MacKinnon, 121) The love that does not speak its name, then, is at the same time a nineteenth century invention and an ancient Greek staple alike, and its silence, the silence of a what can be construed as a gay history, runs counter to the hegemony of dominant (hetero)sexuality.

Queer City maps the junction between locality and universality. Something as biologically widespread as sexuality cannot, of course, be confined to the walls of any one city. The ubiquity of same-sex attraction escapes the vicissitudes of history as well as the physicalities of geography, no matter how many accounts are given in an attempt to pinpoint origins and first causes. But writing queerness is another matter entirely, and, as Ackroyd points out, to discuss a history of queerness—of outcasts and outsiders—is to grapple with specificities that only time-bound, highly contextualised readings can elucidate. Ackroyd brings up the Anglo-Saxon ideal of the *waepnedman*, the "aggressive male" solely interested in sexual encounters with "similarly masculine men" (Ackroyd, 2018: C2). His contention is that we may be tempted to interpret this desire between men with the same rigid preferences (namely, attraction towards men who adhere to the same standards of masculinity) as a precursor to modern day gay culture, which still bears signs of such typologies. However comforting this interpretation might be, such "connotations and explanations" are of little worth. "The participants may or may not have been 'queer' but no one could tell. [...] The matter and concept were unknown." Ackroyd uses queer as an umbrella term, a useful word that opens a series of questions on what it means, historically, to be of a weird sexuality. Such endeavours remain valid even during times when, perhaps, to be queer is not so queer any more, and when voices, violently stifled through the ages, are now being heard. He works within and against the state of emergency mentioned by Benjamin.

The story of queer women is wordless in its own way. Their silence, Ackroyd tells us, "is part of a larger silence," an inward folding upon the voicelessness of the persecuted. Their lives, "of little

significance and of even less interest," were often reduced to pornographic entertainment for male consumption. Sexuality within the female flesh was a threatening idea, as they were "ruled by their bodies and by their passions," less open to reason than the males of their society. Legal action against women who slept with each other was minimal—"veiled behind the acceptance of close friendships," women were allowed to express their emotions, even when, tacitly, they led to "more fervent desires." It may be ultimately impossible to create a "knowable" history of subjects whose narratives were framed against a culture that sought to suppress them. Ackroyd assembles a thread of stories, variegated and cohesive, offering tentative readings with the ultimate goal of finding a common ground, an ideologically "pure" view of queerness, in its simplest definition: the weird, the unusual, the other. Whether it is possible to read it in an un-queer way is a subject for debate. Ackroyd's project differentiates itself from other histories of the sort both in methodology and scope: the spatial, temporal and social are the interconnected dimensions upon which the author constructs his thesis.

England's battle against obscenity, with its rich yet contentious past, appears to have begun in earnest during the rule of Cromwell, according to Saunders (2011: 51). Puritanical ideas about shame drove pornographic materials into the underground, there to proliferate until the monarchy was restored. In later modernity, the command over obscenity regulation fell into the hands of civil law, freed from the Church's meddling; the nineteenth century, however, saw the most serious developments in this aspect. If we take pornography as an instrument whereby man is placed nearer to God, on the one hand, or to animals, on the other, Saunders describes the nineteenth century *Weltanschauung* as interpreting pornography to be more than a reflection of the divide stretching between man and God, acting as an enlargement of it (Saunders 57). Colligan (2006: 10) claims that prior to nineteenth-century changes in obscenity regulation, England's business of peddling an obscene print culture had not been shaped, despite the wealth of "erotic writing and imagery" put forth by writers such as John Wilmot Rochester or John Wilkes. Likewise, obscenity in and of itself did not have much legal conceptual clarity before 1727, when Edmund Curll was brought to court, charged with libel. In the nineteenth century, much legal effort against obscenity was explicitly geographical in nature: its "unruly circulation in metropolitan urban culture" was what the law sought to quell (Colligan, 11); by the end of the century, obscenity had become an international affair, no longer a matter for street circulation, but "expanding mechanisms of long-distance communication" (Colligan, 12). Obscenity was on the rise as a historically grounded cultural object.

1800s London experienced a shift in visibility where queer identity is concerned. Ackroyd envisions the capital as a thriving hub for men and women who deviated from the strictures of heterosexual law. "Nowhere was safe" in this thrumming "nest of male whores" plying their trade as far as the eye could see. The author describes the relocation of these minorities, with the "queer quarters of London" spreading towards the West End, as being a counterpart to capitalist surges, prodding men and women into their newfound status as consumers. Capitalism and sexual desire collude, as per Ackroyd's logic. We must remember the notion of mechanization of bodies, and the breaking of collective ties for the sake of slaking individual thirst wherever it was possible. The West End was one such nexus, "where the money, and the customers, and the bright lights, were all to be found" (Ackroyd, 2018: C16). For the biographer, the queers, an "integral part" of London life, were everywhere, "the railway termini, the public baths, the arcades, the parks, the museums and art galleries, the gymnasia, the restaurants, the new theatres, the public lavatories and above all the restless streets" (Ackroyd, C19). Here we have a social group firmly entrenched in the fabric of the city, performatively obscene, publicly flaunting their otherness. Indeed, Ackroyd notes an instance where "transvestite escapades" were carried out by two youths, upon which they were arrested and tried for too much "frippery and frivolity". Despite this, they were defended and applauded by the Londoners, who found much joy in their unusual antics. "It was all just good fun," Ackroyd comments, "the city was known in that sense to be free and easy." However, this would be offset by developments later during the century.

The ebbs and flows of London influenced the migration and proliferation of homosexuality and transvestite play, but within the arena of capitalist interest, new forms of social power arose, immediately seized by agents who wished to gain the upper hand. *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, a book published in 1881, detailed a disturbing volley of morally repugnant acts, homosexuality alongside incest and paedophilia, tribadism (which is to say, lesbian intercourse) and sadomasochism. But it bore "the unmistakable flavour of the period," hinting that the author was not simply a man or a wom-

an seeking to slander queer citizens, but a person from inside the community. Shortly thereafter, The Criminal Law Amendment act saw the recriminalisation of homosexuality. Any "gross indecency" between men, performed publicly or privately, was to be legally punished. Ackroyd names a "studied vagueness and ambiguity" at the heart of the reform, a malleable tool in the hands of any individual with a bone to pick and with a mind for easy money. There was no need for witnesses or evidence. Nobles were accused of gross indecencies—such is the case of Lord Euston and Lord Arthur Somerset—but were released due to their political influence. The "condition of queer London," as can be surmised from these accounts, found itself in the convoluted interweaving of sex and power.

To articulate selfhood— the deictic I—is to be aware of the norms in which selfhood is engendered. The story of the "I," in Judith Butler's philosophy, is always "the story of a relation [...] to a set of norms" (Butler, 2005: 8). As such, the "I" cannot function as an island unto its own, but it is always "dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence." She reads Nietzsche, claiming that whenever an account of the self is produced, it is only given because an agent with a superior power has demanded it through "an established system of justice" (Butler, 11). The "I" must provide a narrative of its deeds, proving its own innocence, essentially motivated to persuade the audience of its truth. Giving an account of oneself is a dialogic exercise between self and other, unfolding in a "domain of unfreedom and substitutability" constructed by social norms outside the narrator's powers (Butler, 21). Baker (2002: 67) states that while 1950s England had not yet adopted the idea of closet, later on, after the 1970s, the hidden language Polari—the variety of English spoken by homosexuals— can be said to have propped it up. It was resorted to as a tool by gay men and women to converse freely without risking exposure; Polari was, ostensibly, a "safe space" *avant la lettre* (Baker 68). At the same time, its use also covered a "tentative means" to come out, allowing homosexuals to easily identify each other, enabling them to "negotiate the disclosure" of their identities without fearing heterosexual repercussions. What is more, flamboyant individuals spoke Polari as a way to further solidify their otherness, donning yet another layer meant to single them out—this is a representation, then, of an "essential dichotomy" in Polari's pragmatics: as a language, it was the refuge of the man afraid to come out, as well as the pride of the unapologetically visible homosexual. Frank (1995: 172) ascribes to postmodernity the notion of embodied paranoia.

The ontologies of illness within a postmodern frame cover not only what we would class as threats in the usual sense: it is one thing to dread natural disaster or social upheaval; it is another thing entirely to be in fear of institutions "ostensibly designed" to help the sufferer. Frank reads Levinas, and sides with him in his definition of suffering as a "dead end" and "basic senselessness" (Levinas qtd. in Frank, 176). However, much like Levinas, Frank sees in suffering the "possibility of a half opening" (Frank, 177) that allows the self to become visible to the other, "whose exteriority promises salvation" and therefore the chance to recontextualise suffering, granting it a new use.

The accounts of queer individuals throughout history, whether in a London freshly caught in the grip of Christianity or in a much later London shaken by legal frameworks whose ambiguities would systematically endeavour to violently silence those who did not follow its tenets of respectability and propriety, are necessarily steeped in a dialogic exchange marked by uneven power relations. Queer selfhood is a matter to be defined and defended in legal courts, as results of accusations—legitimate or otherwise—made freely by members of society who wished to bring about mutual degradation. To defend oneself is to admit one's fault, endangering one's validity. Ackroyd discusses Oscar Wilde's trials, beginning with his first, in which he was the instigator, accusing the Marquess of Queensbury, who had indirectly called him a sodomite. The biographer considers this action "ill-advised," having only ensured "additional legitimacy" in the "process of pursuing and punishing queers" (Ackroyd, 2018: C17). There is no space to negotiate these norms before the fixities of law: one's language dooms one from the very beginning. Despite producing impassioned encomia to homosexuality and escaping his second trial, Wilde's third trial would see a fundamental rupture in queer representation throughout London. "Shakespeare and Michelangelo," those pillars of queerness previously invoked by Wilde, "counted less than the physical proofs of the buggery of young men." His name, soon a "byword for sexual infamy," remains to this day essential in London's history, a testament to Butler's idea of what it means to give an account of oneself.

Concerning Polari, that "'other' language" spoken by people in "theatres, pantomimes and the merchant navy," Ackroyd notes that its use was liberatory, doing away with the "various impositions of the common language" (Ackroyd, C16). It was necessary, he opines, in the face of "entrapment,

imprisonment and police raids" that pervaded the community in the twentieth century. The "grey and furtive atmosphere of surveillance and arrests" needed a metaphorical safe space, a means by which the oppressed could communicate and foster intimacy, and Polari, with its coded meanings, provided it. Reading this inimical environment as a precursor to the AIDS crisis, embodied paranoia strikes us as relevant. London's "disbelief and even denial" was telling. "It was an American disease. It would pass. A cure would soon be found" (Ackroyd, C18). However, the disease did not pass, and social stigmatization was brought to new heights. The sufferers, "as if they were neither living nor dead," began suspecting the doctors of ineptitude and ignorance, collaborating with the illness itself. The senseless suffering led to the formation of a cohesive group, a group reacting in "understandable fury" against a society that had demonised them in their darkest hour. These men and women heeded each-other's suffering and rose in retaliation.

Conclusion: The Postmodern Turn

Far from being a figure of speech, the closet—with its ambiguous interiorities—is a way of knowing the world and acting within its confines. Sedgwick (1990: 67) denies that the events of 1969 brought about the destruction of the closet: the "surprise and delectability" of new outings became all the more cherished within the public sphere. "The love that is famous for daring not speak its name" was rearticulated. Homosexual ontologies presuppose a series of comings out within one's lifetime: new closets appear, with their "fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics," whenever new individuals are encountered: "requisitions of secrecy and disclosure" are the biorhythm of gay life (Sedgwick, 68). Despite granting gay culture "an overarching consistency," external ontologies—life outside or beyond the closet—are always a possibility. Indeed, to see the closet without "a saving vision [...] of its apocalyptic rupture" is to romanticise "its deformations, its disempowerment and sheer pain," as it is a symbol of enduring oppression, something one must be liberated from in hopes of attaining both visibility and freedom.

The strife between the "salvational epistemological certainty" of coming out and the "equivocal privacy" of the closet is a contentious realm, productive of numerous ideological clashes. Bersani (1996: 11) remarks that visibility is a double-edged sword: while it is certainly "more than a defiant response to those who would sequester, or better, eradicate" queer identities, visibility brings about the possibility of "surveillance, disciplinary intervention," ultimately installing state of "gender-cleansing." Under the sway of Foucauldian panopticons, to be visible is to be policed, constrained, and ultimately subjected to deeply entrenched structures of power. As long as homosexuality is construed as Other/queer, Bersani argues, homophobia will endure: in a strange sense, then, homophobia becomes a symptom of the "ineradicability of homosexuality" (Bersani, 29): each conditions the other's ontological validity. Writing on solidarity, Rorty (1989: 192) suggests an expansion of the ontologies of self, "our sense of 'we,'" to those whom we perceive as others. The key to his interpretation, however, is to be reached not through the "recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings," but through the acceptance of differences, "of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like," as insignificant in the face of the hardships we face as a collective entity: the "pain and humiliation" that are common to all humans. Marginal groups must be included in order to shape real solidarity, as opposed to paying lip service to a solidarity that has never factually existed (Rorty, 196).

The twentieth century, Ackroyd argues, saw a great instability in the public perception of queerness. There had been relative acceptance during the Second World War. Who bedded whom "was of lesser interest in a world where you might be killed or injured at any moment" (Ackroyd, 2018: C18). Following the war, the situation worsened, and the climate was "dominated by fear and suspicion:" one was forced to conceal one's identity to the best of one's ability, for fear of losing one's status in society. The multiplicity of the social apparatus coerced queer individuals into erasing any traces of their deeds lest they be accused; the police and the press acted as "objects of terror," often driving people to suicide. The "deities of family, home and marriage" sought to undo the vile obscenity of deviance. Ackroyd disagrees with the idea that London became sexually liberated in the sixties, describing it as "still cloistered and claustrophobic, a city where queerness was discussed in low voices" (Ackroyd, C18). It was not yet the time to come out; "discretion and subdued gaiety" were the tenets whereby gay society functioned. But the seventies were home to a counterculture proper: the Gay Liberation Front, with its public meetings, deliberately opposed what they perceived to be

straight culture, "the culture of the suits, of the politicians, of the businessmen, of the journalists, of the police [...] that is, anyone who, according to their opponents, knew better than you did".

Queerness took on more politically active nuances, and in so doing, gained the courage to step outside the epistemologies of the closet in order to create social discourse. 1972 brought with it the first Gay Pride, an event marked by obvious visibility, precluding any pretence to anonymity. The author, however, writes of men to whom the prospect of leaving the closet was not desirable, either because it was "in bad taste" or because they did not tolerate the "pack mentality" that groups operated within, the "grim and self-righteous" modus operandi that characterised their agenda. Recent changes within the UK led to the legalization of civil partnerships and same-sex marriage, showing that queer people desire integration within society, ultimately affecting London's status as a gay city. It is now a part of the "normal world," no longer hiding behind the "closed doors and barred windows of the twentieth century." Ackroyd reads this as a welcome progression: "queerness," to him, "with all its panache and ferocity" can best be seen "in elegant retreat" (Ackroyd, C18). Retreat, adaptation and "normalization" are the directions in which queerness is heading. But not all is straightforward, and he remarks upon the conundrum at the heart of the community, if it "desires or fears" fitting in with the rest of society. Coming out, he notes, "is still a rite of passage, frequently characterised by trauma." Things are different in the twenty-first century, but queerness remains odd, situated between joyous otherness and enduring persecution. Throughout this paper, I have shown Ackroyd's contribution to the field of gay historiography in a culturally and geographically specific context: London has always been—and will always be, according to Ackroyd—a queer space, welcoming paradox and contradiction.

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