

THE WILD NOT LESS THAN THE GOOD

Thoreau, Sex, Biopower

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At the outset of a chapter of *Walden* that takes up, by turns, hunting, vegetarianism, and the pollutions of masturbation—a chapter titled, inevitably, “Higher Laws”—Henry David Thoreau (1983: 257) offers up a beguiling little anecdote.

As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented.

Hungry for animal wildness, Thoreau goes on, before turning to those other matters, to write a kind of hymn to carnal exhilaration, in which the familiar genre of naturalist reverie skews rather more frankly perverse:

Once or twice, however, while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar. I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good. The wildness and adventure that are in fishing still recommended it to me. I like sometimes to take rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do. (Ibid.)

Here, then, is a strange abandonment Thoreau reveres, one that we would misperceive only slightly—which is to say, we *would* misperceive it—were we to identify it with the disordering power of sex. The carnal delightedness Thoreau references here is not separable from sex (his eventual meditation on masturbation reminds us as much), but neither is it reducible to it. Or, to say this just a bit differently, the strange abandoned wildness Thoreau depicts in his ventures through the woods is not reducible to the understanding of sex bequeathed to us by that great, epoch-making biopolitical seizure of the body and its impulses by something called “sexuality,” in what was a multiphased process of implantation, investment, incitement, and solicitation. “Sexuality,” that is, marks a relatively recent and quite particular conjugation of body, a sweeping coordination of previously unjoined traits and affects and inclinations into a special kind of character-binding coherence—or so, after Michel Foucault (1978), the familiar story goes.¹ *After* sexuality, only the truly, the committedly perverse would consider fishing a variety of sex. Thoreau writes from before that moment.²

But if Thoreau writes from before the ascension of modern sexuality, before its solidification as a regime of carnal optimization, he does not speak to us from quite outside it. The temporalities here are knottier. As scholars like Michael Warner (1991, 1992), Henry Abelove (2003), and Milette Shamir (2008) have instructed us, Thoreau writes rather from *inside* a long vexed moment, before the calcification of a modern postsexological regime of sexuality but in which the encroachment of that regime, its movements toward coordination and expert ratification, could already be felt, in a number of quarters, and in a number of ways. One way to take up Thoreau’s love of the wild, then, is as an exemplary bit of erotic untimeliness: a reminder of all that gets skewed, distorted, or just left out when we view the nineteenth century too much through the eyes of subjects of that modern sexuality. In part because what looks like sex and love to him squares so little with postsexological visions of the erotic (see again: *fishing*), Thoreau can help us bring into vivid focus some ways of imagining carnal life that get invisibilized by the ascent of “sexuality” in its modern (liberal, identitarian) guises—some possible futures for the body that would not, as it transpired, come to be.³

But “Higher Laws” might beguile us for other reasons as well, beyond what it has to say about configurations of sex that, after “sexuality,” sank into muteness or illegibility. The questions broached by Thoreau’s observations here invite us to consider more closely not just the internal contours of a “sexuality” in a state of partial or uncompleted historical assembly. I want to suggest, rather, that the Thoreau of this portion of *Walden*, ranging the woods in search of animal wildness and something to devour raw, offers us a unique purchase on some of the defin-

ing impasses of contemporary queer criticism, at just this vibrant and unsettled moment. Most crucially, I hope to show, his work telegraphs for us some of the graver liabilities of *sexuality itself*—that commonplace anchoring point for queer or queer-inflected exegesis and critique—as an organizing rubric of inquiry. “I love the wild not less than the good,” he says at the outset of “Higher Laws,” and if there is a familiar strain of Thoreauvian humor in that little conceptual reversal, there is, too, beneath it, a pressing and difficult sort of question, one that Thoreau wrestles with throughout the whole of the chapter. *What does it mean to love the wild?* In Thoreau’s account, as I show, that question has a telling inflection: when you understand carnal life to be integral to wildness, as Thoreau plainly does, but when you understand carnality *also* to be an aspect of the self where the world most takes hold of you, most bends you to its imperatives, how do you yet love the wild?

Thoreau’s answer is not the one to which we have, many of us, grown accustomed. A lot of us, that is, have loved the wild by trying to imagine ourselves toward positions that might summarily be described as sex-positive or pro-sex or sex-radical. We have tried to build conceptually rich, committedly extranormative ways to describe the turbulent powers of desire and to make room for a vastness of preference and predilection. That, in some ways, is what queer work has specialized in: not only in marking assiduously how sexuality came to be “constructed,” to speak in that maximally 90s-ish idiom, but also in multiplying our visions of what might count as sex, expanding the roster of conceivable pleasures, as well as of socialities (or antisocialities) imagined to follow from them. It is worth saying at the outset, and with emphasis: I have no interest in abandoning this tradition, which goes from Audre Lorde (2007), Samuel Delany (1999), Gayle Rubin (1984), and *Powers of Desire* (Snitow, Stansell, and Turner 1983) through ACT UP and the Lesbian Avengers, into Leo Bersani (2009), Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (2015), Tim Dean (2009), Pat Califia (2000), and many another writer. These are theorists who have labored to extend a centuries-deep tradition of sex radicalism into new iterations and more capacious forms. Together they form not just an important precedent but the foundation, the condition of possibility, for much of the most adventurous queer work of the last several decades.

But Thoreau does not love the wild like this. In ways that are frustrating, irritating, and edifying—in ways typical of Thoreau—his love is filled with wariness and mistrust, an agile-minded uneasiness about what saying yes to the wild might entail. In what follows, then, I want to dwell for a bit in his torqued and weird style of uneasiness, in the hopes of shedding at least some light on what I take to be the salient dilemmas of our own queer-critical moment. It is a moment, I think,

in which we have come into a usefully enlarged sense of sexuality itself—that signature of the modern, whose vexed emergence so much queer scholarship has taken pains to trace—as always, and perhaps necessarily, *malign*: an imperial, colonizing reserve of normalizing biopower, in whatever expression, no matter how putatively queer or queered. What can it mean to be pro-sex in a world in which “sexuality,” however queer, is so much a force of capture, so indispensable an element in neoliberal mappings of the political world, the lever of so many invidious distinctions? Figuring out how to comport ourselves around that biopolitical seizure has been, to say the least of it, tricky. And so, following in the trail of other theorists of the queer wild like Tavia Nyong’o (2015) and Jack Halberstam (2013a, 2013b), I want to consider closely how Thoreau does it.⁴ My largest claim is that, in his wrought and precisely calibrated ambivalences, he helps us think through what a queer ethics of sex might look like—what something like sex radicalism might yet be—within a critical dispensation that understands sex less in the register of discourse than of biopower. That small shift, toward the conceptual metaphors of biopower, has, I think, a broad range of consequences. We are only beginning to catch up to them. Thoreau, with his thrills of savage delight, can help.

The first way Thoreau works out his ambivalence about a wildness he reveres but will not unhesitatingly embrace is, as I say, in respect to hunting. He speaks of his own admiration for fowling and fishing, chiefly as ways of slowing the capitalized self down to the more unpredictable rhythms of nature; hunting thus takes its place among the other contemplative projects of *Walden*. But in “Higher Laws” Thoreau speaks also of his own gradual weaning away from such pleasures, saying that even when birding he has come to “omit the gun”:

Yet notwithstanding the objection on the score of humanity, I am compelled to doubt if equally valuable sports are ever substituted for these; and when some of my friends have asked me anxiously about their boys, whether they should let them hunt, I have answered, yes,—remembering that it was one of the best parts of my education—*make* them hunters, though sportsmen only at first, if possible, mighty hunters at last, so that they shall not find game large enough for them in this or any vegetable wilderness—hunters as well as fishers of men. (Thoreau 1983: 259)

One way to read the moment here is consistent with a law in Thoreau: only indulge in what passions you may have it in your power to renounce. (As Warner [1991, 1992] argues, across two splendid articles about Thoreau’s erotics, the definitive

twinning imperatives in Thoreau are: Have no waste; enjoy your waste.)⁵ But that final turn, about becoming hunters of a new sort, intimates something at least a bit different. Thoreau suggests that we indulge our desire, engage with carnality, not quite to renounce it but to train it to yearn more largely: to desire in terms ampler than those initially conceived. Make them hunters who “shall not find game large enough.” The carnal pleasures of hunting are instructive, Thoreau says, because you learn to want larger satisfactions.

This can seem a lot like a more conventional sort of post-Protestant asceticism, to be sure, and the differences Thoreau means to cut here are fine indeed. They are the differences, essentially, between renunciation as a kind of body-phobic push toward mastery and, contrarily, an effort to amplify and sensitize the body’s receptivity, to shake loose the carnal self from its overcoding and, through this disciplined self-attentiveness, to remap it into larger constellations of itself. That at least is much of what his meditations on sensuality and chastity come to, though there, too, his thoughts are not free of notes far more normatively ascetic:

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, yet not pure. The other day I picked up the lower jaw of a hog, with white and sound teeth and tusks, which suggested that there was an animal health and vigor distinct from the spiritual. This creature succeeded by other means than temperance and purity. (Thoreau 1983: 266)

Thoreau can surrender neither his admiration for the hog, whose life is successful apart from anything like temperance, nor his *fear* around the independent animal health of what is carnal within us. If only because of that hint of unforsworn admiration, we can, I think, rightly understand Thoreau’s insistence on chastity (and he does, pervasively, *insist* on chastity) as at least marginally separable from something like Weberian ascetic renunciation. There is in the passage a funny note of half-rueful regard for that hog. It had figured out, as Thoreau has not quite, how to succeed at living in its body.

But there is, also, without question, the fear. “I would fain keep sober always,” he says, striking the note of his ever-watchful self-attentiveness, “and there are infinite degrees of drunkenness” (*ibid.*: 264). Here as elsewhere in Thoreau’s thought, though, that fearful wariness has less to do with any prevailing

sense of the body's impurity than you might think—with its filthiness, its muck, its waste. These are in fact all things the Thoreau of *Walden* finds ways not merely to tolerate but, far more frequently, to cherish. Once again, Warner is fantastic at directing our attention to Thoreau's reverence for muck, filth, and waste, as elements of renewal, for the body no less than the earth. ("Whatever else it is about," Warner [1992: 76] writes in "Thoreau's Bottom," "all this talk of bottoms and their virginity is also about an 'invigorating' anality. In their muckiness as in their penetrability the bottoms of these passages derive their interest in part by standing in for the anus.") What is it, then, that animates this aversiveness, this fretting over an unexpungeable impurity?

The answer, it proves, has everything to do with that *other* great object of Thoreau's attention in *Walden*. This, of course, is market capitalism—"Economy," as he names it in the long famous opening of the book. Or rather, Thoreau's object of fascinated scrutiny in *Walden*, as much as armies of ants or the pond in winter, is what market capitalism wishes to make of us and, especially, what market capitalism wishes to make of our ways of being in the body. The body as such and the body as soft clay for the shaping forces of Economy: this is an important distinction. It marks the difference, essentially, between a post-Protestant bodyphobic asceticism, on the one hand, and a keen wariness of the embodying structures of capitalism, on the other, and it can be too easy to miss. So when Thoreau (2001: 332) says "I am sure that the design of my maker—when he has brought me nearest to woman—was not the propagation of the species," or when, in an essay he writes about chastity and sensuality (and which, of course, perfectly, he gives as a wedding gift), he observes, "The only excuse for reproduction is improvement . . . Beasts merely propagate their kind," we can understand him to be refusing less the dangerous call of the flesh than the *instrumentalization* of the body, the turning of it, through an accepted regime of sexuality, into a mere tool for production. He is, in other words, ever fearful of how what we might think of as "sexuality" becomes a kind of linchpin for the body's instrumentalization, its capture by the productive imperatives of capital. And this rhymes with what Warner describes as his struggle to find a noninstrumental self-relation under conditions of market capital, a self-relation more expressive or contemplative than instrumentalizing. (For Warner that just *is* the project of *Walden*.) What Thoreau fears in all is less the body as such than what capitalism would make of the body, how it will take hold of it and rewrite its economies, its dialectics of waste and efficiency, *away* from what Thoreau envisions are its best possibilities.

A number of congruencies begin to come into focus here. Famously, Thoreau renounces certain kinds of labor in *Walden*, with an energetic insistence on

lassitude and contemplative unproductivity, but *not* the work of cultivating his field of beans, because he wants to find a way to revere labor in a world in which it has been debased. In just this way, according to precisely this dialectic, we can read in Thoreau's wary embraces of chastity, as in the moments of mistrustfulness in relation to the promptings of the flesh, something that is not quite a loathing of the carnal body. We can see there, rather, a yearning for a kind of embodied otherwise, some richer inhabitation of the corporeal self that Thoreau can intuit if not quite live out, not yet. The impulses are, actually, considerably more utopian than renunciatory. Listen to Thoreau's (1983: 266–67) strangely rhapsodic account of the pleasures of chastity:

Who knows what sort of life would result if we had attained to purity? . . . Yet the spirit can for the time pervade and control every member and function of the body, and transmute what in form is the grossest sensuality into purity and devotion. The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it.

Here is a vision of the body become radiantly unrecognizable to itself, moving toward some alternate economy, apart from that of unreflective labor in the name of consumable pleasure that Thoreau thinks defines the capitalized body. “Who knows what sort of life would result,” Thoreau wonders, imagining possibilities for carnal life that are not opposed to the body's pleasures—that in fact reside *within it*—but are as yet available only as intimations, traces of the yet to be.⁶

On just that note, “Higher Laws” ends. Thoreau concludes the chapter by imagining a farmer, whose name is John Farmer. Farmer Farmer, in the day's-end reverie that Thoreau transcribes for us, does not renounce his body, exactly, so much as envision its reinvention:

John Farmer sat at his door one September evening, after a hard day's work, his mind still running on his labor more or less. Having bathed, he sat down to recreate his intellectual man. It was a rather cool evening, and some of his neighbors were apprehending a frost. He had not attended to the train of his thoughts long when he heard some one playing on a flute, and that sound harmonized with his mood. Still he thought of his work; but the burden of his thought was, that though this kept running in his head, and he found himself planning and contriving it against his will, yet it concerned him very little. It was no more than the scurf of his skin, which

was constantly shuffled off. But the notes of the flute came home to his ears out of a different sphere from that he worked in, and suggested work for certain faculties which slumbered in him. They gently did away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived. A voice said to him—Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you? Those same stars twinkle over other fields than these.—But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither? All that he could think of was to practise some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect. (Ibid.: 269)

It is an exquisite passage, animated by Thoreau's reading of Confucius and the Vedas, as well as by the kind of dreaminess of erotic vision by which Thoreau can sometimes surprise us. This is what it means to say that what gets named "disappointment" in Thoreau might be better understood as something nearer to yearning. Here as elsewhere in the archive of Thoreau's meditations on carnal life, we find a renunciatory impulse, an "austerity," that is forever modulating into a scene of carnal fulfillment trembling on the edge of realization—into, finally, an expectancy that has neither forgotten joy nor abandoned the possibility of its renewal.

These are, perhaps, the less-renowned versions of Thoreau, who continues to appear, in popular as well as scholarly imagination, in the guise of a prickly, priggish, elementally hypocritical scold.⁷ If only as a corrective to these imaginings of Thoreau the confounded celibate, it makes real critical sense to insist on the erotic extravagance of Thoreau's vision of the body and its unforeclosed possibilities. But it is worth saying, too, that the "new austerity" Thoreau invokes, if it is marked by these utopic impulses, can seem at moments very, very much like capitalist asceticism run amok. Here, for instance, is another of the riffs on chastity we find in "Higher Laws":

What is chastity? How shall a man know if he is chaste? He shall not know it. We have heard of this virtue, but we know not what it is. We speak conformably to the rumor which we have heard. From exertion come wisdom and purity; from sloth ignorance and sensuality. In the student sensuality is a sluggish habit of mind. An unclean person is universally a slothful one, one who sits by a stove, whom the sun shines on prostrate, who reposes without being fatigued. If you would avoid uncleanness, and all the sins, work earnestly, though it be at cleaning a stable. Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome. What avails it that you are Christian, if you are not purer than the heathen, if you deny yourself no more, if you are

not more religious? I know of many systems of religion esteemed heathenish whose precepts fill the reader with shame, and provoke him to new endeavors, though it be to the performance of rites merely. (Ibid.: 268)

There is no pretending this is not renunciation, and no pretending that Thoreau, as he reviles a conspicuously gendered “Nature” herself, is not dancing through the chambers of a paradox. Or, better, there is no pretending that Thoreau is not at once in love with and fearful of his body, a body he reveres for its winning animality but fears almost as much, not least because he knows that carnality to be the place in him where the powers he wishes to dispute most deeply take hold. He will not surrender the sense that the carnal threatens always to be the aspect of self through which he is most made a creature of the capitalized world and its debasing designs. And yet neither will he surrender those *other* loves, with which he begins and ends, for the mucky, the murky, the carnal. The wild.

I value this unresolving contradictoriness, this mixed joyful reverence and aversive mistrust. I do so not least because, it seems to me, we know the feeling. For those of us nourished by queer theory, and ongoingly invested in its movements and trajectories, these impasses have to them, I think, a striking familiarity. We might of course frame out the tensions and fractures of our current theoretical moment in a wide number of overlapping ways. (As, for instance, an alternation between what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick [2003] long ago designated paranoid and reparative modes of critique; or between critical dispositions figured crudely as historicist and psychoanalytic.) I want to propose that these divisions come clearest in terms slightly different.

My claim is in some respects obvious, though I think stating it with a certain baldness can clarify the odd and often, I think, misapprehending ways some spectral version of “queer theory” has been summoned to the scene of several ongoing methodological debates, vivid especially in literary theory but not only there. In the hopes of intervening in these latter-day deployments of the figure of “queer theory” and its supposed practices and premises—misdeployments, I think—I want to develop the following claim: right now, much of the strongest queer critique is involved in the long-germinating project of working Foucault’s sexuality inquiry out to its largest, and in certain respects its most elusive, conclusions. And this has meant (among other things) entertaining in earnest the possibility that what we understand as sexuality—that historically specific conjugation of affections, inclinations, and dispositions into a coordinated privatized legibility, so sweepingly naturalized as to be hardly articulable in its historicity—is not only

not liberatory but is, necessarily, something nearer to *malign*: a biopolitical coding, both of individuated bodies and of populations, whose aim is only ever invidious differentiation, a multipurpose and vastly geopoliticized optimization. The long movement toward this critical disposition animates scholarship that ranges widely across disciplinary boundaries (and is certainly not located exclusively in English departments or for that matter in the humanities) and has, in its richest iterations, helped us encounter more fully some of the most upending aspects of Foucault's genealogical project. And has left us, too, I want to suggest, in a state of lively, Thoreau-like irresolution in our relation to the perils and promises of sex.

We could think of this cluster of work as following out two closely related trajectories, with both of which I want to dwell for a moment, in the hope of explicating some of their broader stakes and also, by way of conclusion, some of the ways those stakes have been misstated or marginalized. For the sake of expository clarity, I separate them out, schematically and a bit abruptly, though in practice these divisions are not so neat. In the first cluster I wish to consider, then, we can map a shift in queer critical practice away from what might be named a *discursive* reading of sex—an understanding of “sexuality” as a thing produced, or “constructed,” by the array of discourses that “speak” of it, be they medical, legal, educational, ecclesiastic, and so forth. This discursive rendering of sexuality, as the creation of the modes of knowledge that took hold of sex and demanded it speak, marks much of the queer theory of the 1990s, especially work done in period-specific literary studies. (David Halperin's *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, from 2002, might be pointed to as one landmark in the effort to undo just this discursive tendency.)⁸ From sex as discourse we emerge into readings shaped more definitively by an understanding of sex as *biopower*—as part of a regime of corporeal optimization that Foucault explores most deeply in texts that are *not* volume I of *The History of Sexuality* but in those concerned more closely with shifts in strategies of liberal (and neoliberal) governmentality and their relation to modes of sovereignty. In the register of biopower, “sexuality” comes clearer as an implantation designed not solely at the scale of the individual, with the aim of producing his or her “truth” of character or being. “Sexuality” names, rather, a mode of differential maximalization interwoven with a range of other forms of deployment that look to seize, as Foucault says, *life itself*, its labor and its reproductivity but also its functioning, its flourishing or decline, its malleable utility across a diverse set of regulable locales.

This, then, would be queer theory in and after what we might with embracing breadth call the biopolitical turn, proceeding in the light of work by scholars like Achille Mbembe (2003), Giorgio Agamben (1998), and Donna Haraway

(1990) and visible today in the work of a great range of scholars, writing in a number of subdisciplines: Lisa Marie Cacho (2012), Jasbir Puar (2007), Dana Luciano (2007), and Mel Chen (2012) might be only a few of the prominent names in this archive. The animating premises of this expansive corpus, though they may trace back to Foucault, are nevertheless consequentially different from those of work taking up the emergence or contested “construction” of sexuality. Here, what Foucault (1978), in volume I, calls the speciation of “the homosexual” comes to matter considerably less than those *other* aspects of governmentality Foucault describes in his lectures at the Collège de France. The counteremphasis falls especially forcefully on the intertwining processes of carnal optimization that play out across putatively separate registers like gender and race and sex, in a set of moves whose aim is to make ampler room for thinking sex in its relation less to “race” as such (as one among other dissociated units of identity) than to *racialization*: the rationalized management of populations through strategies of differentiation, isolation, making live and letting die. This is sexuality as inscribed, as Foucault (2003: 251–52) writes in “*Society Must Be Defended*,” “in broad biological processes that concern not the bodies of individuals but the element, the multiple unity of the population”—a population in the grip of a power that authorizes itself not in the might of the sovereign or even in the revolutionary overturning of that sovereign but as against threats to the life and flourishing, to the *existence*, of the population as such. The mechanisms of differentiation, isolation, and fragmentation across populations conceived as biologically malleable mass-entities, Foucault names, famously, “racism.”⁹

Following out this counteremphasis, we might notice, as we return to the Thoreau of “Higher Laws,” not only his untimeliness, the obliquity of his visions of erotic life to the forms of “sexuality” that would solidify decades after his writing. We might remark, too, his tweaking insistence on the linking of the wildness he so cherishes to what he marks again and again, with partisan ardor, as *savagery*. (Think again of that “*thrill of savage delight*.”) These are, among their other valences, burlesques of the self-aggrandizements of Anglo-Protestantism, offhand puncturings of white piety that, by this point in the text of *Walden*, will be familiar to his readers. But they mark too Thoreau’s articulate sense of the simultaneity, the co-articulation, of race and sex in the biopolitics of midcentury America—his sense, in all, of whiteness as a technology of biopolitical deployment from which he wishes, at least in these and other similarly caustic moments, to be disidentified.

I am of course greatly exaggerating this distinction, between the discursive and biopolitical readings of sexuality, which themselves broadly map onto the “disciplinary” and “biopolitical” modes of power Foucault explicates in their

intertwining. Sexuality, he observes, is a chief *switching-point* between these individuating and massifying orderings of power. (As Mark Jordan [2015] astutely suggests, we find throughout Foucault's writing less a series of oppositions than the trying out of multiple and overlapping metaphors of power.)¹⁰ This point cannot be made too forcefully: discursive and biopolitical renderings of sex *are not in opposition to one another*, are not antagonists, are indeed far nearer to neighbors than opponents. I pursue them so doggedly here, though, because the shifts in *critical practice* surrounding these distinctions are real and substantive; and it is these—the ways these differing lines of stress have grown out into consequentially different patterns of critique—that are most crucial to our purposes. Indeed, the salient alterations of critical disposition here, in the shifting of analytic stress from discourse to biopolitics, are not difficult to map. If you conceptualize sex as a function of discourse—its situatedness, its circulation, its career as a spoken-of artifact of knowledge and power—you will be liable to think of it rather differently than if you imagine sex more directly as an element of that optimizing seizure of life itself that, in Foucault's rendering and those of his inheritors, characterizes liberal power more than liberty, autonomy, and all the other alibis of Enlightenment modernity. As Sedgwick (1990) was quick to note more than two decades ago in her introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, thinking about sex as discourse can induce a weird unballasted sort of optimism, expressed often as a sense of sex as especially malleable *because* merely discursive. Of course, sex *is* malleable. Sex changes, not least because it is a made thing, a scene of articulation in the historical world. But that is not to say that the realm of the carnal is disarticulated from power with the ease of, say, a change of vocabulary. A turn to critique in the key of biopower, evident across a range of the strongest queer work of the last decade and a half, has been a usefully chastening tonic to precisely that model of weak constructionism.

Nor is it surprising, though it is *crucial*, that such work has found an especially keen articulation in the rich archive of queer of color critique, whose scholarly genealogies have quite pointedly *not* been shaped by the pursuit of the erotic in its isolation from other vectors of social being or by the ratification of sex as the singular, or exalted, or most indispensable vehicle for liberatory political projects. The shift I am tracing here might in fact be thematized precisely in terms of a commitment to the resituating, premise-revising work of queer of color critique. In this respect we might say that the biopolitical turn in queer scholarship addresses itself frontally to the work—the intricate, urgent, unfinished work—of undoing much of the de facto whiteness of earlier iterations of queer theory while yet holding to what is generative and enabling there. Field genealogies are of course forever unstable

and in dispute, but this project has been a vibrant part of queer scholarship, and indeed an incontestably *central* part, at least since the appearance of José Muñoz's *Disidentifications* (and its own meticulous countergenealogies of queer theory) in 1999. To call this work “new” thus is and is not a misnomer: it is, chronologically, definitively *not* new work, though the disruptive force of queer of color critique *within* queer theory remains, across many scenes of inquiry, potent. This is what Rinaldo Walcott (2007: 29) calls “the work of revision”—of “speaking sideways to Queer Theory”—and it is, as he observes, an ongoing project.

Such, then, is one strain of contemporaneous queer work. Alongside this recentring of sex as an element of biopolitical seizure has been a related, though differently calibrated, set of moves. This has entailed a reading of sexuality, that specific and distinctively Western conjugation of the body, as an integral part of the geopolitics of a globalized neoliberalism. Here, too, the archive of queer scholarship is extensive and fantastically various. In work by Puar (2007), Joseph Massad (2007), Saba Mahmood (2004), and Paul Amar (2013), as well as in queer Native studies scholarship like that of Mark Rifkin (2011), Scott Morgensen (2011), J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (2008), or in the vibrant critique evident in the work of scholars collected in a 2016 *GLQ* special issue taking up the geopolitics of queer studies (Arondekar and Patel 2016)—again to name only a few prominent scholars within an expansive archive of work—we are called on to attend to the *valorization* of “sexuality” as it is legible in the West, over and against the different ways the erotic body might be coded and deployed in other traditions. “Sexuality,” in this reading, though it may be inhabited with greater and lesser discomfort across a range of bodies in a given social landscape, emerges as a mode of corporeal organization marked in its deepest structures not only by having been forged in colonial past but equally by its entrenchment in a variety of colonial *presents*. To take only the nearest example: witness, now, the imperial logic of campaigns against what gets named “homophobia” (and, also, “misogyny”) in non-Western and most especially Islamic settings, within an often explicitly marketized strategy now known widely in the idioms of queer critique as “pinkwashing,” for the ways a certain embrace of Westernized sexualities acts as an alibi for any number of ongoing colonial projects. Those organized by the State of Israel are perhaps the most frontal in their geopolitics, but we might think too, more locally, of the strategies instigated by, say, JPMorgan Chase & Co., the proud sponsors of Pride parades near and far, among the roster of what it proudly names its “diversity initiatives.”¹¹ Put it this way: in the Heart of Darkness, Kurtz works for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. “Homophobia,” in our current moment, is offered again and again as a savage custom, requiring intervention and suppres-

sion, a recommitment to the saving power of a liberal orthodoxy no matter how expropriative, and justifying any imaginable violation of sovereignty.¹²

We find this reading of “sexuality,” and often queer sexuality, as an authorizing element in imperial projects worked out across a great breadth of political situations, as well as national and international settings. It underpins Puar’s (2007) astringent critique, in *Terrorist Assemblages*, of homonationalism and the neoliberal aggrandizement of the properly queer, whereby the efflorescence of things queer and queer-positive functions as a sign of the broad munificence of global imperialism. It invests Massad’s (2007) unpacking of the distorting liberal-secular presumptions of what he names the Gay International and its insistence not on defending but *inventing* Westernized “homosexuals” in contexts (like working-class Egypt) where such codings of the erotic body do not hold sway and are in fact harming to populations there. It speaks through Mahmood’s (2004) dismantling of the implicit secularity of sex and the subsequent critical fetishism of an “agency” always failing non-Western women. And it is elaborated in what Rifkin (2009: 22) calls “the co-presence of discrepant . . . incompatible geographies within the United States” underpinned by sexual normativities.

What finally unites this array of analytic work, I would suggest, even across this multiplicity of locales, is above all its wider and wider acknowledgment of the grave liabilities of “sexuality” itself as a cherished bit of conceptual terminology, no matter how queer its extensions. Jordy Rosenberg (2014), in a splendid recent essay called “The Molecularization of Sexuality,” draws on precisely this critical turn to press a case about what they refer to (borrowing a phrase from the queer theorist Roderick Ferguson [2003]) as the “and/or” logic “that has marked queer theory for the past decade or more”—a case, that is, for the critical understanding of queerness as at once an antagonist to, and also conspirator in, normative projects.¹³ Ferguson and Rosenberg give expression here to what Michael Warner (2012) has referred to as queer theory’s generative “ambivalence about itself.” And this is perhaps another way to say that we have been learning, in the enlivening intricacies of all this work, to think out more amply Foucault’s long-ago refusal of the notion that saying yes to sex means saying no to power.

Such, then, has been the galvanizing work of queer studies over the last at least fifteen or more years, pioneered especially by the work of queer of color critique I have mentioned and much that I have not. If I dwell on it a bit here, and on the somewhat belabored listing of the names of a few of its leading scholars, it is at least in part because it has become remarkably easy to find critiques of queer theory that proceed as though precisely this work, this important reshifting, *has not happened*.

Whatever else one might say of them, the phantoms of queer theory that appear in broadsides in the name of surface or sociological reading, for instance, and in some of the new materialism, and perhaps most startlingly in the recent brief against the conceptual narrowness of “queer antinormativity,” are conspicuously guilty of appraising queer theory as though it stopped in 1996 or so, with exceptions typically made for the work of scholars who first began publishing then. I have, I confess, no real heart for overburdening the point here or for venturing a position among what have been the largely unavailing salvos of the “method wars” of very recent years.¹⁴ At any rate, with respect at least to the thinned-out and antiquated versions of “queer theory” that have been circulating, the point has already been made, with clarity and force, both by Jack Halberstam (2015) and by Lisa Duggan (2015), whose critiques of the antinormativity issue of *differences* in the online venue “Bullybloggers” both are rooted in an attentiveness to the genealogies of queer critique I have tried to lay out above. In her response, for instance, Duggan rightly notes that a number of the essays in the special issue do not, as they do their critical work, hew to the framing offered by its editors, in an introduction that essentially upbraids queer scholarship for its commitment to a Manichaean sort of oppositionality, fixed and dyadic, that the authors diagnose as a blinkered “antinormativity.” Of this framing, and its elaboration in the introduction and elsewhere, Duggan (2015) writes that “beginning with Licia Fiol-Matta’s *Queer Mother for the Nation*, published in 2002, much new work in queer studies abandoned the notion that queer identities or practices are somehow inherently radical, or that queer politics is necessarily oppositional to historical forms of political and economic power” (emphasis added). Though I might incline to date it earlier—perhaps to Muñoz in 1999—Duggan and I nevertheless agree on the *established fact* of the broad queer-critical refusal to settle complacently into the notion that saying yes to queerness, or to the queerest sexual practices, means saying no to racial capitalism or to power. To the degree that a charge of reactive antinormativity assumes otherwise, it is, as both Duggan and Halberstam insist, a puzzling falsehood, one addressed less to queer theory *as it is actively practiced* than to some holographic version of it, a fantasy-formation whose putative overcoming or “critique” powers, in turn, a claim for methodological innovation or critical forward-progress.

And yet, as I have been at pains to underline, so much of the vibrancy and the challenge, the disquiet, and the ongoing intellectual torque of queer theory lives precisely in its regard for sex as at once overcharged with political potentiality and reducible, in advance, to no specific politics, and certainly to no political benignity. This is sex not as null set but as necessarily *immanent*: a zone of irresolution and contestation, too freighted by multidirectional imperatives to be

consigned to the realm of the marginal, the frivolous, the politically inconsequential, even if the mere presence of deviance signifies no readable-in-advance set of commitments. So if saying yes to sexuality is not saying no to power, neither is saying no to sex saying yes to politics, or to some more rigorous or practicable version of the political (as though any turn to sex somehow *spoils* a more properly materialist or antineoliberal critique). We might say, rather, with both Rosenberg and Ferguson, that the sex in queer theory circulates in tense proximity to a “sexuality” that instantiates and instrumentalizes it but does not necessarily exhaust it, hence that generative ambivalence we have been tracking in the vicinity of sex. This is where we find ourselves, in the midst of a scene of sustained, and I think lively, unresolvingness.

And it is on the ground of just this irresolution and freightedness, just this unpredetermined multiplicity, that we are returned to Henry David Thoreau, and the clarities he offers. For Thoreau no less than for ourselves, the malignancy of sexuality as optimized implantation is a viscerally present fact, manifest in ways both large scale and infinitesimal. (For Thoreau, that malignancy expresses itself, as we know, as *fear*: fear of what capitalism will make of the body.) And yet, as Thoreau also suggests, that malignity is not, perhaps, the end of the story of sex. In our contemporary moment, there may indeed be nothing revolutionary about a blowjob, as some recent theorists put the matter, with winning polemicism. (See here Drucilla Cornell and Stephen D. Seely’s [2014] precisely titled article, “There Is Nothing Revolutionary about a Blowjob.”) But that does not mean a blowjob is frivolous, inconsequential, or politically disqualifying. (It might be; but also, not.) We need not believe that sex is elementally disruptive or radical or radicalizing to want to hold to the unenclosed possibilities of the carnal, the uncaptured potentialities yet slumbering there. These need not be possibilities for disruption or liberation; I follow Foucault in not having all that much use for political languages that default to an ideal of “freedom,” to blissful exteriority to power. We can do without fantasies of noncomplicity.¹⁵ They might, however, in some of the formations Thoreau’s work has suggested, be possibilities for contact, collectivity, unimagined conjugation. They might, too, be possibilities for a sharper critical disposition toward the multiple crises of the world that are, themselves, powered by and through sex. On this latter point, there is not much question: we have need of one.

The ongoing crises of sex are, after all, hardly abstract. To take only the nearest example: the vivid presence of broken conceptual languages of sex will not come as a shock to anyone working in or near higher education today. Consider the linked crises around Title IX, campus sexual assault, and—as a scholar like Jennifer Doyle (2015) makes piercingly clear—campus protest, these latter typically

in the key of antiracism or anti-austerity. These scenes are linked, Doyle shows in her recent *Campus Sex, Campus Security*, not merely by the university in which they transpire. Rather, they are, each and all, produced by the university as crises of securitization: efforts to cleanse the space of administered campus life not of harm, or inequity, or even stark division, but of possibilities for legal vulnerability or “exposure,” system-wide upheaval, disruptions to the administrative order of things. Here is where sex becomes another kind of Rosetta stone for power. For an institution committed most deeply to its own administrative ongoingness, and authorizing itself in the promise of protection from harm, of making-safe—the logics of securitization—sex acts as a kind of master key. It is produced, Doyle shows, as a mode of *perpetual vulnerability* and *perpetual threat*, in the management of which the power of administration finds itself forever renewed.

What follows from this, in Doyle’s account, is an especially purified form of what Gayle Rubin (1984: 278) long ago named “sex negativity”: a turning of sex into the chief signifier of harm. (That relentless identification of sex with harm as such is a move that, as everyone from Rubin and Lorde [2007] to Doyle herself reminds us, incapacitates no one so much as women, queers, people of color—the bearers of sex.)¹⁶ In the teeth of these crises, Doyle suggests, we have urgent need of a way to describe the kinds of harm that circulate around and through sex, but that does *not* rescript sex as the singular, privileged carrier of harm, that does not, in this way, reauthorize all the most malign impulses of securitization. (Unsurprisingly, sexual securitization provides a ready-made anchor point for policing at its most extravagantly racist, as the violent responses to anti-austerity and Black Lives Matter campus protests persistently show.) And so, with writers like Lorde and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) and Christina Hanhardt (2013) in mind, Doyle invites us to ask: How do we redress sexual harm in a way that does not give further fuel to the machinery of racist securitization? The problem is, of course, not a simple one. But Doyle suggests nevertheless that we are fortunate to have to hand a fantastically rich resource for this precisely this halting, difficult, knotty critical labor. The name of that resource is *queer theory*. Doyle’s work, that is, is exemplary in the way it employs queer theory as a critical language for sex that is responsive to varying degrees of violence and coercion but does *not* default to the absolutizing language of trauma and does not figure sex itself as the sole vehicle, the privileged signifier, of harm. She finds there a critical idiom that has long specialized in the circulating of languages of sex in which risk, autonomy, aversion, pleasure, danger, and sociability operate not in isolation from each other, much less opposition, but in a live and shifting and mutually informing relation.

The nourishing of a sociability capable of just this sort of intricate articu-

lacy is, after all, what the project of queer world-making has always been about, and we can no more excise sex from that project—from its *center*—than we can presume the presence of nonnormative pleasures guarantees its political beneficence. We are left, I think, in a position Thoreau knows well: that of trying to imagine ways of loving the wild that do not accede to “sexuality” as such, either in its easy bucolic aggrandizements or, as Rosenberg has it, in its “molecularization.” What form this love will take—some new austerity, or something else—I cannot quite say, though I do suspect it may take shapes that, like Thoreau’s love of the wild, at first glance look a little suspect: perhaps a little like renunciation, or a little regressive, or maybe a little utopically wide-eyed, or a little (or a lot) implausible. These aspects, these unlikelinesses, might not be reasons to reject outright what new visions of loving the wild come our way. (Though neither are we called to embrace them.) And it is my final sense that in this arduous balancing of joy against wariness, reverence, and skepticism—in the great labor of imagination entailed in the commitment to relinquish neither the wild nor the good—we are, luckily for us, not without resources. There is priggish prudish Thoreau, scampering after the woodchuck he would devour raw, contemplating the jawbone of a hog. He is a weird mirror for us, and that may be a thing to cherish in him.

Notes

1. The reference point here is of course Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1978), especially the work of volume 1. It is not the case that Foucault is the alpha and omega of accounts of the emergence of modern sexuality—part of the point of the present article is to note something of the fracturing of his critical-theoretical legacy, in ways that I think have been generative for queer theory especially—but it is true that *The History of Sexuality* remains a touchstone, an inevitable point of reference or counterpoint, for critical scholarship on the historical contours of sex. For strong interventions into the reception of Foucault’s work, which have been especially important to my work here, see Stoler 1995, Halperin 2002, Huffer 2009, Asad 2003, and, more recently, Jordan 2015.
2. David Halperin (2002: 42) turns this point precisely in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*: “What historically distinguishes ‘homosexuality’ as a sexual classification,” he writes, “is its unprecedented combination of at least three distinct and previously uncoordinated conceptual entities: (1) a psychiatric notion of a perverted or pathological *orientation* . . . (2) a psychoanalytic notion of same-sex *sexual object-choice* or desire . . . and (3) a sociological notion of *sexually deviant behavior*.”
3. Thoreau’s dreamy visions of erotic possibility and erotic life neither exemplify a contemporaneous discursive present-tense nor point the way, via some sort of protohomo-

sexuality, to the regime of sex that *would* arrive, a few decades later, in all its shaky solidity. Neither exemplifying in this narrowly historicist sense, nor quite anticipatory, Thoreau limns for us other, now-muted possibilities for imagining carnal life. This is the force of my own claims in *Tomorrow's Parties* (Coviello 2013), where Thoreau enables an account of erotic life, and of its broken-off or uncreated futures, in which “sexuality,” as it eventually emerged, was not, as it were, the hero. The work of telling the history of sexuality in a key other than the celebratory—as a story of the emergence of a nameable “homosexuality,” say, that might be identified with and rallied around—has been especially fortified by scholars like Molly McGarry (2008), Elizabeth Freeman (2010), and Heather Love (2007). Their work, in this sense, has provided one set of foundations for the move toward that broader skepticism in respect to “sexuality” as an organizing rubric of inquiry with which I am largely concerned here.

4. The work on queer wildness by Halberstam (2013a, 2013b) and Nyong'o (2015) has been crucial to me, as has their generous and exacting conversation. Like them, I have been heartened too by Jane Bennett's (2010) work on Thoreau and vibrant matter, although I part from her in my insistence on the interpenetration, in Thoreau, of wildness and the more malign imperatives of “economy.” On that *interplay* of wildness and captivity, I, again like Halberstam and Nyong'o, am inspired by the models made available in Harney and Moten 2013 and, especially, Muñoz 2009. I am buoyed here, as in my previous work on Thoreau from which this piece both grows and departs, by scholarship on Thoreau, the natural, and economy, by Buell 1995, Mariotti 2010, and Bennett 2010.
5. As Warner (1991: 165) writes in “*Walden's Erotic Economy*”: “Have no waste. Enjoy your waste. Thoreau reconciles these imperatives only in the perverseness of his economy. In order to have no waste you must enjoy your waste.”
6. This is the tenor of my reading of Thoreau's untimely erotics in *Tomorrow's Parties*, which—following from readings like Warner's (1991 and 1992) and Shamir's (2008), and especially from José Muñoz's (2009) invocation of the “not yet”—underscores how persistently Thoreau experiences his body as the reservoir of possibilities (for gratification, attachment, sociability, love) that are inaccessible within the horizon of the present tense.
7. For as fulsome a realization of this position as one can wish for, see Kathryn Schulz's (2015) recent polemic against Thoreau in the *New Yorker*. The arguments will be familiar to anyone who has ever taught “Economy” to a classroom of students. Schulz's essay essentially weds the clichés of undergraduate dismissal—“what a *hypocrite!*”—to an elegant urbanity of articulation.
8. To quote Halperin (2002: 88) at length again: “The history of sexuality, as Foucault conceived it, then, is not a history of the representations, categories, cultural articulations, or collective and individual expressions of some determinate entity called sexuality but an inquiry into the historical emergence of sexuality itself, an attempt

to explain how it happened that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sexuality gradually came into existence as a conjunction of strategies for ordering social relations, authorizing specialized knowledges, licensing expert interventions, intensifying bodily sensations, normalizing erotic behaviors, multiplying sexual perversions, policing personal expressions, crystallizing political resistances, motivating introspective utterances, and constructing human subjectivities.”

9. Foucault (2003: 252) continues, “It is, I think, the privileged position it occupies between organism and population, between the body and general phenomena, that explains the extreme emphasis placed upon sexuality in the nineteenth century.” Sexuality, that is, helps Foucault examine the coexistence of, and alterations between, modes of nonsovereign power defined by an individuating discipline and a regulatory normalization, in what he calls “the play of technologies of discipline on the one hand and technologies of regulation on the other” (ibid.: 253). The issue of this interplay is biopower, a power that promises to *make live*. Hence, for Foucault, the vast utility of racism, which, he writes, “is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die” (ibid.: 254).
10. For one of the most supple and precise engagements with Foucault in recent memory, see Jordan 2015: 81, 76, which is especially strong on the conviction, writ large across Foucault’s work, that “power can be described only in contradictory metaphors,” that “there can be no complete lexicon for power.”
11. For a listing of those initiatives, see JPMorgan Chase’s home page, www.jpmorgan.com/corporate/About-JPMC/corporate-initiatives.htm.
12. I borrow this framing from comments made by Patrick McGreevy in his introduction to the “Sexual Sovereignty: Citizenship, Governmentality, Territory” conference at American University of Beirut, in March 2013.
13. Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black* (2003) is another example of work, at the defining center of the field, invested in explicating the complicities of queerness with what we might, with some breadth, call normative projects. (Christina Hanhardt’s indispensable *Safe Space* [2013] would be another.) All of this is to suggest again that these turns are, by now, part of the ground, the *established premises*, of any work aspiring to the status of queer critique.
14. I am not interested, that is, in entering into the discursive machinery of the dispute over literary-critical method, as it is staged in polemics like the now-infamous—which is to say, much-objected-to and therefore much-circulated—broadside issued by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009) in their introduction to a *Representations* issue on “surface reading,” or in related briefs against (or, in response, for) “critique.” The terms offered there seem to me to generate, very rapidly, their own conceptual cul-de-sacs. For two strong, differently inflected accounts of dead-ending effect, see Orlemanski 2014 and Stockton 2015.

15. I borrow the phrase *fantasies of noncomplicity* from Caleb Smith (pers. comm., 2014) and his extensive conversation about critical practice after Foucault.
16. Part of the force of Doyle's work is to show in vivid detail how Rubin's twinned insights, from "Thinking Sex," about what she calls "sex negativity" and "the fallacy of the misplaced scale" remain among that essay's most crucial, vexing, difficult-to-enact insights.

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