We Are Not Yet Queer (in Victorian Studies): Response

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I am quoting my late colleague José Esteban Muñoz's formulation (except the Victorian studies part) in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Muñoz writes about radical hope: he recommends that we keep our eyes on a "then and there," a new world beyond the "prison-house" of the present (1). In our scholarship, this means rejecting the normative, the "natural," and the known. Scholarship can become too timid, too straight, and too straitlaced, especially in perilous times. I chose three papers from the 2014 NAVSA conference that I thought were strange, risky, daring, and therefore queer in the broadest and oldest sense of the word. These papers remind us that scholarship is utopian, always imagining a future in which we break out of the intellectual bonds that now hold us back. These three graduate students are also literally our future; their work asks us to move along toward it, to assume it will be there, to imagine it into being, to work for it.

Derek Bedenbaugh's "Novel Violations: *The Hermaphrodite* and the Failure of Form," Thomas J. Joudrey's "Penetrating Boundaries: An Ethics of Anti-Perfectionism in Victorian Pornography," and Natalie Prizel's "The Non-Taxonomical Mayhew" all use bodies to interrupt texts. Their papers then interrupt our own bodies, or remind us that our bodies are always interrupted and perhaps only experienced as coherent because of texts. Bedenbaugh makes us wonder if the men and women of the Victorian marriage plot actually exist as such except as textual creations. Joudrey reminds us that pornography shows us not only or even mostly a utopia of splendiferous sex, but rather failing

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and ruined bodies participating in the kind of imperfect interactions typical of always-deteriorating mortals. And Prizel argues that the deformity of the economy (the one we still inhabit) and its idea of who is deserving and who is not leave some of us on our knees—literally and permanently.

The marriage plot was already being dismantled in the 1840s by none other than Julia Ward Howe through a radical character: a hermaphrodite who loves and is loved by various characters of more traditionally recognizable genders, but who cannot marry any of them. Howe's novel was left unfinished, but that seems to be the point; it could not be finished because Laurence, the male-identified hermaphrodite, is not male enough to marry and, in fact, causes his female love interest to die of shock when he reveals his secret. Laurence can perform many genders, making the concept of gender itself dangerously malleable and troubled. Howe's creation of Laurence anticipates the argument about gender many of us now accept reflexively—that is, Judith Butler's framing of gender as performance—but Laurence (via Howe) reminds us that we do not actually accept its implications. If we perform gender, if it is in fact not essential, then we are all (essentially) hermaphrodites, capable of performing another gender and of creating the continuum of gender that we now see all around us but have yet to name or un-name adequately. We are not yet queer.

Joudrey unravels the consensus around "pornotopia" (one agreed upon by an unlikely band that includes Andrea Dworkin, Steven Marcus, and Susan Sontag), showing that its prevailing assumptions are not borne out by the large number of texts that index lost erections, missed climaxes, and the damaging effects—shown in "low-hanging scrota and slack vaginas" (426)—of too much sex. What Victorian pornography offers us, Joudrey argues, is the lived experience of sex and "the eroticism" of our "transient animation" (430). Having a sex and having sex are unbearable (to misquote Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman) in literal, physical terms, especially over the long term.

The nutmeg-grater seller whom Prizel writes about uses what she calls his disability to make his poverty deserving: he is upright though on his knees (he cannot stand); he engages us with dignity, looking straight ahead, but not at the camera. Because he does not beg, but rather offers nutmeg graters for sale on his deformed arms, he performs the deservedness necessary to a political economy in which charity is based on a strict moral calculus, although profit is not.

Although we are not yet queer in Victorian studies, we might follow the lead of these talented scholars to ask some queer questions about unfamiliar texts, too-familiar ideas, and the bodies represented in performances of ruinous sexuality, unacceptably ambiguous gender, and the disability of a beggar who cannot stand on his feet but stands up quite straight on his knees. Nineteenth-century texts perhaps had more courage, or suffered less of what Michel Foucault might call "division" (22), when it came to representing such bodies uncomfortably. Penises fail, the hermaphrodite won't choose an acceptable gender, and the nutmeg-grater seller is not lifted or carried or otherwise relieved of his impossible posture. The ethics of reading these texts require us to contend with difficulty, discomfort, pain, and the lack of a solution or resolution. Each performance refuses closure or relief. This group of essays asks us to look at our common being as crippled, hermaphroditic, and wearing-out bodies. Our longing for form, meaning, closure, and relief applies to our sense of physical sovereignty as much as to our readings of texts. In the damaged object—the unsparing portrait of the beggar on his knees, the unfinished novel maimed by a body that it cannot narrate, the dystopian porn text in which desire leads to dysphoria—we find our bodies and ourselves.

Prizel left the image of the nutmeg-grater seller up on the screen for a large part of her talk: we had to contend with him, to look at his knee pads, lovely hair, fine-featured face, and shriveled arms. Joudrey used the language of pornography to discuss it, shocking and delighting us into an awareness of our typical avoidance of the matter of sex even in conversations about it. Bedenbaugh did not try to refigure *The Hermaphrodite* into a new shape, to make it something more—more literary, more finished, more meaningful. These three scholars honored the difficulty of their texts and their refusals of relief.

Muñoz closes *Cruising Utopia* with a call to critical urgency: "This text is meant to serve as something of a flight plan for a collective political becoming. These pages have described aesthetic and political practices that need to be seen as necessary modes of stepping out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter" (189). If we are going to step out of this place and time and find a future that is more queer, with richer possibilities than the one we now inhabit, it is our job to think actively, collectively, and creatively about where these excellent, inspiring, and risk-taking young scholars will find it.

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