Finding Community in the Novels of Jean Genet

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In his seminal biography *Genet* (1993), Edmund White makes several comparisons between Jean Genet and Rimbaud, whose work strongly influenced Genet's. In particular, White observes that Genet often aligned himself with the poet as a fellow homosexual outsider, even paraphrasing Rimbaud in a conversation with Jean Cocteau: "You and Sartre, you've turned me into a statue. I have become an other", referring to Rimbaud's famous statement, "Je est un autre" (I is an other).[1] Genet was referring to the live burial he felt he'd received at the hands of Cocteau and Sartre, but his assertion is a useful starting point for beginning to think about the more celebrated representations of Genet's life in conjunction with the narrator/protagonist figures he creates in his early work.[2] As a declaration of marginality, Rimbaud's proclamation epitomizes the kind of profound social and symbolic alienation Genet experienced as an abandoned, illegitimate child, gay man, and vagabond/thief, as described by both White and Sartre in *Saint Genet* (1952). This in itself seems a fairly uncontroversial position, until one begins to consider the consequences inherent in representing oneself or someone else as 'other'. What is the cause-and-effect relationship between social alienation and critical self-distancing (some might say self-loathing)? And what kinds of literary fallout might one expect from this; that is to say, what price does one pay for reading a certain kind of otherness 'back' into Genet?

The answers to these questions are demonstrated when we examine the relationship between processes of queer identity building and recent interpretations of Genet's work, particularly White's biography.[3] The 'problem' for any queer theorist talking about Genet is to what degree one must address the alienation inherent in otherness as a form of gay self-hatred. Was Genet alienated from the gay community due to the fundamentally solitary nature of male homosexuality, as he claimed, and was this belief in part a product of internalized homophobia? Are the subjects of his novels the embodiment of a deep and profound self-disgust inherent to the gay experience? Certainly critics have depicted Genet's affection for straight men and the implied heterosexual male reader of his novels as part of the larger queer positivity problem identified in his work. To some extent these facts of Genet's life and *oeuvre* are treated by these critics as biographical/literary evidence that Genet's attitude toward his sexuality followed that of many men of his generation – self-flagellation overcome at least to some degree later in life. The position of Genet as *other*, in this reading, is not an *other* of his own choosing as much as a response to social alienation. The subjects

of his novels, according to such an interpretation, construct themselves in flagrant defiance of the symbolic order, but it is a defiance tinged with pathos, and one that wouldn't 'have' to be, were it not for repressive social conventions.

White's reading of Genet demonstrates just such an approach. In an essay for the *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, White notes that early in life Genet's "sense of solidarity with other thieves was certainly stronger than his links with other homosexuals."[4] This reading seems to be based on a cursory overview of the characters in Genet's novels, almost all of whom engage in some kind of criminal activity as pimps, thieves, traitors or thugs-for-hire. White ignores the homoeroticism that permeates virtually all the male relationships in Genet's fiction, particularly those depicted in *Miracle of the Rose* (1951) at Mettray, the juvenile penal colony where he spent two and a half years of his youth, and in prison. It is also questionable for White to present Genet's stronger allegiance to criminals as a negative aspect of his queerness, particularly when one considers that Genet spent a good part of his youth in prison and formulated most of his significant early romantic relationships during periods of incarceration – a symbolic conflation which led in part to his development of a Holy Trinity of theft, homosexuality, and betrayal, the defining conceit of his early work.

In contrast to this supposed sublimation of queer allegiance, White argues, "by the 1980s he'd come to respect their [homosexuals'] courage and revolutionary potential C although typically he reserved this greatest admiration for sex changes."[5] "Typically" White seems to imply, because sex changes are considered highly perverse and controversial, and are thus irresistible to Genet. However, White concludes, despite such "quirky" opinions, Genet was ultimately the most 'out' writer of his generation, and unapologetically so, two facts which make him (for White) ultimately a liberatory figure, though he acknowledges Genet never fully defined himself as a member of the gay community.

Presenting Genet's gay development as a linear movement – from self-hatred to some measure of peace with group identity – punctuated by idiosyncratic socio-political statements is an overly-biographical approach that fails to acknowledge the importance of non-coherence to Genet's work. I, rather, argue that the estrangement from notions of community and group belonging expressed in Genet's novels is part of the general pattern of interruption, antagonism and alienation from language and linguistic categorization that is Genet's primary motif. In *Genet*, White quotes an interview in which Genet hints at the distance between his works and social perceptions of them:

> *What is a homosexual? . . . . a man who by his very nature is out of step with the world, who refuses to enter into the system that organizes the entire world. The homosexual rejects that, denies*

> *that, shatters that whether he wants to or not . . . . To live with surprises, changes, to accept risks, to be exposed to insult: it is the opposite of social constraint, of the social comedy. . . . I reject deception; and if I've ever exaggerated and pushed my heroes or their adventures in the direction of what's frightening or obscene, it's been an exaggeration in the direction of truth*.[6]

There is a deeply subversive subjective incoherence at work here that White fails to pick up on; his concern lies with the more obviously liberatory aspects of Genet's remark. But Genet's rejection of deception implies something much bolder in that it suggests a more general truth lying behind the anti-social subject, a truth derived from a universal experience of private incoherences laid bare. For White the degradation manifested in Genet's work is of penultimate importance, as it signals to White a sure move away from a negative, radical incoherence toward a publicly-constructed, coherent, positive, political identity. This linear model falters as soon as one begins to examine Genet's novels in depth, as they resist the kind of coherence it implies. Turning radically back on themselves, Genet's narratives are structurally and thematically hostile to linear interpretations.

Sartre: Biography and Choice-Making

An excellent work for comparison to White is Sartre's *Saint Genet*, which highlights the importance of non-linearity in its examinations of the metaphors of onanism and death while still managing to subscribe to a kind of purposeful symbolic order, similar to White. *Saint Genet* notes, for example, Genet's use of waste as a metaphor for unproductivity and radical nonparticipation in the social order. Waste is, I would argue, one of the key metaphors of Genet's fiction, a metaphor that ties into Genet's use of onanism and the sterility of homosexual sex and creates an aesthetic that counteracts productive (hetero)sexual relations and coherent, productive subjectivities. Sartre sees the waste metaphor as important for Genet almost at birth: "The child [Genet] senses that a woman tore him from herself, alive, covered with blood, and sent him rolling outside the world, and he feels himself an outcast. Ever since his birth he has been the unloved one, the inopportune, the superfluous. Undesirable *in his very being*, he is not that woman's son but her excrement."[7] Here we see the nascence of Genet as universal subject with the potential for inauthentic Being-for-others; that is, he has the potential to passively allow those who label him 'illegitimate' and, later, 'thief', to decide his

being for him. Rather than dwelling on the importance of Genet's alignment of himself with waste, Sartre manages to turn Genet into a paradigm of fecundity: he argues Genet's initial isolation from the symbolic order quickly becomes the path chosen by Genet as the only authentic action available to him, given that escape from the label 'thief' is impossible as it is culturally always already inscribed upon his illegitimate being. Genet, according to Sartre, produces himself as thief, alienated homosexual, etc. in a reaction to his marginality. Sartre declares, "Evil is the Other. And it is himself insofar as he is for himself Other than Self. It is the will to be other and all that is Other. It is that which is always Other than that which is."[8] Here again Sartre recognizes the radical otherness taking place in Genet's 'Being,' but is more concerned with Genet's response to his 'othering' by the social order as an authentic existential act, than he is with the myriad radical possibilities Genet makes available.

The Genet of *Saint Genet* is almost godlike in his ability to control his own representations and those he presents in his novels. Not that Sartre believes Genet has any special access to existential freedom; rather, Sartre implies Genet is one of the few people who comes close to achieving it through authentic choice-making. For example, Sartre reads Genet as making the classic existential choice to become homosexual and become a thief. For Sartre, no one is born 'homosexual' or 'normal', and Genet's choice of homosexuality confirms his status as an outsider to the masculine social order by reflecting his choice to be a thief, "Having been caught stealing *from behind*, his back opens when he steals; it is with his back that he awaits human gazes and catastrophe."[9] This is similar, Sartre argues, to women's alienation from their more pronounced backsides, which can be seen by others before their owners can see them. Thus Genet's homosexuality is emblematic of his general inversion: "He was, as he has said, turned inside-out like a glove. Since he has been cast into nothingness, it is from nothingness alone that he wishes to derive."[10] It is generally accepted that *Saint Genet* is more a work of existentialist philosophy than an accurate representation of Genet's life, but Sartre's interpretation of Genet's motivation is nonetheless significant. The implication of Sartre's argument is that Genet's homosexuality (and his denial of community identity) is a defiant moment of social signification in which he participates in the same social system he defies, as a free, culturally understood subject. Sartre recognizes Genet as a free agent, but then ignores the most radical element of Genet's being and of his art – the non-coherence with which he presents his life/life's work (despite the importance of non-coherence to an existentialist existence), and the metaphoric significance of homosexuality to this

project. Sartre's Genet is still a Cartesian subject, presenting a definably defiant selfhood that participates in a coherent system of social signification.

This approach does not recognize the importance of Genet's unstable narrative structure and choices of metaphor as being anything other than part of Genet's free choice to order his own (literary) universe. Sartre elaborates his line of argument in his introduction to *Our Lady of the Flowers*:

> *The world has isolated him [Genet] as if he were pestiferous, it has cooped him in. Very well, he will intensify the quarantine. He will sink to depths where no one will be able to reach him or understand him; amidst the turmoil of Europe, he will enjoy a ghastly tranquillity. He rejects reality and, in order to be even more certain that he will not be recaptured, logic itself. He is going to find his way back to the great laws of the participationist and autistic thinking of children and schizophrenics. In short, we are confronted with a regression toward infantilism, toward the childish narcissism of the onanist*.[11]

Onanism is the leitmotif of *Our Lady of the Flowers*; the novel uses masturbation as a means through which to examine broader notions of homosexuality, authorial power, isolation and sterility. Sartre suggests that Genet uses the image of masturbation as a means of simultaneously bringing the reader close to his narrator, and alienating him – the reader – thus making the reader participatory in his fantasy and perhaps an unwilling voyeur as well. The broader purpose of this alienation/alliance, according to Sartre, is to create a masturbation fantasy through which Genet can order and control his own universe, which he can control from his jail cell as he cannot participate in/control the 'real' world outside his barred window. This fits with Sartre's image of Genet as the purposefully isolated subject, whose complex internal world is strictly ordered in opposition to the external one. And surely there is a place for this argument within ideas about the text, but I would argue Sartre's interpretation of the onanistic metaphor is overdetermined. Yes, observes the narrator 'Genet':

> *It was a good thing that I raised egoistic masturbation to the dignity of a cult! I have only to begin the gesture and a kind of unclean and supernatural transposition displaces the truth. Everything within me turns worshiper. The external vision of the props of my desire isolates me, far from the world*.[12]

In *Saint Genet* this narcissistic universe goes largely unquestioned, but it is far more problematized than Sartre would have it be. Sartre fails to examine this deliberate isolation from the world as an act in itself, both successful (in undermining linear narrative structure) and unsuccessful (in maintaining a complete isolation). Existentially, Genet's onanistic solitude as representative of the tension between choosing a Being-in-itself (fully self-contained) and Being-for-itself (authentic freedom); Genet's onanism could be construed as an inauthentic in-itself, but for the fact that Genet is using it to radically subvert the universal subjects 'thief' and 'homosexual', and the Christian-ordered symbolic hierarchy. Sartre notes that *Our Lady of the Flowers* proves the validity of his existential choice (and indeed his existence) to himself, as "the imagination *represents* objects to us in such a way as to incline our judgment in the direction we wish."[13] For Sartre, the narrator's masturbatory fantasies purposefully prove the plot of Genet's life as Sartre has written it: a life of chosen existential singularity, with a god-like author reordering the world from his jail cell, as Beginning and End. Thus, the novel is a representation of the 'objects' of Genet's life, which all lead back to Genet, are in and of themselves presented as relatively unproblematic. But *Our Lady of the Flowers* intentionally disrupts this type of reading. Masturbation fantasy within the text is not simply a feature of it; the narrator acknowledges his limitations in manipulating the novel's characters in what is supposedly his own onanistic reverie, thus calling into question the reader's trust in the underlying 'truth' of the narrative. Sartre says "Replace God by Genet and you have the universe of *Our Lady of the Flowers*, whose only reason for being is to express Genet – who has written only in order to be read by Genet C and to recall him constantly to love of Genet."[14] This implies a level of absolute authorial control and freedom that I would argue is deliberately undermined throughout the novel. Take for example Genet's alignment of his own identity as Jean Genet, author/narrator, with that of Divine, his protagonist. In allying himself with a character that he as author manipulates through the text (and a character who chooses to align herself with femaleness), he acknowledges a relinquishment of partial control of his text; language can elude and act upon him as it eludes and acts upon Divine. The narrator observes:

> *A mere trifle humiliated Divine. The kind of humiliation which – she was again Culafroy – laid her lower than the ground, by the mere power of words. Words again took on for her the magic of boxes empty, when all is said and done, of everything that is not*

> *mystery. When closed words, sealed, hermetic words, open up, their meanings escape in leaps and bounds that assault and leave us panting*.[15]

Genet's use of 'us' here is significant C in mixing first and third person pronouns throughout the novel, he asks the reader to question his reliability and power as narrator/author (an intentional conflation of roles). This is done in a more outright fashion when the narrator interrupts his narration in order to remind the reader of his situation in jail and admit the limitations of his authorial power. The story of Divine and her circle is thus interrupted and confused by the narrator's 'I' which insists on being heard, though the narrator suggests he cannot truly control what is written.

> *The altar undulated on a foul mud into which it sank: the murdered. Darling drew Our Lady toward him, and, the better to embrace him, struggled with him briefly. I would like to dream them both in many other positions if, when I closed my eyes, my dream still obeyed my will*.[16]

Here Genet seems to be hinting at the limitations of language and imagination in the construction of a narrative; his onanistic body, he suggests, at times acts without his conscious permission. He cannot entirely control it, just as he cannot control language or the reader and, I would argue, language cannot adequately represent him. There are hints throughout the novel of Genet as unrepresentable 'Other' who stands outside language as Genet the gay thief stands outside French culture, hints of a narrator whose subjectivity cannot be contained by the system of cultural relations that governs linguistic exchange.

Thus, the most notable feature held in common by Sartre and White is their reading of Genet's works and the author himself as paradigms of inversion. That is, both subscribe to a view of Genet as literally inverse of normative values. Both also read 'evil' representations of Genet's sexuality and the sexuality of his early works as a necessary (for Sartre, 'authentic') choice that allows the author to defiantly control his own representation rather than constantly seek escape from the inescapable social labels 'homosexual' and 'thief'. For White this authorial control is obviously a delusion that he argues even Genet is not fooled by. *Saint Genet*, in contrast, describes Genet as making the only authentic choice allowed him.

Alone together: Genet's communities

The common belief underlying these representations is this: when Genet presents himself, his love, his thievery, and his sex as holy by virtue of their defamation, this action is a simple inversion of the symbolic social order that in fact subscribes to the same system of linguistic representability as does the social order itself. Sartre says, "He is said to be 'contrary to nature'. But the reason is that, as far back as he can remember, nature has been against him."[17] And in Sartre and White, this symbolic participation ties back into their ultimate picture of Genet as the paradigmatic loner of his early works. Genet inverts symbolic representation and defiantly stands alone, having authentically chosen from the limited options presented to him by the social order. This, despite the fact that in *Saint Genet* at least, there are moments where Sartre seems to be hinting at the kind of unrepresentability I would argue is Genet's goal. Sartre writes, "Genet is alone in stealing. Later, he will know other thieves, but he will remain alone. We shall see that there is no reciprocity in the world of theft. This is not surprising, since these monsters have been fabricated in such a way as to be unable to make common cause."[18]

This is the case because Genet is investigating the hidden symbolic meanings behind common causes, not because there is no form of reciprocal communication at work. Questions of community and communication will be addressed subsequently; for now it is important to observe, in summation, that both White and Sartre regard the uncentered-ness of 'Genet's' subjectivity within the novels as simply the vicissitudes of the symbolic subject – 'Genet' is essentially reactive, and though as a subject he makes real and important choices, they are choices made within a symbolic context that ultimately validates said context. Sartre and White both support a vision of the author (and, for White, the gay man) as a publicly-presented, coherent political subject characterized by positive action in the world, and both are trying to make sense of Genet in this light.

Genet's work is about individual alienation from the symbolic order and the radical possibilities of the alone-ness of that relationship; but notions of community are integral to it as well. To assert that the Genet of his early novels isolates himself from any semblance of a queer community, as noted above, is to miss the obvious homoerotic communities of criminals, beggars, prisoners, and soldiers. Though these communities hardly match Western cultural criteria for queer positivity, the alliances they are comprised of make up what I believe are some of the novels' most important elements.

There are a few features common to all Genetian communities. First, it hardly needs pointing out that the typical Genetian community is exclusively male and that most of its members participate in a profession commonly associated with masculinity (thieves, soldiers, etc.).[19] Second, the Genetian community is a collective thrown together by the confluence of circumstance – they are men who meet begging in the street (as in *The Thief's Journal*) or through forced admittance into a prison community (as in *The Miracle of the Rose*). Another kind of arbitrary community, the nuclear family unit, has absolutely no place in Genet's fiction – Genet replaces it with the family of the prison, for example (and one can read this as part of Genet's inversion of religious iconography – his own Holy Family). Finally and most importantly, the Genetian community is a collection of individuals who are radically unalike, sharing only an anti-social identity. Genet makes a point of demonstrating in each novel the alienation these subjects feel from each other. In *Querelle of Brest* Genet at several points blurs characters' identities together, suggesting a kind of sameness, or communal persona ("The lines of their two bodies [Nono's and Mario's] met to form one continuous pattern, and this terrifying confluence blurred the individual shape of their heads and their muscular physique"[20]) only to subvert it later, as in the bracingly disconcerting scene where Norbert deflowers Querelle:

> *Querelle faced about. He had not been able to catch sight of Norbert's prick. He bent over, supporting himself on his clenched fists – one hand holding the belt – on the edge of the divan. With his flies open, standing facing Querelle's buttocks, Norbert felt himself to be alone*.[21]

This is certainly not the statement we are led to expect, as it works contrary to all traditional expectations of the scene of sexual deflowering, and more generally of descriptions of sexual activity. (Hetero)sex's place in symbolic discourse is as an intimate and profoundly connective moment between a man and woman, facing each other. Sex between Norbert and Querelle has on the surface none of this symbolism – there is a complete lack of mutual exchange, and the reader is privy only to Querelle's nervous thoughts ("What'll he say to me when it's all over? That's supposing he does want to talk"[22]), not to Norbert's. The overall sense is one of alienation during a highly intimate act and yet, by subtly aligning readers with Querelle in this scene through access to Querelle's thoughts, and by placing the testosteronal Querelle in the 'female' role, Genet asks us to more universally consider the loneliness and uncertainty of most first-time sexual experiences, and on a more theoretical level, the alienation of sex itself – a merging that lasts only as long as it takes to orgasm, and ultimately leaves two collapsed, isolated bodies in

its wake. This of course mirrors Genet's position in regards to the reader, which is an attempted merging that cannot quite reach the common, indistinguishable identity toward which he seems to be working.

The power relations that make up Genet's community are necessarily complex, as group dynamics usually are. What sort of system of masculine domination, to take Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, exists in an all-male community? *Miracle of the Rose* gives the reader a particularly clear picture: at both Mettray and the adult penitentiary, communities are strictly hierarchical and evoke comparisons to the encrusted, ritualized male hierarchies of the Catholic Church, a key institution in the perpetuation of male domination, according to Bourdieu, and as the dominant religion in France, a significant influence on Genet.[23] Power exists in both Catholic and Genetian hierarchies at every level, though Genet renders it obvious through the gender doublings and reversals his characters enact. Because of this, the metaphorical ladder of power in the prison of *Miracle of the Rose* can be upset and reorganized by a gesture as simple as the passing of a cigarette. At Mettray, the complexity of the gendered power relations between 'chickens' and their 'bruisers' is evident in the following passage.

> *Old Guépin himself once realized what it cost to touch the chicken, the kid, of one of the bruisers of Family B. He did not yet know who I was when one Sunday, during physical training, he dared punch me...because I had botched up a movement. Villeroy went up to the old man. His teeth were clenched and his thighs already quivering with the shudder that precedes the blow. 'You bitch,' he said, looking at Guépin*.[24]

Power exists in deeply gendered terms that are doubly destabilized here: first, because they are enacted in a space of ostensible sameness – the all-male community – and second, because of the narrator 'Genet's' own allegiance to the feminine. Villeroy is certainly the protector of 'Genet', and yet the young narrator already has a keen sense of his power over other, more physically imposing men: "he dared punch me". According to prison nomenclature Old Guépin presents an authoritative figure, yet his authority is easily called into question in Villeroy's angry "You bitch". Finally Villeroy, though obviously taking the dominant masculine role in his relationship with 'Genet' is nonetheless forced through 'Genet' to act on his behalf and take the punishment that results (though 'Genet' also takes "a sock" at Old Guépin on behalf of Villeroy because "I realized that something was expected

of me",[25] and both end up taking a month's punishment: again, demonstrating a communal solidarity based on anti-social and anti-productive behavior).

The communities depicted in *Miracle of the Rose* and those in Genet's other novels offer radical revisions and interpretations of the power inherent to all social roles. As Bourdieu explains it, gender divides the universe:

> *The divisions constitutive of the social order and, more precisely, the social relations of domination and exploitation that are instituted between the sexes thus progressively embed themselves in two different classes of habitus, in the form of opposed and complementary bodily hexis and principles of vision and division which lead to the classifying of all the things of the world and all practices according to distinctions that are reducible to the male/female opposition*.[26]

Genet's homoerotic, anti-social communities represent a creative possibility to bridge the gaps created by gendered division without resorting to a Cartesian humanism that ultimately reinscribes binaries via the humanist subject. For Genet, alone-ness is integral to community, not a separate entity. The communication implied by the Genetian community is unconcerned with basing itself on shared human characteristics, but is rather a radical antithesis best exemplified in the metaphor of the prison community, where the solitude of one's cell, far from creating complete isolation, instead constitutes the inmate as a part of the wider relational prison network involving the prisoners as individual subjects, as a collective anti-social group, and their guards. In Foucault's brilliant analysis of the effects of Bentham's "Panopticon" in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), he observes that in Bentham's prison model:

> *each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information,* never a subject in communication*. . . . The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities*. . . .[27]

Foucault's point here is that the prisoner is no longer acted upon bodily by the institution; rather, the solitude of his cell forces him to internalize his own surveillance. This would certainly seem to be the case; and yet, one cannot but acknowledge that communication does indeed happen, communication in the sense of a shared feeling of alienation, rather than the authority to 'talk back' or externalize one's own surveillance.

That Genet finds his family in the arms of the most outcast is perhaps not surprising, particularly if one attempts a biographical reading of his work and takes into account the early abandonment of Genet by his biological parents and later by his foster family. The prison community cannot be understood in the same terms as the biological family or the community 'France': it is a community that is the antithesis of these entities. It is not a group with allegiance to a flag (something Genet strongly distrusted) nor is it brought together out of a positive social contract – it is negatively organized, and anti-social behavior is a prerequisite for participation in it. It is a community, in other words, that is the reverse of a community.

Genet's erotic projects

In acknowledging Genet's use of doublings and reversals one must be careful not to falsely explain away the unique and potent eroticism of his work. I would argue there are two erotic projects in Genet's novels. The first is the clandestine sexual organization of prison culture, a queer community that Genet presents as beyond the understanding of the reader (this is its most erotic element – its unknowability). As the narrator says in the opening passage of *The Thief's Journal:*

> *Repudiating the virtues of your world, criminals hopelessly agree to organize a forbidden universe. They agree to live in it. The air there is nauseating: they can breathe it. But – criminals are remote from you – as in love, they turn away and turn me away from the world and its laws. Theirs smells of sweat, sperm and blood. In short, to my body and thirsty soul it offers devotion. It was because the world contains these erotic conditions that I was bent on evil*.[28]

The most important 'erotic condition' for the novels is that they depend upon some sort of normative culture for a negative response which then highlights the gulf of

distance between reader and narrative subculture. This provocative criminal erotica is almost immediately encountered in each novel, and is the textual element to which readers seem to respond most strongly. But it is the second erotic operation that is part of the novels' larger project: the eros metaphor as a means of understanding the non-logocentric means of communication Genet sees as critical to overturning the Enlightenment-inspired notion of a common humanity. This idea of communication implies the existence of a substance beyond what can be understood through discourse, and thus beyond what is realizable through discursive power systems. Genet's vision of community is not positively concerned about human welfare or dignity as much as it is suggestive of an 'other' element to experience. Like Bataille, Genet is deeply interested in what is at stake in intersubjective communications; unlike him, Genet does not propose that each subject enters the process from a place of common humanity. Genet proposes a community based upon difference, best understood through the erotic metaphor as an exploration of limits and acknowledgment of unalike-ness.

Genet's early work is at least in part an attempt to chronicle his exploration of the limits of relationality; in it, Genet wants to reach and explain this connective tissue of experience, but is beset by the limitations of language and the gulf of difference between narrator and reader. One can read in this struggle hints of Genet's first crisis of meaning, so to speak, which occurred in 1953 on a train. Genet realized that he was fundamentally the same as the man sitting across from him, so much so that they were in fact each other. He describes this moment of realization in "What Remains of a Rembrandt . . .":

> *The man had just raised his eyes from a newspaper and quite simply turned them, no doubt unintentionally, on mine which, in the same accidental way, were looking into his. Did he, then and there, experience the same emotion – and confusion – as I? His glance was not someone else's: it was my own that I was meeting in a mirror,* inadvertently and in a state of solitude and self-oblivion*. I could only express as follows what I felt: I was flowing out of my body, through the eyes, into his* at the same time as he was flowing into mine*. Or rather: I* had *flowed, for the glance was so brief that I can recall it only with the help of that tense of the verb . . . .*
>
> *Without ceasing to meditate, during the journey, and held in a kind of state of self-disgust, I very soon reached the conclusion that it was this identity which made it possible for every man to be*

> *loved* neither more nor less than every other*, and that it is possible for even the most loathsome appearance to be loved, that is, to be cared for and recognized – cherished*.[29]

Genet found this flash of insight depressing and impossible to forget – and also anti-erotic, as eroticism for him was dependent at least to some extent upon the notion of individuality. Regardless of whether his experience on the train had such enormous immediate results or has been exaggerated in its retelling, it cannot be denied that Genet's *oeuvre* underwent a significant shift following the incident. He stopped writing novels and became primarily a playwright, whose work focused more on social and political relations than on individual personalities.

It would seem that what I read as Genet's erotic attempt to textually embody the connectivity of human experience contradicts his experience on the train. If the concrete realization of humanity as a group of fundamentally alike beings was depressingly anti-erotic for Genet, how can the attempt to draw these relations be erotic? It is important to keep in mind that this was not Genet's final revelation on intersubjective relationality: later in *Prisoner of Love* (1986) he describes a second revelation that clarified and balanced the first. He writes of this transition:

> *The best-looking boys had the same value and power as the others, but no one had any power over me. Or rather I didn't notice it. I was completely swamped in the animal kingdom and the human race, and my own individual existence possessed less and less surface and volume. Yet for some time I'd realized I had one. I was me, not just anyone or anything. Around me the world began to swarm with individuals, single or separate, capable of entering into relationships*.[30]

Regardless of Genet's personal philosophical development, however, it is still valid to read his early work as suggesting a search for balance between sameness and difference, individuality and group relations. The model of intercourse as an attempt to join two people together is magnified and complicated in Genet's larger attempt to locate a fundamental relationality between subjects that exists outside of language. The metaphor of sex becomes even more applicable when one considers that the goal of sex, like Genet's broader goal, is ultimately doomed because the attempted 'joining' of sex must happen through the same limiting physical bodies, just as Genet's search must take place within the confines of

language. Leo Bersani hints at this in his essay 'The Gay Outlaw' (1994), in which he analyses Genet's statement 'betrayal is an ethical necessity' in relation to the non-procreative sexual acts of *Funeral Rites*, they are important to what he defines as Genet's proposal of 'nonrelational betrayal'. Bersani believes Genet uses the fundamental sociality of the anti-social act of 'betrayal' in combination with the non-regenerative act of anal sex, specifically 'rimming', to call for new, anarchic social relations that are both violent and deeply unifying. The idea of such a 'system', if it can be called that, can only exist through what Bersani calls 'homoness', as (hetero) sex is based on a notion of sex as a private, contained act whereas in male anal sex, two alike bodies face out into the world. Bersani argues,

> *The sodomist, the public enemy, the traitor, the murderer Y are ideally unsuited for such intimacies. Excluded from all triumphant communities (from the heterosexual family and the victorious Allies entering Paris), they are reduced, or elevated, to a kind of object or generalized ejaculation, the fucking of the world rather than each other*.[31]

This kind of radical narcissism Bersani sees as key to Genet's ultimate deconstructive project of destroying the culturally constructed system of relationality. I agree with Bersani when he observes that the metaphor of gay sex is intrinsic to Genet's approach to intersubjective relations, and that Genet seems to be hinting at something that exists beyond cultural/linguistic systems of understanding human relationality. That Genet grounds his project so firmly within the physical body means it is almost impossible to understand the philosophies behind his texts without locating one's own understanding of them in the body and in sex acts.

The implications of feminist narrative interpretations

It would be irresponsible to analyze Genet's creation of a bodily erotics without also considering the implications of some feminist critics' theories of narrative. Can one argue with Kate Millett that Jean Genet is adopting a female subject position in, for example, *The Thief's Journal*, and thus radically destabilizing the sex/gender link, and (more importantly?) is this what ultimately 'matters', so to speak, in the final analysis? Many feminists have written directly about Genet (Millett, Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous) but more fruitful for this project is Leah D. Hewitt's feminist analysis of narrative in *Autobiographical*

Tightropes (1990). Hewitt suggests that the writers Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Wittig, and Maryse Condé have produced 'autobiographical' 'fictions' (both contested terms) that attempt to challenge the masculinist autobiographical tradition through what Hewitt terms a 'dialogic narrative' in which the voices of the Other, 'alien' to the traditional narrative, exist alongside the authorial voice in a way which dismantles its power. Though each writer handles this task differently, considered together Hewitt argues one can recognize a pattern of feminist narrative challenges that cut through what one might term the logocentric approach: the assumption that a lived life features a level of representability and coherence that makes it relevant to the general population. Mastery of this logocentric approach "supposes a unitary subject remaining identical to himself" notes Hewitt.[32] The writers she considers instead locate and use the inherent breakages in conventional autobiography as a means of bringing in 'other' voices and destabilizing narrativity. Due to the nature of her query, it is not of great concern to Hewitt to make a hard distinction between 'autobiography' and 'fiction': she identifies her concern as being primarily 'personal writing', similar to Michel Beaujour's concept of the 'self-portrait', which, she translates, "'distinguishes itself from autobiography by the *absence* of a continuous narrative,' and organizes itself around a thematic or logical principle."[33]

Hewitt recognizes several key concerns for analyzing the autobiographical works of her five authors. Most evocative when considering Genet's novels in this continuum is the public/private dichotomy that haunts the 'woman writer': the blurring of woman's public and private space that occurs in a masculinist cultural economy where women's unpaid work is not considered as such, though vital to the success of a capitalist system. This, Hewitt argues, leads to a logic in which women's public speech acts are considered in some way personal because of the indistinct nature of women's public and private spheres. She writes, "because the public/private dichotomy in Western society tends to create fundamental distinctions between men's and women's lives – the public and private spheres being more clearly defined and separate for men than for women – the odds of being read this way [as always writing the personal, even when addressing public issues] are greater for women."[34] Hewitt warns her reader against the temptation to always address writing by women as 'women's writing' and she especially points out the critical error of allowing writing by men to remain in an ostensibly gender-free zone.

Hewitt's observation of woman's blurred public/private space has been made by many feminist theorists. My concern is the implications of the 'blurred space'. I would argue that is not a question limited to the 'woman writer'; rather

many, if not all, marginal identities are members of a global culture and economy that privileges certain kinds of work over others, and marginalizes those identities not positively associated with the ethos of the Capitalist/Protestant work ethic. Certainly Genet's dual identities 'thief' and 'homosexual' can be considered marginalized by this ethos – the former identity being quite literally anti-work (the thief detracts from the system of the production/consumption of goods) and the latter being anti-work in the sense of non-reproduction; that is, the gay man does not 'produce' as his sexual intercourse is non-generative.[35] Genet's dual marginality makes his 'public' actions blurred or unreadable in a manner similar to those of 'woman': because the narrator 'Genet' does not produce or consume properly, how can his speech acts be read and understood? I would argue that in his representations of the prison, Genet presents a third space in which his narrator and characters are able to question and re-vision public and private spaces, as well as divisions of gender and sexual roles. The prison is both public (it is state-run, and the inmates are ostensibly always being watched) and private (both because of the low percentage of prisoners in the general population, and because the incarcerated are generally cut off from contact with the rest of France). Genet seizes the opportunities offered up by this unique space to create a radical social community that coalesces because of their extreme, radically isolated identities, rather than a common sense of humanity.

The prison community presented in *Miracle of the Rose* is one example of Genet's embracing of negative identity construction:

> *In prison, when the sun that streamed through the window scattered the cell, each of us became more and more himself, lived his own life, and lived it so acutely that we ached, for we were isolated and were made conscious of our imprisonment by the brilliance of the fete that dazzled the rest of the world, but on rainy days it was otherwise and the cell was merely a shapeless, pre-natal mass with a single soul in which the individual consciousness was lost. What a sweet feeling when the men of whom it was composed loved each other*.[36]

On the next page, 'Genet' the narrator remarks of a sexual relationship at Mettray: "I deflowered my pimp."[37] In the first excerpt, 'Genet' can be read as communing with others across and indeed because of the gulf of difference between them, because of the unalike otherness that has drawn them together. In the second, 'Genet' and Villeroy, both participants in such a community, reinscribe gender

differences sexually upon their bodies in what is almost an anarchic challenge to the male/female binary and notions of public/private space. Taking advantage of the multiple ambiguities of prison space, 'Genet' and his fellow prisoners challenge what is considered 'public' and 'private', 'male' and 'female'. Looking at Genet's novels in total, the metaphor of prison best exemplifies what is true throughout the texts, regardless of whether or not their plots encompass imprisonment: the sense of negatively-constructed communities in which constructions of gender are laid bare through radical re-enactments.

Hewitt's primary concern is not the question of woman's public/private space, but the investigation of what she terms 'dialogic narrative'. This could best be classed as an anti-narrative narrativity that attempts to dismantle the terms and conditions of traditional narration. Hewitt argues that each of her authors creates a dialogic narrative in her work and that in doing so she captures the nebulous fluidity of identity construction and interpersonal relations and creates a protagonist whose subjectivity is characterized by a porous interactivity rather than developed through a linear process of self-formation in the style of a *Bildungsroman*. Reading this passage, I am put in mind of two very different but related theory/events: first, Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, so important to keep in mind, particularly when reading French women's writing; second, Genet's crisis on the train, and the elements of the crisis present in the fiction which precedes it. Hewitt's overall identification of patterns of dialogic narrative is indebted to Kristeva's action of the semiotic, as Hewitt acknowledges in several references. In comparing Sarraute's writing to the semiotic, Hewitt explains:

> *The semiotic emphasizes color, tone, rhythm, and (unconscious) drives that puncture the logic of linguistic representation (the realm of the symbolic) but it is also 'a psychosomatic modality of the signifying process' and is 'necessary to the acquisition of language*.[38]

The semiotic acts in contradiction to the symbolic order of language *and* is a necessary part of acquiring language. The multiplicitous nature of the semiotic and the ways in which it acts upon symbolic language are recalled for us in Hewitt's dialogic narrative, and in Genet's writing as well. The flux and inconstancy of human communion, critical to the semiotic, are present in Genet's experience on the train, in the constantly re-negotiated sexual relations of his novels, and in the textual thrust and pull of his narrative relationship to his readers. Genet and Hewitt's writers are writing responses to the smothering voice of traditional

narration that in their radical fluidity open the floodgates to a host of new ways of narrative being. The most consequential difference is the varying projects encompassing them: Hewitt's objective is to identify the 'tightrope' her writers walk between fiction and fact, whereas my reading of Genet concerns what I see as his creation of an anti-relational communication, epitomized in eros. To my mind, Hewitt is onto something when she observes, for example, the similar identity-destabilizing tasks in Sartre and Sarraute:

> *His description in* Being and Nothingness *of the 'look of the other,' that is, a violent struggle between individuals to assert their identities over/through one another, resembles the confrontations in Sarraute's novels between solid external identities created by others in the social contract, and the fluctuations, changes, and oscillations actually experienced by individuals as they engage in that social contract.*[39]

Narrating this struggle so that the rhythms of it are reflected in the oscillations of textual mood and style is also a task of Genet's; but Hewitt stops just short of relating the projects of her writers' to larger anti-humanistic ideals that I would argue are critical to understanding Genet's work. The negative self-construction Hewitt identifies in Maryse Condé's work, for example, can be read as paralleling Genet's own process of identification with negativity and waste. Hewitt argues:

> *If anything, Condé is more comfortable with critical (negative) constructions of the self, because for her, positive images so readily fall prey to simplification. In this context, realism is designed to evoke the multifaceted, equivocal stories of life, when there is no single model to follow, no transcendental truth to obey*.[40]

There are obvious significant differences between the textual self-constructions in Condé and Genet (the greater importance Condé places on racial identifications, for example), but their dual emphases on a critical negativity are part of a larger anti-humanist project I would identify as occurring in a 'queer' space of de- and re-constructed identity formation.

Reading Hewitt alongside Genet is helpful because it allows critical themes to emerge with which any responsible analysis should grapple. The issue of public and private space and the destabilizing use of dialogic models are

important to consider because they contribute to an understanding of Genet's novels as transgressive acts. These issues do not perhaps completely answer the question whether, despite his spatial and narrative blurrings, Genet's writing still participates in a solipsistic masculinity because of the biological fact of the author's genitalia and the privilege it accords, and the male universe his subjects inhabit? I think it can be demonstrated that this is not the case. As with Wittig, Millett, and many other feminists, the "body" is central to Genet's work, though not in an unproblematized way. In fact, one can ask of Millett, for example, whether her valorization of Genet's appropriation of the female subject position is too wholesale: after all, the use of female subjectivities within an almost entirely male context can be read as having the effect of erasing 'women' from the narrative picture. But this critique is also confining, as it ignores the importance of the ambiguous relationship of physical body to subjective identity, and the critical way in which Genet blends body/identity together. The importance that Millett places on this dichotomy hints at the bigger issue at work here: the relevance of the queer subject in relation to the social realities of gender categories. The queer subject is its own complex entity that, in Genet's work, comprises an existence beyond the definitions given it by heterosexist culture. The queer subject is always already a blurring of boundaries, of positionality, due to its place in mainstream cultural discourse as simultaneously unreadable/unknowable and as marked by conceptions of disease, perversion and infertility. In Genet these tropes are made manifest as he both elevates queerness as part of his reversed Holy Trinity and keeps it firmly fixed in the space of the physical body. It is because the queer subject as conceived in Genet is so concretely located in the corporeal frame that we can say provisionally that this subjectivity is not a solipsistic masculinity, but rather a model for queerness that inverts traditional paradigms and offers a means of examining later queer fiction written in the onslaught of AIDS.

Endnotes

1. Edmund White, *Genet* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993) 158-159.
2. By 'early work' I mean *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943), *Funeral Rites* (1947), *The Thief's Journal* (1949), *Miracle of the Rose* (1951), and, with noted exceptions, *Querelle of Brest* (1953), which is less overtly autobiographical than the previous four novels.
3. I prefer the word 'queer' when speaking generally about issues related to non-normative sexual representations to phrases such as LGBT or gay. Heterosexuality can be queer depending on context and manner of representation; I do not wish to fall into the trap of a normative gay sexuality carrying the burden of all sexuality, leaving heterosexuality as the blank screen against which supposed perversions of it are projected. When speaking of a specific act or a specific identity, however, I may use the word 'gay' or 'lesbian' for the historical and cultural meanings these phrases imply.

4. Edmund White, “Once a Sodomite, Twice a Philosopher,” *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 3 (Winter 1996) 15.
5. White, AOnce a Sodomite...” 17.
6. Jean Genet, “Fouillez l’ordure . . .”, interview with Robert Poulet, *Bulletin de Paris*, 19 July 1956, cited in White, *Genet* 197.
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: actor and martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1964) 8. First published as *Saint Genet: Comédien et martyr* in *Oeuvres Complétes de Jean Genet I*, 1952.
8. Ibid. 26.
9. Ibid. 80.
10. Ibid. 81.
11. Jean-Paul Sartre, introduction, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, (1966; Hertfordshire: Panther Books Ltd., 1973) 10.
12. Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers* 124.
13. Sartre, introduction, *Our Lady of the Flowers* 29.
14. Ibid. 43.
15. Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers* 130.
16. Ibid. 123
17. Sartre, *Saint Genet* 7.
18. Ibid. 41
19. The notable exception here is Madame Lysiane, in *Querelle of Brest*, proprietor of the brothel La Feria. But La Feria functions in the novel as another space of ostensible heterosexuality which is co-opted by queerness, and Madame Lysiane’s role is to some extent the manifestation of Genet’s deliberate disruption of the structures of traditional heterosexual relationships. Jean Genet, *Querelle of Brest*, trans. Gregory Steatham (1973; London: Faber and Faber, 2000). First published as *Querelle de Brest*, 1953.
20. Ibid. 31.
21. Ibid. 68.
22. Ibid. 69.
23. Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). First published as *La domination masculine*, 1998.
24. Jean Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (1971; London: Penguin Books, 1984) 114. First published as *Le Miracle de la Rose*, 1951.
25. Ibid. 117.
26. Bourdieu 30.
27. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; London: Penguin Books, 1991) 200-209, my italics. First published as *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, 1975.
28. Jean Genet, *The Thief’s Journal,* trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967) 5. First published as *Journal du voleur*, 1949.
29. Jean Genet, *What Remains of a Rembrandt Torn into Four Equal Pieces and Flushed Down the Toilet,* trans. Randolph Hough (Madras and NY: Hanuman Books, 1988) 13-16. First published as “Ce qui est resté d’un Rembrandt déchiré en petits canés. . .” in *Tel Quel,* 1967.
30. Genet, *Prisoner of Love,* quoted in White, *Genet* 661.
31. Leo Bersani, ‘The Gay Outlaw’, *diacritics* 24 (summer/fall 1994): 11.
32. Leah D. Hewitt, *Autobiographical Tightropes: Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig and Maryse Condé* (London: U of Nebraska Press, 1990) 47.
33. Ibid. 5.

34. Ibid. 19.
35. For clarity's sake it is important to note that I am speaking of thievery and homosexuality as constructed negatively within the *ethos* of capitalist productivity; certainly within the actual machinations of capitalism one cannot argue both thievery and homosexuality are co-opted (along with every social role) by the system. In essence, I am not trying to argue that thieves and gay men do not participate in capitalism but rather that their identities within the system are marginalized and presented negatively, as 'bad workers' if you like.
36. Genet, *Miracle of the Rose* 112.
37. Ibid. 113.
38. Hewitt 66, quotes from Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974).
39. Ibid. 57.
40. Ibid. 168.