

Creative Writing and Critical Thought I

Queer Theory/Queer Fiction

Carolyn Dinshaw and Garth Greenwell

The following exchange is the edited transcript of an event that took place at the Center for Fiction in Brooklyn, New York, on November 18, 2021. The conversation is the first in a series jointly sponsored by New Literary History and the Center for Fiction that brings together novelists and poets with literary theorists and historians to create a series of in-depth conversations about the state of literary practice and study in the contemporary world.

GARTH GREENWELL: Hello, everyone! It feels both strange and wonderful to be in physical space with so many people—thank you so much for being here with us tonight. I first encountered Carolyn Dinshaw’s work in my very first semester as a newly minted student of literature after having studied opera in a conservatory, having given up one life to try to claim another. I took a course on Chaucer with a man named Robert Stein at SUNY Purchase who insisted I read *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*. It has been thrilling to read and reread Carolyn’s work twenty years later, and to see maybe more clearly than I consciously realized how much ideas from *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, ideas that you’ve carried through the body of your work, set the points of my compass for thinking about queerness, aesthetics, negation, affirmation, all sorts of things that I hope we’ll talk about. But to begin: Carolyn and I received the title of this talk; it was not generated by us. And so we thought we might start things off by asking each other about our respective terms. So, Carolyn, what does “queer theory” mean? How do you understand it now as opposed to when you began your career?

CAROLYN DINSHAW: Well, if you feel weird at an in-person event for the first time in a long time, you know, I’m a medievalist. My authors are dead! But I will say it’s such a thrill to meet you. I read *What Belongs to You* in 2016 when it came out—I don’t even know how I came upon it, but probably through one of those fifty publications that recommended it—and I was just completely blown away by the beauty of the prose, the clarity and precision, the ambition to present—what do you say in one

essay?—what it is to face another person. I actually felt that you're doing even more than that: there's so much intimate intersubjectivity that happens in the reading of your work. For me it was sometimes hard to follow who is speaking because . . . who taught you not to use quotation marks? Was that Bob Stein?

GG: Why are you beginning by attacking me? I didn't know this was going to be that kind of conversation.

CD: [*Laughing*] You know, there's at times a melding of voices in your writing that makes it hard to discern who's speaking, but there's at the same time a real invitation to the reader to move into the interiority of the subjects and become a part of them. So that's one of the things that I value so much about your work, that intimacy that you provide. But to the question about queer theory. I know I'm the queer theory part of the show, but I've never thought of my work as queer theory or myself as a queer theorist. That designation has always been bestowed on me by others. Maybe that means that I just never know what I'm doing!

The first time that interpellation into the field happened was in the late '80s: a graduate student at Berkeley where I taught in the '80s and '90s—a brilliant graduate student named Simon Stern—was compiling a bibliography of this new emergent field of Lesbian and Gay Studies. And he put my article "Eunuch Hermeneutics" on that bibliography. Now, I was really surprised by that. I was intrigued. My article didn't have anything to do with lesbians or gays—modern sexuality, or lives, or identities, which is what I thought Lesbian and Gay Studies mostly dealt with—but what Simon had understood was that the piece was really straining against conventional gender binaries of masculine and feminine, which did after all have something to do with being gay or lesbian. That article actually formed the last chapter of *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, which was framed by those conventional gender categories, and I was trying in that final chapter to conceptualize (in response to one of Chaucer's characters on the Canterbury pilgrimage) a personhood that was beyond gender categorization. I wanted to *value* that personhood. So that was what Simon was picking up on, and in a year or two, that kind of conceptualization became increasingly known as queer theory. That sense of radical—everything was "radical" at that time!—uncategorizability became known as "queerness."

GG: That's fascinating to me. That, in a way, that brilliant essay—I have more to say about it later!—gestured toward a space that didn't quite exist yet.

CD: Well, surely you give that essay too much credit! But it turned out that I flourished in the space that I had been interpellated into: I loved the refusal of gender categories and the identities that they grounded. I found that very freeing. Particularly revelatory for me, and this came through reading *Gender Trouble* for the first time in late 1989, was not only the performativity of gender that is the best-known emergent concept from that book, but also Butler's idea of the heterosexual matrix. Do you remember that?

GG: I definitely read *Gender Trouble* back in the day, but I would need to review before the exam.

CD: With the heterosexual matrix, Butler is talking about an identity that requires the coherence of your gender, your desire, and your body morphology. And I thought that their analysis of that matrix and the attendant energy in trying to *disarticulate* those things and make room for new combinations, new possibilities for persons, was super exciting. Another thing that I really loved in that early moment of queer theory was an essay Eve Sedgwick wrote called "Queer and Now," which is published in *Tendencies*. In that short essay, Sedgwick puts the idea of the heterosexual matrix in an even broader context. She talks about how heterosexuality is part of this whole mechanism by which religion, the state, capital, political ideology, domesticity, all these discourses of power and legitimacy, all speak with one voice. And she uses the example of Christmas to exemplify that, which seemed so perfectly explanatory to me! She was writing in probably 1991 during the Gulf War and so on, and she pointed out the hegemonic heterosexuality of questions like "Will the hostages be free *for Christmas?*" (Or, now in our pandemic times, we hear questions like "Will we be able to travel *for Christmas?*") So I loved that analysis of the ways these institutions require this forced coherence. And what queer theory was trying to do was just to burst that apart and provide some air for some other possibilities. Just one quotation from Sedgwick. She asked, "What if instead there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other?" That's such a Sedgwickian turn of phrase there.

GG: Her work is full of beautiful and devastating turns of phrase.

CD: So true. This queer theory moment was indeed beautiful and devastating, a very charged time. While I was in intense conversation with students and colleagues, developing ideas like "queerness knocks signifiers loose, ungrounding bodies, making them strange," it was really

exhilarating. This was the mid-to-late 1980s, the very early 1990s, I was living in San Francisco, I was teaching at Berkeley, Michel Foucault had been there a couple of years earlier. (Butler wasn't teaching there quite yet.) And one thing that is really important to remember is that all of this exciting emergent academic work was fueled by the affect and the activism around HIV/AIDS.

In my own work as a medievalist, as I saw people and whole communities just dying, I wondered how we could find a way of using the past as a resource for community building now, so that's what I tried to develop in *Getting Medieval*. I refused linear history: we were refusing a lot of things, and linearity, that had to go. Teleology also! I developed in contrast this idea of a queer touch across time through which one could form a friendship, a kinship relation, a community across the ages. And that would be a resource for not only the present, but also the future. So, a reader's report for *Getting Medieval*, where I developed that, called me a queer theorist.

GG: Which brings us back to tonight's title. People are still calling you a queer theorist!

CD: Ah, yes—and back then I was flattered. I think medievalists are really susceptible to flattery because we're so often ignored! I thought the term was to be reserved for the big guys whom I've already cited. But what I'm trying to get at—what this aria is all about—is that for me “queer theory” is an historical term. It's very rooted in that early 1990s context.

Heather Love, whose work I know you admire, has said that queer theory was never expected to age. It was always just that thing of the now, of that particular period. The scholar Kadji Amin says that queer theory represented a particular moment wherein “same-sex sexuality, political urgency, and radical transgression” all converged. So, tonight's invitation to discuss “Queer Theory, Queer Fiction” surprised me. And once again, I didn't identify myself as a queer theorist. I'm not really hailed by that term. For one thing it's singular, “queer *theory*,” and one of the things that I'm finding significant in our moment of cultural production right now is an insistence on plurality, on multiplicity. I think of Fred Moten's trilogy called *consent not to be a single being*. So there's that problem with it. I think the “theory” part is also a problem because of the goal of abstraction away from the social. That's just not interesting to me, or useful in what I'm trying to do now, which is to find and explore different ways of being in the world.

One of the things that we kidded ourselves about back in the day was this idea that queer theory could emerge from anywhere and could be

done by anyone. *That's* a great theory, but in reality, queer theory emerged from elite academic institutions in the US and the UK by mainly white practitioners, and so it had a lot of weaknesses when it came to race, ethnicity, religion, body, ability, socioeconomic class. It was very limited in that way as well—limited by its situation of emergence, right?

GG: Right. As everything always necessarily is.

CD: I think now that what we might call “the field” is unfolding in myriad ways. One of the things that's happening, I think, is there's a return to identity. I mean queer theory was, at its core, radically anti-identitarian because identities—Saint Foucault told us—were the vectors by which power incorporated persons, right? But I think there's a return to identities because also at queer theory's heart there was always a very close care, an intimate relationship to lesbian and gay *lives*, and bisexual and trans lives to a certain extent. Now I think that things are coming around such that we're taking some lessons from queer theory, like the destabilization of gender binaries, or the institutional analysis of heterosexuality. But we're moving toward the arenas that queer theory wasn't able to touch. If I were to think of an appropriate rubric for what I think I'm doing, I guess it's “queer studies.” It could also be “queer thought” if we imagine “thought” as fully embodied. So that's what it means to me. If I turn the question back to you, Garth—you're the queer fiction part of our show. How do you feel about that term, and is it adequate to your sense of what you're doing?

GG: I feel like it's a question to which I have various answers, and the answer depends on the spirit in which the question is offered. When *What Belongs to You* came out, I was amazed by the ubiquity of the question, “Do you consider yourself a ‘gay writer,’ or a ‘queer writer?’” (The terms were used interchangeably.) Often this was phrased along the lines of, “Are you a gay writer, or are you a writer who happens to be gay?” And then when I would say, “Oh well, you know, I do think I'm a queer writer. Yes, that does seem meaningful to me,” then there would be the question, “But don't you want to be a writer for everyone?” And so a lot of the conversations around *What Belongs to You* for me were really about wanting to just set that particular question on fire and to insist that not only is it shadowed by a kind of densely impacted homophobic narrative about centers and margins, but also it makes a mistake about how art works.

CD: So annoying, to be backed into a corner that way by some phony “universalism.”

GG: Absolutely. I think the way that they were using this idea of the universal is just radically problematic and bankrupt. But there *is* a kind of universality that actually I do believe in, and that I need to understand part of my experience of art. Like, how is it possible that I can read Chaucer or Catullus or Sappho or Chimamanda Adichie or Yukio Mishima, and feel that not *despite* but *because* each of those writers is so extraordinarily devoted to particularities of time, of place, of bodies, of communities, they arrive at something that feels like it is teaching me about myself, and teaching me about some shared experience of humanness?

So I feel like there’s a legitimate idea of universality and an illegitimate idea of universality, and there’s a lot at stake in telling one from the other. If what I write is able to communicate across particularity, it’s not because it has somehow attempted to leapfrog particularity, to erase particularity, and write into this universal. It’s instead precisely because it is so utterly devoted to particularity. I mean, I had no idea what I was doing when I wrote my first novel. I was really just trying to write one sentence after another. But I certainly was *not* trying to package the value of the lives and communities I was writing about in a way that would make the value of those lives immediately legible to a mainstream. That was just not interesting to me. I didn’t want to write a user’s guide to cruising!

CD: Not even cruising utopia? I guess that had already been written . . .

GG: Oh yeah—a key text for me. I’ve said before that a certain professor at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop—a professor whom I revered and continue to revere—responded to my work by saying that it read like “a sociological report on the practices of a subculture.” That’s an exact quote, branded into my brain. It was an amazing comment to me, because somehow writing about men having sex with men in a bathroom or in a forest was “reporting on the practices of a subculture” for this professor, but writing about a rural congregationalist minister in Iowa was writing about universal humanness.

CD: Your theory of art as communicating across particularity is fascinating—and I like it all the more because it sounds so medieval! You know, Thomas Aquinas and his teacher Albertus Magnus were obsessed with relations between the universal and the particular, but then again, they used that distinction for some objectionable (to me, at least) ideological ends, too.

GG: I do think there's a theological dimension to the way I think about art, and especially about the way art is a meeting point between the particular and the universal. There's something about my sense of that that feels capital-I Incarnational. But anyway, all of this is just to say I absolutely wanted to claim this title of "queer writer," but on my own terms. But "queer" and "fiction" are both terms I want to worry at a little bit. "Fiction" is actually not a super meaningful term to me. I was not trained as a fiction writer. I always read novels voraciously, but I never read them with a kind of passionate identification in the way that I read poems, or in the way that I experience music, which were my two first educations in art. "Fiction" in general and especially "American fiction" are not really super meaningful to me as a context for my work. "Art" is a meaningful context for my work.

Like, if someone wants to try to think about the structure of *What Belongs to You*, I think they should look to Benjamin Britten's chamber operas. If they want to think about the structure of *Cleanness*, I think they would learn more from Schubert's *Winterreise* or Schumann's *Dichterliebe* than they would learn from James Joyce's *Dubliners*, you know? So, in that sense fiction is not meaningful to me but art is super meaningful to me.

CD: Yes, I get that. And those boundaries between artistic media and practices seem to be breaking down more generally, anyway.

GG: Let's hope so! Then there's the question of the queer side of it. In ways that you have profoundly explored in your work, queerness is a concept that at once constitutes identity and also dissolves identity. And that to me is something crucial to the idea of queerness. Queerness feels meaningful to me as a term of both experience—my lived identity and reality—and also art. Queer aesthetics feels really meaningful to me. One of my motivations for writing is to participate in what feels to me like a durably and continuingly vibrant conversation between artists across time, which is all that a tradition is. And that tradition of queer artists talking to each other across time—well it's just absolutely crucial to me. One reason I write is because I want to chat with Hervé Guibert and James Baldwin and Virginia Woolf.

CD: Totally what I was trying to theorize and elaborate in *Getting Medieval!*

GG: Exactly! And yet, if I try to be scholarly and rigorous and ask myself, "What do I actually mean by queerness?" it becomes very hard to say. I teach a course, a seminar, on queer aesthetics fairly often. That makes me confront the problem—like here I am, in a professorial role claiming to have a subject, and yet the bulk of the beginning of that class is about the fact that if I think there is anything I can categorically say is

definitional of queerness, it is that queerness is allergic to definition. If definition is necessarily about delimitation, about drawing lines, about saying what is or what isn't, then it seems to me that the minute we start trying to answer the question, "What do you mean by queer?" we have fallen into a kind of straight logic. We've given up the whole game if we start trying to say what is queer and what isn't.

But my favorite thing about being an artist and not a scholar is that I don't have to have an argument. I'm totally fine with saying I'm not interested in "queer" as a kind of logically defensible category, with a necessary and sufficient definition. I'm interested in affective allegiances and in libidinal impulses. When I teach queer aesthetics, I'm interested in what *feels* queer to us, and what as artists we can *use*. What inspires me? What turns me on? What feels affectively hot to me? And in some sense, I do think that if you allow yourself to fall into that definitional game, it can seem like, "Oh, but actually there's no 'there' there." Like if queerness is not exactly about specific bodies or specific bodily practices, if it's not exactly about sexual identification, if it's not exactly about who you sleep with—well, then you can say it doesn't mean anything, it can mean whatever you want it to mean.

CD: Does that bother you?

GG: That's an interesting question. Sometimes I think maybe queerness isn't exactly a real thing. And yet as an artist I can say with some authority it has real effects. Because what feels to me like queerness results in my definitely real books. And so maybe queerness is a kind of imaginary garden that nourishes real toads. And if that's the case, then as an artist I can say, great! And that in itself feels queer to me—to trust the affective, the libidinal, and then to insist that they offer sufficient authority for the practice of making art and the practice of making a life.

CD: There are a bunch of things that I want to ask you about, but first, let me dwell on a sentiment I'm picking up here to the effect of, "I'm so happy I'm an artist and not a scholar."

GG: Truly.

CD: And yet there's so much fascinating stuff going on in scholarship! Valorizing feeling, for example. Even very disciplinarily trained historians are recognizing the usefulness of educated guesses, of having a "feel" for the material. We scholars always deliver only the possible and probable; even the most rigorous scholarship does that. I'm thinking here of the

medieval historian Ruth Mazo Karras, who has recently written that when we don't have sources for, say, intimate aspects of lives in the Middle Ages, but we're really fully absorbed in what archives we do have, then there is room for imagination to fill in the blanks. So you get a book like Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, which presents a "cast of characters" and which uses precisely such educated guesses. I guess you could call this *fiction*, in this work that has been praised as a really substantial work of *history*.

One thing that really excites me about what's going on right now in scholarship is that I think that the line between, as Bruce put it in his introduction tonight, makers and scholars is definitely blurred. Bruce himself is a medievalist, an award-winning medieval scholar, who has written fictional books—historical fiction—of educated guesses. As a novelist he is completely steeped in the sources that do exist, and he can fill in what doesn't. So that's one thing I'm finding that is bringing our fields or our endeavors together.

When we were talking earlier you referred to a kind of writerliness in queer theory and queer scholarship. I know that an extremely important part of my scholarly practice is the actual writing, finding the perfect word. Sometimes it does feel like poetry! So, there's that aspect of artistry in scholarship. But this larger recognition of the use of imagination in scholarship I find so freeing and so, well, it's just honest. We're finally being *honest*, right?

Here's a question: one of the things that you said about universality and what you're really interested in is that you want to get to the representation of shared humanness. What about the character in *Cleanness* who says, "I want to be a thing. I want to be made an object. I want to be a hole"?

GG: And "I want to be nothing."

CD: And "I want to be nothing." Right: *I want to be nothing*. There's a kind of mystical negativity going on there. But we could also talk about what it means when a human says, "I want to be an instrument" or "I want to be an object." Because there's really interesting work going on in scholarship that is demonstrating the embeddedness of the human in the nonhuman, and actually the inseparability of the human and non-human. Could you just talk about that? "I want to be an instrument." I think you talk about the exhilaration of being made an object?

GG: Well, a few different things. First, when I say that I'm hugely grateful not to be a scholar—I'm also very grateful that scholarship exists!

I'm glad that people are doing it and writing books that I can read and bask in. And I'm also very glad that I gave up my own attempts to write those books—that I found a form that's more congenial for the way my brain works. I absolutely agree with all that you say about the boundaries between scholarship and art making—that they are porous and inexact. Really it's the endeavor to try to make sense of our lives—to try to make meaning—that this is about. I do see in recent scholarship a sense of dissatisfaction with the way that disciplinarity can cut us off from many of our human resources for trying to make meaning. And I think the same thing may be happening in a certain kind of fiction that's much discussed at the moment, what's sometimes called "autofiction"—which I think is a pretty silly term. It's just a way of talking about a number of writers who are interested in what is actually the oldest game in literature; it's nothing new. But let's say fiction marked by a kind of blurring of invention and noninvented fictionality, and also by incorporating the essayistic into narrative prose. That process on the fiction side of things, that too feels like claiming some of these human resources we have for thinking about meaning.

CD: That's kind of what I was getting at when I said we (scholars) are finally being honest.

GG: With what you say about negativity—I guess I feel that any kind of thinking about meaning that's going to feel genuine or legitimate or earned to me has to acknowledge nonmeaning. It has to acknowledge the always-present possibility that we are telling ourselves stories in the dark that point nowhere. Maybe because it feels like such a negative time we've been living through, and also because I think just temperamentally there is an awful lot in me that wants to say no to life, I've been thinking a lot about affirmation, and about the fact that something I need desperately for art to do is to give me a reason to say yes to life. And actually I think that's crucial to art, to the work art does, to the way that art helps us live: it gives us a reason to say yes to life. But for that yes to be meaningful—for that yes to help *me* say yes—I have to feel in it the no it has passed through. I can't feel that it's turned its back on negation; that it's turned its back on the abyss; that it's turned its back on the meaningless nihilism that undergirds us all. I need to feel instead that it's faced up to that negation and passed through it and somehow found in negation a source of affirmation. And yes, I've found mysticism and apophatic theology—the *via negativa*—helpful for thinking about this. What I hope *Cleanness* dramatizes is finally this great deconstructive truth, which is also the apophatic truth, that in cleanness we find

filth and in filth we find cleanness. That these lines we draw and these categories we build, these concepts we organize our sense of reality by, that in fact they're always falling apart. And there's something terrible and also something hopeful in that.

CD: One of the most purely beautiful and utterly moving things I've read in a long time comes at the end of "The Little Saint." In that scene you describe—in minute detail—a night of rigorous and extreme practices of sexual self-renunciation and annihilation, cruelty and dominance. It leads to a powerful affirmation, through (as you just said) grief and melancholic self-isolation, toward the care of the other. After an incredibly intense scene of sex, the narrator breaks down, turns away from the man he's been fucking and weeps, then sobs—but the man, having experienced joy at last, takes the narrator in his arms. "Don't be like that, he [the man] said again as I put my arms around him. Do you see? You don't have to be like that, he said. You can be like this." So simple and so free: *You don't have to be like that. You can be like this.*

GG: It's very moving for me to hear you say that. Thank you. I think that moment is the closest I've been able to get to the kind of process I'm trying to describe. Those men have plunged into the depths of filth together, and what they find at the very bottom—as close to the bottom as they can get—is a radical cleanness, something like grace. The possibility of an entirely different way to live.

So, Carolyn, in trying to think about what excites me in queer art, in queer aesthetics, it was incredibly helpful to me to reread your three books. As I said before, I think there are ideas that go through your entire work, including what you're working on now—which is very different work on mirages—that have been formative for my whole life as a thinker and an artist. Your essay "Eunuch Hermeneutics" is something I think everyone should read. I mean, I feel like all of you here tonight have already read it—and if you haven't you have to run home and read it. It really is just one of the most tremendous pieces of thinking I know. But it's funny, because you say, "Well that's not really an article that has to do with lesbians and gays." Whereas I feel that it is the article that for me was so clarifying about what queerness is. The idea of eunuch hermeneutics, just to gloss it really quickly, is a kind of meaning making that recognizes meaninglessness, a kind of object formation that recognizes the partiality of all objects. You have this wonderful distillation of eunuch logic, which is *je sais bien mais quand même*. "I know well, but even so." You're quoting somebody but I've forgotten who.

CD: Octave Mannoni, a French psychoanalyst.

GG: Thank you! For me, there's something in that—I know this thing is true about reality, *but even so* I'm going to turn to the fictional, to a counter reality, and affirm something, *even though* I know that affirmation is not *exactly* pointing to “the truth,” or to “wholeness,” or to “cleanness,” or to any of these ideal categories. That idea of eunuch hermeneutics seems to me a way to recognize a kind of fundamental brokenness in the world, in humanness, in meaning making that does not fundamentally cut us off from the world, from humanness, from meaning-making. And then also another thing all of your work has been about is—

CD: I love this.

GG: Can you believe this guy telling Carolyn Dinshaw what her work is about! I'm sorry, it's insufferable. But I really do feel that encountering your work when I was very young and just forming myself as a literary person set me on a particular path. Which, by the way, Bruce did not know when he thought of putting us together. Out of the blue, I got this email saying, “Would you be interested in the conversation with Carolyn Dinshaw?” And I said, “Would I!” I was so excited.

CD: But can I just make a parenthesis here? You know there's a pretty famous medieval poem called *Cleanness*.

GG: There is, indeed!

CD: I've been straining to find relationships between that and your work, and I think they can be found, but I think it is a coincidence.

GG: No, no—it's not a coincidence. The Pearl poet is really important for me. Very much so. But that idea of cleanness—so, in case any of you don't know, *Cleanness* is a medieval poem. Strangely, no interviewer ever asked me about it! But it's a medieval poem that recounts several biblical narratives, including, very importantly, the narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah, which is, to me, the nightmare vision of cleanness. That's where holding a certain kind of commitment to cleanness leads. It leads to a scorched earth, where nothing can live. I don't think that my book is in intricate conversation with the poem, exactly, but it was not coincidental.

CD: Just FYI, *Cleanness* is an editorial name because, you know, medieval poems weren't really given names.

GG: Don't take it away from me, Carolyn.

CD: It used to be known as *Purity*.

GG: Carolyn, stop! Jonathan Franzen wrote that book! Though actually that's interesting, because in almost all the languages *Cleanness* is being translated into, "purity" is the only available term. Which of course is very different from cleanness. But it's *pureza* and *purezza* and *pureté* and *Reinheit*. It's a little sad, because I love that English has a word that feels very different from either "purity" or "cleanliness."

But I was going to say quickly the other super exciting thing in queer aesthetics that your work has engaged with is affective connections between the present and the past. And that idea of being led by desire, being led by affect, to touch something in the past and finding there something that allows us to live in the present and imagine the future. When I look at a dancer like Kyle Abraham, or a performer like Taylor Mac, or a writer like Brandon Taylor, when I look at so many queer artists, I see that impulse to turn to the past as a way to help us see the present and imagine the future. Speaking of time, I cannot believe how late it is, Carolyn.

CD: I can't believe it either. We had this whole itinerary.

GG: But this also happened in our Zoom conversations. Like we would start talking and then two seconds later I would say, "Carolyn it's been an hour, what has happened?" But we do want to have some questions—

CD: From the audience. Can we take five minutes, and let's see, give some ideas of what we would want young people like our students to read in these very troubled times?

GG: I definitely want to take down your list, yes.

CD: Okay, and I want to hear your list, for sure. I thought of four books. Audre Lorde's *Zami*, because I feel it's just inexhaustible. I think the history that the narrative imparts is so important; the book actually performs the development of Black feminist thought and Black lesbian thought. But also, she narrates her experience of an illegal abortion. And you know, unfortunately, that's—

GG: Very timely.

CD: It's very timely indeed. Also, the idea of difference arises so organically and is lived so fully in her narrative: she writes how to live in what she calls "the very house of difference." That is—well, it's like deconstruction in another—a lived—register. So *Zami*. I would also recommend *Close to the Knives* by David Wojnarowicz.

GG: Very close to my heart.

CD: Yeah, that kind of rage and love and intensity seem more and more relevant, now that we're back in the culture wars again. Can you believe it? Wojnarowicz's commitment to action and activism are utterly compelling. His commitment to love. And also, students need to know about the AIDS crisis. They really need to know that history! Then there's a book by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney called *The Undercommons*. Do you know that one?

GG: Oh yeah, definitely.

CD: Such a rousing manifesto for finding subversive intellectual spaces in—what do they call it?—"the inner outside" of the university, and for recognizing that exploitive labor policies demean everyone's labor in the university. Finding how to think for and with others. And trying to find different ways that the unpredictable can happen. So that book, especially for graduate students. And then for everlasting love, I would say *The Prophets* by Robert Jones, Jr.

GG: Interesting! It was just a finalist for the National Book Award.

CD: The ending is so coruscatingly beautiful, it's still in my mind. The book's centering homosocial relations and homosexual, same-sex sexual relations within chattel slavery in the US is just brilliant and important and very moving. That's my list. What is your list?

GG: So, I'm not going to give a list. I'm constantly making book recommendations on social media, so you can find them there. But also in our planning sessions we imagined that we were going to end by talking about teaching. And I was actually not going to talk about "what" I teach but instead "how" I try to reimagine what a workshop can be. A workshop is a class where the bulk of the material is not provided by me, but by students. I'll just say that I'm very suspicious of the workshop model. I'm very suspicious of the ways in which authority is formed within the traditional workshop model. And so I spend a lot of time thinking about ways to teach workshop that try to break that down. But I would really love to take at least a couple of questions, if anybody has any.

GG: I feel like in the very few live events I've done just on the other side of lockdown, the dreaded pause before the first question is now much longer.

Hi. Garth, you mentioned at the beginning you were trying to find a connection between the particular and the universal, and when you were talking about that I was thinking, "Oh, the real." Maybe that's the thing that connects the two. Because the real is very particular, and reality is universal. So I was wondering what relation your work had to the real, and especially when you were saying similarly that you don't ascribe to a fiction identity, but I was wondering what relationship your work has to reality? And to Carolyn, as a kind of a side note, why does the academy struggle so much with using the category "real" rather than, say, "realism"? What relationship do you think reality has in the academy and in scholarship today, and what kind of struggles does it find there?

GG: You know, I want to utterly reject the idea of "reality." And it's funny because as you were speaking I was thinking, "Wow, that does absolutely follow from what I said." And yet—*mais quand même!*—absolutely not, no. I really do question our access to a kind of reality that we could all agree is there and experience in the same way. So, in some sense, I would want to really trouble the idea of "the real" or of "reality." But the problem is that when you talk about "the real" in that way, I imagine something that escapes subjectivity—and actually the kind of humanness that I feel in art is super saturated with subjectivity. So it's not like it gets us to some object out there. It's instead about, again, how we make meaning in ways that feel recognizable across great gulfs of distance, of difference. But Carolyn, what would you say about the idea of the real in reality?

CD: Well, usually, when people pose questions that include that word they're talking about "the real world" versus the academy.

GG: Oh interesting, right.

CD: And I think this is actually a really big deal. I wouldn't use "the real world" but I would think in terms of the public. There is an emergent field called Public Humanities, for example, and there's something called Applied Social Sciences as well; I think these fields are trying to address what our questioner called "the real." For me, I think that all humanities are Public Humanities. This is kind of my thing: ideas of the public frame all our work, and yet we don't really acknowledge that; we are privileged to pursue our passions, but we don't often answer to the publics that inform our work, the idea of who actually constitutes our disciplines. So thanks for the question, because the nonacademic

public is increasingly important now as higher education is less and less valued; it is assessed solely in terms of its value proposition vis-à-vis employment, without acknowledging the value of what it can be, a search for our shared humanity.

GG: You know this makes me think of one of my favorite lines in your books. You're talking about those ridiculous congressional debates in the 1990s around funding for the arts and the humanities. And some republican senator scoffing at the idea of giving money to support a program studying Gregorian chant.

CD: Yes—a database for Gregorian chant.

GG: There's this wonderful line where you say, "[Just imagine] a grown man who does not know the value of studying Gregorian chant!" And I just thought, "Thank you, Carolyn Dinshaw, for speaking for me." Absolutely. Something that I think about a lot is the trap of relevance. This idea that we can know what we need from art before we experience it, or that we can read the back of a book or the description of a movie and say, "Oh, that's going to help me live or it's not." Well that's not how art works, you know.

CD: And that's not really the way learning works.

GG: That's exactly right.

CD: I think you know that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in *The Undercommons* say, let's get away from teaching as mere knowledge production. Because we can't know in advance what is going to be important.

GG: Totally, totally. I wonder if we have time for one more question, maybe just to get at least two other voices in the room.

Hi. Garth, a lot of your work explores the nature of consent in the gay community, which is something I cherish because I feel like it doesn't get written about enough. But I'm wondering from you if you believe that this generation of gay men is due for their own #MeToo-like reckoning.

GG: Well, that's a devastating question.

CD: [*Looking at watch*] Do you do you think time's up?

GG: I would love to answer that question responsibly, and I'm not sure that I can. As always, I feel super contradictory things. Very early in the eruption of the #MeToo movement I got an email from some glossy magazine saying, "Garth, we want you to write a hot take"—they actually said "hot take"—"We want you to write a hot take. We want the gay #MeToo essay." I said absolutely not. Because a hot take can't accommodate everything that would need to go into really thinking about the question of consent. There's the question of the extent to which our desires are knowable, there's my commitment to respecting the sovereignty of other people, there's my own experience of the violation of that sovereignty, and there's also my cherishing of ways in which desire has been educative for me because I could not know what I desired until I was pushed into the desire for it. There's also the centrality to my own sexual life of spaces in which one can experience the terror and *also the exhilaration* of a performance of nonconsent within an aesthetic frame, like an S&M encounter. How do you fit all of that into a hot take? Or my sense that there are historically specific cultural forms of queer life and queer eros—maybe especially around cross-generational relationships, educative relationships—that have become very hard to think about in the fullness of their complexity.

Teaching both graduate students and undergraduates I'm often surprised—well, I'm surprised by the response to all sorts of texts, but I was recently surprised in an undergraduate class when Alexander Chee's utterly brilliant, gorgeous, incredibly nuanced and careful novel *Edinburgh* broke my class. Because my students—who were very thoughtful, wonderful students—did not have a conceptual apparatus that would allow them to see the complexity of the relationship in *Edinburgh* between a twenty-five-year-old man and a seventeen-year-old adolescent. They were deeply disturbed that the book did not clearly and finally condemn that relationship and give them a stable ground of righteousness from which to judge it. But you know, for me, the whole point of art is to *take that ground away from us*.

What I realized, as I was trying to understand the intensity of my response to the request for a hot take on consent and queer relationships, is that they wanted something that would provide such a ground, that would draw a clearly legible, stable line between righteous and problematic. But I'm not sure I think righteousness is ever an ethically adequate position. In any case, consent is one of the questions that for me, because of the way I'm made, I need art to think about. None of my other tools will let me think about a question like that in a way that could feel adequate to my sense of complexity.

And so my—I hope it’s the opposite of a hot take, my cold take, my very long, slow, tepid, ambiguous, ambivalent cold take on consent in queer relationships is the last chapter of *Cleanness*. That was not written in response to #MeToo, but I tried to do my best to think about consent and what consent means and where it’s crossed and what it means if it’s crossed. And what it means if you can’t know if it’s crossed. Other chapters of *Cleanness*—obviously “Gospodar” and “The Little Saint”—are about that too. I need fiction—the pressure of scene, the kind of heat-seeking syntax I’m drawn to—to think about a question as difficult and profound as the one you asked. Carolyn, did I do a good job of not answering that question? I was trying really hard not to answer that question.

CD: No, I think that was a really full and beautiful answer.

GG: Thank you, everyone. Thank you so much.

CD: Thank you.

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