theories and methodologies

Waiting for Someone to Argue With

KYLE C. KAPLAN

WHILE THUMBING THROUGH SUSAN SONTAG'S COPY OF THEODOR W. ADORNO'S *MINIMA MORALIA*, I FOUND THE STIRRINGS OF AN ARGUment. Sontag responded to Adorno's twenty-fourth fragment, "Tough Baby," by writing "machismo ↓" next to the first line. Her annotations continue on the following page alongside Adorno's concluding remarks:

> In the end tough guys are truly effeminate ones, who need the weaklings as their victims in order not to admit that they are like them. *Totalitarianism and homosexuality belong together*. In its downfall the subject negates everything which is not of its own kind. The opposites of the strong man and the compliant youth merge in an order which asserts unalloyed the male principle of domination. In making all without expectation, even supposed subjects, its objects, this principle becomes totally passive, virtually feminine. (46)

In addition to her underlining, Sontag writes "(male)" in the right-hand margin before Adorno's "homosexuality" and then briefly reflects on his claim in the left-hand margin: "True?? yes."[1]

"Tough Baby" exhibits Adorno's penchant for layering succinct observations so that they suddenly crystallize, exposing the inexorable force of the kinds of social domination that structure our lives. Reading over Sontag's shoulder, I feel convinced by Adorno's dressing down of autonomous he-men as needy bullies. But, as others have commented, it is hard to stomach his dependency on homophobic stereotypes and his equation of femininity with passivity (Hewitt; Rycenga; Halle). Sontag's affirmation ("True?? yes.") also reminded me how often similar thoughts appear throughout her archive. Even before she purchased *Minima Moralia*, Sontag recorded a similar idea on 3 September 1972 in her diary: "Connection between male homosexuality and fascism, between Puritanism and communism: sex + politics."[2] In an entry from 21 January 1978, she corrects herself in the same way she qualified Adorno's maxim, by changing "Homosexual" to "Male homosexual" in the following observation: "Male ~~H~~homosexual 'world' ~~gave itself~~ abandoned the gentle/bitchy

KYLE C. KAPLAN is a PhD candidate in music studies at Northwestern University, where he also serves as a Mellon fellow with the gender and sexuality studies program. His dissertation, "Intimate Critique: Music, Collaboration, and the Romance of Identity," examines the influences of interpersonal attachment on mid-twentieth-century debates about musical modernism.

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homosexual (the 'fairy,' 'fag,' 'fruit'—compulsively attending to his sexual needs)—+ gave itself over to lechery, vice and sexual manias." On 20 April 1980, Sontag's initial thought of "an essay w/o ideas: description, + modulations of description" is immediately rejoined by the following fragment:

> The masculinization of homosexuality—h's no longer alienated; no longer identify with culture (against nature). Being h. no longer facilitates a critical attitude to society. Now h's ~~have~~ affirm some of the worst, + most conventional, tastes of this society: sexism (hatred of women), consumerism, brutality, promiscuity, emotional dissociation. ~~The only a~~ Not alienated but (self-ghettoized): The notion that good experience is extreme experience. Hence, drugs are necessary. How else could one disco for 8 hours or practice sexual abominations which are so painful.

Sontag ends up reading like Adorno both in substance and form. Her critique of masculinization relies on the accumulation of succinct observations that cohere into an arresting but ultimately reductive diagnosis.

Sontag's comments are prescient because contemporary queer communities—activist, academic, sexual, or otherwise—continue to grapple with the exclusions and injuries caused by those who still affirm "the worst, + most conventional, tastes of this society." I find her comments difficult, though, because they rely on overgeneralized and clumsy caricatures, their tone is judgmental if not prudish, and the ugliness of their truth is not easily forgotten. Especially given the gauzy promise of an "essay w/o ideas," her description of homosexual men shifts unexpectedly toward sharp, base insights: gay men are misogynists and anal sex hurts. In short, Sontag's descriptions do not gently undulate like some kind of erotic poetry—instead, they calcify gut reactions. Mena Mitrano argues that Sontag's unvarnished diaries and annotations are key to her largest critical project. "Encountering Sontag in the archive," Mitrano claims, "means following her longing to withdraw from rhetoric, dogma, and thinking imagined as 'possessing'" and to descend "towards 'the situation of thinking'" (6). Although she never completed a planned essay about Adorno, Sontag repeatedly found this desire to descend into his thought, and, as Mitrano points out, she took the time to tape photocopies of excerpts about writing from *Minima Moralia* into her diary. I think it is equally telling that Sontag also collages a trio of fragments on women's subordination from *Minima Moralia*, signaling an unwillingness to let go of a hope that even scrappy, hastily crafted thought can become a blunt force to change the world. Her argumentative strategy, for me, is prismatic, suturing critical insight to rigid flecks of description that are fluidly arranged.

Pardis Dabashi invited the writers in this section to consider how academic argument so often calcifies hunches into convictions, and Sontag's comments embody the tension in this process. On the one hand, Sontag's remarks retain the diagnostic bite of critical theories designed to name the toxicity in a given community and then attempt to reckon with that toxicity through clear, forceful argumentation. On the other hand, the slow accumulation of these observations over several years, and Sontag's unwillingness—or more likely disinterest—in coalescing them into a systematic analysis, align with a postcritical ethos that, per Heather Love, flirts with thin, sociological observation as a critical method of description. I would like to hold on to this tension in order to parse some of the ways that an individual judgment (True?? Yes) becomes an argument between people. I suggest, further, that that leap is made largely by way of qualifying descriptions ("male" homosexuality), which simultaneously intensify and abstract that which is being described.

I use my encounter with Sontag's archive to briefly reflect on the status of argumentation in queer studies, which has recently

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questioned and redefined its theoretical and methodological commitments to antinormativity. Part of queer theory's initial strength and institutional success was its ability to synthesize both sides of the critical-postcritical divide, in the sense that it provided a legible, communal site for people to call for the radical dissolution of binaristic and normalized habits. And yet with time, antinormativity has been conferred vast amounts of intellectual, cultural, and material capital to the point that scholars have questioned its viability as a critical stance (Caserio; Halley and Parker; Berlant and Edelman). Recourse to antinormativity's love of saying no—to heteronormativity, to subjecthood, to sociality—has become so unreflexive and predictable that for Mari Ruti it is now one of the "bad habits" shared by all strains of progressive critical theory (Ruti, "Bad Habits"). I agree, and I heed calls by scholars like Ruti and Lynne Huffer to reassess the ethical underpinnings of queer critique. In what follows, I stage Huffer's and Ruti's arguments in an effort to draw attention to the solidarity that can exist between calls to action whose argumentative styles sound distinct.

Sontag's comments may predate discussions of queer antinormativity, and her writings generally appear only on the outskirts of the queer theory canon, but her engagement with Adorno nevertheless provides an alternative model for critique that suffuses negativity with a desire to remain connected through conversation. Huffer has stressed the importance of such models, arguing in *Are the Lips a Grave?* that there is an ethical need to reconsider queer theory's foundational investments in asocial or nonrelational models of antinormativity. "Any theory—including queer theory," she writes, "has an obligation to examine the conditions of possibility of its own speaking position *as theory*, where theory is defined as a set of truth claims that, by virtue of their utterance as theory, move away from particularity toward generality" (69). Keeping in mind Sontag's descent into the "the situation of thinking," I believe it is valuable to think about how theory's generalizations elaborate and modulate description, a process I contend is best captured by a sense of waiting. José Esteban Muñoz reminds us that waiting, at its most poetic and hopeful, is a utopian sensibility queers are accustomed to, since they have located their hopes for some distant, other time on a far-off political horizon. But more often than not, the kind of waiting I am thinking of is built into the foundations of professional academic life and conduct: waiting to be called on, waiting for comments, waiting for acceptance e-mails, waiting for rejection e-mails, waiting for postings about potential jobs, waiting for tenure decisions. As somebody more familiar with the first five items on this list, I am acutely aware that my waiting is accompanied by fear that there is nothing left to wait for, or doubt that I have developed the kinds of critical patience that produce viable, marketable scholarship that might buy me more time. Goading me back to work, however, is a compelling sense of urgency in the thrill of having a gut reaction to something or coming up with an idea that helps me wait a bit longer. I think this push and pull is one thing that makes theory, queer or otherwise, possible, and thus it affords us a chance to reflect on the habits of those who grapple with these affective rhythms.

Especially in identitarian criticism, scholars have to adjust to the complex timing of making arguments that require slow, indulgent forms of reflection to articulate the need for immediate political action. These theoretical moves can end up creating standstills, like the one Huffer identifies in the cleavage of queer and feminist theory, which has "produced what many view today as a stagnant, compromised, or moribund sexual politics" (9). For Huffer, this split boils down to a "difference between a feminist investment in narratively secured moral norms and a queer disavowal of normativity epitomized

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by performative rupture" (13). Treating this split as a foundational story, queer theory casts itself as the more disruptive alternative to its feminist counterpart, which is confined to the mundane tasks of redefining proper conduct and working within institutions. Huffer states that it is understandable why queer theory has taken an ethical position against norms and regulations, but she warns "it has done so at the expense of a robust historical thinking about how subjects actually live and negotiate their relation to moralities" (30). In other words, as much as we might like to imagine a world where our sexuality is somehow free of any moralizing or policing, it is ethically irresponsible to ignore the fact that sex takes place between people and in contexts that are often hostile to those people because of who they are and what kind of sex they are having. But instead of advancing a sexual ethics that makes sex more amenable to norms, Huffer recognizes the need to develop an ethics dynamic enough to keep up with the fundamental volatility of sex. The goal for Huffer is "not to escape sexual morality but to reshape it from within" (22).

This project takes form as a genealogy of queer feminism in which Huffer reads between theorists, legal cases, novels, films, and personal narratives to excavate the rifts in and instability of erotic life. For Huffer, *eros* names "an uncertain, embodied, disruptive encounter of subjects with others" that presents a chance to develop an ethics of alterity that is "kinky and relational but attentive to harms" (12; 32). Further, Huffer asks us to turn inward to better attend to one another's erotic alterity, asking not for consensus but contestation. The benefit of this relational model is that it allows Huffer to emphasize the fissures that eros produces between people, providing a much more variegated terrain for approaching sexual politics than a wholesale embrace of individual sexual liberation would. The difficulty, though, is that things get messy when we are confronted with stories of harm, betrayal, hostility, and failure in our intimate experiences. *Are the Lips a Grave?* reproduces this difficulty in several ways, perhaps most notably in Huffer's willingness to describe scenes of betrayal from her own personal life with her partner. Aside from the struggles they narrate, these stories self-reflexively stage the impossibility of finding examples from everyday life that satisfy the demands of emancipatory theoretical or political projects. One tactic is to smooth out complexity by leaving out details or simplifying what counts as ethical sexual behavior; but as I have suggested elsewhere, the conceptual difficulty of such stories is central to their pedagogical and critical functions, especially when it comes to addressing the fundamental ambivalences of quotidian erotic life. Instead of smoothing out the complexity of her claims through conceptual abstraction, Huffer lets her stitching show, drawing attention to how her project holds together only as "a weave of voices: a crazy cat's cradle, some might say, of my own decades-old thinking about sex" (1). Thus, while she argues directly for a queer feminist ethics that foregrounds the rifts in encounters with erotic alterity, her own argument bears the same uneven texture, the result of years of patiently putting together divergent things—theorists, experiences, texts.

In other words, *Are the Lips a Grave?* draws ample attention to its own construction, and it is the moments of exposure, I find, that exemplify how waiting figures in the aesthetic dimensions of an argument. Penelope Deutscher describes such moments in Huffer's work as changes in perception brought about by style; she suggests that they give queer texts the ability to shift conceptual ground and dislodge hegemonic beliefs. I would add that beyond their immediately jolting effect, such changes in perspective also expose the long, often tiring process that went into creating these critical gestures. Huffer's aesthetic thus emerges from her willingness to refashion her thoughts until an individual

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observation ascends the scale from particular to potentially universal things (ethics, beliefs, truths). This dilated approach to argument is particularly apt for a field that addresses the vicissitudes of individual experience in the name of political and ethical change. But this does not mean that ethical critique must emulate Huffer's patiently crafted style or that we have to abandon argumentative forms that are more ironed out.

Take for example Ruti's approach to queer theory's antinormative crutch in her book *The Ethics of Opting Out*. Ruti homes in on the same ethical instability that Huffer addresses, but Ruti assesses the problem in terms of how hard and fast academic queer theory tacked toward a nonrelational and subjectless model of ethics. Skeptical of assimilationist and neoliberal promises of equality, Ruti stakes out a critical position outside the dominant queer landscape where "antinormativity has become a default politico-ethical stance" to such an extent that arguments are evaluated for how well they abandon or destroy the Enlightenment subject rather than for their viability in the real world (37). Not only has antinormativity been embraced "so indiscriminately that one act of defiance seems just as good as any other," she writes, but this leveling has been exacerbated by a theoretical "eagerness to reach the next radical edge" (38). For Ruti, major texts by scholars like Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman offer seductive theoretical celebrations of queer failure or self-undoing *jouissance*, but translating their claims into livable ethics for flesh-and-blood people creates issues. Explicit about her own Lacanian investments, Ruti repeatedly faults Edelman for his stalwart investment in a self-annihilating, destructive eros. Once we exit the world of pure theoretical speculation, Ruti maintains, we can see that the moments of dissolution he describes "are not solely self-negating; they can also make us feel . . . well . . . immediately real" (121; ellipses in original). Ultimately, her preference for sustained pleasure over orgasmic self-shattering leads Ruti to posit a livable ethics informed by our creative and relational capacities.

Ruti's argument is lucid and direct, even if Ruti places it within a heterogenous collection of arguments about queerness. For example, she introduces her project as "a cacophony of voices in order to provide a map of sorts for the current state of the field," which she patiently creates without the use of footnotes (10). Though this framing is nominally the same as Huffer's "weave of voices," the effect is antithetical; Ruti's authorial voice clearly articulates her views with a refreshingly accessible precision that cuts through the theoretical din. Further, at times it is searingly honest regarding her frustration with the time frame of queer theory's development. Take for example her comments on Huffer's abandonment of antisociality in the years between *Mad for Foucault* (2010) and *Are the Lips a Grave?* (2013). In *Are the Lips a Grave?*, "Huffer manages to revise her stance on the matter in the relatively short span of three years . . . [offering] one possible route out of the impasse that has haunted queer theory for what to me seems like an absurdly long time" (Ruti, *Ethics* 133). Ruti's exasperation at having to wait so long for queer theory to rethink its asocial commitments is even more clear when she considers how these commitments are parlayed into "the general denigration of femininity within queer theory" (186). Responding to the pervasive tendency to align femininity with weakness, she bluntly states: "one must ask why queer theory, which has made a point of deconstructing more or less every naturalized myth of our society, *persists in fetishizing more or less every naturalized myth about femininity that our culture has managed to produce, including the idea that there is something intrinsically masochistic about female sexuality*" (186–87). These claims are matched with meticulously rehearsed and compelling examples that show just how pervasive this

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treatment of femininity is. The effect is that queer theory and queer theorists are spoken about like the living, evolving things that they are and are treated with the respect that Ruti asks for herself. She is clear: it is as tiring to read these misogynistic texts as it is for queers to have to put up with the offenses of compulsory heterosexuality. What I appreciate is that Ruti is able to show us the rewards of building a compelling theoretical explication and critique while also being willing to share with us the more tactile, quotidian moments of not being willing to wait to do this: "What the fuck? That is what I wrote on page 135 of [Halberstam's] *The Queer Art of Failure*" (189).

Even if Ruti's "What the fuck?" and Sontag's "True?? yes" are opposing gestures—the first an exasperated dismissal, the second a slightly more contemplative avowal—both are highly expressive responses of fatigue with masculine domination in all of its guises. This kind of solidarity is one, if not the principal, metric by which to judge the strength of an argument: its ability to be repeated and mobilized so that the message is loud and clear (Ruti's message being fuck misogyny in all its forms). But Huffer's interest in narrative disruption, and the more idiosyncratically fragmentary inclinations of Sontag and Adorno, present alternative notions of strength. Having to piece an argument together can make that argument all the more indelible precisely because it takes work to hold a series of reactions together, to fuse them into an insight, to wait for that insight to come back. Simply put, it is easy to remember a line like "homosexuality and totalitarianism go together" because of its snappy intolerability. But the sentence I am most drawn to in "Tough Baby" is the one where Adorno describes the "gesture of virility" that raised his initial suspicions:

> Its archetype is the handsome dinner-jacketed figure returning late to his bachelor flat, switching on the indirect lighting and mixing himself a whisky and soda: the carefully recorded hissing of mineral water says what the arrogant mouth keeps to itself: that he despises anything that does not smell of smoke, leather and shaving cream, particularly women, which is why they, precisely, find him irresistible. (45–46)

There is something perverse about reading such an elegant description of misogyny, one that conveys such a refined, singular image in order to stress its ordinariness. It presents an unromantic scene of being alone; of not having anybody to talk to, let alone engage with in an argument; of the harmful things that can fill that silence. And yet, because of the construction and descriptive acumen of the passage, it is a vital reminder that arguments can begin in things that scream out to us just as much as they can be heard in a soft, sibilant hiss.

Notes

My thanks to Lee Jasperse, Scott Newman, and the staff of the UCLA Library Special Collections.

1. Sontag's copy of *Minima Moralia* is held in the Susan Sontag Papers, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, collection 612, box 212.

2. I quote Sontag's diaries from the Susan Sontag Papers, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, collection 612, box 128. The diaries are reprinted without the struck-through text in Sontag's *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh*.

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