


“HAVE YOU TRIED IT WITH THREE?” ANN QUIN, LOVE TRIANGLES, AND THE AFFECTS OF ART/WRITING



Alice Butler

ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART

ABSTRACT

“My favourite one with masks is just the three of us, two reject one, or one rejects two, or all three reject each other, or equally accept,” wrote the British avant-garde novelist, Ann Quin, in her 1966 ‘interdisciplinary’ novel of domestic desire and conflict, *Three*. Entangled within the novel’s formal mesh, comprising blurred dialogue, densely-woven description, discarded journals, and poetic tape recordings, the reader enters into a triangular love affair in retrospect, in the fictionalizing and remembering of it, after it has happened, after S—the mysterious intruder and diarist who send shockwaves through the marriage of Ruth and Leon—has disappeared. Reading Quin’s novel alongside the feminist and queer work of Ahmed (2006), Carson (1986), and Sedgwick (1993), this article traces the contradictions and multiplicities of affect, love, and desire—produced by the fragile boundaries between rejection and acceptance—that ‘shape’ the novel’s triadic relationship. It opens up the love triangle as a queer erotic formation: as a subversion of the ‘straight’ line of desire that points to heterosexual coupling, and also as an affective stage for homoerotic intimacies, autoerotic encounters, and masochistic fantasies.

KEYWORDS

love triangle, disorientation, art writing, affect, desire

For N and A
Love,
A

1. Meetings

Listing work and medical history, the folder was stamped *confidential*—a fragile skin separating private and public—where etched into the see-through fabric of its pages was also a name: ‘figures’ amounting to the parts of a body. *Ann Quin*. Grazing my fingertips across this intimate document, I was pulled closer to her, across time, space: a glimpsing. Was this, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) once wrote in memory of a writer she knew, also “love at a distance”? Or was it “even just reading and writing”? (104-105). I too met Quin through “snatches of print,” the pieces of her life and writing, as torn edges made asymmetrical shapes and fragments, ripped at 45-degree angles (Sedgwick 1993, 104-105). First it was just the two of us, on that strange day in the Royal College of Art’s archive, that started the affair. But then there were more; another began to enter the frame: from two to *three*.

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This essay is dedicated to the points of the triangle that complete that shape with me. ‘N’, back then, was familiar to me: an impressive figure and talent whose work on women’s experimental writing preceded mine. I felt her influence. Did she feel mine? I wondered if there was room for us both. It was almost erotic, our flashes of contact and conversation, the absent presence of it all, as we held each other closely (via the spectral nature of shared texts swallowed and cited, the ambiguity of collaborations to come), in spite of the distance, and the academic professionalism, which first blocked an intimate flourishing.

It was only when we eventually started writing together, some time after I first found ‘A’ (Quin) in the archive, after I knew N was getting to know her too,¹ that the separateness of our study evaporated. We came to each other in a different

way. Our words began to stick together, like the wet pages of a book. We met again through A: her body, her life, her objects, her *writing*. Our voices blurred, our readings entangled; we started to forget who said what in our chorus of correspondence. We signed off emails keenly with kisses: crafting a friendship of solidarity, affection, and writing. Bonded by A, we have energized each other.

Through this process of partnered, piecemeal writing, I (or was it *we*? I slip between them) began to think more about the love triangle as a shape of desire and a shape of writing: how it manifests as gendered affect and queer eroticism in Quin's experimental fictions, and how it has also given rise to new forms, new *shapes*, of feminist critical art writing: a writing on, to, and with, other intimates, as expressed across these essay parts. How does the love triangle, when translated as a shape from which to write, sculpt and advance my own close reading, close merging, close inhabiting of Quin's literary threes?

In this essay, N's fluid fragments in parentheses permeate its parts; her words enter mine, a swallowing. Through this methodology of incorporation, I uncover the desire, the competition, the rivalry, the artistry, the nourishment, the kinship, the learning, the love, that sticks between friends, who are also writers, who are also collaborators, invested in the same love object—and how this leads to new and intimate readings of the love triangle as an erotic trope in Quin's writing. As an example of what Maggie Nelson (2015) calls “wild theory”—defined as “writing that is within a particular, often academic, discipline, but also belongs to something else by virtue of its creativity and recklessness” (2015, n.p.)—this essay theorizes, conceptualizes, and performs what I newly term a *love triangle in writing*, running with the critical and creative potential of the affects, erotics, and identificatory lines that bind it.

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In October 1959, Ann Quin took up her post as a part-time secretary at the Royal College of Art's painting school, after being cleared ‘fit’ by her doctor. She could type quickly for the men in charge, over one hundred and fifty words per minute, and then even more into the night (but this time for herself: these are the working conditions of a secretary/novelist), as she feverishly worked on the typewritten sheets that became her first novel, in her compact room at 62 Redcliffe Road, London, SW10. Here she dreamed, as she scratched, and summoned, the disturbing seaside world of *Berg* (1964) that echoed the spaces of her childhood and adolescence spent on the Sussex coast. (It was in Brighton, the most hedonistic of seaside towns, that Quin was born, in 1936.) This ‘debut’ novel—it was the first one to survive impulsive urges to destroy her writing through burning

(Hodgson 2019)—was warmly received within the literary landscape. Its surreal eroticism, absurdist violence, and anarchic use of language, narrative, and form, added a new dimension—namely a more closely attuned attention to feeling and desire, as entangled *within* (not separate from) literary experiment—to the innovative work of Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, Alan Burns, and B.S. Johnson: British avant-garde novelists to whom Quin was closely aligned, and who were also committed to radically shifting the aesthetic and moral boundaries of novelistic form in the 1960s.

Nearly sixty years later, I am a writer whose life is subsumed by unpaid hours of affective and administrative labour, in a ‘study’ nearly as small. Ann Quin—as a working class, experimental, woman writer navigating the intersecting power structures of the 1960s—gives me hope and energy to keep writing. She was my first love, “a writer’s love” (Butler 2019, 154)—she was the author of four (nearly five) novels that subverted realist conventions in their abstraction of form, narrative, voice, character, body, and time: each work diving deeply into the psyche’s clashing parts, the fragmentary nature of post-war society, the transgression of social and sexual (as well as literary) norms—who left the land for the sea, at the darkness of dawn, in 1973; aged only thirty-seven.² She shadows and mystifies my writing, like morning mist, like scribbled annotations in the margins of my paperbacks, a cloud of correspondence—awaiting a reply.

Who from? A or N?

(N: Ann Quin has long occupied the peripheral reaches of my vision. There is a flurrying of edges that takes place in her stories, moments of intensity between people, objects, scenes, that flare and then dissipate, a rush of words or images suddenly sucked away. This way of looking at the world exists for me too in life after reading them. I, like so many others—Kathy Acker, Chloe Aridjis, Deborah Levy—find myself steeped in her prose. She has never been the focus of my attentions, but her writing clings to me in a murkier way, a thickening of threads, shadows, and shapes through which all else must pass. When I begin to read or think or write, I’m not necessarily aware of this webbing. However, often unexpectedly, a droplet of recognition would slide down these fine connective strands, and Quin would emerge again.)

At my writing desk, a portrait-postcard of Ann Quin sits propped up, amongst pens and pencils; the books I’m writing ‘with’ (N’s missives included); open pots of lip balm, and an abandoned glass of greyed-out water (a drowned fly flailing



Oswald Jones (1929-1998), Ann Quin, undated
 © Oswald Jones Archive/Bridgeman Images.

within it). A, along with N, along with Sedgwick and Acker, and more, is figured in close proximity to my writing: spatially, spectrally, affectively; her writing hands reach for mine, breaking the ‘pastness’ of the photographic object. Her large, brown eyes glance upwards to a body just beyond the frame: the luminous point of the triangle: reckoning with the character (or *voice*) in her head.

Quin wrestled with a cacophony of interior voices as she suffered regular, often annihilating, bouts of mental illness over the course of her writing life: from the early years of her novelistic experiments, through to her swimming out to sea, when she was half way through the manuscript of *The Unmapped Country* (published posthumously in 2019) that staged a surreal critique of psychiatric

care. In the photograph, she appears locked in a trance, a psychological state of reverie. Could her fixed gaze suggest a creative embrace of the chorus, a reparative rehabilitation of what made her sick? In asking this question, I am aligning my reading with Sedgwick's (2007) reworking of Melanie Klein's affect-oriented psychoanalysis; her specific recognition that the likelihood amongst intellectuals and writers to experience depression indicates how such psychological precariousness is as “densely woven into our abilities as into our disabilities, our quite individual creativity as much as our sometimes stereotypical forms of blockage” (641).

It is hereby possible to trace a connecting line (however murky and entangled) from the sick tendencies of Quin's life to the sick impulses of her work, namely the manic layering of voices that defines her writing from *Berg* onwards. It is displacement, rather than direct correlation. As Patricia Waugh (2015) has argued of Virginia Woolf's work, experiences of voice-hearing can be seen as intimately connected to the “precariousness of writing” itself, where sensations of madness, exposure, and self-shattering give way to “a new interpretive frame”: a re-embodiment of the disembodied, dissolving the fragile boundaries between self and world (54-55). It is perhaps, then, unsurprising—given the polyvocal, inner-consciousness of Quin's choral, cut-up texts—that it was “Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*” that made her “aware of the possibilities of writing,” when putting pen to paper as an adolescent novelist (Quin 2018, 16).

In the unframed portrait of Quin, her fingers (no wedding ring: her archived resumé stated ‘single’) clutch at a lit cigarette, curl inwards. She fumbles for flesh, or words: a body suspended in the flux of writing. She is (as I am: fumbling for N to reach A), hovering between gesture and meaning, letters and words, speech and reply. Her mouth is half-open, a vocal gesture unfinished. With teeth showing in wild conversation, these are the indistinct seconds and sounds before the climax of understanding, with those that are invisible. (Me or N? Whose voice?) Quin holds space, language, and art between her hands; she kneads it together, all the genres at once—from poetry to prose to drawing to music, never just one.

Reading her third ‘novel’ *Passages* (1969), Hilary White (2020) calls this the “indiscipline” of Quin's writing: wherein the ‘soft formlessness’ of the text shrinks away, skirts sideways, from the rigid singularity of one visual or verbal creative propensity, and how this is intimately connected to her revisions of sex, embodiment, and gender (113-114). I'm attracted to this mode of indiscipline for its ties

with *adolescence*—the writerly experimentation (Barthes 2011), liminal awkwardness (Litvak 1997), and queer desires (Sedgwick 1993; Mavor 1999), which smudge this indefinable age. Adolescence is an “open structure” according to Julia Kristeva (1995, 199), meaning that it can seep outwards beyond its borders, and trespass on ‘maturity’—in art, writing, and the messy spaces in between. For Kristeva (2012), the novel (and for Quin, the form-crossing novel), *is* the adolescent form for the “perpetual subject-adolescent”: it is here, Quin can try to set herself *free* (11, 14), cut loose from the stifling conventions of gender, sexuality, and writing discipline.

(N: Our adolescence aligns on that same stretch of coast. It was there that I first found kinship with seawater, surrendering to the relentless rolling grey. There is no curling of toes into sand here, but a buckling of arches against shingle. I see our limbs cross in those waves, our flesh puckered, speech lost to the water. Is it ‘love’ to be disarmed by another, a willingness to succumb?)

I am disarmed by two others, two writers, whose poetic images provide flesh and texture to my writing and thinking, returning to the tips of my fingers, to be released again. N materializes in the shadows of the text. She comes and goes like ebb and flow, a destabilizing force, which energizes the desire of my writing. It is this mode of triangular love—displayed in hybrid essay form—that helps me to access the particular and erotic intimacies involved in literary recovery, the complex desires and affects of the love triangle in Quin’s writing (namely her second novel *Three* [first published by Marion Boyars in 1966]), and the feminist effects of critical art writing that meets and merges with the lives, bodies, and words of others. These three lines of flight—historical, analytical, and methodological—all invested in critical closeness and the inhabitation of ‘content as form’ comprise the essay’s triadic discussions.

2. Scratchings

A was my first love object, then it was N, now it is both. But other writers are also part of my adolescent, interdisciplinary, undisciplined, wild theorizing world. I’ve learned from their scratches, their shapes. Indeed, the smoking, suspended digits that form the ‘punctum’ of Quin’s author-portrait—as the fleshy detail of the image: “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me.)” (Barthes 1981, 27)—illustrate what Maria Fusco (2019) has recently explored in relation to interdisciplinary writing, that it comes into being through *scratching*. It is a relentless, indecisive itch for new modes of writing and expression, bringing forms, worlds, and bodies into contact, as Quin does in her capacious novel writing of art and literary experiment, and as I am exploring, performing, gesturing towards here, crossing between art, writing, and theory, touching crossed limbs, holding phrases in my mouth.

For many, the desire to scratch is also the desire to create friction (or a space in between), to flirt with the paradox and adolescent-style mistakes, to welcome *surprise*: one of the energies described by Sedgwick (2003), following Klein, as integral to reparative reading (146). Maggie Nelson cites Sedgwick’s call for reparative practices in her own 2015 book of interdisciplinary scratchings (comprising memoir, fragment, love letter, dialogue, essay, and theory), *The Argonauts*. She re-enacts Sedgwick’s text in her own gestures, in which love is shown to be not only pluralistically queer, but also *citational*, as etched into the margins of the page are the names of the authors that have brought accompaniment in her relational and *wild* writing-as-loving. I am following Nelson’s adventurous reliving of reparative reading to support the flourishing of citational kinship. It is this love between writers—brought to life by interdisciplinary writing, the ambivalent spaces *between* forms—which, I argue, cuts open new readings of affective, erotic, desiring relations as interwoven within creative critical practices. It generates fresh possibilities for feminist scholarship, encompassing the desire of collaboration, choral noises, intimate disclosures, affective textures, and the risky, reckless refusal to be only one thing (form, discipline, genre, or voice).

Similarly, in Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart’s dialogic experiment of ‘descriptive theory’, *The Hundreds*—involving prose/poems that “follow out the impact of things (words, thoughts, people, objects, ideas, worlds) in hundred-units or units of hundred multiples”—affect is drawn into form (2019, 44, ix). Like the ‘sting’ of the punctum, like Quin’s own writing of unstable, affective encounter, it “grabs you into an elsewhere of form” (Ibid., 5), and that form is an entanglement of many different forms. “Collaboration,” they say, as one voice of two, “is a meeting of minds that don’t match” (Ibid.). I picture their writing held together by a forward slash, a cut, but also a thread, binding and separating, their words and worlds. Echoing *The Argonauts*’ epistolary address, and this essay’s own processes, *The Hundred’s* was in many ways formed through correspondence: sending each other their interstitial prose/poems, editing and transcribing, writing to, with, through, and against, the other—and involving other ‘others’ in the process. Indeed, referencing Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* (with which Nelson’s wild love theory is also involved), Berlant and Stewart initially meant for their text to include “cascading cites” in the margins, a showering of ideas and connections (Ibid., 20), before deciding that their referential matter needed to be enclosed more *intimately*, “wind up parentheses holding the things we think with” (Ibid.): like open envelopes containing love letters.

To invoke this visual metaphor is to also suggest a tactile, personal object, one to be *felt* on the “palm of the open hand” (Sedgwick 2003, 3). For to write in relation to another (thing, body, text, encounter), is to be in close proximity to it (emotionally, materially), *almost* touching. Inspired by recent instances of reparative dialogue-makings by Berlant and Stewart and Nelson, this essay thinks *with* (in Haraway’s theorization of “thinking-with,” it is the *pimoa cthulhu* spider, with its tentacles trying ‘to feel’ this way and that, which represents not only Haraway’s [2016]) “threading, felting, tangling, tracking, and sorting” pattern of thought, but also the future world she is speculating [39, 31]), and therefore *writes* with—because this is correspondence—“more than one voice” (Cavarero 2005). I am *thinking with* that open envelope: it holds A and N within an intimate surround. Other citations also spill from its throat. As gestural as Fusco’s scratch, Haraway’s string arms, or Berlant and Stewart’s “scoring over words like a sculptor chiseling things” (2019, 10), it creates relational and embodied correspondences between me and them (A and N), art and writing, fiction and theory: hands outstretched: a forward slash.

3. Graspings

I am grasping for A, and for N, within a “sphere of a pure and endless mediality,” as Giorgio Agamben (2000) notes of gesture (58). Gesture, like adolescence; like interdisciplinary writing, also occupies the messy middle ground. Three points suspended in time: I picture our younger selves (“eternal adolescents” at twenty-two to three [Kristeva 1995, 199]) walking the corridors of the art school at Kensington Gore, making marks, fragments, and gestures in words: our hands too hovering, hesitating, in ecstatic (*adolescent*) indecision: a space in between art and writing.

(N: It’s where we encountered one another. I see you both, two points. A and A, years apart, each poring over that sheet of credentials, hands drawn together to smooth the creases. I am between two A’s. I know A’s work through A. Their bond is stronger, their understanding more intimate. What is it to be the more distant point in the triangle? “Two people. I to them—they to me?” (Quin 2009, 53). Am I, like S of Ann Quin’s 1966 novel *Three*, an intruder?)

Expanding the meanings and manifestations of the love triangle into a textual, erotic realm involving three women, three *kin* (two alive, one dead), this ‘writers’ love triangle’ is shaped by our affective entanglements and encounters, by echoes, citations, mutterings, and silences: words said, left unsaid, confusing who said what. (A, you move between us, and us between you, in erotic triangulation.) This way of writing/loving can never be singular, when it is split, fractured, and

shared amongst women writers. I cite, collect, copy, and cut: words, pictures, and encounters. I write *beside* them both, following Sedgwick’s (2003) attraction to the same preposition for its nondualistic capaciousness, the space it gives for a “a number of elements” to “lie alongside one another” (8). As an interdisciplinary practice that slides across creative and critical registers (another forward slash, slanting waywardly off centre), ‘beside’ in this text is relational, affective, and gendered, a grasping for bodies, genres, disciplines, and voices, “desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating,” all at once (Ibid.).

Love sits closely to competition when writing beside, chiseling triangular lines between us, our hot and intimate orbit. And such frictions are nourishing for critical acts. In this text, to inhabit the triangle in methodology and written form is to attend to it anew, to bring hidden erotic formations to the surface, to write and read differently with them, allowing for bold new readings of eros (as demonstrated by close reading Quin’s *Three*) to materialize with its contact lines.

As Sedgwick (2008) too suggests, there is something sibling-like in this critical position (8), echoed in the writerly formation I am grasping for here, which is defiantly ‘sister-sister’, as complexly homosocial—but differently gendered—as the erotic triangles conceptualized by Sedgwick in her earlier 1985 book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Here Sedgwick expands on the propositions made by René Girard in *Desire, Deceit, and the Novel* (1961) as a means to highlight that “in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” (Sedgwick 1985, 21), and that this bond is always shaped by historically-specific economies of power, thus challenging Girard’s original conceit that the triangle is symmetrical, ahistorical, and ungendered (Ibid., 22–24). Sedgwick argues instead that the erotic triangle is a shifting, “sensitive register,” through which the “play of desire and identification” takes place (Ibid., 27), including those relationships that pertain to the “hidden obliquities” of homo/hetero and sexual/nonsexual binaries (Ibid., 22).³

Sedgwick hereby disorients the ‘universal’ verticality of the triangle familiar to the Oedipal complex, wherein the Father holds the penis-envy– or penis-complex-key to heterosexual object choice, encouraging us instead to look sideways, or slantwise, even horizontally. Juliet Mitchell (2013) has also argued for an “analytical understanding of lateral relations along a horizontal axis, not instead of

but in addition to the vertical” (14), through her re-reading of Freud, Winnicott, and Klein, and the multitudinous figure of the sibling who has slyly crowded the case notes (Ibid., 17). “Does the dominance of verticality hide the horizontal?” asks Mitchell, “Does this skew our understanding of gendering?” (Ibid., 25). By returning to the traumatic effects caused by the “arrival or expected but non arrival of a sister or brother,” Mitchell claims that it is the horizontal (and jealous) relations between siblings, formed in the context of the vertical, which produces the “gendered, social child, girl or boy” (Ibid., 28). Close to Klein’s theory of reparation emerging from the depressive position, when the sibling recognizes the negative affect in jealousy, “positive rivalry, competition, and creative struggle” can emerge (Ibid., 30).

I hereby propose that it is the (*performative*) siblings’ struggle—the triangular play of affect, desire, and identification—which unleashes interdisciplinary writing of more than one voice, which shapes the love triangle as a feminist space from which to write. As I write beside A and N, the love triangle rotates: each point always seeking the affection (and approval) of the intruder, each point always unsure of whose turn it is to be her. From uncertainty has spilled creativity, pleasure, love: the desiring thrills and risks of reading and writing.

The roles of lover, beloved, and intruder also become messy and confused (to more violent effect) in Quin’s abject 1966 novel of domestic desire and conflict, *Three*, wherein a mysterious lodger, simply named S, sends shockwaves through a marriage, before and after her sudden disappearance (a suggested suicide). S describes the sharp, shifting angles of the erotic triangle that plays out across the novel, through the guise of their improvisational mime theatre: “My favourite one with the masks is just the three of us, two reject one, or one rejects two, or all three reject each other, or equally accept” (2009, 66). I echo the three protagonists’ triangular performance in the tentacular textures of my writing and thinking, its moving lines of affect and influence, its projections and silences. I compete with N for A. I desire N’s words through A. I love A even more *because* of, not in spite of, N. This method of critical embodiment has brought me closer to the particular contradictions of desire, love, and affect (produced by the fragile boundaries between rejection and acceptance) that ‘shape’ the novel’s triadic relationship.

4. Cleavings

After three years administrating at the Royal College of Art, Quin escaped, first for Europe, and then for the United States, where she ventured to explore the relationship between poetry and painting as part of a literary fellowship. Visu-

alizing new possibilities for art, desire, and writing, she positioned herself as the third point of the love triangle in a number of poets' marriages, dedicating *Three* to “Bobbie and Bobb [Creeley]” (Quin 2009, v). These are erotic life experiences that hum and pulse throughout her second novel, *Three*, pieces of which were starting to coalesce into an unfamiliar form, a ‘scratchy’ fictionalizing of autobiography, in a way that foreshadows the experimental life-writing of American authors, Kathy Acker and Chris Kraus. Like Quin, the transgressions of these writers are to be found in the formal fissures of the writing—the cut-up layering of epistolary modes, the schizophrenic narration and unbroken syntax, the spatial arrangement of words—as well as the sexual transgressions to be found in the fragmented narrative content, which climaxed, for Quin, in the cut-up novel *Tripticks* (1972) (alluded to by the title’s wordplay, it is also focused on a triangular relationship). In a letter to her friend, Father Brocard Sewell, penned during the writing of *Three*, Quin supposes that her fascination with the “relationships between three,” could be “partly because I have never known the family unit, and partly the influence of the Roman Catholic convent I spent my childhood in... Does all this sound too Freudian for words?” (Jordan 2018, n.p.). It is my proposition that Quin’s unfamiliarity with the archetypal family unit, re-emerges in her writing as a subversive hostility towards it, a gesturing towards alternative kinships and sexual relations, illuminating the spectral, seductive, and shifting forces of the ‘intruder’.

For the majority of *Three* (but not *all*: there are no absolutes in this text of shifting perspectives), this part belongs to S—she is the glyphic code to be cracked: a mysterious guest, and a lascivious artist: reminiscent of the modernist ‘other’ woman. Ruth and Leon initially take S in for a stay of convalescence, compensating, the pair agree, “for the family life she never knew” (Quin 2009, 6). She soon becomes entangled in the domestic, material, and romantic structures of their lives, as represented by the closeness of their sleeping arrangements, which S notes down: “I listened to unfamiliar noises, silence. R’s breathing. L’s nasal gasps, restless turnings” (Ibid., 67). In this stifling narrative space of aural flicks and bodily twitches, S’s flesh is pulled from both sides, compartmentalizing itself. She leaves only traces of her body and voice behind, for Ruth and Leon to animate and re-enact further, within the context of their own conjugal dynamic. Theirs’ is a triangular affair that we only come to know in retrospect, in the fictionalizing and re-remembering of it, after it has happened, after S has left the scene, conjuring presence-in-absence through the journal entries, spoken tapes, and filmreels that

get left behind: the objects that sustain the erotic field of tripartite desire, re-embodying it and her. As Leon suggests, “A life there perhaps we’ll find” (Ibid., 16).

(N: In a darkened room, L watches S enter and emerge from a breakwater, over and over, again and again, in loops as water lapping at a bank. I am an intruder when I swim. These movements made with such deliberation only cleave. This is what I’m doing now, cleaving my way between two A’s. Can we draw each other close when we write through our bodies? Casting each arm out to break the surface, I slip back beneath it, failing it. I pull mouthfuls of air down to where they cannot be, escaping in dribbling lines of bubbles. Intermittent signals that will surface.)

The eroticism of *Three* is drawn from its *intermittences*: the foamy cuts between characters’ dialogue, seeping from one voice to another; the flashes of memory absorbed within the splintered recordings of S; the fragments of intimacy and violence offered by S’s journaling hand, “making it harder to piece together—which piece fits in precisely where?” (Ibid., 69). It is within this epistolary entanglement, “the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance,” as Barthes calls it, that the erotic grabs hold, overwhelms, and confuses (1998, 10). In fact, the webbed density of the novel’s textures, its “dark (invisible passages)” (Mavor 1995, 94), where viewpoints overlap or contradict, is intimately connected to the assault it also makes on the straight lines of desire, as the contours between S, Ruth, and Leon, blur beyond recognition. As S confesses to her journal, she is “pursued by a compulsion to jeopardise such a bourgeois stronghold,” when it is a marriage, in fact, that is struggling to reproduce, to form a nuclear family unit (Quin 2009, 61). Misunderstandings like these, cleave their way through *Three*. To read it is to succumb to the disorienting particles of mist that cloud the text, and the triad’s mountainous summer retreat.

(N: *Three*, in particular, is the stiffening of atmospheres. Every movement, word, intrudes upon another.)

N intrudes on the body of this text, an erotic presence smeared across the surface of the page: criss-crossing voices and words in ways that echo the murky, intimate spaces of *Three*. For while it is first Ruth who is left isolated by triangulation, reduced to a vulnerable body, an exposed *thing* (“How I hated it when you both went off for those so-called long tramps,” she tells Leon [Ibid., 10], echoing the scribed perspective of S: “R conscious the whole time, aware of a hand, eye, jumps to hasty conclusions” [Ibid., 62]), the erotic, entangled atmosphere of the novel enacts the movement of desire, shadowy gestures (impossible to trust), and shifting intimacies. For example, when Leon is away working, the two women become closer, as “R” appears to S, “suddenly like a child,” who invites care from her friend, her competitor, her desired (Ibid., 141). (These are, I have lived them in writing, the shifting roles of the homosocial love triangle.) Ruth is a woman-child, asking S “to stay with her,” while lying in the “stuff” room—of hot

flesh and compressed space—“half naked under the sheet” (Ibid.). As the bed linen meets her sick, debilitated, desiring body (Ruth suffers with abscesses, headaches, depression, and infertility: she is, as the artist Johanna Hedva (2016) would now say, a “Sick Woman,” rejecting the society that seeks to contain her), skin flashes: the Barthesian erotic (Barthes 1998, 10).

And echoing Mavor’s (1999) and Nelson’s (2015) queer feminist readings of Barthes, it is these erotic flashes of flesh; S’s brushing of Ruth’s abject hair within her “restless” bedroom enclosure (Quin 2009, 141), which creates an atmosphere of homoerotic desire, interlaced with unsaid messages and seductive gestures. As S articulates in her journal, “A certain intimacy sprang up between us, that somehow never exists when L is around” (Ibid.). Theirs’ is a queer affection that ‘springs’ up—like a sudden source of water bursting forth from the ground—when the male figure, the property owner, the husband, the publisher of books, is absent. By figuratively aligning S and Ruth’s partnership with water, Quin shows how their sexual orientation has flipped or moved off-kilter, the fluid excesses of their desire causing new ripples, new currents, new freedoms, within the shifting shapes of the love triangle.

This is of course a spatial metaphor that describes triadic desire, “like the direction of [*multiple*] arrows toward the loved object” (Ahmed 2006, 70). And in *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson (1986) re-considers a fragment by Sappho in the context of these arrows and erotic directions, arguing that “it is not a poem about the three of them as individuals, but about the geometrical figure formed by their perception of one another, and the gaps in that perception” (13). In those gaps, desire foams; the pain of absence is infectious: a triangle emerges as desire’s shape (keeping it alive, like this very writing) (Ibid., 16). “For, where eros is lack,” writes Carson,

its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them. There are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros (Ibid.).

In *Three*, the ‘straightness’ of those lines that make up the directional circuit (its heterosexual arrows), is upended, *perversed*, by the “discontinuity” of S and Ruth’s “queer desires” (Ahmed 2006, 71) that also belonged to Sappho. Following Ahmed’s conceptualization of perversion as a “spatial term, which can refer to the willful determination to counter or go against orthodoxy, but also to what is wayward and thus ‘turned away from what is right, good, and proper’” (Ibid., 78), when S

and Ruth gravitate towards one another, try on the same dresses, get sticky, share the space of the bathroom, the love triangle deviates, in spatial and bodily terms, from the “point of heterosexual union or sexual coupling” (Ibid.). Even after S has gone, Ruth wears her discarded nightgown, their perspiring, dreaming, eternal-adolescent bodies meeting, skin to skin, in a surrogate sexual thrill achieved without penetration. She is the adolescent stealer of clothes, the ‘sick woman’ getting psychoanalyzed, the perverse “masturbating girl”—as theorized by Sedgwick (1993) in her collection of essays that connected adolescence with queerness, *Tendencies* (118, 1). In an essay included with that collection, Sedgwick reads the bedroom scenes of Jane Austen’s 1811 novel *Sense and Sensibility*—which are also shaped by the horizontal love between two women (who are also siblings)—and finds within them moments of eternally infantile autoeroticism that unsettle the binary of the homo/hetero cleavage (Ibid. 109-129).

(N: Water, like desire, is corruptible. It curdles into the gels, jellies, slurries, objects sucked at, leached away, ejected, sprayed, slithering along the ground, and taken into the mouth. Quin’s writing exists in this smearing between emotional bonds, phrasal blotching.)

The stickiness of their perverse partnership is echoed in the gestural ink of the intimate journal, where S (like Austen’s Marianne) unleashes her private thoughts, desires, and feelings, an overflowing, *corruptible* force, similar to the “powerful gush of words,” which Barthes (1998) recognizes in the text of pleasure (7). S’s writing is erotic and queer, like the water she swims in, or what the poet Eileen Myles (2014) recognizes more specifically as ‘foam’: the gushing fluids of the body: “speech coagulated on the corners of your mouth” (n.p.). Myles (2014) finds foam secreted in a constellation of texts about gender (this one is wet with saliva and spray), because “gender makes excess, especially when it’s unstable which it always is” (2014, n.p.). In contrast, Leon fills his ledger with ‘straight’ numbers or ‘facts’; publishes books in the public domain, such as his book on (according to Ruth), “Egyptian art or something,” which he then corrects as the upright, “Monolithic Mosaics” (2009, 2). But as Jane Gallop (1985) has fluidly argued by getting close to feminist correspondences—and as evident in S’s sticky scripts (or our own permeating parts)—while gender norms have dictated that “women write letters [*or diaries*]—personal, intimate, in relation [*italics mine*],” and “men write books—universal, public, in general circulation,” there are instances of mouth-watering and moist subversion in women’s epistolary acts (104-107). Gallop gets close to queer licks of an open envelope, drawn by Mary Cassatt. Then, in a fluid cascade of associations, she gets even closer to the transgressive adoption of this gesture by French feminist writing, particularly Annie Leclerc’s 1977 essay “La Lettre d’amour” (“The Love Letter”), which is also a *relational* and *public*, wild theorizing, “philosophy of the body” (Ibid., 108).

N and A, I feel these fragments foaming: oral notes of fluid correspondence. You helped me dip my fingers into the queerness of water. I swim beside you, brushing your arms. I've kissed your open letters.

5. Gropings

What would it be to give you these notes by hand? What would it be to ‘touch’ you this way? Correspondence, like the sense of touch, is relational; it conjures contact between objects and bodies, through gestures of communication that are etched with traces of the body and affect. As Sedgwick (2003) elucidates: “the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself” (14). As a perceptual system, touch is the bind that shapes the writer’s love triangle, as I reach for you (N and A) through the mist, the blur, the phrasal blotchings (I can barely *see*).

(N: It seems to me that Quin is a writer of the extremities, a world delivered through feet that pace and fingers that pry. These are radical gestures in writing. Christine Brooke-Rose aligned her circle of avant-garde writers, which included Quin, with the gesture of ‘groping’. “Experiment,” she suggests, “means two things. One is that you’re groping, you don’t quite know where you’re going, and you make discoveries about language. And the other is that you decide on a constraint, which produces a different style, the reader doesn’t know why he feels it, the physical signifier is made more physical, the signified less important” (Friedman and Fuchs, 1989). To grope is to use the hands in feeling, touching, to handle or feel something, it is the appraisal of something with which one is unfamiliar, to search space, seek signs. The result, however, is the need to possess this other, of “plucking” and “pulling about,” in which something is ultimately ‘grasped’ (Williams 1994, 627).⁴ It is a lustful advance, usually taking the form of rough, heedless grabs at female flesh, an unwanted searchlight shone into water that sends life darting. Is all writing an act of desire? Does writing fulfill this need to press at the edges, however inept, inexperienced, all fingers and thumbs?)

Am I more likely groping, then, as I write through and with experiment: the wayward urges of the forward slash (/) that sits between art and writing?

Responding to the provocation, “*To be an experimental woman writer*,” in the 1989 essay “Illiterations,” Brooke-Rose claimed that such a phrase contains “Three words,” within which are held “three difficulties,” three barriers to overcome

involving gendered oppressions in society, the sexism of canonical hierarchies, and primarily, the particularly dismissive context in which literary experimentation authored by women was then received (55–57, 64–65). While “traditionally, men belong to groups, to society (the matrix, the canon),” Brooke-Rose (1989) postures, “Women belong to men” (66), giving way to a situation in which the woman experimental writer is pigeonholed as an ‘imitator’ of existing and already legitimized innovations authored by men: “fluttering around a canon,” rather than forming her own (Ibid., 65).

In *Three*, Leon places Ruth’s abject handwriting under similar surveillance, as he devours her diary against her will. Meanwhile, she sucks the top of her pen, emotional and leaky. Is this a bodily resistance to Leon’s consuming her? Brooke-Rose (1989) draws critical attention in her essay to the labels stuck upon women writers, how the committed absorption of “feminist ‘themes’” can reproduce gendered binaries and close a reading down (67). Brooke-Rose promotes “bisexualism” instead, indeterminacy in reading, as well as writing (Ibid., 68). My argument here, as I think with Ruth’s intimate coalescence with her inky implement, is that the ‘difficulty’ of groping experiment signaled by Brooke-Rose includes a fourth unnamed problem: how to write emotion (a dismissed feminist theme) *into* the experimental text, via the uncontainable objects its characters grope for, or *suck*: gestures of the hand and the mouth? And how to do this in a way that opens out desire, writing, sexuality, and gender to fresh possibilities, rather than close such themes down?

This scratches at the assumption, also challenged by Jennifer Doyle (2013) in relation to contemporary performance art, that the difficulty of art considered ‘experimental’—its withholding of meaning and dense formalism—usually involves (or is presumed to involve) a “regulation of affect (in which opacity, the difficulty of meaning, is packaged as cool, distanced, and anti-emotional)” (8). Doyle argues conversely that the difficulty of performance artworks is intimately “tied to their emotional and identificatory geometries” (Ibid., 21),⁵ a project shared by *Three*, as S expresses in her journal:

Attempts at censoring any desire to think what should be felt. This is the most difficult. So conditioned are the reflexes they become part of a mausoleum, when emotions outweigh surrounding matter a figure monstrous in shape chiselled from soft substances (Quin 2009, 56).

Invoked by this image of soft substances, and feelings becoming museums, the relational ‘shapes’ and ‘geometries’ of the novel, formed by bodies and objects within the home, represents a kind of emotional and experimental phenome-

nology, wherein (like Melanie Klein’s “phantasy-with-a-p-h”), “human mental life becomes populated, not with ideas, representations, knowledges, urges, and repressions, but with *things*, things with physical properties, including people and hacked-off bits of people” (Sedgwick 2007, 629).

This is staged from the novel’s outset, when Ruth is “startled from the newspaper” (a published object, denoting masculine publics), by Leonard, “framed in the door-way. ... Screen. Sliding doors. Rush matting” (Quin 2009, 1). As a series of room dividers, semi-transparent interfaces, and obstacles, these objects create the affective thicket that clutter and shroud the novel, a suffocating atmosphere of emotions left unspoken, of repressed domestic life, which pricks the skin of the reader. And as she inscribes it here, Quin often favors the ‘rule of three’ in her enumerations of objects, be it the screens that form an unsettling threshold between inside and out, or S’s childhood memories of clutter: the texture and smells of “Eau de cologne. Disinfectant. Mothballs” representing the affective afterlives of things (Ibid., 27), to which we both cling to and seek closure from in equal measure.

For, according to Ahmed (2014), emotions “involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected... emotions are a matter of how we come into contact with objects and others” (208). It is relational and embodied, this emotional matter. Therefore, to locate affect in the sphere of unmediated physiological reactions, and emotion in the sphere of conscious intentionality, as Ahmed (2014) suggests, refutes the blurry ways in which we are ‘pressed’ upon by bodies and objects (as when S describes the ways “Impressions stain. Spread,” in one of her abstract tapes [Quin 2009, 17]), creating feelings that are sometimes unrecognizable *as* feelings, as subjective feelings that belong to us (208). And yet, even when such experiences mark us affectively in this muddy way, like a splash of paint that stains and spreads beyond recognition, this does not make them *impersonal*.

In *Three*, the groping advances of Quin’s poetic/prose, where words themselves become things on the page, gestures toward the unsettling kinship between objects, feelings, desires, and the bodies that inhabit them: “emotions handled, shifted about, dropped, picked up, but always attached as a child’s pair of gloves” (Quin 2009, 63). Ruth’s *personal*, particular agitations, for example, are felt in her constant re-arrangement of domestic furnishings—“She straightened cushions, placed objects in different positions, re-placed chairs, slid the doors apart, stood

between, and faced the room” (Ibid., 3)—so that her emotional frenzy, born from her gendered position, is in a way inseparable from the objects she gropes for and inhabits, *habitually*, through repeated and performative gestures. Or as Ahmed (2006) argues, “Gender is an effect of how bodies take up objects, which involves how they occupy space, by being occupied in one way or another” (59). Ruth’s discontented affects are in many ways shaped by the things that fill her space, and yet, as Ahmed (2006) suggests, “sometimes we reach for what is not expected” (62), or we reach for it differently, “becoming an object” (159). This is what Ahmed (2006) calls disorientation, wherein “bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach” (160). Ruth appears as if a body out of place like this; she is ungrounded, disoriented, and oblique, “estranged from the contours of life at home” (Ahmed 2006, 170), as she busies herself with the rim of a whisky glass, strokes metal pistol lighters, or jabs tweezers manically into the air.

Ruth longs for “*something*, someone” (Quin 2009, 10; italics mine), but departs from what will “cohere” (Ahmed 2006, 70) or straighten: the home, its objects, her desire. Instead, her affective, haptic gestures point to the queer effects and possibilities of disorientation, with and through, objects-in-space. For example, Ruth deviates from the horizontal and vertical axes of space, by shifting objects’ usage, or offering a new ‘perspective’ on what ‘to do’ with them. Her affects make her both passive and subversive in the ways she brings objects near, signalling affective *undercurrents* of agency. Such encounters open up a visionary, but disorienting, angle on the world that opens up the affective complexities of female sexual desire. When she holds the whisky glass, her lips also nudge “the inside” (Quin 2009, 6), in a suggestion of onanistic pleasure. Or, after trying on clothes; squeezing into dresses; struggling out of them; touching the material; tracing the design; folding and unfolding blouses; slipping them on and off; holding a necklace above her neck, its beads springing fatally apart; she then licks the broken beads, replaces “them on her extended nipples, her head thrown back, knees pressed into the carpet, feet together” (Ibid., 12). Haptic encounters such as these, as when Ruth “scratched the edge of the eiderdown... hugging the transistor which she turned low, hand sliding up the aerial” (Ibid., 15), invite new readings of queer autoeroticism (following Sedgwick 1993). Quin uncovers the covert pleasures of disorientation, of keeping the lines of desire and its objects waywardly off-kilter. Tentacular gropings.

‘To grope’ also finds a secondary meaning in *Three* that renders the sexual body an objectified ‘thing’. Ruth is violently raped by her husband, his heavy actions silencing her cries: “He lifted her back, parted her legs. No Leon don’t not now—

not like this. He pressed down, held himself over her mouth, between her breasts. Don't cry shhh there. He touched her with his fingers” (Quin 2009, 78). As a shocking and abject portrait of marital rape, it is portrayed as disturbingly ‘every-day’, a recurring event that Ruth attempts to clean from her skin (eradicating the violence of his touch) with the towel she asks him to fetch. This is one example of the ways in which Quin rejects the idea that sex is “sublime or even beautiful” (Doyle 2006, xxi), instead exposing the quotidian machinations of power that cause, reap, even dangerously legitimize, sexual violence within the home. It is a painful and raw scene, couched within the writing's perspectival and dialogic blur.

The triangular blur of *Three* is thus also about the blur of desire that disorients and unsettles: the slippages between intimacy and violence; between straightness and queerness; between pleasure and pain; between emotion, affect, and feeling. “The divinity of desire is an ambivalent being,” writes Carson (1986) in *Eros the Bittersweet*, “at once friend and enemy who informs the erotic experience with emotional paradox” (5). Like water (and like fantasy), it cannot be fully known or held, as Carson (1995) suggests in her hydro ethnography (117), further demonstrated in the seascape scenes of S's masochistic fantasies that are etched into journal entries, which blur the line between fiction and reality. S's fantasies involve drenched fragments on a “cliff edge, the sea spilling into the sky. Back to front. Kneeling. Like dogs. He said. Arms stretched out, bodies arched, more submission demanded. And rolling over as in waves. With the waves” (Quin 2009, 71). Her desire to submit, to relish in self-abandonment, and become a ‘sex object’ (Doyle 2006, 99)—as excessive and transgressive as the ocean's currents—disorients the lines of heterosexual desire that connects intercourse with the fulfilling of reproductive capacities. It replaces the domestic “boundaries of bed, floor, walls” (Quin 2009, 71). As a complex portrait of female sexual desire that shows its masochistic, violent, affective, and outdoor-public variants, it points to the radical vision of Quin's love triangle, the ways it oozes and gropes beyond borders, strays off the line of the vertical.

(N: For S, to lose herself to another is to be born anew by the tides. Sex as primordial, an act as old as the oceans, this all betrays a thirst for knowledge, for new acts, new words: amniotic becomings.)

6. Drawings

I am hereby arguing—via wayward diversions, fragments, intrusions, mutterings, gestures, and encounters—that *Three* is also ‘drawn’ at a 45-degree angle; its vision on the world tilts sideways. Quin plays with, writes ‘with’, the wayward slashes of the triangle, waving and rotating forward and back, like the frenetic movement of desire (Carson 1987, 17). *Three*’s textual spaces—formal, sexual, affective, autobiographical—are shaped according to this line, this ‘dis/orientation’: neither horizontal, nor vertical, but both; the ‘novel’ occupies a state of radical in-betweenness. Ahmed (2006) hopes that when the “reproduction of the facts [...] fails,” “new impressions... new lines... new objects... even new bodies” will emerge and gather in spaces redrawn (62). And hidden with the oblique, disorienting textures of *Three*, it is possible to find them: not only in the non-linear narrative depiction of an erotic love triangle that is smeared across the novel’s surface, and which immediately challenges the monolithic and vertical structures of the heterosexual couple and nuclear family, but also in the queer geometries formed by Ruth and S in the slantwise, murky shadows of journal, dialogue, and tape.

‘Pressed’ by bodies and objects (Ahmed 2014, 208), Ruth gropes for the diagonal line in her intimate encounters with the disembodied, inanimate spectre of S, deviating ‘off line’ in her autoerotic encounters with domestic objects, in her absorption within S’s posthumous documents, in her sickness and her sweat. She is the dis/oriented queer subject becoming an object, feeling the “oblique... as another kind of gift” (Ahmed 2014, 107). Here the wayward directionality of ‘queer’ as a sexual and spatial orientation materializes, and the verticality of the home gets redrawn at a slant. As Ahmed (2014) suggests, “Queer orientations might be those that don’t line up, which by seeing the world ‘slantwise’ allow other objects to come into view” (107). In *Three*, these include Ruth’s autoerotic objects, as well as the watery objects of S’s uncontainable, masochistic fantasies (multiplying triangles upon triangles).

These moments of queer disorientation within the novel are intimately connected with the fragile, confusing, and shifting contradictions of affect (it too is a diagonal line: unfixed). Hence, while queer disorientation in *Three* might begin with the “bodily feeling of losing one’s place, and an effect of the loss of a place” (Ahmed 2014, 160), from this experience of groundlessness, comes the possibility of groping and desiring, *obliquely*, as a radical way of living and loving and feeling and embodying, as another way of *writing*. The triangular drama of *Three* evolves from the slanting, blurring, wayward, and perverse, effects of that

shape. It repeats, gets redrawn, over and over again, on tangents that deviate from the central triad, through affective and erotic encounters with objects, through investments in writing, through the writing of fantasy. In effect, it is spliced through with disorienting diagonal slashes that refuse the straight singularities of love, desire, affect, and *form*.

And so is this essay, which has groped—through the gestural layering of correspondent voices: beside A and N and more—for a revised understanding of triangular relationships, in particular a new shape of feminist art/writing that draws affect and love into theory, a type of citational kinship. Feeling its way with its tentacular arms that slash, this shape spasms between: forms and disciplines; jealousy and love; straightness and queerness; allo and auto; presence and absence. As an interdisciplinary methodology, it has attended to the aims of performative writing to embody, and re-live, the contributions of its absent beloved. It has thought ‘with’ the radical geometries of *Three* by way of evocation, restaging the complex affects and desires of the writer’s love triangle, this one specifically (but there will be more, for triangles can multiply). “Fingers take on a life of their own,” in this essay, “angles drawn in the air” (Quin 2009, 55). It is this angle, this perverse line, mapping a wayward course forward, that I am transfixed by. It opens up the possibility for a future of disoriented writing, where forms, voices, disciplines, and desires, slip and swim astray... *away*.

*

Postscript: a special thank you to Natalie Ferris for her words, epistles, readings, and writings; for allowing me to think and write with our triangle:

A

N, A.

Endnotes

1. See Ferris, Natalie. (2021). *Abstraction in Post-War British Literature 1945-1980*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Forthcoming.

2. There has been a resurgence of interest in Quin’s work over the past ten years. In scholarly terms, PhD theses have focused on situating her experimental fictions within social, political, cultural, and creative landscapes (Williams 2013; Hodgson 2014; Van Hove 2017; White 2020), and writers have mused about Quin’s influence and contemporary significance (Levy 2016; Rourke 2018; Home nd.). Quin scholar, Jennifer Hodgson, is writing a book on Quin’s life and work, which follows Robert Buckeye’s critical biography *Re: Quin* (2013).

3. For more on the concept of triangles in Sedgwick's living and theorizing of identification, see Wiegman, Robyn. (2015). *Eve's Triangles, or Queer Studies Beside Itself*. *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 26 (1), pp. 48-73.

4. In the entry for 'grope' included in *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature* Vol. 2 (1994), Gordon Williams refers to a 1560 description of the "sexual preliminaries" in Scott's "Scorne of Wantoun Wemen," in which "brasing, graping, and plucking" signifies the "genital caress" of 'groping'.

5. Jennifer Doyle slides between the terms, 'affect', 'feeling', and 'emotion' in this book, avoids naming their differences, because, as she argues, when art that is "defined by its work with affect, emotion, or feeling," is accompanied by a "critical language that presumes (even provisionally) that feelings are self-evident, that emotions can be parsed and catalogued, produced and consumed at will," in a way that affects *cannot*, the reading becomes emptied out of the specific effects of the works themselves (2013, xiv). I am indebted to this same relationality in the terminology I employ.

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