Subversion Without Limits

From *Secretary*'s Transgressive S/M to *Exquisite Corpse*'s Subversive Sadomasochism

Susan E. Cook

2006

Contents

To speak of S/M is to evoke a subcultural practice that is both heavily commodified and politically self-aware.[1] The black leather, whips, and handcuffs stereotypical of S/M—shorthand for sadomasochism—ritualize and commercialize the relationship between its two components in a theatrical recovery of a practice that has been, from Richard von Rrafft-Ebing's writings in the 1890s, cast as pathologically perverse. S/M parodies normative heterosexual relations, performing traditionally gendered roles to hyperbolic excess. Yet in her 1991 "Maid to Order: Commercial S/M and Gender Power," Anne McClintock observes that S/M's parodie critique is unsatisfying: commercial S/M's "theater of risk inhabits the perilous borders of transgression," she writes, but caught between mimesis and catharsis, S/M works by "neither replicating social power nor finally subverting it."[2] McClintock's claim is that commercial S/M can, through its parodie treatment of gender roles, transgressively cross or unsettle the regulating limits established by the social order, but that it ultimately fails to alter the power relations it critiques. McClintock suggests that S/M aspires towards subversive change; what it achieves is transgressive play.

This essay examines—in the wake of McClintock's critique of commercial S/M—the subversive potential of masochism, sadism, and sadomasochism. I begin my analysis with Steven Shainberg's 2002 film *Secretary,* which follows the masochistic secretary Lee through a marriage plot structure to S/M fulfillment with her boss Edward. I then read the film against Poppy Z. Brite's 1996 novel *Exquisite Corpse,* which graphically depicts the sadistic love story of Andrew and Jay, two homosexual serial killers, and the victims they have sex with, torture, and cannibalize.[3] The conclusion of Brite's novel imagines a movement from pure sadism to a more thoroughly sadomasochistic relation. Shainberg's film and Brite's novel reveal a continuum from transgressive, limit crossing commercial S/M at the start of *Secretary* to subversive, internally critical sadomasochism by the end of *Exquisite Corpse.*[4] As representations of psychic structures made over into social practice through the languages of sadism and masochism,

[1] I would like to thank Maurizia Boscagli, Barbara Tomlinson, James Kincaid, and the readers at *Discourse* for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

[2] Anne McClintock, "Maid to Order: Commercial S/M and Gender Power," in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power,* ed. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: British Film Institute, 1991), 226–27.

[3] *Secretary,* DVD, directed by Steven Shainberg (Los Angeles: Lions Gate Entertainment, 2002); and Poppy Z. Brite, *Exquisite Corpse* (New York: Scribner, 1996).

[4] I base this distinction between transgression and subversion on Foucault's formulation of transgression as that which plays around the limit, never finally "upsetting the solidity of foundations" even while it crosses and re-crosses them; and my understanding of subversion as a kind of "critique-from-within" or simultaneous "use and misuse" that instigates political change by inhabiting the norm and modifying it from inside the system. See Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 35; and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 80.

these two texts move towards articulating a politics grounded not in the other, but in the other's psychic and—in *Exquisite Corpse*—physical implication in the self.[5]

The commercial S/M of *Secretary* and the initial sadism of *Exquisite Corpse* offer two distinct and yet related ways to conceptualize pain, pleasure, and the threat that pleasurable pain poses—or fails to pose—to the social order. Sadism deploys an institutional control and is very much invested in physical pain, whereas theatrical, commercial S/M parodies normativity with a system of contractually controlled and fetishistically displaced *representations* of physical pain— essentially, this S/M is mainstream masochism and not sadomasochism "proper."[6] In *Masochism,* Gilíes Deleuze takes pains to separate sadism from masochism, debunking what he calls "the spurious sadomasochistic unity" on the grounds that "a genuine sadist could never tolerate a masochistic victim" and vice versa. According to Deleuze, the sadist and the masochist inhabit two separate worlds. Each has a complement, but Deleuze is clear that the complement to sadism is not exactly masochism, and the complement to masochism is not exactly sadism. Deleuze grounds his critique of sadomasochism in the difference between the Marquis de Sade's and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's language, attributing to Sade the language of description and imperative, institutional demand (such as the category of the law, which is delineated and enforced unilaterally, from the top down), and to Masoch the language of dialectical and persuasive contract (such as a written agreement established between two consensual parties). These two discourses are, for Deleuze, incommensurable.[7]

Secretary and *Exquisite Corpse* offer two very different investigations of pleasure and pain. Realized in different mediums, these texts illustrate the wide spectrum this conversation occupies. At the same time, both texts are critical of the subtle and not-so-subtle violence of heteronormativity, and both were marketed as crossover, artistic renditions of subject matter more characteristic of pornography (a realm particularly welcoming to the discourse of S/M). On one level, *Secretary* exemplifies commercial S/M antics, self-consciously mocking gender norms and displaying its own deviance in full whips-and-chains, BDSM (Bondage and Dominance, Sadism and Masochism) splendor. Yet the film begins to separate itself from S/M parody, first by more performatively questioning gender roles, and finally by critically disintegrating the distinction

[5] My description of the relationship between self and other is informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis and political philosophy. While this connection between self and other is admittedly antagonistic in that it entails the incorporation of the other into the self, here I consider this relation in terms of a fantasy represented in literature and film. As a practice, cannibalism is destructive; as a fantasy, this bodily incorporation can mark a political resistance to social lack.

[6] In this essay, I consider bodily pain as inherent to a sadistic or sadomasochist economy rather than a masochistic one. For more on the way bodily pain questions the very limits of inside and outside, see Steven Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 148–49.

[7] Gilíes Deleuze, *Masochism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 40. Indeed, this incommensurability is ironically figured in the popular shorthand "S/M" itself: in this shortened form of sadomasochism, sadism is literally barred from masochism.

between contract and institution—and hence, beginning to complicate Deleuze's insistent separation of sadism and masochism. *Exquisite Corpse* exceeds both transgression and sadism. Serial torture, murder, and cannibalism root this novel in sadism, with cannibalism situated as the ultimate taboo to be violated. Rather than crossing and recrossing social limits transgressively, Brite's figuration of cannibalism more subversively challenges the very existence of such limits. W hen Andrew and Jay eat their victims, they attempt to dissolve the separation between their own bodies and the bodies of the others. They quite literally incorporate the bodies they have sadistically tortured, masochistically (if symbolically) taking that pain they have inflicted into themselves. Their consumption obliterates the social limit between self and other, as well as the limit separating sadist and masochist.[8]

Secretary. Transgression in Masochism

In *Secretary's* climactic scene, the protagonist/masochist Lee goes on a hunger strike, refusing to leave her boss' chair until he validates their S/M relationship. As Lee tells a news reporter covering her sit-in, "In one way or another I've always suffered ... I feel more than I've ever felt, and I've found someone to feel with, to play with, to love. In a way that feels right to me." These words mark Lee's self-acceptance and decision to claim her masochistic desire. No longer will she be imprisoned by what others classify as "suffering." "Suffering" was unhappiness at home and shame to accept her desire; with Edward in their S/M relationship, Lee is far from "suffering." Lee expresses her masochism by sitting in Edward's office for days, refusing to move because he has told her to remain there until his return.[9] In contrast to the cannibalistic incorporation of *Exquisite Corpse*, Lee's hunger strike is a bodily refusal to incorporate: it is an insistence on her own very individual desire. As the days go by, Lee becomes a public spectacle: family, friends, her ex-fiancé, her ex-fiancé's angry parents, a priest, a feminist, and many others come to see her, to argue with her, and to plead with her. She

[8] Abraham and Torok's definition of incorporation informs my use of the word throughout this essay. Describing incorporation as the linguistic element of a melancholic attachment, Abraham and Torok write that *''"Incorporation results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such."* Incorporation is the refusal to part with the lost other; it is the inability to speak about this loss; it is a process of psychic fusion turned literal. Incorporation circumvents the linguistic division of sadism and masochism delineated by Deleuze insofar as it disorders language systems themselves. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, vol. 1, ed. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 130.

[9] Aside from the scenes in the beginning of the film where Lee cuts and burns herself, this hunger strike episode is *Secretary's* clearest exposition of bodily pain. In their S/M encounters—and in true S/M style—Lee and Edward only indulge in the most superficial of pain. During their first physical interaction, Lee receives a large bruise from Edward, but this temporary mark stands in sharp relief against the permanent scars she herself has left all over her own body. A true masochist, Lee derives pleasure from the parodie promise of pain and from the language describing it. In this way, the S/M depicted in *Secretary* is more appropriately masochistic than it is both masochistic and sadistic.

becomes a news story, she gives an interview, and thus Edward reads her epiphany. In its context, Lee's declaration is ironic. Her very personal and culturally deviant desire is not merely documented by the press; the press facilitates the realization of her desire by transferring her spoken words to Edward's reading eyes: what "feels right to me" is no longer a private contract between Edward and Lee, but instead a topic for public discussion and debate. This placement of personal desire in public discourse exposes the film's commercial use of S/M by playing up the question of deviance to campy proportions, modeling the opening of the topic to mainstream consumption and critique, and consequently raising the question of *Secretary's* subversive potential.

Secretary takes up the discourse of S/M to the extent that it is a theatrical, self-conscious parody of its own commercialism. In the middle of the film, Lee sits in a busy café, listening to a self-help book-on-tape and learning more about her alternative desires and how to keep her dominant sadist boss happy. The cover of the book- on-tape lies on her table for everyone in the café to see; its title is "How to Come Out as a Dominant/Submissive." The book-on-tape appears as Lee's second such appeal to the world of pop-culture self-help; an earlier scene shows Lee reading aloud from a *Cosmopolitan* magazine (don't indulge in "relationship talk" too early, Cosmo advises its readers). The Dominant/Submissive how-to book appears, not in contrast to the Cosmo article, but as another in the same series: each deploys the gender roles it more or less consciously toys with, and each appears as a mainstream commodity in spite of its greater or lesser perceived "deviance." The very appearance of the book as a *book-on-tape* suggests its banality. Thus Lee's recreational listening—and the subject she listens to—is coded commonplace, in spite of its suggested deviance. A representative example of *Secretary* s playful style, the book-on-tape scene deploys cliché deliberately, using S/M to parody and critique commodification and normativity simultaneously.

The film's transgressive S/M performance is depicted as lighthearted fantasy. Its darker elements—Lee's self-mutilation, her father's alcoholism, her family's domestic abuse—are somehow all resolved as her masochism finds its satisfying complement in her new S/M relationship. The fantasy is sustained, prompting criticism of the "certain dopey, saccharine quality" with which the film ends.[10] Disapproval of the film seems focused on the ending: the coda is for one critic "too tidy," while for another it is "silly and sensuously flat."[11] As a self-mocking fantasy, *Secretary* is aligned with McClintock's description of S/M as "the theatrical exercise of social contradiction": a performance that is "self-consciously *against* nature, not in the sense that it violates natural law, but in the sense that it denies the existence of natural law in the first place."[12] *Secretary's,* parody is, like the commercial S/M McClintock describes, transgressive in its use of traditional gender norms to turn those norms against themselves. Yet the S/M both *Secretary* and McClintock address is also its own stereotype. The scandal it poses to

[10] Frances L. Restuccia, 'The Use of Perversion: *Secretary* or *The Piano Teacher.*?" *Lacanian Ink* 5 (Winter 2004), http:/www.lacan.com/useperv.htm.

[11] Ibid.

[12] McClintock, "Maid to Order," 210.

nor- mativity is repeated again and again until the fetishes it addresses— black leather, whips, chains, servant costumes, baby costumes, etc.—are accepted at a commercial level and transformed into commodities. S/M's transgression is, like the whips and chains that are used to represent it, bought and sold.

This commodified transgression does not truly unsettle any social norms or sexual taboos: writing of capitalism and sex, Linda Singer places S/M in the category of "specialized sexualities" that are endlessly proliferated by capitalist economy "to produce a kind of compensatory optimism ... the market's way of producing a 'revolutionary' development and sustaining a sense of *apparent* freedom through the proliferation of a range of erotic options, styles, and scenes."[13] Thus, the S/M fetish paraphernalia is one more sign of S/M's appropriation, in this sense economic, into the very dominant culture it sets itself in opposition to. Singer shows S/M's manipulation by the market economy as a deviance offered but always controlled, always deferred. S/M's mainstream commodification reveals that by playing the normative against itself—by operating forever at the borders—S/M risks appropriation by the very social structure it sets itself against. *Secretary* itself, as a film that successfully capitalizes on its own subcultural subject matter, is an example of the appropriation of deviance.

Secretary's, theatrics are, however, occasionally abandoned for more performative acts. By subtly critiquing its own margins—by reversing S/M's typically parodied gender opposition and by destabilizing the: distinction between institution and contract—the film retains a useful transgression as well as a potential for subversion. *Secretary* unsettles S/M's own gender strategy. Deploying the active/passive binary against itself, S/M is most clearly transgressive in its manipulation of heteronormative gender roles. McClintock argues that "The economy of S/M is tlm economy of conversion: slave to master, adult to baby, pain to pleasure, man to woman, and back again ... in S/M, roles are swiftly *swapped.*[14] McClintock's work emphasizes S/M's power to subvert normativity by performing *reversed* gender roles; most of her examples involve dominant women as sadists or "dominas" and correspondingly submissive men as masochists. McClintock's point about S/M is that it threatens assumed gender norms, yet her overwhelmingly heterosexual examples suggest that this threat is powerful only insofar as it involves performed gendered opposites: in other words, S/M transgression seems to reaffirm gender categories through opposition, with women dominating and men submitting.

This gendering transgression of gender, which Lee destabilizes with her own gendered performance, has its historical foundation in Masoch himself. Deleuze writes that "Masoch and his heroes are constantly in search of a peculiar and extremely rare feminine 'nature.' The subject in masochism needs a certain 'essence' of masochism embodied in the nature of a woman who renounces her own subjective masochism."[15]

---

[13] Linda Singer, "Sex and the Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Erotic Welfare* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 48 (my italics).

[14] McClintock, "Maid to Order," 207 (my italics).

[15] Deleuze, *Masochism,* 42–43.

In Masoch, the men are always masochists, and theirs is a subservience and pleasure in pain borrowed from a natural female quality. In their writings on sadomasochism, both Sigmund Freud and Rrafft-Ebing describe aggression as a "natural" or "normal" male characteristic. The masochist therefore ruptures normality by desiring to be passive, his opposite gender quality. Rrafft-Ebing pathologizes this tendency; Freud discusses it in terms of normative and non-normative drives. McClin- tock instead claims for S/M a self-aware "symbolic exercise of social risk."[16] For McClintock, S/M is powerful because it is theater, always questioning the normative by embodying *opposites.*

As a female masochist, *Secretaras* Lee complicates this picture of S/M role play: Lee's masochism is a parodie S/M critique of gender norms, yet her parodie embodiment of her own gender comes dangerously close to reifying a more stereotypical gendered submission. Indeed, the film introduces Lee as a stereotype: she is her alcoholic daddy's "little girl," whose self-mutilation has kept her either in her parents' house or in "the institution" and out of work until her first job as secretary for the lawyer, Edward Grey. Lee's masochism is explicitly linked to her relationships with men. The linear narrative begins with her release from what she calls "the institution."[17] She has apparently been institutionalized because her father's alcoholism drives her to self-mutilation. Here, the film seems to invite a Freudian reading: because of her father's alcoholism and consequent failure in his role as stable law of the family, Lee must look for the law elsewhere. Following Freud's definition of the masochist, Lee "wants to be treated like a small and helpless child, but, particularly, like a naughty child."[18] Without a father to reprimand her, Lee must scold herself until she encounters a willing father figure in her lawyer boss. But is this female submissiveness to the law of the father masochistic or merely heteronormative? In her reading of Freud's gendered masochism, Kaja Silverman suggests that female masochism *is* heteronormative. Silverman writes that, for Freud, one of the three forms of masochism, "Feminine masochism ... always implies desire for the father and identification with the mother, a state of affairs that is normative for the female subject, but 'deviant' for her male counterpart."[19] Lee's gender thus renders her situation both normative and masochistic.

Yet the film extracts Lee from stereotypical female subservience and places her in a stereotypical S/M relationship. By deploying Lee's embodied gender against itself, *Secretary* is willing to go further than mere transgression-as-gender-reversal. Taking McClin- tock's understanding of S/M as theatrics that destabilize the gender norms

[16] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* trans. James Strachey (Basic Books, 2000); and McClintock, "Maid to Order," 210.

[17] The institution is a place that cruelly—one might suggest even sadistically— separates Lee from her desire to self-mutilate. Yet her release from this institution also marks the start of Lee's development as a masochist.

[18] Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 19, trans. James Stra- chey (London: Hogarth, 1961), 162.

[19] Kaja Silverman, "Masochism and Male Subjectivity," in *Male Trouble,* ed. Constance Penley and Sharon Willis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 37–38.

it mocks, it is possible to see *Secretary's* use of S/M as a threat, not merely to gender *norms,* but to gender *as such.* In line with Judith Butler's differentiation between "performance that a prior subject elects to do" and a performative act that "constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express," S/M in *Secretary* is gender performative rather than a single gender performance.[20] S/M is not a play Lee and Edward perform when they feel like being transgressive; it is a practice that arguably deviates from heteronor- mativity by reiterating the excesses of that normativity. It is a performance that does not end, but that becomes inextricable from the people Lee and Edward "are." In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Butler notes that gender is performative, with "no performer prior to the performed." Rather, the repeated performance creates the identity of the performer. At the same time, there is a psychic excess that goes beyond subjectivity, and this excess makes "disruptive repetition within compulsory heterosexuality" possible.[21] In other words, while it is impossible to cease performing gender, it *is* possible to manipulate the excess at the fringe of performance. *Secretary* depicts a masochist performing her gendered identity with a deviant difference by channeling it through a stylized and ritualized S/M relation. Hinting at the performative, *Secretary* edges away from an excessively theatrical S/M and towards a more subtle subversion.[22]

Inhabiting and altering traditional gender norms allows Lee to call the naturalness of those norms into question. Lee and Edward marry at the end of *Secretary* in what might seem to be a heteronormative ending to their deviant relationship. After reading Lee's interview, Edward rushes to the office, revives the starved Lee, and consummates their S/M relationship with a contractual marriage. This marriage is an imitation of the traditional ceremony Lee was previously offered from Peter. Lee is trying on her wedding dress in anticipation of her marriage to Peter, when she suddenly decides to run to Edward's office and demand the relationship she desires. Because she refuses to move from Edward's office chair until his return, Lee must by physical necessity urinate in her white wedding dress. The urination reveals Lee's devotion to Edward and her renunciation of the traditional marriage Peter offers her both literally—she places her desire for Edward above physical necessity— and symbolically—she pisses on the traditional "white wedding" she is offered. The film's final, summarizing sequence suggests that Lee's and Edward's married life will never quite settle into hetero- normativity: after learning how her husband likes his bed made, Lee strategically places a dead cockroach on the clean sheets in order to instigate punishment—perpetuating pleasure

[20] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories,* ed. Diane Fuss (New Y)rk: Routledge, 1991), 24.

[21] Ibid., 24, 28.

[22] Lee's resolutely parodic-masochistic version of pain, however, limits this movement. The masochist's pain is a linguistic pain, a contractual description that "occludes" the pained body through words. However, the film's simultaneous use of a sadistic institution challenges the division between sadism and masochism.

by a continuous (loving) subversion of the law. The end of *Secretary* leaves Lee and Edward to enjoy their slightly askew happily-ever-after.

This final episode contains the film's richest potential. As Frances Restuccia writes, Lee and Edward "go contractless at the start and for most of the duration of the film and then eventually bind themselves legally together."[23] The masochistic contract is, in *Secretary,* the wedding Lee and Edward finally enjoy at the end of the film. Their S/M relationship is thus collaboratively regulated— the rules are now clearly drawn and Lee can relax and enjoy her regulated pain. Yet, in spite of this manipulation of marriage as parodie play and masochistic contract, the contract is also an institution. Lee may piss on her white wedding dress and favor a black dress instead, but this reversal does not negate the third party or institution concretizing the wedding contract. The institutional element to Lee's and Edward's contract need not represent the failure of masochism, however: rather than showing the futility of subversion, this simultaneous contract/institution gestures toward a potential blending of discourses. W hile *Secretary* is predominantly masochistic, this blending of contract with institution begins to destabilize the permanent and seemingly absolute division Deleuze imposes between sadist and masochist.[24] This destabilization will continue in *Exquisite Corpse*—this time through a more radical blending of style, contextual narrative, and finally subject-as-sadist and object-made-masochist.

Exquisite Corpse: Subversion Beyond Sadism

Brite's title *Exquisite Corpse,* as Richard Davenport-Hines notes in his compendium *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil, and Ruin,* comes from a song by the 1980s goth band Bauhaus. The song describes "cruel love and the corrosion of corpses"—a fitting reference for Brite's dark novel.[25] Vi-I the expression "exquisite corpse" has an older lineage, and one that is likewise apt, if not authorially intended. An "exquisite corpse" is a Surrealist group poetry game developed in the 1920s and '30s in which someone would write a phrase of poetry on a piece of paper, fold over the paper to hide all but the last line, and pass the paper to the next player. The

[23] Restuccia, 'The Use of Perversion," 3.

[24] McClintock writes of both pain and S/M-to-sadist blending in a slightly different context, explaining in her second footnote that "The sub-culture is not synonymous with the non-consensual inflictions of violence, pain, abuse or terror. A man does not usually don leather gear, fetish costumes and make-up before battering his wife. *At times, however, the boundaries may blur and distinctions falter*' (228, my italics).

[25] Richard Davenport-Hines, *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil, and Ruin* (New York: North Point, 1998), 361. In the novel, Luke listens to Bauhaus' last album and remembers that the singer Peter Murphy "only sang half the songs on the album, officially because he'd been in the hospital ... The emaciated, androgynous singer had once bragged about a psychic's prediction that he would die of AIDS in Paris; now he had a kid ... As far as Luke was concerned, Murphy should be here begging to trade places with him" (135). Murphy—and Bauhaus by extension—is a theatrical simulacrum, disgusting Luke with his representation of the bodily pain Luke himself feels.

game, which earned its name from the first poem written in this way, represents the Surrealist Compte de Lautreamont's call for collective collage: "poetry must be made by all and not by one." Later, the game evolved to collective drawing, each player assigned to draw one section of a body, "though the Surrealist principle of metaphoric displacement led to images that only vaguely resembled the human form."[26]

The Surrealist exquisite corpses were collections of distinct and irreconcilable parts, yet Brite's novel appears to move in a slightly different direction, emphasizing as it does bodily, psychic, and narrative fusion. Collective creation—particularly the collective creation of the body—suffuses the novel from its formal style, through its contextual narrative backdrop, and finally to its sadomasochistic conclusion. This collectivity emerges from the level of language as well as of narrative as a blending: in Brite's novel, collection implies the disintegration of borders, the melting of insides into outsides. The novel's culminating, subversive blending is what Andrew refers to as the "final taboo" of cannibalism. In the West, cannibalism can be seen as the ultimate taboo for the way it fundamentally violates the category of the subject: it involves one subject incorporating the cannibalized subject-object into himself. "I was unnerved by the thought of waking alone in the dark and still feeling them with me, in my very cells," Andrew admits to his lover Jay, from whom he learns the finer points and pleasures of cannibalism.[27] Cannibalism marks the literalization of a symbolic desire for the other: it is a disintegration of the separation between subject and object, and indicates a transition from the sadistic instigation of pain to the sadomasochistic incorporation of that pain. As sadists, Andrew and Jay torture their boys. W hen they eat the boys, however, they incorporate those tortured bodies into their own. This act transforms sadism into masochism, for by taking the pained object into their very selves, the sadists can retroactively experience the pain they themselves inflicted: they make the tortured flesh their own, moving from sadists to sadomasochists. This move to blended sadomasochism is prefigured—or perhaps performatively reiterated— through the novel's mixture of Romanic-Gothic prose and pornographic detail. At the same time, the novel's pervasive discourse about AIDS, homosexuality, and heteronormative panic repeats this blurring motif on the narrative level. Refusing to leave theatrics to the realm of S/M, *Exquisite Corpse* manipulates the cliché of transgression itself. Norms are not questioned here—they are embodied and uncomfortably, performatively used against themselves.

Like the title itself suggests, *Exquisite Corpse's* style resists simple classification. Its subject matter aligns it with pornography, but its florid, darkly Romantic style places it in a more aesthetically elite category. As they are used in the book, subject and style are not dissimilar or dissociated. Brite writes in a way that is difficult to dismiss

[26] "Exquisite Corpse," http://www.exquisitecorpse.com/definition.html (accessed February 27, 2005). There are hundreds of interactive Exquisite Corpse websites today, affording anyone who likes the opportunity to compose the next line in a corpse poem.

[27] Brite, *Exquisite Corpse,* 175.

as pulp and difficult to embrace as poetic: the book refuses to locate itself as either high or low art. *Exquisite Corpse* is both at once, and frequently in the same passage:

> After you've been going for a while, after they've begged and screamed and vomited and realized none of it is going to make any difference, they pass into a kind of ecstasy Their flesh becomes like clay. Their insides cleave to your lips. It becomes a collaboration ... his body not only stops resisting—it falls into your rhythm.[28]

As he describes torturing his victims, Jay slips back and forth between metaphorical and literal language, shifting from a specific, clinical recollection of torture to a more abstracted consideration. "I cut them into manageable pieces and flay the meat off the bones. This was really messy at first, but I improved over time," Jay describes, after theorizing in a more "dreamy," darkly Romantic way, how "they pass into a kind of ecstasy. Their flesh becomes like clay. Their insides cleave to your lips. It becomes a collaboration."[29] Waxing poetic, this second passage displaces precise description. Like Deleuze's description of Masoch's language, Jay's "dreamy" words "bear the stamp of decency ... The body of the victim remains in a strange state of indeterminacy except where it receives the blows." Yet this displacement through language is *itself* rudely displaced with the explicit account of dismemberment and cannibalism that follows: Jay goes on to catalogue his practices with precision, striving as Roland Barthes notes of Sade himself, "to leave nothing outside the words and to concede nothing ineffable to the world."[30] The combined use of Romanticized Gothic style and overtly precise textual pornographic/clinical description reveals, at their intersection, a formal blending of the languages of sadism and masochism.

While the shift from the filmic *Secretary* to the literary *Exquisite Corpse* ostensibly matches a move from commercial S/M to sadomasochism, the pornographic and Gothic element in Brite's novel troubles the neat separation of media forms:[31] Pornography and the Gothic are literary genres, but each is also part of a larger, multimedia genre, and as such each produces a separate anxiety of definition that is then reiterated in Brite's stylistic blending. On the level of genre, one of pornography's interests is in the way "the instabilities and permeability of cultural borders is inextricable from the fragility and tenuousness of our own psychic borders," while the Gothic depicts the "external embodiment of all the inner anxieties."[32] Describing "How to Look at

[28] Ibid., 176.

[29] Ibid., 177, 176.

[30] Deleuze, *Masochism,* 26; and Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 37.

[31] By framing the distinction I am making between these two texts in terms of "movement," I do not mean to indicate that they obey some notion of historical progression (and indeed, *Secretary* postdates *Exquisite Corpse* by six years, thus disrupting such a developmental narrative). Rather, these texts are situated along a non-sequential continuum.

[32] For pornography, see Laura Kipnis, "How to Look at Pornography," in *Bound and Gagged* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 167; for the Gothic, see Davenport-Hines, *Gothic,* 314.

Pornography," Laura Kip- nis notes that visual pornography "should interest us, because it's intensely and relentlessly about us," yet because it exists at the edges of the cultural map, pornography has the potential to instigate anxiety: "The edges of culture are exquisitely threatening places." In its excess, then, pornography is able to confront its viewers with the social limits it crosses. Yet pornography is also a demand for "a fictional, fantastical, even allegorical realm ... a sanctioned space for fantasy," even while it remains a transgressive tally of "each and every one of society's taboos, prohibitions, and proprieties."[33] Pornography—and the Gothic as well—often embodies fantasy and reality simultaneously through its mobilization of clinical pictures and prose. The Gothic, David Punter writes, participates in a "radical decentering" at its very linguistic origin: the word Gothic "itself challenges history: it enters us upon a terrain on which we might have to ask, who were the Goths? And thus it brings us face to face with an origin which is no origin," for the 18th century word remains dissociated from its Visigothic root.[34] Gothic writing is persistently haunted by its own otherness to itself—a displacement like that enacted in Masoch's descriptions. At the same time, however, the Gothic is a language of the horrible, the grotesque. The Gothic's anxiety is rooted in both this explicit terror as well as the decentering that allows such explicit terror to be written. Like pornography, the Gothic refuses straight metaphor or straight lit- eralization. As literal accounts of society's taboos, both genres disrupt social order transgressively; as partially metaphorical styles, each threatens to go beyond transgression. Thus two genres, seemingly separated by one's depiction of "reality" and the other's use of "fantasy," find a homology in their deployment and blending of both elements. The distinction between Gothic and pornographic writing can break down in practice, becoming a generic exquisite corpse: "Gothic pornography."

Like S/M, this Gothic pornography occupies a fraught relationship with the margins of society it is not wholly relegated to. The difference between the signifier "sadomasochism" and the prepackaged "S/M" marks the mainstream appropriation of this practice through the commodification and banalization of its stereotypical fetish objects. Similarly, the Gothic and pornography find themselves sharing an uneasy relationship with the center they are not wholly excluded from. Both are trapped in a permitted transgression, fated to repeat their clichéd deviance over and over again. Yet, this repetitious inside/outside position is nevertheless the very foundation of subversion. *Exquisite Corpse'works,* on this tension between the society that forbids and the deviance that resists, situating itself as a novel about margins that centralizes those margins, rupturing the division between the marginal and the central.

This rupture is extended to the narrative level: the novel's plot is developed at an intersection of cannibalistic serial killing, early 1990s New Orleans gay subculture, AIDS, and recreational drug use. Listed thus, these elements suggest an uncomfortable

[33] Kipnis, "How to Look at Pornography," 161–66.

[34] David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law* (New \brk: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 1.

causal relationship: drugs—deviance—homosexuality—AIDS—disease— pathological serial killers. The novel suggests such a causal chain, however, only to undermine it. AIDS, the novel's subtext that refuses to remain beneath the surface, is both a link between the serial killers and other homosexual characters (everyone is either infected or fears that they might be), as well as a contagion that produces panic beyond the homosexual community, scaring the "breeders," as Luke calls them, and stimulating the novel's own political critique of heteronormativity's homophobia. Luke is the novel's political critic, broadcasting his outrage on an illicit radio station. He reads AIDS-related headlines over the air—and there are plenty of them circulating in this novel—and comments sardonically on the stories' offenses:

> guess why the governor of Mississippi refused state funding to AIDS research clinics! This is a good one. He said it was a *behaviorally caused disease* and normal taxpayers shouldn't have to foot the bill ... So I wrote to my legislators and said I wanted a refund of all my tax dollars that went toward research on birth defects, fertility drugs, miscarriage ... anything related to the production of the healthy human fetus. I figured, since pregnancy is a *behaviorally caused condition* whose morality—or lack thereof—I deplore, I shouldn't have to finance the disgusting problems of breeders.[35]

Luke's disgust strategically politicizes the novel, refusing any causal relationship that would link AIDS with homosexuality and serial killing. While hysterical, paranoid headlines pepper the text with messages such as "THE GAY PLAGUE—ARE YOUR CHILDREN SAFE?," Luke responds with rants that expose the mainstream press's clichéd paranoia by mirroring its grotesque logic.[36] In the process, Luke opens the book to a wider discourse of the role of AIDS in homosexual panic and identity politics.

These correspondences between killers, homosexuality, and disease negotiate a background suffused with Luke's political rants and the offensive, over-the-top homophobic headlines. Woven together, this tapestry avoids pathologizing or otherwise othering homosexuality. Instead, the novel deploys a form of what Lee Edel- man calls "homographesis" by defining "as central to 'homosexuality' a refusal of the specifications of identity (including sexual identity) performed by the cultural practice of a regulatory homographesis that marks out the very space within which to think 'homosexuality' itself." Edelman's second, deconstructive homographesis arises out of an understanding that homosexuality is "metaphorized as an essential condition, a sexual orientation, in order to contain the disturbance it effects as a force of dis-orienta- tion."[37] The need to render homosexuality legible paradoxically marks its illegibility—in order to be othered it must be seen, but once it is seen, it is seen to be not entirely other

[35] Brite, *Exquisite Corpse,* 94.

[36] Ibid., 139.

[37] Lee Edelman, "Homographesis," in *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14.

after all. Stable identity is itself questioned by this homographesis. As Luke walks to the French Quarter near the end of Brite's novel, he passes streets with "more of a genteel-homo air" where "In these lovingly renovated, tastefully appointed homes, people were making dinner, having sex, getting dressed to hit the bars, dying of KS and PCP and CMV and crypto and toxo and a hundred other incomprehensible horrors the rest of the world just called 'AIDS.'" The activities Luke imagines occurring inside the houses shifts from the dinner and sex to AIDS-related sufferings problematizing both the category of homosexuality as well as the category of AIDS. The homes themselves disclose their inhabitants' sexual preference and hence possible relation to death by AIDS—"a rainbow flag or windsock fluttering from every other porch, a pink triangle or a SILENCE=DEATH sticker on every other car bumper"—but they simultaneously inscribe and de-scribe their owner's sexuality.[38] Even while these homes identify their inhabitants' sexual preference, they challenge the security of the identity they describe: the dinner, sex, and AIDS contained within are notable in that they are *not* contained to these particular houses or to these sexual preferences. The straight press seeks to identify and contain gay citizens by associating them, again and again, with AIDS and hence death—and yet the press's paranoid attempts at containment originate in an implicit acknowledgement of the instability of the borders separating all identities, bodily and otherwise. The novel links the homosexual serial killer narrative and AIDS narrative as part of a wider critique of heteronormativity, disrupting the very notion of transgression by more radically challenging the limit itself between diseased and healthy, killer and lover, and—more implicitly than the others—homosexuality and heterosexuality.

The very *"constitution* of the subject," Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write in their work on transgression, comes from an identity "discursively produced from the moment of entry into language by ... oppositions and differences."[39] Throughout *Exquisite Corpse*, oppositions and differences begin to blur. The language of and about the serial killers mirrors, sometimes with difference but always with resonance, the language of the lovers Tran and Luke. Luke's disease has made him a "crazy fucking sadist," for it has driven him to both murderously envy Tran's health as well as desire that Tran remain with him. This first drive makes Luke want "Tran to inject diseased blood, Luke's own blood, into his vein ... [he] wanted Tran to die, not even *with* him, but *instead* of him."[40] In this instance, Luke's desire is noticeably removed from the killers' own cannibalistic motivations. Instead of killing others to affirm their own separate lives, Andrew and Jay kill to make the others part of themselves: "All Jay's boys became part of him. They would be with him forever, flesh of his flesh, loving

[38] Brite, *Exquisite Corpse,* 218.

[39] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 148.

[40] Brite, *Exquisite Corpse,* 201, 82.

him from the inside." Similarly, Andrew's pre-cannibalistic murders stem from a need to not "feel alone."[41]

At the end of the novel, Luke insists on the difference between cannibals Andrew and Jay on the one hand and himself and Tran on the other. Luke sees Andrew and Jay abducting Tran from the streets of New Orleans, and goes to rescue his lover. He arrives in time to observe the two cannibals feasting on Tran, and he takes his revenge by killing the killers. "I don't know you," Luke sobs as he slits Jay's throat, the desperation of his claim calling its veracity into question. This disavowal is an inverse echo of Jay's and Andrew's previous love/rape scene: in this earlier scene, Jay tells Andrew that "If I loved you, I don't think we'd both still be alive. But I *know* you, Andrew, and that's something I've never said to anyone else."[42] Whereas Jay identifies with his fellow cannibal Andrew, Luke must vehemently refuse such an identification. Nevertheless, Luke's hysterical need to *not* know the killer who has been cannibalizing his beloved Tran is belied by the "hideous familiarity" in Jay's grin. Just before uttering his disavowal, Luke tastes his lover's blood without thinking. This nascent cannibalistic action prompts Jay's knowing smile and produces Luke's simultaneous recognition and disavowal of the cannibal Jay.

More unsettling than the novel's graphic descriptions are the moments when those descriptions refuse to fully vilify the characters or the actions themselves: as Andrew narrates to us after raping Jay, "Our eyes locked and something passed between us, something that changed this from an act of rape to an act of love, more intimate than killing the boy together had been."[43] In the slippage between excessive violence and "normal" love, *Exquisite Corpse* challenges the solidity of such categorizations. Again, Andrew challenges readers:

> Some may think killing is easy for men like me, that it is a thing we murderers do as casually and callously as brushing our teeth. Hedonists see us as grotesque cult heroes performing mutilations for kicks. Moralists will not even grant us a position in the human race, can only rationalize our existence by calling us monsters. But *monster* is a medical term, describing a freak too grossly deformed to belong anywhere but the grave. Murderers, skilled at belonging everywhere, seed the world.[44]

Murderers, Andrew argues, are far from monsters consigned to the fringes of society: they are central to that society. And the queer goth culture of *Exquisite Corpse*, another border community, is right in the thick of that society as well. Rather than reflecting each other in a closed system, this correspondence between homosexual and murderer reflects the heteronormative, socially sanctioned world— and shows the failure of all of these divisive categories to truly identify, explain, or pathologize.

---

[41] Ibid., 115, 11.

[42] For the final showdown scene, see page 233. For the earlier love/rape scene, see page 185.

[43] Ibid., 188.

[44] Ibid., 70.

Sadomasochistic Potentials

Cannibalism, the "final taboo," brings sadism beyond its transgression and into the realm of sadomasochistic subversion. Through the pain they produce in their object-boys, Andrew and Jay are sadists. They give Tran a pain "He had no reference for," a pain that feels "as if it were reaching some sort of crescendo," but which perhaps "was capable of attaining infinite peaks."[45] In their role as sadists, the killers affirm their subjectivity through the objectifying pain of the other. Jay and Andrew, however, also eat their victims, incorporating their pain and making these objects into abjects that are consumed or "encrypted" rather than expelled. The corpse, as Rristeva writes, "is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us."[46] Yet, the object-boys become abject before their deaths—their pain renders them so. Significantly, Jay and Andrew begin to feast on the boys when the boys are still alive, feeding on pained flesh before pain and life is gone. This cannibalistic consumption, then, is a consumption of pain itself. It is a Consumption of the abject, "what disturbs identity, system, order."[47] By consuming this abjection, the killers claim the power to render themselves abject. They embody the in-between, the excess separating categories such as life and death, subject and object, and pain and pleasure.[48]

Through Andrew, the novel presents the scandal of cannibalism as a means of exploring isolation and the desire to keep the other. Andrew's pre-cannibalistic murders fill him with loss, for he keeps his dead victims until the smell grows obvious, and then cannot help but "let another one go." Such loss fills him with sorrow, and he would drink, vomit, and sob himself "to sleep, having lost at love again." Yet Jay, who teaches Andrew to cannibalize the boys, does not feel such loneliness. He eats their meat to make it "become my meat" and soon "I started to feel them." Andrew internalizes this lesson, eventually feeding on the dead Jay, wanting "to keep Jay's meat in me as long as I could, to process and assimilate as much of him as possible. W hen I awoke, he would be with me always, and all the world's pleasures would be ours to revel in." The novel, then, is Andrew's tale of transition from desiring/lacking subject to something else. At the beginning, Andrew is a subject desiring objects that always "leave" through decay, reproducing Andrew's sense of lack and desire. His situation is classically psychoanalytic, a resonance played up in his description of his

[45] Ibid., 225, 227.

[46] Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," in *Powers of Horror,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

[47] Ibid., 14.

[48] In a way, Andrew preempts this abjection/incorporation from the very start of the novel. He is able to escape from prison by entering a dream state "between consciousness and void, a state where my lungs seemed to stop pulling in air and my heart to cease beating" (15). At the end of the novel, he returns to this deathlike state in order to process Jay's meat for as long as possible. He does "not need or want to pass for dead ... This time I was not corpse, but larva" (238).

own birth: "I emerged from the womb quite blue, with the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck," whereas "The boys I killed may have been strapping infants, but at the time of their deaths they were intravenous drug users who shared needles as if borrowing one another's pocket handkerchiefs."[49] The boys take Andrew's place in death. As a cannibal, however, Andrew no longer experiences the desire that Deleuze and Guattari describe as "this abject fear of lacking something."[50] Lack is no longer part of the equation. Subversively extending beyond the limits of lack and even subjectivity, Andrew's solitary sadism incorporates other subjects.

At the end of the novel, two bodies decay on the floor: *"Tran fell out of his binding straps and melted slowly into Jay's ribcage."*[51] With macabre, bodily difference, this description repeats the cliché of love as the blending of two hearts. As well as mocking this poetic cliche, though, the blending of these bodies reflects the blending of flesh that occurs when the killers eat their boys. The radical result of cannibalism in the novel is not only the total rupture of killer/non-killer identity categories, but the obliteration, through painful incorporation, of subject/object itself. If Jay and Andrew are sadistic in their torture of object-boys, they become masochistic by consuming these tortured bodies and making the bodies their own. This internal sadism-turned-masochism resonates with Freud's formulation of an internal sadosmasochistic totality: "A sadist is always at the same time a masochist," Freud writes, prompting Deleuze's criticism. Deleuze notes a problem in this formulation, for it ignores the specificity of each "perversion": "We tend to forget that all the available energy of the subject becomes mobilized at the service of his particular perversion."[52] The sadomasochistic totality in *Exquisite Corpse*, however, "works" because of its very rejection of the stable category of "subject." Jay's and Andrew's sadism becomes masochism at the moment—always fleeting, and hence repeated serially—of the subject/object rupture.

Commercial S/M seems safe from the dark sadomasochism of *Exquisite Corpse.* In its glossy, packaged form commodified S/M appears to be a body-less and pain-less form of pleasure-pain, and thus at a far remove from the messy, abject, bodily pain of sadomasochism. This distinction, however, effaces the (less glossy, embodied, and perhaps not pain-free) means of production underlying commercial S/M. Sadomasochism, on the other hand, foregrounds the pained body—and yet does so only to annihilate the self-knowing, individual subject. The two mark points in a "perverse" pleasure-pain trajectory, but their correspondences haunt. As abject, sadomasochism "neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them."[53] Like *Secretary's* parodie S/M, *Exquisite Corpse's* sadomasochism toys with institutional law, exposing and

[49] Brite, *Exquisite Corpse,* 11, 173, 238, 14.

[50] Gilíes Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 27.

[51] Brite, *Exquisite Corpse,* 240.

[52] Freud, *Three Essays,* 25; and Deleuze, *Masochism,* 45.

[53] Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," 15.

dismantling social norms by performatively inhabiting those norms. Unlike *Secretary,* the novel's sadism nullifies all need for contracts. Whereas *Secretary* blends institution and contract, *Exquisite Corpse* obliterates them both. Rather than playing around the limits, abjected sadomasochism refuses those limits "the better to deny," and not just modify, them. Far from connecting homosexuality to disease and psychosis in a moralistic design, the novel's matrix of correspondences illustrates the extent of sadomasochism's potential for radical social critique. Just as homosexual panic reveals the fluid border of a defensive heteronormative identity, so too does the cannibals' work challenge what it means to love, what it means to be satisfied, and what it means to *be.* Sadomasochism does not stop at mocking social institutions. Inhabiting transgression itself, sadomasochism nevertheless offers a brutal, shocking vision of political potential as a disruption of self and other, an abject that crosses both bodily and subject/object limits.

Fusion, blending, the collapse of self into other: by focusing on the bodily incorporation of one into another through the cannibals Jay and Andrew, the novel seems to suggest murder is the final point on this sadomasochistic continuum. The novel's epilogue, however, moves beyond this conclusion. Luke, who found himself uncomfortably identifying with the cannibal Jay in the novel's climactic confrontation, shares the epilogue with an italicized description of Tran's and Jay's decomposition and fusion. While Tran and Jay literally become one body, Luke awakens from a drugged stupor long enough to try to "understand how it had all happened" and to "grope toward why": to make sense of his story, he "fixed his eyes on the ceiling and began to talk." On this final page of text, Luke's spoken narrative contrasts with Tran's and Jay's bodily one: their fused bodies remain *"an ivory sculpture-puzzle shining in the dark, waiting to tell their mute love story."*[54] Incorporation, for Abraham and Torok, is antimetaphorical.[55] Yet metaphor re-emerges in Tran's and Jay's "mute love story" and Luke's verbal narration. As though to critique the murderous limit of psychic and corporeal incorporation, the two parts of the conclusion resonate on this point of narration, but do not come together. *Exquisite Corpse* at once illustrates sadomasochism as the decimation of the self-other limit and refuses a final formal representation of this fusion. It is up to us to hear Luke's tale; it is up to us either to collapse it with Jay's and Tran's mute story or to believe that Luke has refused incorporation. The novel's political potential lies precisely in its ambivalent figuration of such a choice.

Susan E. Cook is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her interests he in the intersection of psychoanalysis and cultural criticism, and she is currently writing a dissertation about incorporation as a thematic device and formal structure in the long nineteenth-century British novel.

[54] Brite, *Exquisite Corpse,* 240.

[55] Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel,* 132.

Susan E. Cook
Subversion Without Limits
From *Secretary*'s Transgressive S/M to *Exquisite Corpse*'s Subversive Sadomasochism
2006

Discourse, Vol. 28, No. 1, Scenes Elsewhere (Winter 2006), pp. 121–141 (21 pages).
<jstor.org/stable/41389743>
Author's website: <susanelizabethcook.com>
Wayne State University Press