Reflexive conclusion: Queering the narrative

In conclusion, I would like to delineate the ways in which my understanding of queer, as outlined in the essay, “‘A bit out of line, somehow’”, overlaps with and illuminates my short stories as presented in this dissertation. The fiction here is not intended to illustrate the notion of queer in any simplistic way (let alone produce a pastiche of Burroughs). It would have been too restrictive for me, in the writing of the fiction, to view those pieces as straightforward exercises in giving content to the idea of queer. Instead, in a relatively loose way, I would like to show how, in my view, the stories work with the articulations of queer as outlined in the essay.

Such an approach, it seems to me, is in keeping with the sense of queer I described in the Burroughs essay. In the essay, I quoted David Halperin’s view that “[Q]ueer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable reality [... It] acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm […] ‘Queer’, in any case, does not designate a class of already objectified mythologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.”

This quasi-definition functions here as the outline of queer; if, as Halperin italicises himself, “There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers” [SF62], it is nonetheless incumbent upon one to decide to what, at least, queer might refer in the context of my work on William Burroughs and, in relation to that, my own fiction.

We need not rehearse the issues Halperin raises vis-à-vis gay versus queer identities, except to note that his use of the term “queer identity” is oxymoronic, or at the very least problematic. Queer, as noted in my essay, is anti-identitarian and anti-essentialist in tendency.
I have also noted, however, the ways in which, outside the bounds of theory, “gay” often slides into “queer”. Thus there is a grey area here that is in itself rather queer. On this superficial level, my stories in this dissertation often find themselves in that grey area. Most of the characters represented here (the exceptions are the straight characters in “Private reserve”) could be called “gay” in the sense to which we have become accustomed since the rise of a gay rights movement in the United States in the 1960s. But I am not engaged in an affirmation or explanation of gay life as such, despite the fact that gay or queer life in some form is the material basis of the stories. The sexual identity of the speaker in “Loan”, for instance, is unclear, despite the fact that he is obviously making a sort of sexual play for another man. In other words, he may not be being gay, but he is in some way doing gay — and that disjunction in itself pushes him toward the queer space. The being/doing distinction is important because it reveals the problem in the essentialist or identitarian conception of sexualities, in which the “doing” flows from an innate “being”. It is a simple experiential fact, however, that not all men who participate in same-sex sexual activities consider themselves “gay”. The implication of Judith Butler’s work on performativity is that the flow of being/doing is reversed; that we in fact assume “being” on the basis of what people do, in a gesture of what might be called retro-essentialization. The effect of Butler’s approach to such “gender trouble” is, in fact, to collapse the distinction between being and doing: for her, as for queer theory, being is a form of doing, and our sexual identities are not immutable inner essences but themselves performances.

In only one story do I contrast gay/queer and straight characters — in “Private reserve”. There, however, the intent is not so much to define these categories in relation to each other but to allow the personal relationships that by their nature define the gay couple versus the straight couple to criss-cross and interpenetrate. The story strongly implies that there are more important things going on between these people than their self-definitions or the nature

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1 Halperin, 62. Texts cited are fully referenced in the bibliography. Hereafter Halperin will be referenced in the
of their sexual relationships per se. I make a (character make a) joke about the contrary uses of the terms “gay” and “queer”, which is a light way of commenting on this slippage as it is manifested in colloquial speech. It is useful, in my view, to try to give some sense of how such terms may operate in a non-theorized space. Here there is a link to Alan Sinfield’s mobile application of “queer”, as mentioned in “‘A bit out of line, somehow’” — and how he uses the term’s very slipperiness to articulate something about its possible workings.

In spirit of that very mobility, I would like to trace in relation to my stories in this dissertation what some of the articulations of queer may be. It is not so much a matter of giving content to the empty space Halperin outlines, of providing it with what Halperin calls “a positive truth”; queer is, as he says too, “not a positivity but a positionality” [SF62]. It is rather, for me, a matter of showing how the queer idea can be used to produce readings and writings. My essay shows what a “queer reading” may entail. It is less clear how those articulations may be traced in the space of “queer writing” — as praxis. For one thing, queer theory is precisely that: a form of theory. While much has been done to theorize queer, less has been consciously done to write queer, to create for queer what Earl Jackson Jr calls, in relation to the fiction of Robert Glück, “embodied narratives”.

In my fictional texts as presented in this dissertation, I have drawn on and worked with different themes and forms that might be seen as queer, and in this conclusion I will show how some of the tropes and modes characteristic of Burroughs’s writing, and which mark it as queer, are visible in mine — despite their apparent differences.

First, as I have said, the stories have as their thematic basis a concern with characters and situations that highlight issues of sexual subject positions and a range of behaviours related to that. These characters are located in what I have called the grey area in which “gay” turns into “queer”, a slippage I have noted more than once. Such a location, however, would not in and of itself be sufficient to characterise these fictions as “queer” as opposed to “gay”.

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body of the text as SF.
To my mind, the thematic basis of my stories is but one element of their queerness: it is in conjunction with their formal strategies that the idea of queer comes more fully into focus and is articulated. As with Burroughs, it is the combination of sexuality as theme and a formally transgressive presentation that makes such fiction queer. In the essay, I quoted Susan Ruben Suleiman quoting Roland Barthes, who sees a “transgression of values” embedded in a “transgression of the forms of language”. Queer, as theorized, is certainly a transgression of both of the heteronormative paradigm as well as the essentializing tendency in the “ethnic model” of (gay) sexuality; queer, as fictionalized, needs, in my view, to take on as part of its project the “transgression of the forms of language”. In my stories, the transgression that such marginal sexualities represent is echoed in a series of formal transgressions of conventional literary practice. The very forms of the stories, to a greater or lesser degree, and in different ways (depending on the story), are anti-normative. Instead of a concern with the ontological issue of homosexuality, gayness, queerness of any other sexual subjectivity, as delineated in the “being” of the characters, I am instead more broadly interested in queering narrative itself.

Thus, for me, the importance of formal issues in an articulation of queer writing. In my fictional texts, there is an over-aching element of queer that appears, of its nature, in a volatile and mobile way: indeterminacy. This notion may appear to be an all-too-convenient escape clause, and certainly I would not argue that indeterminacy is limited to queer writing or, indeed, provides a sufficient condition by which one may determine the “queerness” of any particular text or reading thereof. Different forms of indeterminacy appear in many different arts across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, from the sheer plethora of possible meanings crammed by Joyce into one sentence of *Finnegans Wake* to the open-ended, ever-susceptible-to-revision compositions of Pierre Boulez, or, most obviously, in the aleatory strategies employed by composers such as John Cage — there, indeterminacy is part of the

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2 In De Lauretis, 112
3 Suleiman, 75.
very fabric of the work’s being and conditions of possibility.\textsuperscript{4} In the fine arts, too, indeterminacy has played a key role in the development of modes of artistic production we now regard as vitally important to the arts in general in the twentieth century. For instance, the works of Robert Rauschenberg, from the 1950s onward, combine items of junk found on streets with the expressive paintwork of the abstract expressionists, or, later, use silkscreen images in a way that transmutes their pictorial, figurative and/or informational content into something other — into elements of an abstract, yet not wholly abstract, design. The boundaries between sculpture and painting are blurred in Rauschenberg’s “assemblages”, even as the delineation of abstract vs figurative is shifted and sometimes erased in his silkscreen paintings.\textsuperscript{5} The deliberate creation of such indeterminacies (and others) has continued into this century, evolving in the conceptual works of many artists today. To give but one example, the work of South African artist Alan Alborough espouses an intense engagement with materials and materiality itself, while making it very hard for the viewer to come up with a neat, clear interpretation of the work. By evading the usual conventions of conceptual art, a form or group of formal strategies in which “interpretation” is as important as the work itself, perhaps sometimes more so, Alborough has made the process of “reading” the work an engagement with indeterminacy.\textsuperscript{6}

As I say, indeterminacy does not necessarily make a work queer — none of the composers or artists mentioned above are thought of as queer (though there is debate about the nature of Cage’s and Rauschenberg’s homosexuality). Yet, as Halperin’s discussion of that oxymoronic “queer identity” indicates, indeterminacy is itself a key part of the theorization of queer. It resists taxonomic stability, for one thing, and refuses the essences that are deemed to constitute identities; it refuses conventional hierarchies and modes of

\textsuperscript{4} As Kostelanetz notes in relation to Cage and particularly his use of chance in composition, “One key to Cage’s aesthetic is the absence of hierarchy” (81). Here may be seen a concern related broadly to a range of tendencies in, particularly, what has come to be called post-structuralism and post-modernism. The hierarchies implicit in “natural” and definitional binary formulations such as straight/gay, in which one term is always the norm, are precisely what such theorists wish to address.

\textsuperscript{5} Ferguson, 28-39
procedure. This strategy surfaces in various ways in my own fiction as represented in this dissertation. In the first story, “For rent”, I evade the traditional social-realist manner of giving to the characters a solid personal history or background. I do not approach the character of the protagonist-narrator, John (who has the blandest, most non-associative name possible — short of a mere “K” or “X”), as an “omniscient” narrator would. I do not tell the reader (in so many words) how old he is, where he lives, what class he belongs to, how he earns a living, and so forth. What details of his context there are emerge oblique. If he and (especially) the young man called Jason/Damian/Joe remain somewhat cryptic personalities, that is part of the indeterminacy in which I am interested and which gives the story some of its queerness. Obviously, this is thematized by the changes John observes in Jason/Damian/Joe, echoed in his name-changes, and the final uncertainty as to whether he is in fact who John thinks he is. Thus I undercut, in this story, the traditional realist narrative’s investment in identity, which is to say the fullness of character. On a narrative level, my strategy focuses the reader’s attention instead on the minutiae of the interactions between the two, in their negotiations around sex particularly — and here, clearly, the concern is with the power relations imbedded in their interaction. This harks back to what I refer to in the essay as a kind of generative conceptual moment of queer: the acknowledgment of sexual relations as participating in the play of power across personal interactions. This notion is drawn directly from Michel Foucault, who, as the essay states, can be seen as a sort of godfather of queer theory. To say, however, that sexual identities and sexual acts are conditioned by power (represented, for instance, by money), is not to overdetermine them: as Foucault argues, where there is power there is also resistance, and there is in sexuality itself an element of indeterminacy that is the very gap or space in which that resistance operates. Queer theory is an instance of such a resistance.

Perryer, 26-29
In “Loan”, the power relation inherent in the situation is also clear. A young man is trying to pick up a probably older man for sex, sex for which the older or at least other man will be expected to pay (not that the young man, the speaker, is being fully explicit about that). A certain element of indeterminacy is built into the structure of the story in its formation as a dialogue with one half or side missing: the other man’s replies to the young man’s speech are not given, though I believe that for a perceptive, participative reader they are readily imagined. Elements of formal indeterminacy are also built into “Private reserve”: the paucity of the equivalent of “stage directions” (authorial description of action, etc) means that the reader has to determine who is speaking to whom, and thus to develop gradually a sense of what such utterances mean in the web of relations between the various characters. This links to the narrative in that it revolves around a particular silence. The partial dissolution of identity (or, perhaps better put, the suspension of the usual markers thereof) plays with queer’s resistance to such categories.

The longest story in this dissertation, “I wrote a letter to my love, but on the way I dropped it”, is a thoroughgoing engagement with indeterminacy as a fictional strategy. First, on a formal level, the piece is generically indeterminate or unstable. Its placement here as a “story” means that it is a piece of fiction. Yet it is written in the form of a series of letters from one man to his former lover of many years. In that, it refers to the epistolary form familiar from the earliest days of the novel itself, such as Laclos’s *Liaisons Dangereuses* or Richardson’s *Clarissa*, a technique that both asserts its value as a transcription of lived experience and at the same time (in its very ability to encompass all the necessary narrative elements) throws a question-mark over the letters’ status as “real” letters. There is indubitably more in them than would ordinarily appear in letters, even in a busily epistolary age. In my story, the letters question their own existence as “real” letters, in that (like “Loan”) this is a one-sided correspondence: the stated addressee will probably never be sent the letters or get to read them. The text is perhaps more accurately described as a series of notebook entries, but
that itself introduces another species of indeterminacy into the text. Notebooks tend to be heterogeneous in their recorded utterances; they are capable of containing a multiplicity of different kinds of textuality, from narrative accounts and perceptions noted to personal ruminations to lists of “things to do”. The very nature of a notebook is that it accede to the fragmentary, the incomplete, the indeterminate. It represents a kind of process rather than a finished text, whether overtly fictional or not. It holds such (formal) closure in suspension, and presents itself as provisional. Thus, “I wrote a letter …” resists the conventional constructed form of the short story and revels in its own generic indeterminacy.

Which brings us to another element of what I would characterize as queer writing: polyvocality (or what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia). In the essay on Burroughs, I pointed to the mélange of voices that inhabit his texts, each contesting the others and also the text as a whole (and in its “wholeness”) from within by their very heterogeneity. In “I wrote a letter …” there is a multiplicity of voices struggling if not for primacy then at least to make themselves heard. There is the basic narrative voice that pushes the story, what there is of it, forward from one event to the next (though in this context it may be asked what constitutes a fictional “event”). There are the passages of dialogue that, as they do in conventional fiction, add different voices to the mix and in fact stage the clash, confrontation or interweaving of different voices. There is the voice of the narrator-protagonist’s interority, his musings on what went wrong in the relationship that has just ended and his own (contradictory) descriptions of his reactions to that event or series of events. There are small spurts of poetry, an entirely different kind of discourse (its tendency toward extreme condensation contrasting with the expansive ramble of a confused, questing consciousness); often the poetry itself is not finished, but is in an early state of becoming; later, at least one poem reaches a more complete form. Besides all that, moreover, there is the metafictional element (a fiction placed within the sequence of “real” letters which is in fact a fiction), where an episode described by the narrator, Oliver, as real turns out to be an invention — as he admits, it is fictional. This should cast an interesting
retrospective light on the rest of the story or text as previously read, playing as it does with different levels or kinds of fictionality by way of different but interpenetrating voices and modes. Here, the polyvocality employed in a different way in “Private reserve” (where it is presented as the various utterances of different characters) takes on a different tone. It turns in on itself, as it were: these voices are the many different voices of one person, one narrator, who is thus revealed to be less than unitary and or fully determinate.

Perhaps this is a good place, then, to speak of another articulation of queer: *perversity*. I fully acknowledge that in my fictional praxis there is a flouting of many conventions long assumed to be integral to the practice of fiction, even if only residually. This in itself is nothing new — it is in fact a quintessentially modernist procedure. It is interesting to note, however, how attached we still are (as readers, as writers) to the things that make a text easily readable, which is to say understandable. We like the signals in a text that reduce its indeterminacy. In these fictions of mine, I have deliberately reduced, to varying degrees, those convenient signals. I do not believe that that renders them unreadable, or even uninterpretable. It is, to my mind, a valid strategy to be *perverse* in this regard, to deliberately and thoughtfully diverge from the inherited patterns — to transgress. (And, as far as that goes, my perversity is as nothing compared to *Finnegans Wake* — still, after so many years, the *ne plus ultra* of non-realist fiction.) *Transgression* is also an old technique in fiction; the history of twentieth-century literature may be seen as one of progressive formal transgression.

In all this formal play, there is much of another articulation of queer: *performativity*. The notion of sexual identities as *performative*, à la Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others, is a radical one. It contradicts in every way the traditional understanding of sexuality as essential and identity as stable. On the level of textuality, however, performativity is inbuilt (even if it is concealed). Writers of fiction as far back as Defoe are aware of the performative nature of their textual productions: often, in the very attempt to make them “real”, to present them as documentation of some kind other than an invention *ex nihilo*, they
acknowledge the performativity of their texts. For modernists such as Joyce, performativity is self-reflexive: the high level of play with and distortion of language and the highly determined over-arching structure of texts such as *Ulysses* (whatever the degree of their internal mobility) point to the fact that such writers set out, in their fiction, to *perform*.

Even contemporary writers such as Dennis Cooper, whose “blank” style couldn’t be further from the elaborate linguistic inventions of a Joyce, reveal their awareness of the text’s performative nature. At first, the material in Cooper’s novel sequence beginning with *Closer* seems to be presented in a fully transparent way — there is no play with language, simply an almost bland recounting of events in the plainest possible words and syntax. That the events in question are often horrific (a conjunction of sexual desire and gory dismemberment) is a first clue to their performativity, which becomes readily apparent later in the sequence. In *Frisk*, the bloody sexual adventures of a key figure are revealed, in the latter part of the text, to have been (though unsurely so) a meticulous description of his murderous fantasies. In this respect, Cooper reduces the text’s indeterminacy in a way that Genet, for instance, in works such as *The Miracle of the Rose* and *Funeral Rites*, does not — Genet maintains the permeability of fantasy and (represented) reality to an unprecedented degree, especially in the latter book. In the final volume of Cooper’s sequence of short novels, *Period*, the recurring motifs (which is to say obsessions) of the foregoing books are reordered, cut up in a Burroughsian fashion, remixed and re-presented to the reader in a way that makes it clear that Cooper’s blandly transparent style is not an attempt at even a denuded form of conventional realism: he acknowledges the performativity of his fiction and his fantasies — especially his fantasies. One is reminded of nothing so much as Hamlet and his deliberate performance of a madness that nonetheless finds its way to a truth.

In this respect, my story “Bite” may be seen as the most overtly performative of those collected here. This bite-sized fragment begins *in medias res* and ends on an equivocal note,
without firm closure. In contrast to Cooper’s work, however, and unlike my story “For rent”, it is not written in a minimal style, but rather in long, lush sentences heavy with adjectives and almost drunk on their own descriptiveness. That its narrator is a vampire refers to the long tradition in fantastic literature, going back centuries, in which the vampire or some similar (quasi-)supernatural creature represents a marginal sexuality that threatens the supposed order of conventional categories and mores. Such, it might be said, is the position of the queer. If, in the fantastical literature of the vampire, blood-drinking stands in for some set of unimaginable and unspeakable sexual practices, my use of the vampire as a sexual figure stands for the “multiple intensities, variable colorations, imperceptible movements, and changing forms” [SF98] of which Foucault speaks, and for the free play of sexual differences that he would like to see replace the hierarchies of binary oppositions and the impermeable boundaries of fixed taxonomies.

Their status as performances is a strong presupposition of my fictions. It may be unnecessary to point out that their level of play with form and language is placed in the foreground. Again, such performativity is not exclusive to queer, but, along with the other articulations of queer I have identified contributes an extra level of self-awareness, one akin to queer’s hyperconsciousness of sexual difference in all its slippery minutiae. Set against one another, my fictions here advertise their contrasting differences: the cold, blunt, minimal narration of “For rent”, for instance, versus the almost organic profusion (the excessive quality I identified in Burroughs) of “I wrote a letter to my love, but on the way I dropped it”. The internal polyvocality of this long story is analagous to the way contrasts between narrative voices emerge between different stories. The voice of one contests another. There is no continuity of style, as a more traditional collection of stories would evince; they do not

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7 Cooper’s novels already embody the indeterminacy generated by an absence of social context and, usually, interiority. We do no know where these characters come from or why they do what they do; Cooper offers no explicit clarification. See Annesley, 55-57, and Young, 235-263
8 See Frayling, especially part 7, “Haemosexuality”
9 And my vampire’s blood-drinking is explicitly sexual — it is not a displacement of sexuality, as it is for even recent writers of vampires stories such as Anne Rice.
settle into a stable, univocal whole. This multiplicit and polyvocal indeterminacy, combined with their perversity, transgressiveness and performativity, as well as their embedded or embodied thematic concerns, make them queer. I do not wish to give them a concerted, overall “identity” or wholeness beyond this. I prefer them to sit alongside each other, in a constellation of uncertain organization, neither entirely fitting together like pieces of a preordained puzzle nor entirely disparate and discrete. In this way, these queered narratives speak to one another (and to the reader) in their many voices.