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## **Savage embraces: James Purdy, melodrama, and the narration of identity**

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## Illegible Desire: The Epistemic Promiscuity of Sexual Identity

When Parkhears Cratty meets the story's central character, Fenton Riddleway, we find both men in a park at night. Parkhears is looking to meet people, presumably to listen to their stories and write a novel about them, but he is never really interested in what these people have to tell. Instead, he is mostly interested in looking at their physiques. When the two men meet, Fenton seems anxious and wants Parkhears to take him to the place where he is staying; he is new in town and cannot find the address that was given to him. Parkhears picks up on Fenton's anxiety and notices a bulge in his pocket. He cracks a joke about Fenton having a gun and making sure he does not shoot himself in the foot, but nevertheless decides to take him to the address that Fenton was unable to find.

Later in the novel, we find Fenton on one of his midnight wanderings through Chicago. He stops before an all-night movie theater and decides to go in. Once inside, Fenton notices the putrid smell of the men and boys who are usually out on the streets at night. Through the dark he sees men turning their heads to look at him, and from time to time a hand reaches out to touch his flesh. Fenton falls asleep in one of the chairs. After a while he awakes: it is already six o'clock in the morning and he decides to return home. On his way out he takes a look at a want ad he had picked up a little earlier, which says in large lettering "MEN MEN MEN".

These two scenes from 63: *Dream Palace* (1956) could have easily been taken from Barry Reay's *New York Hustlers* (2010), Allan Bérubé's *Coming Out Under Fire* (1990) or Samuel Delany's *Time Square Red, Time Square Blue* (1999). The first two are historical studies, the latter a memoir, and all deal with promiscuous sex practices between men in the first decades after the Second World War. These studies demonstrate how, since the Second World War, parks, movie theaters and public restrooms in urban centers like New York, San Francisco and Chicago functioned as spaces in which men could find illicit sex with other men when homosexuality was still forbidden by law. Often, older men called "Johns" would hang around public parks after dark looking for younger men, nicknamed "trade", who would have sex with them in exchange for money, food or shelter. Similarly, all-night movie theaters (which would become porn theaters in the late '60s and early '70s) were ideal places to cruise for sex with other

men. The theaters were dark, patrons would pay admission only once and could stay the whole night. Often, “Johns” would find plenty of homeless “trade” who would use the theaters as a place to hustle for extra money.

Using only covert language to refer to this kind of promiscuous sex between men, readers of gay literature who were familiar with these practices would nevertheless recognize these scenes of hustling by their specific setting and their ambiguous references to objects and actions that suggested male genitals or sex acts between men. It would not be difficult for the reader-in-the-know to recognize in the two scenes from 63: *Dream Palace* described above the sites of illicit hustling between two (or more) men. Parkhears’s looking for “material” for his book, even though he is only interested in outward appearances, obviously marks him as a “John” and the way he interacts with Fenton, including a covert reference to his genitals by way of suggesting he has a gun, seems to be a classic pick-up scene from gay pulp fiction of that era (Bronski 8). Similarly, Fenton’s spending the night at an all-night theater while being looked over and touched by other patrons strongly suggests the cruising practices that Delany describes in his memoirs.

However, while the reader-in-the-know could read “between the lines” and construe from these two scenes the sites of male hustling, nothing in the two scenes explicitly refers to this actually being the case. Fenton’s behavior and obliviousness to what is happening around him suggest that he is actually naive and blind to the potential for same-sex activities around him. Read literally, both scenes are nothing other than random situations in which Fenton happens to find himself while looking for his overnight address on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street. The suggestion of sex actually taken place or being solicited must be actively read into these scenes, a practice very common among readers of “gay” literature who look for textual evidence that homosexuality has always been a theme in art and literature, even in times when it was forbidden and the merest suggestion of same-sex intercourse would have been considered obscene and perverse.

Reading between the lines, or uncovering a “hidden” or “secret” gay identity from a historical text is a common practice of a gay and lesbian readership informed by, in the words of Gerard Koskovich, “the sense that LGBTQ people had been deprived of their heritage” (3). He argues that writing queer histories became an important cultural practice in the twentieth century, especially for the foundation of early homosexual organizations in the 1950s as “the search for a shared heritage began to shift from largely private and fragmentary pursuits to more public and structured ones” (11). The rhetoric in many of these studies often reverts to the topos of a history that must be uncovered, something that must come “out of the shadows”, something

that has always been there but was yet to be recognized.<sup>1</sup> The metaphor of something being hidden, or something yet to be found, grants validation to the queer historian's work, as it retroactively establishes common vocabularies and cultural practices that tie marginalized communities together.

Beyond historiographic work, reading between the lines for suggestions of homosexual desire or same-sex practices has been the endeavor of many scholars in gay and lesbian studies, and has produced some powerful readings by Eve Sedgwick and Leo Bersani, among others.<sup>2</sup> However, reading for a covert homosexual desire where on the surface there seems none to be found also brings something else to the text. Reading between the lines not only attempts to uncover a hidden discourse on sexuality contemporaneous to the work, but also produces from the text new discourse contemporaneous to the reader. While it is relevant for historical purposes to reconstruct languages with which sexualities could be discussed, especially when there was no room for such sexualities in the public sphere, it is equally important to remain critical of the subject position and historical context that the reader brings to the text.

Reclaiming a text by showing how reading against the grain opens up a "gay" reading that would previously go unnoticed might, in fact, be at once both a liberating and a restrictive mode of reading; liberating in the sense that it indeed might be historically relevant, yet restrictive in the sense that it often silences other possible significations of the text. I want to consider this proliferation of discourse on sexuality in terms of what Gayatri Spivak calls epistemic violence (74). That is, the myriad ways in which a text signifies might be overwritten by such a strategy of reading for its hidden meaning. In such cases, the text is stripped of its potential to mean something different in different contexts and to different readers. If the interpreter of the text is hell-bent on it being about homosexuality, she or he often excludes the possibility of it signifying in different ways that might be contradictory to the interpreter's cause.

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1 For examples of works that use this metaphor, see Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr., eds. 1989; John D'Emilio 1982; and Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman 1998. More recent works that include similar metaphoric language to reclaim a shared queer cultural past include Ann Cvetkovich 2003; Heather Love 2007; Cait McKinney 2018; and Christopher Nealon 2001. See also the *History UnErased* project for the adaptation of this rhetoric in contemporary pedagogic settings.

2 See for example Sedgwick's response to Bersani's famous "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1989) in which she proposes *fisting-as-écriture*, which undermines the "polarities that a phallic economy defines as active and passive" (*Tendencies* 101).

The potential of such violence in the shape of sacrificing other possible readings to serve the agenda or desires of the interpreter is a central concern in my reading of 63: *Dream Palace*. The possibility of reading between the lines to uncover a homosexual desire or illicit same-sex practices that cater to the interpreter's desires is a recurring theme throughout the novel, and many characters read Fenton in a similar way, as I have suggested above. While Fenton is portrayed as naive in the scenes I have just described, in other scenes Fenton is aware of the passes that are made at him and he responds violently. Fenton does not necessarily recognize himself in the sexuality that is ascribed to him by others, and even finds such a suggestion insulting enough to become vicious. His outbursts introduce a tension in the novel that centers around the reading practices that occur in both the reader and the characters that read Fenton. In my reading of 63: *Dream Palace*, I argue that the novel, together with Fenton, resists being read in one specific way. Instead, the novel continues to suspend the possibility of a conclusive interpretation and looks to keep Fenton's sexuality unresolved. In doing so, the novel responds to the epistemic violence done by reading a specific sexual identity into Fenton's character. By having him, and the novel as a whole, resist the possibility of an absolute truth-claim about his sexuality or identity, Purdy introduces a queer strategy that I will call 'epistemic promiscuity'. That is to say, both Fenton and the novel can always be read in a different way, and each reading of either Fenton or the novel will open up yet other different possible readings. Truth-claims about Fenton's sexual identity are not necessarily voided just because they are invalid, but more often because the truth about his sexuality can be many possible things at once without privileging one truth over the other. 63: *Dream Palace* is, then, a novel that looks for a language in which we can be sexual beings without the constrictions of the identity categories in which sexuality is usually cast.

In 63: *Dream Palace*, Purdy signals reading literally and figuratively as the primary modes we use to make sense of sexuality and sexual identity, making clear that neither can be employed unproblematically. Both literal and figurative readings inevitably feed back into fantasies about fixed sexual identities. I argue that the point of the novel is that different incongruent readings are always simultaneously possible, and that reading for a particular meaning in the text is to do violence to its multifaceted significations. However, I will demonstrate this by doing exactly what the novel attempts to resist: prioritize a specific reading over other possible readings. I do so to foreground the epistemic violence that is committed by the constant misreading of Fenton's acts, by characters in the novel and by its readers as well. Going against the grain of the novel allows me to highlight its operations of resistance, and to identify its queer strategy of epistemic promiscuity.

“Up we go then, motherfucker”

63: *Dream Palace* appears to follow the conventions of a classic detective novel, posing a mystery to be solved. At the beginning of the novel, the reader drops in on a conversation between Parkhears Cratty and the “greatwoman” Grainger. While drinking a tall glass of Holland gin, Grainger asks: “Do you ever think about Fenton Riddleway?” (DP 85).<sup>3</sup> Fenton was a young man down on his luck whom Parkhears had briefly taken on as a protégé. Fenton, it turns out, is also the central character in the novel’s plot, for the reader soon realizes that a certain mystery surrounds him. Grainger’s suggestion that Parkhears “write down what Fenton did” (85) is the catalyst for the novel’s main narrative, and shortly after Grainger’s incentive Parkhears starts to tell the story of “what Fenton did”, which was kill his brother, Claire.

Apprehended within this framework of a classic detective novel, the story takes as its organizing principle a preoccupation with the narration of story and history. Tzvetan Todorov (1987) described the detective novel as a genre that dramatizes the ways in which both history and story are produced through its doubled mode of narration. At the very basis of the genre lies the question “whodunnit”: the detective novel starts out with the premise of a crime and it is up to the detective to reconstruct the events that led up to the novel’s beginning and figure out who was the perpetrator of the crime. According to Todorov, the reader is thus presented with two narratives folded into one: the first narrative is the history of the crime that is reconstructed by the detective, and the second narrative is that of the reconstruction itself (44). Ernst van Alphen calls this doubling of history in the detective novel a “dramatization of the paradox of narrativity. While the story of the novel is presented as a repetition of the history of the crime, it is simultaneously the task of the story to produce that very same history” (“Vertellingen” 100, my translation). Inherent to the genre of detective fiction, then, is the production of history by way of the detective’s reading for clues that ensue from the crime, while the history of that very same crime can only exist as a result of this act of reading.

Reading runs through the detective novel as its central theme, but this reading can only be done retroactively. As the conclusion of the history of the crime (the murder; the stolen object) is already present at the outset of the story, the detective reconstructs what happened prior to the event in question, first by recognizing certain

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3 Where deemed necessary I use DP to indicate that I refer to 63: *Dream Palace*.

objects as clues, and then by interpreting these clues as signs for the actual facts of the crime. In 63: *Dream Palace*, the reader repeats the work of the detective since he or she must participate in the reconstruction of “what Fenton did”. As it is never made explicit that Fenton actually did kill his brother, the reader must look for clues and reconstruct the gaps in the story to solve the murder mystery. These clues are signaled by textual interventions – such as ellipses – and linguistic plays on names. The reader can make sense of these signs only retroactively; as the plot progresses, the reader starts to recognize how previous remarks or plot elements form a part of the answer to the question of what Fenton did.

To highlight the theme of reading as reconstructing a history in the detective genre even further – or rather, to problematize this theme – it is telling that in place of an actual detective, the crime of 63: *Dream Palace* is reconstructed by Parkhearsht Cratty, an unsuccessful writer of the type found throughout Purdy’s oeuvre. His failure as a writer is magnified by his apparent failure as a reader. When Parkhearsht first meets Fenton, the former is wandering around in a park “looking for ‘material’ for his book” (88). But instead of finding something to write about, he never seems to be truly interested in what he encounters: “many times he had run across people in the park who had told him their stories while he pretended to listen to their voices while usually watching their persons” (88). And again, when Parkhearsht tells his wife Bella about his encounter with Fenton, “[she recalls that there had been] scores, even hundreds, of these people Parkhearsht met in order to study for his writing, but the stories themselves were never put in final shape or were never written, and Parkhearsht himself forgot the old models in his search for new ones” (92). Parkhearsht’s failure to write is here closely connected to his disinterest in stories or in the reconstruction of history; he either fails to listen to the stories of the people he encounters, or constantly forgets their stories in favor of either their outward appearance or someone entirely new.

Parkhearsht’s incapacity to write or read, and his utter disinterest in reconstructing histories make him an unlikely character to narrate the crime of 63: *Dream Palace*. After all, as Todorov points out, the second-tier narrative of the classic detective novel – the reconstruction of the crime scene’s history – is often explicitly narrated by a friend of the detective or a journalist who is writing a book or newspaper article about the whole affair (45). Parkhearsht’s disinterest in reading and writing undermines an unwritten assumption of the classic detective novel: the idea that there is a true crime scene that must be narrated in the first place. Todorov argues that even if traditional detective novels take as their premise a crime scene of which the true facts must be reconstructed by the detective’s detailed close reading and interpretation of signs, the truth of these events can only exist through the doubling of their narration: that



of the history of the event and its subsequent reconstruction. The truth of the crime scene in the detective novel, then, can only be produced through its reconstruction, that is, the transformation of history into story. If the crime has no truth prior to its narration, the assumption that it has a truth at all, that there is a true history of the crime scene, might consequently be problematic in and of itself. This is exactly the problem that 63: *Dream Palace* raises in its attempt to reconstruct “what Fenton did”. The further the story unfolds, the more this initial question is pushed aside while the focus of the novel’s narration keeps shifting around. As I argue later in this chapter, the focus of the narration moves from the question of “what Fenton did” to the question of “who Fenton was”. This move from action to identity further problematizes the truth question, for here too, as we will see, the truth about Fenton’s identity or actions can only be narrated retroactively. The truth cannot exist prior to its history being reconstructed as a story.

Despite the fact that the novel presents itself as a more or less traditional detective story with a murder mystery at its narrative heart, it plays with some of the premises of the detective genre and unsettles certain assumptions about whether it is possible to access the truth about a person or event through its retroactive narration. One of these premises is that classic detective novels in the tradition of the “whodunnit” are organized around the detective’s endeavor to find out who committed the crime, while the crime itself is already present at the beginning of the narration. In 63: *Dream Palace*, the opposite situation occurs: while the culprit is already present, the actual crime is only unveiled at the end of the story. Since the novel is organized around the discovery of the crime instead of the culprit, it already sidelines the possibility of there being a truth to this crime at all.

Although the novel upsets the basic premises of the detective novel, the reader is nevertheless invited to trace the work of the detective and piece together textual clues that might provide some answers to “what Fenton did”. The solution to this mystery, however, is not at all straightforward and might perhaps move beyond the crime suggested at the end of the novel. That is, the murder of Fenton’s brother Claire might not be the actual crime that Parkhearst and Grainger discuss. Since the detective and the reader of the detective novel can only reconstruct the history of the crime retroactively, I want to take this strategy to heart and read the novel in reverse to find clues for a different interpretation of the crime than what is offered at face value. The novel ends with an ambiguous statement by Fenton, which I propose can be taken as an unsettling of the narrated truth about “what Fenton did”.

At the end of 63: *Dream Palace*, Fenton picks up his brother Claire and carries him up the stairs of their house on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street. While carrying Claire, Fenton says: “up we

go then, motherfucker" (145). After this remark, the novel stops abruptly, leaving the reader to wonder who might be addressed by "we" and by "motherfucker". The abrupt ending and the lack of any narrative motivation for the statement pose a second, two-part mystery to be solved: Who is the motherfucker that Fenton speaks of, and why does the narrative end with this expletive?<sup>4</sup> As the text itself offers no solution to the question of the addressee, the options from which the reader can choose involve multiple possibilities: Fenton could be addressing himself, his brother, or both of them at the same time, or the motherfucker could be an apostrophe that addresses neither Fenton nor Claire.<sup>5</sup>

The ambiguity of this address is amplified by another ambiguity in the novel, which is made apparent when we consider the narrator of the story. The opening scene, in which Parkhearst and Grainger remember Fenton, frames the narrative which, in the tradition of the detective novel, is presented as a flashback that reconstructs the crime. Grainger coaxes Parkhearst into telling the story of what Fenton has done. Thus, the external narrator of the opening scene puts Parkhearst forward as the narrator of the central narrative: "Parkhearst would take another drink of the gin; then his voice would rise a bit, only to die away again as he told her everything he could remember" (88). However, while this sentence announces a shift in narration – which we assume jumps from an external, omniscient narrator to the character-bound narration of Parkhearst – the tense in which the story is narrated remains the same: "There was this park with a patriot's name near the lagoon. Parkhearst Cratty had been wandering there, not daring to go home to his wife, Bella" (88). Even though the flashback takes on Parkhearst as its focalizer, the narration continues in the third-person singular, treating Parkhearst merely as a character in the detective narrative that can be seen as his own story.

While the detective narrative that organizes the structure of the novel can be seen as Parkhearst's story, his own appearance as a character transgresses the conventions of the traditional detective story, in which the narrator is often someone other than the detective, usually a friend or uninvested bystander. Parkhearst's appearance as a character in his story frustrates a straightforward identification of the embedded narrator with Parkhearst as focalizer. The undefined identity of the narrator makes the addressee of the utterance "motherfucker" ambiguous. Even though the words are

4 Although it has been a common expletive since the 1970s, in 1956 "motherfucker" was a much more controversial word and not at all common in print. It has even been argued that this is the first instance in which the word *motherfucker* appeared in American printed press at all (Dawson 124).

5 Think of the colloquial use of "we" as first-person singular in sentences such as "here we go".

directly spoken by Fenton, they remain embedded within the ambiguous narration. As the external narrator maintains organizing control over the narrative that would otherwise be the domain of Parkhearst, the reader begins to suspect that there is more to the novel's mystery than Parkhearst's point of view can reveal. Looking more closely at the "motherfucker", then, raises a new set of questions that are not easily resolved: What is the meaning of this exclamation? Who is addressed? Why does the narration stop at this exact moment? The novel refuses to be read straightforwardly, and I argue that by uncovering these ambiguities in the novel we can begin to identify Purdy's concern with the way in which sex acts are read as straightforwardly legible signifiers of sexual identities.

### Reading Fenton from Behind

Starting my own interpretation at the end of the novel, I take my cue from a reading strategy proposed by Jonathan A. Allan. In his book *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus* (2016), Allan reads several canonical texts that center around the configuration of sex and sexual orientation literally "from behind" (6). "Reading from behind" indicates reading from a backwards position; to scrutinize a text's assumptions and concerns by tracing problems posed at the end back to the beginning (18). From this perspective, trying to establish the signification of Fenton's utterance on the last page of 63: *Dream Palace* involves looking at earlier parts of the novel for answers. However, this is not the only aspect of Allan's project. For him, reading from behind also opens up the potential to uncover organizing principles in a text that are rooted in anal desire instead of phallic desire, which for him is the primary signifying principle in Western literature. By focusing on the alternative organizing principles of texts that foreground the position of the posterior, such as the novels *Brokeback Mountain* (1997) and *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), Allan questions the conflation of anal desire with certain assumptions about sexual orientation and gender identification. Following Sedgwick's question, "what about male desire for a woman's anus – is that anal desire?" ("Anality" 155), Allan explores the sexual orientation that is assumed in representations of anal desire and of the anus as the site of sexuality. Anal desire, Allan argues, is not only consistently (mis)read as homosexual desire, but also seen to connote notions of passivity and femininity that fuel homophobic discourses and homosexual panic. Yet, although the texts that he reads often repeat and reinforce these assumptions about the anus, the anus is also always a signifier that cannot be contained. Any reference to, or act associated with

the anus, opens up to assumptions about sexuality and identity. As such, Allan argues, the anus has the potential to destabilize the phallus as the organizing principle of Western sexuality.

In reading 63: *Dream Palace* “from behind”, I take the detective novel’s position of reading and reconstructing retroactively quite literally. I propose exploring Fenton’s final exclamation as an invitation to the reader to return to the beginning of the novel and ask which question constitutes its central mystery. Reading back to the beginning of the novel, the question of “what Fenton did” begins to resonate in a different way. Moreover, since the text does not provide conclusive evidence as to who the addressee of “up we go then, motherfucker” is, both Fenton and his brother can be considered plausible options. In both cases, when read literally, the term “motherfucker” evokes the specter of incest. If we consider the possibility of Fenton apostrophizing himself by saying “up we go then, motherfucker”, what Fenton did might not just be the killing of his own brother, a crime that has already been solved, but also the breaching of the incest taboo.

In the following, I prioritize one reading over other possible readings – namely reading “motherfucker” literally as referring to someone who has had intercourse with his mother – not because I believe it is the interpretation that makes most sense, but because it exemplifies how such prioritization uncovers the novel’s own concern with the way in which certain readings are prioritized when interpreting acts as signifiers of sexual identity. My choice to prioritize a literal reading is motivated by Fenton’s own inability to read for anything other than literal meaning.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the novel, we find instances in which Fenton is unable to read between the lines and instead interprets everything at face value. This becomes quite apparent from the title of the novel, which refers to an address, presumably the building in which Fenton and Claire live, on Chicago’s 63<sup>rd</sup> Street. This address, however, is not written in the usual way, which would exclude punctuation and would run along the lines of “63<sup>rd</sup> Street Dream Palace”.<sup>7</sup> This unconventionality would not necessarily draw attention to itself or be considered meaningful if it did not give rise to a disagreement between Fenton and Parkheast, who, upon meeting each other for the first time,

6 The novel’s placement within the context of Purdy’s oeuvre provides an additional basis for this interpretation. Incestuous fantasies are a prevailing theme in Purdy’s work, and while in most scenarios this remains just fantasy, the novels *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967) and *The House of the Solitary Maggot* (1974) both feature scenes of intercourse between mother and son.

7 See [pe.usps.gov/text/pub28/28c2\\_001.htm](http://pe.usps.gov/text/pub28/28c2_001.htm) for the officially preferred writing of US address lines.

debate whether the “63” should be pronounced “sixty-three” or “sixty-third” (90). Fenton insists that it is properly “sixty-three” and, according to Parkhears, he never learns to say it correctly.

Fenton and Parkhears adopt slightly different strategies with regard to the pronunciation of the address line. Although the address line does not appear in written form during this brief exchange, there is a considerable possibility that Fenton and Parkhears’s debate over it pertains to the way it is written in the title of the story: “63: Dream Palace”. After all, the external narrator focalizes from Parkhears’s point of view, who in turn introduces Fenton to the reader by means of this anecdote. This anecdote immediately draws attention to the story’s primary location of action. As a paratextual element to the story, the title is still part of the way in which the narrative is organized by the external narrator, and both the title and the short scene alert the reader to the curious spelling of the address line. While Fenton reads it literally in the way it is written – Sixty-Three Street – Parkhears reads it for what it indicates: a building called Dream Palace on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street. These readings do not necessarily indicate a change in the meaning of the address line, nor are they mutually exclusive – both still refer to the same address – yet the resulting ways of referring to it do not fully correspond to each other either. To be fair, the difference does not completely correspond to the difference between figurative and literal readings as processes of meaning-making, but the scene does indicate Fenton’s and Parkhears’s different attitudes towards reading. Throughout the novel, these divergent attitudes emphasize recurring tensions between incommensurable, but not mutually exclusive, readings that are central to the novel’s strategy to resist the practice of reading the fantasy of sexual identity into Fenton’s actions.

One of these tensions between literal and figurative readings can be identified when returning to the meaning of “motherfucker” at the end of the novel. Prioritizing a reading in which Fenton’s exclamation is considered in its literal sense as referring to someone who has had sexual intercourse with his own mother almost inevitably invokes its figurative counterpart: Oedipus, or more precisely, the Oedipus complex.<sup>8</sup> Jim Dawson argues that the first use of “motherfucker” in American print coincided with the introduction of homosexual characters in the genre of juvenile delinquency novels and credits Purdy’s *63: Dream Palace* as the first one to do so (124).<sup>9</sup> In a similar

8 Besides such overt play on names and the thematic connection with the Oedipus myth, Purdy’s work shows an overall debt to the Greek classics. In her extensive study, Bettina Schwarzschild (1968) traces the many influences of Greek tragedy and philosophy on his oeuvre.

9 Perhaps unwittingly so, the novel’s first edition also draws a connection between the expletive

vein, Roel van den Oever has demonstrated that because of the increased popularity of psychoanalysis in postwar America, many authors evoked the Oedipus complex as a strategy to address homosexuality while also disavowing charges of sympathy for homosexual characters.<sup>10</sup>

The play on the Oedipal fantasy is made more apparent if we take into account Purdy's peculiar and often meaningful naming of his characters. As in many of his novels, the characters of *63: Dream Palace* have outlandish monikers. The names Parkhearst Cratty, Grainger the "greatwoman", Claire as a male name, and Fenton Riddleway all stand out for being fairly unusual. As is often the case in Purdy's novels, these names have multiple meanings and functions, and they invite the reader to read them on different levels. Resonating with the detective genre that frames the novel, the name Riddleway literally signifies the "trajectory of the riddle". Fenton's association with the Oedipus myth is further reinforced if we think of the sphinx whose riddle Oedipus must solve. With the question "What did Fenton do?" already positioning Fenton as the novel's central subject, the association of his name with the idea of mystery also places him at the center of the second conundrum that needs unraveling: Is Fenton the motherfucker that he talks about/to? Although the question of "what Fenton did" can be taken as the organizing principle of both a "straight" reading and a "reading from behind", in the former reading the question points towards a possible crime, while the latter reading foregrounds a tension between literal and figurative interpretations of Fenton's last remark.

The shift from the literal "motherfucker" to its figural reading as the mythical Oedipus is further complicated if we examine other shifts from the figural to the literal, and vice versa, in the psychoanalytical appropriation of this mythical figure. The Oedipus character of the Greek myth and his Freudian counterpart gesture towards a constant tension between literal and figurative significations. While in the ancient myth, Oedipus was quite literally a "motherfucker", we must take into account that the narration itself belongs to the narrative tradition of mythology, which makes ample use of figurative language and which in modern times is often read as wholly figurative. Freud's adaptation of this myth in his writings about

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"motherfucker" and homosexuality. *63: Dream Palace* first appeared with the British publisher Victor Gollancz, who censored the novel's final line. Instead of "motherfucker", the last line in this edition reads: "Up we go then, bugger". Bugger, from the word *buggery*, is a British English word that indicates a man who has anal intercourse with either another male or female, but it is most often used to connote homosexuality.

10 See in particular the opening chapter "Momism and the Lavender Scare" (5–36) in his book *Momma's Boy: Momism and Homophobia in Postwar American Culture*.

the development of human sexuality, on the other hand, transforms the Oedipal narrative into an abstract schema. We no longer encounter an actual character, but are confronted with a series of psychosomatic developments that more or less follow a similar pattern. The character Oedipus merely becomes the figure on whose narrative this schema is based. Such a stylization renders figural the scenes of patricide and incest from the original narrative since Freud treats these patterns as purely phantasmatic (Laplace and Pontalis 315). That is, in the Freudian schema the subject is by no means expected to literally commit acts of incest or patricide. It is in the transition from the literal to the figurative use of Oedipus that homosexual desire becomes associated with the failure to sublimate the child's initial desire for the mother and thus develops an attachment to an object of the same sex.

There is another shift from the figurative to the literal at work in the Freudian adaptation of the Oedipus myth. Although the schema of cathectic attachments to the mother and father figures is a figurative rendering of the original myth's narration, in Freudian theory this schema nevertheless maps out actual psychosomatic processes that organize real desires. The phantasmatic cannot just be paralleled with figurative language, as the Oedipal schema affects the development of the subject's psyche quite literally. There is, then, already a tension between a literal and a figurative rendering of the Oedipus myth in the Freudian description of sexual development. If my reading of the Freudian adaptation of the Oedipus myth foregrounds how sexuality hinges on the tension between the literal and the figurative, the references to this myth through a literal reading of "motherfucker" also make clear how such a literal reading is inherently problematic. While my interpretation prioritizes a literal reading of the term "motherfucker", it immediately initiates a chain reaction of literal and figurative readings that complicate, or even undo the validity of this prioritization. To tease out this tension even further – or, in Jonathan Goldberg's treatment of melodrama, to suspend the resolution of the impossible plot situation – I want to linger a little bit longer on the Oedipal connotations of the "motherfucker" and the possible readings that this enables, not only of Fenton but also, as we will see, of his oddly named brother Claire.

Returning to the question that a reading from behind raises – Is Fenton the motherfucker that he talks about/to? – the literal reading of the "motherfucker" as someone who has had intercourse with his mother, and the subsequent figurative turn to the Freudian Oedipus complex, provokes further consideration of the fantasy of sexual identity. Reading back for clues to a possible resolution of this question, we find that the object of the question shifts around. "Who is the motherfucker?" turns into "Who is Fenton?" Parkheast defends his reluctance to tell "what Fenton

did" by turning it into a question of identity: "I can't write down what Fenton did because I never found out who he was" (86). Through the constant repositioning of the questions that make up the detective story – What did Fenton do? Who is the motherfucker? Is Fenton the motherfucker? – a reading from behind that traces concerns exposed at the end of the novel back to clues provided at its beginning foregrounds the novel's central concern with the act of reading for sexual identity. Not only is this concern thematized in the plot, but this question also folds back onto the novel's reader who, after all, is positioned to prioritize any of the possible readings that are put forth in the narrative. My prioritizing the reading of "motherfucker" literally as the placeholder for Fenton's sexual identity is doubled by the way his sexuality is read as identity by others throughout the novel. As such, the novel provides a commentary on cultural assumptions about the connection between physical pleasure and sexual orientation, and as a consequence sexual identity. In the next section I reflect on two crucial scenes in the novel in which characters do exactly that: read Fenton's physical appearance and actions as signifiers for his identity.

### Speak, So That I May Read You

We have already seen that the focalizer of the main narrative, Parkhearst Cratty, is unsuccessful as both writer and reader. In his non-commitment to reconstructing the histories of people he interviews he fails to distinguish story from history. Or, to put it more precisely, he mistakes story for history. His failure to read Fenton "properly" is doubled twice over in the novel. First, when Parkhearst introduces Fenton to Grainger, the latter shows hardly any interest in the boy. Instead, she and Parkhearst continue bickering about her drinking habit and other petty frustrations between the two of them. Eventually Parkhearst admits that he has brought Fenton to Grainger to seek her explicit approval and asks "Do you think you're going to like Fenton?" (113), but it is only after coaxing by Parkhearst that Grainger deigns to look at Fenton. It is not until this point that Grainger finally shows interest in Fenton. After giving him a good look-over she recognizes in him the features of her late husband Russell and without letting Fenton speak up for himself, she has decided who he is: "'He's Russell!' Grainger said finally" (116). Then, to reinforce her reading of Fenton as Russell, she makes him dress up in one of Russell's suits that she keeps upstairs.

In the second scene, Fenton is drawn to a theater where Shakespeare's *Othello* is performed. While at the theater, he makes the acquaintance of a man named Bruno Korsawski, who, in turn, introduces him to the play's leading actor, Hayden Banks.



However, much to Bruno's annoyance, Fenton remains silent in Hayden's presence, while Hayden is charmed by him and clearly expresses his interest. Bruno admonishes Fenton for not opening his mouth (137). After his introduction to Hayden, Bruno takes Fenton to see the play, but in the theater Fenton cannot help falling asleep, agitating Bruno even more. Even worse, Fenton cannot suppress the urge to pass gas. When after the performance Bruno and Fenton return to Hayden, Fenton again falls silent. Despite Bruno's clear anger at Fenton's behavior, Fenton seems oblivious to Bruno's response and even takes pleasure in his abrasiveness (138). In the evening that follows, Fenton becomes increasingly intoxicated after drinking copious amounts of bourbon and smoking a marijuana cigarette offered by Bruno. At that point, Bruno starts to kiss and undress Fenton, leading the reader to believe that Bruno and Hayden are trying to take advantage of his intoxicated state. After an ellipsis that follows the undressing, we find Fenton naked in the middle of the room; Bruno and Hayden appear to have been beaten up and Bruno forces Fenton at gunpoint to leave the house.

This short and violent scene, which is nevertheless presented in comic fashion, plays around with the misreading of the overactive anus as a signifier for a homosexual orientation, or, more specifically, a homosexual identity. Jeffrey R. Guss suggests that in Western fantasies of sexual orientation the anus is "the very ground zero for homosexuality" (39). The association of anal intercourse with homosexuality is so deeply entrenched that the anus itself has become an index for homosexual desire. A man who takes pleasure in the stimulation of his anus is almost invariably read as a (latent) homosexual, no matter what his self-identified orientation might be. Following this notion, it could be argued that Bruno and Hayden mistakenly read Fenton's incessant farting during the performance as a sign of the anality of his sexual orientation. That is to say, just as for Allan the anus is an excessive signifier that destabilizes "phallic" or straightforward readings, so too is Fenton's anus overflowing with meaning as he fails to control his sphincter. Indeed, the lack of control over his sphincter and the apparent delight he takes in it are interpreted as signs of homosexuality.

The two scenes can be read in conjunction with each other. Or at least, I propose to read the latter through the lens of the former. While the latter scene with Bruno and Hayden centers around the (quite literal) violence that is done by misreading someone's behavior for his or her sexual identity, the former draws attention to the way in which looking is claimed as evidence to justify this act of misreading someone else. Seen through each other's lens, these scenes seem to be complementary. In both scenes the characters look for signs that can replace Fenton's lack of speech, but they

do this in different ways in each scene. In the first, Grainger's superimposition of her late husband's image over Fenton's identity relies purely on her visual appreciation of Fenton's physical appearance. In this scene Grainger looks, but what she sees comes to stand in for Fenton's lack of speech. In the whole scene he says no more than half a sentence. In Bruno and Hayden's reading of Fenton, on the other hand, we have a scene in which all of Fenton's acts become a speech acts, again to fill in for his own lack of speech.

In the act of reading for identity, someone's physical appearance comes to replace his or her own speech. Appearances and acts become, for the reader, the signifiers that replace the object's own self-identification. When speech acts function as evidence for someone's interior truth, we can understand these as sites of meaning-making closely related to the genre of confession. This genre, when juxtaposed with the detective novel, highlights the way in which the production of identity is temporally reversed in these genres' narrative logic. Just as in the detective novel, in which the story of the crime can only be produced retroactively, so too does the confession retroactively produce the semblance of an already existing identity.

Fenton's own lack of speech leaves a hole in the narrative that his readers – respectively Grainger, and Bruno and Hayden – feel compelled to fill. In his treatment of the detective and mystery genres, Geoffrey Hartman argues that works in these genres are troubled by a lack at their center: “The center they scan is an absence; the darkness they illuminate has no heart”. This observation leads him to quip that “instead of a whodunit, we get a whodnut, a story with a hole in it” (206). Barbara Johnson, in her brilliant reading of Derrida reading Lacan reading Edgar Allan Poe's “The Purloined Letter”, echoes Hartman's witticism when she theorizes the “lack” in Lacan:

The theory seems to imply that at some point in human sexuality, a referential moment is unbypassable: the observation that the mother does not have a penis is necessary. And therefore it would seem that the “lack” is localizable as the substance of an absence or a hole. To borrow from Geoffrey Hartman's discussion of certain solutionless detective stories, if the purloined letter is the mother's phallus, “instead of a whodunit we get a whodnut, a story with a hole in it.” (496, original emphasis)

Both theorists are concerned with the economy of signification in a genre that allegorizes the act of reading itself. Hartman sees the American detective novel's obsession with the act of reading as an act of self-cancellation. “Our eyes ache to read

more,” he writes, “to know that the one just man (the detective) will succeed – yet when all is finished, nothing is rereadable” (218). In the moment the detective has solved the circulation of signifiers, once the so-called hole is closed, the reader can no longer return to it, for the reader would only be confronted by the genre’s own artificiality (218).

Johnson, on the other hand, elaborates on the lack’s construction in language to theorize how it circulates as a signifier: “Even on this referential level, is the object of observation really a lack? Is it not rather not an observation at all but already an interpretation” (496, original emphasis)? The absence of a sign, then, for Johnson is already a signifier in its own right. It is embedded in a language that always locates the absence of a sign in a symbolic structure, and thus makes the absence itself into a meaningful signifier. We have already seen in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* how the lack of speech becomes a meaningful sign in the genre of confession.<sup>11</sup> There, Captain Stadger takes Daniel’s silence for admission, and thus the lack of speech becomes the absence which itself starts to signify. In the scenes described above Fenton’s lack of speech also starts to circulate, however the absence of his voice is not just read as admittance. Instead, his silence invites Grainger, and Bruno and Hayden to look over his body for other meaningful signs. Fenton’s silence displaces his speech from his voice to his physical appearance or to his overactive anus – both of which are then taken as confessional speech acts by his interlocutors.

The way Bruno admonishes Fenton for not speaking to Hayden and the way in which Parkheast presents Fenton for Grainger to look at are both reminiscent of the famous Socratic adage that hones in on the genre of confession: “speak so that I can see you” (Erasmus 242). This commonplace notion, when considered in full, can be seen to address the orientation of Socratic desire, which privileges speech over appearance as the site for libidinal attachment. Found in Erasmus’s translations of Petrarch’s *Apophthegmata*, the entire aphorism reads as follows:

When a wealthy man sent his young son to Socrates for him to assess his character, and the boy’s attendant said, “His father has sent his son for you to look him over, Socrates,” Socrates said to the boy, “Speak then, so I can see you,” meaning that a man’s character did not shine forth so clearly from his face as from his speech, since this is the surest and least deceitful mirror of the mind. (242–243)

11 For a more detailed discussion of the confession as a performative speech act in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, see Chapter 1.

Fenton's presentation to Grainger copies this Socratic scene almost exactly, up to the point where Grainger finally looks at Fenton and responds to his appearance in a manner opposite to Socrates. Instead of inviting him to speak so that she can get to know him, Grainger continues to ignore Fenton and finally makes a judgment about his person based purely on his looks. Bruno and Hayden, on the other hand, clearly express their annoyance with Fenton's lack of speech. In their desire to hear Fenton talk, they start interpreting his every action as a potential speech act, displacing the silence that comes from Fenton's mouth with the noises that his anus produces. Regarded within the framework of this Socratic adage, the two scenes complement each other: each foregrounds a different aspect of how the fantasy of identity hinges on the assumption that identity exists prior to its production through speech, and that the speech act of confession grants unmediated access to that identity.

In the aphorism cited above, Socrates is invited to attach his scopic desire to the boy by the father who asks him to "look him over". However, Socrates refuses to attach his desire to the boy's body, instead demanding that he speak. In this scene, speech is privileged as the object to which Socratic desire can be attached. The displacement of Socrates's scopic desire is motivated by his desire to get to the truth, or essence, of the boy. After all, speech "is the surest and least deceitful mirror of the mind". For Socrates to be able to appreciate the boy in front of him, he needs the boy to be a speaking subject. Socrates reads the boy's speech as a reflection of his innermost self—as an indicator of an absolute and essential state of his interiority, to which there is no access but through language. This way of reading is akin to how Paul De Man discusses the genre of confession as "an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood" (279). In his reading of Rousseau's *Confessions*, De Man shows how confessions are considered to occur "in the name of an absolute truth which is said to exist 'for itself'" (279). In other words, the language of confession does not correspond to the material world, but to the abstract idea of truth, to which we only have access through that very same language. Thus, confession produces a truth that exists in and of itself, but only if it is interpreted by its reader as a figurative use of language, in which case the interpretation congeals into the fantasy of the stable identity of the confessant.

If, as De Man suggests, confession operates as an epistemic use of language that produces a truth that exists only for itself, this truth-claim has no referential function since the interiority to which it confesses can only be made available verbally (280). De Man's interest in confession relies primarily on its performative rhetoric, which is "tied specifically to the absence of referential signification" and which "functions predominantly as if the matter had been settled positively" (291). Peter

Brooks subscribes to this understanding of confession as a performative speech act as he writes in his discussion of De Man's chapter that the confessional performance "opens the possibility that the performative aspect will produce the constative, create the sin or guilt that the act of confessing requires" (*Troubling Confessions* 21). The performative power of confession operates on the absence of an external referent to which a confession is made, while simultaneously rendering that referent present through the very language of confession. Just as for Johnson, the "lack" is already a signifier, for De Man, too, the mode of confession renders the absence of an external referent a meaningful sign. This is where the seemingly literal language of confession – seemingly, because of its self-referentiality – turns towards the figurative. At this turn, De Man recognizes the possibility for deconstruction, for it is the introduction of the figurative that both produces and disrupts the integrity of the truth that is confessed (292).

The narrative logic of confession, then, mimics that of the detective novel. Just as the supposed true facts of the crime in the detective novel can only be produced through the narrative reconstruction of the event, and thus by turning history into story, so too are the truths about acts or identities in confession only true when narrated. In both situations, however, there is an assumption that this narration offers unmediated access to the history of either the crime or identity, and its reconstruction takes on the semblance of truth by the suspension of the difference between history and story. Because of this belief that the truth of an event or identity can be narrated unproblematically, and the belief that the story is always a truthful representation of history, the genres of both the detective novel and confession operate on the assumption that there is an event or identity to narrate in the first place.

Fenton's silence in front of Grainger, Bruno, and Hayden mobilizes the confession's doubling of the assumption that a pre-existing identity or event is inherent in the detective novel. At the same time, his silence also problematizes the ease with which this assumption is made, and it questions the function of the reader/detective/confessor in the production of any truth claims about his identity. While his silence can be interpreted as Fenton being an empty canvas onto which others can project their fantasies about his identity, his violent response to Bruno and Hayden's advances surely suggests the opposite is true.

The context of the Socratic aphorism amplifies the tension between literal and figurative reading that is at the heart of Purdy's novel. Socrates reads language figuratively as confession, and so too do the characters surrounding Fenton. Parkheast already introduces a position that privileges a figurative reading when he debates the pronunciation of the title's address line, and this position is extended by Bruno and

Hayden's reading of Fenton's overactive anus. Read from this perspective, Bruno's frustration with Fenton's overactive anus and silent mouth is not just an issue of politesse. Rather, Fenton's refusal to speak in front of Hayden also means that he refuses to confess to a certain sexual identity. Without such a confession, Bruno and Hayden can only venture a guess as to Fenton's sexual orientation by reading his actions figuratively as signs of his sexual identity. In a series of figurative displacements, the passing of gas comes to fill the lacuna produced by Fenton's refusal to speak. In other words, Fenton's verbal speech is substituted by a perceived "anal speech act". Being taken as a substitute for his verbal speech, Fenton's "anal speech" is then read figuratively as expressing an innermost truth about his sexuality: namely as signifying a submissive homosexual desire. The tension between literal and figurative readings that pervades 63: *Dream Palace* is played out most extensively in the scenes at and after the theater performance. The sexual identity that Bruno and Hayden read into Fenton when they take his overactive anus as a confessional speech act can, in fact, only be produced by the figurative reading that fills in the gaps left behind by a literal one. In doing so, however, such a reading renders itself vulnerable to the destabilization of the very truth it tries to establish.

### Epistemic Promiscuity

The destabilizing impulse of the novel's refusal to be read in a totalizing manner gestures towards an overarching theme of Purdy's novelistic world: a resistance against the normative and restrictive notion of sexual identity. In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Daniel continuously switches between denial and admission in his confessions and makes it impossible to unambiguously align his sexual practices with what others consider to be his sexual identity. So too does Fenton refuse to provide certainty about what his gestures and speech acts might signify in terms of identification. In their attempts to destabilize how other characters can make meaning about their identities, I recognize a larger project that acts as a thread throughout Purdy's oeuvre, and which we will see return in the next chapters. This project is tied in with contemporary queer strategies that resist normative and hegemonic structures that organize our sexual and social lives. Daniel and Fenton's refusal to be read unambiguously is a strategy that I call *epistemic promiscuity*, with which I mean to indicate both Purdy's resistance to signification within a single structure of meaning-making, and his acknowledgment of the limitless potential of meanings with which signifiers circulate in American society.

The notion of epistemic promiscuity is informed by fundamental and ongoing discussions within queer activism and Queer Studies that posit promiscuous sexual practices as ethical alternatives to societal structures that privilege patriarchal and heteronormative monogamy. These debates arose in the wake of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, in which mainstream media and conservative pundits launched a concerted attack on promiscuous sexual practices between homosexual men as the primary cause of the rampant spreading of HIV, rather than the lack of adequate response from the government or otherwise homophobic and sex-negative policy implementations (Crimp 244; Harper 253; Watney 80–86). For Douglas Crimp, the amount of time conservative gay activists such as Larry Kramer and Randy Shilts spent on criticizing gay male promiscuity rather than advocating safer sex practices, amplified homophobic discourses that require gay men to abstain from sex in order to be non-threatening (242–251). Embracing promiscuity as an open, yet relational organizing principle for a sexual community was a means to renegotiate a gay communal identity: “Having learned to support and grieve for our lovers and friends; having joined the fight against fear, hatred, repression, and inaction; having adjusted our sex lives so as to protect ourselves and one another – we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture ... and our promiscuous love of sex” (270).

Contemporary queer thinkers have taken Crimp’s early reflections of promiscuity to task by theorizing the ethics of promiscuous sex practices. “Promiscuity”, Tim Dean writes in response to Crimp, “concerns more than new sex partners: it also concerns new ideas and new ways of doing things” (5). He positions promiscuity in opposition to purity, which he identifies as an anti-intellectual and anti-queer position. That is to say, within representations of queer sex, the notion of purity stigmatizes non-normative sex practices by sanitizing the public image of queer people. Dean identifies the ideal image of the unthreatening – because desexualized – homosexual as an act of oppressive and disenfranchising violence. Instead, he argues for a mode of cross-identification through sex practices that forego social stratifications based on class, race, and generation: “People closely associated with sex compromise the ideal image and mess things up; they menace our boundaries, auguring disruptions of integrity, by threatening to draw us out of ourselves into promiscuous contact and mixing” (20). In doing so, Dean echoes Delany’s assertion that promiscuous sex practices promote connections across identitarian categorization.<sup>12</sup> As such, these queer theorists argue that promiscuity opens up into an infinite number of possible

12 See Delany’s *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999) for his impassioned argument for cross-class connectivity through promiscuous sex practices such as cruising and visiting porn cinemas.

identifications and thus a limitless potential for meaning-making. Or, as Bersani puts it, “tireless sexual promiscuity makes for a connectedness based on unlimited bodily intimacies” (“Shame on you” 95).

Crimp, Dean, and Delany are mostly concerned with the social interconnectedness of promiscuous sex practices. For instance, Dean’s work on the gay male sexual subculture of barebacking presents itself as an ethnographical study that, in its findings, has certain implications for queer politics. Delany, too, is interested in social structures of promiscuous sex practices as he responds to neoliberal policy makers’ attempts to ban gay sex from public spaces. Their celebration of promiscuity, however, also translates into queer practices of meaning-making. Or rather, promiscuity can be considered a queer strategy of resistance against homogenizing and totalizing ways of reading. To understand this, I draw attention to a warning against epistemic promiscuity that Cornel West voiced in a position paper on pragmatism: “epistemic pluralism degenerates into epistemic promiscuity that encourages epistemic policing by realists and foundationalists” (1748). The uncertainty of a shared frame of reference, a shared mode of meaning-making, instills in West the fear of repressive policing by foundationalist thinkers. However, this statement belies his investment in a caricature of postmodernism that equates pluralist thinking with political and philosophical non-commitment. Yet, queer theorists continuously show that the non-commitment of promiscuity should not be confused with non-attachment. Instead, just as Dean and Delany make a case for promiscuous attachment across race, class, and generation, other queer literary theorists argue for similar promiscuous attachments across modes of meaning-making and across fixed epistemic frameworks.

In his meditation on homosexuality in the work of Roland Barthes, D.A. Miller comments on the promiscuity of the signifier in the former’s work, which he describes as “a proven ability to ‘fall’ into an infinity of not always untraceable contacts” (19). The signifier, for Barthes, is in constant circulation and refuses to attach itself to a fixed and absolute meaning. For Barthes, Miller argues, the moving signifier provides a strategy against “gay self-nomination”, which Barthes considers to always stand in relation to processes of Othering and the submission to normative societal structures. “To proclaim yourself something”, he writes, “is always to speak at the behest of the vengeful Other, to enter into his discourse, to argue with him, to seek from him a scrap of identity” (quoted in Miller 23). Promiscuity evacuates the sign of normative meaning and could, indeed, turn into an emancipated signifier: “Observe how ‘the goddess Homosexuality’ or ‘Homo’ gets enfolded into ‘the goddess H.,’ where H, as relatively emancipated signifier, can then unfold into a plurality of perversions, among which homosexuality, even ‘in this case’ has lost its priority” (22–



23). Seen through the lens of Barthes, then, the practice of promiscuity that Dean and Delany propose becomes not just an anti-identitarian strategy in which open erotic attachments circulate to produce multiple possible and co-existing meanings, but also a form of resistance against normative and perhaps even “monogamous” ways of reading. The promiscuous signifier resists the epistemic violence that reading for a homosexual identity, as I have detailed in the opening of this chapter, entails.

The scene described above already dramatizes the violence done by a totalizing reading. Bruno and Hayden’s reading of Fenton turns out to be a severe misjudgment on their part, and neither they nor Fenton leave the scene unscathed. After Bruno and Hayden kiss and undress Fenton, an ellipsis is inserted to signal the passing of time, and which suggests that Bruno and Hayden have acted upon their misreading of Fenton’s sexuality, much to the latter’s displeasure. After the ellipsis, we find Fenton “standing naked in the middle of the room, boxing; he was boxing the chandelier and had knocked down all the lamps; he had split open Bruno’s face and Bruno was weeping and held ice packs to his mouth” (141). Although Purdy makes ample use of ellipses in his dialogues and free indirect speech to mark brief pauses, the ellipsis featured at this point in the narrative is unmotivated. As such, it indicates an unspecified passage of time in which Fenton transforms from being passively undressed to an active aggressor.

When we combine the centrality of the speech act as truth-claim – which is pertinent to the confession – with the detective genre’s assumption that there already exists an identity that can be uncovered, the central problem for Fenton becomes a question of how to resist being (mis)read by others. That is, is it possible for Fenton to behave sexually without his acts being interpreted as signs for a sexual identity? And by extension, can we attribute Fenton’s resistance to being read in a certain totalizing way to the queer strategy of epistemic promiscuity? In attempting to answer these questions I return to the ambiguous expletive at the end of the novel, the “motherfucker”.

### Displacing the Lack

In the previous scene, we’ve seen that its violence hinges on the unmotivated ellipsis near its end. Since it is not presented as part of a speech act in any form, the ellipsis is wholly the domain of the narration. The ellipsis suggests that in the course of the scene, something so awful happens that even the narrator chooses not to tell it. As such, this ellipsis makes the reader complicit in how Bruno and Hayden (mis)read

Fenton's lack of speech as a displacement of signs that they interpret as signifiers of his sexual identity. The gap in the narration connects two different states, and the passing time indicated by the ellipsis leads the reader to fantasize about how the narration could go from one state to the other. What happens between Hayden's undressing of Fenton and Bruno being beaten up – by whom? – is entirely left to the reader's imagination. This ellipsis, just like Fenton's lack of speech or his involuntary farting, is an empty signifier that displaces the lack of signs that could be read meaningfully for the truth about an event.

This is, however, the only time such an unmotivated ellipsis appears in the novel. Now I will turn to another usage of the ellipsis in 63: *Dream Palace* that we find much more frequently: ellipses that are part of direct or free indirect speech. These ellipses might be even more ambiguous than the one in the scene described above. Although it is tempting to interpret them as moments of silence, moments in which speech temporarily halts only to continue again, we should keep in mind that these speech acts are still embedded in the narrator's text. Just as the unmotivated ellipsis puts a part of the narrative under erasure, so too can we not exclude the possibility that these ellipses put speech or acts under erasure as well. An ellipsis that makes this point most saliently enters at the moment in which Fenton seemingly strangles his brother. This particular moment reads as follows:

Then suddenly Fenton realized that he did not want Claire to come with him. He preferred him to stay in the old house. And at the same time he knew that if he stayed he would never have a moment's peace

...

There was no way out that he could see. He could only stand there staring at Claire with impotence and rage.

"All right for you," Fenton said at the end. "All I can say is watch out, watch out something don't happen now to you." (133)

This is where Fenton leaves the house, as in the next scene we see him waiting by the theater where *Othello* is performed. The next time we find him back at the house, he discovers Claire dead with clear signs of strangulation. During the scene leading up to this moment, Fenton and Claire argue about Fenton's intentions to move in with Grainger and perhaps even marry her. In the course of their argument Fenton grows increasingly agitated because Claire does not believe a marriage with Grainger will succeed. Fenton, on the other hand, regards Claire's skepticism as a sign of defeat and an attempt to sabotage his only shot at a better life.

Despite its brevity, this segment is nevertheless complex if we consider the various levels of narration involved. The first part is narrated in free indirect speech, while the last sentence reverts back to direct speech. The narrator takes on Fenton's focalization, and through this we are allowed a glimpse into his thought process. His thoughts, however, end abruptly once he realizes that there is no solution regarding Claire's dependence on him. After all, Claire is severely ill and Fenton's only options are to either bring him along to Grainger's house, or remain in the house on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street. The ellipsis here could indicate a brief pause in Fenton's thoughts just as much as it could point towards a thought or action erased by the external narrator, who had already taken on the perspective of Parkhears as focalizer. Parkhears's embedded focalization opens up into yet another set of possible interpretations. The ellipsis could be the result of either a lapse in Parkhears's memory – he could consciously leave out details of the fight – but, perhaps most plausibly, he might have reached the limit in his fantasies about Fenton and Claire's argument. Even though Parkhears remains embedded as focalizer because of the story's framing, he himself is not present at the scene. What is narrated – or omitted from this narration – could very well be seen as that which Parkhears believes or fantasizes to be the true facts of the event. As such, the ellipsis in this scene is a signifier that, much like Fenton's lack of speech and flatulence, becomes promiscuous as it attaches itself to multiple possible readings that refuse to exclude one another. The only fact that the reader can be fairly certain of is that something must have happened in the space of this ellipsis.

After the ellipsis we find Fenton standing over Claire, enraged either by their previous argument, or by his inability to find a solution to this situation. At this point, the narrator returns to direct speech in which Fenton voices a threat to Claire. While Fenton seems to suggest that nothing has happened yet – he only warns Claire to be careful that nothing happens to him – the narrator mentions something must have happened anyway. The short phrase “at the end” is puzzling since no action or event, other than Fenton's standing and staring, has been narrated in this segment. At the end of what, we might ask, does Fenton voice this ominous threat? And when does this event or action occur? During his standing and staring, or is that also part of this “at the end” that the narrator mentions? Could it be that this action is exactly what is put under erasure by the sudden ellipsis in Fenton's train of thought? Whether the ellipsis represents a blackout on Fenton's part, the limits of Parkhears's fantasy, or the external narrator's decision to purge the text of excessive violence, its pairing with the phrase “at the end” implies that it is exactly at this moment that the story takes a dramatic turn.

The next time we encounter Fenton in Claire's room, we find him staring at his younger brother again, and this time Fenton begins to grasp the reality of the situation. "He was back in the old house, in Claire's room, and though he was staring at Claire, he knew that his staring was to no avail, that he already knew what had happened and that the staring was to prevent him from telling himself what he saw" (141). Refusing to accept that Claire is dead, Fenton begins to go about his daily morning routine, talking to his brother and even trying to make him eat breakfast. When his attempts to force coffee and bread between Claire stiff lips fail, Fenton begins to see the marks of strangulation on his brother's broken neck. Looking down at his hands, Fenton connects the dots and draws the conclusion that he must have done this himself (143).

I have already discussed at length the "motherfucker" at the end of the novel, and the ways in which its meaning circulates throughout the story when we trace its ambiguity back to one of the opening questions that Parkheast poses: "Who is Fenton?" Another reading of the "motherfucker", one that I have left mostly untouched so far, surfaces if we pair Fenton's discovery of Claire's death with the later scene in which he carries his dead body upstairs. As soon as Fenton realizes his brother has been strangled, he addresses him and says: "you're dead, you little motherfucker" (143). This is the only other instance in which we encounter the expletive "motherfucker" in the novel, and this time it is clearly addressed to Claire. The lack of ambiguity in this particular instance makes it probable that the addressee of the last exclamation is, in fact, Claire as well. Reading Claire, and not Fenton, as the motherfucker of this narrative has significant implications for questions I posed earlier in my analysis. Within this new context, the meaning of "motherfucker" no longer pertains to the question of Fenton's identity, but to that of Claire. Again we see that certain key signifiers in *63: Dream Palace* are promiscuous in their attachment to different possible meanings.

While considering Claire as the "motherfucker" would undoubtedly result in a valid interpretation, my aim here is not to exhaust all possible different readings of the novel, an endeavor that seems as impossible as it is unnecessary for me to make my point. Instead of offering a new interpretation of the novel based on the idea that Claire is the addressee of the final sentence, I believe that different readings are possible, and even plausible, at once. What interests me at this point is that both readings are made plausible by textual evidence, while the novel nowhere privileges one reading over the other. If this is true, then to what extent is reading Fenton as the "motherfucker" – which holds different meanings with regards to Fenton's sexuality – just the result of the reader's desire to read the lack of signs as a displacement of signifiers that could

tell the reader something about Fenton's sexual identity? Parkhearst's reluctance to talk about the events surrounding Fenton because he "never found out who Fenton was", immediately followed by the actual narration, creates the expectation in the reader that the story will in fact disclose more about Fenton's identity. The mere fact that the story can now be told must indicate that Parkhearst finally found out who Fenton was after all. The question that remains unanswered leaves a gap in the narration that, just like the scene with Bruno and Hayden, tempts the reader into reading for signs that displace the initial absence of a confessional speech act, but which also continuously refuses to attach itself to one specific narration.

## Conclusion

Having read the novel "from behind", that is, having taken my cue from the issue of ambiguous identity raised at its bottom, I now return to the novel's very top: its title. "63: Dream Palace" features a typographic element that frames the novel's concern with misreading the anus and the notion of the motherfucker as signifiers of a certain sexual identity. We have already seen how the spelling of the title provokes a disagreement between Fenton and Parkhearst over how to pronounce it. This comic interaction and the peculiar way in which the address line is written draw attention to its possible meaning and function in relation to the novel's overall concerns with reading and writing (sexual) identity. That is, in the way it is written and in the confusion that results from this, the novel's title already signals a concern with the tension between literal and figurative readings. As we have seen with the figurative connotation of the Oedipal scenario that is introduced by reading the motherfucker literally, from the outset of the novel we recognize that any attempt to read its title literally is immediately frustrated by its figurative connotations. Just as the typographic ellipsis in the scene with Fenton, Bruno, and Hayden frustrates a literal reading, so does the typographic oddity in the title open up to fantasies about what the ":" in the title might signify. Taking Allan's provocation to "read from behind" to heart, it is not difficult to find the figure of the anus in the title: Purdy's preoccupation with textual and linguistic eccentricities invites the reader to read the typographic colon too literally, that is, to take it for its homophone: the anatomical colon.<sup>13</sup>

13 Michael Ballin and Charles Lock also note the typographic oddity in the novel's title which they deem a "weird [juxtaposition] of the naturalistic and the grotesque" (17). My analysis of the colon as a figure for the anus is inspired by my conversations with Charles Lock about the novel.

To extend Purdy's habitual play on words and punctuation, we could say in jest that the anus is also implied in the playful naming of Fenton Riddleway. If the name Riddleway points towards the sphinx of the Oedipus myth, then the novel's preoccupation with the readability of the anus as a sign for sexual orientation allows for the slippage of this riddle of the sphinx into a "riddle of the sphincter": what does Fenton's anus say about his sexual orientation?<sup>14</sup> While this question is on the minds of the characters Fenton encounters, the novel never offers a straightforward answer to it. Instead, it stresses the possibility that different incongruous readings coexist, rendering a univocal reading of sexual identity impossible. Any attempt to privilege one reading over others results in misinterpretation and does violence to the person being read. Both the anus and the motherfucker hover over the text as specters, as opaque signs that resist being read in one specific way. As such, Purdy recognizes something in desire that resists being read, or being made legible. Looking for a language with which we can address sexuality as something we do rather than as something we are, Purdy dramatizes the tension between these readings, neither of which provides access to Fenton's desires.

In conclusion, I cannot but admit that for the sake of this argument that I too have prioritized one specific reading of the novel by interpreting the "motherfucker" literally as referring to Fenton. Although there is textual and contextual evidence that motivates my reading, other possible readings of the motherfucker are not necessarily excluded by the text. The ambiguity of the address and of the narrative situation make other readings – e.g. of Claire as the addressee or of "motherfucker" as a colloquial term of endearment – plausible. Thus, while my reading argues against the violence committed by imposing a certain reading onto the text, this very same reading performs the violence it argues against. Privileging one reading, as I have done over the course of this chapter, at once confirms and undermines Purdy's project to destabilize generalizing narratives and readings that fix identity categories onto sexual behavior or body language. Taking this project to heart, however, the "riddle of the sphincter" might have a solution, yet this solution can only be posed in uncertain terms, for what Fenton's anus says about his sexual identity is always at once everything and nothing.

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14 To also finally read Hartman's and Johnson's linguistic joke "from behind": it should by now be fairly obvious what would constitute the "hole" of this novel's "whodonut".