



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

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

Kessel, L. van

### **Citation**

Kessel, L. van. (2019, December 4). *Savage embraces: James Purdy, melodrama, and the narration of identity*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/81091>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/81091>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The following handle holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation:  
<http://hdl.handle.net/1887/81091>

**Author:** Kessel, L. van

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

**Issue Date:** 2019-12-04

## Queer Death/Queer Resistance

On 13 March 2019, a small group of people gathered at the cemetery of the St Peter and St Mary Church in the village of Weedon Lois, about thirty minutes outside of Northampton in the UK. The crowd assembled on the tenth anniversary of James Purdy's death to bury him next to the grave of the English poet Edith Sitwell. It had always been Purdy's wish to be buried next to her, as he firmly believed that she singlehandedly gave him the opportunity to publish his debut collection of stories *Color of Darkness* in 1956.<sup>1</sup> At the time, Purdy had little success with publishing in America and thus had some of his short stories privately printed so he could send these out to authors he admired. Of the few authors who responded, Sitwell showed the most enthusiasm for his work, and the two writers struck up a friendship that lasted until her own death in 1964. It is because of this friendship, Purdy always maintained, that he gained his first publishing contract with Victor Gollancz, after which American publishers followed suit. Although it might be debated whether Purdy's initial success as an author can be fully ascribed to his friendship with Sitwell, the event of his burial reifies this specific reading of his authorship's beginnings. Indeed, the leaflet accompanying the ceremony reads, "[hers] was encouragement enough to set James Purdy on an extraordinary literary course" and "[t]hanks initially to the recommendation of Dame Edith, Purdy would gain many admirers among English writers" (Lock n.p.).

I turn to the scene of Purdy's burial to end my dissertation for several reasons. Quite obviously there is a compositional reason: since I opened my introduction with an anecdote of how Purdy orchestrated the narration of his own birth year, opening my conclusion with a story of how Purdy orchestrated his own burial feels satisfying on a narrative level. It also points to Purdy's lifelong preoccupation with the narration of his own life. If, as I suggested, it is indeed true that Purdy lied about his age to ensure the association of his work with a younger generation of authors, then his wish to be buried next to Sitwell organizes yet another aspect of his literary biography. The ceremony not only enshrines Purdy's friendship with Sitwell, but also recasts this friendship as a relationship between patron and protégé, which, as Frank

---

<sup>1</sup> Shortly after Purdy's death in 2009, John Uecker mentions this wish in his introduction to the publication of selected plays by Purdy (xii).

Baldanza has pointed out, is a dominant theme throughout his oeuvre (“Paradoxes” 347). The narrative of Purdy’s burial functions as a palimpsest superimposed onto other narratives of his literary origins, for these can no longer be narrated without the knowledge and consideration of the former. Finally, the scene of Purdy’s burial and the way in which this scene can be considered a final attempt of Purdy to narrate his own life foregrounds yet another theme that runs throughout this dissertation: queer death.

While my primary occupation was to read Purdy’s work through the lens of melodrama and analyze the ways in which he interrogates the fiction of identity, I have been particularly attentive to the consequences that Purdy’s resistance to identity has had for his own characters. Daniel in *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, Fenton in *63: Dream Palace*, Cabot in *Cabot Wright Begins*, both Billy and Edna in *Children Is All*, and in a sense also *The Nephew’s Cliff*, resist the superimposition of a totalizing identity fiction, challenge dominant readings of their identity, or propose alternative narrations of their own or others’ identities. Some of them emerge relatively unscathed from their acts of resistance. Cabot might have suffered memory loss and impotence, but he eventually finds a way to claim ownership of his own identity narration. Fenton, too, seems to emerge reasonably unharmed. In fact, he seems to be the one assaulting those who try to fix a particular identity narrative onto him. Less fortunate is Edna, who finds her own narration of her son’s identity can only be made manifest when she slips into insanity. Cliff, who might already be dead before the narration of *The Nephew* even begins, further recedes from the narration until he is eventually devoid of all identity. Finally, Daniel and Billy find their deaths because they resist a totalizing reading of their sexuality or national identity (Daniel), or because they cannot be read on their own terms (Billy). Resisting, refuting, or interrogating identity, then, comes at the great risk of social or even literal death.

Death is an important theme for queer thinking, especially in the wake of the AIDS crisis, the most devastating period of which coincided with the time at which gay and lesbian scholars began to organize under the umbrella term of “queer theory”. In Chapter 2, I discussed how this led to a theorizing of promiscuity as a counterhegemonic and anti-homophobic response to homophobia and sex negativity in dominant discourses. For example, in his seminal essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, Leo Bersani theorizes promiscuity in relation to the Freudian death drive. Gay sex – more specifically, anal penetrative sex between two men – during the AIDS crisis, he suggests, has become emblematic for masculinist fears of self-shattering through sexual pleasure (“Rectum” 220). For Bersani, to receive anal pleasure constitutes a radical rejection of heteronormative social structures

and confronts society with its own fear of latent homosexuality; a fear that resulted in a long history of homophobic and misogynistic criminalization of sex between men. This position, which Bersani further developed in *Homos* (1995) and which has been dubbed the “anti-social thesis in queer theory” (Caserio et al. 2006), has gained much traction among queer scholars who seek to imagine ways in which queer subjects can subvert heteronormative social structures, or who seek to produce counterhegemonic knowledges that foreground queer experiences within these structures. This mode of queer negativity, as some scholars have dubbed this stance (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2011), politicizes the nonnormative and anti-social subjectivation of queerness by positing it as a more ethical alternative to the repressive subjectivating mechanisms of heteronormative and patriarchal societies.

Writing that concerns itself with the antisocial thesis in queer theory tends to center on acts or objects that refuse to conform to social norms as world-making in their own way. Thus, as I have discussed in Chapter 5, Jack Halberstam proposes to read failure not as nonperformance or the absence of meaningful acts, but as acts of world-making that puncture hegemonic knowledges and “exploit the unpredictability of ideology” (*Queer Art of Failure* 88). While perhaps never spoken aloud, a strong undercurrent in these accounts of queer antisocial resistance is the assumption that nonnormative subject formations are ethically privileged over their normative counterparts. If normative subject formations are inherently oppressive, even for those who seem to embody these norms, then surely accounts of subject formation that undermine the seeming self-evidence of the norm must occupy an ethically preferable position. However, such a wholesale celebration of counterhegemonic practices tends to overlook that these practices might often employ the same vocabularies and strategies of meaning-making as the dominant culture that they seek to subvert. In Chapter 1 I have touched upon the subject of privileging a subjectivating mechanism that seemingly opposes normative heterosexual subject formations: “coming out of the closet”. Although “coming out” has been, and is arguably still, an important strategy to socially and politically mobilize queer-identified people, the mode of confession that structures the narrative of the closet lends itself to a truth-claim that renders “coming out” both as the only alternative to heterosexual subject formations and as the dominant subjectivating mechanism for queer people. Thus, not only does the confessional mode of “coming out” entrench pre-existing norms, but it also becomes a norm in and of itself. I argue in Chapter 1 that Daniel does not resist sexual desire per se; if anything, Daniel acts out his desires through the mode of sleepwalking. Instead, his crisis is induced by the social demand

to confess to a certain sexual identity based on his sexual acts. For Daniel, “coming out” would subject him to the same oppressive identity categories that the narrative of “coming out of the closet” is believed to subvert.

Daniel’s resistance to identity is similar to that of other characters we find in Purdy’s novels. Far from rejecting sexual desires – either normative or nonnormative – characters such as Fenton, Cabot, and, *in absentia*, also Cliff, resist the inscription of their sexual acts onto the fantasy of identity. Of these characters, Daniel is arguably most successful in his resistance: until the moment he dies, he refuses to confess to a specific sexual identity category. That Daniel dies because of his sustained resistance to identity makes him emblematic to discussions that seek to identify world-making acts of queer resistance in the occasion of queer death. In my Chapter 2 I have discussed Daniel’s death in relation to José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of disidentification, for it is in his death that Daniel can both give in to Captain Stadger’s “savage embraces” and disavow the confines of restrictive identity categories. Indeed, Muñoz is emphatic in his claim that “disidentification is not always an adequate strategy of resistance or survival” (*Disidentifications* 5, original emphasis). Although Muñoz draws much of his thinking from utopist reflections on futurity, he too recognizes a mode of world-making or an emancipatory gesture in the theme of queer death. As such, Muñoz opts to read the suicide of New York dancer Fred Herko as a denaturalizing performance which gestures toward the ethical implications of staging and performing death. Ultimately he claims that “[t]o denaturalize the way we dwell (move) in the world is to denaturalize the world itself in favor of a utopian performativity” (*Cruising Utopia* 151).

Although I do not wish to dispute the validity of reflections on the performative and world-making operations of queer death, I do want to caution against an all too celebratory theorizing of queer death as the ultimate gesture of disavowal and counterhegemonic knowledge production. Even if Daniel’s death dramatizes a sense of liberation that is embedded in the radical rejection of the demand to live life in a certain way, it also takes away Daniel’s opportunity to resist the narration of his identity beyond his conflict with Stadger. While Daniel’s disidentifying performance allows him to both resist the category of identity and act out his sexual desires, this is only successful insofar as his performance of disidentification is directed at Stadger’s totalizing reading of his identity. Identity narratives produced by others are unaffected by Daniel’s actions and, to some extent, even reduce his resistance to “severe mental disturbance” (ECW 239), if they take his resistance into consideration at all. After his death, the narration of his identity continues in a letter from the army informing Eustace that Daniel “had died of injuries sustained in basic training” (239).

What happened between Daniel and Stadger is no longer part of how his death is narrated by others. Daniel's act of disidentification is ignored in favor of a narrative that makes his death seem like a mere accident. This time around, however, Daniel is no longer present to confront this fixating of his identity.

Similarly, Cliff in *The Nephew* could be considered to have lost agency over his identity-production. Although the reader can only construe Cliff's relationship with his family and neighbors retroactively, since he already died before the novel's beginning, this relationship can certainly be considered antisocial and queer. The disavowal of his community by enlisting in the army recalls the topos of "going away" that Stephen D. Adams identifies in early queer writing (*Homosexual as Hero* 56), or at least gestures towards Robert L. Caserio's 1997 reflection on the complicated relationship between gay men and the army in post-World War II queer writing. Yet, here too, death not only signifies an escape from restrictive identity categories, but also prevents Cliff from sustained resistance. In fact, his death even brings these identity categories to the front and center of the narration. Only after his death does Alma begin to occupy herself both with the narration of Cliff's identity and her categorization of the identities of the people around her. Although Alma's sudden preoccupation with identity grants her new meaningful relationships with her neighbors, it comes at the cost of Cliff's own narration. As the novel progresses, Cliff's image gradually recedes into the background, until he becomes an empty canvas onto which Alma can project her own changing attachments to her community.

Cliff's death, as is the case with Daniel's, resists being sentimentalized in a way that an all too celebratory theorizing of queer death runs the risk of doing. Although their deaths indeed radically undermine the ways in which their identities were narrated prior to dying, they also leave open a space for new identity narrations. These new narratives do not necessarily adhere to the radical rejection of identity that the antisocial thesis in queer theory wishes to see. Instead, these identity narrations might return to normative and repressive modes of subjectivation, or perhaps even result in new and unexpected insights for those telling the stories. As such, Purdy's novels move away from the ethical privileging of the antisocial thesis in queer theory. Instead, they dramatize the many different effects that this theoretical position produces. His novels suggest that the effects of reading for identity do not necessarily terminate with the performance of antisocial practices. Reading practices continue beyond the physical encounter with the subjects being read. For Purdy's queer characters, survival means the ability to navigate the plethora of coexisting and contradicting identities that are produced in the repeated act of reading. Resistance against the category of identity, then, is not so much a question of radical rejection of heteronormative

social structures; rather, resistance is located in the constant interrogation of the narrative foundation of identity itself. If identity is an effect of narration, if identity is indeed wholly fictive, then understanding how these narratives operate and how reading practices contribute to the production of different identity fantasies is a key strategy for those who wish to dismantle the restrictive nature of identity categories. Exposing identities as the product of narration arms those who wish to defend themselves against the totalizing and violent force that reductive reading for identity entails.

The identity narratives that I have focused on in my dissertation almost exclusively pertain to fictions of sexual and national identities. While Purdy undoubtedly also interrogates other identity categories, such as gender, race, and class, the categories of sexuality and nationality remain the most pervasive in his attempts to undermine the narrative production of identity.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, I have separated discussions of sexual and national identity by focusing in my first three chapters on sexual identity, while turning my attention predominantly to national identity in my last two chapters. This separation, I admit, is artificial at best. Like Siobhan Somerville, who demonstrates that in early-twentieth-century America fantasies of homosexual identity were part and parcel of racist and xenophobic discourses, I want to suggest that a critique of sexual identity requires a consideration of national identity, and vice versa. Indeed, throughout my dissertation these identity categories have bled into one another, despite my best efforts to separate them for the sake of analytical clarity. Thus, as evidenced in Chapters 1 and 5, the army as an institution that organizes the relationship between the citizen and National Symbolic also enforces a compulsory heterosexuality onto that citizen. As such, sexuality, and in particular the type of sexuality that is promoted by a heteronormative patriarchal society, can be considered a national fantasy insofar as it organizes the way in which individual subjects attach to the National Symbolic. In Chapter 4, I demonstrated how institutions, such as national holidays and the prison industrial complex, structure the fantasies through which subjects attach to the National Symbolic. In Chapter 5, on the other hand, I suggested that these attachments can be remodeled through an investigation into the operation of these institutions. Alma, who in writing a memorial attempts to appropriate Cliff for her own idealized image of national identity, ultimately reconsiders her own notion of national identity and her relationship with her community when the memorial she is writing transforms her own attachment to the

---

2 See, for example, the introduction to a discussion of gender in the short story "Don't Call Me by My Right Name", the novel *Malcolm*, and Chapter 3 for a discussion of race in *Cabot Wright Begins*.



National Symbolic. Whereas at first she cannot imagine a national identity that can include homosexual subjects, she eventually moves to an understanding of national identity in which diverse sexualities can coexist.

Finally, in the preceding chapters I identified several strategies with which Purdy's characters attempt to undermine the restrictive and oppressive force of identity fantasies. Some of these strategies – such as disidentification (Chapter 1), epistemic promiscuity (Chapter 2), and the performative force of failure (Chapter 5) – I have borrowed from, or based on, queer scholarly writing. Others I have found in literary theory, and narratology in particular. In considering narrative devices such as *mise-en-scène* (Chapter 1) and focalization (Chapter 3), but also the mode of melodrama, as enabling readings that undermine the totalizing force of identity fantasies, I hope to make a valuable intervention into the critical mode of queer theory, which, as I have shown in Chapter 3, “remain[s] suspicious of narratology’s formalist priorities and binary frames” (Warhol and Lanser 2). For one, I argue that theoretical reflections on queer and nonnormative subject formations are to a great extent embedded in a narratological understanding of concepts such as time, repetition, actor, action, space, and place. More importantly, however, I maintain that if we consider the fantasy of identity as an effect of narrative, queer theory’s interrogation of these fantasies is no longer incompatible with narratological approaches that investigate the operations of narrative itself. On the contrary, narratological analysis contributes to the examination of oppression and violence that reading sexual acts for sexual identities entails. If Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser suggest that queer theorists are leery of narrative theory’s perceived categorizing impulse which reduces a text to binary oppositions, I contend that careful narratological analysis shows that there are always multiple possible narratives at stake, even if subsumed by a totalizing identity fantasy. It is the task of the narratologist, then, to show that the experience of a stable identity is the effect of narration itself. This task is, if anything, a queer task indeed.

