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The radical reconfiguration over the last three decades of critical studies and what constitutes 'knowledge', whereby 'theory' and writing, literature and the 'social', poetics and politics have crossed each other's path, has led to an irreversible interrogation of previous autonomies. It would be simple to reduce this trajectory to a superficial social history that commences around 1968 and develops, above all, through the writings, both theoretical and literary, of new historical subjects distinguished by gender, ethnicity and minority status. However, these are also symptoms of an altogether deeper current that, to use the unfashionable concept of egemonia, draws our attention to the limits and crisis, both intellectual and institutional, of a particular historical-cultural formation and its subsequent arrangement of disciplines in the western academy. The confident nineteenth-century positivism and/or idealism that cultivated and established the present day divisions and distinctions of the social sciences and humanities (and the critical and historical sense of such terms are themselves to be investigated) is exhausted. Confronted by nervous retrenchment into orthodox backwaters or else the continual adjustment of the inherited discipline in order to continue to converse with change, the initial dispositif is now clearly in crisis.

Yet crisis is, of course, the very basis of criticism. This is to suggest a theoretical modality that is neither conservative nor merely accommodating. But if positivism and idealism are no longer able to mirror the world in their languages, if the confidence of a subjective objectivity orbiting around the universal I/eye (humanism) is justly afflicted by doubt, then critical work, whether in literature or anthropology, becomes an altogether more exposed, more vulnerable, undertaking. Whatever the response to such a situation, which, of course, requires recognition as a critical situation and not something to be brushed under the carpet, it becomes clear that a local response, for example restricted to the field of 'English literature', cannot be divorced from a wider comprehension of the crisis-criticism of the humanities and its particular tutelage of 'knowledge'. It is in this direction that the new series of *Anglistica* proposes to travel, drawing critical strength, above all, from an interdisciplinary approach that has historically developed within the vicinity of English literary studies, that of cultural studies. But, precisely because it is interdisciplinary, existing between and beyond existing disciplines, neither cultural studies nor the critical perspective proposed for this journal can claim the authority of an intellectual orthodoxy nor the institutional recognition of a disciplinary regime. Being vulnerable is an uncomfortable, but necessary, position to occupy; the only comfort it provides is the perpetual aperture, the opening, through which an intellectual challenge can continue on its way.

CONTENTS

Vol. 1-2 (2004)

Politics of Archiving and the Aesthetics of Memory
(editors for this issue: Marie-Hélène Laforest – Marina Vitale)

Marie-Hélène Laforest	Editorial	5
POLITICS OF ARCHIVING		
Claudia Buonaiuto	Archival Sounds. Caryl Phillips's Atlantic Story	11
Laura Fantone	Death of a Discipline. Other imaginary maps	29
Angelo Ferrillo	'Con-signing' the Past: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and apartheid memory	49
Fiorenzo Iuliano	Tacit Cruelties: archive of the body and violence of pleasures	69
Paola Sallei	Unpacking the Library of Modernity	87
Laura Sarnelli	"Undoing the Colonial Archive". Isaac Julien's <i>Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask</i>	107
Marina Vitale	Palimpsests of History and Memory	125
THE AESTHETICS OF MEMORY		
Bianca Del Villano	Re-membering and Forgetting in <i>Memento</i>	149
Manuela Esposito	The Archive of Natural Elements: Woolf, Irigaray and Zambrano	167
Serena Guarracino	Voicing the Archive. Sexual/national politics in early music	185
Tiziana Rosapane	"Just a Word on a Page and There Is the Drama". Sarah Kane's autobiographical archive	203
Sonia Torres	Memory and Displacement: identity discourses in (between) Chile and Canada	219

Fiorenzo Iuliano

**Tacit Cruelties: archive of the body
and violence of pleasures**

Your spring & your day are wasted in play,
And your winter and night in disguise.

(William Blake, *Nurse's Song*)

Body and archive

In his text *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida emphasizes the layered structure of the archive, whose complexity lies in the composite articulation and juxtaposition of different signs, involved in a mechanism of mutual reference and deferral never to be subsumed in a conclusive and comprehensive synthesis, despite the overhanging menace of a superimposed system of global signification provided by historiography. Derrida interrogates the genesis of the archive, the multiple and sometimes contrasting meanings ascribed to it, and the ways in which, as an epistemic tool, it opens up new directions for investigating the field and the limits of historiography. The archive is a normative notion, a hermeneutical instrument, a topological scheme; it assembles signs and provides them with a regulatory and, to some extent, teleological value. The collection of signs, the 'con-signing', is a normative as well as an hermeneutical act – the archive is a 'topo-nomologic' construct, a means through which the signs are collected and at the same time deciphered, and whose authority and sovereignty is guaranteed by the powerful forces embodied by the archons, the only authorities entitled to exert their power upon it.¹

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

Derrida discusses and interrogates the archive along the silent track of the 'Freudian impression'. His thought proceeds, as usual, through metonymical suggestions, progressive and juxtaposed hints for speculation that create a constellation of thoughts and ideas, rather than an organic dissertation.

My aim in this essay is to follow or to parallel a metonymical route similar to Derrida's, trying to make a connection between the terms I want to address, not in order to construct a final and comprehensive thesis, but merely to show affinities, similarities, subtle evocations and sometimes strange equivalences. I wish to speak of the archive of the body and of the body of the archive; and I wish to speak of the power of violence in the constitution of both the body and the archive, where by violence I mean a regulatory instance capable of imposing a meaning to the objects it threatens. I will examine some texts that question the role of violence and representation, and the interaction between these two notions: what violence comes to stand for, once it is represented, and what it comes to stand for once it is avoided, repressed, and substituted by representation.

To this purpose, Jean Luc Nancy, Judith Butler and U.S. writer Stephen Greco will be interpellated. Nancy, in his *Corpus*, deals with the notions of body and corporality and their role in the contemporary political and epistemic scenery; in "Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex", Judith Butler examines the constitution of the (hetero)sexed self as an act of violence; while in the short-short story "Good with Words" by the American writer Stephen Greco violence is theatrically reshaped in the forms and the gestures of sadomasochistic gay sex, and is, at the same time, rhetorically erased and deactualized.²

Jean Luc Nancy traces a suggestive parallel that connects the body and the archive: the body, 'corpus' in Latin, also stands for collection of norms and laws.

² Jean Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Paris: Éditions A. M. Métailié, 1992); Judith Butler, "Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex", in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Stephen Greco, "Good with Words", in *The Sperm Engine* (San Francisco: Green Candy Press, [1987] 2002), now in David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell, eds., *The New Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 2003).

...a catalogue instead of a logos, the enumeration of an empirical logos, without transcendental reason, a gleaned list, aleatoric in its order and in its completeness, a consecutive, laboured recitation of parts and pieces. ... The model of the corpus is the Corpus Juris, the collection or compilation of the Institutions, the Digests, and the other Codes of all the articles of the Roman law. It is not a chaos, nor an organism: the corpus stands, not exactly between the two, but rather elsewhere.³

The notion of corpus is seen by Nancy as disrupting the organic coherence of the archive: the body is, like a 'corpus', a collection of data, of signs, perhaps of suggestions, which, however, never amount to a regulatory scheme, a conclusive and comprehensive system capable of summing up all the instances at stake. The body is read (or perceived) as a 'corpus' and not as an 'organon'; it is a collection of signs moving on a metaphoric surface, which collide and blur into each other miming the coherence they lack. The 'organon', on the contrary, stands for a coherent 'summa' of consequential and interdependent norms, arranged in a vertical sequence, where each item depends on the one that precedes it and creates the nomological bases for the following one.

The 'organon', a well established notion in the Aristotelian philosophical tradition, is a collection of texts dealing with logical and scientific methods, ranging from the analysis of ontological categories of the existent to the exposition of the principle of syllogistic logic. On the other hand, modern thought has its own 'organon' in Francis Bacon's work, his 1620 *Novum Organum*, characterized by a pragmatic and at the same time strictly rational stance, which, drawing on Aristotle, established the deductive and scientific rules according to which human knowledge had to proceed in order to arrive at truth.

The 'corpus' cannot body forth the 'organon' – this can be inferred from Nancy's words – and it is not so much meant to embody any coherence as to replicate it, and to literally give body to an imagined coherence depriving it therefore of any meaning and showing in exemplary fashion the lack of ground from which logos draws its strength. The body finds its natural, but

³ Nancy, *Corpus*, 47-48; my translation. I wish to thank my friend Gianna Fusco who helped me translate the quotations from *Corpus* into English.

at the same time controversial, form, in the act of writing: the *corpus juris* is a written text that instances the force of the law, opposing the metaphysical and transcendent value of the *corpus Christi* from which Nancy's speculation starts – the body whose immateriality comes to be the most craved object in Western culture, devoured, incorporated, digested in order to achieve an immaterial, disembodied, exclusively spiritual salvation located in the farthest and most unreachable elsewhere. The 'corpus juris' is the secular, down-to-earth, reassuring transcription of this unreachable body, its immanent descent among men and its translation in terms that are not superimposed, but commonly shared and consensually accepted.

The secular and rational reshaping of this body of salvation comes to be a collection of norms, that is, an act of writing; paradoxically enough, the body of salvation can circulate and make sense among people only as writing, and only once translated into a 'corpus', a collection of sentences – an archive – which from its very start stands for something else, replicating and replacing the metaphysical unattainability of the body of salvation. The corpus is not the actual body, Nancy seems to suggest; it is entangled in the same net of mutual referentiality and symbolic dependence, but the body as flesh or as performance – or illness, counter-sexuality, erotic and imaginative power that disrupts the certainties of the *corpus juris* – is posterior, marginal, derived from a process of exclusion and abjection.

The body as archive can emerge as a provocative and performative response to the force of the law and to its regulatory strength, preserving on itself the traces of different and disseminated processes of repression, abjection and refusal. It is a body that retains in its structure the signs of a past superficiality by now completely incorporated, as Freud underlines in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Indeed embryology, in its capacity as a recapitulation of developmental history, actually shows us that the central nervous system originates from the ectoderm; the grey matter of the cortex remains a derivative of the primitive superficial layer of the organism and may have inherited some of its essential properties.⁴

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton & Company, 1990), 29.

As a collection of traces, the body is the body of writing, or, as Jean Luc Nancy writes, "restless discourse, casual syntax, declination of occurrences. *Clinamen*: a prose inclined toward the accident, fragile, fractal ... Corpus: a writing that travels and sees, one after the other, all the lands of the body".⁵

Corpus instead of organum, clinamen instead of logos: there seems to emerge a perception of the body and corporality which, bypassing Aristotle and Bacon, draws on Epicurus (or Lucretius) and maybe Deleuze in the attempt to find more suitable patterns for philosophical speculation, and whose most appropriate structure is displayed on the surface and in spatiality – meant as a mechanism to distance, create spaces, gaps and voids, similar to writing and to the material disposition and arrangement of signs on a sheet of paper or in electronic synapses. The body is archive insofar as it parallels the process of writing, which is first of all an act of touching and distancing, a performative and never ending 'fort/da'. "Writing is not signifying. But it must be said that this – reaching the body, touching the body, *touching*, at last – is what constantly happens in writing".⁶

The body as archive is also the body of repression. In Freudian terms, repression is crucial to understand how impulses and drives, thoughts and gestures, undergo the process of archiving. For his part, Derrida insists on the importance of repression in structuring the archive, maintaining that his 'mal d'archive' has been conceived as a 'Freudian impression', and retracing the articulated semantic and etymological spectrum of the words impression-repression. As he has argued, the English word 'impression', and its association with the psychoanalytic word, 'repression', refers among other things to a typographical jargon:

The first impression is scriptural or typographic: that of an inscription ... which leaves a mark at the surface or in the thickness of a substrate. ... Can one imagine an archive without foundation, without substrate, without substance, without subjectile?⁷

⁵ Nancy, *Corpus*, 49-50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁷ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 26-27.

At the same time, 'impression' can also be understood as a suggestion, an indefinite idea not clearly shaped, an embryonic form of thought, whose extreme vagueness is fundamental and constitutive of its inner essence, a notion that cannot be completely read as transparent. The 'mal d'archive', or the 'Freudian impression', emerges out of a mixture of these meanings, and of their (more or less) legitimate, not to say spurious, affinity with the Freudian 'repression'.

I will try to proceed along the same metonymical routes traced by Derrida in approaching the archive as a moveable chain of signifiers, hinged on the dyad 'impression-repression'. The English word 'repression' does not account for all the nuances at play in the German words that express the same meaning. Derrida hints at this metonymical dynamic, by pointing to the shifting signifiers which convey, in French, English and German, the meaning of 'repression': 'Verdrängung', repression, 'refoulement'.⁸ A profound affinity connects the notions of 'repression' and 'representation'. The word used by Freud is 'Verdrängung', but a similar association is contained in legal German, where the word 'Vertretung' means 'representation, substitution, remotion'. Thus the Freudian repression comes to be a substitution but also a representation or rather, a substitution achieved through a representation – the superimposition of a cathected, empowered figure designed to act (or to speak) in one's stead.

Violence and memory

Derrida maps the rich and articulated semantic spectrum that constellates the word 'impression', but his words seem to miss one implication, which binds up the archive with violence. Impression is a wide-ranging term, as he has pointed out, conveying an array of nuances that either blur or annihilate each other. Impression – as pressure, forcing – is also an act of violence; if it is one of the bases of the archive, it follows that memory is caught in a complex dynamics of forces and drives clashing against one another. Freud, too, commonly refers to pushes, breakings, forced drawings and so

⁸ Ibid., 28.

forth to address the mechanisms of repression and memory, using a lexicon connotated violently. Strangely enough, Derrida does not refer to a crucial text in which memory and impression are entwined in a mutually inclusive-exclusive play. Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, written in 1887:

... it is by no means merely a passive inability to be rid of an impression once it has made its impact, nor is it just indigestion caused by giving your word on some occasion and finding you cannot cope, instead it is an active desire not to let go, a desire to keep on desiring what has been, on some occasion, desired, really it is really the will's memory.⁹

Memory itself is produced through violence, as Nietzsche forcefully asserts,

When man decided he had to make a memory for himself, it never happened without blood, torments and sacrifices ... all this has its origin in that particular instinct which discovered that pain was the most powerful aid to mnemonics.¹⁰

The body can be resignified as a locus apt to incorporate and reconfigure the archive only if it is a violated body, a body on which violence is forcefully impressed.¹¹ Again, the impression: a forced,

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1887] 1994), 39.

¹⁰ Ibid., 41. Deleuze and Guattari, too, define *On the Genealogy of Morality* as the "great book of modern ethnology". They maintain that the body in pain, marked by the 'sign', is the first step toward the complete organization of the fluxes – which constitute the primitive 'territorial machine' – into the compartmentalized dynamics of the 'socius': "All the stupidity and arbitrariness of the laws, all the pain of the initiations, the whole perverse apparatus of repression and education, the red-hot irons, and the atrocious procedures have only this meaning: to breed man, to mark him in his flesh, to render him capable of alliance, to form him within the debtor-creditor relation, which on both sides turns out to be a matter of memory – a memory straining toward the future." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, [1972] 1984), 190.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, on the other hand, suggested a relationship between sadism and the

more intense, somehow hurting gesture, which leaves its marks and survives its actuality.

The impression serves memory, but at the same time it marks the body. It is intimately connected to flesh and blood, to the inscriptions on the body, and to the practices of reconfiguring bodies through a more or less violent transformation, be it produced by surgery, drugs, cyber-technologies, or simply by piercings and tattoos.

If the body as a whole bears on itself the traces of a violent impression, the sexed body, or rather, the 'hetero-sexed' body, is the site in which the fluctuation of violent drives and archiving needs finds a concretion, the symbolical locus that enacts the production of a sanitized memory. This memory must be preserved and exhibited as exemplary, inasmuch as it is the result of a complex process of exclusion that finally culminates in the paradigm of the legitimate heterosexual body. Judith Butler acutely explores the evolution of this process, arguing that the production of heteronormative bodies and sexuality implies the double move of incorporation and repudiation of phantasmatic abject identities. Butler's text is also marked by continuous references to the force of violence: she speaks of "the trembling body" produced by the law, the "cruel strategies of erasure", the "abjected spectres that *threaten* those very subject-positions", and then states, "the question here concerns the tacit cruelties that sustain coherent identity, cruelties that include self-cruelty as well, the abasement through which coherence is fictively produced and sustained".¹²

The close link existing between words and their illocutory power, on the one hand, and bodies and their materiality, on the other, is stressed by Butler, who points to the dynamics that produce heterosexual normativity and install it as the natural paradigm from which the so-called anomalies break away.¹³ Bodies "come to

history of civilization; in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* he wrote: "The history of human civilization shows beyond any doubt that there is an intimate connection between cruelty and the sexual instinct; but nothing has been done towards explaining the connection, apart from laying emphasis on the aggressive factor in the libido." *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, [1905] 2000), 25.

¹² Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 101, 112, 113 (my italics), and 115.

¹³ This theme has been taken up and extensively analyzed by Butler in her following

matter", Butler affirms, both in that they come to materiality, acquiring a legitimate and sanitized material shape, and in that they enter the discursive and normative field consistent with the codes of heterosexual normativity;¹⁴ otherwise, they are condemned to inhabiting the phantasmatic (and psychotic) realm of abjection, and stand for the unmentionable and immaterial locus of perverse desire – which can never be (symbolically) rescued from its role as a threatening and cautionary instance. As she argues, "the limits of constructivism are exposed at those boundaries of bodily life where abject or delegitimated bodies fail to count as 'bodies'".¹⁵

Butler maintains that the assumption of sex, far from being a natural act, is the result of a set of strategies of exclusion, which produce the abject figures of the "feminized fag and the phallicized dyke", as haunting and threatening sites of abjection.¹⁶ The heterosexual and heteronormative identity is produced through the identification with and the subsequent rejection of these symbolical sites; this fluctuating dynamic never achieves its final goal and perpetually constitutes menacing identifications that need to be overcome in order to gain a steady, permanent and reassuring position of legitimate identity. However, the process of exclusion is not a definitive one, as Butler observes: "it is not ... that a subject disavows its identifications, but, rather, that certain exclusions and foreclosures institute the subject and persist as the permanent or constitutive spectre of its own destabilization".¹⁷

Identity, like memory, is produced and enforced through violence; the body as a 'corpus', by now readable in its materiality and threatening actuality, is born of violence, and must preserve and exhibit the traces of the impression in order to achieve a permanent identitarian status. Identity itself, and heterosexual identity in

texts, especially *Excitable Speech*, but also *The Psychic Life of Power*, both published in 1997.

¹⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15. A similar thesis is exposed by Butler in her recent *Precarious Life. The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).

¹⁶ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

particular, must get through the violence of the abject identification in order to stabilize its own normative character. To Butler's reflection, identification-through-abjection occurs (or may occur) as the result of specific historical circumstances – once more, ontogenesis replicates phylogenesis, and a significant correspondence between a psychoanalytical and a socio-historical process takes place. This does not simply mean that circumstances generate such striking coincidence between otherwise different and independent processes, but that the same mechanisms of dynamic identification and repudiation that map the emergence of a viable and legitimate identity inform the constitution of social agencies as well.

The erotic and cathected site of abjection is represented not simply by gay sex or gay subjectivity, but, as Stephen Greco's "Good with Words" illustrates, by the 'stigma' produced by the Aids spread, at once incorporated and refused through the mechanisms of representation.

Sex and simulation

Memory, violence, body, simulation. Simulation itself as violence, or perhaps simulated violence as a rhetorical inscription on the body, capable of rendering the body the apt site to enact the mechanisms through which the violence of history is displayed. "Good with Words" first appeared in the gay magazine *Advocate Men* in 1987, when the debate about Aids and safe sex, especially gay safe sex, was reaching its momentum in the United States.¹⁸ It is a short-short story with almost no plot, which describes a scene of sadomasochistic sex among three men. Under the menace of Aids, safe sex was considered the only possible way to escape the risks of contagion; thus, sexual (sadomasochistic) intercourse among the three central characters (the narrator Stephen, his friend Paul, and another man) is turned into mere representation or, to some extent, into a rehearsal. In this tale, a central role is played by words and verbal violence, which must replace the typical gestures and behaviours of sadomasochism, evoking and imitating them. The

¹⁸ Further reflections on the theme of safe gay sex and Aids can be found in Simon Watney, *Policing Desire. Pornography, Aids and the Media* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

sadomasochistic bodies mime the experience of pain to which they are subtracted, and which is achieved through simulation, through a theatrical gesture that renders the bodies themselves blank sites to be mapped by the actual forces operating in the historical dynamics.

The attainment of pleasure is earned through a baroque mechanism of representation, and through the verbal play in which the three characters seem to be completely absorbed. Towards the end, the narrator comments:

I couldn't help thinking how dismal a conclusion a stranger would have drawn simply by reading a transcript of our encounter. And even if he'd been there himself, would a Times reporter or health department official have understood how loving it all was?¹⁹

This tale shifts the attention to the connection existing between violence and simulation, and upon the immediacy and immediate consequentiality of the shift from violence to simulation, or violence as simulation. Violence cannot be identified with simulation, even in the case of literary texts where violence is narrated as its actuality exerts its force even when it is merely described. But at stake, now, is the menace of illness, perceived as a sort of intrusion, a 'foreign' element, which compels Greco to write of sex and violence as and through an act of cautious simulation, in his remembering, or maybe regretting, a lost 'golden age' of gay liberation and free sexuality, in an era marked by the threat of Aids and of its biopolitical consequences. He writes: "... I found a scene ... that would have seemed innocuous enough four or five years ago, but now, in the era of Aids, took on a faintly unsettling quality".²⁰

History makes its abrupt irruption into the somehow enchanted realm of gay sex and the American urban gay community in the 1980's: the spread of Aids and its stigma, violently attached to gay people, represented the abrupt interdiction for gay men to enjoy rights of full and legitimized citizenship. Gay sex, once conceived as challenging the rules of straight sexuality, is now forcibly turned to instancing a mortal practice.

¹⁹ Greco, "Good with Words", 337.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 334-35.

In contrast to the supposed mono-directional trajectory of “normal” sex, which finds an obvious conclusion in the orgasmic discharge, sadomasochistic sex enacts violence as an alternative and deviating form of sexual pleasure.²¹ Sadomasochism finds in the enactment of violence, and in violence as an enactment, its most intimate form of pleasure with no consequential and ‘teleological’ ending, but based on a complex liturgy of forms and practices, involving a particular attire, specific tools, a more or less steady separation of roles and, what is fundamental to the tale by Greco, a proper use of words.²² A friend of the protagonist, Albert, ends the tale with a significant assertion: “Stephen, if you can’t tell the difference between talking about something and the thing itself, then you belong in a cave, drawing bisons on the wall”.²³ Words are among the necessary tools employed in sadomasochistic pleasure, once this form of pleasure is forbidden under the menace of Aids. If sadomasochism is a deliberate enactment of simulated violence – perhaps of the same violence actually perpetrated on the ‘abnormal’ bodies of queer people – the sex scenes described by Greco comes to be the simulation of a simulation, the complete erasure of pleasure as immediate and orgasmic *jouissance* and its deferral to the realm of words, of performance, and representation.²⁴

²¹ See the essay by Brady Thomas Heiner “The Passions of Michel Foucault”, *d i f f e r e n c e s: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 14.1 (2003), which emphasizes the role ascribed by Foucault to the potentiality of gay sex to constitute itself as ‘counter-sexual’ (“the limit experience”). Foucault stresses, among other things, the potentiality of gay sex for remapping and redrawing the boundaries of subjectivity once the primacy of heteronormative sex, and its strong influence on the constitution of gay identity as a “normalized” and “sanitized” one, had been completely dismissed.

²² See the brief essay by Mark Graham, “Sexual Things”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10.2 (2004), in which Graham discusses the rhetorical and, to some extent, ideological role played by objects in sexual intercourse: “Things link the sexualities of the assemblages in which they figure to processes that are supportive but also sometimes subversive of hierarchies of sex, sexuality, gendered meanings, class, “race,” ethnicity, global capitalism, nationalism, and so forth. ... The things involved in sexuality and gendering, I want to suggest, exceed their performative context as a matter of routine rather than as an isolated exception” (302).

²³ Greco, “Good with Words”, 337.

²⁴ In the essay “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification”, in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), Judith Butler argues that the drag

In the tale by Stephen Greco political subjects, once marked by the stigma of abjection, must die in order to recover an otherwise forbidden access to pleasure, and the death of these actual subjects (whose political identity, in this case, is given by their homosexual behaviour) amounts to their inscription in the simulated order of sadomasochistic sex. As Judith Butler points in a note to “Phantasmatic Identification”,

... it is this already circulating trope of homosexuality as a kind of social and psychic death that is exploited and strengthened in homophobic discourses which understand Aids to be the result of homosexuality (rendered as definitionally unsafe, as danger itself) rather than the result of the exchange of fluids. ... The decentered or vanquished subject initiates the possibility of a heightened eroticism and an affirmation of life beyond the hermetic and closed circuit of the subjects.²⁵

It is exactly that ‘stigma’, made more and more significant by the theatrical resort to ‘simulated sex’, that is capable of giving way to a new legitimating and inclusive process – in other words, to compartmentalize homosexuality (thanks to its previous representation and repudiation), and finally archive it in an acknowledged and sanctioned status of legitimate citizenship. Pleasure is experienced as violence also because a compulsory act of erasure of the subject must be faced in order to gain access to a preserved, but otherwise foreclosed, realm of pleasure.

The abject body must be transcended and negated in order to restore a lost sexual legitimacy. The constitution of a legitimate subject is a complex process, as Judith Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*, which implies subtle mechanisms of identification with certain symbolical instances and repudiation of others, rated as abject.

performance shows the ‘imitative’ character of gender: “Thus, drag imitates the imitative structure of gender, revealing gender itself to be an imitation” (145). Drag is, thus, ‘imitation of imitation’, a notion that seems to me not so far from the idea of safe and (or maybe as) sadomasochistic sex conveyed by Greco’s tale as ‘simulation of a simulation’.

²⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 266.

The body itself is a symbolical locus, through which processes of identification or repudiation can be performed, and the materiality of the body proves to be the crucial site where the process of legitimate identification can take place. The suppression of the body and corporeal life is discussed by Judith Butler as a strategy delineated by Hegel in order to define a subject as organically structured; this mechanism of suppression empowers the very object it obliterates. As Butler points out,

The impulse or bodily experience which would be negated, to return to Hegel, is inadvertently *preserved* by the very activity of negation. We can see in both Hegel and Freud a certain reliance on a dialectical reversal by which a bodily experience, broadly constructed, comes under the censor of the law only to reemerge as the sustaining effect of the law. The Freudian notion of *sublimation* suggests that denial or displacement of pleasure and desire can become formative of culture.²⁶

Sublimation is the first step towards complete subjectivation; if one connects sublimation to the exemplary condemnation cast upon gay sexuality as a consequence of Aids, it comes to be the first requirement for restoring gay sex and gay behaviour to a previously experienced legitimacy, recognizing its status of legitimate citizenship.

Let me go back to Freud and his essay about repression. He characterizes 'repression' as a form of archiving, a move that suspends the immediacy of an impulse, consigning it to the unconscious: "... the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance".²⁷ Repression is archiving, a process through which something is taken away from the place where it previously belonged and consigned to another symbolic site, be it the unconscious or, as in Greco's tale, the rhetorical and, to some extent, ideological, mechanism of representation. But repression is also a

²⁶ Butler, "Stubborn Attachment, Bodily Subjection. Rereading Hegel on the Unhappy Consciousness", in *The Psychic Life of Power*, 58.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Repression" (1915), in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton and Company, 1989), 569.

process of suspension, (temporary) negation, dislocation, a characteristic gesture through which the actual weight of reality, its concretion, its annoying burden, is literally 'suspended', temporarily annihilated, removed from contingency. This gesture, this cautious and momentary respite, is the first step toward archiving history and consigning it to the realm of representation. The bodies in Greco's tale are called to embody the repression of historicity; they mime an already and elsewhere mimed violence. One of the rhetorical strategies of sadomasochism, the enactment of a fictive violence to point to and simultaneously exorcize actual violence, is now fragmented in an array of layered paradigms, where each act of miming refers to a parallel and identical act perpetrated elsewhere.

This leads to the other, more complex, question regarding the bodies involved in this mechanism of perpetual deferral of pleasure, and of its relegation into the phantasmatic field of words properly used, and what they can incorporate, represent, or stand for. If the whole mechanism of sex is a representational one, the role that can be played by bodies by now deprived of their actual sexual connotation is dubious. Nancy has suggested that the body itself could be an archive, and display in itself the archival inscription of its own story and of its sense of belonging, or not-belonging. In Greco's story the sex scene is emblematic, because the body and corporeality seem to have been completely banned, and substituted by a complex apparatus of roles and words; words are invoked as the aptest substitute for sex, as the title "Good with Words" seems to suggest: in the era of Aids, 'words' are all that remains to be good with.²⁸

Greco's queer bodies stand to incorporate symbolically, and perhaps to archive, the implosion of the codes of heteronormative sexuality and behaviour and, at the same time, to bear upon themselves the traces of the lives lost to Aids and commonly

²⁸ The importance given to words is all the more significant if related to the context in which the tale is set: "silence=death" was one of the most common slogans of the gay movement in the 1980's. The 'politics of words' hinted at by Greco in his tale can be also read as a paradoxical and ironical reference to this strategy; cf. the note on pages xxvi-xxvii in *The New Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories* for a brief overview of the relationship between literature, gay activism and Aids.

considered 'ungrievable'. The violence of the archive amounts, in the Aids era, to the violent storing of desires, pleasures, intercoursés, imposed by the emergence of Aids and by the overt condemnation Aids was for gay men during the 1980s.

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?²⁹

We must ask what status should be ascribed to the 'words' Stephen Greco refers to in his tale, since the narrative can be read as an attempt to 'word' bodies and pleasures, translating the threat of Aids and the spectrality of violence into the more reassuring realm of a sexual performance, filtered through and preserved by words. The three characters keep playing standard(ized) roles; the tale opens with a long oneiric scene that somehow sheds an oblique and dreary light upon the whole narration. The men repeat stereotypical and almost ritualistic expressions – words already heard, belonging to the crude and anonymous jargon of pornography, which properly fit the theatrical setting into which they have turned sadomasochistic sex.

The scene heated up rapidly.

'I live for that dick', said Paul, the gaze fixed on it.

'Then, tell me about it, man. Let me hear it.'

Paul's drone became more animated.

'Please, let me have your dick. Slip it into my head.'

Then he looked up at the guy's face.

'I'll take your load, okay? Let me suck it out of you. I don't care if I get sick.'

I guess that was what they both wanted to hear.³⁰

²⁹ Butler, *Precairous Life*, xiv-v.

³⁰ Greco, "Good with Words", 336; my italics.

Words, in this short and dismal story, are just formulas; they do not embody the authoritative and nomological power of 'logos', the word that forces things into meanings, paralysing both terms in a rigid mechanism of reference. Formulas are invoked to undermine the archive, contaminate its structural and epistemic purity, and resort to the power of parody and performance, of liturgy, even of sortilege – words capable of escaping the domain of logos and its illocutory force. "And words are only words, even if they do bring the big, bad world into the bedroom, where we can *play* at controlling it".³¹

The bodies depicted by Greco are literally ex-posed, exhibited, deprived of any foundational ground that could inscribe them in an organic mechanism of mutual interaction; they operate as performative machines, complex engines violently inserted in the dynamics of a representative strategy. Such bodies are, in Deleuzian sense, 'machinic', crossed by both incessant and turbulent fluxes of desires and contrasting processes of censorship and sublimation. This clash finally results in the fictive and theatrical forcing of roles and expressions showed in the tale; the bodies cannot be figured as 'wholes', because they lack both an inner organic structure and a teleological (or soteriological) nature. The process of embodiment, a mechanism through which history literally descends among the bodies and makes sense once it is incorporated in their interactive play, must stop and surrender, because of the sovereign death instinct that the (homo)sexualized stigma of Aids seems to have cast upon them. This echoes Jean Luc Nancy's reflection on the possibility of the body to be 'grasped'.

Since a body cannot be grasped in its entirety, as love and pain show, since bodies cannot be totalised, nor founded, there cannot be an experience of the body, just as there is not an experience of freedom. But freedom itself is the experience, and the body itself is the experience: the display, the taking place.³²

³¹ *Ibid.*, 337 (my italics).

³² Nancy, *Corpus*, 89.