

## CRISIS/CLIMAX: THE MONEY SHOT AND THE SEXUAL WAGE

Michael Dango

This is an essay in two counterpoised parts, each taking on a related constellation of sex, work, and the aesthetics of narrative form. I offer the two sections paratactically, but they aim to come to the same nexus of theoretical problems from different positions in a market of cultural production. The first is about the nature of work in heterosexual porn work, how porn has absorbed the insecurities and exploitative demands of a shifting labor regime after deindustrialization, and the ways in which this shift in labor is incarnated in sexual narratives that, literally, offer more bang for your buck. The second is about the nature of sex in heterosexual narratives that seek to distance themselves from the “merely commercial” cultural production of porn—literary fiction that remains ambivalent in its desire to be an artful commodity in a publishing landscape that financially favors, perhaps more than any other genre, the genre of romance fiction. A collection of close-readings of a couple dozen literary novels from the past decade shows how the pornographic and what I call the “sexual wage” meant to compensate the stagnation of real wages and the decline of the “family wage” are anxiogenic for a literary project that aims to reclaim the transcendence of art and sex alike. At a historical period in which capital has crowded out space for leisure, the literary novel finds itself in a double bind of trying to reclaim sex as leisure’s last holdout while distancing itself from “mere” pornography that serves capital’s interests.

### I. Compensatory Pleasures in Sexual Work/Narrative

The history of porn is of porn losing the story. For instance, from 1749 to 1968, Kathleen Lubey has tracked the condensation of sexual narrative in the multiple printings of the anonymously authored novel *The History of the Human Heart*, the originally “textually and thematically heterogenous” text that had crowded the sexual exploits of its characters with footnotes,

paratextual apparatuses, and a surplus of moods in excess of the raunchy.<sup>1</sup> But by the 1968 version, the text had “been made efficient,” pruned of these orbital discourses in order to focus on just the facts, or rather acts, of sex. The result is a narrowing not just of the text, but of what counts as sexual: “so many dynamic, probing, and uncertain associations with sexuality—associations with religion, science, philosophy, cognition, early feminism—are scrutinized and subdued as pornography becomes more strictly defined as a purposeful address to readers’ erotic interests.”<sup>2</sup> The history of pornographic narrative is in turn synchronized with the history of heterosexual sex, which, in the account Lubey cites from Henry Abelove’s *Deep Gossip*, is also synchronized with the history of modes of production: the sexual has focused more and more on penetrative sex culminating in penile ejaculation, an efficiency motivated by industrial capitalism’s definition of productivity and one that has deemphasized, or even excluded altogether from the category of “real sex,” such activities as cunnilingus.<sup>3</sup> For Abelove, as the assembly line production of a product becomes paradigmatic of labor, so, too, does the linear production of male orgasm become paradigmatic of sex. But what happens to what counts as sex, and therefore what is the proper purview of porn, when the assembly line is itself overtaken by the flexibilization of labor in the later twentieth century?

From 1968 to the present—from the Golden Age of film pornography to the digital era of Pornhub and OnlyFans—this synchronization with modes of production, the pruning of the pornographic, and the privileging of ejaculation have continued. The “money shot” continues not only to complete pornographic narrative but to define it, by providing the incontrovertible visual evidence of pleasure that the clitoral orgasm apparently does not—attempting to overcome the challenge of what Linda Williams has called the “invisible pleasure of the insatiable woman.”<sup>4</sup> That is, the appearance of cum not only “signals the narrative conclusion of sexual action,” but also signals, retroactively, that this scene was indeed a hardcore sex scene.<sup>5</sup> The irony that this particular shot is the one that makes the money is that, at least in heterosexual porn, the actors required for it do not make the money, or as much of it: porn is one of the few industries in which men make relatively less than women. Although porn work reverses genders, it entrenches the logic of gendered labor: what capitalism needs most, it compensates least. In the context of other so-called productive labor, this would be the unwaged reproductive labor disproportionately

provided by women, or else the underpaid service labor that is feminized in its wake; but here, in the context of porn, it is the labor of the ejaculatory body that is often the necessary condition of a narrative being porn at all.

At the same time, the activities and details that surround this money shot—epiphenomena that are negatively defined as not making the money—continue to be excised. In the transition to video—VHS or even DVD porn, to be bought or rented for at-home consumption—feature-length heterosexual porn came to mean less a long narrative intercut with explicit sex scenes which may or may not advance the narrative as a whole, and more a paratactic sequence of sex scenes usually glued together only by the recurrence of an actor (like Jenna Jameson in *Brianna Loves Jenna*) or by the recurrence of a particular sex act (*Anal Addicts #10*). This has paradoxically required more and less of porn workers—more, in their frequency of producing penetrative sex scenes and their accompanying money shots, and less, in the sense that this work is supposedly less “skilled” than that of acting per se. As Heather Berg explains in her recent and pathbreaking *Porn Work*:

The shift away from dialogue-heavy theatrical releases and toward sex scenes strung together with little narrative had broken open the pool of those who might be eligible to take on porn work, since directors no longer had to rely on the relatively small population of performers comfortable with both screen acting and screen sex. Performance labor became less specialized, and with some exceptions among the top stars of the era, individual workers lost the limited bargaining power they had had.<sup>6</sup>

The digital revolution of the 1990s intensified these trends. “Profits shifted away from producers and to global distributors,” Berg explains. “Meanwhile, the performer pool grew larger still, rates got even lower, and long-term performer contracts were almost entirely replaced by a hypermobile gig economy that now even elite workers had to navigate.”<sup>7</sup>

The decline of the studio could sometimes mean more control over labor conditions for porn workers, but more often it meant they had to absorb the risks and finance the resources studios originally bore and provided. “Larger studios once paid for performers’ sexually transmitted infection (STI) tests,” for instance, as well as “a full set wardrobe, and a hair and makeup artist. Now, workers almost always bear these costs.”<sup>8</sup> Complete

or nearly complete self-production of sex scenes by porn workers, increasingly facilitated by online platforms like OnlyFans and the development of technologies that make it possible to shoot professional quality videos with an iPhone and a ring lamp, and exploding during the work-from-home necessities and ethos of the Covid-19 pandemic, continue this individualizing of performance labor and responsibility for overhead costs. They also indicate the extent to which the story of sex and sex work is no longer paired with the industrial capitalism Abelow says limited what counted as sex, and is instead paired with the flexibilization of labor after deindustrialization. The “bargaining power” Berg notes performers lost after the Golden Age of theatrically released porn produced by studios is now essentially nonexistent, since there is usually no boss or company with which to bargain in the traditional sense, not unlike how the rise of the service sector, too, has radically distributed labor, making it harder to collectivize. The means and tactics of the classical labor movement—the union and the strike—are hard to foment and stage without a scene in which labor is concentrated. Porn work today is increasingly a matter of networked independent contractors setting their own schedules and collaborations, rather than an assembly line’s staging of actors from a studio stable.

On the flipside, the stagnation of real wages during this period has put increased pressure on what porn is supposed to provide its consumers, or how much and how often it should provide. Scholars often discuss the loss of the family wage after deindustrialization in terms of the monetary wage; the decline and then flatlining of minimum wage, not to mention the subminimum wage that is legal for tipped workers because customers are supposed to make up for the wages that employers are not providing, has meant the single income traditionally made by a husband can no longer “cover” the unpaid reproductive labor of his wife at home.<sup>9</sup> From the perspective of porn work, two other aspects need to be considered. First, the reliance on customers for a wage has meant, like for wait staff at restaurants, an increasing pressure to cater to the demands of customers, thus the proliferation of scenes made “by request” on subscription-based platforms like OnlyFans. This, too, puts pressure on paring down the sexual; a typical OnlyFans scene, set in a hotel room and often beginning with the performers already undressed and involved in the action, is one endpoint for the trajectory Lubey had begun to trace from 1749. This is also because, second, customers increasingly expect more action for less payment.

This expectation is not just because the Internet has made piracy the norm for porn, with the default assumption now that porn can be had for free at XVIDEOS or Pornhub or RedTube. It is also the expectation because, in the very moment that the monetary wage stagnates, more pressure is put on what we might call the sexual wage. As Marxist feminist scholars like Silvia Federici have argued, the creation of the family wage to cover women's reproductive labor did not just entail the primitive accumulation of their bodies that made their labor invisible as labor, or as labor deserving a wage; it also meant a kind of bonus for the men whose labor covered theirs. For Federici, "the concealment of women's unpaid-labor under the cover of natural inferiority [has] enabled capitalism to immensely expand the 'unpaid part of the working day,' and use the (male) wage to accumulate women's labor; in many cases, they have also served to deflect class antagonism into an antagonism between men and women."<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is not just that the male wage was supposed to pay for women's work by proxy. It is also that this wage was itself supplemented by women's work, particularly sex work: access to women's bodies was one additional compensation, a bonus tip, to the wage made by productive labor. "Impoverished and disempowered as they may be, male waged workers could still benefit from their wives' labor and wages, or they could buy the services of prostitutes."<sup>11</sup>

The recent rise of the identity of the "incel"—the involuntarily celibate man—makes visible the otherwise implicit contract between the laborer and capital: that sex is owed to a man, not because he is a man, but because his productive labor is otherwise underpaid; he is owed a sexual wage as supplement, like how service workers deserve a customer's tip to make up for subminimum wage. Rape, we know, is one way of securing this entitlement. As Angela Davis formulates it in "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting": "When working-class men accept the invitation to rape extended through the ideology of male supremacy, they are accepting a bribe, an illusory compensation for powerlessness."<sup>12</sup> Davis is not scapegoating working-class men; the capitalist class rapes too, and more often, and are the ones anyways offering the "invitation" to rape women—but they do so with impunity. And their impunity models the contract the incel felt he had signed. Working men can accept to be exploited in their wage, because a cross-class fraternal alliance gives them free access to women's bodies, but as the monetary wage continues to fall, this sexual wage must rise to

compensate. Enter free porn and the high frequency of sex relative to narrative, raising the supplemental wage of sexual pleasure. As workers make fewer dollars per hour, porn features more orgasms per minute.

What facilitates this correlation is that sex has been considered the paradigmatic form of leisure, which is supposed to be the obverse of labor: it is irrational rather than industrialization's rationalizations, and it is nonproductive from the perspective of commodity production. As Federici already observed in her classic 1975, "Why Sexuality is Work," sexuality is "supposed to be the compensation for work and is ideologically sold to us as the 'other' of work: a space of freedom in which we can presumably be our true selves." In the half century since that essay was first written, the space of freedom has been further constrained, a constraint that is experienced temporally: "the timing, conditions, and the amount of energy available for love ... are out of our control."<sup>13</sup> Porn, it turns out, is one thing whose timing can be controlled in an age when videos can be fast forwarded and a quick wank is possible before the next Zoom meeting. There is nothing new about the structural conditions under which leisure ideologically understood as freedom outside of capital is actually just labor demanded of workers unpaid by capital. But the "incel" names a figure who ascends when this structure reaches a crisis point.

What transformations in pornographic narrative in turn index is simultaneously the new conditions of on-demand pleasure work and the new demand for its consumption as sexual compensation under the increasing casualization of the service economy. Under conditions of entrenched structural economic inequality in which, as others have noted, crisis is no longer a decisive event but more like a "chronic" or "ordinary" situation or mood, so, too, has crisis's etymological brother, the climax, come to become not singular but rote.<sup>14</sup> Very few narratives today follow the Freytag plot diagram that itself was implicitly modeled on male sexual response, from arousal to climax to the falling action of post-orgasm flaccidity; neither does pornographic narrative itself, with orgasms now multiple in another sense: not the apex of a mountain, but just another clip in your ongoing, continuous digital feed.

As I will explore in the following section, there is one other paradigmatic scene of leisure offered as the ideological obverse of labor: art. What is art to do with its sister, sex, when both are burdened with so much need for release from 24/7 work but so little time for their exercise? The

same pattern and linking of the different shapes of phenomena explored in this section—the decline of waged labor; the absorption of overhead into labor’s responsibility; the pruning of the sexual to just the “action”—is shown in inverse, or in relief, in supposedly non-pornographic narrative—narrative that is supposed to be freed of necessity. As Marxist scholars of aesthetics, perhaps most recently Leigh Clare La Berge, have taught us, the “aesthetic” itself was constituted at a time to provide relief from the dictates of an emerging capitalism.<sup>15</sup> Art is beautiful, while the market is ugly. Art is useless, and is beautiful because it is useless, in contrast to the necessity of the market or the cold exchange of commodity relations. This divide has long been gendered, with the moral and nonproductive domestic labor of women meant to balance the brass labor required in the public market.<sup>16</sup> But as the neoliberal market, too, becomes increasingly modeled off of sex work, as Annie McClanahan has been one of the most careful to describe—with sex workers in many ways first to the conditions of risk-absorption, entrepreneurial labor, and gig work that have become generalized in the Uber economy—narrative that approaches the sexual has needed to resist the “money shot” in order to maintain an illusion of being artful or, in the context of prose narrative, literary.<sup>17</sup>

Aesthetic experience has often been analogized to sexual experience, in the ideal.<sup>18</sup> Sex, like art, is supposed to be absorbing and transcendent: nothing else matters when you’re doing it. In sex scenes, the lights dim; the focus blurs; the orchestral music swells. Everything else is blocked out. In literary fiction today, an inverse dynamic tends to emerge: we know we’re in a sex scene, but we seem to be having everything but the sex told to us. We know the color of the wallpaper, the feel of the sheets—but have yet to see some genitals. Novelists are more like interior designers than voyeurs. This is not because they are prudes, but because of the precarious place literary writers find themselves in today: a global marketplace in which their work has high cultural capital but makes a lot less money than the leading commodity in letters—the romance novel. How novelists write sex scenes today tells us more about the contradictions of navigating the post-Amazon, post-print-on-demand world than they do about their authors—or, for that matter, about sex.

## **II. Narrate or Describe?: Sex Scenes in the Global Literary Marketplace**

In a kind of precursor to the contemporary writing workshop advisor's critique of a short story that "tells" rather than "shows," György Lukács famously examined why some late-nineteenth century authors were more likely to "describe" events rather than "narrate" them: Flaubert and Zola give us characters that merely watch what happens going on around them, whereas Scott, Balzac, and Tolstoy have characters directly involved in actions of significance.<sup>19</sup> That's why the first group describes events, like spectators, and the latter narrates them. For Lukács, the difference between the two is in part attributed to how close authors were to the revolutionary events of their times: whether they were in on the action or were, indeed, mere spectators. But description is not just the mode of a more conservative writer who lacks the revolutionary consciousness that, as Marx said, "men make their own history." It was also, according to Lukács, the inevitable result of the long march of capitalism, which had dehumanized social life to the point that it lacked meaning, and humans found themselves without agency, cogs in a machine. In particular, the problem with "describing" is that you don't see that machine at all, and therefore don't see how you could disrupt or sabotage it. You get a lot of details, but not the design of the machine itself. What Lukács liked about someone like Tolstoy is the total sense of history he provided, therefore the full vantage point from which to diagnose how to intervene into the world.

Jennifer Fleissner has convincingly offered that Lukács failed to see how the piling on of details in description is itself a kind of agency, just not his preferred kind of agency, which is essentially teleological, confrontational, and progressive. For Fleissner, the descriptive mode—and the genre said to be its guarantor, naturalism—does not simply nullify agency. "Naturalism's disturbing quality is not that it removes agency, plain and simple," Fleissner argues, "but that it ties the agency we desire, that hope of mastery and completion, to repetition and failure."<sup>20</sup> To reframe naturalist description as, not inactive, but "active in particular ways that lead, oddly, to fixity rather than forward motion," is to name its version of history as compulsion, a version that is thereby highly gendered; for it turns out the compulsive is the boy or girl who can't grow up to be a man or a woman, and just as a woman (for instance) does not neatly reach her maternal endpoint in modernity but "veers off course," history does not arrive at a conclusion, but hesitates, pauses, circles.<sup>21</sup>

This gendering of these modes of "agency"—feminine description



versus masculine narration—takes on a peculiar, actually reverse, configuration in the contemporary literary archive of sex scenes. For it turns out that where you are more likely to find sex narrated rather than described is in the decidedly feminine-coded marketplace of romance fiction. Moreover, the conjuncture of sex and literature today inverts relations between economic and cultural capital: romance makes economic capital at the expense of cultural capital. As the feminist sociologist Eva Illouz has written in her book, *Hard-Core Romance: Fifty Shades of Grey, Best-Sellers, and Society*, the romance is the prototypical best-seller, immensely popular for how it stages and then resolves contradictions inherent to twenty-first-century heterosexuality. Romance makes the big bucks, but it is a spurned genre—too girly, not serious enough, for horny soccer moms rather than serious readers.<sup>22</sup>

The irony is that “serious” readers—readers of *literary*, not genre, fiction—are in rapid decline. As one pair of sociologists of literature has put it in an editorial for the academic journal *Cultural Sociology*, literature has become “an object of cultural consumption for dwindling and aging publics.”<sup>23</sup> Although lazy individuals are often blamed for this decline, Sarah Brouillette, in an essay on “Romance Work” that quotes this same editorial, has suggested we might look instead to the evaporation of leisure time under postwar capitalism. When you’re stuck answering work emails on your phone even while sitting on your couch at home, you might find less time to read at all—and when you do, the escape of romance might be what you turn to more than, say, *Moby-Dick*.<sup>24</sup>

Literary writers who describe, not narrate, sex repudiate the feminization of literature at the same time that they distance themselves from its popularization. The phenomenon was perhaps best encapsulated by Jonathan Franzen’s famous rejection of Oprah’s selection of his *The Corrections* for her book club: a selection that undoubtedly would have boosted sales but which came at the risk, for him, of alienating male readers. A previous generation of masculinist writers—Norman Mailer, John Updike, Phillip Roth, Henry Miller—had the option of making sex (what seemed to them to be) “manly”: man as actor and aggressor, woman as passive object. A more recent generation managed to reclaim sex for male ownership by nonetheless disavowing the aggressive script. This is the cuteness of sex in film and literature at the turn of the millennium led by Judd Apatow’s fumbling, but allegedly therefore endearing, male protagonists: they are

virginal and adolescent, even when 40-Years-Old.

In the past decade, however, the cuteness of sex has seemed less tenable a strategy for getting close to sex but not as close as a romance writer. It's not just that increased awareness of widespread sexual predation has allowed us to reckon with the ways in which cuteness, too, can be leveraged as an alibi for harassment. It's also that the same conditions that have reduced literary audiences—the steady overtaking of leisure by work—have also revived the desire for sex to be transformative, like a work of art, as Federici had explored in “Sexuality as Work.” Because unlike the work of art housed in the museum you no longer have time to visit—or can no longer afford to visit, with the decline of wages—sex is something you can *just do*. It is supposed to be the form of leisure unmediated by institutions, the last holdout for a time-space beyond the market and its proxies. But to sustain the fantasy of sex as a form of leisure beyond labor, it must be elevated above necessity, must be shown to not itself be another form of labor—which requires not only the continued erasure of sexuality *as* work, but also the new creation of sex scenes as serving some higher purpose than work, undirtied by the merely commercial dictates of genre sales. How, then, to give us sex without narrating sex like denigrated genre fiction? In contemporary literary fiction, there are four main strategies of giving a sex scene without giving sex acts, of getting us in the room without telling us what is happening.

*Strategy #1: Weird Diction.* The way that gets lots of authors in trouble, and onto the annual shame list of the *Literary Review's* “Bad Sex in Fiction Award” nominees, is by using such awkward or nondescriptive metaphors that it's hard to see what they're referring to—or what they're covering up. The wartime and aggressive metaphors of an earlier generation of chauvinistic authors, for whom a woman's body was a territory and sex was a penetration of the front lines or a domination of virgin land, are less common, although the geopolitical still surfaces in, for instance, Lydia Yuknavitch's *Small Backs of Children*, when we are reminded not subtly and not infrequently in one scene that a character's lover is Polish: “A small droplet of blood emerges like the red head of a pin on a world map”; “[r]ed blotches bloom on her skin, randomly, the colors of the Polish flag”; “[h]er beating heart, to the dictatorial eye of the poet, was as stunning as a Warsaw uprising.” “Mouths attack and retreat,” Yuknavitch writes. “Bruises rise like bomb blasts.”

And the religious language of an earlier D. H. Lawrence shows up in novels by writers including Jaime Quatro; in *Fire Sermon*, sex is “other-worldly, ecstatic in a religious sense, at the deepest point of penetration the room fell away and the sky tore open and we were swept up into electric galaxies, our bodies fused together in the presence of a God who allowed us to reach up and run our fingers through the down of his beard.” The move to an ecstatic register is a literal leaving behind of the physical body and what it does, so that the appearance of a “beard” at the end of the sentence, because belonging to God rather than one of the lovers, almost seems to mock the human body altogether. In another work, Quatro has a man tell his lover the sex “would be devotional”: “I would leave myself on your tongue like a communion wafer.”

*Strategy #2: Itemize Bodies.* Even without metaphorical language, description can redirect from what’s going on, turning an action into a tableau, the action into the stage itself, as when Jennifer Egan redirects to the room and the lighting in *Visit from the Goon Squad* right when genitals are about to make an appearance: “Sasha dropped to her knees beside the tables and pulled him down, the Persian carpet prickling her back, streetlight falling through the window onto his hungry, hopeful face, his bare white thighs.” Alternatively, writers can turn a verb into a noun or adjective so the action itself lacks an agent: “And then Matt was spread out on me,” we are told in Alexander Chee’s *Edinburgh*, instead of “Matt spread out on me,” requiring the effect to seem as if spontaneous (“and then”); or: “His lips taste like wet grass, cold at first. That was the first kiss” instead of “He kissed me.”

In Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*, a character driving to a hookup “kept the radio on very loud so he didn’t have to think about what he was doing,” and the writing, too, piles up description that makes it hard to see what they will end up doing: “Her body was all soft and white like flour dough. He seemed to fit perfectly inside her. Physically it just felt right, and he understood why people did insane things for sexual reasons then.” So, too, does the protagonist of Alan Hollinghurst’s *Sparsholt Affair* provide an inventory of bodies that replaces what they do: “His cock had more character than he did, tight skinned and curving to the left.” It’s a sexually explicit image, but a static rather than moving image—like a beautiful painting, it invites passive absorption, aesthetic judgment rather than action. “But it was all very quick when it came to it,” the scene concludes, and the “it,” too,

is very quickly narrated.

In other novels, the description of bodies becomes more like a roll call of body parts than a narration of sex, as in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: "Before long their arms were involved, their legs were involved, their lips were involved, and they were tumbling on to the floor, involved at the groin (hard to get more involved than that), making love on a prayer mat." As in Rooney's novel, where the attention to description conveys its character's shyness or avoidance of the sex itself, so, too, is the attention to detail in *White Teeth* really the obsessiveness of the present character, Millat, who immediately regrets the sex on religious grounds and spends the rest of the paragraph meticulously positioning his prayer mat. But if this redirection from the sex is Millat's, what happens in the next paragraph, an intrusive moralistic digression, is the narrator's: "It's a funny thing about the modern world. You hear girls in the toilets of clubs saying, 'Yeah, he fucked off and left me. He didn't love me. He just couldn't deal with love. He was too fucked up to know how to love me.' Now, how did that happen? What was it about this unlovable century that convinced us we were, despite everything, eminently lovable as a people, as a species?" Description, in other words, is not only a character's avoidance of the mechanics of sex itself, but also indexes a historical period in which sex has come to seem something owed.

*Strategy #3: The Generic.* Sometimes, a reference to a hastily rendered "it" (as in Hollinghurst's "it was all very quick") is a way for characters to dissociate, to make bad sex seem less personal if it's the impersonal story of some larger class of people, as when the protagonist of Nell Zink's *Wall-creeper* puts up with bad anal sex with her husband ("Look at Stephen! He thinks he's having sex!"): "I acted like in those teen feminist poems where it's date rape if he doesn't redo the Antioch college rules chapter and verse while you're clearly failing to see rainbows." A friend tells the narrator of Rachel Cusk's *Transit* that all sex to her seems this kind of impersonal genre: "sleeping with a man, she was very often have this feeling, that she was merely the animal for a pre-existing framework, that she was invisible and that everything he did and said to her he was in fact doing and saying to someone else, someone who wasn't there, someone who may or may not have even existed"; and the generic is repeated at the level of narration, where "sleeping with a man" becomes a type narrated in the plural, rather than an event narrated in the singular, for instance sleeping with so-and-

so on such-and-such a date in this-and-that way. Sometimes, thinking of one's self as a genre, and thinking of any particular action as part of an impersonal structure, so that *this* event or desire loses its specific impact, is a defense mechanism, as when a girl sexually abused by her stepfather in Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* collects a number of moments into one, in order to make it abstract, in order to look away from any moment in particular: "She hated her body for wanting release even more than she hated it for its supposed beauty, but somehow the hatred made it all the more urgent. She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted him to need her. She was very bad."

Other times, the generic conveys just how routine sex can be, especially in long-term sexual relationships, as if to say, on any specific occasion it happens: nothing much to see here. "Sex at twenty-two was idyllic," we learn in Meg Wolitzer's *The Interestings*. "Sex at twenty-two wasn't college sex at eighteen, which carried with it a freight of insecurities, nerve endings, and shame. Sex at twenty-two also wasn't self-sex at twelve, which was just about being quiet and discreet in your narrow bed and thinking how strange it was that you could feel this way just by doing this. Sex at twenty-two wasn't, either, sex at fifty-two, which, when it took place all those decades later in the middle of the Jacobson-Boyd's lengthy marriage, could be a sudden, pleasing surprise that awakened one of them from sleep." The passage starts off with generic statements that are then offloaded onto an impersonal "you"; when we end up grounding the genre in a particular couple, the Jacobson-Boyd's, their middle-aged sex is itself a kind of genre, their own routine. While the twenty-two-year-old Jackson-Boyd couple has sex, the scene concludes in a descriptive detail, as if a pan away from the bed: "A book that had been lying splayed open on Jules's night table—a series of case studies about eating disorders that she'd checked out of the social work library at Columbia, where she still had privileges—somehow ended up across the room, accidentally thrust into the dusty space beneath the bureau." They, too, are turning themselves into "case studies," first a case study of "sex at twenty-two," later a case study of sex in their own marriage.

The passage helps us leave the scene of sex by moving to a different time: "It wasn't found until nearly a year later, at which point more money was owed in fines than the book was worth. But she had already stopped looking for it, because by that time Aurora Maude Jacobson-Boyd had been born, and life was different." The consequences of their sex are told; the acts of the sex can be more or less presumed. Sometimes the shift

is not in time, fleeing away from the scene, but in perspective, getting out of participating in it. While having sex across the street from a camp for teenagers, Jules, the wife in this couple, becomes “self-conscious, as if one of the teenagers from the camp might have stealthily slipped into the house, and was even now standing in the doorway of the darkened room, shifting from foot to foot while watching an improbably carnal scene between these two people in their fifties. At any moment the gangly teenager would quietly say, ‘Um, excuse me? Jules? Dennis? A boy in my teepee has a nosebleed that won’t stop.’”

*Strategy #4: The Progressive.* A subtler, but perhaps most telling, strategy used by writers is to turn their actions verbs progressive rather than perfect: not “they fucked,” but “they were fucking.” This tends to turn the action into a scene, because the action itself is not completed, therefore harder to visualize. In *The Interestings*, “Dennis’s mouth was opening, his head tilting, his large hand cupping Jules’s breast that dropped down like a crookedly hung ornament.” Aside from the odd simile that makes it hard to see with the cupping looks like, the ongoing opening, tilting, and cupping makes it seem like sex is aspired to, rather than accomplished. The progressive is logically paradoxical, for to speak of an ongoing action you are in the middle of is to assume some end result; but the function of progressive is to keep that end result “excluded from view.”<sup>25</sup> If I say “I am building a house” the point is the house is not built yet; but if the house does not exist, what am I building at the present moment, in the middle of things? For many logicians, the progressive must therefore be understood as modal or at least entailing modality, for until the house is, in fact, built, “I am building a house” is speculative, the house a mere prediction with the implicit qualification “if all goes as planned.”<sup>26</sup>

Linguists have tracked the emergence and spread of the progressive in grammatical contexts. In early modern English, ongoing actions did not require the progressive, so Lord Polonius can ask Hamlet, “What do you read my Lord?” instead of “What are you reading?” When it was used, progressive markers add emphasis to an action narrated rather than conveying aspectual information of its ongoingness: “they mark any event, be it in progress or not, as remarkable, perhaps because it took place at all, or because it is considered as more important or noteworthy than other events which are also related.”<sup>27</sup> This essentially subjective use of the progressive form suited it in particular for colloquial and casual contexts, and

it spread, especially beginning in the eighteenth century, through spoken conversation or in written genres that mirror conversation, including drama, letters, and eventually the novel. More subjective expression, or emotional investment in what is being said, means more use of the progressive. But in modern English, the originally emphatic nature of the progressive has become “obligatory” when expressing the ongoing aspect of an action.

The obligatorification of the progressive is one reason for its continued explosion in the twentieth century; as recently as the nineteenth century, it was not required in uses where it would be today. But its spread is also through its expansion to other contexts where it remains, not obligatory, but again subjective. One expansion is the progressive’s engagement with stative verbs. Because the progressive paradigmatically takes on actions that are ongoing, it is typically barred from rending static states, but when permitted to, it tends to re-evaluate that state as itself a kind of action. “I am knowing English” is nonsensical, as possession of knowledge is a state that therefore does not have a beginning and end one could be in the middle of (in contrast to “I am learning English”). By that logic, “My laptop is resting on the table” should be nonsensical, too, but what makes it allowable is the way the progressive pulls the state of position into a kind of dynamic activity. The other development of the progressive in the twentieth century is what Svenja Kranich calls its “interpretive” function, when the progressive re-names or interprets an action. “When he winked at me, he was telling me he liked me” converts an overt physical action into something else, here flirtation.

The progressive is thus a thematic summary of the other techniques of doing sex without narrating it—to make it generic and therefore abstract; to make it metaphoric and therefore hard to visualize; to provide an inventory of nouns rather than verbs. Like these, the progressive is a technique of slowing down, turning action into scene, turning sex into something else. What these strategies all have in common is a description that turns sex into a setting, the stage rather than the events that occur on it. Or rather, it becomes a stage for something else. Sex opens up to subjective transformation or plot development or motif. Ironically, there is something erotophobic happening when writers want sex to be more than it is, as if it is only of worth or notable when something else is also on offer.

But even more than erotophobia, what this description of sex symptomizes, what this piling on of details that turns sex into a scene for some-

thing else captures, is the very economic system that has also incentivized literary writers to distance themselves from the narrational mode of the romance in the first place. The evacuation of leisure, a space for personal experience to be just that, has made both art and sex suspect. Sex, in literary novels or novels that aspire to be art, tries to sell itself by being more. It returns the sexual to the messy original text Lubey had explored from 1749, but differently motivated: a need for sex that transcends work and the crisis of the wage by becoming not the occasion for a money shot but for the collection of details widening what the world could mean.

## NOTES

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- 5 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 6 Heather Berg, *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 13.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 9 See, classically, Nancy Fraser, "After the Family Wage: Gender Equity and the Welfare State," *Political Theory* 22, no. 4 (1994): 591–618.
- 10 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), 115.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 99.
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- 13 Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 23.
- 14 Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 5; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 8; Michael Dango, *Crisis Style: The Aesthetics of Repair* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 17–23.
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- 26 Ivan Mayerhofer, "In Defense of the Modal Account of the Progressive," *Mind & Language* 29, no. 1 (February 2014): 85–108. For a review of the literature in this debate, see Alex Silk, "The Progressive and Verbs of Creation," *Journal of Semantics* 33, no. 1 (February 2016): 19–48.
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