America’s “White” Cultural and Sexual Dissensus: The Fictions of Edmund White

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This essay examines the representation of sexuality and identity in the fictions of American novelist Edmund White. Gay sexuality and identity politics are discussed in relation to “coming out,” the discourse of American identity, and whiteness. White’s output is shaped and informed by the cultural, historical and political circumstances which have conditioned how gay male sexuality has been discursively shaped over the last forty years. Yet his work has been inflected by theorizations of sexuality which have called into question the very specificity of a homosexual and/or gay identity. Who is White’s audience today, and who wants to read a “white” boy’s story anyway?

The main issue for today’s gay writers is perhaps not whether they can write about homosexuality or about their experiences and feelings as gay men, but what gay fiction actually is – or can be.¹ How could one get through a course completely silent about Walt Whitman, Henry James, Henry David Thoreau, H. D., Herman Melville, Elizabeth Bishop, James Baldwin, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Hart Crane, Allen Ginsberg, Gertrude Stein, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich?²

I. CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES: A CONTRADICTORY CONSENSUS FOR QUEER WRITERS

In dominant political and cultural histories of America, lesbians and gay men have been positioned as both disloyal and deceitful. Gay men in particular were forced to occupy the zones of the social margins, and although they

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were thought to pose a threat to the security of the nation, their invisibility meant that gay men possessed a unique but dangerous ability to betray both friend and foe alike. If America, during the Cold War, imagined its external threats in relation to the Soviet Union and communism, so its internal menace was constructed less in terms of unharnessed, permissive liberals and more in terms of the danger to security posed by communist sympathizers and homosexuals. But America’s consensus, and its ideology of social cohesion, typified in popular-cultural representations of home and family, were always precarious, and always in danger of imploding. In many ways, the Stonewall riots of June 1969, alongside the civil rights, homophile and leftist movements which contributed to the political impetus behind the riots, served to undermine the consensus which had been constructed around the family, marriage and American citizenship.

It is against this backdrop that White writes his fictions. These are fictions, however, which are as contradictory as the period and it is these contradictions which are examined in this article. On the one hand, and to summarize arguments made by, among others, Robert McRuer, White’s positionality is never in doubt: he is middle class, he is American, he is white and he is gay. On the other hand, and to synopsize the arguments made in this article, White is deeply reliant on non-American cultures in the construction of his fictions. His acclaimed critical biography of Jean Genet situates him in a much wider social–political sphere than American bourgeois liberalism or neoconservatism, and markers of national, sexual or social identities are always in his work secondary to his belief that friendship is greater than any fixed identity. White’s fiction, I argue, casts a contradictory shadow across any canon of gay-American or American-gay fiction, though it has been strategically important for White to write within the necessarily erroneous terms of identity. White’s output both disrupts and (re)constructs

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4 See Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988). Even this liberal, and sympathetic, cultural history of the family in America depicts a society in which “the family has been stripped of much of its legal meaning” (xv).


6 This is particularly evident in his two recent novels, *The Married Man* (2000) and *Fanny: A Fiction* (2003), and his *My Lives* (2005).
the identity categories “gay” and “American.” His very recent work only adds to such a contradictory and complex consensus.

Despite his acclaimed status as a “gay writer” across America and English-speaking nations more generally, he is seen in Europe as either a “gay American writer” or an “American gay writer.” These accolades, which bring the appellations “gay” and “American” together, only serve to emphasize the conflicts and tensions of the period. Does White write about America, or does White write about queer subjects who are American? What is it that makes his literary fictions “American,” and what is it that makes White’s fiction gay or queer before it is American? His essays and fictions raise more problems about representativeness than they solve. The notion of “gay fiction” is meaningful in relation to the contexts which structure and thereby restrict how readers and publishers understand the terms “gay,” “American” and “fiction.” For White, gay fiction and gay writers are contingent and provisional concepts, understood partly in relation to the management and production of literary fictions. White frequently reveals his uncertainty about the exact meaning of gay fiction, demonstrating his reluctance to promote a canon of “lesbian and gay books” or a community of lesbian and gay readers. “A canon is for people who don’t read,” he argues.

White, it seems, is as interested in what books people read as in how books are read. The books people read and study are themselves not outside a sphere which White broadly labels “Western Civilization” with its “small sacred library.”

II. IN SEARCH OF AMERICA’S GAY FICTIONS OR AMERICAN GAY FICTIONS? CANONS AND THEORIES

1. Canons and canonicity

Questions about canonicity, tradition and community have preoccupied a number of critics in lesbian and gay cultural studies in America. Questions about sexuality, identity and Americanness have occupied the theoretical inquiries of the work of critics who have disrupted canons and identities.

7 The dust jacket of My Lives suggests that no one has been as candid and as “rueful” about “growing up gay in Middle America,” yet his essay from ten years earlier notes how the canon of gay fiction is, like all canons of art, not one which is easily settled; nor should it be, in White’s view.


9 Ibid., 375.

10 Ibid.
I discuss such disruptions specifically in relation to Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick, but the work of Tim Dean, Lee Edelman and Judith Halberstam is also relevant to these debates. Dealing first with questions of canonicity, it is argued in some commentaries that there are categories such as gay novels and gay writers. It is surely futile to reject such claims, though closer examination unveils problems regarding the exact specificity of these labels. Studies by Mark Lilly and Greg Woods, for instance, argue that throughout the twentieth century it is possible to map a tradition of gay novels. Although Woods views “gay literature” as a shifting concept, he contends nonetheless that “what emerges from such accumulations of texts is the certainty of their cultural centrality. This is not a marginal tradition, even if it is sometimes marginalized.” More problematically, Woods does not recognize that the margins can also be strategically powerful spaces from which to challenge hegemonic – which is to say heteronormative – cultural formations. Moreover, a canon of marginal writing still constitutes a canon, though Woods is interested in making gay fiction part of the mainstream canon of literature in English.

Writing before Woods’s recent account, S. D. Adams is optimistic about “the exploration of homosexual themes” in literary fictions. Whilst the specificity of such themes is never fully stated, he is certain that they are now “commonplace.” “Homosexuality” (as opposed to “queer”) is a term which, for Adams, is neither contentious nor contradictory, though Adams’s references to America’s militant sexual liberationists, and allusions to a group of (pre-“queer”) “self-respecting ‘queers’” allow him to establish his preference for the term “homosexual” over “gay.” Adams seems to miss the ideological and pathological dimensions which a preference for “homosexual” assumes. Similar to Woods, Adams’s optimistic survey of


14 Woods, 16.


16 See also Michelangelo Signorile, *Queer in America: Sex, the Media and the Closets of Power* (New York: Random House, 1994).
“heroes and authors” is sometimes theorized in relation to a homogenized community of homosexuals. His account focusses on a “selection of writers whose work marks the emergence of the male homosexual’s quest for selfhood from the literary landscape of compulsory villainy and tortured ambiguity.” Adams’s references to queers, pre-queers, sexual liberationists, homosexuals and gays establishes a degree of diversity amongst gay men, though again he fails to see the extent to which these and other terms problematize the very notion of gay male specificity and by implication the notions of margins and mainstreams in the culture. More contentiously, it is never clear what “homosexual selfhood” means.

Stressing the transformative power of gay fiction along the lines of Adams, W. R. Koponen’s work sees gay novels as guides for life. White’s protagonists see in libraries and bookstores an alternative world to the predominantly Mid-western and white middle-class spaces of his parent culture of the late 1940s. In White’s The Beautiful Room Is Empty, characters’ reading lists for the closeted 1950s and 1960s include James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room and John Rechy’s City of Night. In the post-Stonewall world, Koponen argues that gay fictions are now involved in a “highly visible process of self-creation” in which new “gay myths” are being developed. This mixture of “homosexual” content, theme and self-discovery, which Adams, Koponen, and Woods consider essential features in lesbian and gay fictions, is similarly emphasized in Claude Summers’s Gay Fictions from Wilde to Stonewall: Studies in a Male Homosexual Tradition. However, the terms “America” and “Americanness” are rarely interrogated in either Koponen’s or Summers’ accounts. Whilst gay novels are guides for life, it is not clear whose lives are being referred to or how the novels actually operate as guides. Moreover, the “novel-as-guide” theory of Koponen raises questions about aesthetics and tradition, notions which are foregrounded in the work of Woods and Adams. In Summers’s account, for example, there are many homosexual literary traditions, just as there are many writers to study. Summers is confident in the predominantly aesthetic, as opposed to cultural, rationale informing his selection of texts. “Literary quality and representativeness” are the key criteria governing this selection of fiction “that is roughly analogous to the

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17 Adams, 8–9.
18 W. R. Koponen, Embracing a Gay Identity: Gay Novels as Guides (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1993).
20 Koponen, 150.
development of homosexual consciousness from Wilde to Stonewall.”
However, notions of homosexual consciousness are never discussed in any
detail, and nor are they considered in relation to the more plural notion of
“many homosexual literary traditions.”

Canon formation of this kind can contribute to a “politics of social
change” and a “project of human liberation.” The gay and lesbian canon
came about “in opposition to the prevailing prejudices.” However, literary
canons, as I have suggested, raise problems concerning the very terms
“homosexual,” “gay,” “consciousness” and “identity.” The preceding
summaries suggest that canon formation, of strategic importance amongst
writers and readers of lesbian and gay fiction, is also bound up with the
construction of a lesbian and gay culture. But the diversity of this culture,
and its place in terms of margins and mainstreams, is not clarified in the
aforementioned work. Phrases such as “homosexual self,” “gay tradition” or
“gay novel” have served the purposes of community-building and militancy
in periods of homophobic hostility. Unfortunately, acts of self-nomination,
following Foucault, are never straightforward or necessarily progressive. Gay
writing has been written in opposition to heteronormative discourses, and the
fictions have sometimes mobilized individuals and groups across America to
contest their specific oppressions. But if aesthetics and literary merit are the
grounds which bring the canon together, why are novels also therapeutic
guides for life or texts around which communities are formed? The more
general notion of “homosexual selfhood” is something which theoretical
frameworks seriously undermine (see the following section). There is little
doubt that these fictions were produced and consumed in environments often
hostile towards literature written by gay men and lesbians. The logic of the
canon, then, is important if, following Summers and others, it is necessary
affirm the reality of homosexual identities – both in terms of what the subject
does and who the subject is. However, homosexual identities, like American
ones, are not as clear or obvious as some of the criticism makes out.

Discussions about the nuanced specificities of gay and lesbian identifi-
cations, and questions about America and Americanness, have often been left
out the discourses which propel canon formation. Sonya Jones’s collection
of essays exemplifies a greater diversity of issues, examining lesbian sub-
jectivities, sexuality and postmodernism, gay male fiction and autobiography,
Latino novels on AIDS, and literary–sexual history. Whilst some essays

22 Summers, 28.
23 Ibid., 11–12.
24 Sonya Jones, ed., Gay and Lesbian Literature since World War II: History and Memory (New York
are interested in homosexual specificity, others complicate these quasi-ontological concerns, opting instead for a decentring of America via a critique of the humanist subject, community-building and sexual citizenship. More recently, representations of lesbian, gay and queer lives in the work of, for example, Ana Castillo, Bertha Harris, Essex Hemphill, Larry Kramer, Audre Lorde and Benjamin Saenz suggest that America’s queer subjects are people who can and do exceed the limiting figures associated with the epistemology of the white, male and predominantly urban canon. At the same time, this work has undermined dominant notions of what it means to be North American.

2. Critical and theoretical frameworks

During the period when lesbians and gay men were mobilizing around identity coalitions in activist as well as popular-cultural domains, so the whole notion of sexuality and national identity was being seriously interrogated in other spheres. Tense and conflicting dialogues since the 1970s, between liberal humanism on the one hand and American versions of postmodern antihumanism on the other, have served to problematize notions of subjectivity, personal identity and local and national community. In terms of American literary–cultural production, a number of writers have reflected such tensions in their fictions. In addition to work by writers already mentioned, so also the work of Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow, Barbara Kingsolver, Chang-rae Lee, Bobbie Ann Mason, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan and Alice Walker shows how the “America” produced and consumed in fiction is not a country or a construct with a shared “culture.” In Lee’s America, success in business, enhanced social standing and a commitment to versions of Christianity typify the “native” American. As noted, the recent work of critics such as Judith Butler, Tim Dean, Lee Edelman and Judith Halberstam continues to interrogate the political and cultural dissensus which popular media representations of sex, gender and ethnic consensus complexly conceal. There is little doubt that the dominant discourses informing America’s optimistic assurances of the future, alongside capitalist and Fordist production, generated the promise of unity and integration. However, fictions by the above writers have supplemented America’s dominant histories of childhood, the family, masculinity, heterosexuality, ethnicity and gender, proving effective in the deconstruction of hegemonic national cultures of consent.

In addition to challenges to liberalism, some fictions and writers have reflected a self-conscious interest in literary form and aesthetics. Patricia
Waugh, for instance, suggests that much American fiction by men has been characterized by strategies which seem to “ridicule [the reader’s] nostalgia for stable identity”; narrators, characters and implied readers “dissolve into categorizations of grammar.” Alongside experimentation with form, the voices and narratives of the margins in America intensify and complicate debates about value, consensual aesthetics and the “ethics of marginality” more generally. Noting the operation of the “sexual” in many of the nation’s dominant discourses, Edelman and David Savran separately argue that the work of writers such as James Baldwin, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams casts a contradictory shadow over the political unity and cultural coherence thought to typify the period before 1974. Baldwin was frequently attacked by other African Americans, particularly Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, for not being sufficiently black and African in his work, a charge which hides Cleaver’s promotion of heterosexual manliness as the gender norm for men. Baldwin, following through Cleaver’s logic, is neither American (he is gay) nor African (he is writing in the name of Caucasian America). Baldwin, like Williams, is figured as tortured and lacking a straightforward (which is to say American) identity. The “tortured” Williams, who died in a “luxury” hotel (the press were desperate for a seedy room soaked in sex and drug scandals), is likened in an obituary to his 1961 play *The Night of the Iguana*. The “warring elements in the playwright’s complex personality” comprise the “spoiled priest, the dying poet, the wandering quick-sketch artist, the bawdy proprietress of a tropical hotel – and the ugly, almost prehistoric lizard, bound by the heartless beach boys and struggling to be free.”

It is within – and often against – this disjunctive cultural context that fictional interventions by lesbian and gay writers, including White, have also operated to undermine singular accounts of what it means to be connected (or not) to America’s lesbian, gay and queer communities. Baldwin and Williams, for example, serve to challenge stereotypes even though in the popular media they have themselves been sexually and racially stereotyped. More problematic, however, is the interrogation of America’s cultural homogeneity and the deconstruction of identity enacted in much fiction, drama and theory, which stands in contrast to the fictions and identity-based theories of traditionally marginalized constituencies. Whilst experimental fiction

28 Ibid.
since Baldwin and Williams appears to have buried the liberal self, other writers have found it necessary to consolidate a strategic sense of self in order to establish tradition in opposition to the discourses of heteronormativity. Although consensus among lesbians or gay men may be politically useful, the differences within and amongst both groups register the contradictory nature of sexual “sameness.”

The contradictory nature of “sexual sameness” has been subject to much theorization in work broadly labelled (American) “queer theory.” The queering of all identity categories (e.g. sexual, racial and national) will clearly impact on how a canon of American gay literature is understood. Two of the figures most associated with this trajectory and whose work is particularly useful in the examination of White’s fiction are Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick. The potential and implicit irresolution of identity explorations of the kind summarized above led Sedgwick to argue that the foundational methodology of Western sexological formulations is grounded in and organized around a radical incoherence. In Sedgwick’s argument, this incoherence is stated in terms of “minoritizing” and “universalizing” notions of sexuality and identity. On the one hand, the minoritizing view holds

that there is a distinct population of persons who “really are” gay; at the same time, [the universalizing view holds] that sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities; that apparently heterosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires, and vice versa for apparently homosexual ones; and that at least male heterosexual identity and modern masculinist culture may require for their maintenance the scapegoating crystallization of a same-sex male desire that is widespread and in the first place internal.29

Sedgwick’s development of Foucault’s work enables her to underscore the degree to which discourses about sexuality are as much about the operations of knowledge and power as they are about an assumed or definitionally coherent sexual identity. One of the principal arguments put forward in her work is that notions such as sameness/difference, public/private, secrecy/disclosure inform sexual and national identity formulations and invariably underscore and naturalize heterosexual hegemony. Incorporating insights from Foucault’s History of Sexuality with deconstructive textual inquiry, Sedgwick traces how state institutions and public agencies since the late nineteenth century have operated on the basis that heterosexuality, because of its apparent naturalness, is, axiomatically, the normal and inevitable pattern of personal relationships in the nation. Rather, heterosexual

29 Sedgwick, The Epistemology of the Closet, 85.
relationships, which came to be seen as natural practices, also sanctioned the attendant homosocial national practices which contributed to extensive homophobia and misogyny.

This incorporation of homo-/heterosexual definitions into America’s legal, medical and literary discourses is not missed by White. *A Boy’s Own Story*, for example, exposes the social structures which from birth reinforce the judgement that, alongside gendered anatomies, American identity was also assignable on the basis of a homo- or heterosexuality. “Sexuality, placed in a privileged relation to individual identity, truth, and knowledge,” writes Sedgwick, operated to transform “virtually every issue of power and gender.”

Despite the endemic incoherence of definitions, sexuality in general, and heterosexuality in particular, powerfully regulated a matrix of other binarized markings in the nation. Sedgwick notes, however, that concurrent with the formation of sexual species, other, “less stable … understandings of sexual choice also persisted … often among the same people or interwoven in the same systems of thought.”

Despite highly visible crises, Sedgwick writes that these “impactions of homo/heterosexual definition took place in a setting, not of spacious emotional or analytic impartiality, but rather of urgent homophobic pressure to devalue one of the two nominally symmetrical forms of choice.” Sedgwick traces how homo-/heterosexual definition marked other practices and determinations which became hegemonic in American and Western cultures, supplementing the inside–outside logic of stratifications based on class, gender and race.

Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* similarly notes how one effect of such “hegemonic heterosexuality” has been to naturalize the national-cultural discourses which would attempt to institute and stabilize sex, gender and identity. Butler’s main contention is that gender does not axiomatically proceed from sex. In *A Boy’s Own Story* White’s young hero looks to his physicality, his hand gestures and his face, wondering why, with a man’s body, he does not desire women. The narrator is a boy like other boys, but he is confused as to the meanings which attach to his gender in American culture in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the sexes might seem binary in their “morphology and constitution,” for Butler “there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two.” Butler suggests that identities are produced in discourse, through the repetition and reiteration of various

30 Ibid., 3.
31 Ibid., 9.
32 Ibid.
subject positions that circulate in language. The narrator of the first two novels of White’s trilogy spends hours learning how to act “straight,” confused as to how he can pass as heterosexual but still desire men. But it is this very ability of the narrator to manipulate the discourse, and ultimately to resist its interpellation, which affords some sense of agency. The narrator also highlights the very plastic dimensions of gender discourse; he knows he can pass as straight.

Whilst the terms of any discourse are constraining, Butler suggests that such constraints should be viewed alongside the possibility that both discourse and speech avail themselves to repetition and reiteration. In Gender Trouble Butler argues that the recitation of “heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the heterosexual as original.”

Qualifying these claims in Bodies That Matter, Butler emphasizes that the constructed status of heterosexuality does not imply that opposite-sex relations are thus denaturalized or that “parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them...; there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion.” However, in Excitable Speech Butler analyses the operation of speech-act theory in relation to American legal procedures, the armed forces and political structures. She suggests that speech and discourse are not always stable or stabilizing. Recognition of this fixity and instability – the very excitability of discourse – can provide a sense of agency via a counterdiscourse that “acknowledges its emergence from and dependency upon structures of constraint.” In White’s fictions, identity is always seen to be formed within a discursive matrix of citation and iteration. But the identities and the fictions are open to potentially resistant acts of re-citation and re-iteration, a point which is absent in the work which discusses canon formation. However, the enabling aspect of discourse, alongside the allied possibility that discourse can be utilized to reshape or rearticulate the contours of individual subjectivity, suggests that identity is less a concern than the political potential which discourse itself excites. White’s protagonists are always hailed by terms and names they do not fully choose. But these terms which we never really choose are, in Butler’s theory, “the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open.” It is the implications of Butler’s and Sedgwick’s work in terms of White’s

36 Butler, Bodies that Matter, 125.
38 Ibid., 38.
coming-out stories and his representations of gay/American sexualities which are now considered in the next section.

III. AMERICA’S CLOSETS: THE OPEN SECRETS IN WHITE’S FICTIONS

The impact of these disruptions to liberal, humanist and common-sense accounts of identity have not escaped the attention of White. However, a number of issues emerge as far as the possibilities and politics of gay self-representation and community are concerned, both in relation to the work of White and in relation to theorizations about queer writing. Who, for instance, was White’s audience when *Caracole*[^39] and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* were published in 1985 and 1988? Deaths from AIDS, alongside homophobic and anti-homophbic discourses, structured and informed much of the activism of the decade. Moreover, direct references to the homophobia of the Reagan years are absent, and in both novels there is no mention of the many issues confronting post-Stonewall communities. But White also writes for a queer 1990s readership, so who were his readers in the decade which saw the publication of *The Farewell Symphony*[^40] and *The Married Man*[^41]? Which groups today read the popular rites-of-passage novel *A Boy’s Own Story*, twenty years after its publication? Did White imagine different readers, different “yous,” different Americans each time a book from his trilogy was published? Are his readers “gay” readers, “American gay” readers, “gay American” readers, or simply queer readers? *Caracole*, a novel praised as a stylistic tour de force, undermined White’s status as a “gay writer” of “gay fiction,” accolades which White himself has always been uncertain about. Do his novels constitute a corpus of “gay fictions” in the first place? Some commentaries on White position him as a writer who has sought to chronicle the lives of gay men since the publication of *Forgetting Elena* in 1973[^42]. It might be argued, however, that his novels say far more about American cultural and domestic politics than they do about sexuality.[^43]

[^43]: This is certainly true of White’s *The Married Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), and *Fanny: A Fiction* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003); see also the essays in *The Burning Library*. 
Does this mean that his work is consumed by a wider, straighter or decidedly queerer audience at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

These questions aim to highlight the ways in which White’s fiction imagines communities of readers as much as it addresses America’s cultural and political specificity. His first two published novels, *Forgetting Elena* and *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* (1978) are discussed by White in ways which underline the impact of the Mid-west, New York City and Europe on the novels. White, describing the early months of “gay liberation” after Stonewall, suggests that many readers, writers and publishers continued to live with the legacy of a homophobic and closeted past. For lesbian and gay writers, observes White of the early 1970s, every artistic decision we made had its political aspect. Should we write gay fiction at all? At that time there was no known market for our work, few bookstores that would carry it, precious few editors who would even read our manuscripts. Literary friends told us that we were betraying our high calling by ghettoizing ourselves.

Biographer Stephen Barber records that during the 1970s White “was aiming for a gay readership which was yet to materialize.” *Forgetting Elena*, for instance, was not considered “gay” at all (even though it provides meticulous details of early 1970s gay male cultures on Fire Island), and “passed with little attention, noted simply as the first appearance of work by an original young novelist.” Although White eagerly signed his name to a gay sex manual, it was not until the publication in 1982 of the first novel of his trilogy, *A Boy’s Own Story*, that he was considered a gay writer who wrote gay fiction. The novel was popularly acclaimed not only as a gay rites-of-passage novel, but as one which charted something of America’s own rites of passage in relation to its lesbian and gay subjects. It is also a story about a boy who feels he betrays what it means to be an American boy; he is a sissy, sleeps with other boys, does not really date girls and thinks his body exposes him as a fraud. By 1985, when *Caracole* was published, Neil Bartlett notes how White was criticized for abandoning the “gay world” altogether, preferring instead the concerns of a “larger [straight] world.” Such accusations are difficult to sustain when it is borne in mind that White’s sociological travelogue, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* was one of the first books to explore the diversity and heterogeneity of American gay-male

45 White, *The Burning Library*, 368.
47 Ibid., 51.
cultures. Yet the criticisms also assume a degree of specificity about male homosexuality, and that sexual identities make sense outside of their textual representations.

In the case of White’s fiction, sexual identities are clearly textual constructions. Prior to the Stonewall riots of 1969, discussion of a canon of lesbian or gay fiction, or evidence of communities whose sexual identities might be considered homosexual, rarely occurs outside discourses also associated with the closet. Lesbians and “homosexual” (as opposed to “gay”) men, alongside their fictions and their writers, were governed by different political conditions and assumptions. Describing this period, White records how the majority of homosexuals viewed their “experience as diseased and inauthentic.” Drawing on a slightly longer history, White contends that before gay men were considered “sick”, they were judged to be “criminal” or “degenerate.” White’s attention to the discourses of sexuality in America are important in the ongoing evaluation of his and others’ constructions of gay and American subjectivity. The fiction’s changing representations (of spaces, communities and people) suggest that there are no sexual identities which cohere outside of the figures which constitute the sexualities in question. Neither the novels nor the short stories assume that sexual subjectivity in America is a cultural or personal constant.

The three novels of the trilogy, for example, demonstrate that no fixed lexicon of America or sexuality lays bear the truth of these identities. In A Boy’s Own Story, White’s mid-twentieth-century teenage narrator sees himself and all homosexuals as sinful, deviant and anti-American. “I wanted to overcome this thing I was becoming and was in danger of soon being, the homosexual.” The “homosexual” narrator who begins the trilogy is, in The Beautiful Room Is Empty, learning how to be “gay,” eagerly casting off his homosexual pathology and Cincinnati childhood, and celebrating the opportunities he associates with gay, urban America. At the beginning of the 1980s, The Farewell Symphony shows how gay men are represented in terms of threat. Popular media representations during the 1980s depicted AIDS as a gay plague, a punishment meted out for sins of the flesh. Gay men themselves


were encouraged to see their sterile sex, their diseased bodies and their non-reproductive love as both self-endangering and anti-American. Yet *The Farewell Symphony* also moves on to critique the “pink economy” of the early 1990s when gay men became valuable commodities under consumer capitalism. It is also during this period that the term “gay” makes way for “queer” and post-gay definitions of sexuality. Yet the highly desirable gay male bodies constructed in consumer-capitalist advertising, and the very visible and marketable identities these men were encouraged to perform, nonetheless continued to threaten the fabric of American family life.\(^{54}\)

That the lesbian and gay communities of the pre- and post-Stonewall periods mobilized around a politics of sexuality is not in doubt. *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* and *The Farewell Symphony* make clear how and why the identity politics of the period were strategically necessary in bringing together anti-homophobic coalitions. However, the contexts and texts of the Stonewall generations seem to suggest that the images deployed in the construction of homosexuality expose something more plural than acts of gay self-nomination and coming out might suggest. At the end of *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and throughout much of *The Farewell Symphony*, White’s narrators articulate the importance of sexual liberation at the same time as reminding readers of groups for whom all sorts of other freedoms are yet to happen. “We couldn’t find a single mention of the turning point [Stonewall] in our lives,” recalls the narrator of *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*. Whilst the language of post-Stonewall coalitions attests degrees of pride and shame, *States of Desire* documents the continuing and forceful operation of homophobia and the closet. Gay men in parts of Utah and Texas, for example, do not share the same vision of sexual freedom as groups in Boston, New York City or San Francisco.\(^ {55}\) Such unevenness, alongside the discourses which position identities and sexualities in terms of sexual sameness or difference, are present throughout White’s writings, and his novels do not in any uncomplicated sense present “out” gay characters. Indeed, coming-out narratives, as Judith Roof has suggested,\(^ {56}\) tend to reinforce America’s dominant heteronarratives, repositioning lesbians and gay men within an uncontested sexual framework. Despite the proliferation of outing campaigns, “coming-out

\(^{54}\) See Rosemary Hennessy’s *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000). Hennessy’s is one of the most dense analyses of sexuality and representation to appear in America during the last decade.

\(^{55}\) Such unevenness is charted in Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain*, published in the *New Yorker* in 1997 and made into a film by Ang Lee in 2005.

stories” and gay identity narratives of the last fifteen years, White’s fictions do not settle how sexual subjectivity is figured.

The semantics of gay self-ascription in all White’s narratives are inscribed in a language which affirms and negates gay identity at the same time. In *A Boy’s Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* the teenage hero struggles to understand whether his sexuality is visibly marked on the surface of his body or whether in fact it is a germ trapped inside his flesh. His sexuality is figured variously as an affliction, a curse and a sign of abnormality, yet it is something which is invisible, hidden, undetectable. He is not a real American boy until he desires girls. On one level, the teenager’s narrative mirrors how homosexuality in America was being figured in psychological works. Popular psychotherapy texts of the 1950s have a profound impact on the Midwestern narrator of *A Boy’s Own Story*: “I’ve internalized my mother and when I fall in love I merely project her introjected image.”

Although this paraphrase of psychotherapy also satirizes his therapist’s advice, similar information convinces characters in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* that hospitalization is the only cure for homosexuality. The same novel reports how magazines at the end of the 1960s perceive homosexuality as “a pathetic malady.” Whereas lesbians and gay men use an increasingly positive and militant language, the homosexuals of the popular press are linked to “drugs, free sex, and sloppy liberal rhetoric.”

The textual contradictions of sexuality have been usefully theorized in the work of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick. Sedgwick observes how “the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know.” Butler’s explorations additionally stress “the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, and discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin.” If sexuality is as diffuse as Butler suggests (i.e. in discourses more than it is anchored in bodies and anatomies), then notions of gay identity and gay community in America are more complex than some activist strategies might imply. If there is no truth of sexuality lodged in the body of the homosexual, what precisely “comes out” in outing and coming-out narratives? Whilst White’s stories offer no final definition about the truth of homosexual identity, the novels nonetheless attest the political, albeit provisional, necessity of laying claim to the term “homosexual” or “gay” because of the way the terms colonize the subject in the first place.

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57 *A Boy’s Own Story*, 175.
59 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, x–xi; original emphasis.
In laying claim to terms such as gay or queer, White’s fiction acknowledges a homophobic and militant past as much as it shows how the language of sexuality oscillates between denigration and celebration. His use of a range of discourses also signals how the fiction attempts to imagine communities of readers. However, the subscribers who access an Edmund White online reading group lay claim to his fiction in ways which far exceed literary form or genre. Some are interested in White’s fiction because of the way it appears to chronicle recent history, whereas other readers are captured by the author’s deployment of fantasy or romance. In like manner, the depiction of queer communities in *The Farewell Symphony* should not be judged entirely in terms of the story’s exactness to historical detail. The novel is nonlinear, shifting in and out of moods, times and narrative tense. Readers move freely around America and Europe, where the cityscapes of New York, Rome, Paris and Venice are personalized hotel rooms, private bars, bathhouses, doctors’ surgeries and publishing outlets. *Forgetting Elena* is modernistic in its stylized exploration of America’s sexual secrets, whereas *Caracole*, the first of his so-called “non-gay” novels, is set in a space and period which resembles Venice in the eighteenth century and Paris during the Nazi occupation.

If readers are unable to recognize New York’s gay cruising zones in the surreal opening of *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, then the feuds, carnivals and sexual role-playing staged in *Caracole* will seem decidedly anti-realist by comparison. Whilst both novels are concerned in different ways with sexuality, both are also preoccupied with childhood and the family, personal anxiety and social and political deceit. In the case of *Caracole*, White satirizes totalitarian government, exposes political corruption, critiques intellectual conceit and explores the usefulness of individual and subcultural acts of resistance in his fantastical island-city. Drawing on conventions associated with romance and epic, and using second-person address throughout the whole of *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, White demonstrates his reluctance to adopt realist modes in his fiction. White’s America is vast, something from which he is exiled and yet something to which the émigré always returns. For White, gay novels and their readers (inside and outside America) are always to some extent imagined, at once connected to gay lives and yet necessarily connected to the much bigger audience in which “gay” variously means homosexual, deviant, ill, sterile, deathly, happy, queer, urban and metropolitan.

To suggest that gay fictions should or must be concerned solely with gay men’s lives in realistic or positive ways is problematic. As outlined at the

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60 See http://www.edmundwhite.com/.
beginning of this discussion, commentaries on American gay fiction, alongside surveys of homosexual literary traditions, have tended to assume some degree of homogeneity about the specificity of lesbian and gay lives. White’s output seems to suggest that there are no typical gay novels, just as there are no typical Americans, gays, or gay Americans. Moreover, gay-affirmative criticism has sometimes assumed that gay novels and gay writers are in a position to offer reliable and representative descriptions of gay cultures. What, however, constitutes “reliability,” and who might constitute lesbian or gay cultures? What renders a text homosexual, proposes Marco Pustianaz, may be “the biographical homosexuality of the author, [the text’s] hidden homosexual coding, its latent meaning, its textual reception, all of these or a variable combination.”

White’s trilogy, for instance, examines the powerful ideologies which structure American society as much as it examines gay cultures. His first-person storytellers, his Cincinnati teenagers, Michigan students, urban twenty-somethings, HIV-positive men and American and European academics and artists, provide a running commentary on how subjects in the mainstream and the margins operate within the forceful parameters of family life, suffocating middle-class domesticity, single-sex schools and Mid-western values.

White’s fictional explorations expose an American landscape characterized by social dysfunctionality, psychological illness and depression, loneliness, and disconnection. People are exiled, either by choice or by force. He shows how parents fail to connect with each other and with their children, and in the case of A Boy’s Own Story White explores what becomes of children who fail to measure up to the dominant versions of boyhood, manliness and masculinity. Yet White’s work shows how subjects build alternative communities, not to replace family life, but to expose heterosexual marriage as only one way of living human relationships. The insights into pre- and post-Stonewall worlds provided by the trilogy and States of Desire make known the discourses of compulsory heterosexuality and gender division across America more than they uncover the secret of gay life in urban America. However, if some “straight fictions” document family life and gender connection as natural and inevitable, White’s fictions imagine alternative interpretations to these ideologies. Rather than measuring the fictional representation of gay lives on the basis of authenticity (that is, White is a “gay” writer or “American” writer), verisimilitude (White writes the truth of marginalization) or mimesis (there is a “gay” truth and White knows how to copywrite this), White’s

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fictions are more productively conceptualized as interpretations which document periods of transition and uncertainty in straight and queer worlds.

IV. NOT QUITE FAREWELL: MARRIED MEN AND FEMINIST ACTIVISTS

It is transition and uncertainty that feature strongly in White’s last two novels to date, *The Married Man* (2000) and *Fanny: A Fiction* (2003). *The Married Man* is, in many respects, a travel story which started in *The Farewell Symphony*. The many journeys of self-exiled American furniture scholar Austin and the French architect Julien – across Providence, Rhode Island; Key West; Venice; Rome; and finally Morocco – are also propelled by an uncertainty which White refers to as “AIDS-restlessness.” It is Julien’s physical and emotional decline from AIDS which preoccupies the last half of the book. The novel’s language pictures Julien as his body fragments and dies. He is “the bowler hat descending into the live volcano”; he resembles the “Ottoman Empire in a turn-of-the-century political cartoon”; and as the dying Julien looks at the pages of the Koran before his death, he, like Arabic mystics of the past, confronts the “cloud of unknowing.”

This is a “gay” novel in that it depicts love between two men, it charts the impact of AIDS and it is aware of the conflicting contexts of discourses of political correctness on the one hand, and an ongoing homophobia on the other. Julien, however, is a lover before he is gay lover, an adoring friend and confidante of the Bohemian and wary Austin. But the novel is also post-gay (as opposed to “queer”) to the extent that it is written against the backdrop of societies which are increasingly ignorant of Stonewall, lesbian and gay rights, activist lobbies and “Pride” marches. It is also a novel about an American in Paris and a Parisian in America and is indebted to some extent to writers such as James Baldwin and Henry James whose work is defined in relation to journeys of alienation, exile and home. It is these geographical, temporal and emotional journeys, at times very much in the tradition of Baldwin and James, which define and determine White’s novel and his two protagonists. But White’s penultimate novel to date is witty and confident in ways that Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* is not, and his prose style is more relaxed and less encumbered than James’s work. Nonetheless, the transatlantic journeys, the journeys across Europe and the final journey to North Africa are woven into the identity of the two lovers. These are identifications more than they are “identities,” at once ephemeral, compounded and subject to borders.62

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62 See Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* and her discussion of the work of Willa Cather.
Borders, however, are crisscrossed and transgressed, vulnerable and per-vious, protective and penetrated. Whilst the search for a permanent space in which to live and die is finally realized in the desert of Morocco, the lovers come to see that it is the very movements across time and space which provide them with a sense of identity. Austin’s desires to hold off Julien’s death remind readers that in remembering and mourning lost times, so we are always required to construct an identification on the basis of that which is absent and past:

Julien’s death wasn’t a sentimental loss, a sweet, fierce absence, and in no way was it an aesthetic loss, if that meant [Austin’s] life was less agreeable without Julien. No, it was as if they had fused, as if Julien had been an alien who’d snatched his body, encoded his nervous system and changed his blood type, colonized his organs and rescripted his memory bank.

Here identity is founded on an identification and a cross-identification. But to the extent that all sexual subjects are constituted in cross-identifications encoded in terms of translation and displacement (“I” is also qualified by the other’s “you”), so the sexuality of the two male lovers is not radically distinct from heterosexuality, even though the novel bespeaks a love which historically did not speak its name.

Another, much earlier, transatlantic journey made by Scottish feminist-activist Fanny Wright provides the backdrop for Fanny: A Fiction. This is also a story about a socialist, allowing White to reaffirm his own belief in an alternative to capitalist modes of production. A self-proclaimed anticapitalist and very vocal feminist before the terms were invented, yet also mistress to (the much older) General Lafayette, Fanny Wright is a polemical figure of the early 1800s. Wright, from Scotland, fights for workers’ rights, for the rights of African Americans, for sexual rights and for women. It seems yet again that White is abandoning his gay world. If he is, then it is surely in order to explore the much bigger world of sexual freedom in the context of racism and nascent American democracy. Born in Dundee 1795, Wright was orphaned by the time she was three. She was raised by her relative, James Milne, a member of the Scottish school of progressive philosophers. She visited America in 1818 and on her return published her thoughts in Views of Society and Manners in America (1821). In the book Wright praises the new and radical American “democracy.” In 1824 she returned and in the same year she became familiar with the utopianism of Robert Owen and New Harmony in Indiana. The following year Wright bought two thousand acres of land in Tennessee and established the utopian community Nashoba. She also bought slaves from local farmers and immediately freed them. She also encouraged sexual freedom, arguing that marriage was ultimately a repressive
institution. She also argued that mixed-race marriages and relationships would be a sure way to end racism.

Wright is mocked, ridiculed and loved, and her supporters are as many as her detractors. In 1825 she gave a series of lectures (highly unusual and controversial for women of the time) in which she propounded her abolitionist views and for which she was vehemently and publicly reviled. Actively involved with radical journals, including the New Harmony Gazette, a progressive newspaper of the period, and the Free Inquirer; she championed the rights of the labour and women’s movements, campaigned for the abolition of slavery and spoke up for universal suffrage, socialism, birth control, and free secular education.

White’s novel adopts a quasi-biographical mode, borrowing from Nabokov’s Pale Fire, and situates a “discovered” mock biography, written by the mother of Anthony Trollope, in the body of the fiction. Trollope’s mother had herself written an account which disparaged North American cultures of the time. Published in 1832, Domestic Manners of Americans concerns itself with “primitive” traditions, though the two women meet on a transatlantic voyage and their friendship eventually turns to serious rivalry. It is this Wright–Trollope dialectic which propels White’s novel. Trollope dismissed American customs as much as Wright welcomes America as a space in which to build an ideal world.

Fanny is also a novel about the meaning of “America” and “American.” Trollope’s colourful and witty anecdotes are White’s source, and he uses them to good effect in this mock biography. The layering effect of this mode means White is able to explore human interaction, rivalry, affection and motive. But he uses this to consider the social, the political and the psychological dimensions which served to construct the America of the 1800s. On the one hand, Mrs. Trollope, initially great friends with Fanny, is soon very antagonistic. This augments Fanny’s already passionate temperament and the depictions of the feuding make very funny reading. The novel is also packed with hilarious scenes describing American democracy. On the other hand, this is also a story set in the mid-nineteenth century and so women’s rights, slavery and the wider social and economic conflicts associated with industrialization and urbanization provide a wider backdrop for the book.

Whether he adopts fantastical modes, as in Caracole and Forgetting Elena, or autobiographical strategies, as in The Farewell Symphony, or mock biography as he does in Fanny: A Fiction, it is clear that his fiction confronts readers with the operations and ethics of power in America. In that sense, he not simply a “gay” novelist talking about gay lives. White sees an America which manages
and fixes identities, often on the basis of sexual object choice, to the exclusion of other affiliations. However, the America which is represented in his fiction is also one which exposes the discourses of postmodern consumer capitalism. In the rhetoric of advertising and consumption, subjects can choose an identity in the same way as buying consumer goods, and people can choose bodies, sexualities and identities in the same way that they can choose a car or a new hairstyle.

Underneath the appearance of choice, however, lie the decay and inbuilt obsolescence upon which capitalism relies. If Caracole is about a larger, presumably heterosexual world, then the exploration is staged in a novel which deconstructs the very ideals upon which this larger world depends. A similar deconstruction occurs in Fanny: A Fiction. Perhaps more provocatively, White situates his fiction in a historical context which allows him to reconsider how the discourses of the nation and attendant cultures of domesticity, marriage and the family do not guarantee Western modernity’s promise of autonomy and personal freedom. For White, freedom is precious but costly. By 1829, for instance, Fanny Wright had settled in New York and published her Course of Popular Lectures. In 1831 she married the French doctor Guillaume P. Darusmont. The marriage ended in divorce but not before Darusmont gained control of her property, including the royalties from her books and the income from the lecture tours. She died in December 1852 before the case was concluded. Her tombstone in Cincinnati, also White’s hometown, reads, “I have wedded the cause of human improvement, staked on it my fortune, my reputation and my life.”

However, even in White’s supposedly gay fiction, his treatment of American and gay cultures is inseparable from an examination of micro-histories set against the wider backdrop of international capitalism’s drive to manufacture and profit from ever more identities. Although Anthony Quinn, for instance, has suggested (on the back cover of the novel) that The Farewell Symphony “unfolds nothing less than a secret history – of gay sexuality,” it is difficult to establish the specific secret or the sexuality in light of White’s attempt to intervene in a much bigger history whose secrets are far from sexual. White has yet to say “Farewell.”

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