

“The Child with a Lion” — prefatory remarks by Chris Cutrone

I wrote “The Child with a Lion” in 1998 at the request of *GLQ* editor and Foucault scholar David Halperin, after I had written a 1995 letter reply to the black gay writer Darieck Scott’s 1994 *GLQ* essay “Jungle Fever? Black Gay Identity Politics, White Dick and the Utopian Bedroom;” Halperin was interested in my writing a full-length piece that developed the substance of my critique of Scott’s essay. Darieck Scott is a fiction writer, and his subsequently published novel *Traitor to the Race*, whose story centered around a black-white interracial male homosexual relationship overdetermined by race, written in multiple (first- and third-person) narrative character voices, confirmed my apprehension of the theoretical problems of his *GLQ* essay, despite my sympathy with his avowed intentions, to free interracial relationships of *a priori* significance. I wanted to address the critical diremption I perceived between the theoretical intentions of Scott’s *GLQ* essay and his novel *Traitor to the Race*, but not through a literary critique of the novel or positivistic theoretical dispute with his *GLQ* essay, but rather a theoretical critique of the assumptions underlying both the essay and his novel, in the form of a textual counter-demonstration of literary-aesthetic practice. Halperin was aware of my work as a video artist that addressed black-white interracial male homosexuality, so I set out to write an essay that was performative of the problems it was addressing, a work that would enact as well as discuss issues of racialized desire and social identity. I was unsure of my audience, because my essay makes certain assumptions about racialized narrative identification and lyrical effect that could easily be lost on a self-restrictedly identified “white” readership. Like my video art work, which responded to and participated in issues of media production, media art works self-identified as culturally “black,” I wrote my essay so that it would formally respond to its problems through participation in “black”-identified literary production and in imaginary dialogue with a “black” readership. “The Child with a Lion” was published in *GLQ* 6.2 (2000).

As I had done in my video art works, I attempted to perform an immanent critique of the socio-cultural identity politics of racialized desire and sexuality. I wanted to take the postmodernist critique of the subject, the “death of the author,” as well as of a “centered” reading subject, seriously, in order to better apprehend its critical power as well as its limitations, and this involved taking performative problems of my own subjectivity in writing as the fundamental material for my essay. Just as personal-lyrical media art had served as the point of departure for my video works, the late anthropological move to anecdotal evidence, and the concomitant phenomenon of erotic memoir as postmodernist genre *par excellence*, served for my writing “The Child with a Lion.” I wanted to address problems and aporias of the attempted ethical move to a paradigm of inter-subjectivity as a way of overcoming a subject-object dichotomy, hence the pertinence for my project of Adorno’s social critique of the persistence of a subject-object dialectic. Benjamin’s *One Way Street* and Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, Breton’s *Nadja* and *Mad Love*, Bataille’s early writings and Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* served as ur-texts for “The Child with a Lion.” The central, more literary and concrete sections of my essay are framed by more explicitly theoretical *prolegomena* and *epilegomena*. In response to the postmodernist valorization of the aphoristic essay style, I would seek to socially-historically contextualize, specify and reflexively critique the formal qualities of my essay. The following pages comprise my social-theoretical questions for regarding the stakes of “The Child with a Lion”; my retrospective appraisal of “The Child with a Lion” in response to questions from a mentor about the development of my dissertation work; the *GLQ* reader-referee endorsement and *Humanities Abstracts* citation for “The Child with a Lion”; and my adaptations of language from Adorno’s essay on Benjamin in *Prisms* and from Gillian Rose’s monograph on Adorno, *The Melancholy Science*, asserting the integrity of formal and substantial aspects of “The Child with a Lion.”

“The Child with a Lion” — social-theoretical questions

There is no pleasure to me without communication: there is not so much as a sprightly thought comes into my mind that it does not grieve me to have produced alone, and that I have no one to tell it to.

— Montaigne, “Of Vanity” (1588), *Essays* bk. 3, ch. 9

The essay . . . is concerned with what is blind in its objects. It wants to use concepts to pry open the aspects of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is a merely subjective arrangement. It wants to polarize the opaque element and release the latent forces in it. Its efforts are directed towards concretizing a content defined in time and space; it constructs a complex of concepts interconnected in the same way it imagines them to be interconnected in the object . . . and yet it remains idea in that it does not capitulate before the burden of what exists, does not submit to what merely is. The essay . . . judges what exists . . . by an enthusiastic fragment from Nietzsche’s late period: “If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event — and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified and affirmed” [*Der Wille zur Macht*]. Except that the essay distrusts even this kind of justification and affirmation. It has no name but a negative one for the happiness that was sacred to Nietzsche. Even the highest manifestations of the spirit, which express this happiness, are always guilty of obstructing happiness as long as they remain mere spirit. Hence, the essay’s innermost formal law is heresy. Through violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something in the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy’s secret and objective aim to keep invisible.

— Adorno, “The Essay as Form” (1958), *Notes to Literature* vol. 1

How is the essay form, its methodological procedures, its aesthetic experience, and its melancholic affect, since, e.g., Montaigne, characteristic and illuminating of capitalist social modernity? — How does the essay form remain a socially necessary form of appearance today?

How are the social-theoretical problems characterized by Adorno’s “The Essay as Form” to be understood in the context of poststructuralist valorization of writing and reflexive discursivity over philosophical system? Has the social-critical situation of the essay changed significantly since Adorno wrote, from the 1950s to the present, and, if so, how? How does the postmodernist essay style comport with the social-critical characterization of the essay form provided by Adorno? What does a critical-aesthetics of the essay form say about society today?

Adorno wrote that, “Because society can neither be defined as a concept in the current logical sense, nor empirically demonstrated, while in the meantime social phenomena continue to call out for some kind of conceptualization, the proper organ of the latter is speculative *theory*”; that “the requirement that society must be defined through theory . . . is itself a theory of society”; and that “one should treat social facts like objects, should first and foremost renounce any effort to ‘understand’ them . . . firmly persuaded that society meets each individual primarily as that which is alien and threatening, as constraint . . . genuine reflection on the nature of society would begin precisely where ‘comprehension’ ceased” [“Society,” trans. Fredric Jameson, in Bronner and Kellner, eds., *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (Routledge, 1989), 269].

“The Child with a Lion” states that, “As a moment of social life resistant to representation, interracial intimacy finds expression in what Adorno calls ‘non-conceptual knowledge’, the sympathy between subject and object to which the work of art, in this case, that of writing, gives

form. The impulse to aesthetic autonomy expresses what the subject has been denied. The social problem of race becomes a problem of aesthetics: the problem of identity and non-identity in the work of art becomes the problem of the racial subject-object.” How might one characterize the social necessity driving the forms of writing taken by “The Child with a Lion?” How does “The Child with a Lion” reveal critical moments of aesthetic experience; how is such aesthetic work a form of critical social investigation?

How does “The Child with a Lion” attempt to appropriate for itself, in terms of Adorno’s social-critical aesthetics of the essay form, the poststructuralist critical-theoretical mode of *écriture*? What are the social-theoretical implications of adopting such a mode?

“The Child with a Lion” — *GLQ* reader-referee endorsement

“I find this essay to be a fascinatingly maddening engagement with the social politics of interracial male-male eroticism — maddening perhaps because of its peculiar combination of intensive idealist speculation (à la Hegel, Kant) and its insistence, nevertheless, on the irreducible character of certain material social facts (i.e., the intractability of race and racial difference), often suggestively elaborated through the keen adducement of Fanon. The lack of centeredness that this combination generates, while frustrating at least for me, does not, however, constitute a fatal flaw . . . the piece offsets by provocativeness — and by an estimable critical intelligence — the disorientation its highly associative character tends to produce. I come away from the essay not quite knowing exactly what I think about the postulations it offers up — or, indeed, what the author *himself* thinks about them — and I expect that I won’t be alone in this among its readers; but I definitely find myself *thinking* about them nevertheless, and this in what I experience as a highly productive manner. It seems to me desirable that *GLQ* should publish such pieces as this, considering that thoughtful provocation is one of the fundamental objectives of the journal, and I recommend that this essay itself be published, on the condition that the author . . . at least consider the possibility that he is misreading Darieck Scott when he suggests that, in his ‘Jungle Fever?’ essay, Scott proposes ‘rendering the interracial illegible as such’. It seems to me that Scott is *actually* suggesting the *impossibility* of such a project — just as is the author of ‘The Child with a Lion’; or that he is perhaps suggesting that, precisely *because* this project is impossible, we are necessarily compelled to proceed as though interracial relationships really *are* devoid of social signification” (*GLQ* anonymous reader-referee, June 1999). *GLQ* subject descriptors: Gay men. Afro-American gays. Interpersonal relations.

“The Child with a Lion” — *Humanities Abstracts* citation

“The writer discusses black-white interracial homosexuality from his perspective as a white male, recognizing the dubiousness of his attempt. He proceeds as if interracial intimacy were a problem of the text, the inexorable force of racial difference and its traces in writing implicating not only the writer/reader but language itself. Employing the techniques of montage and bricolage, he invokes a potentially infinite series of iterations of one specific stereotype of interracial male homosexuality that forces otherwise heterogeneous textual sources into writing about the situation of a ‘little white boy’ with a ‘big black man.’ He reveals that he is endeavoring not to authorize the stereotypical scenario with his incidental personal experiences but to redeem the utopia promised by the stereotype, the happiness the interracial symbolizes that causes it to be stigmatized by both white and black people. Subject descriptors: Homosexuality — United States. Sex attitudes. Intimacy (Psychology). United States — Race relations” (*Humanities Abstracts* © 2000 H. W. Wilson Company).

“The Child with a Lion” — literary turn and writing project
Chris Cutrone to Ken Warren, August 2001

When I wrote “The Child with a Lion,” I believed that the most fundamental social problems could be read critically in the characteristics of even the most marginal social phenomena, in this case manifestly abject intimate encounters — but in this way, my essay was meant to offer a critique of the genre of erotic memoir in its role of affirming personal experience; I maintained that personal experience itself should be brought to bear on its social context as a critical and not simply constitutive category. My procedure in “The Child with a Lion” was premised on Adorno’s observation, following Benjamin’s, that fundamental social forms could be discerned to be at work in even the most apparently extraordinary phenomena, when critically objectified as constellations and dialectical images. This is what motivated Benjamin’s attempt to “rescue” commodities themselves, following the art practices of Surrealism, focusing especially on those social objects rendered recently obsolete by the movements of capital — for isn’t there something antiquated and obsolescent, even nostalgic, about the romance of the interracial? Objects of the commodity form, broadly defined, e.g., including social subjects, are regarded by Benjamin in their guise as the ur-phenomena of society, in which the very latest objects of social life reveal traces of the most ancient processes of socialization, the natural itself regarded as a historical relic. Hence, the sphinx-like appearance of human physiognomic difference, imagined as “natural,” human beings themselves as artifacts of social history. — Adorno asserted that “the utopia of the qualitative . . . takes refuge . . . in the traits of fetishism” [*Minima Moralia* (Verso, 1978), 120], but the fetish is the product of the form of repression of empirical history effected by the symbolic, by identity. Benjamin stated that every document of civilization is simultaneously a document of barbarism, and this is a model of the trade-off inherent in the most fundamental dynamic categories of capitalist social forms, following Marx’s critique of them in *Capital*. This is a model for the procedure in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that regards enlightenment as myth and myth as already enlightenment, and it provides a point of departure for Adorno’s model of ideology critique, in contrast to the traditional Marxist economic base-ideological superstructure analysis of ideology as falsely reconciling and masking the reality of antagonistic socio-economic material interests.

In writing “The Child with a Lion,” I was unhappy with the choice of regarding American black-white “racial” difference either as a product of social history, narrowly defined, a mask for political economy, or as productive of or prior to social history, as a cultural-historical ingredient. I wanted a way of writing about racialized desire and the values of blackness and whiteness as objects of socially effective abstraction in precisely the sense that cultural accounts tend to obscure and traditional Marxism tends to “see through:” I wanted to go beyond the critique of racism as ideology obscuring social reality and the cultural-historical account of more or less effective social fictions. “The Child with a Lion” considers that perhaps it is the very lopsidedness and manifest inadequacies of conceptions of black-white racial difference in America that render the posited differences so available for constant re-deployment. If so, I am interested in how conceptions of racial identity function, how positing “difference,” heterogeneity, is itself only coherent from a societal perspective as a homogenizing move: not a static opposition modified over time, but a dynamic contradiction that partakes in its own reproduction. In “The Child with a Lion,” I was interested in how the very paradoxical and antinomial nature of racialized identity is not prohibitive but rather generative of social categories of black-white racial difference as a historical fact of American society. Hence, “The Child with a Lion” pushes on conceptions of racial identity aporetically while regarding their inexorable reality.

Adorno wrote about Benjamin's procedure that inspired "The Child with a Lion" that, The essay as form consists in the ability to regard historical moments, manifestations of the objective spirit, "culture," as though they were natural. Benjamin could do this as no one else. The totality of his thought is characterized by what may be called "natural history." . . . The French word for still-life, *nature morte*, could be written above the portals of his philosophical dungeons. The Hegelian [and Lukácsian] concept of "second nature," as the reification of self-estranged human relations, and also the Marxian category of "commodity fetishism" occupy key positions in Benjamin's work. He is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects — as in allegory — but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient, "ur-historical," and abruptly release their significance. Philosophy appropriates the fetishization of commodities for itself: everything must metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things. Benjamin's thought is so saturated with culture as its natural object that it swears loyalty to reification instead of flatly rejecting it. [Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," *Prisms* (MIT Press, 1981), 233]

Hence, "The Child with a Lion" deliberately participates in the reification of black-white racial difference, remaining spellbound while following through the most aporetic ramifications of such reification, all the while protesting against it — eschewing the authority of the exceptional or particular and emphasizing the general and even the stereotypical. In this way the forms of discontent themselves may be considered as part of the problem to be overcome, discontent as the basis for reproducing the problem. If indeed "the only way out is through," then this needs to be critically grasped as being a theory of the specifically modern social conditions of capitalism. Adorno stated in his essay "Society" that "the requirement that society must be defined through theory . . . is itself a theory of society." Adorno protested that Benjamin's allegorical procedure could degenerate into a wide-eyed presentation of the facts and arrive at the crossroads of positivism and magic, but Adorno tried to account for and critically grasp the socially determinate possibility of such a "bewitched" spot. Adorno offered a Benjaminian notion of mimesis to help theorize cultural forms, and this has been seized upon as a critique of reason, to argue for the mimetic against the conceptual, for the ineffable against the semiotic. But Adorno's critical theory tries to grasp the social determination of such an antinomy, grasping the specific ways the mimetic and the non-conceptual participate in the self-reproduction of capitalist social forms, how social processes can be characterized in terms of the mimetic as well as the conceptual. Hence, aesthetic effects, as forms of "non-conceptual knowledge," are intrinsic and not extrinsic to social forms of capitalism. In the theoretical *prolegomena* and *epilegomena* to my essay, I argued that this is the way the formal-aesthetic qualities of "The Child with a Lion" should be regarded.

The anonymous reader-referee for *GLQ* endorsed the publication of "The Child with a Lion" with the characterization of my essay as a "fascinatingly maddening engagement with the social politics of interracial male-male eroticism — maddening perhaps because of its peculiar combination of intensive idealist speculation (à la Hegel, Kant) and its insistence, nevertheless, on the irreducible character of certain material social facts (i.e., the intractability of race and racial difference)." The reader describes the "lack of centered-ness that this combination generates," a problem that my essay "offsets by provocative-ness — and by an estimable critical intelligence — the disorientation its highly associative character tends to produce." The reader describes coming away from my essay "not quite knowing exactly what I think about the postulations it offers up — or, indeed, what the author *himself* thinks about them — and I expect that I

won't be alone in this among its readers; but I definitely find myself *thinking* about them nevertheless, and this in what I experience as a highly productive manner.”

I want to develop the social-theoretical basis for critically grasping the productive paradox thus described. Rather than regarding the aphoristic essay form or even dialectical theory as being themselves emancipatory, following Adorno, I want to emphasize how these procedures are symptomatic as well as diagnostic of society. Adorno does not endorse the essay as form so much as he seeks to account for its socially determinate possibilities. Susan Buck-Morss, for one, in *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, describes how Benjamin furnished a model of “symptomology” that inspired Adorno’s work. Conventionally, such recourse to “symptomology” is ascribed to Adorno’s pessimistic appraisal of the potential for the emancipatory social transformation of late capitalism. But I want to argue that Adorno considers the socially symptomatic aspects of, e.g., modern art practices, as providing moments for illuminating the modern forms of social mediation themselves. The ways in which such practices might be supposed to point beyond society reveal the ways in which the social forms of capitalism might point beyond themselves. It is not a matter of art against society, aesthetic strategies in the face of blocked social potential, but rather discovering the unfulfilled potentials of capitalist social forms in those suggested by the production of art. The presence of the aesthetic is the presence of social opacity; Adorno’s social-critical aesthetics of the “primacy of the object” is an attempt to get at capitalism as the dynamic social context for a subject-object dialectic. Adorno’s aesthetics is meant to be the culmination and “proof” of his critical social theory, and not the advocacy of an extrinsic standpoint “not yet subsumed” by capitalism. But what is “not yet subsumed” is constantly re-posed by the activity of capitalist social forms themselves: it is an ineradicable moment, and part and parcel, not a contradiction of the form of social totality to which it helps give rise. Perhaps the most avant-garde aesthetic practices provide no way out other than advancing the dynamic categories of modern society: nothing has proven more subversive or revolutionary than capitalism itself. Adorno is said by his *epigoni* to have resisted the “literary turn” because of his ethical commitment to irreducible material social facts, but such an apologia is as much a non-dialectical travesty as is the literary turn itself. There is no melancholic gaze from without society, but Adorno’s critical theory itself and the possibilities of praxis it demonstrates implicate themselves in the object of critique, capitalism.

“The Child with a Lion” — morality and style (I)

What Theodor W. Adorno calls the essay as form [*der Essay als Form*] consists in the ability to regard moments, manifestations of the objective spirit, “culture,” as though they were natural. For Adorno, Walter Benjamin could do this as no one else. “The Child with a Lion” follows what Adorno calls Benjamin’s “bequest” to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically, for what transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which does not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Interracial intimacy in America resists both tendencies towards what reactionary paranoia colloquially refers to as the potential for “race war” and the liberal project of overcoming historical segregation and thus liquidating racial identification as a salient social relation. For “The Child with a Lion,” “racial” difference is characterized by what may be called “natural history,” hence the essay is drawn to those aspects of racial identity which reveal it to be something petrified, frozen or obsolete, devoid of vitality and fossil-like, yet remaining a perpetual mark of (American) civilization. The French word for still-life, *nature morte*, could be written above the portals of its philosophical dungeons, for the true content of the perpetuation of racialized identity in America is life which does not live. The Hegelian concept of “second nature,” as the reification of self-estranged human relations, and also the Marxian category of “commodity fetishism” occupy key positions for the critique of racial identity in “The Child with a Lion.” “The Child with a Lion” is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects — as in allegory — but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient, “ur-historical,” and abruptly release their significance. In this way, philosophy might appropriate the fetishization of commodities for itself: everything must metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things. Hence, “The Child with a Lion” swears loyalty to reification instead of flatly rejecting it. This is the origin of the essay’s tendency to cede its power to its objects, which remain diametrically opposed to its critical project. However, by permitting thought to get “too close” to its object, the object becomes as foreign as an everyday, familiar thing under a microscope. The thought presses close to its object, seeks to touch it, smell it, taste it and so thereby transform itself. Philosophy condenses into experience so that it may still have hope. But hope only appears in fragmented form. “The Child with a Lion” overexposes its objects for the sake of the hidden contours which one day, in the state of reconciliation, will become evident, but in doing so it reveals the chasm separating that day and life as it is. In the paradox of its “impossible possibility,” “the utopia of interracial intimacy” overcomes the dream of reconciliation without betraying it and making itself an accomplice in the foreclosure of racial identity: that love of difference — in this case, between people of different “races” in America — shall not be. It is nothing other than the explication and elucidation of the paradox of “the utopia of interracial intimacy,” with the only means it has at its disposal, the all too compelling stereotyped images of racialized desire, that drives “The Child with a Lion” to immerse itself without reserve into the world of multiplicity.

[Language adapted from Theodor W. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin” (1965), *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (MIT Press, 1981), 233, 240-241.]

“The Child with a Lion”— morality and style (II)

“The Child with a Lion” attempts to exemplify Adorno’s negative dialectic, and is informed by the idea that concepts, as ordinarily used, are distorting and mask social reality. Following Adorno, “The Child with a Lion” must find an alternative way of using concepts, and, hence, the relation of a thought or a concept to what it is intended to cover, its object, is problematic. It follows from this that standard modes of communication are also inadequate, since they depend on the ordinary use of concepts. For “The Child with a Lion,” the question of communicating its ideas becomes the question of what a reader should experience when confronting the text. “The Child with a Lion” uses several stylistic strategies in the attempt to present the objects of its ideas and to “see beyond” the subject. When “The Child with a Lion” discusses concepts, it uses passive and impersonal constructions: such concepts are not attributed directly to “us,” but are personified by dramatic metaphor. Other stylistic strategies are directed at the experience of a reader and may be described as “shock,” “exaggeration,” “fantasy” or “provocative formulation.” An idea thus “provocatively formulated” may be left and not enlarged upon, but may be restated later in the text with different emphasis. This gives an impression of confusion, but it in fact amounts to a set of parallaxes, apparent displacements of an object due to changes of observation point. This is quite consistent with the idea that the object cannot be captured, and that a *set* of presentations may best approximate it. “The Child with a Lion” is ironic in the standard senses of the word: “the use of words to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning,” “an expression or utterance marked by a deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning,” and, in the dramatic sense, “apparent perversity of fate or circumstance.” The convictions of “The Child with a Lion” are often arrogantly stated, however, the essay must be read from a methodological point of view and not literally. For “The Child with a Lion” is dramatizing the ideas constellating around a “little white boy” with a “big black man,” presenting them *as if* they were absolutely and literally true, in order to undermine them more effectively.

[Language adapted from Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (Columbia University Press, 1978), 11-26.]