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## Susan Sontag, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Politics of Queer Biography

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Queer autobiography and biography are vital tools for making visible identities and life stories that have historically been rendered silent, invisible, and unnarratable. Forms like the autobiographical coming out story, for example, assume a mimetic relationship between life experience and narrative, culminating in personal liberation and political visibility. While autobiography can provide a first-hand account of queer experience, biography can amend the historical record by recuperating queer lives of the past; both genres, then, seem to support the project of LGBTQ politics.

Queer biography, specifically, can be understood as an “activist genre,” according to Melanie Micir, because it aims to “transform long-standing social conventions” (*Passion Projects* 7). Intergenerational transmission of queer experience through biography serves contemporary publics eager for connection with queer predecessors, yet, Micir asserts, it is usually undertaken on behalf of “silent and vulnerable subjects of biographical preparations who, no longer living, cannot ‘offer meaningful consent to their representation by others’” (“Living in Two Tenses” 121). The question of how we read queer lives of the past remains unsettled, not merely around the issue of consent but also in relation to the politics and ethics of rendering them legible through contemporary understandings of sexual identification. Queer theory— particularly the queer historiographic work associated with scholars such as Michael Warner, Heather Love and Valerie Traub—has shown that the scholarly project of tracing the historical construction of sexuality, and its culturally and historically specific emergence as homosexuality in the late nineteenth century, exists in tension with the political and affective allure of reclaiming all non-normative

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sexualities of the past as queer or proto-queer. This identificatory reclamation serves a progress narrative and risks erasing the complexities of sexual identification in the past *and* the present. The critical desire for recuperation through narratives of LGBTQ progress risks, as Heather Love asserts, “transforming the base materials of social abjection into the gold of political agency” (18). Can biography, a genre seemingly wedded to heteronormativity and expressed in a teleological narrative form, provide nuanced accounts of queer lives?

This paper considers recent biographies of two writers—Lorraine Hansberry and Susan Sontag—who were unwilling or unable to come out during their lives and whose stories and identities are therefore not easily assimilable to contemporary narratives of LGBTQ liberation that rely on progress and visibility. While Sontag was notoriously reticent about her sexuality and maintained an aesthetic and political impersonality, Hansberry, although she broke barriers as the first Black woman to write a Broadway play, was constrained by respectability politics, and died before she could see social and cultural norms change. In Imani Perry’s *Looking for Lorraine* (2018) and Benjamin Moser’s *Sontag: Her Life and Work* (2019), both biographers reclaim their subjects as lesbian writers. I aim to compare how Moser and Perry navigate the politics of recuperation, as well as the conventions biography, a genre which is perceived in queer theory as particularly susceptible to producing sexuality as a site of truth for queer lives. Ultimately, I ask what biographical methods align with these queer theoretical aims, and how biography, long considered an inferior object of analysis in queer theory, might be recognized as having the same potential for aesthetic and political innovation as autobiography.

### **Queer Theory and the Normativity of Biography**

Heather Love’s ambivalence toward politically motivated recuperation is in keeping with queer theory’s stance toward biography more generally. Lauren Berlant describes the genre of the life, or “bionarrative,” as “a most destructive conventionalized form of normativity” that is at odds with “queer, socialist/anti-

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capitalist, and feminist work [which] has been about multiplying the ways we know that people have lived and can live” (182). Similarly, Gayatri Gopinath contends that biography risks “enshrin[ing] a model of autonomous selfhood in liberal humanist terms” (84). Although she is writing about autobiography, Bidy Martin describes how it upholds the very essentialist conceptions of sexual identity that queer theory has worked to dismantle, as it “suggests that sexual identity not only modifies but essentially defines a life” (381). Martin’s concern evokes the longstanding connection between biography and psychoanalysis, as the case study and later the psychobiography both understood the biographical subject’s “hidden motives” and sexuality as the key to understanding the life as a whole (Marcus 217). It is through the confession and narration of sexuality that sexuality emerges not just as an act, but an identity, as Foucault famously contends in *The History of Sexuality*.

Biography risks perpetuating, through narrative, an understanding of homosexuality that queer theorists have worked to dismantle over the past three decades. There is a direct line from Foucault to the turn toward queer temporality and anti-relational queer theory, which have made narrative and teleology the bugaboos of the field. In Tyler Bradway’s recent intervention against this tendency, he explains that, “influenced by psychoanalysis and poststructuralism, queer theory understands narrative as a conservative form that contains the unruly energies of sexuality” and “straightens perversity through sequence” (711). Bradway reminds us that the anti-relational queer theory associated with Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani has posited queerness as a radical rupture of a social world that is structured by heteronormativity and reproductive futurism. From the marriage plot to biography, and other formally conventional genres, narrative is tied to heteronormativity, while antinarrativity, Bradway asserts, is “a default principle that underwrites much work in the field” (711).

In short, queer theorists have remained skeptical of biography because of its seemingly easy alliance with liberal LGBTQ politics, essentialist understandings of sexuality, and heteronormative narrative structure. This has led to what Wendy Moffat describes as a rift between lesbian and gay social

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history and queer theory, which has “cut itself off from some of its richest evidence”—real lived lives—to focus instead on “track[ing] and expos[ing] the operations of power” (213). While this division is less evident in autobiography, where experimentation with form often links politics to lived experience, the same has not occurred with biography, due to both the genre’s supposed heteronormativity and the unequal power relations between the biographer and the biographical subject. Biography has remained aligned with the field of LGBT Studies and the feminist recuperative projects of the 1970s and 1980s, while queer theory, influenced by post-structuralism’s turn away from the individual, continues to devalue the form.

Despite this rift between queer theory and biography, biographical criticism has troubled the connection between the normativity of narrative and the normativity of a life since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. It is no coincidence that some of the first writers who raised these questions were queer members of the artistically and sexually experimental Bloomsbury group. It could even be argued that the experimental biographical form and a new public consciousness of homosexuality as an identity emerged simultaneously. Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, both practitioners of the “New Biography” in the 1920s, broke with the conventions of the Victorian biography, “a parti-colored, hybrid monstrous birth,” according to Woolf, that uncritically celebrated heroic masculinity in multi-volume works whose chapters were structured around heteronormative markers of a successful life, such as marriage, childbirth, and career (151). Although far removed from queer theory and queer biography of the early twenty-first century, Woolf’s critical writing on biography, not to mention her own experiments with biography, including *Orlando* (1928), suggests that narrative biography is not inimical to an anti-identitarian understanding of sexuality and even subjectivity itself. In “The New Biography,” (1927), Woolf calls for a new form that accomplishes the hitherto impossible task of fusing the “granite” of truth with the intangible “rainbow” of personality (149). She contends that a good biography seamlessly combines these two ingredients to accurately portray the individual self in historical time. Yet, Woolf also

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questions whether the “truthful transmission of personality” is a worthwhile goal, as the self, like a rainbow, is impossible to capture in its multiplicity. Biographies of the future, she argues, will be most successful if they can balance these two elements while refusing the reduction and stasis involved in representing personality, and sexuality, too, as fully knowable to the biographer. Woolf’s writing on biography demonstrates that the seeming opposition between biography and queer theory in the contemporary moment—one associated with narrative and heteronormativity and the other with formal experimentation and an anti-identitarian sexuality—is not an inescapable framework. Indeed, I would like to suggest that biographers who look backward to modernist experimentations with genre, rather than those that impose a conventional form onto the life, can use them as a model for undoing this opposition.

### **“a lifelong moral hatred of the self”: Susan Sontag and Psychobiography**

Moser’s *Sontag: Her Life and Work*, the first official biography of Susan Sontag, does not attempt to trouble the biographical conventions that impose a normative structure onto a queer life. The biography, which won the Pulitzer for biography and autobiography in 2020, was described by the selection committee as “An authoritatively constructed work told with pathos and grace, that captures the writer’s genius and humanity alongside her addictions, sexual ambiguities and volatile enthusiasms.” It is an 800-page tome, constructed through Moser’s unprecedented access to hundreds of interviews with Sontag’s family and friends and both published and unpublished archival materials. The biography works through the conventional methods of genealogy and chronology, beginning with the story of Sontag’s grandparents immigrating to the United States, and ending with her death, with chapters between focused on her work and relationships. Aside from its formal conventionality, its significance, as the Pulitzer description emphasizes lies in Moser’s “authority” in exposing the unsavory aspects of Sontag’s personal life, which provide contrast with the impenetrable figure known for the cultivated combination of intellectual and erotic appeal that made her one of the most enduring cultural icons of the twentieth century. Although

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Sontag consented to the publication of her diaries shortly before her death in 2004, and an unofficial biography appeared in 2000, she notoriously kept her personal life, especially her sexuality, separate from her stylized public persona. While her relationships with women are a well-known fact now, this is in no small part due to Annie Leibovitz's memorialization of their relationship in *A Photographer's Life, 1990-2005*, which outed them as a couple and presented unprecedented intimate images of Sontag's body, including controversial photos of her disfigured corpse. These photographs, Nancy K. Miller argues, confront the reader with "a biographical vulnerability of the flesh rarely alluded to by Sontag herself," and "are far less easy to defend as belonging to an ethical project and point toward the fatal flaw of the celebrity photographer: the inability precisely to distinguish between what is and isn't in the interest of the photograph's objectified subject" (208; 212).

Moser's biography enacts an equivalent form of personal exposure on his objectified and unconsenting subject. This is not to suggest that the biography should have flatteringly maintained Sontag's invulnerable (and heterosexual) persona. Yet, Moser does not merely include Sontag's sexuality as one aspect of her life: he makes it her life's defining fact. Sontag's pathological disavowal of her embodiment—traced back to her relationship with her mother—is responsible for all of her flaws, from her failed relationships; to her lack of empathy; and to her lies, exaggerations, and self-hatred. He diagnoses her as having "remained, almost to the point of caricature, the adult child of an alcoholic" and cites psychological literature on the long-term effects of closetedness: "Hiding and passing as heterosexual becomes a lifelong moral hatred of the self; [...] a maze of corruptions, petty lies, and half truths that spoil social relations in family and friendship" (33; 635). Given that Moser assumes the epistemological authority over his subject in the manner of analyst, it is no surprise that in the *Gay and Lesbian Review* Irene Javors calls the work a "psycho-biography," a genre that Martin describes above as guilty of contributing to the pathologization of homosexuality. The biography aims to reveal what is

behind the mask Sontag constructed “to conceal her sexuality and personal self, one that she never managed to take off, but instead covered it with another, the identity of the famous writer” (629).

In its very structure, then, the biography falls into the trap that has made queer theorists skeptical of the genre’s capacity for rendering a queer life. Beyond this, Moser contends that Sontag’s closeted sexuality explains her aesthetic and political projects. She saw the whole world, including the self, as an “aesthetic phenomenon” and was “indifferent to politics” (199). He describes her writing on illness, sexuality, and AIDS as her “worst” because she left the personal, specifically her body, out of the work (400). Failing to mention her cancer diagnosis in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and her connection to the gay community in *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1989), Sontag “inadvertently illustrates the very thing [she] denounces. Its pages reveal how metaphor can quickly slide into obfuscation, abstraction, lying” (519). Moser’s own politics emerge in his comparison of Sontag with Adrienne Rich, who was willing to name her lesbian-feminist experience, to talk about her body, and risk exclusion from the mainstream critical establishment, whereas Sontag preferred to be the exceptional woman among men, to never identify as a woman writer or a gay writer. Moser suggests that Sontag’s closetedness was increasingly selfish and unethical as women and gay people made political and social gains: “If the culture had changed,” Moser concludes, “Sontag had not” (629).

Through his singular focus on exposure, Moser repeats the “fatal flaw” of the celebrity photographer; he fails to undo the binary of the public and private Sontags, relying on dichotomies—the separation of mind and body, and appearance and reality—to structure his analysis, even though Sontag herself was opposed to this understanding of the relationship between surface and interiority. She argued that camp, an inherently queer genre, relied on playfulness with the construction of appearances; and makes a related argument in “Against Interpretation.” Rather than consider how artifice and the construction of personas have been a survival strategy and aesthetic choice for generations of queer writers and artists, from Gertrude Stein to Andy Warhol, Moser condemns Sontag’s impersonality because

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it frustrates interpretive practices that demand queer sexual expressivity. This analysis depends on a model of LGBTQ politics where autobiographical transparency supports representation, and closetedness stands for repression and political indifference, leaving little room for non-mimetic aesthetic modes and conceptualizations of queerness that precede its consolidation as an identity. Impersonality and abstraction, the refusal to make oneself legible to dominant political paradigms, have also been recognized as a queer aesthetic practice, particularly in recent work on queer form. While this does not excuse Sontag's political indifference, it is important to recognize the right of queer artists to refuse to speak on behalf of a group they are presumed to represent. Moser's biographical method ultimately falls short of recognizing the potential queerness of Sontag's refusal to be seen, knowable, or interpretable. His attempt to reclaim Sontag as a lesbian—but a politically suspect one—appears to confirm queer theory's suspicion towards biography and to reinforce the affiliation of narrative and normativity.

### **“third person memoir”: Lateral Relationality as Biographical Method**

Although Lorraine Hansberry was just three years older than Sontag, and they moved in some of the same intellectual and artistic circles in New York in the early 1960s, they are rarely considered part of the same generation. Their preoccupations were, of course, very different. Sontag had just broken into the elite intellectual world of the *Partisan Review* and Hansberry was catapulted to fame after the success of *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Yet, for both, their intellectual flourishing came as they broke away from early marriages and began to explore their desire for women. However, for different reasons, they were each motivated to separate the personal from their public personas, which seems to facilitate accusations of closetedness. Sontag, as we have seen, found herself in the impossible position of being the exceptional token woman among an elite male literary establishment. Hansberry, who came out of a Black bourgeois environment, had already risked enough with her public commitment to communism; to be a visible lesbian would have taken her too far beyond the norm of Black respectability she was expected to embody. And for both,



their relationships with women have only recently become public information. Hansberry's queerness, less open of a secret than Sontag's, did not become "official" public knowledge until after her husband's death and after a previously restricted box in her archive became accessible, even though lesbian scholars and activists, including Adrienne Rich, had attempted to claim her as part of a lesbian feminist genealogy as early as 1979 (Mumford).

Although both biographies are recuperative projects that correct the queer historical record, Perry's approach breaks with biographical conventions. It is not just Perry's title, *Looking for Lorraine*, that is inspired by Isaac Julien's 1989 avant-garde film, *Looking for Langston*; she also draws on his archival, fragmentary, queer method. Julien's film reclaims Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance as part of a queer genealogy, yet sets the film, as Kara Keeling argues, "in an imaginary space of shifting and interlocking temporalities" which, crucially, allows the film to avoid "producing or asserting a historical truth that might become a ground for redeeming Hughes's homosexuality" (572). Rather than attempt an exhaustive account of Hansberry's life, as in what Berlant refers to as a "bionarrative," Perry takes a non-linear, thematic approach, and calls the book "less of a biography than a genre yet to be named—maybe a third person memoir" (1). While organized in a loosely chronological order, *Looking for Lorraine* begins with an introduction that foregrounds the writer's relationship to her subject, and includes chapters organized around Hansberry's relationships. Relationality, a major tenet of the life-affirming queer theory of José Muñoz, is central to the future-oriented, sustaining formation of bonds among queers of color, which reject the implicitly privileged stance of anti-relational queer theory. Repeating the truism that "all biography is autobiography at least in part," Perry recognizes that her personal motivation for writing the biography is to honor Hansberry as a pioneer and role model; she does not close off her own relation to Hansberry or the affect produced by that relation (4). With this acknowledgment, Perry breaks down the distinction between biography and memoir and shows the constructedness of the biographer's authority

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over the biographical subject. She thus avoids the model of life writing that “enshrines a model of autonomous selfhood in liberal humanist terms” that Gopinath refers to above.

Perry claims Hansberry as part of a Black, feminist, and queer genealogy, yet deliberately works to avoid the violence of both archival erasure *and* the unacknowledged personal motivation for writing biography. Wendy Moffat, drawing on Eve Sedgwick, explains how conventional biographical methods run counter to queer ways of reading (215). As an alternative to “paranoid reading,” motivated by an hermeneutics of suspicion, which has characterized much queer theoretical work, Sedgwick “explore[s] some ways around the topos of depth or hiddenness,” particularly the critical positions of “beneath,” “behind,” and “beyond,” and proposes “beside” as an alternative (8). Moffat explains how “Sedgwick rejected teleology...in favor of an unfixed narrative” but she “did not forsake narrative for the promise of antinarrative” (215). Working “beside” Lorraine Hansberry, Perry uses a queer biographical method, one of lateral relation, that refuses to seal off her personal connection to the work and avoids a stance of archival authority, particularly towards the subject of Hansberry’s sexuality. Affect and relationality are fixtures of a biographical practice that avoids normativity without forsaking narrative altogether.

While Perry’s acknowledgment of Hansberry’s sexuality is groundbreaking, this is not the focus of the biography, and she deliberately avoids making assumptions that might serve a presentist political agenda. Of a letter suggesting but not confirming Hansberry’s first relationship with a woman, Perry writes,

I decide to leave the mystery intact. The task of the biographer is always incomplete. No matter how meticulous she takes herself to be, the biographer mustn't venture from archaeology to intrusion or wild speculation, despite the intriguing possibilities of the latter two. The word scratched out could mean a number of things: secrecy, an inside joke, a romantic reference, a lifelong attachment. (25)

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Coming up against the limits of the archive, Perry does not try to fill the gaps and provide closure, as this is beyond the scope of a biographer who recognizes the historical violence of both elision and distortion—sometimes through hypervisibility—of queer lives, particularly for queers of color.

Instead of demonstrating Hansberry's queerness through archival evidence, Perry shows how Hansberry lived a queer life through her commitment to politics, which counters the heterosexual, assimilationist version of Hansberry that has long existed in the public imagination. Despite the Black left's later rejection of Hansberry, Perry shows that her politics were not only more radical than has been acknowledged—her first job was with Paul Robeson's *Freedom* newspaper, funded by the American Communist Party, for example—but also involved an analysis of Black freedom that was connected to both global anticolonial movements and a robust feminism. In a previously unpublished letter to *The Ladder*, an early lesbian publication, Hansberry praises their creation of a space that does not “foster any strict separatist notions, homo or hetero” but recognizes the need for solidarity among all women (80). She was ahead of her time in recognizing, in 1957, that “the hostility toward same-gender-loving people had the same root as the domination of women” (80). Perry devotes a chapter to Hansberry's relationships with James Baldwin and Nina Simone—referring to them as a “trinity” of queer “geniuses”—and explores how they sustained each other through a queer practice of friendship rooted in shared investments in revolutionary art and politics (118). With this organizational choice, Hansberry affirms relationality, rather than heteronormative markers of a successful life, as fundamental to queer survival and flourishing.

Unlike Moser, Perry does not condemn Hansberry for the constraints that made the public expression of her sexuality impossible. Working from a lateral position that avoids simplification and reduction, she recognizes that because queer lives exceed the limitations of the archive, they are not easily assimilable to the conventional form of the life and contemporary forms of LGBTQ identity. Yet, Perry shows how biography can still operate as an activist genre, one that, without relying on logics of exposure, sexual expressivity, and heteronormative temporality, nevertheless establishes a place for Hansberry in the

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queer canon and encourages the cross-generational queer affiliation desired by biographers and readers alike.

### **The Futures of Queer Form**

This essay began by asking how biography, a genre queer theory has historically characterized as a normative form, can tell the story of a queer life without undermining its queerness. I have suggested that biographies that draw on the methods of queer theory and recognize the historical contingency of identity, particularly for reading queer lives of the past, provide a model for addressing this problem. Yet, this is not simply a matter of asking how biographers might be more responsible about the ethics of posthumously outing what Micir refers to as the “silent and vulnerable subjects of biographical preparations.” Queer scholarship must continue to take biography and other popular forms seriously lest it risk further alienating itself from the lived experiences of queer people, whose activism and survival are often sustained by understanding their identities and histories through conventional narrative forms.

The recent proliferation of scholarship on queer form and queer narratology shows that the field is experiencing a shift away from the celebration of aesthetically experimental forms as a privileged site of radical politics, and that a turn to form need not reproduce sexual identity as a site of truth. As Bradway argues, uncoupling the association between experimental form and queer politics, on the one hand, and narrativity and neoliberal LGBTQ politics, on the other, challenges the field’s institutionalization of particular objects of analysis as appropriately queer (713). While Bradway argues that narrative “can contest heteronormative kinship plots” and facilitate queer relationality, Kadji Amin, Amber Musser and Roy Perez, in their introduction to a special issue of *ASAP/Journal* on queer form, show that formalism is not an inherently conservative project. A turn to formalism might work as a strategy of resistance to the expectation that queer people, and particularly queer people of color, visibly attest to the conditions of their oppression by producing work that is “all content and no form” (234). This scholarship shows that

the field has begun to relinquish its attachment to antinarrativity, antirelationality, and rupture as its preferred affective structures and modes of analysis. To continue to serve as a meaningful method for understanding how queer lives of the past informs our situatedness in the political present, queer theory might see the examination of the forms through which our affective investment in these lives emerges, not as a burden, but as a condition of possibility for future scholarship.

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