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Queer...

by

William Bybee

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of Master of

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

To the Graduate Faculty:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of William Bybee find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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QUEER...

Thesis Abstract—Idaho State University (2021)

This thesis & exhibition examine the cultural repressions and expressions of queerness since the 1940s- primarily in America. Furthermore, I examine and focus on Queer abstraction and the use of codification within works of art. Queer artists have continued to make art even when it was illegal to do so and it is time for the queer community to claim their place in history.

Key Words: Codes, Codification, Queer Abstraction

QUEER...

In 1951 Edward Sagarin, a professor of sociology and criminology (under his pen name Donald Webster Cory) published his book *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach* and wrote that the most profound and overriding experience of being gay in the postwar years was that of being different from mainstream society.

The dominant factor in my life...towering above all others, is a consciousness that I am different. In one all-important respect, I am unlike the great mass of people always around me, and the knowledge of this fact is with me at all times, influencing profoundly my every thought, each minute activity, and all my aspirations. It is inescapable, not only this being different, but more than that, this constant awareness of a dissimilarity.¹

This experience of dissimilarity from “the great mass of people”² was one which permeated every aspect of homosexual consciousness, saturating every waking moment, thought, and feeling. As a gay man in the 1950s, Cory writes, one could not help but think “the fateful words: I am different.”³ This difference was widely insisted upon (and enforced) by prominent figures of church, state, and mainstream society as well as by experts in medical professions. This feeling of “I am different” still exists today in 2021. We, as a Queer people, have always been there. Throughout history we have used art to tell our stories. In this thesis I will examine Queer abstraction and the use of codification within works of art. Questions I am addressing include:

- What is the history of the treatment of the LGBTQ+ population in America since the 1940s?

¹ Gavin Butt, *{Between You and Me} Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p51.

² Gavin Butt, *{Between You and Me} Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p51.

³ Gavin Butt, *{Between You and Me} Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p51.

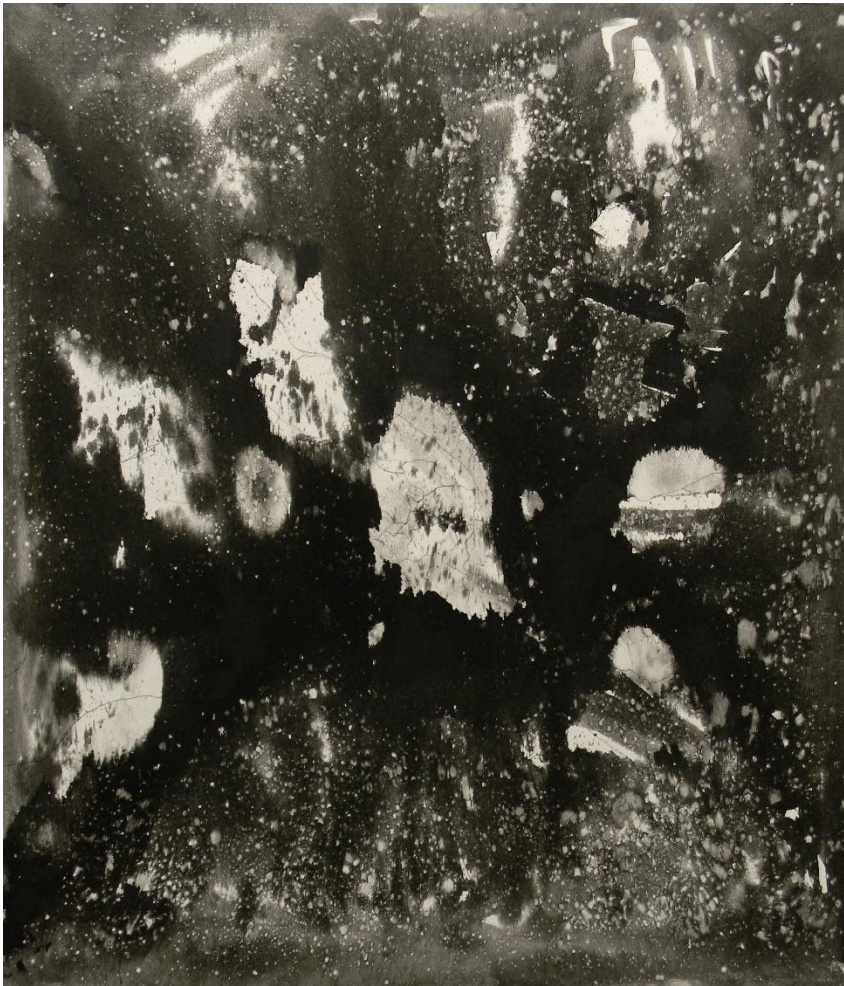
- What is the traditional way that Queer artists have made art and what codification have they used to communicate with their audience?
- What is Queer Abstraction and how is it in use today?

In addition to these questions, I present my own use of Queer codification in my exhibition as well as present contemporary artists using codes.

As a Queer, white male that grew up in a rural town in Idaho, I did not have a lot of Queer people in my life. The only Queer people that I knew were the abusive ex-husband of my stepmother, the people that my father dealt with as a police officer, and the people I heard about in school that were dying of AIDS. Also, you cannot forget the “sinners” that my church told me about and how they are “evil and going to Hell.” Like Cory, I too, knew that I was different, and I did not want to be different. During my first year in graduate school, I was struggling with how to make art that was relevant and not just abstract. As a painter I had made a decision to not be openly political in my work. Painting is my safe space where I did not have to be political and make work about fighting for my rights and life. Abstraction was the language I was using as a painter. I regarded my work as a “safe space.” I did research into the very fact that abstract art is restorative and calming according to research in neurobiology. I am aware that the issue of “safety” is a reoccurring theme in my paintings including safe spaces. During this struggle, I came across a post on my social media page about an artist presentation for an exhibition at the Des Moines Art Center called *Queer Abstraction*; David J. Getsy, an art historian that works at the Chicago Art Institution, was to be speaking about the exhibition. A couple of months later I found a video of Getsy discussing Queer Abstraction from the exhibition. It changed the way I looked at art and how abstraction played a part in this world of queerness.

I started a series of paintings of research that used maps, which led me into the killing of

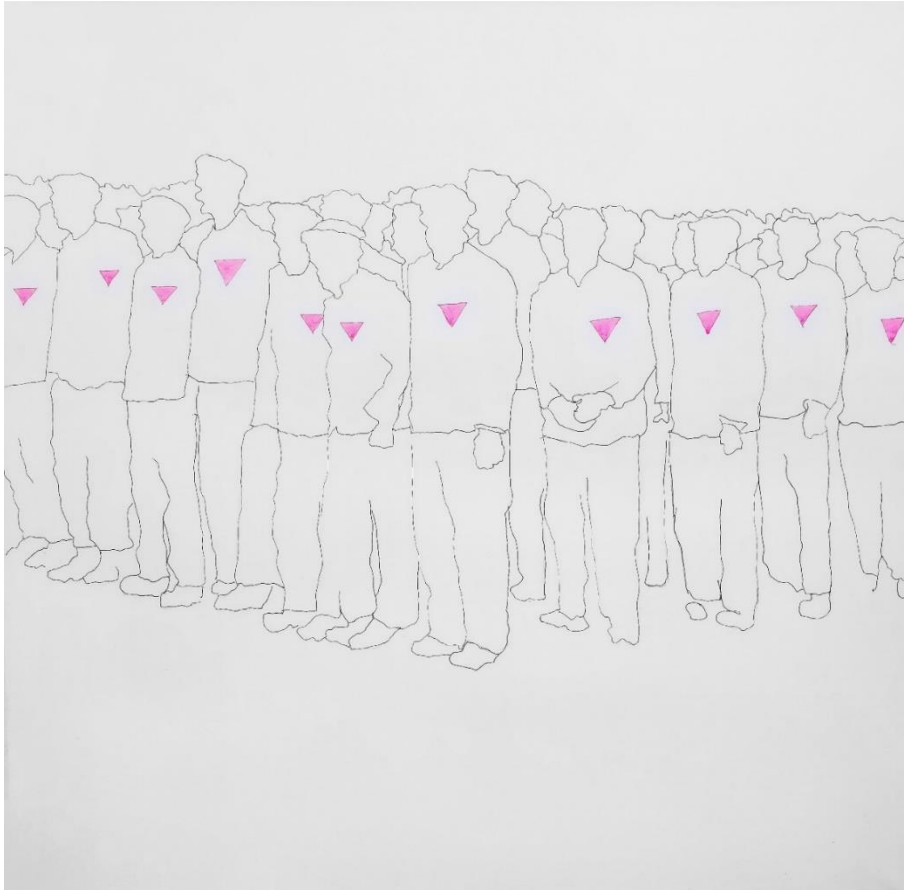
Queer people by the Nazi regime, and this led to the examining of contemporary concerns of queerness. After World War 1, Queer people of the world started to group together in major cities and to build their own communities. These areas are what have become known as Gay Ghettos, the first of which was in Berlin's Schöneberg (Image 1) formed in the 1920s. This area was a hub for safety and growth in the Queer community and remained so until the Nazis came to power in the early 1930s.



(Image 1) William Bybee, *Berlin*, 2020, 40 x 46-inches, India Ink on canvas.

The persecution of the Queer population under Nazi Germany began in 1933 and lasted until 1945. The Gestapo compiled lists of Queer people, an estimated 100,000 were arrested and about 50,000 were officially sentenced. An estimated 15,000 men were sent to the concentration camps

(Image 2) here it is estimated as high as 65% were killed.⁴ My paintings serve as a reminder of what has happened to us as a people, so it will not happen again. My work and this thesis examine the cultural repressions and expressions of queerness since the 1940s- primarily in America, my own cultural heritage, as I look at systems and structures that I inherited and that influence me as an artist and Queer man.



(Image 2) William Bybee, *Concentration Camp*, 2020, 36 x 36-inches, Acrylic on canvas.

⁴ United State Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Persecution of Homosexuals in the Third Reich," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, [Persecution of Homosexuals in the Third Reich | The Holocaust Encyclopedia \(ushmm.org\)](https://www.ushmm.org/learn/encyclopedia/articles/persecution-of-homosexuals-in-the-third-reich), Accessed on [02/17/2021].

HISTORY OF QUEER PEOPLE

In 1945 the United States was in a post-World War II boom. The economy was thriving, and America was finally at “peace.” The middle class was the most financially stable it had been in a long time. People moved from the country to the suburbs of the major cities. The baby boom was happening and became the driving force of the American engine.

Even though there was a sense of peace, the political world of the United States was focused on the beginning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union (1949.) With the rise of communism in Europe and other parts of the world, it was not long until suspicions of communism in America arose. In 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy launched a hearing in the Senate that would become known as the ‘Red Scare.’ These hearings were used to search for hidden Communists, but they also initiated a witch hunt to find all homosexuals employed in the federal government, known as the ‘Lavender Scare.’ At this time homosexuals were considered a security risk because they could be blackmailed for federal government secrets or be outed as a homosexual. In 1947, the United States Park Police created a sex perversion elimination program in Washington D.C. A year later, congress passed act (U.S.C. 1940 edition, title 19, sec. 1524) for the treatment of sexual psychopaths in the nation’s capital, which facilitated the arrest and punishment of people who acted on same-sex desire and labeled them as mentally ill. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in 1953, signed executive order #10450, which set security standards for federal employment. This would remain in place until President Clinton ended the ban in 1995. Sexual perversion was added to a list of behaviors that would keep a person from holding a position in the government. It barred homosexuals from having or receiving a security clearance. This caused hundreds of gay people to be forcibly outed and fired from federal employment.

By the mid1950s similar policies were drafted and enacted by state and local governments. Some federal employees were fired because of “guilt of association.”⁵ In New York City, laws against “degenerate disorderly conduct” applied to anyone perceived as signaling homosexuality through dress, hairstyle, deportment, or even topics of conversation: “Two men were arrested on the evidence that they were discussing the opera.”⁶ Other cities, like New York, made it a crime for bars to serve alcohol to homosexuals. Starting in 1930, the motion picture production code restricted any positive depictions of homosexuals by Hollywood.

The Cold War and the government’s repression of homosexuals made living a life openly as a Queer person exceedingly difficult and illegal. Sexual secrecy, in general, and the secret of homosexuality animated much of the post war American culture. Jonathan D. Katz, art historian and a Queer studies scholar, said it best in his essay “Committing the Perfect Crime.”

Pro-foundly cold war, which is to say, bifurcated split between public and private. The cold war had generalized the mobilization of the bifurcated social identities, such that what was historically a specifically queer mode was increasingly writ large across culture.⁷

The cold war, repression, and climate of sexual secrecy caused American people to force the Queer population to retreat further into the closet. The Queer world at this time was moving much like the heteronormative world, “gay men seeking to escape middle-class conformity gravitated to the San Francisco Bay Area and a few other major urban centers.”⁸ This growth in

⁵ James Gleason, “LGBT History: The Lavender Scare,” NGLCC.org, National LGBT Chamber of Commerce, October 3, 2017, March 5, 2020. <https://www.nglcc.org/blog/lgbt-history-lavender-scare>.

⁶ Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 157.

⁷ Jonathan D Katz, “‘Committing the Perfect Crime’: Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art,” *Art Journal*, 67 (2008): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20068581>.

⁸ Richard G Mann, “American Art: Gay Male, 1900-1969,” *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*, edited by Claude J. Summers, (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc. 2004), 17.

Queer populations allowed Queer communities to emerge. With the emergence of gay communities, gay organizations arose. In 1950, one of the earliest Queer organizations in the United States was formed - the Mattachine Society, created by Harry Hay and others in Los Angeles. Five years later in San Francisco, the Daughters of Bilitis was formed. These early organizations wanted to be known as *homophile* groups not homosexual, creating some distance between the idea of homosexual sex and the homophile groups (even though this was largely semantics.) These early groups wanted Queer people of the United States to stay in the closet even though they did not know what the closet even was yet. Homophile groups pushed the policy that homosexuals are just like straight people but do one “thing” different. In 1952, Bob Mizer founded *Physique Pictorial*, a Men’s fitness, bodybuilding, and modeling magazine. This publication was marketed openly and consistently to gay men and showed exclusively athletic, “clean-cut” white men. Magazines and newsletters like *Physique Pictorial* faced problems from federal rules against sending perverse material in the postal system, lasting until 1958 when the United States Supreme Court ruled that the homophile magazine *One*, was not “obscene, lewd, lascivious and filthy”⁹ and thus could be sent through the postal service. This was the first Supreme Court win for Queer rights.

ABSTRACTION

During this same time in the United States, the art world was being introduced to the world of Abstract Expressionism. In the 1940s and 50s American painters such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning were introducing a new form of abstract art that expressed who and what they were as individuals, painters, and *men*. These artists were

⁹ Craig Kaczorowski, “Censorship in the Arts.” *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*, edited by Claude J. Summers, (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc. 2004),76.

committed to art that is an expression of the self, born out of profound emotions and universal themes. Abstract Expressionism was deeply involved with an American ideal of male masculinity.

Abstract Expressionism was the first major art movement that came out of the United States. It started around 1945 and was largely based in New York City. Abstract Expressionism was a painterly quest to express one's self through art and provoke emotions in viewers. These artists emphasized the free, spontaneous, personal, and emotional by utilizing considerable freedom of technique. The artists that were involved in this movement became obsessed with the teaching of the Swiss Psychiatrist Carl Jung and the Austrian Neurologist Sigmund Freud.

It has come to light that during the 1950s and 60s the CIA used the Abstract Expressionist artists to help fight the cold war with the Soviet Union. The government had a vested interest in the Expressionist's artists, but some politicians believed there was a link between abstraction and homosexuality. The free expression of emotion that "abstract-expressionists practice(d) carefully restricted which emotions were appropriate to express."¹⁰ The Abstract Expressionist artists that were excluded from membership were women, homosexuals, and art critics that disagreed with their established ideas in the field. "The role of the domestic in American art was clear: it marked the limits of masculinity."¹¹

¹⁰Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153.

¹¹ Tom Folland, "Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 92, No.4 (December 2010): https://www.jstor.org/stable/29546136?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents.

¹¹ David J. Getsy, "Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction," *Queer Abstraction* (Des Moines : Des Moines Art Center, 2020), 67.

QUEER ART THEORY CODING AND ABSTRACTION

The Queer art world at this same time was divided into two different camps – one of representational (academic/classical) and the other of non-representational (abstraction) art. The world of representational art was and is full of stereotypes; the human figure is inherently loaded with meaning. “Whenever a human body is represented, we rush to classify it- and taxonomies of race, age, ability, gender, class, and appeal are all brought to bear on that image of a person.”¹² Representational artists such as Tom of Finland, George Platt Lynes (Image 3), and Duncan Grant created works that were obviously about being Queer and therefore they faced discrimination for being Queer.



(Image 3) George Platt Lynes,
Male, 1937,
11 x 8-inch, vintage
photoengraving on matte paper.

¹² David J. Getsy, “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction,” *Queer Abstraction* (Des Moines : Des Moines Art Center, 2020), 67.

Representational art mostly took the form of mediums of sculpture, drawing, painting, and photography. Photography was a fairly easy way to capture the human form and the cheapest way to reproduce it for the mass media. *Physique Pictorial* was just one of a handful of magazines that were available for men to see pictures of other men (under the guise of fitness and health). Many “utilized a wide range of motifs and props, so it was not unusual to see a model dressed as a cowboy, a construction worker, a buccaneer, a Spartan wrestler, or simply relaxing al fresco.”¹³ By the end of the 1950s, photo studios such as the one that Bob Mizer set up were marketing their photographs more openly to gay consumers than had the earlier magazines. Although the publication gradually dropped the pretense of physical fitness or bodybuilding interests, they generally communicated with their audience in coded terms. Kieron Devlin, Academic Support Lecturer at the University Arts of London, stated, “Artists living in times when sexual openness was impossible sometimes used sly codes.”¹⁴ Such avoidance was not only coy but constituted a form of active resistance within the homophobic culture of postwar America. Many artists had to adopt strategies of concealment to avoid controversy or possible even imprisonment. Erin Silver, Assistant Professor at the University of British Columbia, stated in her M.A. thesis essay “No ‘Gestures of Return’? Querying Queer Aesthetics in North American Art”:

Scholarship reveals that many artists working in the twentieth century did, indeed, develop modes through which to embed sexual identity in their work without compromising their social and professional success, modes that remain relevant to queer artists working today.¹⁵

¹³ Ken Gonzales-Day, “Photography: Gay Male, Pre-Stonewall,” *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*, edited by Claude J. Summers, (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc. 2004), 253.

¹⁴ Kieron Devlin, “Subjects of the Visual Arts: Bathing Scenes,” *The Queer Encyclopedia of the Visual Arts*, edited by Claude J. Summers, (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc. 2004), 291.

¹⁵ Erin Silver, “No ‘Gestures of Return’? Queering Queer Aesthetics in North American Art,” (Master’s thesis, Concordia University, 2009), 58.

The Abstract Expressionism movement in the art world enabled the next generation of artists to create Queer art by utilizing abstraction. Artists began to employ symbols and the use of codes to hide meaning. This use of codes (codification) in their art is known as Queer Abstraction. Non-representational or abstract art at this time had a more difficult challenge of conveying messages about Queer identity than the representational artists. With photographs you were able to see that the art was about men because it had a male figure in it, but with an abstract piece of art, how do you imply a male body when you do not show a male body? Silver in her essay had this to say,

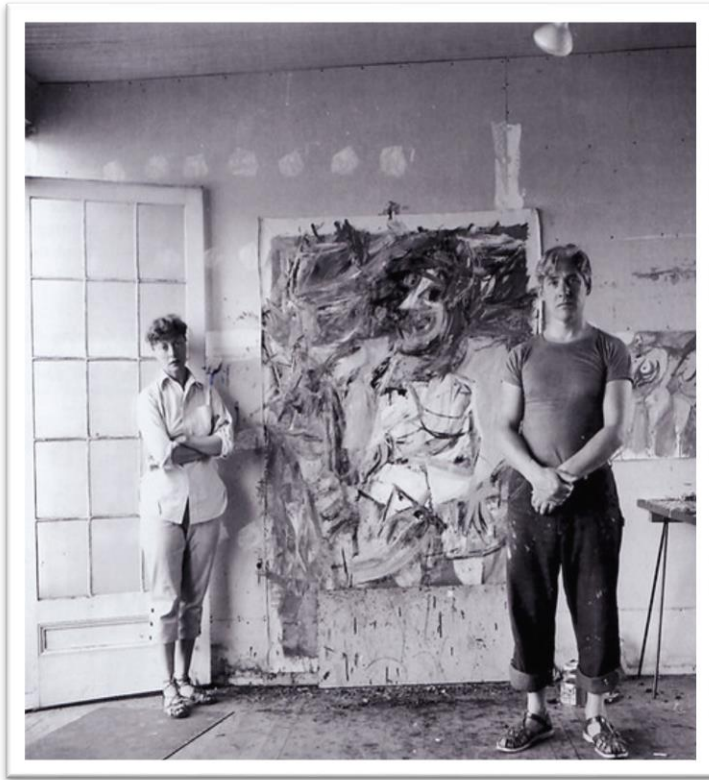
Queer(s) have enduring relationships to coding that often originate in serious deliberation on how to effectively communicate queerness, and queer desire, in societies with little tolerance, and little affinity, for these realities.¹⁶

The Queer community (was and is) familiar with codes and hidden language symbols. One of the most famous language codes that the Queer community had is the Hanky code used in the cruising world (cruising is the process used to find sex out in public.) The code worked like this: depending on what sexual act you are looking for is what color of handkerchief you carry in your back pocket, and if you are looking for the act or want to perform the act, tells you which pocket you place your hanky into. Cruising culture has developed a whole hidden language for it.

Many artists working in Modernism developed modes through which to embed sexual identity in their work. To be a successful artist at this time, the art world wanted you to be a certain way and to have certain traits. To “embody the prototypical American artist, he needed to

¹⁶ Erin Silver, “No ‘Gestures of Return’? Queering Queer Aesthetics in North American Art,” (Master’s thesis, Concordia University, 2009), 54.

be produced as masculine, independent, and perhaps above all, straight.”¹⁷ As a Queer abstract artist the codification of art caused a blurring of boundaries between public/private and high/low



(Image 4) Hans Namuth,
Willem & Elaine de Kooning,
1953.

art. In 1953 Hans Namuth took a photograph (Image 4) of Willem and Elaine de Kooning in his studio to try and fortify Willem’s image of being a male straight masculine all American artist. Because of work by feminist and other art historians, we are now familiar with the gendered coding of representation which denied Elaine de Kooning her identity as an artist, photographically positioning her as wife and muse. In this image, Elaine serves to help define Willem as the Prototypical American artist, masculine and above all straight. This was necessary to reinforce his reputation in response to the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s, report *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* that places artists as having the identity of being a homosexual. Dr.

¹⁷ Jennifer Doyle, “Secrets and Lies: Gossip and Art’s Histories,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 2 (2007): 8, Accessed: 07-03-2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068477>.

Kinsey was a biologist and professor of entomology and sexologist that in 1947 founded the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University, he published two papers *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), both of these papers place out of date gender ideas on people. Assemblage artist Robert Rauschenberg famously erased a drawing by Willem De Kooning. In the action of erasing, Rauschenberg is questioning and challenging the world he was in line to inherit from the Expressionists. Rauschenberg is making a statement against the implied stereotypes in the Abstract Expressionist world and the forced identity of that art community.

Dr. Tom Folland, an art historian, addresses these ideas in his essay “Robert Rauschenberg’s Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decorations,” that Rauschenberg’s work “vitiates the boundaries of public/private when the distinction, in art, was really between a public arena and a domestic space that shored up the binaries of the male/female (or heterosexual/homosexual.)”¹⁸ Robert Rauschenberg, in the early 1950s, started making collage art pieces that he called “Combines.” These works were made from found objects that he combined on a flat surface and then painted. In the “Combines,” Rauschenberg developed his own version of a gay iconography by using symbols and made the decision to not verbalize the meaning of the items in his artwork, employing a strategy of *resistance to interpretation*. This strategy positioned him in an authoritative role, causing a reversal of viewership, leaving the mainstream art world on the outside, clamoring to get in. Rauschenberg used Queer codes (which I detail in the next chapter) and the method of avoidance to keep people away from the secret of his Queer life to keep him safe and out of prison. David Getsy wrote that “Queer existence is

¹⁸Tom Folland, “Robert Rauschenberg’s Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration.” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 92, No.4 (December 2010): 5, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29546136?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents.

always wrapped up in an attention to form. Whether in the survival tactic of shaping oneself to the camouflage of the normal, the defiant assembling of new patterns of lineage and succession, or the picturing of new configurations of desire, bodies, sex, and sodality.”¹⁹ “Same-sex inclined artists found themselves, rather fortuitously, replicating a larger cultural dynamic, itself increasingly concerned with the presentation of self in everyday life; albeit for very different reasons.”²⁰

Artists like Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, John Cage, Robert



(Image 5) Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955,
75 1/4 x 31 1/2 x 8 inches,
Oil and pencil on pillow, quilt,
and sheet on wood support.



(Image 6) Jasper Johns, *Tennyson*,
1958, 73 1/2 x 48 1/4 inches,
Encaustic and collage on canvas.

¹⁹Davis J. Getsy, “Queer Relations,” *ASAP/Journal*, vol. 2, number 2 (2017): 4, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2017.0041>.

²⁰Jonathan D Katz, “‘Committing the Perfect Crime’: Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art,” *Art Journal*, 67 (2008): 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20068581>.

Indiana, Ellsworth Kelley, Lenore Tawney, and Agnes Martin all knew and influenced each other's work. Most of these artists do not identify as Abstract Expressionist artists, they are Pop artist or neo-Dadaist and even Minimalists artists. Rauschenberg and Johns had a 6-year relationship with each other, and Lenore Tawney, Agnes Martin, Ellsworth Kelley, and Robert Indiana lived together in New York city. Abstraction has a long history, but its prevalence within the Abstract Expression movement was a catalyst for these artists to use abstraction, a method of communication they needed to convey the message of Queer life to their viewers. These relationships informed how they thought about their audiences and had an impact on each of their works. Evidence of this can be seen when comparing paintings like the two shown. In 1955, Robert Rauschenberg released his combine entitled *Bed* (Image 5), and in 1958, Jasper Johns released his piece titled *Tennyson* (Image 6); both pieces are in the same shape and about the same size and look like beds.

The more you knew about these artists and their life, the more you know about their art, and the codes that they chose to use in their works. Each of these artists struggled with how they wanted to be identified throughout their career as artists. Dr. Christopher Reed, Art Historian at Penn State, stated that "Rauschenberg's 'Combines' put the onus of meaning-making on viewers, challenging audiences to name what they see, confident that few dared broach the topic of homosexuality and that those who could explicate the codes would be revealing their own suspicious sensibility."²¹ It is through the codes the artist used that they were protected in their lives and the messages that were in their art could be sent out and received by their viewers that understood; thus, leaving the message invisible in plain sight. "There are multiple audiences for the work...a general audience, an audience among a circle of friends, and

²¹ Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 156.

audiences of each other. These levels of audience at various points in the work engage different reading strategies.”²²

It is important to note that Queer codification occurred in works of art prior to Queer Theory a practice initiated in the early 1990s out of a need to reflect the identity of the LGBTQ+ community more accurately and it was not made up of just white male and gay individuals. Queer Theory looks to challenge the traditional binary of people being (heterosexual/homosexual) or (male/female) and (white/nonwhite). The concept of individuality as constituted through intersectionality lies at the heart of Queer Theory. Because of the practice of Queer Theory, Queer Abstraction is a concept that has come to light in the last decade as Art Historians, Queer Theorists, and Feminist Theorists have been looking back on history with a Queer lens. American Theorist Jack Halberstam, in 2012, is credited with coining the term “Queer Abstraction.”²³ Queer Abstraction has not been defined as a movement just yet, but more as a concept still trying to find its footing in history. The Feminist communities have been studying the past for female artists for a while now and have rediscovered female artists that have been left out of the art history canon for years. It is time for the Queer community to claim our place in history. Unfortunately, because of the AIDS crisis, many artists have died and will remain silent and never have a chance to set the records correct about why they made the art they did. But others have started to speak about themselves and who they are both as Queer artists and what their art truly is addressing.

²² Jonathan D Katz, “‘Committing the Perfect Crime’: Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art,” *Art Journal*, 67 (2008): 16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20068581>.

²³ L.M. Lancaster, *Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art* (Order No. 10279330), Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Thesis A&I, (1898794058), Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/dissertation-thesis/dragging-away-queer-abstraction-contemporary-art/docview/189794058/se-2?accountid=11563>.

Getsy asks “What happens when the body is invoked but not imaged?”²⁴ Traditional representational gay art has traditionally shown the body. Getsy poses the question: is it gay art if the body is not shown? In Queer Abstraction the art exceeds the constraints of binary logic. It stops and makes the viewer ask even more questions other than “is this gay art or not”. According to Dr. Julia Bryan-Wilson, an art historian at the University of California at Berkeley, Queer Abstraction is “a resource for all those in the margins who want to resist the demands to transparently represent themselves in their work.”²⁵ Coding is a way that permitted closeted artists to pass as straight to the non-queer viewer.

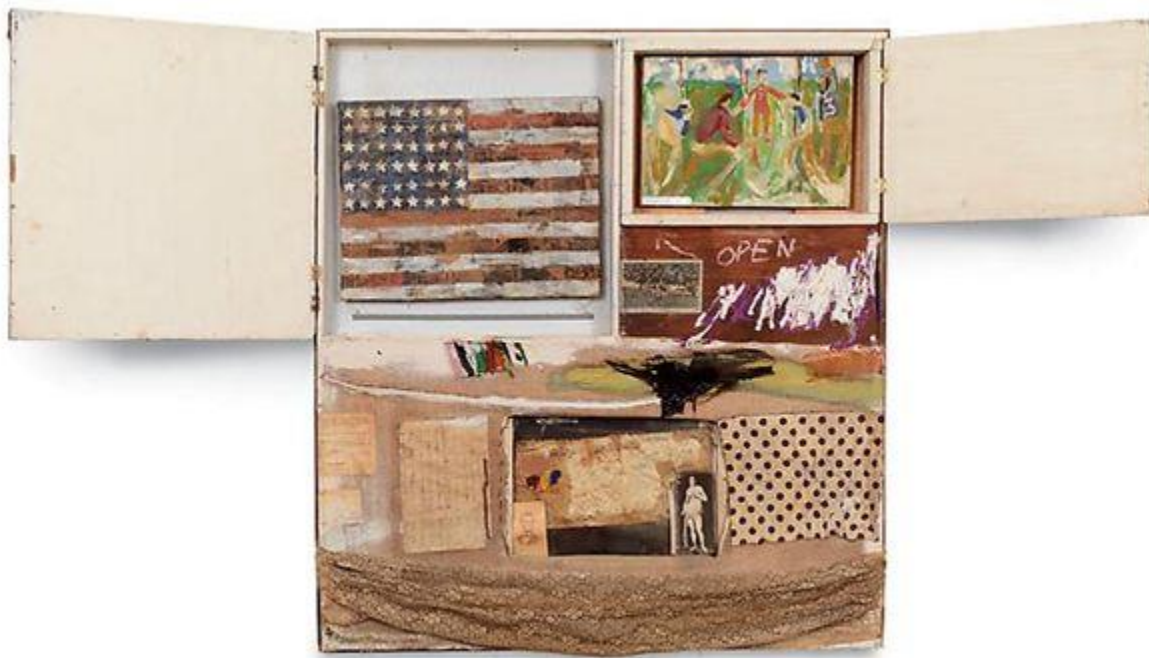
EXAMPLES OF CODIFICATION IN QUEER ART

Coding at its base is a form of *camp*. “Camp” is a concept with its roots in the 1600s and it is thought to be from the language of *Polari* that was created by the British Queer community in the 19th and 20th century. Polari was a blending of many languages and it is believed that the word *camp* was derived from the French word *camper*, meaning “to portray or pose”, or the Italian word *campare* meaning “to make something stand out.” The Queer community has and still does practice the concept of *camp*. Camp is a method of paying respect to the past of the Queer world. Camp may be easier to identify than it is to define. Drag is a prime example, performers dress up and imitate pop culture icons from the present and past, such as Cher, Judy Garland, Tina Turner, and Madonna. The Queer art world has its own version of camp. Jasper Johns used camp in his painting *Tennyson* (image 6), Johns used the word Tennyson in the

²⁴ Ashton Cooper, Loren Britton, Kerry Downey, John Edmonds, Mark Joshua Epstein, Avram Finkelstein, Chitra Ganesh, Glendalys Medina, Sheila Pepe,” Queer Abstraction: A Roundtable,” *ASAP/Journal*, vol. 2, number 2, (2017): 286, accessed June 5, 2019, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/665992>.

²⁵ Ashton Cooper, Loren Britton, Kerry Downey, John Edmonds, Mark Joshua Epstein, Avram Finkelstein, Chitra Ganesh, Glendalys Medina, Sheila Pepe,” Queer Abstraction: A Roundtable,” *ASAP/Journal*, vol. 2, number 2, (2017): 286, accessed June 5, 2019, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/665992>.

painting. This was a reference to Lord Alfred Tennyson whose poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.* from 1850, was rumored to be about his friend and lover Arthur Henry Hallam, that died of a sudden cerebral hemorrhage in 1833. In a couple of 'Combines' Robert Rauschenberg used the image of Judy Garland, and art critics have read that as a code of his relationship with men. Rauschenberg produced a piece titled *Short Circuit* (image 7), from 1955, in this 'combine' he uses the American flag, a program from a concert of John Cage and a signed autographed picture of Judy Garland. Jonathan D. Katz in his essay *The Art of Codes*, states "Judy Garland was and is the high priestess of gay culture, the queen diva of all time. Her inclusion in this and other combines of the period directly alludes for the first time in



(Image 7) Robert Rauschenberg, *Short Circuit*, 1955,
40 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 37 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches,
Combine: oil, fabric and paper on wood supports and cabinet
with two hinged doors containing a painting by Susan Woil
and a reproduction of a Jasper Johns flags by Elaine
Sturtevant.

Rauschenberg's work to his identification as a gay man."²⁶Camp is strong in the world of contemporary Queer art. In 1991, Felix Gonzalez-Torres created a sculpture "*untitled*" but known as Perfect Lovers (image 8). This work has two identical clocks that are placed on a wall



(Image 8) Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "*Untitled*" Perfect Lovers, 1991, 14 x 28 x 2 ¾ inches, Clocks, paint on wall.

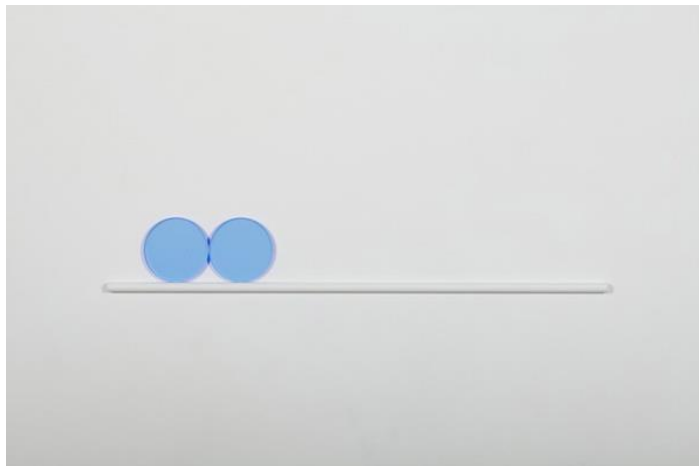


(Image 9) Ellsworth Kelly, *Rebound*, 1959, 68 1/4 71 1/2 inches, oil on canvas.

with the edges just touching on one side. As the clocks run over time the batteries lose their charge and slowly lose time and get out of sync. Eventually the batteries die. This symbolizes how the AIDS virus slowly affect their bodies as a couple. This is a camp reference to Ellsworth Kelly's painting *Rebound* (image 9), the Kelly painting is about the first moment of touch between two individuals. Both pieces have inspired artists working today including me. Gonzalez-Torres repeated this moment in a couple different sculptures, in doing so he honored his partner that died from AIDS. A reoccurring theme in Gonzalez-Torres work is centered around the battle over AIDS and most pieces referenced the struggle his partner had with AIDS and how the Queer community needed help in fighting to stay alive. This theme of AIDS is

²⁶ Jonathan Katz, *The Art of Code*, Queer Arts Resource, Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership, 1993, Jan. 19, 2021, [Jonathan Katz \(queer-arts.org\)](http://queer-arts.org).

picked up by many artists, but Prem Sahib comes to mind. Prem Sahib is an artist that was born in London, England and his work incorporates both painting and sculpture and arises from a belief regarding sexuality, intimacy, desire, and community. In 2013, Sahib completed a sculpture called *Two Dots* (Image 10), this piece is made to reference the rapid HIV test and it has a strong camp reference to *Perfect Lovers* by Gonzalez-Torres. I have a series of paintings that have a camp reference to Kelly, Andy Warhol, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres; my painting *Touch* (Image 11) draws from *Rebound*, Andy Warhol's screen-print art, and *Perfect Lovers*. *Touch* relies on and uses the same imagery as the screen-prints of Warhol and has the moment of touch like Kelly and Gonzalez-Torres, but it shows how this same moment is experienced by all people no matter their sexuality, gender expression, or gender status.



(Image 10) Prem Sahib, *Two Dots*, 2013,
11 x 100cm, Aluminum, paint, acrylic.



(Image 11) William Bybee, *Touch*,
2020, 24 x 24 inches,
Acrylic and India Ink.

WHERE *QUEER* ... FITS INTO MY WORLD

As I began my research into Queer Abstraction, I was excited to see the amount of

information that researchers have been able to pin together over the years. I feel that I have just begun to scratch the surface of the information that is still waiting to be discovered and I am excited to see how Queer Abstraction is going to be used in the future. Queer Abstraction gave me a language to communicate with. The use of codes felt natural to me, I do not know if it was because of my use of abstraction as a painter or the fact that I am a Queer person and I am used to looking for coded messages in life.

I and the Queer Contemporary art world is heavily influenced by what is going on in today's social political world. The *Black Lives Matter* (BLM), the *#Me Too*, and the *Trans Lives Matter* movements are all working in conjunction with the Queer identity movement. These political-social groups insist on taking responsibility for one's actions and owning who you are as an individual. As a Queer, white, gay, polyamorous, cis male identifying individual that is married to a Queer, white male-presenting, non-binary, polyamorous individual, I will never fully understand what these other communities have had to go through to get where they are today, but I will help them and lend them my strength as they need it.

In my work I am reexamining *the Kinsey Scale* from Dr. Alfred Kinsey that human sexuality ranges on a scale from 1 to 6, with 1 being completely heterosexual and 6 being completely homosexual. Kinsey believed that 37% of all people, or 2 out of 5, are homosexual. This had a dramatic effect on society as a whole and the way people looked at human sexuality. Today the Kinsey Scale or Spectrum visualizes gender as a continuum from men to women and masculine to feminine. The Kinsey Scale does not address all possible sexual identities. The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid and the Storms Scale have stepped in to further define sexual expression. These are just three of more than 200 current scales to measure and describe sexual orientation. The spectrum of Gender identities other than man and woman are now considered

non-binary or gender fluid. The middle range might include Transgender, Agender, and Genderqueer. The gender expression spectrum model ranges fall between masculine and feminine with the middle area being Butch, Femme, and Androgynous. The orientation spectrum ranges from Heterosexual to Homosexual and encompasses Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer, and Skoliosexual. None of these spectrums are perfect and they are always changing to adapt to how individuals identify. In my painting series *I in 10* (Image 12 and 13) I explore the topic of this spectrum and “represent” how we are all made up of the same matter, but we vary by amounts and the pattern in which it is organized.



(Image 12) William Bybee, *Two*, 2019, 18 x 36 inches, Acrylic on canvas.

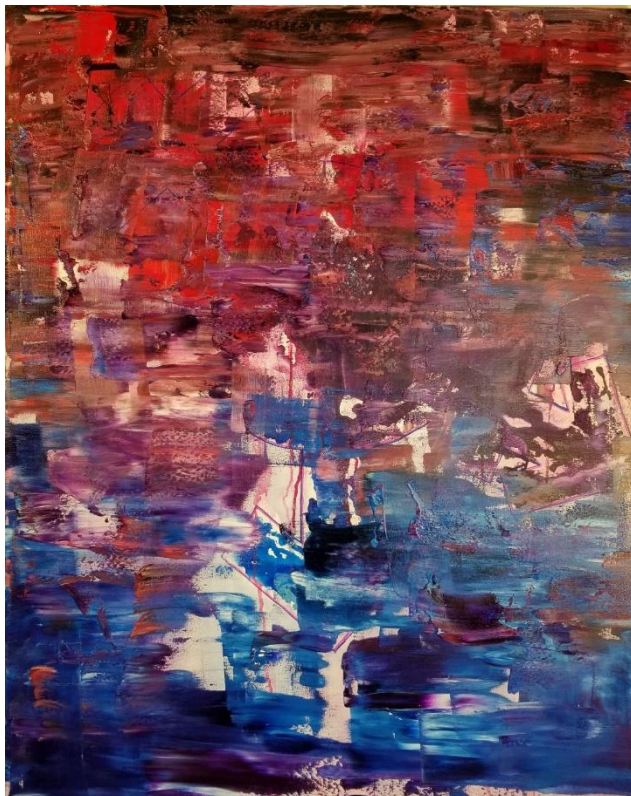


(Image 13) William Bybee, *Seven*, 2019, 18 x 36 inches, Acrylic on canvas.

When I placed the same colors on the canvas, I varied the amount of each color used. The canvases are 18” x 36” and approximately the same size as a mirror that you might find on the

back side of a door. The matte grey background is reminiscent of school pictures that most grade school kids have taken every year.

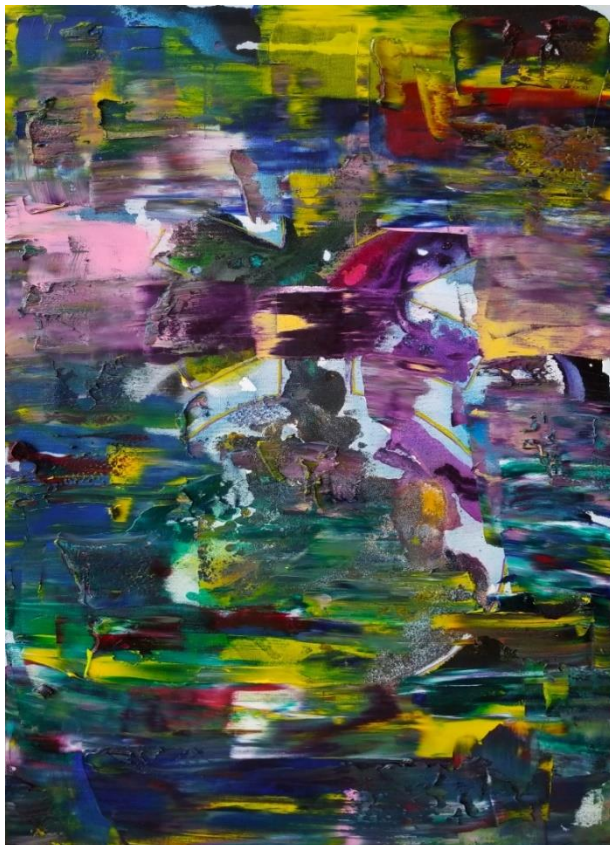
In my research for *Queer...* I spent time with the Queer people that influence me as an artist and person, and I wanted to investigate what made them the people they are today. I created paintings that explore the debate of how we are raised and who we end up being as adults. Every person that is born into this world must negotiate with the hopes and dreams of the people that are bringing us into this world. They place on us a world full of stereotypes and of what we should be like and how we should act. Before you even get a chance to breathe you are being forced into gendered colored stereotypes that are traditionally male or female, these are the colors that will follow you throughout your life. Racism, transphobia, homophobia, and other hateful things are taught to us while we are children, and we must unlearn those as adults. The process is painful and can take a long time to accomplish. We need to eliminate this from our lives. Each of the paintings in my series *What Lies at Your Core*, are snapshots of people's lives



(Image 14) *Trans Men are Men*,
2020,
36 x 48 inches,
Acrylic ink, and oil paint, William
Bybee.

and what it was like for them growing up. I genuinely love each of them and feel honored to have shared this experience with them.

Trans Men are Men (image 14) is a portrait of a great person that was assigned female at birth and raised as a girl, but as an adult came to understand that what they were truly at their core was male. He has since then transitioned to being a man. I started the first layer of this painting with the transgender symbol, this is a combination of the male and female symbol plus a third arm that is a blending of the two together. I wanted to know how he felt being raised as female and what colors he would have associated with that time in his life. I asked if he felt that pinks and red would be correct and he said that it would have been dark reds because he was not a happy girl. For the adult layer, I brought in more “masculine” colors into his painting with different shades of blues. I have also included purple in this top covering of paint to symbolize the mixing of the male and female qualities.



(Image 15) *Your Identity is Valid*, 2020, 30 x 48 inches, Acrylic ink, and oil paint, William Bybee.

Your Identity is Valid (image 15) is a portrait of a person that is one of the closest people I have in my life. In the last year they have come to understand that they do not think of themselves as male or female. Their identity is fluid and can change from day to day. They consider themselves to be non-binary or gender fluid. They were born and raised as a male but as they have matured, they have come to the understanding that their identity is not static and does change. For this painting, I started the first layer with the non-binary symbol, this is a gender symbol that has both the male and female on it at the same time. They were raised as male and that is how I began to add color to this painting. This painting has many secondary colors in it because of the mixing of the gender identities. The fluidity of this person allows for more color mixing and not just reds or blues. My paintings use color as didactically as culture uses gender.

I started this thesis with the hope to be able to help Queer people in the future to have a sense of history of what has come before them and to feel that they are connected to a rich and diverse past. We have survived the repression of the heteronormative world, and the concentration camps of the Nazis. Queer artists have made art that is diverse and representational of who we are as a culture, even when it was illegal to do so. The need to connect to people that are like you is a need that has been and always will exist. Donald Webster Cory's words of "I'm different,"²⁷ will unfortunately remain true, but the ability to see yourself in people that are in your lives and in the past can come true. The connection I feel with Queer Abstraction has changed the way I look at the history of the art world, and I hope I can help future artists find this connection.

²⁷Gavin Butt, *{Between You and Me} Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p51.

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