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Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017. 272 pp. \$94.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8223-6917-2.

Review by Mairéad Hanrahan, University College London.

This is an interesting and thought-provoking book on the relationship between modern pederasty and queer history. It is, primarily, a disappointed book: the author explains that it developed out of his uneasiness at aspects of Jean Genet's relationships that, in his view, mean that Genet cannot be considered as an example of "truly marginalized and alternative queer socialities" (p. 5; original emphasis). Yet, rather than dismissing Genet outright for his "failure of a contemporary political ideal" (p. 15), Kadji Amin seeks to put his disappointment to constructive use, developing a "deidealizing" approach that would enable him to explore the implications, for Queer Studies more broadly, of the ways in which Genet's erotic structure does not appear to him consonant with political ideals of egalitarianism. He builds on a growing body of work, notably Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, to argue for a non-teleological perspective on pre-Stonewall queer history, in order to engage with how earlier queer experience may clash with contemporary political discourses as well as prefigure them.^[1] Specifically, Amin sets out to explore the place of "modern pederasty" within queer theory today. He defines pederasty as any male same-sex relation "built around an eroticized differential of age or generation" (p. 39), not just the ancient Greek model of a pubescent boy and adult man. Following David Halperin's *How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality* ^[2], the book outlines how, prior to the post-Stonewall emergence of erotic egalitarianism as the ideal of homosexuality, pederasty was the dominant model of male same-sex relations. Amin's aim is to theorize the disturbing legacy that this undertheorized dissymmetry continues to produce today.

Disturbing Attachments thus makes a contribution to queer history, in that it excavates the genealogy of an erotic structure that has received relatively little attention in Queer Studies. The book contains some good historical archival research into Mettray, the *maison de correction* or reform school to which the teenage Genet was sent for three years, that allows Amin to analyse the function that such institutions served in French colonial history. These reform schools provided a source of labour that could subsequently be steered to become the soldiers and farmers on whom the colonizing enterprise depended. The discussion of *Le Langage de la muraille*, the unpublished script for a film about Mettray that Genet wrote towards the end of his life, is particularly telling. Amin shows how the film-script is driven by a biting political awareness on its author's part of "how Mettray fit into a vast governmental-colonial-military-economic network of administration and exploitation" (p. 157) that is sharply at odds with the

writer's earlier eulogy of France's prison system in general, and Mettray in particular. Nevertheless, the attempt to historicize is only part of a broader conceptual project, the aim of which is to investigate "what happens when queer attachments fail to live up to the inverted ideals of politicized scholarship" (p. 13). The book proposes Genet as an example of a marginal figure whose erotic investment in pederastic and racially fetishized relations is deeply problematic, and it explores how a consideration of such cases is productive in terms of ensuring that Queer Studies does not allow itself to be recuperated by the conventional modes of thinking that it seeks to challenge: in other words, that it continues to queer itself.

In my view, the book's most useful insight is at a theoretical level: recognizing that a non-normative sexuality can be complicit with oppressive power structures in other respects, it places a welcome emphasis on the existence of an irreducible tension between the erotic and the political. However, I remain unconvinced by the presentation of Genet as a pederast in the sense that Amin defines it, as someone erotically invested in relations fundamentally structured by a power differential of age (and race). The argument is predicated—somewhat disconcertingly, given that Amin is otherwise squarely on the side of those who valorize the primarily anti-identitarian thrust of Queer Studies—on the basis of a categorical identity: Amin explicitly sets his reading of Genet against those who have "misread" the writer as "a gay man rather than a pederast" (p. 28). I shall return later to this binary distinction which I find problematic in a number of respects. However, I will first outline why, in my view, the book's presentation of Genet's work and of the man himself as primarily invested in specifically pederastic structures is not persuasive.

Chapter two is given the key work of establishing that Genet's imaginary universe is one of primarily pederastic investments, eroticizing a difference in age. It focuses on Genet's second novel, *Miracle de la rose*, in which the adult narrator, Jean, imprisoned in Fontevault, is in love with Bulkaen, a man a few years younger who had also spent time in Mettray after the narrator's period there. Much of the novel is taken up with Jean's nostalgic recollections of his erotic adventures as a boy. Amin quotes an important framing passage in which the narrator explains that, having spent his childhood yearning to be like the virile thugs around him, as soon as he "achieved total virility—or to be more exact, as soon as [he] became a male" (quoted p. 58) [3], the thugs lost their glamour. Amin interprets the narrator's desire for Bulkaen as the attempt, in line with the "carceral norms of pederastic development" to "reliv[e] the *mœurs* of Mettray, this time as the elder and more dominant partner in a pederastic couple" (p. 59). This interprets the narrator's adult desire as an attempt to reproduce, albeit by adopting a different position within it, the specifically age-differentiated hierarchies of his childhood environment.

There are a number of problems with this argument. Firstly, the erotic relations in Mettray were between boys of similar ages. Amin's main example of status differentials between elder and younger boys in the reform school is that the narrator was sixteen and Villeroy, his *marle* or *mâle*, was eighteen. Such a narrow age difference (one more typical of heterosexual than pederastic couples) offers a rather flimsy basis on which to argue for an essentially pederastic structure to Genet's eroticism. Furthermore, in a passage that Amin himself quotes, the narrator emphasises that, far from representing a very different age category, Villeroy and he were close in age: "I loved Villeroy, who loved me. Because he was a child himself (he was eighteen), he was closer to me than anyone ... ever was" (quoted p. 61). [4] Far from explicitly extolling the pleasures of a male body at a different stage of development from another (the

lack or presence of facial hair, for example), Genet's emphasis is on the boys' similarity.[5]

Secondly, the idea that the "transition from punk to big shot" (p. 66), from subordinate to dominant, is an age-related development is not borne out by Genet's text. Rather than a time of linear "masculine development" (p. 61), Mettray figures for the narrator as a time when the positions of top and bottom were non-exclusive. The narrator was at one and the same time *both* the subordinate (to Villeroy) *and* the dominant to another boy.[6] Similarly, at the same time as he was the narrator's *marle*, Villeroy was the subordinate to "un marle plus puissant." [7] Genet explicitly generalizes this as the structure of all erotic relations in Mettray: 'je fus encore terrassé par cette idée que chaque mâle avait son mâle admirable, que le monde de la beauté virile et de la force s'aimait ainsi, de maillon en maillon, formant une guirlande de fleurs musclées et tordues, ou rigides, épineuses. Je devinai un monde étonnant. Ces marlous n'en finissaient pas d'être femmes pour un autre plus fort et plus beau.' [8] Far from eulogizing a pederastic opposition between dominant and subordinate, by stating that each couple was a link in a chain of incremental positions that looped back on itself (like the inmate's chains that, in the eponymous "miracle of the rose," are transformed into roses), Genet in fact makes it impossible to identify any one individual as simply or absolutely powerful or powerless. Thirdly, while each individual relationship at Mettray was indeed hierarchical rather than egalitarian, as this last quotation exemplifies, Genet's emphasis is systematically on the hierarchy as one of gender rather than age: between a *femme* and a *mâle*. The *fêlure* or crack that haunts all men is more convincingly that of lost femininity than, as Amin interprets it, a lost "attachment to a carceral youth" (p. 67). The elaboration of the distinction between "pederast" and "gay man," like that between "queen" and "homosexual" (p. 65), on which the argument of *Disturbing Attachments* is based depends, in fact, on an evacuation of the sexual difference that Genet's writing systematically highlights.

Similar objections could be made about the different grounds on which Genet is argued to offer an example of racial fetishism. For reasons of space, I shall limit myself to the discussion of Genet's relationship with Abdallah Bentaga, whose suicide in 1964 must indeed count as one of the most troubling elements in any consideration of Genet's life. The dissymmetry of the relationship between the white, middle-aged, wealthy, French Genet and the younger German-Algerian man who, persuaded by Genet to become a high-wire artist, suffered a terrible accident that meant he could no longer perform and became financially dependent on Genet, is incontestable. But to propose that Genet's promotion of a tight-rope career for the other man "effectively killed" Bentaga (p. 135) is a highly questionable and tendentious claim that actually begs the interesting questions arising from the relation between them. For Amin, Bentaga "seems to have grown dependent on his white, famous, and comparatively wealthy lover's approval, and [...] would have been hampered from remaking himself by the literally murderous racial climate that reigned in France during and just after the Algerian War of Independence. [...] The power that Genet exercised over Bentaga as a result of his combined pederastic dominance and cultural, racial and financial capital ensured that Bentaga *would not recover* from Genet's loss of interest in him" (p. 135; original emphasis). This is not only to blame Genet for a social and political context no more within his control than within Bentaga's; it is moreover to ignore the fact that Bentaga's financial dependency and consequent loss of power in the relationship appear to have caused Genet to lose interest in it, not to eroticise it. It argues against, rather than in favour of, the view that Genet invested erotically in a power differential.

Who is in a position to judge if Genet felt in a dominant position at the beginning of their relationship? The text he wrote about Abdallah, *The Tight-rope Walker*, suggests rather that what he admired in the other man was that he was a kindred artist. Amin's condemnation of Genet rests on the mere fact that there was a difference of age and of race between him and Abdallah, and not on any evidence as to how this difference was experienced by them—even though, for example, a discussion of Genet's later connection with David Hilliard recognises that Genet fantasized this by representing himself as the Black Panther's son: "for two months I was to be David's son. I had a black father thirty years younger than myself" (quoted p. 129).[9] At issue here is not one, but two age-related hierarchies (old/young, child/father)—yet their effect is clearly to contradict each other. This quotation is absolutely typical of Genet's writing insofar as it makes it impossible to determine which of them is in the powerful position. Finally, it should be noted that Abdallah was already an adult when he began his long relationship with Genet. Leaving aside the question of his agency, are we to understand that any relationship with an age differential (or race differential) is in and of itself suspect? The existence of an age gap between consenting adults can surely only be convincingly analysed in terms of a pederastic dominance if some evidence is adduced to support the view that the gap is erotically perceived or experienced as a power hierarchy and invested in as such by one or both partners.

This brings me to two final considerations. The first is linguistic. Late in the book, Amin acknowledges a difference between French and English, when he explains that in French male homosexuality in general was usually called *la pédérastie* (p. 148). The French equivalent for the English faggot, poof, or queer was, indeed, *pédé*. Genet's interview with Hubert Fichte makes clear that he used the terms *pédéraste* and *homosexuel* interchangeably: when asked what his 'theory of homosexuality' was, Genet replies: "Je n'ai pas de théorie de l'homosexualité. [...] Je constate: je suis pédéraste. Bon." [10] Yet this difference in language is not taken into consideration in any of the earlier analyses of Genet's use of the word "*pédéraste*," with the result that Amin often interprets as a reference to a specifically-age-differentiated eroticism what would usually be read as simply signifying homosexuality.

This linguistic troubling of the opposition between pederast and gay man on which *Disturbing Attachments* is premised opens in turn onto the properly political dimension of Genet's eroticism. Even if we were to accept that Genet was primarily attracted to younger men because of a power dissymmetry in the relationship, the important question would then surely become the analysis of how he acted in relation to that inequality: whether in practice he sought to consolidate or to undermine the hierarchy. The disappointment that drives *Disturbing Attachments* ultimately derives, it seems to me, from the assumption that Genet's sexuality was structured on phantasmatically reproducing a hierarchy in which the places of dominant and subordinate were clearly distinguished, and that he was erotically invested in being the powerful partner. Yet, while it is indisputably biographically true that Genet had a number of relationships with younger men, Amin does not demonstrate either that in Genet's imagination a discrepancy in age was erotically charged, or that his real-life relationships—all of which, it must also be remembered, were historically situated before the transformation in erotic possibilities of the post-Stonewall era—were experienced by either partner as pederastic dominance. On the contrary, the quotations above about the chain of amorous relations and the generational role-reversal with David Hilliard are emblematic of how Genet's writing profoundly challenges oppositional exclusivities at every level. If Genet can serve to keep Queer Studies queer, it is not because he represents a disturbing form of sexuality but rather

because his texts fundamentally disturb the identitarian categories and norms that Queer Studies at its best seeks to trouble and destabilize.

NOTES

[1] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[2] David Halperin, *How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[3] Jean Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Penguin, 1951), p. 25.

[4] Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, p. 113.

[5] Similarly, far from presenting Bulkaen as boyish or effeminate, the first mention of the younger man in *Miracle de la rose* emphasizes the “énorme torsade de muscles” of his arm. See Jean Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), v. 2, p. 237.

[6] Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, p. 393.

[7] Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, p. 408.

[8] Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*, p. 410.

[9] Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2003), p. 300.

[10] Jean Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré*, éd. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 173.

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