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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.

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I am honored that *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* is the occasion for a published exchange within the field. I thank esteemed Genet critic Mairéad Hanrahan for her astute review of my book and the editors of *H-France* for the opportunity to respond to it. While Hanrahan is, by and large, complimentary of my heuristic of deidealization and historicizing orientation, her appreciation ends when these methods pull me beyond the familiar (and to her, beloved) queer theoretical deconstructive approach. It is this difference in orientations--hers deconstructive and mine deidealizing--that leads her to be unpersuaded (and likely disappointed) by my elaboration of Genet's pederastic imaginary.

To begin, a few clarifications on how I define modern pederasty. As Hanrahan notes, *la pédérastie* is a notoriously linguistically slippery term in French. In Genet's time, it was used to denote age-differentiated pederasty specifically, to refer to male homosexuality in general, and to criminalize public sex between men as an offence to public decency and a danger to youths. This has often led critics and commentators to ignore age and power differentials when studying *la pédérastie* (certainly, this has been the case in Genet criticism). In addition, Hanrahan rightly notes that the mere existence of an age disparity is not sufficient to define a male same-sex relationship as pederastic. After all, the elder partner might exercise less social power than the younger, or both partners might eroticize the more reciprocal aspects of their relationship. I theorize this when I write, "What defines modern pederasty is not, therefore, the mere existence of an age difference. It is the fact that this age difference, whether great or small, is eroticized and structures the relationship" (p. 39). This points to Hanrahan's central misreading. Modern pederasty is not an identity defined by either a substantial age gap or a fixed hierarchy of power. It is an erotic structure, an imaginary, and a phantasmatic investment in differentials of age and power. As an erotic structure, pederasty may find expression through relations of kinship, mentorship, and care as well as domination and abuse, and its hierarchies may also be reversible--this is the topic of my fourth chapter. The erotic and structuring effects of age differentials are amply evinced by Genet's profoundly pederastic imaginary--his proclivity for describing same-sex relations, even between partners of quite similar ages, with reference to differences of age, gender, race, and power. One example is his frequent linguistic "boying" of the younger partner. In *Miracle de la rose*, for example, he repeatedly uses the term *gosse* to describe Bulkaen, the narrator's object of desire who, while younger, is nonetheless incarcerated with Genet in an adult men's prison. It is this pervasive pederastic imaginary--

complete with theorizations of pederastic desire as the God's method « pour fabriquer les hommes impassibles des prisons » in *Miracle de la rose*, [1] and of Genet's own pederastic pedagogy with "the boys" (*les garçons*) [2] whom he takes care of in an interview with *Playboy* magazine—that leads me to interpret his relationship with the much younger Abdallah Bentaga as pederastic even in the absence of Genet's own writing about this relationship. It would seem that, for Genet, *some* pederastic differential of age and power, even if mostly fantasized, is necessary for a relation to become erotic. This does not, however, prevent him from deidealizing, deconstructing, and debasing such hierarchies in his writings and interviews (more on this below).

As practiced in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and North America, modern pederasty is less a rigid identity than it is "a genealogical overlap between the seemingly incompatible notions of pederasty as a nonreciprocal act of sexual subordination that does not confer a sexual identity and homosexuality as a sexual identity capable of cementing a long-term reciprocal relationship" (p. 41). The former understanding of pederasty is clearly laid out in David Halperin's *How to Do the History of Sexuality*; [3] it is more applicable to Ancient Greek pederasty than to modern pederastic practice. The latter understanding of homosexuality is familiar to us; my book argues that it was, in fact, a recent invention. As a "curious overlap" (p. 41) between these two mutually exclusive models, modern pederasty is a heterogenous and incoherent formation. To clarify, this is not to say that, whereas modern pederasty is conflicted and incoherent, modern homosexuality is not. For the Foucauldian genealogist, all sexual categories are internally heterogenous and incoherent, beginning with the figment of "modern homosexuality" itself.[4] This does not, for that matter, render them any less powerful or meaningful.

Is pederasty an identity that marks one as queer or something that any normal man might practice alongside a healthy attraction to women? Is it feminizing, menacing one with the label of *folle* or, to the contrary, is it hypermasculinizing, distinguishing one as "un double mâle"?[5] How does one distinguish youths who are sexually receptive in prison as a stage in the formation of their normative prison masculinity from those whose sexual receptivity is the expression of a perverse and unmanly love of submission? Genet lived through the historical moment in which the modern pederastic model—in Europe, most active within the working class, sailor, and prison cultures with which he identified—was gradually eclipsed by the homosexual model. He therefore writes of sexual subcultures in which the clarity of the older pederastic model is being distorted by the gravitational pull of the new idea of homosexuality. Perhaps the younger partner is not a normal boy at all, but simply a fag, no different from the prison *folles* who served as object lessons, during the era of "sexual inversion," in the internal femininity of *all* those who practiced same-sex sexuality. (Whereas *folles* today would be most closely associated with transgender women, in the early twentieth century, they were more likely to be seen as displaying the internal truth of all homosexual men – that they were "women" within).[6] Most disturbingly of all, perhaps the tough, dominant partners in a pederastic relationship were likewise only *folles* in disguise. In *Miracle de la rose*, Genet uses the narrator Jean himself to illustrate this possibility. Jean poses as a pederastic prison tough only to confess, "C'est quelque chose en moi qui sait très bien qu'il serait vain de me donner du mal pour paraître fort et maître de moi, car *ma folle nature* apparaîtra toujours par mille fissures." [7] In the early twentieth century, modern pederasty was already a threatened category. This historical destabilization was the condition that allowed Genet to become a major theorist of the instability of pederasty's codes, as well as an avowed pederast.

Hanrahan takes issue with the fact that I claim for Genet the identity of “pederast” against the anti-identitarian ethos of queer theory, as well as the deconstructive tilt of Genet’s own writing and sensibilities. However, “pederast” is not a fixed identity in the way Hanrahan imagines, and it is quite possible for Genet both to be a pederast and to mine the internal incoherence of the very category of pederasty. Indeed, one of the points of *Disturbing Attachments* is that there is something queer about modern pederasty—in terms of both the kinds of relations and politics it enables across generation, race, and class, and the slipperiness of its own definition. To say that modern pederasty is slippery, contradictory, and queer, however, is not to imply that we should do away with it in order to focus on Genet’s queering of identitarian binaries in general. This would be the purely deconstructive approach, and it is the one Hanrahan favors when she concludes that “Genet’s writing profoundly challenges oppositional exclusivities at every level.” However, in focusing exclusively on Genet’s deconstruction of identities, scholars tend to anachronistically project contemporary sexual norms on him in order to then demonstrate how he queers them.

It is easy to demonstrate that Genet queers binary distinctions such as masculine and feminine, homosexual and heterosexual, and dominant and submissive. To end the analysis there, however, is to fail to attend to which of these moves are, indeed, queering, and which are merely illustrations of the dominant sexual norms of Genet’s milieu. The homosexual/heterosexual distinction, for example, was not germane to the working-class cultures Genet depicted in his writing. Active/passive, older/younger, dominant/submissive, and masculine/feminine were far more significant. Thus, passages in which Genet appears to “queer” the heterosexual/homosexual distinction are only transgressive to the contemporary reader who lives under the weight of that distinction. Genet himself is most likely describing how “normal,” masculine-identified men negotiated sexual contacts with other men according to certain (often vague and performative) subcultural rules, which would define some of those contacts as normal and others as marking one, irrevocably, as queer, no different in nature from a *folle*. Masculine/feminine, however, *was* a significant cultural distinction which Genet *does* often queer, for instance, by suggesting that putatively masculine pederasts are, in reality, surreptitiously feminine. The critical subversion of such passages, however, is lost to the reader who fails to understand the unwritten rules and assumptions that enabled working-class pederasty in the first place. In other cases, what may appear to contemporary readers to be a queering of masculine/feminine is actually a description of a recognized sex-gender identity—that of the *folle*. The *folle* was neither a contemporary transgender woman—understood as being feminine to and through, despite her male assignment—nor a contemporary gay man. She was medically defined, as well as subculturally understood to be characterized by the inversion of the feminine within the masculine. To note that a *folle* such as Divine in *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* queers masculine/feminine divides, then, is to state the obvious. This is not transgressive, historically speaking, for it defines the very category of the *folle*. We must understand the category of the *folle*, however, if we are to hone in on moments in which Genet does queer it.

To note that Genet queers, deconstructs, or reverses dominant/submissive (in a pederastic relationship, for example) is not to conclude that he wanted to dispense with that binary or that it was insignificant to his own erotic practice. Indeed, I take my central heuristic of deidealization from Genet’s proclivity for defiling his most cherished and eroticized ideals—such as that of a dominant, phallic masculinity—without, for that matter, ceasing to libidinally invest in them. While deidealization may employ deconstructive means, its ends are affective and

erotic. Genet's puncturing of phallic masculinity, his mischievous delight or soul-searching angst in revealing pederastic youths to be queens within and pederastic elders to be dependent on their younger partners for their own sense of dominance is not a disinvestment in the system of pederasty itself. For, whereas deconstruction is a form of critique, "deidealization is another word for love" (p. 175). I find Genet's practice of deidealization compelling because I recognize the significance of this affective signature within queer cultures more broadly. For a contemporary example, we need only consider the status of top and bottom identities in North American queer sexual relationships. As the many modifiers for bottoming - "bossy bottom," "power bottom," "topping from the bottom" - attest, it is well known that the bottom position, which draws much of its charge from the abjection of male sexual submission, is not only submissive. The fact that, in lesbian cultures, performing oral sex is associated with the sexual expertise of the top whereas, in gay male cultures, it exemplifies the sexual services of the bottom might be taken as demonstrating the incoherence of top and bottom as fixed points within a hierarchy of power. And yet, the very elaboration of terms such as "power bottom" demonstrates that, for many queers, an inhabited paradox is preferable to a deconstruction and dismantling of binaries. Rather than critique and dispense with top/bottom, dominant/submissive positions, many queers get an erotic charge from playing them to the point of contradiction and incoherence.

In the spirit of deidealization, my moments of disappointment in Genet always seek to go beyond mere condemnation in order to understand something about the historical conditions of politics and the profound shaping force of social inequalities on erotic and political imaginaries. My point is never that Genet was a racial fetishist and a pederast, that these things are exceptional and bad, and therefore, that we should critique and condemn him. Rather, I emphasize the *pervasiveness* and the *unexceptionality* of modern pederasty and racial fetishism. *Disturbing Attachments* probes at once how pederasty and racial fetishism trouble the contemporary values of erotic equality and color blindness and how they enabled Genet's radical politics. My argument that racial fetishism and pederasty animated Genet's late activism with the Black Panthers and the Palestinians simultaneously deidealizes this activism and asks that we think about racial fetishism and pederasty differently, as potentially generative of progressive and queer politics rather than as only an impediment to them. It would be a serious misreading of Genet to suggest that his inversions of pederastic hierarchies, or his interrogation, in *The Blacks*, of the racial identities of black and white are part of a project of deconstructing and disinvesting in these identities. Genet was profoundly erotically magnetized by both racial and pederastic difference. What makes him a pleasure to write about is his capacity, in the midst of intense affective and erotic investment, to interrogate and mine this investment's very roots. Like Queer Studies, Genet is deconstructive, but not only.

Deconstructive scholarship needs to be historically informed and affectively attentive if its deconstruction is to be relevant. This point is particularly germane to French Studies scholars. Derridean deconstruction has had both a historical and a lasting influence in French Studies. Hence, French Studies scholars tend to find the most resonance in the anti-identitarian and deconstructive strains of queer theory. Whether in Queer or in French Studies, however, deconstruction without history leads to a deconstruction, over and over again, of what are thoughtlessly assumed to be universals. Deconstruction without attention to affect breeds the ill-founded assumption that the critique of all identities (which easily becomes another universalism) is the ultimate intellectual goal. *Disturbing Attachments* attends to modern pederasty as a complex historical formation that electrified Genet, even as he sought to mine,

deidealize, and reverse it in his writing, and that animated his most radical political positions.

## NOTES

[1] Jean Genet, *Miracle de la rose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), pp. 215-216.

[2] Jean Genet, *L'Ennemi déclaré: textes et entretiens*, ed. by Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 24.

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

[4] For the Foucauldian genealogist, it is the “incoherence at the core of the modern notion of homosexuality that furnishes the most eloquent indication of the historical accumulation of discontinuous notions that shelter within its specious unity.” See Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, p. 107.

[5] Jean Genet, *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* (Décines: L'Arbalette, 1946), p. 180.

[6] See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) for a queer historical analysis of the parallel US category of the “fairy.”

[7] Genet, *Miracle de la rose*, p. 165.

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