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Master's Thesis

A Grotesque and Gothic Corporeality:

Queer Transgression in *Closer* and *Frisk*

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how two novels by Dennis Cooper, *Closer* and *Frisk*, conceive of queer sexuality as transgressing heteronormative notions of moral standards, and how they challenge these by elevating their subject matters to an excessive degree. Drawing on the concepts of the grotesque and the Gothic, this thesis explores the aesthetics of *Closer* and *Frisk*, focusing in particular on the way corporeality figures as a central aspect of how these texts explore the ways in which the body becomes a site for Cooper's discourses of transgression. Furthermore, drawing on Lee Edelman's notion of the queer subject as inherently opposed to the value of every social form and structure, it is argued that the adverse representations of Cooper's subjects work to add to this oppositionality. Thus, this thesis investigates how the queer expressions of desire in the texts are inextricable from the aberrant imagery of the body; the body as Gothically grotesque in the novels provides ways to configure alternative ways of conceptualizing the queer body and investigate its ties to transgression.

Keywords

Transgression, Grotesque, Gothic, Queer, *Closer*, *Frisk*

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1 Introduction

"'Fine, have it your way,' he said. 'Don't give me what I want, but you'll be sorry, kid.' He started slapping the ass with ferocity. He laughed out loud as the pert globes turned purple and twitched into ugly shapes … The skimpy body was tossing around like a beached fish. The sight made his prick leak. 'I've landed the boy of the century,' he thought. 'No shit. Man, those sunken eyes, that runny nose, those chapped lips.'" (Cooper, *Closer* 62)

"In the last couple of photos somebody had rolled the boy over, so we could see what he looked like on both sides, I guess. That's when I knew for sure he was dead because instead of an asscrack, he had a crater. It looked as if someone had set off a bomb in his rectum." (Cooper, *Frisk* 28)

The novels written by Dennis Cooper are undeniably grotesque. As the preceding passages highlight, this grotesquerie is directly tied to sexuality, and in particular a queer sexuality. With this preoccupation with obscene representations of sexuality, death and the body itself, his novels revel in themes that are as intriguing as they are transgressive. His novels present the experiences and desires of queer men as provocatively disturbing and unrepentantly amoral, where grotesque imagery is centered and brought to the fore to challenge the very notion of propriety and decency. Because of this, the unmitigated presence of the grotesque in his works requires further investigation into its function in the narratives. While often considered an intrinsic aspect of them, it is the premise of the present thesis that the grotesque also serves as a key role in formulating his distinctive discourses surrounding queerness and sexuality as being inherently transgressive.

This pull towards grotesquerie permeates the majority of Cooper's literary catalogue, where his discourses of violence, death, eroticism and degeneration take

precedence and form the bulk of his themes. With his extremities of representation, much of Cooper's fiction, as horrifying as it is evocative, likewise exemplifies horror fiction's mimetic abilities, as it "'requires its audience to find pleasure' in the vertiginous shifting 'between sympathetic abjection and a connoisseur's appreciation for the technical production of fear'" (Wills 69). In this sense, Cooper's erotic and violent poetics and subject matters provide possibilities for investigations of the interconnection between his Gothic evocations of grotesquerie and sexuality. Cooper's Gothic[1] mode, as will be explicated at length further ahead, harkens to the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic "poetics of violence" (Wills 71), all the while as it signals a particular fascination with the body and its mutability that is inherently queer[2], much like the genre of the Gothic itself. Cooper's fiction, with its discourses surrounding transgressive sexualities and ethics, situates itself within a tradition that emphasizes a connection between the grotesque, the Gothic and queer expressions of desire that are themselves distinctly transgressive. Fred Botting also argues that contemporary American Gothic in particular utilizes the grotesque, and particularly its unnerving and menacing presence in the everyday, as a fundamental aspect of its fiction (Botting, *Critical Idiom* 104). Cooper's fiction, with its urban

[1] Cooper's fiction in fact deliberately establishes itself within the Gothic tradition; the short story *Curtains* was, for example, part of the 1997 exhibition *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth-Century Art.*

[2] Queer is understood here, and in this thesis, as Eve Sedgwick's conceptualization of the concept - as the "open mesh of possibilies, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resources, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (8)

mundanity as a backdrop to its grotesque debauchery, situates itself quite neatly within this tradition.

With these themes of transgression and the sexually taboo, Cooper's fiction places itself within another long standing tradition of transgressive works, much like those of the Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille and Samuel R. Delany. It is undeniable that the conception of transgression—while obviously culturally and historically dependent—is still a persisting element of discussion that does not seem to relinquish its rhetorical force of contravention. That is to say, the transgressions of these works—Cooper's included—still manage to shock and provoke in contemporary times. Indeed, the notion of transgression, as postulated by Bataille himself, as suspending a taboo without suppressing it (36) indicates a self-reflexive awareness of its dependence on existing structures of hegemonies and taboos.

It is then at this juncture that the current thesis bases itself; Cooper's works, aligned with sexual and bodily transgressions as they are, present an opportunity for an analysis of the interrelation between modes of transgression such as grotesquerie, the Gothic, and queer sexuality as provocative interrogations of discourses of normalization and moralism surrounding the subject within his novels. Arguably as transgressive today —if not more[3]—as they were at their time of publication, it is then ultimately the argument of the current thesis that the novels analyzed presently explore these themes of

[3] Cooper's entire body of work has repeatedly fallen victim to censoring and even erasure; in as recently as 2016, Google erased a decade's worth of material pertaining to Cooper's work, including a novel, due to "specific Terms of Service violations" (Gay 2016).

transgression specifically through discourses of the queer male body through the evocation of a Gothic grotesque.

Two of Cooper's earliest works in particular that serve as the points of analysis in the current thesis, *Closer* and *Frisk*, both part of his quintology series *The George Miles Cycle*, published in 1989 and 1991 respectively, are works primarily interested in the body. Earl Jackson, Jr. argues that Cooper's themes of aberrant sexual practices are not necessarily part of an identity politics per se, but are rather "subordinated to an investigation into the interior of the body, a movement of objectification and obsessive violation of the body's contours" (Jackson Jr., 151). While the body in his work has thus received previous scholarly focus, it has yet to be analyzed in concord with a Gothic perspective that accentuates the horror of the depictions within it with the intent of positioning the aspect of horror and grotesquerie as a fundamental aspect of the body's importance and subversive potential in the narratives.

The fascination with bodies is certainly made obvious throughout both of these narratives; in *Closer*, the narrative centers around five teenage boys, all in some way connected to each other through their relationship with a boy named George Miles. As the narrative progresses, the boys participate in increasingly transgressive sexual, obscene and violent acts with each other, and with George in particular, as they traverse the morally dubious hinterlands of Cooper's (sub)urban environments, replete with disenfranchisement and substance abuse. What remains at the center of *Closer*, ultimately, is a grotesque fascination with the male body, its orifices, fluids and the limits of its corporeality. The boys are immersed in a culture of almost obsessive

sexuality; the pornographic imaginary that establishes itself in the text is as aberrant and vile as it is evocative and romanticized. In this sense, the nigh romantic depictions of sexual violence—such as when one of the primary perpetrators of this violence muses on the incomprehensible beauty of death and sex (Cooper 83)—harken to a Gothic preoccupation with eroticism and transgression, providing the foundation for the impetus to analyze the Gothic permutations of the novel.

Frisk, although chronologically the second novel in the quintology, shares no particular fabulaic commonalities with its predecessor. It does however expand on Cooper's corporeal poetics and continues his fascination with the body in a decidedly more traditional Gothic manner, with more explicit representations of body horror and violence. The introductory section introduces the narrator to snuff pornography; the dead and mutilated body of a young man is described in vivid detail and absorbed by the narrator to the point of obsession. This instance of horrifying voyeurism forms the foundation of the subsequent narrative, as the narrator progresses through his life profoundly captivated by the notion of death, particularly in a sexual context, as a direct result of this instance of being exposed to graphic sexual death. The novel's conclusion acts as the climax of this predilection—in letters being sent to a former lover, the narrator depicts his acts of gruesome sexual violence in exquisite detail, having ultimately embraced his "resentful fascination with the body's limitations" (Jackson Jr., 163) and engaged in the murders of a plethora of young men. An added element of interest in *Frisk* is the inclusion of ambiguously semi-autobiographical narrator Dennis; Cooper's work is by his own admission autobiographical to a point (Glück 245), and the

inclusion of a character explicitly referencing the authorial self signals a somewhat disquieting form of metaliterature that undoubtedly adds to its withstanding controversy. Indeed, after the publication of *Frisk*, Cooper received death threats from a queer activist group (Lev 21), reinforcing the notion, which will be discussed further ahead, that Cooper's fiction and its rejection of normative conceptions of a queer morality were as contentious at the time of publication as they are today; both queer and heterosexual readerships have denounced it for its refusal to adhere to any particular politics of morality. Whereas *Frisk* can more readily be considered a Gothic horror narrative through its more explicit allegiance to Xavier Reyes' conceptualizations of corporeal transgression, *Closer* denotes an allegiance to the concept that can be seen to locate it more squarely within queer transgressions.

With its indulgent convergence of violence and desire, it is then no surprise that the themes of the body have been at the forefront of critical analyses of Cooper's fiction. His discourses of the body are indeed almost omnipresent; whether it signifies a crisis of representation, as argued by Marvin Taylor (182), or an exploration of the spectacle of death, as argued by Jackson, Jr. (152), the body in his works remains assiduously structured as the agglomeration of his overarching themes. The evocation of the grotesque as a part of Cooper's bodily discourse investigates how grotesque figures can function in ways that cause a dissolution of the borders between normal and abnormal. In doing so, grotesque figures can come to signify a rejection, or at the very least a suspension, of sanctioned forms of normalcy and thus criticize "the idea that there is some ethically compelling aspect to 'normality' … to which there is no ethical obligation

to correspond" (Edwards and Graulund 10). This interrelation between the Gothic evocations of grotesquerie and corporeality ultimately works to foreground the role of the body in Cooper's discourses of queer transgression and dissent.

Cooper's poetics of eroticism and transgression subsequently signal an adherence to the Gothic tradition of boundary transgression, be it social or corporeal, and as such, a supplementary discussion surrounding the pornographic dimension of the novels in this analysis also serves to further expand the analysis of the body's significance as a site of queer subversion and resistance against discourses of normalization. This is supported when considering Douglas Crimp's assertion that the obfuscation of the sexual aspects of queer identities is centralized as the main argumentative point in favor of the tolerance of queer identities (277). With its viscerality, the inclusion of pornographic—and by extension grotesque and bodily—aesthetics in Cooper's novels then functions as a significant aspect of the resistance present in them, as they markedly bring to the fore the aspects of queer sexualities that are most often suppressed by institutions and regulatory organs. The positioning of Cooper's novels as Gothic further strengthens the connection with their queer affectations, as the Gothic has "in a sense, always been 'queer'" (Hughes and Smith 1), connected as it is with discourses of heterodoxy and transgression, much in the same way as queer sexualities are considered to be. Moreover, it also serves to situate the novels within a particular type of horror that accentuates the rejection of an eventual redemptive conclusion that would satisfy a heteronormative conception of queer liberation.

With regards to the Gothic themes of the body of the novels, it is worth noting Reyes' assertion that the Gothic genre is inherently somatic and corporeal (2), and thus, to consider Cooper's bodies depicted as specifically Gothic bodies in this sense allows for a critical investigation of the spectacle of violence and transgression of corporeality in Cooper's work as transgressive not only for the sake of shock value (as detractors of his work have argued),[4] but as part of a larger discourse of queer resistance and subversion. In doing so, it puts the body at the forefront and allows for an analysis of the body *itself* as a central instrument of queer resistance through its own transgression and viscerality. By extension then, the body as Gothic and grotesque in Cooper's work inherently questions the limits of decorum and taste, as it explores what Reyes contends the Gothic corporeal does: our "fears of alterity and marginalization while simultaneously allowing for an undermining of normative expectations and conceptions of what a body is forced to be" (Reyes 7).

Aligned as it is with modes of transgression, it then becomes evident that Cooper's fiction problematizes issues of homoeroticism, sexuality and morality that remain central to, most of all, academic discourse. When considering the criticism and denunciation, and even censoring (Lev 24), of his work at the time of their respective publications in relation to the persisting controversy of his themes in the twenty-first century, this controversy points to a need to further engage critically with his works to, in the case of the current thesis, investigate how these themes can come to serve as

[4] Lev writes that a common criticism of Cooper's work is the assertion that it does not have any goal other than to shock and disturb its readership. (24)

investigations of discourses of normality and morality. Cooper's interrogation of the "greater social machine that is mainstream American culture" (Lev 25) has rendered his work censored by both mainstream and alternative presses and even habitually seized at the Canadian border (24).[5]

Cooper's transgressive discourses of the body are made all the more pertinent when considering the context they stem from, as well as the contemporary climate they manage to continually critique. Published at the tail end of the AIDS crisis in America, *Closer* and *Frisk* are inscribed with the specter of the epidemic that precedes and informs them. In addition to the imposing of an "unanticipated literalness upon the risks to the body and the self that sex constitutes in much of his work" (Jackson Jr., 151), the subsequent aftermath of the crisis contextualizes the persisting relevance of his works. Cooper's characters, the majority of them teenage boys, navigate the debased spaces of his urban dystopias, glaring with their absence of parental security or supervision of any kind, as they participate in acts of sexual transgression and erotic violence, mimicking in their promiscuity and licentious conducts the perceived behaviors of queer men prior to the AIDS crisis.

By situating itself rather staunchly in opposition to queer politics' embracing of heteronormative institutions[6] and its politics of propriety in the wake of the onslaught of AIDS, Cooper's fiction assails the censuring of desire and its representations and adopts,

[5] It should be acknowledged that much of the subsequent analysis is located within a primarily American context; much of Cooper's work gains its evocative force from this context as well, and so it is the primary focus throughout the analysis.

[6] Michael Warner in his *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999) discusses this at length.

by deliberately positioning his characters as "others", a stance that ultimately rejects the normalization of a sanitized queer sexual identity and its practices. This repudiation of propriety politics remains as controversial today as it was at the time of publication for *Closer* and *Frisk*; in the 1990's a new strain of queer moralism vehemently detracted the promiscuity of the "gay lifestyle" and advocated for a shrunken public sphere and a "responsible" domestic privacy (Duggan 182). Crimp similarly argues that the AIDS crisis gave new life to moralism that repudiated the queer lifestyle in America (8), and Warner asserts that the loathing of queer sexual practices still persists in queer politics (48). What truly ascertains the persisting controversy—and the continued relevance—of Cooper's works, however, is not simply their reactive force at their times of publication, but the fact that sexually explicit queer literature, and indeed even homosexual practices, are still considered pornographic and obscene by mainstream media organs today (Schulman 83). Considering global conservative trends that aim to restrict and suppress queer existence,[7] Cooper's explicit works still manage to locate themselves as radically pertinent. There is then a precedence for investigating the abject and grotesque ways in which Cooper's bodies are depicted and transgressed, as well as the explicit sexual content in his novel, as they provide alternate ways to conceptualize queer resistance against normalization that are still considered contentious.[8]

[7] See *Global Homophobia: States, Movements and the Politics of Oppression* edited by Weiss and Bosia for a comprehensive account of the global politics of homophobia in contemporary times.

[8] It is worth noting, however, that the role of homosexual sexual excess in fiction is contentious. Munt states that it carries a "double valence … it contains a radical challenge to heteronormative coercion; on the other hand it is a reaction to that same repressed conservatism, thus continuing … to be inscribed within it" (92).

In this sense, by centering queer desire and intercourse specifically, and imbuing it with the specter of violence and abjection, Cooper further accentuates the inherent oppositionality of queerness against the hegemony of "every social structure or form" (Edelman, *No Future* 4). As Edelman further states in regards to the experience of queerness, "the embrace of queer negativity, then, can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself" (*No Future* 6). Edelman also convincingly asserts that we should strive to listen to queer sexualities that are produced by the forces of reaction heralded by queer people themselves (16). The subsequent analysis owes much of its theoretical groundwork to Edelman's queer theory, as it serves as the basis for much of the discussion and general conceptualization of Cooper's queer mode, especially in terms of its view of this oppositionality.

By depicting and subsequently representing the sexual practices of homosexual men in graphic and often obscene detail, Cooper's fiction thus publicizes these acts of sexual transgression, and in doing so, signals a reaction against the hegemony of heteronormativity and the policing of queer existence. It further signals a reaction to systems of power that legitimate the oppression and regulation of queer identities. In essence, Cooper's work "exploits the eschatology" (Halberstam 167) of the politics of normalization that are imposed on queer identities. By exacerbating these sexual transgressions and the accompanying violence, Cooper not only lays bare the vagaries of queer desire, but problematizes the notion of transgression itself. His fiction, by virtue of

its overt queerness, erotic violence and grotesque transgressions, then situates itself within the politics of transgression that characterize the Gothic mode described by Botting; in addition to its depiction of "excessive emotion, a celebration of transgression for its own sake, Gothic terrors activate a sense of the unknown and project an uncontrollable and overwhelming power which threatens not only the loss of sanity, honour, property or social standing but the very order which supports and is regulated by the coherence of those terms" (Botting, *Critical Idiom* 5). Cooper's fiction, I argue, achieves its transgressive potential through the depiction of queer sexuality, but also through his Gothic interaction with the grotesque, and its accompanying preoccupation with the body.

The project of this thesis is then to investigate the role of the transgressive modes of the grotesque and the Gothic in his works, and argue that by employing grotesque imagery and a Gothic conceptualization of the body and corporeality, Cooper formulates a discourse of transgression that locates the queer male body as its foundational vessel. In addition to this, Cooper depicts a queerness that Edelman designates as a resistance against futurity and the logic of opposition itself (*No Future* 4, 24). Both quite literally and figuratively, in fact; the spectacle of death in *Closer* and *Frisk* signals the death of the Child[9] and the resistance against a politically construed futurity by not only ascribing the characters queer identities, but also by literally killing them; the acts themselves both

[9] The Child in Edelman's discourse, as will be examined ahead in the analysis, is symbolic of the persistence and reinscription of social and political values in our children, thus allowing for a continuous reproduction of hegemonic discourses.

literal and symbolical manifestations of this resistance against the forces of heteronormative normalization.

The following theoretical section will outline the concepts of the grotesque and the Gothic as they are conceptualized in this thesis, as well as delve into Edelman's queer theory. The analysis will then divide the two novels into two sections, with the analysis of *Closer* focusing more on the intersection between queer transgressions and grotesquerie, and the analysis of *Frisk* developing the intersection between the Gothic and the grotesque.

2 The Grotesque, the Body and its Implications

An analysis of the grotesque body in *Closer* and *Frisk* requires first that the concept of the grotesque—a concept that is, at times, ambiguous and routinely resisting a coherent definition—is explained. This section will investigate the Gothic and the concept of corporeal transgression, and ultimately how a queer theoretical dimension will serve to reinforce and reinvigorate these concepts within the scope of the current thesis.

There have been several attempts to comprehensively define the concept of the grotesque. It has been characterized by Wolfgang Kayser as an aspect of horror, where the fundamental attribute is its ability to invoke a sense of estrangement and alienation from the world (Stieg 253) and oppositionally defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as potentially positive imagery that revels in its own aberrant aesthetics, in particular in relation to his notion of the carnivalesque, but likewise able to inspire fear and revulsion as seen in the Romantic grotesque. Both definitions nonetheless emphasize the concept's principal concern with the visual. Frances S. Connelly, in her critical exploration of modern art,

further defines the grotesque as an assemblage of modalities, "better understood as 'trans–', as modalities; better described for what they do, rather than what they are" (4), and continues to reinforce the transgressive inherence of the concept by underscoring its relation to boundaries both corporeal and societal.

The grotesque is, as argued, historically and inherently tied to aesthetics. The first critical investigations of the term pertained primarily to the visual arts (Cohen Shabot 64-65), and subsequent analyses have, while focusing largely on literature, retained the notion of grotesque aesthetics, particularly in relation to the body. The grotesque's origin in visual aesthetics, while not expounded on further in this thesis, still works to inform the current analysis, as it is this author's conviction that Cooper's grotesque aesthetics are highly visual and thus achieve their revolting impact through this visualization. The grotesque is indeed predominantly physical and visual, and is in literature evoked by descriptions that enable visualizations of the characters as grotesque (McElroy 7). In addition to this, Bernard McElroy argues that the grotesque gains its evocative force through its placement in a context that is *already* grotesque (7). The worlds of *Closer* and *Frisk,* grotesque and excessive as they are, certainly lend themselves to the rendering of the characters as grotesque, as will be investigated further ahead.

Grotesque bodies are, hence, in essence bodies that are distinctly *un*aesthetic; they are abject, defiled, monstrous and transgressive. Rather than merely inviting disgust and repulsion however, the grotesque also oscillates between attraction and torment (Bloom 2), and the bodies thus come to inhabit that same ambivalent space. To Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque body is one that is not separate from the world, and one where:

> The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. (Bakhtin 26)

The Bakhtinian grotesque body is then one of excess and transformation. It exists at the aperture of life and death and is concerned with the lower bodily strata and degradation. The grotesque body is, according to Bakhtin, "unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (26). It exists in a state of perpetual metamorphosis, where notions of death and rebirth are at the center, and orifices and protrusions of the body come to serve as manifestations of the body exceeding itself (26). It is a body that is "in the act of becoming" (317), where the limits of corporeality are transgressed and transcended as it situates itself interstitially between the world and itself. To Bakhtin, the transgression of the material body leads invariably towards, or rather inwards, the bowels and the phallus. This inward movement is a central aspect of the grotesque imagery of the body, as the bowels, the genital organs and the orifices of the body signify the place where "the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation" (317). Furthermore, it is through actions that pertain

to these spheres, such as copulation, defecation, eating, drinking and even dismemberment that the grotesque body exists in the world and becomes truly grotesque.

The domain of scatology in particular is to John Richard Clark, as is worth noting, a fundamental principle of the grotesque's involvement in satire; defecatory matters serve as satirical reactions to society notions of propriety. Even more so than sexuality, fecal matter "of bowels and bowls … is more unsavory and offensive, and in polite society it is treated as forbidden knowledge. For that reason, the satirist cheerfully opens the privy door and herds us in" (Clark 116). In this sense, the bodily aspects of the grotesque extend past the physical manifestations of the external body, and in the abjection of the internal there exists equal opportunities for grotesque subversions of normality and propriety. This notion is supported by Ian Miller, who purports that disgust "has a kind of inevitable connection with the satisfaction of desire", arguing that what lies behind the veneer of disgust is not only considered foul but perhaps even fair (111). Both *Closer* and *Frisk* utilize this excess and abjection of the grotesque to, while perhaps not explicitly satirize, then still offering critique satirically on the propriety and politics of the recognition of queer people.

These acts of grotesquerie also serve to reinforce another essential aspect of the grotesque body and style: the notions of hyperbole, exaggeration and excess. As fundamental attributes of the grotesque style, these inscribe the grotesque with another essential notion of the concept for Bakhtin—the language of abuses, curses and debasement. Abuse, Bakhtin argues, is essential to the grotesque due to its "direct

influence on the language and the images of this literature" (27), and is related to all other forms of degradation present in grotesque literature.

Another aspect of Bakhtin's conceptualizing of the grotesque is his notion of "grotesque realism". Basing this concept of material bodily principle on the culture of folk humor of the Renaissance, Bakhtin suggests that grotesque realism acts as a utopian site of cosmic, bodily and social aspects that converge to into a whole that is "gay and gracious" (19). In grotesque realism, the bodily elements of filth and debasement are inscribed with a positive character that asserts the grandiosity and festive aspects of the grotesque. He further goes on to state that the artistic logic of the grotesque image "ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths" (Bakhtin 317) While Cooper's novels arguably depict the opposite of this Bakhtinian festive and joyful grotesquerie at times, grotesque realism nonetheless becomes a pertinent facet of the current analysis when considering the aforementioned facets, as well as the primary principle of grotesque realism: the acts of degradation and debasement. In addition to the inwards movement of the grotesque, Bakhtin also establishes a topographical connotation related to the movements of degradation and debasement. The dichotomy between upwards and downwards motions, which in their cosmic connotations denote movement towards Heaven and Earth, become in grotesque realism movements that pertain to the body; upwards towards the head and downwards towards the bowels and the genital organs (21). The grotesque is primarily concerned with this downwards movement, as "the accent [in the grotesque] is placed not on the

upward movement but on the descent" (371). In this way, it is inextricably linked to degradation.

Degradation is to Bakhtin to simultaneously kill, bury and reproduce, in order to bring forth something better; not in its negative sense, but rather in a rejuvenating and invigorating endeavor, so as to conceive of something grander and more positive. It is at this point that Bakhtin's conceptualization of the grotesque asserts its positive character, as he argues that the grotesque, particularly in its Renaissance iteration, is founded on the exaggeration and excess of both negative and positive poles. The grotesque imagery is ultimately redeemed by laughter, as the spectacle of the carnival allows for the subversion of terror through laughter (39). The grotesque, no matter how timid, cannot be conceived without a trace of humor according to Bakhtin (38). It is in opposition to this carnivalesque however, that Bakhtin denotes another aspect of the grotesque that does not align itself with the jubilance of Rabelasian grotesquerie: that of the Romantic grotesque. The Romantic grotesque, in opposition to the grotesque of the Renaissance, centers terror at the forefront of its tradition. The world of the Romantic grotesque "is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile" (38-39). In Romantic grotesque, the regenerating and positive power of the grotesque of the Renaissance is instead reduced to vulgarities and is employed with the intent of causing the reader fear (39). This unredeemed terror of the Romantic grotesque veers more towards the general employment of the grotesque in Cooper's novels, but they likewise utilize the regenerating force of the folk humor

grotesque in their attempt to visualize the grotesquerie in the novels as a powerful force of resisting normalization.

Expanding on the concept of the grotesque body, especially in regards to its potential horror, Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund state that the grotesque body is a body of parts; at times incomplete, malformed or mutilated, the body becomes grotesque because it is ambivalent and resists notions of corporeality (2). It is both confined to its limits and its grotesque traits, and transgressive at the same time. This transgressive potential is inscribed in the grotesque due to its interaction with the particular context it exists within: it is reliant on the expectations of normalcy and propriety that are standard for its time. In this sense, the grotesque and grotesque bodies "influenc[e] a collective consciousness, a shared set of social, cultural and historical assumptions that arise from conventional beliefs and attitudes" and are subsequently relegated to the margins of society for this reason (12). Grotesque imagery is as such inherently opposed to conventional conceptions of classical aesthetics, all the while as it is itself a distinct aesthetic category (37). Fundamentally, the grotesque provokes conflicting reactions; the grotesque body is a production of both adversity and attraction, and disturbs the observer due to this ambivalence (78). Edwards and Graulund further assert that grotesque figures can "conceptualiz[e] and recogniz[e] broader varieties of being" (10) by disrupting notions of normality. The grotesque, far from simply evoking feelings of disgust, fear, shock or even laughter, is then a powerful instrument employed to resist forces of normalization—and perhaps more importantly, it can similarly criticize the implied ethical compulsion to adhere to normality by consciously deviating from it (10).

To Edwards and Graulund, the imagery of the grotesque body is one that is never passive, and grotesque appearance that is being presented aggressively—such as violence or sexuality—entails an active transcribing of these functions on the body, which in turn inspires the monstrous in the observer. Grotesque bodies then "act as a nexus of cultural anxieties about human bodies, for any action against monstrosity suggests a similar response to humanity and reveals an explicit threat to the person (45).

Inscribed in grotesque bodies is then the notion of transgression, as they denote the dissolution of borders both through their physical appearance and their potentially aberrant behavior (48). In this sense, as will be argued later on, the grotesque body intersects with the queer body in several significant ways, and in particular in Cooper's two novels. Kathryn Hume makes a salient point in regards to the experience of the grotesque in fiction that is significant in regards to Cooper's novels; it relies on "social standards that register the offense within the story and shows characters who call our attention to the phenomenon" (82). Much of the grotesque imagery in his novels is overtly so, but it likewise operates on the level of societal offense—that is to say, societal offenses are represented within the novels as well. As a transgressive trans-modality, as denoted by Connelly (4), the grotesque nature of the novels functions on a descriptive, textual level, but also on the level of contextual boundary transgression; the spectacles of violence, rape and pedophilia are then not only clearly grotesque in depiction, but in the transgression of morals and law.

2.1 Gothic Horror Made Corporeal

The inception of the literary Gothic mode is set in the eighteenth century, where it signified a lack of morality, reason, and an incongruence with neoclassical beliefs (Botting, "Gothic Darkly" 13). With the Gothic used derogatively to denote art and writing that did not conform to the aesthetic standards of the time, it subsequently came to signify a resonance "as much with anxieties and fears concerning the crises and changes in the present as with any terrors of the past" (14). Much like the grotesque, the genre of the Gothic has also historically denoted a transgression of borders and disruption of categories ("Gothic Darkly" 18). While not necessarily always coincident, the grotesque and the Gothic routinely function together in tandem, whether it be to provoke terror, disgust or laughter. The Gothic in fact often relies on grotesque evocations to produce its aspects of terror and, most importantly, to accentuate the body as the epicenter of anxieties regarding humanity (Reyes 4). They are also bound through their transgressive potentialities; the Gothic can be fundamentally transgressive, investigating and problematizing the uncertainties about "the nature of power, law, society, family and sexuality" (Botting, *Critical Idiom* 3). Much the same as the Gothic, the grotesque serves to denote transgressions of the societal status quo, where the grotesque form and imagery violates accepted, harmonious or sanctioned boundaries. Inscribed in the Gothic mode is then a predilection for transgressions and encounters with the monstrous that bring to the fore the underlying fears and anxieties regarding the human condition.

The Gothic, in Jack Halberstam's analysis, is characterized by its invocation of the dichotomy between dread and desire alongside an excess of meaning; it acts as a

versatile technology producing monsters whose alterity signifies the socially and politically constructed fears of deviance from the norm of its time (1-2). The monster of the Gothic tradition subsequently condenses the sexual and racial threats to the nation and the bourgeoisie, and tends to show clearly the markings of sexual deviance and gendering (3, 4). The horror of Gothic fiction, he argues, is ultimately skin deep (Halberstam 163),[10] thus locating the site of many of the themes explored in Gothic fiction in the body as such. Catherine Spooner, in her analysis of the contemporary Gothic, supports this notion; contemporary Gothic, she argues, is "more obsessed with bodies than in any of its previous phases: bodies become spectacle, provoking disgust, modified, reconstructed and artificially augmented" (63). She goes on to argue that the preoccupation with "freaks, scars, diseased flesh, monstrous births and, above all, blood" in the contemporary Gothic tradition stems from an attempt to emphasize and reinscribe the body with a physicality that is lost in the current decorporealized information society (Spooner 65). This preoccupation even mirrors many fundamental aspects of the grotesque as defined by Bakhtin even while they go beyond his conceptualizations in practice. Although, while Spooner notes the connection between the Gothic and the grotesque in Gothic fiction, in particular in relation to bodies, she argues that grotesque bodies in the mode are seldom redeemed by the laughter that Bakhtin centralizes in the grotesque mode; in fact, they are predominantly represented as sinister and disturbing (Spooner 68). This delineation of the grotesque in the Gothic is one that *Closer* and *Frisk*

[10] Halberstam also locates sexuality as the overarching, indeed encompassing, locus of the Gothic tradition. Many of the anxieties regarding race, gender class and nation are subsumed under the threat of sexuality present within the monstrous sexual body that exemplifies many Gothic fictions (7).

most readily adhere to—as will be made evident in the analysis, the grotesque bodies of Cooper's young men are distinctly ambivalent in their production of fear and humor and are deliberately positioned as horrific as part of their reactive force all the while as they are at times presented with a sense of grim joviality.

Reyes argues, much in the vein of Spooner, that all Gothic is preoccupied with the body. He states that corporeality is significant as a part of the Gothic because it is "like the mode itself, caught up in a tug of war between its denunciation of the laws that govern the status quo and its exploitation of carnality and gore for affective or entertainment purposes" (8). It is in fact the corporeality of the Gothic mode that makes it particularly well suited to transgress borders and boundaries, as its interaction with decorum and excess is often finely balanced between high-brow and low-brow modes of fiction, thus not shying away from excessive modes of representation.

As has been argued by Kelly Hurley in relation to the body, the Gothic body at the *fin-de-siècle* is characterized by the notion of the abhuman. The abhuman body is one of dissolution of the unitary human subject; it is a site of metamorphic variability and hosts the tensions inherent in the movement away from notions of stability and towards the ambivalence of a human body that risks becoming "other" (Hurley 3-4). The notion of transgression remains central here too, as the abhuman body is one that hosts anxieties regarding the potential transgressive nature of the human subject, and further reinforces the perception that the Gothic body functions as a vessel for representing the potentialities for transcending boundaries of normative humanity.

Hence, while the predominance of the genre has not been solely focused on the human body, the Gothic has, despite this, always retained a particular fascination with its corporeality. The essential vessel for articulating the dread of difference that characterizes the Gothic is the body, argues Marie Mulvey Roberts; in particular bodies, as likewise argued by Reyes and Hurley, that are seen as hosting "dangerous desires, inculcators for destabilizing ideas or containers of counter-hegemonic ideologies, normally related to race, class, religion, gender or sexuality" (Roberts 2). The construction of the monster in Gothic fiction is furthermore, argues Roberts, the result of a war waged on marginalized individuals whose bodies signify the fear and difference of the Other (221). She states that:

> The body is a potential site of monstrosity for those who do not fit into the body politic. Irregularity and the grotesque have been associated with the architecture of the Gothic and are also indicative of wayward flesh and its deformities. The monstrous body provides a battleground on which good versus evil can play out for perpetuity. (223-4)

In one way or the other, the body has then remained present in the Gothic mode throughout its existence, and the relation between the Gothic and its evocation of the grotesque has likewise functioned together to conceptualize a Gothic body.

This corporeality has evidently remained at the center of the genre's ontological explorations of the limits and tensions between the signification of humanity, and it further allows for an exploration of the intersection between the Gothic and queerness. The Gothic, with its exploration and ambivalence regarding monolithic orthodoxy, offers

a literary mode that espouses a queerness that achieves an "assimilation of the alternative, acceptance of the valid claims of heterodoxies that might be, variously, cultural, theological, political or, indeed, sexual" (Hughes and Smith 2). It is significant to note then that the queerness of the Gothic literary mode is more than the *literal* queerness that might be inscribed within it; that is, the sexual sense of the term might feature as an aspect, but the ability of Gothic literature to challenge and subvert hegemonic discourses and boundaries is in essence queer.

The Gothic body itself becomes frightening, argues Reyes, through its interstitiality. The fear of a Gothic body is aroused because it can either "refuse absolute human taxonomies or destabilize received notions of what constitutes a 'normal' or socially intelligible body" (5). The work of Gothic bodies is the exploration of an inherent fear of difference and marginalization, but also, as Reyes argues, to undermine the conceptions of what a body *is*, as well as to lay bare the "impositions of biopolitics" upon it (7). It is through the thematic and imaginary representations of the body that this corporeal Gothic mode unravels a discourse of negotiation and critique of the shifting boundaries of humanity. The body, as further argued by Reyes, is then always bound up in several social and political discourses (13). In this sense, though the characters in *Closer* and *Frisk* are decidedly human, by virtue of their queer identities—and subsequently their queer bodies—they act as destabilizers of this constitution of a socially and politically intelligible body.

While not exclusively the case, Reyes additionally argues that grotesquerie and excess are central aspects of the body Gothic, and that all Gothic is fundamentally

corporeal by virtue of the shocking and often sensationalist representations of the body. Unlike the Bakhtinian carnivalesque mode however, grotesque Gothic bodies are often left unresolved with the absence of laughter and merriment, as has been similarly argued by Spooner. The employment and exploitation of a Gothic body in a grotesque manner to critique and challenge normative discourses of the body is a common occurrence, particularly in what might be considered "low-brow" Gothic fiction. As Reyes argues, texts in the Gothic tradition that go too far in their violent reverie are often accused of being in poor taste (8), as the taboos of their extratextual context denote their transgressions as excessive and distasteful. He emphasizes that the moralistic detraction of explicitly violent and horrifying fiction often fails to consider the larger discourses surrounding the value of gratuitous and extreme graphic violence in fiction as tools for representing the body in transgressive ways (Reyes 11). Gothic violence to and representations of the body, far from simply being gratuitous and superficial, "often conceal much more complex philosophical reflections that go hand in hand with contemporary notions of the body in the Western societies that produced these fictions" (166). This notion of the inherence of violence in the Gothic mode further harkens to Reyes' concept of corporeal transgression. It is conceptualized by him as instances of "dismemberment, mutilation, mutation, extreme disease or transformative surgery" (11), which elicit feelings of shock, horror or disgust by normative standards with the intent of transgressing those very same standards. Directly related to this is the notion that corporeal transgression can act as a liberation from social and political constructions of the body (60). While not including the corporeal transgression that may result from non-

normative sexualities or genders in his study, Reyes' conceptualization of this transgression in its visceral and abject sense is still essential, as the argument of this thesis positions the violence enacted on the bodies of queer subjects as fundamental in its reactive force; that is to say, the corporeal transgressions of Cooper's novels become queer through their enactions of violence.

2.2 Queer Theory, Futurity, and the Politics of Opposition

As seen in the introduction and throughout, this thesis opts to use the word "queer" to denote the sexuality discussed. While the current thesis does not have the scope to comprehensively delineate between the terms of "queer" and "gay" I have opted to use queer so as to encompass the ties with the Gothic as a queer mode, and to further emphasize the transgressive properties that queer denotes.

In *Homographesis*, Edelman argues that twentieth-century heterosexist discourses insisted on the necessity of "'reading' the body as a signifier of sexual orientation". Through this reading of the body as legibly queer,[11] heterosexuality was thus able to legitimate itself against the "threat" of the unnatural queer body by insisting that the queer body, while ostensibly legible, could also pass, sinisterly, as heterosexual (4). Edelman goes on to argue that this cultural production of the queer body:

[11] Edelman distinctly discusses male homosexuality specifically in *Homographesis*, but for the purposes of maintaining a coherent structure throughout the thesis, I have opted to use 'queer' to encompass this.

> exercises control over the subject (whether straight or gay) by subjecting his bodily self-representation to analytic scrutiny, the arbitrariness of the indices that can identify "sexuality"—which is to say, *homo*sexuality— testifies to the cultural imperative to *produce*, for purposes of ideological regulation, a putative difference within that group of male bodies that would otherwise count as 'the same' if 'sexual identity' were not now interpreted as an essence installed in the unstable space between 'sex' and the newly articulated category of 'sexuality' or 'sexual orientation.' (10, emphasis original)

In this sense, Edelman asserts that the queer body is one that *is*, rather than merely inhabits, a body that demands to be read, where sexuality is always already inscribed in it (10). However, as he further notes, it is also through this process of conceiving the queer body as a subject of discourse that the regulatory and normalizing practices of cultural discrimination have come to enact their disciplinary force upon queer subjects (10). In his neologism *homographesis*, Edelman in turn situates sexuality as "necessarily determined by the rhetorical structures and the figural logics through which 'sexuality' and the discourse around it are culturally produced" (xiv). In addition to conceiving the queer body as part of even textual discourse, Edelman likewise positions sexuality (especially male gay sexuality) as a cultural production that is made to bear the representative force of non-normative sexualities so that they may be understood and constructed meaningfully in opposition to heterosexuality (xv). Equating this view and position of sexuality to the position of writing in the West, Edelman argues that gay male

sexualities figure as “the superfluous and arbitrary thing that must be ignored, repressed, or violently disavowed in order to represent representation itself as natural and unmediated” (xvi). Thus, by representing a threat to the “logic” of heterosexuality, gay male sexualities and queer sexualities in general come to figure as figures of opposition to it. This view of queer sexualities as something that must be violently disavowed or repressed locates Cooper’s two novels as especially pertinent, considering their visceral and distinctly overt representation of a male queer sexuality that refuses the analytical scrutiny of heteronormative discourses and their normalizing practices.

This notion of opposition is expanded on greatly in Edelman’s *No Future*, where he conceives of queerness as being inherently oppositional. Edelman situates the political —or as he argues, an endeavor that locates itself outside of politics completely— imperative of queerness within the rejection of what he designates as “reproductive futurism”. Queerness, he argues, “names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children’, the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (3, emphasis original). Reproductive futurism as denoted by Edelman, locates the child as the symbol of Western culture’s unwavering faith in the unquestioned value of the future. This Child as a symbol is inscribed with the values of its preceding generation, embodying the citizen as an ideal “entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed” (11). At the cost of anyone marginalized, the Child’s imagined future freedom weighs heavier than that afforded to those who would serve to *oppose* the creation and perpetuation of the Child. It is at this juncture that Edelman

locates queerness; it becomes, by virtue of its refusal to propagate the fantasmical Child, a threat to the political institutions who mandate the collective reproduction of the Child as well as a threat to social order itself. The queer can never, in this sense, only define an identity—it must also disturb it, as it disturbs the social organization it exists within (17). This disturbing of identities and social organization certainly makes itself clear in Cooper's novels, as the representational excess present within them works to figure his characters as threats to both the social structures within them, but also to a heteronormative conception of what the queer subjects must necessarily represent. The presence of an abundance of young men and boys within the narratives who indulge in obscene and violent, even predatory, acts of sexuality certainly challenges and threatens the stability of social organization.

Edelman asserts that queerness' opposition to futurity is what signifies a potential end to Western civilization as it is known, because if "there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself" (*No Future* 13). This undoing of civil society rests on the acknowledging of the Freudian death drive—that is, the compulsion towards death and destruction—rather than denying it in the way heteronormative society does through the propagation of reproductive futurism. Queerness thus comes to figure as oppositional against the logic by which politics configure our social reality, and in accepting the figural burden of queerness the queer person's "opposition is precisely to any such logic of opposition, its proper task

the ceaseless disappropriation of every propriety" (24). In discussing the role of these queer subjects in politics, Edelman argues that:

> while the right wing imagines the elimination of queers (or of the need to confront their existence), the left would eliminate queerness by shining the cool light of reason upon it, hoping thereby to expose it as merely a mode of sexual expression free of the all—pervasive coloring, the determining fantasy formation, by means of which it can seem to portend, and not for the right alone, the undoing of the social order and its cynosure, the Child. Queerness thus comes to mean nothing for both: for the right wing the nothingness always at war with the positivity of civil society; for the left, nothing more than a sexual practice in need of demystification. (Edelman 28)

The oppositionality of the queer subject is thus figured in a multitude of ways, but it is also paradoxically refuted by the very institutions that espouse that oppositionality; configured against heterosexuality, homosexuality "gets put in the position of difference from the heteronormativity that, despite its persistent propaganda for its own propagation through sexual difference, refuses homosexuality's difference from the value of difference it claims as its own" (Edelman 60). Thus, while signifying difference inherently, queer subjects are still denied that value of difference by heteronormative institutions, leading them to fruitlessly either embrace their queerness as difference, thus securing the identities of heteronormativity, or disavow this identity and affirm the pervasive "truth" of it. However, as Edelman ultimately argues, queerness is finally oppositional to not only heteronormativity and futurity, but to the very foundation

of social order itself. The queer subject, "himself neither martyr nor proponent of martyrdom for the sake of a cause, forsakes all causes, all social action, all responsibility for a better tomorrow or for the perfection of social forms" (101). In refusing the "ethical" task of propagating the future, of adhering to the standards and conventions of social norms, queer people signify the impossible ethical task of not compassionately investing in the fantasy of the future and finally locate their ethical register outside that of a recognizably human register (101).

3 A Grotesque Gothic and Queer Transgression in *Closer* and *Frisk*

Taking together the notions of corporeality present in the grotesque and the Gothic, one can conclude—as this analysis section does—that Cooper's two novels, concerned with the body as they are, explicate a bodily discourse that, through what Leora Lev states to be their "discourses of eroticism and violence, with their evocation of bodily orifices, fluids, and spasms" (15), raise profound questions regarding expressions of death, desire and, not the least of all, the queer body as a site of a heterosexual codification of desire that is exacerbated and reveled in to the point of exploding these notions by employing a grotesque Gothic. In an interview regarding his fiction, Cooper himself states that "the pull toward horror, for lack of a better term, is very intense for me. It attacks me on so many fronts. It terrifies me, it holds an overwhelming erotic charge, it fascinates me intellectually like a puzzle or problem, and it makes me feel insane and deeply emotional" (Glück 248). As the subsequent analysis of *Closer* and *Frisk* will argue in this coming section, it is at this position of queer transgression through acts of

grotesquerie and Gothic conceptions of the body and horror that Cooper expounds on this discourse of queer desire that revels in this deviant imagery.

3.1 Grotesquely Corporeal, Gothically Queer

The preoccupation with the body is foregrounded in the very beginning of *Closer*, where John, one of the boys the narrative centers around, proclaims his hatred for his face. While that alone does not preclude any particular grotesqueries, this rumination is immediately followed by the assertion that "as a kid he'd been punched in the mouth and looked great for a couple of weeks" (Cooper, *Closer* 11). The connection between bodies and violence, and in addition grotesquerie, is then immediately established as this juxtaposition between the evocation of violence and the alteration of bodies is foregrounded, and this same preoccupation with the body as the site of grotesque and Gothic fascination remains present throughout the narrative.

Much of the grotesquerie of the novels is furthermore inextricably connected to sexuality. While the characters' queerness is overarchingly designated as grotesque by virtue of their rejection of normative forms of existence—and are, as such, grotesquely ambivalent as they do not always appear physically grotesque but are rendered as such by their queerness—it is at the juncture of sex and in sexual contexts that the evocative force of the grotesque manages to gain its full effect. This in turn forms a sort of double valence, as the evocation of non-normative sexualities and sexual acts does not only denote grotesque transgressions of the body and normativity, but also deliberately interacts with the response to said depictions. The grotesque imagery in Cooper's novels makes no attempt at redemption; instead, as I argue, it provocatively elicits adverse

responses to the filth and gore of its subject matters to interact with notions of propriety and responsibility that are imposed on queer subjects.

Both novels center the ambivalence of the body as a point of grotesque inquiry; in *Frisk*, the body serves as the instigator of the narrator's preoccupation with the body as being transgressed. As a child, the narrator's exposure to hardcore pornographic magazines featuring beautiful young men in increasingly disturbing sexual situations leads to his subsequent obsession with reimagining, and ultimately emulating, the snuff pornography of his childhood. Fundamentally, both *Closer* and *Frisk* provide an inextricable link between the spectacle of sex, the sexual body and a grotesque Gothic that figures the body itself as central facet in the discourse of queer transgression and refusal to adhere to futurity that I argue is at the center of Cooper's narratives.

At the center of the sexual and bodily grotesquerie in *Closer* is George Miles, a troubled teenage boy whose body comes to serve as the main site of the romantic Gothic explorations of the grotesque in the novel. George is at times distinctly without autonomy; he can barely be considered as a subject, as his body is the only aspect the surrounding characters consider worth noting. He is objectified, quite literally, and used and abused without any regard for the consequences of the transgressions enacted upon him. In the beginning of the narrative John describes how George "shut his eyes, went limp, and kind of squeaked" (*Closer* 12) as they are having sex. Moreover, he comments that he uses George as a "prop" and that "he made a lot of mistakes … but if George noticed or cared, it didn't show" (12). It is interesting to note in regards to this, that this

objectification sometimes works doubly, as George himself ostensibly contributes to this objectification of his own body, as will be seen further ahead.

Inscribed in George are also traditionally Gothic anxieties regarding sexuality and law, as his queerness and young age designate him as a center of potential transgressions. George is very beautiful and youthful, and as such the juxtaposition between the grotesque imagery and actions that are ascribed to him and his desirability serves to exacerbate the ambivalence of his body; it exemplifies a Gothic position between dread and desire, where his body becomes Gothic not only through his sexual body and its alterity, but through its grotesque transgressions of a normative body. When meeting George for the first time, John initially notes that he is "maybe even a little too cute" (*Closer* 12), and as John, who notoriously paints distorted portraits of conventionally beautiful young men, paints George and subsequently has sex with him he muses further on the corporeality of George's body. He notices the warmth of George's skin all the while as he notes that "[t]hat was the weirdest part, feeling how warm and familiar George was and at the same time realizing the kid was just skin wrapped around some grotesque-looking stuff" (13), directly contradicting the perceived beauty that George possesses otherwise. John's artistic inclinations work to affirm the visuality of the grotesque in an almost meta-visual manner, as his distorted portrait of George along with his designation of George himself as potentially grotesque formulate a doubled visual imagery.

As John finishes the portrait of George he has spent months working on, George comments that he looks to be wearing a Halloween mask in it, to which John glibly

states that the same can be said for the real George (*Closer* 19). While presented as a joke within the narrative, the notion that George's countenance resembles a mask designates him as a grotesque visage, and this notion is reinforced when John asserts that his portraits work as a mirror to the real world (*Closer* 20). As such, George becomes doubly grotesque, the grotesquerie evoked not only through his physical body, but in representations of it as well. This literal objectification, as well as its transformation into a signifier, of George's body further designates it as Gothic, as his position in the narrative often pertains to his body being used, observed or transgressed—that is to say, it is being represented through this excess and thus becomes Gothic, as argued by Reyes (11). As a result the corporeal dissonance that arises works to position George as somewhat akin to a spectator of his own corporeality. Much of the subsequent violence enacted upon his body is both described without affect and similarly lacking in response from George himself. In this sense, George's body is a grotesque body of parts, where his body becomes emphatically disaffected and portrayed simply as a passive site of potential transgressions. In writing about pornography and horror films, Jay McRoy argues that both horror texts and pornography, vilified as they are, work to encapsulate "the literal and figurative deconstruction of the discrete human form" (McRoy 192). In both instances, the body is constructed as fragmented and ontologically disassembled into its constituent parts; in *Closer*, George epitomizes this fragmentation. As much is even mentioned by one of George's friends Cliff, who while discussing another friend's potential pornography written about George, notes that "'It's clever,' Cliff says. 'Making George seem a corpse is inspired, and he does sort of turn into one when you're with

him. The night we fucked I had this weird feeling I was alone and not alone at the same time'" (*Closer* 66). In addition to the previously argued object position that he inhabits, this disassembling functions to position his body as one that is resolutely in opposition to a normative, heterosexual one, as it is objectified and effeminized on a basis of male queer desire rather than on a heterosexual one. In this sense, George's body comes to investigate the notion of a socially intelligible body as it ultimately becomes divorced from the notion of a body that can be legibly read as whole and complete. It is, even before the subsequent violence and violation of it, a body that has been corporeally transgressed due to the fact that its borders are dissolved.

As a result, George's body becomes Gothic, as it hosts the tensions inherent in the notions of a queer sexual body, seeing as queerness is being embodied in the form of a teenager's transgressed body that becomes the center of the text's overall rejection of a heteronormative sexual decency. As Halberstam also notes, the Gothic genre—particularly in its contemporary iterations—often figures the threat of sexuality as the primary demarcation of threatening otherness (7). Considering Edelman's assertion that the queer body by itself also figures as a threat to heterosexuality (*Homographesis* 4), conceptualizing George's body as Gothic allows for an understanding of the interconnection between the Gothic mode in the text and how it figures alongside the queer sexual body to undermine the normative conception of one. Furthermore, this Gothic conception of his body also works to reinforce the general notion of Edelman's conceptualizing of the queer subject as a threat to social organization, as the body as

presented within the narrative threatens the very stability of a legible body that would conform to an easily digestible representation of one.

On a more physical level, the fragmentation of George's body renders it a body that can be nothing but grotesque as it, by being divided so starkly into little more than parts, comes to signify a transgression of the human body as unified and complete. That is not to say that there is a supernatural element that allows for George's body to fully transcend the boundaries of corporeality, but rather that the objectification of his constituent parts simultaneously render him as a body dissolved and a body, much like Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, that through its parts comes to transgress it nonetheless.

The fragmentation of George's body into that of a grotesque body of parts is made the most evident in the sexual encounters he recurrently finds himself in. In a first encounter with an older man, George comments that he "like[s] the feeling of being plugged up. Sloppy tongue down his throat, fingernail in his piss-slit, two fingers up his ass" (*Closer* 38). This instance also confirms that the objectification of George's body is to some extent self-imposed. While George seeks out the sexual encounters, and evidently is seen to even enjoy them at times, the subsequent instances of objectification are cast in a different, more ambiguous light.

The grotesque evoked here, while evidently of the sexual kind, also functions in a Bakhtinian sense, where the dimensions of the lower bodily stratum are emphasized alongside the body's opening up to the world. The segmentation of sensory experiences he recounts also serve to accentuate the object position of his body; George's body

"ignores the closed smooth and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices" (Bakhtin 317) much like Bakhtin's conceptualization of the grotesque body. Especially in regards to his body, George exemplifies the Bakhtinian grotesque imagery, as he is in essence never closed off from the external world. This grotesque body that is achieved, however, does not occur naturally as George is repeatedly presented as somewhat of an epitome of youthful beauty. The true grotesquerie pertains to the violations of his body and its boundaries, as it is through them that his body ultimately becomes the host of a grotesque bodily image.

His body functions as an extension of the orifices of his body, and the movements that invariably lead towards the lower bodily stratum are foregrounded in the sexual encounters he participates in. This is investigated at length further ahead in this analysis. In addition to this, the grotesque is further exacerbated by the dubious nature of the sexual encounter itself in the aforementioned passage; George is not of age, and the older man is aware of the legal transgressions they are partaking in while engaging in intercourse. As they finish, the man pleads with George to not disclose their engagement, asking him to "please… don't tell your folks or …" (*Closer* 37), implying that he knows their encounter would be considered illicit. Once again, the depiction of the grotesque in relation to the body is reinforced by the external circumstances surrounding it, and ultimately compounding it further. These circumstances, through their transgressive nature (that is, their legal transgressions), amplify the bodily grotesqueries as they foreground the role of this as a central part of the evocative force of the grotesque.

George's continued affairs with older men highlight how conventional instances and images can turn grotesque by virtue of their interactions with rejections of normativity; the sexual encounters are rendered grotesque as they are cast in the light of a grotesquely transgressive context.

It is at a later sexual encounter of George's with another older man that the grotesquerie evoked becomes aligned more acutely with horror. The older man, after having him suck on ice cubes to effect the frigidity of a corpse, and subsequently positioning him lifelessly on the floor, frisks his body as if performing a medical examination. During this, George passively states that "[j]ust then a cock clogged his throat. Skin and pubic hair smothered his face. It made him think of the pirate mask he used to wear every Halloween. He concentrated on that fun idea, and did his best not to think of Philippe, who was patting him down like a cop" (*Closer* 42). The recurring allusion to mask wearing, and the grotesque penetration of his bodily boundaries certainly enhances the relation between George's body and its grotesque affectations. It is, however, the subsequent passages that establish the particular interrelation between horror and grotesquerie that exemplifies Cooper's novels. As George, under the influence of hallucinatory drugs, passively experiences the older man's incursions he imagines himself as if:

> He was an old miner pointing his gas lantern into a cobwebbed shaft. He scratched one dirt-caked, stubbly cheek and pushed his hat back. Far down the passageway, covered with dust, a small skeleton swung, tinkling in a rotted noose. He took his lamp in and cut it loose. George blinked, attempting to stop

> the hallucination. He'd accidentally shit. He tried to rise up. “No,” Philippe shouted, “that is what I wanted to happen!” His voice sounded prerecorded. George tried to do what he always did when life grew too realistic. He made up a Disneyland ride and rode through it. This one was honestly scary. It wended its way through a dark, barren tunnel that kept getting smaller and smaller. Occasionally skeletons fell from the roof and cracked in slivers around him. A heavily accented voice was saying really weird things, like, “You are dead, baby.” “Ouch!” The ride ended. (*Closer* 43)

The passage, evidently metaphorical and representing his bowel movements alongside the intrusion by the older man, details the undercurrent of horror that suffuses George’s experience with him. Worth noting is also that the older man is subsequently represented somewhat akin to a Gothic monster in the preceding passage, not only through the veneer of the hallucination, but due to him and his body hosting dangerous desires that destabilize the notion of normalcy—that is to say, his pedophilic inclinations. At a later point in the narrative the same older man is focalized, thus bringing to the fore another transgressive disturbance of normalcy; a preoccupation with killing that underlines the previous encounters with George and harkens to the same Gothic tropes in a manner that is verging on meta-textual, as they are exposed as representations of these tropes in a somewhat parodic manner: “Philippe lay in bed imagining George's death. He was extremely drunk, his eyes were closed. The world he saw rang with percussion. Skeletons snapped. Blood and entrails exploded on a grand scale, while George, deposited deep in these fireworks, flailed like a tiny, crazed acrobat” (*Closer* 80). This passage, equally as

evocatively grotesque as the sexual encounter mentioned above, likewise foregrounds the corporeality of the grotesquerie, both in relation to the body of George as well as the general abjection of bodily matters. It also exemplifies the inextricable relation death has to sexuality in *Closer*, and the embracing of the death drive—as Edelman argues is one of the central commitments of the queer subject— becomes starkly evident as the older man dreams about murdering George, and subsequently of putting an end to futurity in the literal sense of the word.

In the preceding sexual encounter reality serves as the true grotesque imagery for George, and the escape into fantasy does little to alleviate the impending terror of the combined sexual intercourse and acid trip. With the emphasis once again resting on the lower bodily stratum, and more specifically defecation, the instance of George's actual defecation once again marks itself as truly grotesque. The visualization of his intestines as a "cobwebbed shaft" with skeletons dangling from rotted nooses in turn evokes an almost comical representation of traditional horror imagery, harking as it does to Gothic evocations of anxieties surrounding death, yet ultimately serving to locate the Gothic squarely within the text, as the grim humor of the situation revels in the excessive representations. In addition to this, George's introspective hallucinations, horrific as though they may be to him, are depicted in a carnivalesque fashion. Gothic horror texts often employ the anus for comedic effect (Conrich and Sedgwick 255), and the simultaneous depiction of a Disneyland ride as a metaphorical conjuring of defecation situates the instance as a decidedly absurd and comedic one. The employment of the carnivalesque in matters scatological is supported by Ian Conrich and Laura Sedgwick, as

they state that “the business of excreting bodily wastes and the spaces associated with the process are taboo, due to the privacy of the parts of the human anatomy involved in removing pollutants. One way of dealing with the body’s taboos is to employ the carnivalesque” (255). This assertion also reinforces the notion of taboo that permeates the entire sexual encounter George finds himself in. Once again there is a double valence present, especially in regards to the grotesquerie, as the bodily dimensions present themselves as grotesque through both intercourse and defecation, and likewise through the taboos that are associated with both of these acts themselves. The juxtaposition of the decidedly comedic effect of the “Disneyfication” of his bowel movements and George’s perceived horror of the situation does however function as a destabilization of the horror of the text. While Gothic horror is known, as mentioned above, to employ the anus for comedy, its employment likewise does little to establish a particularly frightening atmosphere. While the absurdity and comedic effect of George’s Disney-inspired hallucinatory trip works to destabilize the horror of this particular sexual encounter, it also proves a somewhat self-reflexive awareness of the text’s position within the Gothic genre. As such, while the overarching theme of both of the texts analyzed here can be ascribed the label of Gothic horror—*Frisk* in particular—they routinely interact with the conventions of the genre to interrogate the Gothic’s inherent discourse of instability” as argued by Vijay Mishra (qtd. in Palmer 166), that situates Gothic texts in between carnivalesque humor and horror.

Defecation playing a distinct part in the bulk of *Closer*’s later sexual encounters moreover serves to figure the body—George’s especially as he is the one most often

exposed and exploited in this manner—as a host of a plethora of anxieties regarding the body itself. As Miller argues, “when our inside is understood as vile jelly, viscous ooze, or a storage area for excrement the orifices become dangerous as points of emission of polluting matter, dangerous both to us and to others” (89). Defecation functioning as a sort of focus within these encounters then signifies the explicit excretion of these anxieties into the public sphere, and signifies the violability of the dignity and autonomy of the body; in doing so, it, however grotesquely, locates the “horror” of sex and queer sex as intrinsically tied to the human body itself, and the focus on the anus in particular locates this anxiety as particularly associated with queer male sex. In this sense, conceptualizing the body in these novels as Gothic, in regards not only to the violence that is later enacted upon them, but due in part to their grotesque sexual functions, allows for this investigation of the role that these play in the discourse surrounding the queer body as a site of resistance and, perhaps most significantly, dissent. The feeling of disgust is, according to Freud, connected to the notions of shame and morality (54-55). As Miller states in regards to this, disgust is culturally constructed and associated with objects that have been designated by said culture as inferior and vile. Disgust and contempt are in this sense politically significant, as they “work to hierarchize our political order: in some settings they do the work of maintaining hierarchy; in other settings they constitute righteously presented claims for superiority; in yet other settings they are themselves elicited as an indication of one's proper placement in the social order” (8-9). The employment of the grotesque as a reactive aesthetic then positions

George as an object of disgust not only in the sense of his political designation as such, but through the actual depiction of him as such as well.

As George continues his affair with the older man, the transgressive nature of the encounters is further exacerbated, as George implores one of his friends to witness the intercourse firsthand. Within the narrative there has then been a further establishment of grotesquerie that works to position the spectacle of sex as another aspect of transgression; by inviting his friend as a voyeur, the ocular scene of queer sex is, if not made public, then at least providing levels of voyeurism that investigates the spectacle of George's sexual escapades. By positioning the sexual encounter between George and the older man as a spectacle within the narrative that is not inherently private, the text is interrogating the very notion of queer sex—and in this case, sex that readily disrupts the conception of queer sex as necessarily a normative, assimilated sexual union between two married participants—as being allowed to be represented. As Edelman argues, the "spectacle or the representation of the scene of sodomy between men is a threat to the epistemological security of the observer—whether a heterosexual male himself or merely heterosexual-male-identified-for whom the vision of the sodomitical encounter refutes the determinacy of positional distinctions" (*Homographesis* 191). The encounter, by being witnessed by both the friend in the text and the reader, is then granted a double valence that accentuates the possibility for voyeurism. This threat to the observer as depicted within the narrative serves to destabilize any notion of security that might be ascribed to the bodies of the characters. As also argued by Edelman, the queer body (in particular the gay male one) is constructed culturally as a meaningful opposition to the heterosexual

body, and through the representation of these queer bodies in the narrative as engaged in excessive depravities and obscene grotesqueries they become akin to caricature. The excess itself elevates this opposition of the queer body as legible and heightens it to an absurd degree, ultimately expounding the threat the queer subject figures against heteronormative society, seeing as the grotesquerie and depravity signals the role of its "opposition … precisely to any such logic of opposition, its proper task the ceaseless disappropriation of every propriety" (Edelman, *No Future* 24).

While Edelman designates the threat of represented sodomy as an epistemological one, it is also quite literalized as a threat of terror in the scene where George's friend Cliff observes the scene in the text. As he watches the events unfold, he remarks that he initially likens it to a religious one, but that it quickly devolves into obscenity (*Closer* 46). He then likens it to a porn film he had once viewed, where the bodies had at once appeared "monstrous one second, toylike the next" (46). As the scene continues, Cliff observes the same event that had been previously focalized by George; watching George get spanked through the window, Cliff notes that "after a dozen [the older man] eased off, smiled down at his handprints and mouthed a few words. The asshole swelled, trembled, then very slowly produced a turd … I thought I could make it, but halfway down the street I splayed my hands on the nearest tree and threw up" (*Closer* 46). As George's body once again functions as a center of grotesque imagery and conduct, the publicization of the scene allows for the concretization of this grotesque effect; although it harkens to a Rabelaisian carnivalesque folk humor with its excess and excrescences, the event is ultimately unredeemed of the jovial and transcendent humor that it likewise

harkens to. The subsequent reaction that Cliff displays—the vomiting, that is—informs the reader of the disgust that the encounter is allegedly supposed to elicit, dampening the comedic effect that the scatology would otherwise evoke.

Textually, however, considering the repetition of these encounters throughout the relatively short narrative, where the focus remains on the anus and its expulsion of waste, there is a confounding effect of the disgust that the scatological grotesquerie invokes. As Miller states, disgust "has a kind of inevitable connection with the satisfaction of desire, whether these desires be openly admitted or whether they fester only in denial" (110-111), while continuing to assert that that which is disgusting has the power to be alluring in itself. Thus, these repeated encounters, and the preoccupation with defecation itself throughout both texts, can be seen to adhere to this assertion and intimate that these encounters provide a certain satisfaction of desire in fact due to their overt repugnance. In this sense, the general grotesqueries presented in both texts are not merely affirmative of any moralizing repudiation of the perceived obscenities and behaviors in them, but work to interrogate the role disgust can play in highlighting how queer sexual expressions of desire – vile as though they may be in these cases – may in fact prove to be alluring and significant in their own right. Further, when considering Bakhtin's carnival mode, it is the purity of the binary distinctions between the "high" and the "low" that is being transgressed, much in the way that the grotesqueries in *Closer* vacillate between obscene horror and the allure of that obscenity. As such, the interconnection between the grotesqueries and their transgressions can be seen to highlight the ambiguity between disgust and desire in relation to Cooper's queer mode.

What is left in the wake of Cliff observing the scene described earlier is an ambivalence that he is unable to reconcile with George himself—this irreconcilability is reinforced by another friend of Cliff, Alex, who states that George is cute, but that he "reminds [him] of a cartoon character. You know, the 'real boy' Pinocchio's forced to become in the old Disney film? Ugh. That's why I can't imagine the scene you described last night"[12] (*Closer* 50). George and his body epitomizes the ambivalence that is inherent in the grotesque bodily image and is, through the evocation of such filth and degeneration, situated once again within the realm of the Gothic. Not the least as well because he's once again likened to something inanimate, and notably reverses the traditional narrative of Pinocchio, reverting from a "real boy" to an object. His body becomes a spectacle, much in the way that Spooner characterizes the modern conception of the Gothic as favoring; through the evocation of disgust the corporeality of George's Gothic body is reinforced and ultimately established.

The public spectacle of George's sexual encounters continues as Alex likewise observes the event. Alex, whose intention for watching the event unfold is to gather material for a pornographic film he is intending to write, centralizes the grotesque corporeality of the event further. Initially noting that "George's body is nothing apart from his crotch, which resembles a mouse. His head sways on top of that vague streak of whiteness, a kitsch souvenir, its lips and eyes the unnatural colors of candies" (*Closer* 62), Alex highlights the discomfiting corporeality of George's body. The notion of the

[12] Although Disney's version of Pinocchio is referenced here, it is interesting to note that the original tale can be considered a Gothic narrative as well. This is investigated in David Del Principe's "Gothic Pinocchio: Pedagogical Approaches to Collodi's Classic" (2006)

grotesque present here, and indeed present in many descriptions of George, pertains to the almost unnatural and strange presentation of his body. It does not always comfortably align itself with Bakhtin's grotesque bodily image, and neither does it even particularly read as explicitly grotesque at times. Whereas Bakhtin's grotesque bodily image denotes an affirmative transformation of the body in the throes of death and copulation, George is consistently denied any redemptive or jubilant transformative properties, and does not achieve the same subversion of propriety to become "gay and gracious", as Bakhtin asserts the body ultimately becomes in grotesque realism, as seen in the theoretical section (Bakhtin 19).

However, this does not diminish the grotesque effect that nonetheless establishes itself. As has been argued previously, George is at times described as anything *but* unaesthetic, which would traditionally designate him outside of the grotesque paradigm, but the preceding passage exemplifies a particular type of grotesque that establishes itself within Cooper's two novels. This grotesque stems as much from the surrounding events and acts pertaining to the characters as it does their physical bodies, devoid as they often are from overt grotesque features. In addition, as I have argued previously, the grotesquerie also stems from the transgressions of the notions of sexual decency that are routinely ascribed to queer subjects in regulatory discourses. Whereas these excessively obscene sexual encounters might seem to simply reinforce the homophobic assertion that queer subjects, and by extension queer sex, are inherently pornographic,[13] I argue that the excess of the texts serves to conflate this notion to revel in it, codifying queer desire

[13] See Schulman (2012)

as pornographic for the sake of representing it in a form that cannot be seen as anything but absurd and reactionary. Simon Watney, in writing about the subjugation of queer bodies by regulatory institutions, argues that it is particularly in relation to queer sexualities that this regulation becomes pertinent, and that "the very existence of homosexual desire, let alone gay identities, are only admitted to the frame of mass media representations in densely coded forms, which protect the 'general public' from any threat of potential destabilisation" (Watney 42). The focus laid on pornography and its obscene representations in Cooper's texts, while seemingly simply affirmative of a densely coded form of queerness that situates itself in degenerate opposition to a morally sanitized heterosexuality, also functions through its excessive representations, to "re-create the body otherwise: to see it perhaps as monstrous, or grotesque or mortal or violent, and certainly also sexual" (Lauretis qtd. in Palmer 155). Lauretis' assertion, although originally intended for lesbian fiction, certainly provides a way of conceptualizing the ways in which the representations of excessive and violent sexuality in these texts might as well function as reactions to the stigma surrounding queer sex. This notion aligns itself with Lisa Duggan's claim regarding queer sexuality as not so much as just an identity, but dissent (Duggan 182). To view the practices and expressions of desire in Cooper's texts as dissent functions to locate them as deliberate provocations that intend to destabilize heteronormativity.

It is towards the end of the novel that the most poignant intersection between a Gothic corporeal transgression and grotesquerie transpires. As George meets up with a friend of his older sexual partner, passively intrigued by the man's offer of sex, he

engages in a threesome with the two older men. Once again the focus is laid on the anal and excretory aspects of the sexual encounter, with one of the men commenting that his anus "looks like a child's pout" (*Closer* 68). While that likeness in itself provides a significantly disturbing imagery, it is the subsequent bodily transgression that exemplifies the intersection of corporeal violation and grotesquerie:

> Two fingers slid up his ass. Since he'd met Philippe, George had learned how to count them. Two more joined in. He hadn't taken that many before. "Not bad," he thought. Someone felt for his lips, pried them open and four fingers slid down his throat. "He's got a big mouth," Tom whispered, "I love that." George gagged a few times. "Let it loose," Philippe said in a soothing voice. George didn't want to, then he was vomiting. When that ran out he noticed most of Tom's hand was inside his hole. The other was fiddling around in his throat like it had dropped something. (*Closer* 68)

George is penetrated from both ends, and as a result he is abjectified as he expels waste both through his prior defecation and his vomiting. While the instance does not denote a corporeal transgression adhering completely to Reyes' designation of it including instances of "dismemberment, mutilation, mutation, extreme disease or transformative surgery" (11), it nonetheless *is* a corporeal transgression in the literal sense of the term. George's bodily boundaries are transgressed and violated as the older man turns him into little else but a puppet for his needs. While Reyes' concept of corporeal transgression does not investigate the potential corporeal transgressions stemming from queer sexuality, I argue that the preceding passage proves its allegiance to the concept

precisely by virtue of the centering of the queer sexual encounter. The violence inherent in the sexual acts performed by George and, as with the previous examples, enacted upon him offers a complementary perspective on the concept that highlights how a queer corporeal transgression can be conceptualized through the excess and obscenity of transgressive sexual encounters. In this sense, as has been evidenced throughout the text's preoccupation with George's constituent body parts, and in particular his genitalia, the corporeal transgression works through the way his body in particular is transgressed through penetrations and sexual violence.

As has been further evidenced throughout the narrative of *Closer*, Cooper's bodies inhabit a position that oscillates between frightening and abject, and humorously grotesque. This in turn informs the sensationalist spectacle of this latest encounter (and admittedly the bulk of the preceding encounters as well), as it exemplifies the text's allegiance to the conventions of the new avant-pulp genre that Reyes highlights as a genre particularly connected to the Gothic; with the instances of sex and defecation foregrounded, the corporeal transgressions of the passage pertain to these acts, and as such they deliberately exploit the adverse effects of centering the same acts for the purpose of provocatively aggrandizing them.

Towards the conclusion of the narrative George is found in a penultimate transgressive encounter that aligns itself more closely with the types of Gothic encounters that present themselves throughout *Frisk.* As George meets up with an older man who has promised to kill him as part of his own sexual gratification, he notes that the older man "was a creep but now things wouldn't matter so much" (*Closer* 75),

preparing himself for the scene by ingesting various drugs and Novocain. Unlike the earlier instances, where George's passivity is foregrounded to create a sense of detachment from both his body and the grotesqueries of the encounters, the current one highlights his anxiety and ambivalence regarding it. Immediately preceding the violence that the older man inflicts on him, George observes through his drug-induced haze that whatever tools the older man is procuring "looked fun. No, it looked kind of dangerous" (Cooper 75). As the older man starts his ministrations, he provocatively asks George if he knows what is in that "cute body" of his, to which George displays some of his first genuine emotions in the text: fear and distress. The subsequent passages explicate the narrative's most poignant instance of a Gothic "poetics of violence" that exemplifies the intersection between desire and death: "Tom didn't talk for a while. The sounds continued. George listened attentively. He realized he was being chopped down. He sort of wished he could know how it felt, but Tom was right. He'd be crying his eyes out and miss the good parts. It was enough to see his blood covering the floor like a magic rug" (*Closer* 75). In a classic instance of corporeal transgression George is being mutilated and violated, and ultimately permanently altered by the ministrations of the older man. It is also significant that the location of the mutilation is once again centered around his extremities—in particular his backside—as that not only continues the theme of anal preoccupation, but centers the violence around the debasement of an organ that by itself designates an essence of lowness and male queerness. In this sense, the violence is not only a Gothic enactment of a transgression of bodily boundaries and unity, but it is also a distinctly queer enactment of violence on the body itself, as it is indivisible from the

sexual context from which it stems due to its focus on the anus and the implications of the transgressions enacted on it. Furthermore, the grotesque dimension of the violence also serves to center his extremities, and as such the debasement of the encounter takes on a truly grotesque character that revolves around the degradation and subsequent dismemberment of his body. As the older man's violations continue, George's drug-addled mind struggles to continue to stay passive, and in the penultimate moment of violence he hears the "strange-sounding music stopped. George heard a soft voice. 'Any last words?' it asked. George was surprised by the question. If he was supposed to be dead, how could he talk? Still, why not? 'Dead ... men ... tell ... no ... tales,' he said in his best spooky voice" (*Closer* 75). The repeated references to Disneyland throughout the narrative, as well as in this instance, serve to create a sense of grim humor surrounding the situation, which would allow for the interpretation of the encounter in light of a sort of Bakhtinian folk humor.

As argued by Jesse Bier in regards to Gothic horror, laughter—or specifically "grim laughter"—therapeutically provides "a protection against total disintegration" (qtd. in Palmer 166), which finds it routinely employed by queer narratives as well as Gothic ones. However, despite the possible comedy of the situation, it is immediately followed by George pleading to not be killed in an emotional outburst that contradicts his earlier disaffected response to the impending violations. There is once again an uncomfortable ambivalence present in the presentation of potential humor in the grim encounters that center around George throughout the text, where the possibility for a

grotesque suspension of social norms resulting in an affirmative "rebirth" of the subject is denied by the visceral horror and violence of the passage.

The end of the ordeal ultimately finds George back home inspecting the damage done to his body in a penultimate moment of grotesque corporeality where he notes that "his ass wasn't really an ass anymore. He couldn't look at it. He dropped the mirror" (*Closer* 76). Although not explicitly descriptively grotesque, the passage alludes to the violence enacted upon him, and offers a stark juxtaposition to the presumed beauty and unity his body symbolized prior to the events of the narrative, making the transformation ultimately grotesque, although once again lacking any sort of affirming or concluding elements that would give the grotesque imagery any sort of particular positive value in its subversive potential. Arguably, the passage could even be read as a complete refusal of any grotesquerie at all, as there is quite literally no orifice left with which to transgress the boundaries of the body and the whole of the earth with.

As mentioned by Elizabeth Young, the whole spectacle of George's meeting with the older man exemplifies one of the most overtly violent taboos in contemporary culture: child sexual abuse and murder (54). With the transgression of this certain taboo, the text quite literally becomes emblematic of what Edelman terms queerness' opposition to futurity; although Edelman's Child of the future is often little more than a symbol, the attempted murder of George becomes a literalized example of the queer subject's refusal to propagate the future. As he states and as seen in the theoretical section, "the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the

undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself" (Edelman, *No Future* 13). Certainly the fatal jouissance of the encounter figures as a stark employment of the queer's oppositionality, and while the successful murder of George would have figured as the ultimate opposition to a heteronormative vision of futurity, the aborted attempt proves to be equally, if not more, as oppositional. The failure to murder George even hints at the possibility of a future after all, but the attempt itself locates it as, at the very least, an attempted opposition to the future. If the queer subject, as conceptualized by Edelman, opposes any notion of a social order or code of ethics, and adheres only to a "culture of Death" that refutes the propagation of the Child of the future for the sake of a non-reproductive sexual desire, then the "failed" murder of a child who is themselves queer, surely figures outside any comprehensible politics at all, refusing both closure or redemption.

3.2 A Grotesquely Queer Desire for Death

Cooper's second novel in the *George Miles Cycle*, *Frisk*, is as mentioned earlier in this thesis not a continuation of *Closer*, but a completely unrelated narrative. It does however thematically continue the legacy that *Closer* foregrounds while also expanding on the excess of it. Where *Closer* constructs a narrative surrounding grotesque excess, *Frisk* in turn centralizes the spectacle of death in this same grotesque representation of bodies and sex, thus situating itself more squarely within a Gothic tradition. Much in the same way as its predecessor however, *Frisk*'s inception highlights the body as the main site of Cooper's grotesque Gothic. There is then a difference in the way both of these narratives approach the Gothic in particular; where *Closer*'s Gothic mode situates itself more in

line with queer transgressions, *Frisk* is located within a more traditional Gothic horror narrative, where these queer transgressions are supplemented more readily with evocative representations of pure violence.

In describing a collection of morbid pornographic photos, the narrative of *Frisk* opens with the one of the descriptions depicting a:

> Close-up. The blotch is actually the mouth of a shallow cave, like the sort ocean waves carve in cliffs. The uneven frame of ass skin is impeccably smooth. The inside of the cave is gray, chopped-up, mushy. At its center's a pit, or a small tunnel entrance, too out-of-focus to actually explore with one's eyes, but too mysterious not to want to try. (*Frisk* 9)

Like in *Closer*, the anus is once again highlighted and given particular attention in all of its grotesque and violated glory. It also intimates a connection to the Gothic, with its allusion to the rectum being a cave harking to a Gothic preoccupation with caves and their depths. Similarly, the fact of the cave residing within a body once again locates the Gothic as primarily concerned with the bodies in the text. The model in the photo, alluded to be a pubescent boy, epitomizes the narrative's subsequent preoccupation with young men in sexual situations resulting in death; throughout the text the fascination with desire as a conduit for death remains the primary theme. The imagery the photos in the beginning depict is itself a recurrent theme, as the narrator notes that his preferences pertain to the likeness of the boy depicted in the photo, as he is seeking to emulate the experience and thrill of seeing him transgressed in the same way he was in this snuff pornography.

Even chronologically prior to the photos described in the beginning of the novel the narrator, Dennis, explains that his fascination with death and sex stems from his consumption of illicit snuff pornography provided by an older man. The same boy as the one present in the photographs of the previous passage is pictured in another collection of pornographic imagery that a young Dennis is exposed to. As he scans the images, he focuses on the ones where the young man has seemingly been killed:

> His eyes and his mouth were wide open. That's why I'd thought he was laughing. He was pale, cute, and had long, straight black hair. There was nobody else in the photos with him. In the last couple of photos somebody had rolled the boy over, so we could see what he looked like on both sides, I guess. That's when I knew for sure he was dead because instead of an asscrack, he had a crater. It looked as if someone had set off a bomb in his rectum. (*Frisk* 28)

The explicit imagery, centered as always on the rear, provides a shockingly grotesque aesthetic that sets the tone for the novel. The excess that presents itself in *Frisk* provides a different perspective than the one that forms throughout *Closer*: as seen in the aforementioned paragraph, the presence of death as a significantly more pressing and present theme formulates an aspect of horror that is all the more essential to the formation of the Gothic in the narrative. The threat of horror rests more on explicit and shocking corporeal imagery that is not only sexual in nature, but also laden with the spectacle of death, than the obscene grotesquerie in *Closer.* The horror likewise rests on the destabilization of the dichotomy between the bodily boundaries of the inside and the

outside, as guts and viscera are frequently exposed to the outside. Considering Botting's argument regarding horrific depictions of bodies as a mode of Gothic representation, in which he states that "horror entwines spectacle and reality in an indeterminate scene of effects and affects that, further, engage and repulse audiences in the staging of often overwhelming and unbearable images" (Botting, *Limits of Horror* 139), *Frisk*'s narrative extrapolates on imagery that frequently borders on the unbearable. The frequent allusions to and, eventually, depictions of corpses throughout the text certainly figure as the main Gothic representations. Not only do their employment within the narrative signify a more serious dalliance with death than *Closer*, where death is often sensationalized and even "Disneyfied", as earlier stated in the analysis of *Closer*; they also denote a grotesque corporeal border transgression unlike any other. As Kristeva argues, corpses "*show* [us] what [we] permanently thrust aside in order to live … the corpse, the most sickening of wastes is a border that has encroached upon everything" (3-4, emphasis original). As a result, the transgressions in the novel are, in addition to the same kinds of transgressions encountered in *Closer*, located primarily in the body, but instead of them being centered on sexual grotesqueries they are more often housed in the evocations of dead, mutilated bodies resulting from the preceding sexual grotesquerie.

That is not to say that the sexual grotesque is not located within this text as well. Like its predecessor, the novel often finds its evocative force of the grotesque within the various and multitudinous sexual encounters that are narrated throughout. Early in the narrative Dennis and his lover Julian manage to locate the boy—now a young man—featured in the snuff pornography and engage in a threesome with him. As both young

men perform oral sex on the other man, Dennis comments that “the crack opened up. Julian cleared his throat, hocked some milky spit. Using his nails, he combed spit evenly through the hairs down there, reorganizing them into a spiral around the knotty, purple hole” (*Frisk* 23). Conversely, while this passage is remarkably similar to the types of representations of sexual intercourse found in *Closer*, it is one of the few encounters that do not immediately prelude the narrator’s predilection for death in quite the aggressive manner that a considerable subsequent amount of them do.

As they are proceeding with the intercourse, Dennis realizes that the other man they are engaging in intercourse with is in fact the model in the pivotal photographs of his younger years. As he is told to relay the content of images to the other man he does so “very colorfully, the way I'd described the images to myself while jerking off. Spoken aloud, the descriptions seemed much more pretentious, ridiculous, amoral ... something, than they'd ever been in the secret, uncritical world of my fantasies. But Henry didn't care how sexily I described the idea of him dead” (*Frisk* 31). The admission of amorality present here is decidedly self-reflexive, as the recognition of his fantasies being just that highlights the connection between the illicit nature of his desires and his awareness of their deviance. This makes this notion of the amorality present in the narrative even more pertinent, as it is mentioned in so many words by the narrator himself. The first-person narration that is employed here throughout the text also serves to center a certain ambivalence regarding the events that are depicted. While Cooper once again makes no attempt to ultimately redeem the violence or transgressions presented in the text (arguably he does the opposite), the narrative nonetheless engages in a different kind of

interrogation of the events and grotesqueries. Dennis, the narrator, knows his proclivities are adverse; his obsession with sexual death is both foregrounded and almost compulsive, and in this compulsion the violence is rendered as almost inevitable.

As the narrative progresses, with the narrator delineating his experiences by dividing them into his lived years, the AIDS epidemic looms ever present in the background of his increasingly explicit encounters and experiences. Not only does this serve to contextualize the narrative historically, it also significantly informs the preoccupation with death and bodies throughout. Against the backdrop of the epidemic, the grotesque and violent sexual dealings of the narrator gain an increasingly sinister connotation – the threat to the body is not only figured in the narrator himself, but also as a result of sexuality itself. As argued by Watney, AIDS "is not only a medical crisis on an unparalleled scale, it involves a crisis of representation itself, a crisis over the entire framing of knowledge about the human body and its capacities for sexual pleasure" (9). This crisis of representation is then indivisible from its connection to queer male sexuality especially. Again, the subject of AIDS adds to the threat of the queer body within the narrative, as it extrapolates on the cultural production of queer subjects as aberrant sexual delinquents; ironically, this does ring particularly true in the case of the novel's narrator, who exemplifies this type of sexual degeneracy. While Dennis acknowledges that the AIDS epidemic inevitably impacts his sexual relations, that is to say that it leads to him avoiding them completely for a while, it also allows him to, at times, examine his sexual partners under the guise of checking for any signs of the illness to determine if they would serve as potential victims.

A few years prior to the height of the AIDS epidemic, Dennis explicates his burgeoning interest in fulfilling his fatal sexual fantasies. After some time spent with another young man, he relays that "I'd started to drift off a lot during sex, which Samson didn't particularly notice. In reality I was caressing him. In my head I'd be grabbing objects off the night table, crushing his skull, then mutilating his body, especially his ass, while he tried to dissuade me from murdering him in a brain-damaged voice" (Frisk 34). The stark visualization of sexual murder undeniably situates Dennis' as a potential Gothic killer; a potential that is later fully realized as his fantasies emerge into reality. As much is even argued by Wills in her article on snuff fiction, where she situates Dennis as a post-Gothic killer (71-72). Dennis, as the novel's primary transgressor, is furthermore arguably constructed as a Gothic monster. As Halberstam argues, the technology of the Gothic often condenses the threats of the genre's transgression into a cultural monster who hosts the anxieties surrounding them (1-2). Dennis, who as a queer man shows the signs of sexual deviance that are also often ascribed to these Gothic monsters (Halberstam 3,4), also reinforces his status of monstrosity by virtue of his viscerally grotesque murderous dealings. Ultimately, where the body of George in *Closer* comes to figure as the primary facet of queer grotesquerie, it is Dennis' body that hosts the majority of the grotesque evocations in *Frisk*. This is due in part to the fact that he spends the bulk of the text not actually acting on the impulses he imagines in great detail – they exist only in concord with Dennis and his presumed reader. That is not to say that the grotesquerie evoked is not as evocative as its predecessor; if anything the detailed imaginings and subsequent actions of the narrator more readily affirm their allegiance to

classic evocations of Gothic violence and grotesquerie. It is, however, a significant difference between the texts who are otherwise very thematically similar. The body is nevertheless at the forefront of *Frisk*, especially considering the narrator's centering of it in his own actions; describing a hypothetical violent scenario he states that "it's more like my body would lose it, and I'd be observing the damage it does from a safe place inside" (*Frisk* 46). Followed by this is a further admission by Dennis that his own corporeality is negligible in opposition to the focus he lays on the corporeality of his objects of desire: he states that he does not notice his body, as it is "just there, working steadily. I wash it, feed it, jerk it off, wipe its ass, and that's all. Even during sex I don't use my body that much, I'm more interested in other guys'" (48). Thus, considering the immense care he puts into selecting men who look just like his first obsession sparked by the snuff pornography, most everything that transpires in the novel is irrevocably inspired by a preoccupation with the body.

Condensing the bulk of the grotesquerie into the novel's narrator also serves to, I argue, locate the evocative and dissenting force of its use more powerfully within the text. The disquieting presence of an autofictive narrator could—and indeed this has been a consensus among detractors of *Frisk*[14]—profess the complicity of the author himself in regards to the adverse and deviant events within. On the other hand, as Flannery O'Connor argues in "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction", the penchant for writing about freaks is due to the fact that they are still recognizable as freaks (44). In Cooper's case, the turn towards auto-fiction could work instead as an acknowledgement

[14] Lev (20)

of the political discourses surrounding the denouncing of queer subjects, and as such the acknowledgement of the narrator's deviance serves to critique these discourses by representing them excessively.

As has been evidenced in the analysis of *Closer*, the spectacle of death and sex is not a novel venture in Cooper's fiction. However, while sex is often the precursor to the violence that is either imagined, or later acted upon in *Frisk*, the narrator himself relays that he views his sexual escapades as more than pure carnal desire. In a parenthetical passage interspersed in a several pages long embedded story about one of his objects of obsession, Dennis admits that he wants to do something "intense" about his desires. He states that "I don't like to use the word 'sex' because what I'm interested in is more serious, though it resembles sex superficially" (*Frisk* 45-46). In this sense, sex becomes somewhat displaced as the primary facet of grotesquerie throughout the text, and becomes almost impossible to divorce from death, as Dennis cannot imagine a sexual union that does not preclude death. While explaining his murderous impulses and the snuff pornography that sparked them to a male escort, Dennis comments that "I think of it as religious. Like insane people say they've seen God. I saw God in those pictures, and when I imagine dissecting you, say, I begin to feel that way again. It's physical, mental, emotional. But I'm sure this sounds psychotic and ... oh, blah, blah, blah, blah" (*Frisk* 66). Thus, while sex is undeniably a primary aspect of the narrative, and Dennis' predilections, it is ultimately viewed as a vessel for hosting his obsession with death. Despite this however, he is also quick to dismiss his obsessive tendencies as seen in the previous quote, due to his highlighting the fictionality of these violent sexual acts.

Dennis' inability to divorce sex from death is made evident in a passage where he has hired a hustler to satisfy his needs without the threat of giving in to his murderous impulses. By his own admission, the turn to male escorts does not actually hamper the impulse to murder, but manages to stymie it enough for him not to follow through with it nonetheless. Here the sexual relations are mostly waylaid, or at least dispassionately glossed over to make room for his post-coital musings:

> I lay in bed putting Finn through hell in my thoughts. I tore up his body like it was a paper bag and pulled out dripping fistfuls of veins, organs, muscles, tubes. I made his voice as otherworldly as civil defense sirens had sounded to me as a kid. I drank his blood, piss, vomit. I shoved one hand down his throat, one hand up his ass, and shook hands with myself in the middle of his body, which sounds funny, but it wasn't. (*Frisk* 38)

Dennis' imaginings in the current passage are excessively obscene and grotesque; in a display akin almost to the exact grotesque bodily image Bakhtin conceptualizes, the hustler is at once imagined as completely open to the world, his bowels and genitalia transgressed and violated, with his bodily fluids pouring out of him. The same can in turn be said about Dennis himself, as he is the recipient of these fluids, and the exchange between the contents of the bowels is akin to the type of grotesque topographical movement Bakhtin designates as part of the grotesque. The final admission, however, immediately subverts the fatal jouissance of the reverie—there is little humor to be found in Dennis' obsession with sexual death.

Another distinction that is worth noting is the similarities between the aforementioned passage and the encounter between George and the two older men in *Closer* that was analyzed in the previous section; in both of the passages there is a double penetration with an allusion to a handshake in the middle of the body, except whereas the aspect of death remains somewhat of an undercurrent throughout *Closer*'s passage, it is foregrounded more explicitly in this one. While the obscene grotesqueries throughout *Closer* could sometimes be considered somewhat humorous at times, they gain a decidedly more sinister connotation by Dennis' own admission in *Frisk*. This too is however complicated by the consistent and insistent focus on the fictionality of Dennis' violent reveries. There is a certain dichotomy between the extremes of his imagination and his lack of acting upon them in the majority of the narrative that would serve to deflate these sinister connotations, if not for the eventual, penultimate acting on these urges that once again serves to reinforce the grim reality of the narrative.

The corporeal transgression is once again evident in the preceding passage, and I would contend it also succeeds the base definition of corporeal transgression provided by Reyes, as he states that sexual violence does not play a part in this conceptualization. The violence that consistently escalates throughout the text is inextricably tied to sexuality, despite it often functioning as a precursor to it, and despite Dennis' own assertion that what he participates in is something more than just sex. Nevertheless, the corporeal transgressions, the mutilations, killings and dismemberments that take place are irrevocably tied to queer sexuality, as they are always figured as extensions of queer desire. In essence, the violent delights in *Frisk* can be nothing but queer, not only in their

associations, but in their boundary transgressions as well. Dennis himself even expounds on this intersection of sexual desire and the notion of death, as he muses that "I'm just weirdly, intensely entertained by the thought of a boy being deep in the ground and unreachable … Sometimes I've tried to imagine and upgrade the deaths, making them scarier, messier, quicker. I sprawl in bed, dreaming up a spectacular ending for someone, say Samson (R.I.P.), usually while I'm jerking off, since that's the only time I ever feel anything about anyone else" (*Frisk* 56). He mentions, in as many words, that he is unable to muster any emotion in regards to anyone unless he imagines them experiencing spectacular violence, or even death.

This focus on bodies, and the bodies of the men Dennis seeks out also serves to enforce the Gothic notion of corporeality in the text. As stated by Bloom in regards to Gothic horror, "the body 'has long been a silent witness,' not only to violence but to its own human uniqueness, as confirmed in the 'blood, fingerprints, bodily fluid and DNA' through which 'the identity of an individual is fixed'" (Bloom qtd. in Wills 81), but *Frisk* offers a subversion of this otherwise pervasive treatment of Gothic victims of violence. Not only are many of the victims only victims of Dennis' imagination, but they are also named, given attention to in relation to their bodies and configured as living, breathing human beings. When the actual killings eventually start, this notion is subverted quite drastically. The victims become nameless objects, whose bodies simply become the canvases of Dennis' realized imaginations. This much is seen in the change of treatment with the victims of his later escapades; whereas earlier men and boys have been named as Dennis imagines their demise, his later victims are instead only denoted by their

associations. They are described much in the way of "this cute, sleepy-eyed guy about twenty-one", "a punk, maybe twenty, twenty-one", "one other boy. He was ten or eleven years old" (*Frisk* 82, 86, 90), thus distinctly lacking the same personal and humanizing qualities that Dennis ascribed to his earlier fictional victims. The contrast creates a quite stark juxtaposition between the identities of the fictional victims and the eventual, actual victims, where the physicality of their bodies is the only thing denoting them as corporeal subjects. The focus laid on Dennis' actual victims is decidedly Gothic, as they become spectacles much in the same way Spooner argues bodies are wont to become in contemporary Gothic narratives, all the while as they are inscribed with a corporeality that is nothing if not obscenely grotesque, as will be discussed further ahead. These spectacles are evidenced by the visual nature of the killings, where Dennis and his accomplices voyeuristically revel in the mutilations they enact, such as when they "contorted [the boy's] hips until the asshole was totally accessible. They skinned back the cheeks with their fingers until it was a purple cave. I started nibbling and sucking it. I tried to blow it up like a balloon" (*Frisk* 88).

Not long before the narrative delves into Dennis' realization of his fatal obsessions, he muses on the nature of them, noting that despite his restraint in most sexual situations, "inside my head the most spectacular violence is happening. A boy's exploding, caving in. It looks sort of fake since my only models are splatter films, but it's unbelievably powerful" (*Frisk* 51). There is a distinctive preoccupation that Dennis displays throughout the narrative that also pertains to the fictive nature of his imaginings. Whereas the simulacra of violence in *Closer* is represented by repeated allusions to

Disneyland, it is in *Frisk* denoted by Dennis' obsession with splatter film and snuff pornography, both things which are in themselves simulations of violence and not real enactments of it. This in turn adds a complexity to the general representation and obsession with said violence in the text, as they are in essence doubly removed from any actual reality.

He goes even further in his ruminations, tying his fantasies to a certain sort of existential knowledge of his objects of desire, where the abject expulsions resulting from his transgressions become essential for the realizations of his desires:

> I'm pretty sure if I tore some guy open I'd know him as well as anyone could, because I'd have what he consists of right there in my hands, mouth, wherever. Not that I know what I'd do with that stuff. Probably something insane ... spill the guts through my fingers like pirates supposedly did with doubloons or whatever. Except there'd be a smell, which I guess would be strong and hard to take. I can't imagine it. Maybe the odors of piss, shit, sweat, vomit, and sperm combined. I guess in a perfect world I'd eat and drink all that stuff and not just get nauseous. That's my dream. That's what I'm thinking about. I've got this longstanding urge to really open up someone I'm hot for. (*Frisk* 51)

Dennis' obsession with "opening someone up", with the abjection of his victims' internal fluids and viscera, figures as an intersection between his sexual preoccupation with both the male body and death itself. His obsession once again figures death as an inextricable part of the type of sexuality Cooper denotes in *Frisk*, and epitomizes the grotesque

aesthetics that take precedence throughout, only becoming more intense as the narrative progresses.

In the concluding section of the novel Dennis sends a variety of letters to his old lover, in which he describes his extensive murderous ventures as he resides in Amsterdam. He intimately describes how his obsession with sexual death ultimately leads him to commit the final transgression as he actually kills his first victim. While recounted as a spontaneous moment, sparked seemingly by chance as he smashes an empty bottle over the head of his first victim (*Frisk* 82), he notes that it was simply a culmination of a decade's worth of fantasies of killing. With the levee broken, Dennis recounts the various young men that he mutilates, dismembers and violates in excessive detail: his first victim, whose head he has just caved in, "shit all over my legs and the bed on his way to the floor, which made me weirdly furious. I grabbed hold of his neck and ground the broken bottle into his face, really twisting and shoving it in. Then I crawled across the room and sat cross-legged, watching him bleed to death" (*Frisk* 82). The first of many unnamed victims, the young man is killed by Dennis himself. The instance is less overtly grotesque than it is purely violent, with the violence itself centering on the impulsive and uncoordinated nature of the act. As Dennis' letter progresses, the machinations behind the murders become increasingly intricate, with Dennis working together with two Germans to target and kill whichever men and boys he finds alluring enough. With death as a central aspect of transgression within the novel, it can be seen to, like *Closer,* locate its politics of futurity squarely in line with Edelman's notion of queerness' opposition to the future. The Child, who once again takes the actual physical

form of one (or several in fact!) in *Frisk*, is routinely and unequivocally, killed. Edelman evidently does not discuss the queer subject's opposition to the future and the killing of the Child as a literal thing, but the embracing of the death drive certainly becomes evident here. In this most explicit of representations, *Frisk* conceives of the queer subject's disturbing of every social norm as it makes it evident that if anything, there is no future to be conceived of in the narrative, only the fatal reverie of Dennis himself embracing a positively queer culture of death. In addition to this, the representation of Dennis' penchant for queer violence and deviant fantasies reacts to the unmediated "logic" of heterosexuality, and rather than disavowing or repressing these desires to allow for this naturalization of heterosexuality in opposition to queerness, Cooper's decadent representations revel in their unrepentant transgressions and conceive of queer desires as liberated from this logic.

Much like in *Closer*, one of the persisting elements of transgression is the pedophilic inclinations that motivate Dennis to seek out and murder most of his victims. While the majority of them are alluded to be in their late teens, one of his more notable ones is a fifteen year old boy. As Dennis recounts having sought him out for weeks, he details the subsequent kidnapping and murder of the child. As the child fruitlessly pleads for mercy and release from Dennis' windmill-turned-murder house, Dennis kills him in a prolonged fit of frustration. As he recounts, when the young boy screams "his mouth opened incredibly wide. Then I really wanted to kill him. The red mouth triggered the need, because it was a preview of something" (*Frisk* 89). In an allusion to the cavernous mouth of the grotesque body, Dennis revels in the violence and gore that his

machinations are going to lead to, and embraces the fatal jouissance of his murderous impulses in a penultimate act of corporeal transgression.

One of the final and indeed most excessive representations of Dennis' violent practices is enacted on a ten year old boy. While the entire passage heightens the sexual grotesqueries to an almost absurd degree, it is the concluding remarks as Dennis eventually kills the boy that truly exemplifies the extent of his fatal obsessions:

> This time I managed to part a small area between his nipples and see maybe two inches square of purple material. I licked all inside there. It was incredibly lush. Blood was leaking from five or six spots along the cut. I wish he could see this, I said. He's too fucked up, Jorg said. I went over the cut once more. It opened up. I pulled back the halves of white stomach flesh and saw his jumbled yellow guts, which had a weird strong stench. His chest was still rising and falling. That fascinated me for some reason, so I punched his face several more times. Then I deeptongued his slobbery mouth for a while. I was really delirious. (*Frisk* 92)

The intersection between the overt corporeal transgression in the preceding paragraph and the disturbing vivisection of the boy, alongside the final admission of desire from Dennis, construes a grotesque imagery that epitomizes Cooper's unabashed predilection for somatic transgressions. As Reyes states, body Gothic often "exploits corporeality unashamedly, often for no reason other than to playfully disintegrate normative corporeality" (Reyes 56). While Reyes distinctly does not connect this assertion with oppositional messages challenging discourses on sexuality in particular, the corporeal

revelry in the passage cannot be divorced from its queer context. In this sense, with the context of the corporeal transgressions being sexual in nature, and the violations themselves connoting strongly to his sexual invasions, the violence can be nothing but queer. This is reinforced by his literal incursions, such as licking the boy's guts, and penetrating his mouth with his tongue. There is, as has been evidenced in the preceding paragraph as well as in the general narrative, a penchant for penetration as part of the sexual transgressions. While penetration is arguably transgressive by itself as it is by its nature transgressing boundaries, it also works to mimic heteronormative discourses of penetrative sex, with Dennis' partners playing the role of the passive female recipient. In this sense, this preoccupation also relies on a heterosexual codification of desire that is transposed onto the queer sexual encounters in the text, but it is once again through the grotesque Gothic evocations of these encounters that this gains its oppositional force.

It is not until the last pages of the novel that it is revealed that even the presumed murders taking place during Dennis' stay in Amsterdam are fictitious. As his former lover and his brother join him in the Netherlands, they discover that there is no possibility that the killings could have taken place, and they confront Dennis. As Dennis reveals that all of the murders were little more than reveries intended to satiate his desire for killing without committing to the acts themselves, there is a distinct sense of ambivalence regarding his murderous predilections. The killings, as grotesquely excessive as they have been imagined throughout the text, are then definitively located within the realm of fantasy; a fact that ultimately works to subvert the provocative subject matter that the novel has formulated throughout the narrative. That is however

not to say that the effects of the imagined fatal reveries are diminished. The final subversion of the instances of violence and transgressions problematizes the notion of death in the novel, as it exists ultimately only as a fantasy, as visceral and descriptive as though that fantasy might be. With death being no more than an imaginative specter haunting Dennis throughout the text, it can arguably be considered more provocative than if the killings were actually taking place. While the actual murders would explicate a traditionally Gothic narrative whose, in this case, sexually deviant monster would figure as a real threat, *Frisk* subverts that notion. However, by not revealing the fictitious nature of the killings until the end (and even then, it is left ambiguous if they are truly fiction considering the general unreliability of Dennis' narration), the threat of Dennis' fatal impulses is left to influence the text and reinforce the Gothic horror of his grotesque killings through his extensive imaginings, thus rendering them indubitably evocative. It also bears repeating that, as Reyes contends, Gothic violence often investigates complex philosophical reflections surrounding the body and its limits, as well as its role in Western society (166). Considering this then, the reality of the killings does not have to figure as the primary evocative force, seeing as the fictitious violence imagined by Dennis nevertheless powerfully investigates these very notions by virtue of his preoccupation with it despite the fact that the line between fiction and reality is upheld in the end. The evocative force of the desire is still its ability to possibly transgress the boundaries of the real and the imagined; in the fantasies they are allowed this liberating force by not being denounced and being allowed free reign. The ambivalence between

the real and the fictitious provides a locus of desire that *Frisk* investigates, while ultimately keeping it fictional.

What the final reveal of *Frisk* ultimately does is to make undeniable the interconnection between queer desire and death that permeates both of the novels analyzed in this thesis. The fantasies of killing, being to Dennis both pornographic and liberating (*Frisk* 107), work to figure the expressions of desire in the novel as oppositional not only to the future, in Edelman's words, but to any such logic of heteronormative ethics. As has been argued throughout, both novels can be seen to exemplify this queer oppositionality in their unequivocal representation of grotesque and Gothic bodies and transgressions, depicting in their excess a refusal to adhere to the logic of a heteronormative future and making the queer threat to that social order quite literal.

4 Conclusion

Closer and *Frisk* are both novels that deal extensively with transgressions, in particular in regards to corporeality. With their deliberately provocative subject matters pertaining to sexual deviance, sexual death and a preoccupation with an excessively obscene and disturbing queer mode, these novels serve to formulate a distinct discourse that problematizes the notion of expressions of queer sexuality. Both texts locate themselves within a Gothic tradition of transgression, as they investigate aspects, particularly of sexuality, that are both considered taboo and morally dubious, arguably making distinct efforts to shock and provoke as they do. All the while, both novels signify an allegiance to a grotesque aesthetic that serves to exacerbate the aberrant material it presents. One can, reductively, consider these texts to promote a reinscription of conservative beliefs

regarding queer male sexuality as predatory and morally deviant, but *Closer* and *Frisk* can also be seen as attempts to interrogate the very same notions and devise new ways to conceive of queer sexuality as oppositional to any such logic of categorization. Both novels achieve this oppositionality by investing in a particular heteronormative coding of desire that in many ways can be seen to mimic the very same discourses they are argued to repudiate; nevertheless it is through this referencing and mimicry that they ultimately stand up against and subvert these notions, through means of representing them excessively and almost absurdly.

With their respective focuses centered on the body, both novels conceive of the queer body as a potential site for both transgressions and Gothic grotesquerie. Neither novel makes any attempt to sanitize their respective depictions of bodies in states of boundary transgressions—be it if they are penetrated, mutilated, dismembered or abjected. This refusal to establish any sort of redemptive or moral quality within the narratives further works to destabilize the notion of a neatly, easily digestible representation of queerness. Instead, the texts revel in their increasingly abundant and excessive representations of grotesque bodies and acts, and the excess itself forms the structure on which the grotesque and Gothic transgressions gain their evocative force. It is then possible—and indeed this is the conviction of the current author—to view the two novels analyzed in this thesis as attempts to signify an allegiance to an alternative queer expression of sexuality that does not wish to conform to any notion of a sanitized, unproblematic queer existence.

Throughout *Closer* and *Frisk* the evocations of a Gothic grotesquerie is focused on different representations; *Closer*, by virtue of its preoccupation with the boy George Miles, configures its Gothic grotesquerie through its queer transgressions. As the novel delves further into the increasingly obscene representations of the sexual encounters of George's, it expands on a discourse that figures the body—George's in particular—as a central site of transgression. The explicit and excessive representations of sexuality that abound in *Closer*'s narrative are decidedly grotesque. The focus is laid in particular on corporeal violations, where the body is both abjectified and disgust-provoking, and queer sexuality comes to figure as the vessel for Cooper's provocative exhibitions of expressions of desire that can be nothing but grotesque. The body in *Closer* is figured as Gothic not in a squarely traditional sense, but rather through its capacity for transgression and its role as a host for the ambivalence inherent in Cooper's queer subjects. Through the representations of the unrepentant grotesquerie in *Closer*, it remains steadfastly challenging, conceiving of queer sexuality and identity as resolutely subversive and capable of liberating itself from heteronormative conceptions of sexuality through the evocation of such adverse concepts as the Gothic and the grotesque. Central to the endeavor of *Closer* is likewise the inherent oppositionality to any ethical propagation of the future within Cooper's queer subjects. The sexual grotesquerie and the penchant for murderous impulses exemplify how the queer characters embrace Edelman's notion of a fatal jouissance that refuses the heteronormative conception of a future inscribed those normative values and how they instead embrace the possibility of refuting that future completely.

Frisk expands on the same themes that are introduced in *Closer*, and ultimately exacerbates them. The transgressions of the body are literalized in the representations of the murders of Dennis' victims, imaginary as though they may be, and the focus is shifted further into the throes of Gothic horror, where the extremities of Cooper's grotesque aesthetics are once again utilized to evoke a disturbing and amoral picture of the limits of Dennis' desires. With the body in *Frisk* becoming a Gothic spectacle of indulgent violation and corporeal transgression, it signifies the ambivalence that coincides with the Gothic tradition and its conception of sexually deviant "others". Desire and sexuality in both *Closer* and *Frisk* do not have to be made palatable to heterosexual society for it to be considered profound. Rather, as they provocatively contend, they can be represented as obscenely vile and unrepentantly—if self-awaredly—amoral in a move to reject the sublimation of queerness to oppressive, regulatory organs aiming to restrict it.

The analysis in the current thesis is by no means entirely comprehensive, and rather allows for possible further exploration and investigation of how Cooper's themes of the body and the transgressions related to it can be fruitfully expanded upon to encompass more of his work. Further research could potentially delve into how the particular societal structures in place in the novels inform the machinations of desire as well; although this is discussed to an extent in Young's chapter "Death in Disneyland: The Work of Dennis Cooper", a concordant analysis of the commodification of desire present in both novels would supplement the current analysis. Additionally, a discussion of this kind would benefit from a wider perspective, as Cooper is certainly not the only

author whose subject matter pertains to these same types of transgressive discourses. The continuous contention present in the marketing, distribution and reception of queer literature speaks to a persisting need for an investigation of texts that refute the prevailing discourses that aim to suppress the multiplicity of queer existence.

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