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The Sluts: Of Community On-the-Line . . .

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Dennis Cooper's *The Sluts* (2004) was written over a period of eight to ten years, during the composition and publication of the so-called "George Miles Cycle," a celebrated and controversial body of work.¹ *The Sluts* retains elements of the novel cycle while at the same time breaking with it in many ways. It similarly dramatizes violence and non-heteronormative sexuality (it contains an illuminating representation of the sexual practices of American teenage males) but it departs from these other novels of the same period in its sustained use of internet phenomena as a structuring device. *The Sluts* essentially denies the closure of the cycle and, in line with Cooper's own belief that "pushing oneself to go somewhere new and unforeseen is always at the heart of [writing]," it also inaugurates something radically different ("Stuck pt. 2").

In order to chart the new and unforeseen dimensions of Cooper's work we will attempt to make his text resonate with the iconoclastic thought of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The latter, in their dynamic and unclassifiable collaborative work, often state that upon encountering a work of art one should never pose the question "what does it mean?" as this neuters the affective force by diverting it into systems of representation and yields little more than a reiteration of antiquated arguments. According to Deleuze and Guattari, it is rather more pertinent to ask "does it work?" and "what does it do?" (*Anti Oedipus* 109). That is to say: how does the artistic object help us to think differently from prescribed lines of thought and how may these new lines of thought be connected to others? This article will therefore attempt to reproduce the structure of a Deleuzoguattarian rhizome, staging

¹ The works in this novel cycle include the titles *Closer* (1989), *Frisk* (1991), *Try* (1994), *Guide* (1997) and *Period* (2000).

often unconventional encounters between *The Sluts*, Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, and research into online phenomena and queer theory. In so doing, it will suggest how *The Sluts* might help us to view community differently and demonstrate the essential role fluid, heterogeneous and rhizomic thought has to play in this process.

I. Brad, Becoming, a Rhizome

To attempt a summation, however brief or extensive, of a body of work which takes as its subject an elusive body (or more precisely, as I will attempt to show below, a body without organs) is at best difficult, at worst, counterproductive. However, it may be necessary to take a risk and pass through this deadlock for just a moment. *The Sluts* takes as its locale a number of web pages upon which reviews of predominantly gay male escorts are posted. The text is composed solely of reproductions of these reviews, along with transcripts of other technological communications such as e-mails, message boards, instant message conversations, telephone conversations and faxes. These texts are primarily concerned with an escort known as Brad and his "true" identity, including the sexual encounters he may or may not have had. However, as the reader makes his or her way through the text, following what is frequently referred to as the "Brad thread," it becomes clear that "Brad," at least in any sense of a stable, coherent, organized identity, has ceased to be. The "Brad thread" takes us from the review section of a website ("Site 1") to a discussion board on the same website ("Board") and on to a second review page ("Site 2") via a number of emails and faxes supposedly written by Brad himself ("Email, Fax"). Thus Brad has been replaced with a sprawling electronic entity which has thoroughly permeated the text. Furthermore, for the sake of our investigation, we must point out that the explosion of Brad into his various "threads" is produced by the various interactions of an online "escort loving community" (Cooper 110).

When we are introduced to Brad by bigman60, he is

described as a 5'11", 150lbs, "beautiful, skinny kid" with dyed blond hair and hazel eyes (2). With each new review, however, Brad undergoes a range of minute mutations and metamorphoses. In the period from June 2001 to September 2001, which comprises the first section of the work, the escorts who bear the name Brad or have the name attributed to them fluctuate in height (anywhere from 5'6" to 6'), weight (115lbs to 165lbs), hair color (dyed blond, blond, dirty blond, brown) and eye color (hazel, green, blue, aquamarine, brown). "Brad" also vacillates between being circumcised and uncircumcised, and being a "kisser" or not. The only unchanging characteristic in this network of multiple interpretations seems to be the extraordinary amount of physical punishment to which the bodies of Brad are willing to subject themselves. Thus, bigman60 "pinch[ing] and twist[ing] the hell out of [Brad's] nipples" seems positively benign in comparison to secretlifer34, who puts Brad through some "heavy tit torture and CBT [Cock and Ball Torture] and a heavy whipping of his chest, stomach and thighs" (27). Later he exclaims, "Brad is the heaviest masochist I've ever met, heard about or even imagined in my fantasies"; he also reveals how he "cut [Brad] with a knife and whipped and beat his whole body until there was nothing I could do would [sic] stop the bleeding. I broke his nose and jaw and may have accidentally broken his neck. I squirted lighter fluid on his genitals and ass and lit them on fire a couple of times..." (32). This wild pack of Brads, yearning for abuse and the plateaus of intensity that sadomasochistic play seems to provide, immediately calls to mind Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs (BwO).

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the organization of the unconscious and desire by psychoanalysis has profound effects on the organization of the body and of the social body or *socius*, which has a vested interest in it. Thus the body and the *socius* are both made up of a rigid hierarchical organization of parts, organs, intensities and flows which negate all other forms of existing outside of that formation. What Deleuze and Guattari call the body without organs, on the other hand, is the body underneath or adjacent to this normative ordering, a body which thrives on

encountering difference and otherness. It seeks to connect and reconnect with flows, plateaus of intensity and other bodies without organs outside of the limitations of the organized body, which they call the organism. It seeks a de-organization or disarticulation of ratified lines of existing because “the [BwO] suffers from being organized in this way, from not having some other sort of organization or no organization at all” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 8). They dramatize the suffering BwO this way: “the BwO howls: ‘They’ve made me an organism! They’ve wrongfully folded me! They’ve stolen my body!’” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 159). In a bid to move away from this “domestication” which organizes who/what one is and who/what one may become, Deleuze and Guattari encourage a move towards becoming the BwO. One way of so doing may be through divesting the genitals of their erotic hegemony, degenitalising and thus breaking down the hierarchical organization of the organism through S/M:

In short, the masochist uses suffering as a way of constituting a BwO and bringing forth a plane of consistency of desire. That there are other ways, other procedures than masochism and certainly better ones is beside the point; it is enough that some find this procedure suitable for them. (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 172)

So we might say that “Brad” uses pain to make himself into a BwO, creating waves of intensity that are no longer genitally-focused, thus destroying the organism.

Secondly, Deleuze and Guattari characterize the unconscious in plateau 2 of *A Thousand Plateaus* as a multiplicity, differing with itself; it is a polyphonic entity which has found itself ordered, organized and “massacred” by psychoanalysis into a pre-ordained “mommy-daddy” system:² “Castration! Castration! cries

² I borrow this concept of the “massacred” unconscious from Guattari’s “massacred body,” which appears in his “In Order to End the Massacre of the Body” in which he extends his criticism of the hierarchical organisation of the body’s parts, flows, organs, “massacring” the BwO. As he proclaims:

the psychoanalytic scarecrow, who never saw more than a hole, a father, or a dog where wolves are, a domesticated individual where there are wild multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 42). Thus another procedure, which leads to the constitution of a BwO, is training oneself to listen to the “pack” unconscious and experiment with its multiplicities: “The full BwO is a body populated with multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 34). It is not hard to see, then, how the ever-enlarging “pack” of Brads might herald an emerging BwO.

As we have previously indicated, it is essential to note that this BwO—what Deleuze and Guattari call a line of flight, which escapes from the stratum which bears the signifier “Brad”—is loosed through the encounters between the various reviewers on the website’s review page and message board. Each comment made by the members of the site responds to the previous one, discussing their “Brad’s” correspondences with and deviations from the previous ones, and sometimes directly interacting with the previous reviewers. For example, bizeeb7 believes a precedent was set which allows him to dispense with usual precautions: “I knew from the earlier reviews that Brad could be barebacked and thats [sic] a huge fantasy of mine so I fucked him condom-free” (12). Reviewers like secretlifer34, however, are more reluctant to believe the accuracy of preceding posts, “Some of it rings true but a lot of it doesn’t. I saw no roommate. He had a tattoo of Christ’s face that one else [sic] has mentioned” (28). From the way in which every online review cites previous reviews, adds to them, revises them and ultimately, puts *itself* up for revision, a certain conversational pattern emerges, which thus generates and is generated by the BwO of the work.

We can no longer sit idly by as others steal our mouths, our anuses, our genitals, our nerves, our guts, our arteries. In order to fashion parts and works in an ignoble mechanism of production which links capital, exploitation and the family. We can no longer allow others to turn our mucous membranes, our skin, all our sensitive areas into occupied territory—territory controlled and regimented by others, to which we are forbidden access. (32)

In *Dialogues*³ Deleuze remarks on the characteristics of a conversation as he sees it:

For as someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much as he does himself. Becomings are not phenomena of imitation or assimilation, but of a double capture, of non-parallel evolution, of nuptials between two reigns. Nuptials are always against nature. Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. There are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc. This could be what a conversation is: simply an outline of a becoming. (Deleuze and Parnet 2)

These conversations thus unleash becomings that cause the non-parallel evolution of the members (or “reigns”) of the site. In *The Sluts*, they are indeed shown to have the power to cause the evolution of the reviewers. For example, we are introduced to cuteystevieinsd who weighs into the discussion of Brad at its seventh review, adding to the ever-growing multiplicity of the latter: “I’m writing because of this whole Brad thing going on here. When I knew Brad, he used to call himself Kevin... If I’m right and I like I said [sic], I’m 99.9% sure I am, then this whole thing is a big scam by Kevin” (23). In this way, Brad experiences another deterritorialization and simultaneous reterritorialisation: being freed from the territorial signifier “Brad” and simultaneously seized by the signifier “Kevin.” However, upon his touching off the BwO, Stevie opens himself up to deterritorialization, to becoming other than what he is, by virtue of the conversation he has engaged. So Brian’s response to this review turns Stevie from the “cute blond boy, 24 but look[s] much younger [with a] great ass and legs” into “Stevie Sexed” “who appeared in a number of porn videos a couple of years back” and who was supposedly “on his death bed with advanced AIDS-related pneumocystis . . . a sick, lying, has-been bitch” (24). Ed, from the “Boys Next Door” escort agency causes a further evolution of an “intelligent” Stevie into a rather mentally unstable one: “It pains me to say that complications from [Stevie’s]

³ *Dialogues* is a work which emerges in the form of a “conversation” with Claire Parnet.

ongoing battle with AIDS have taken a toll on his mental state” (25). As the conversation continues, Stevie morphs into Brian and secretlifer³⁴: “Webmaster message: I have reason to believe that Stevie of San Diego not only wrote this review [bearing the handle secretlifer³⁴] as well as many of the other reviews, but is also ‘Brian’” (34). And this line of flight is in turn reterritorialized. Again, the Webmaster:

I offer sincere apologies to Stevie for jumping to the conclusion that he wrote the earlier reviews. While their author or authors remain a mystery there is no evidence to suggest that Stevie is behind them. (47-48)

Indeed, while he evolves, he too effects the evolution of others, and this is the working of the conversation’s structure. Before we are told of his murder (54) Stevie responds to “Review #8,” causing the evolution of Ed from “Boys Next Door,” who is now portrayed as Stevie’s less-than-benevolent benefactor: “I think Ed’s just pissed off with me because I wouldn’t sleep with him but I’m very professional and don’t think it’s cool to sleep with my boss” (29). The same process of evolution affects other reviewers as soon as they connect themselves to the “Brad thread”: Brian, builtlikeatruck, corey, Elaine, Jimmy Taylor, Zack Young, among others, all experience similar metamorphoses and evolutions.

As Brad is shattered into a multiplicity, bringing forth a BwO, the characters who effect this mutation are themselves mutated: “‘what’ each becomes changes no less than ‘that which’ becomes...One and the same becoming, a single bloc of becoming, or as Rémy Chauvin says, an ‘a-parallel evolution of two beings who have nothing whatsoever to do with one another’” (Deleuze and Parnet 2-3). The BwO spreads itself out over this web of becomings, tying the participants of the conversation together as they illuminate its existence, deterritorializing and reterritorializing, coming together and becoming different, shattering each other and piecing each other back together. In a word: loving. For if love is a “freeing of bodies from the organism and subject, allowing their triggers and patterns to interact and form new maps (new longitudes and latitudes) that allow new types of flows and hence

new affects” (Protevi 191), then perhaps the “escort-loving community” of *The Sluts* is a community of love. It is a community of nuptials without couples, without sovereignty or self-interest, a rhizomic community which touches the virtual and all its possibilities:

When bodies join in the mutual experimental deterritorialisation that is love, we find Deleuze and Guattari’s most adventurous concept: the living, changing, multiplying virtual, the unfolding of the plane of consistency. Love is complexity producing novelty, the very process of life... Love is a war machine. (Protevi 191)

*II. Rhizome AND Community . . .*⁴

At this point it may be necessary to clarify how a rhizomic community such as the one portrayed in *The Sluts* might differ from other conceptions of community and what potential this might have as a commentary on the entire social apparatus or *socius*. One of the problems associated with the doxical formation of community is that it creates itself by delineating a project of unity or fusion of its parts (and of each individual part). Opposing itself to difference, this community is based on exclusion and exclusivity, erecting barricades between what it is, and what it is not, in a bid to define and unify itself. This exclusion of difference and emphasis on self-sameness (or what Deleuze and Guattari call the process of “biunivocalisation”) has shown itself to be at the heart of much injustice and persecution in the history of communities and nation-states as well as that of genders, races, and sexualities (*A Thousand Plateaus* 6). The majoritarian or dominant voice consolidates itself and its position of power by purging the community of the influence and visibility of its other. These self-interested communities, by their very composition, are

⁴ If the rhizome means fluidity, openness and connectivity, this subtitle (and those that follow) will point towards this configuration in their use of the conjunction “AND”: “the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and...and...and...’” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 27).

undemocratic, stagnant organizations of individuals which, through the negation of (the visibility of) the other and difference, close themselves off to change and to the future reorganization or disorganization of themselves.

The 20th century has seen the oppressed so-called “minorities” react to the dominant sovereign community⁵ by forming their own communities in an attempt to redress the balance of power. This they have done with considerable success (one could count the decriminalization of homosexuality in an ever-growing number of countries among their hard-won achievements). However, due to the “overcoding” of society by what Deleuze and Guattari call the “abstract dualist machine” (that is, the normalization of the perception of the world as a binary, hierarchical organization of parts), these communities also define themselves in terms of a self/other binary: their referents have been reversed but the signifiers still apply.⁶ This means communication and interaction across the self/other fortifications remains at a trickle (if anything). Certain individuals still find themselves wandering the battlements unseen and unheard (bisexuals, transsexuals, non-metropolitan homosexuals, heterosexuals who partake in sexual acts outside of the “charmed circle” of heteronormativity); nothing changes fundamentally and the machine carries on.

What is proposed by the concept of a rhizomic community could be seen as an alternative to the organization of these sovereign, self-interested communities. If the latter base themselves on the consolidation of various stable identities around one shared

⁵ By suggesting that these “sovereign communities” still exist, I realise that I seem to contradict Deleuze in “Postscript on Control Societies” (*Negotiations*, 177-182). Here he states that we have moved away from “sovereign societies,” and that we now live in “discipline societies,” which we are leaving behind on the way to “control societies.” Nonetheless, I believe there are definite correspondences which would warrant further investigation, between this (admittedly quite Derridean) notion of ‘sovereignty’ as a force of censure and exclusion, and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “state” or “universal” thought as that which restricts becoming other and rhizomic, nomad thought.

⁶ For more on this “abstract dualist machine” and overcoding, including, but not limited to, what Deleuze and Guattari perceive as the phenomenon of “faciality,” see *A Thousand Plateaus*, “Year Zero: Faciality” and Patricia MacCormack’s “Faciality.”

tenet or interest of those identities, then the former diverges from this model in a number of very basic ways. For one, a rhizomic community does not take as its main structuring principle this “shared interest or tenet.” It is, rather, the encounters and conversations (becomings) which are most important and which give this community life. Second, the importance and relevance of this concept of a “stable identity” is significantly devalued. As soon as a becoming is initiated, the individuals involved acknowledge themselves to be unstable, shifting, populated with multiplicities and differences. A “depersonalization through love” is agreed upon and both parties embark upon an a-parallel evolution, which moves towards an unknown horizon, while keeping the stratum of signification (this stable “I”) just within sight (Deleuze 7). Evolution, change, becoming-other and the movement towards an unknown horizon thus define the rhizomic community. These elements all include a feature which gives this Deleuzoguattarian community one of its greatest strengths for change: a reconceptualisation of time.

The virtual is what Deleuze names that “unknown horizon” toward which the becomings of the rhizomic community orient themselves; its actualization is what we call the present moment. The virtual is “always in contact and actively-affectively participating with what is happening and about to happen contemporaneously (as becoming): in excess of consciousness an affective accumulation continually pressing towards its differentiated actualization in the future” (Seigworth 163). Thus becomings are “events,” which break through to the virtual, revealing glimpses of the infinite possibilities to actualize it differently, free from the chain of present moments which bind the individual and society to an automated repetition of history:

Becoming isn’t part of history; history amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to “become,” that is, to create something new. This is precisely what Nietzsche calls the Untimely... Men’s only hope lies in a revolutionary becoming: the only way of casting off their shame or responding to what is

intolerable. (Deleuze 171)

The “hope” that this mapping of becomings, which we call a rhizomic community, provides for the future cannot be stressed enough. In its embrace of difference, its willingness to change and mutate indefinitely as it confronts and negotiates these differences and its orientation towards the virtual, the rhizomic community is, in Derridean terms, pure hospitality: to the other, to the future, to democracy to-come.⁷

III. Rhizome AND Community AND Queer . . .

The rhizomic community we find in *The Sluts*, however, is a community of (predominantly) gay men. Why is it that dissident desire and the non-normative sexualities such as those we find in the work lend themselves so well to the development of this kind of community? If we follow Leo Bersani’s psychoanalytic formulation of homosexual desire, we find that perhaps there is a particular aptitude for the kind of relationality and socializing (that is, creation of and engagement with encounters, becomings) which is homosexual:

Contrary to the usual Freudian sequence of a loss compensated for by fantasy-identification with the lost object, in the scenario of homosexual desire the subject has himself managed the loss (presumably by placing his mother

⁷ Of course, this statement may attract the eye of anyone versed in Derrida’s work on hospitality as the “pure” hospitality of an impossible community:

There is a certain “self-limitation” built right into the idea of hospitality, which preserves the distance between one’s own and the stranger, between owning one’s own property and inviting the other into one’s own home. So there is always a little hostility in all hosting and hospitality, constituting a certain hostility. (Caputo 110)

A community thus built on “pure” hospitality and limitless inclusion, a “universal” community, is impossible to sustain. It is a contradiction in terms: “If a community is too welcoming, it loses its identity” (Caputo 113), “suicides” itself, becomes divided and so crumbles. It might be worthwhile to bear the above statement in mind as we continue our analysis of *The Sluts* rhizomic community and its inevitable collapse.

in the position of his ego) and most importantly, the loss is made up for not by another introjection but by *new relations with new love objects*. (original emphasis, Bersani 17)

Following Foucault, he proposes a new kind of relationality (not relationship) between “partially dismantled subjects” in the practice of cruising, which would give birth to “new alliances and . . . unforeseen lines of force” (Bersani 11, 20). If we consider the interview with Foucault from which Bersani has drawn inspiration for his concept of a gay relationality, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” we find other aspects of the homosexual which are hospitable to the rhizomic community. Namely, we find a specific relation to the untimely. In language akin to that used to describe becoming by Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault says: “Homosexuality is an historic occasion to re-open affective and relational virtualities... diagonal lines that [the homosexual man] can trace in the social fabric permit him to make these virtualities visible” (Foucault 311). A number of other theorists have commented on this element of homosexual desire. For example, Judith Halberstam has recently theorized a “queer time” which “expands the potential of the moment and . . . squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand” (Halberstam 2). Guattari himself speaks of the “paradox related to time” when it pertains to the homosexual and goes on to explicitly link homosexuality to becoming:

In order to accede to the ontological dimensions thrown into question by homosexuality, we must abandon this progressivist view of time. . . Escapes are possible which allow access to what I call an intensive existential relation, a relation of immanence that no longer posits a before, an after, a black, a white, a male, a female . . . precisely a becoming. (“Toward a New Perspective on Identity” 215)

One must stress, however, that all of these formulations of a “queer temporality,” which opens onto a virtual temporality, are not seen as an intrinsic quality of the homosexual subject *per se* (this would be to return to a kind of stable, essentialist identity, neutering the rhizome). Rather, these theorists are working out a conceptual

instability based on the minoritarian or “perverse” position of the homosexual in society and the kind of relationality this could point towards. Thus Bersani leaves open the possibility of “a certain homosexualizing of heterosexual love” (17); and Guattari contends that because homosexuality as he sees it is a temporal paradox, a person (identified as gay or not) must, to an extent, always “become homosexual” (216). What each proposes seems more in line with a queer theoretical construction, a queer theory which moves away from self-interest and representation, towards relationality and an unknowable future. In Brian Massumi’s words, this is a radically “queer community”:

There’s a whole flowering of Queer politics that exceeds ideas of self-interest and representation, because it deals with ideas of community which aren’t bounded... there’s no way of projecting an end point. So, although you can have vague ideas of where you’re going or where you want to be, it’s very important not to have a too detailed sense of it, partially because I think it’s a way of not affirming the present and the potential in the present [i.e. the virtual]. (“Extremely Important”)

IV. Rhizome AND Community AND Queer AND Technology . . .

In addition to conforming to certain traits of the rhizome and queer sexuality, it is essential to note that in *The Sluts*, Cooper presents the reader with a community that relies on technology as its sole means of expression. This is a community which uses the infrastructure of the internet (web pages, instant messaging, message boards, e-mail) in order to establish itself: the becomings through which the community flows are initiated and maintained by virtue of cybernetic communicational devices. It seems to flourish in this environment. However, in spite of this, and the fact that, as David Bell has remarked, they “discuss rhizomes, machinic assemblages, flows, lines of flight, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, becomings, BwO, nomadism—all concepts which can be (and many have been) applied to cyberspace and

cyberculture” (78), Deleuze and Guattari themselves remain highly ambivalent about the influence of computer technology on society. In our final section we will see how this ambivalence finds its justification in the conclusion of *The Sluts*. But before doing so we will examine how some recent developments in the study of online communities relate to the kind of rhizomic architecture explored above.

A recent article by Phillip H. Gochenour explores the phenomenon of the online community from the perspective of what he calls the “distributed community” (34). In a break with recent scholarship in the field, which has tended to concentrate almost exclusively on online gaming environments, his research focuses on the modes of communication an online community uses, modes such as those found in *The Sluts*: instant messages, e-mail, and IRC channels (akin to message boards and instant messaging).⁸ He derives the term “distributed community” from Paul Baran’s consideration of distributed communication networks and, following the latter, describes this community as being made up of “nodes” which communicate with each other in an a-centralized system (36). Further, in exploring these nodal subjects, he moves away from Sherry Turkle’s classic theory of online subjectivity. While Turkle proposed the idea of a kind of subjectivity which could fluidify in its interactions with others online but “would not cease to be when one withdraws from the social field” (qtd. in Gochenour 39), Gochenour, on the other hand, offers the idea of a nodal “autopoietic” subject, created as a knot of relationality:

No subjectivity pre-exists communication with others and the subjectivity that develops is indeed multiple, a product of the various interactions in the different worlds which are

⁸ Recent work has tended to focus on other types of online communities which form around gaming environments like MUD’s (Multi-User Dungeon) and MOO’s (Multi-Object Orientation). This kind of work may be useful in an exploration of Cooper’s latest work, *God Jr.* (2006), the majority of which takes place inside a computer game. However, I believe Gochenour’s illuminating exposition of *distributed* types of community organization is the most pertinent in relation to our analysis of *The Sluts*.

brought forth with others. (my emphasis, Gochenour 45) This concept of the autopoietic subject (which resonates harmoniously with Guattari's own theory of a "polyphonic" subject)⁹ raises important questions for Gochenour about the formation, not just of online communities, but of communities in general; he treats these cybernetic modes of communication as merely an extension of less advanced communications, such as face-to-face communication and telecommunication. For him, community is "contingent on communication," communication which, quoting Maturana and Varela, he says "triggers structural changes in the autopoietic unities" (Gochenour 44, 42).

We provide this analysis in order to highlight the distinct similarity between this concept of an online "distributed community" and the rhizomic queer community in *The Sluts*, namely: the emphasis of both on the metamorphosis of the subjects of the community as soon as communication between them is engaged. Moreover, if we follow Gochenour's line of reasoning, we come to a very Deleuzoguattarian conclusion: this community of autopoietic nodal subjects in communication, or what we have come to call a rhizomic queer community based on relationality, may form the basis of any community. But such a possibility has been viciously suppressed in favor of a notion of community based on a self/other dualism. The rhizomic community has been, in effect, channeled into a sovereign community, just as the multiple has been overcoded by the dualist and, as we observed at the beginning of our analysis, the BwO has been organized by the organism.

V. Deleuze and Guattari's Warning: Beware of the Empty BwO

In their creation and investigation of concepts such as

⁹ Gochenour's approach is highly influenced by the thought of philosopher Vilem Flusser and cognitive scientists Maturana and Varela (42). For more on the relation between Guattari's polyphonic subject and Maturana and Varela's autopoietic subjectivity see: Watson, J. "Schizo-Performativity? Neurosis and Politics in Judith Butler and Félix Guattari."

rhizomes, becoming and nomad thought, Deleuze and Guattari open up ways to think differently about the individual, the world, the nation-state and, as we have seen, the community. In this way, their work is affirmative; a “positive exercise” which should inspire the reader:

to pry open the vacant spaces that would enable you to build your life and those of the people around you into a plateau of intensity that would leave afterimages of its dynamism that could be reinjected into still other lives, creating a fabric of heightened states between which any number, the greatest number, of connecting routes would exist. Some might call that promiscuous. Deleuze and Guattari call it revolution. (Massumi, *A User's Guide* 8)

Yet, the fact that they are affirmative does not mean they are utopian dreamers¹⁰ or that their concepts are quasi-transcendental imaginings which have no rigor or application in the world; their philosophy is meticulously structured and practical. They are very much aware, for instance, of the fact that we live in a world in which the sovereign community and identity hold sway and thus, in order to change this structure, patience is necessary; they, like Foucault, acknowledge that there is no point outside of the system from which we may effect its change overnight. One must continue to operate within this dominant system, while at the same time finding and experimenting with those “vacant spaces” within it. Foucault calls these points of resistance; Deleuze and Guattari call them “lines of flight.” To do otherwise would be to become ineffectual and to open oneself to being pathologized by the hegemonic ideology and therefore more susceptible to control by that ideology. That is why they tell their readers to

¹⁰ Indeed, to dream a utopia is to foreclose the virtual, to dream a relative future still anchored in the present, not an *absolute* future (to-come) of that unknown horizon towards which Deleuze and Guattari orient their reader: “Utopian thinking that would assign a shape to the supermolecularity-to-come is a function of molarity, it belongs more to the constrictions of the past than to any expansive future... Utopia is the gentle death of revolution” (Massumi, *A User's Guide* 103).

“Schizophrenize” themselves (not to become a schizophrenic). On the invocation of these warnings by Deleuze and Guattari, we turn to the final section of Cooper’s work and ask, like Deleuze and Parnet: “Why is it that all the examples of lines of flight that we are given, even from writers we like, turn out so badly?” (240).

According to Deleuzoguattarian thought, the BwO, the rhizome, the line of flight are all, in a sense, imprisoned by the society in which we live. As mentioned briefly above, this imprisonment cannot simply be thrown off in order to usher in a new era for the human and non-human, and Deleuze and Guattari strenuously advise against such a course of action. They charge us with the painstaking work of forging new escapes, through experimentation with the regimes which bind the individual and to which the individual is bound. This how it can be done:

Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialisation, possible lines of flight, experience them... It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 178)

In other words, if one moves too quickly from individual organization to dividuated disorganization, one merely exchanges societally disciplined individuality for a society of control, the control of modulated individuals. As a result, Deleuze and Guattari advise staying in sight of the strata (of signification, of the organism, of subjectification): “you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality” (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 178). The consequences of not heeding their warnings are clear:

Staying stratified—organized, signified, subjected—is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into a demented and suicidal collapse, which brings them down on us heavier than ever. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 178)

This is how you botch the BwO: creating an empty BwO which does not encourage fluidity or change and is disconnected from everything. It would be a masochist BwO “like hardened empty envelopes, because their components have been blown up too quickly and too violently, an overdose” (Deleuze and Parnet 144). The line of flight has turned into a “line of abolition or destruction, of others and oneself” (Deleuze and Parnet 144).

For us, this clarifies unsatisfactory and anticlimactic conclusion of *The Sluts*. We have previously seen that from the outset of the work Brad is exploded into a multiplicity, destroying the organism and freeing the line of flight on the BwO. But was it done cautiously and patiently enough? Deleuze and Guattari affirm: “Not wisdom, caution. In doses. As a rule immanent to experimentation: injections of caution” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 167). Brad is shattered into myriad parts far too quickly and the carelessness with which this is done manifests itself by the end of the work. Because of the overemphatic destratification of him by a deluge of reviews for over 200 pages (approximately one year), Brad finally becomes unhooked from any semblance of a stable subjectivity. Brian comments on this as the Brad “thread” reaches its self-destructive conclusion: “For what it’s worth I think this whole thing has turned grim and unimaginative... Now Brad is just a name. You don’t even know who it belongs to anymore” (256). Guattari might call Brad the community’s “phantasy,” “something that puts into play, that brings out something that carries [them] away, that draws [them], that locks [them] into something” (“A Liberation of Desire” 213). When Brad “empties out” and becomes a fantasy which is divorced from any content, he ceases to exist and brings forth an empty BwO. “Is it just me, or has the fun and eroticism and intrigue *gone out of this Brad thing*,” snazystocky asks, “I just think this whole thing has gotten really grim and depressing. I guess I just feel really disappointed. I don’t know how I expected it to end, but this isn’t doing it for me” (my emphasis, 239). Shattered, fragmented and empty, Brad ceases to flow or to inspire flows of desire and intensities and thus connectivity ceases; the community which flowed through those connections crumbles:

The empty BwO seems to have emptied itself too fast, too definitively... It establishes a line of flight that is unable to free the circulation of intensities, making other further connections with other BwOs impossible. It is a line of flight that ends in its own annihilation. (Grosz 171)

That this shattering of Brad is made possible by virtue of the internet returns us to the ambivalent opinion Deleuze and Guattari have of computer technology. It may have provided the means by which our online rhizomic queer community established itself, but it can also be a short-cut to dividualation: to the careless breaking up of the subject into dislocated, dead pieces which cannot prompt change or evolution and which can be rerouted into a society of control.

Coda (Rhizome AND Community AND Queer AND Technology AND... (à venir))

Throughout this article we have attempted to plug *The Sluts* into certain elements of Deleuzoguattarian thought in order to outline how aspects like technology and expressions of non-normative queer sexuality affect Cooper's fiction and the kind of social groupings found therein. We will conclude by inverting this critical trajectory and suggest that the preceding investigation, having benefitted from certain formulations of queer theory, can in fact be used to reflect upon the future of the field itself.

One conclusion which might be drawn from our reading of *The Sluts* is that what we have called an unconditionally open online rhizomic queer community always courts a kind of suicide in walking a path of individuation/dividualation. While it must leave itself open indefinitely and connect with the virtual through its becomings, there is the danger that its rhizome might be killed off and captured by a control society. Yet it is our contention that the very concept of queer is not merely an adjective or a noun, a stable identity or a comprehensive taxonomy of sexual practices. It has always been a kind of call to rhizomic thought which moves and keeps moving one toward the unknown in a non-teleological

manner. Various queer theorists have remarked upon this important feature. For example, in words reminiscent of Massumi's above, David Halperin speaks of queer as that which "does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance" (62). It is this "heterogeneous scope" which turns queer into an immeasurable multiplicity: a rhizome, indefinitely open and calling for an encounters with an unidentified other. However, in explicitly adopting this non-sovereign and fluid definition of itself, it inevitably exposes itself both to suicide through dividuation and to capture by the overcoding dualist machine of the *socius*. But it is clear: if queer is to have any force as an anti-identitarian affirmation of heterogeneity, then it should err on the side of dividuality and unconditionality and risk its own death for, at its inception Judith Butler wrote of queer:

If the term... is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of an urgent and expanding political purpose. (Butler 228)

Thus queer should resist definition and individuation which makes it into an "it," a homogeneous monolith that can be assimilated and neutered. It should reject the kind of co-opting, concretizing and ownership it has received within the academic establishment which gives it the name Queer Theory and yields queer theorists. This kind of anti-assimilationist, unconditionally open, rhizomic queer studies might cause the suicide of Queer Theory as we know it, but perhaps this would be in order to secure its future and the future of a queer theory to-come.

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