

A Life That A Breath Might Shatter:

The Politics of Poetry in Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*

by

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For my mother,
whose life has sometimes
been poetry.

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Abstract

Jean Genet's decision to create his story around a trans character indicates his interest in the human potential for fundamental change, and also takes seriously the affective aspects of trans experience while remaining conscious of the ways in which social institutions play a strong role in the construction of selfhood. In his humanizing description of Divine's life story, he shows the way in which we all change over the course of our lives. There is, in Genet's description of subject formation, also an implied social critique that stems from the recognition that individuals are subject to the constraints of their history and environment. Although it has been argued that Genet was apolitical and had no revolutionary inclinations (Sartre 170, 203), this paper will show that even in his earliest writing he both had clear political views and saw his work as a means to effect revolutionary change.

In thinking through Genet's depiction of Divine it is helpful to consider some of the ways subjectivity has been theorized through physical embodiment. Three main contemporary thinkers who contributed to the ideas within this paper share a basically materialist understanding of the human experience of selfhood. Sara Ahmed focuses on the physical and historical grounds of phenomenological experience, and Alexander Weheliye conceives of a radical politics derived from the flesh. Mel Chen describes a system of social hierarchy that is no less physical for being linguistic; describing how human language is a physical act with deeply material effects. Each of these theorists' work allows a different aspect of Genet's political agenda to come to light in the embodied experiences of Divine.

Keywords: Transgender, Trans Feminine, Queer, Phenomenology, Animacy,

Flesh, Subjectivity, Race, Gender, Tante, Prison, Precarity

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Introduction

Jean Genet's first novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943), is framed as an extended sexual fantasy that the author imagines in order to pass the time in prison while awaiting trial. Originally written in French, Bernard Frechtman's translation remains the definitive English language version, and he manages to convey most of the author's playful perversions of the French language. Genet's protagonist, Divine, is a trans feminine sex worker whose life is detailed in a chronologically non-linear series of vignettes beginning with the occasion of her funeral, and centered primarily on her various romantic relationships.

Genet's decision to create his story around a trans character indicates his interest in the human potential for fundamental change, and also takes seriously the affective aspects of trans experience while remaining conscious of the ways in which social institutions play a strong role in the construction of selfhood. In his humanizing description of Divine's life story, he shows the way in which we all change over the course of our lives. There is, in Genet's description of subject formation, also an implied social critique that stems from the recognition that individuals are conditioned by the constraints of their history and environment. Although it has been argued that Genet was apolitical and had no revolutionary inclinations (Sartre 170, 203), this paper will demonstrate that even in his early writing he both had clear political views and saw his work as a means to effect revolutionary change.

In the novel, Genet describes his own subject formation as the product of an ongoing process of forgetting and that this creates a seemingly coherent sense of

self. That “drama,” as he calls it, is prone to being shown as a false or incomplete construct when confronted with those same forgotten elements. He then calls for the reintegration of the abject into the self as a means to combat this destabilization. His use of Divine’s life changes to illustrate this theory is suggestive of the way in which he envisions subject formation as an open-ended series of transformations that, he remarks, “forces me to see myself becoming another, and on the first drama grafts a second” (Genet 109).

The French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, was one of the first to write at length on the subject of Jean Genet, when in 1952 he published *Saint Genet*, which turned out to be a 600+ page tome containing his theories about what could have caused someone like Genet to come into being. Having little knowledge of the man outside of what was in his books up to that point, Sartre nevertheless freely applied a mixture of Freudian psychoanalysis and his own existential philosophy to his subject. The end product bore little resemblance to Genet himself, and perhaps such was not even Sartre’s real intention, but either way, Genet subsequently stopped writing for quite a while. When he finally returned to the page, it was to write plays rather than the novels that had brought him so much fame in the earlier part of his career.

One of Sartre’s more puzzling assertions was that Genet was entirely uninterested in social change. He declared, offering no proof, that, “Genet does not want to change anything at all. Do not count on him to criticize institutions” (Sartre 66). It may be this assumption that marks where he went off the rails, because Genet’s work is such a product of his political outlook that if one were to discount

that, one would be hard pressed to make any sense of him at all. The re-insertion of this key element into his work is therefore absolutely necessary to the project of recovering Genet.

Genet's inventive, associative writing style reinforces a feeling of memory mixed with dream, but he does not back away from the complexities of reality. His fantasy is intimately connected to the flesh and body of his characters and himself. Of Divine, he says that, "poetical expression will never change her state of mind. She will always remain the tart preoccupied with gain" (Genet 12). By this he seems to indicate that hers is a poetry that resists being "cut off from the terrestrial world" (Genet 12). Although it has been suggested that Genet fell into the trap of Cartesian mind/body dualism, it seems clear from this passage that he is not willing to commit to any such separation (Sartre 225). Instead, his work suggests a commitment to materialism, and an understanding of the effects of social institutions on the formation of subjectivity.

In thinking through Genet's depiction of Divine, then, it is helpful to consider some of the ways subjectivity has been theorized through physical embodiment. Three of the central contemporary thinkers who contributed to the ideas in this paper share a basically materialist understanding of the human experience of selfhood. Sara Ahmed focuses on the physical and historical grounds of phenomenological experience, and Alexander Weheliye conceives of a radical politics derived from the flesh. Mel Chen uncovers a system of social hierarchy that is no less physical for being linguistic, describing how human language is a physical act with deeply material effects. Each of these theorists' work allows different

aspects of Genet's revolutionary political agenda to come to light within Divine's embodied experiences.

The first section will discuss Genet's description of Divine, and the problems that arise in interpreting meanings across the distance of both time and cultural difference. Divine's gender non-conformity set her apart in 1940's France in a way that may be less pronounced today, leading the modern day reader to have a somewhat different experience of the text than a person in the past might have had. It is important, however, to note that Genet himself was writing from personal experience. If the people of his own time largely avoided trans feminine sex workers like those in his story, he did not, and it is this familiarity that lends the novel its descriptive richness. In responding with modern sensibilities, then, today's readers may have the chance to engage with Genet's work in a way that is perhaps more true to the author's actual vision.

Thus far, the narrow focus on Divine's transgressive gender presentation has caused some important aspects of her personality to remain unconsidered. These include elements such as the precarity of her life as a sex worker, her adjustment to city life after having been raised in a country village, and the role that her background plays in shaping her understanding of self. A sympathetic reading of Genet's work, then, will accept Divine as he describes her - not marked by alienation and difference, but as a vibrant and multi-faceted person. To read Divine in this way is to accept Genet's assumption that, despite her low social status, her experience can be deeply relatable and revealing.

The second section explores how Genet uses Divine's inner experiences as a way to explore selfhood. His willingness to identify closely with Divine allows him to discover what Sara Ahmed might call a "queer phenomenology." For example, when Divine leaves her provincial childhood home, she leaves the "drama" of her childhood as the boy, Culafroy, and eventually becomes Divine in her Parisian garret. At the same time, however, she brings her provincial attitudes with her to the city so that the second "drama" does not replace the first, but is "grafted" to it. Genet's use of the term "graft" here is instructive in light of a scene in which Divine shows her "country" side by objecting to the use of a branch of pink cherry blossoms for decoration. Genet explains that, "In the country, the peasants taught her to respect fruit trees and not to regard them as ornaments" (Genet 19). Divine's change of locations allows her the freedom to make significant changes to her name and her gender presentation, but she still retains a core of her past that grounds her sense of self. Like a grafted tree, Divine produces strange new flowers without forsaking her roots.

The third section discusses Divine's creation of her life world as a radical response to the social death experienced by the marginalized. Where Culafroy was rejected from the social, Divine is able to find a social group within which she is highly regarded. She manages to live comfortably and enjoy a full life despite being faced with a high level of public antagonism and marginalization. As a sex worker, Divine's bodily integrity is vulnerable to being regularly violated, despite which she survives and even thrives. This is an example of what Alexander Weheliye refers to as "habeas viscus", or the power of the flesh to persist and flourish despite lacking

legal or social personhood in the traditional sense. Genet describes his own abjection as a “detachment from the human” that offers him insight into the artificiality of social roles. Thus for Genet, the abjected person is placed in a unique position outside of the human social world, from which they can gain “extraordinary lucidity” (Genet 114). His interest in getting “outside” the human echoes Weheliye’s interest in, “what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain” (Weheliye 8).

The fourth section examines how the use of language reflects the stratified power structures within the book, and also the ways in which Genet disrupts those structures. Mel Chen’s concept of animacy illuminates how the author’s linguistic animation of Divine overturns social hierarchies that would normally accord her less agency due to her marginalized social status as a trans feminine sex worker. Genet also subverts the concept of property through a revaluation of theft as a productive and pro-social act. Genet thus counters the idea of queerness as a dangerous contaminant with his own portrayal of queerness as desire itself, which motivates the reproductive act of stealing.

Finally, the last section suggests that Genet’s own incarceration at the time he wrote this novel offers insight into the process of criminalization as a form of abjection. Genet often describes the inmates of his prison as being carved from stone, thus emphasizing how immobilized they are within their cells. Prison is an extreme form of erasure, in which undesirable elements are removed not only from

the social imaginary, disappearing from the public eye, but also are prevented from communicating or engaging with the outside world. Thus prisons serve as a form of group forgetting, scapegoating those whom a society is not willing to acknowledge as part of itself in order to create a harmonious but misleading self-image. Genet suggests that the way to cope with this instability is to embrace the part of the self that seems repellant. The process of forgetting, othering, and moral judgment is ongoing, but Genet's novel would indicate that to maintain stability this process of reintegration must be similarly ongoing. Genet's humanizing of Divine through his portrayal of her in the novel is an example of such a process of reunion. Divine may represent an element of himself he will embrace in the process of writing, but through his sympathetic depiction of an abjected character, he also means to allow the reader the chance to become more accepting of those, such as prisoners, who occupy a similarly abjected position in their own society.

Chapter 1

Divination

The act of reading Genet's 1943 novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers*, in today's world is complicated by the question of presentism, or the application of perspectives from the reader's time to interpretations of the past, as one may be tempted to imagine the character of Divine through the lens of present day gender categories rather than as a production of a particular time and place. This is not simple presentism though, because she seems anachronistic to her own time, and illegible to those around her as she makes her way through a world intent on

excluding her. Genet illustrates this exclusion poignantly with the lines, “She smiled all around, and each one answered only by turning away, but that meant answering. The whole cafe thought that the smile of (for the colonel: the invert; for the shopkeepers: the fairy; for the banker and the waiters: the fag; for the gigolos: “that one”; etc.) was despicable” (Genet 12). The inability of anyone in the room to decide on a label or category for her echoes the question offered here, namely, how to understand her despite the obscuring effects of our own prejudices.

Perhaps there is a way in which Divine presents a queer challenge not only to the gender binary but also to the boundary between the past and the present. In his article, “Anachronizing the Penitentiary,” Kadji Amin makes the argument that the sexual milieu Genet describes in *Miracle of the Rose* is not adequately described by the term “pre-Stonewall,” and this insight holds true for *Our Lady of the Flowers* as well. While this pre-Stonewall period is often imagined as a time before openly queer sociality, Genet chooses to locate his novels in places or situations in which these alternative sexual activity and relationships, if not the norm, are certainly not stigmatized.

Our Lady of the Flowers takes place in the environment of the criminal underclass of Paris, and unlike the café scene, the people who form the main cast of the story are not only unsurprised but without exception they are accepting of Divine’s desire to be understood as feminine both sexually and socially. This is not to say that she does not encounter people who react negatively to her, but simply that these people are peripheral to the story, and thus the reader is led to imagine that they are peripheral to her life. She is treated to rude muttering when she

orders tea in a cafe, and almost thrown out by the waitstaff. She is even chased and intimidated by a gang of children in Spain. These, though, are incidental to the real narrative, which is about her loves and betrayals. In her story, Genet is able to depict the lives of the oppressed outside of the narrow lens of oppression, and in doing so, he shows a world in which sexual minorities successfully carve out spaces of social freedom to be themselves, and within which Divine's complexity and unique beauty can come to light.

Genet calls Divine a "tante," indicating a social role that was both common and recognizable to the Parisians of his time. Translated as "queen," a tante was not simply a gender role, but also indicated things about the class, status, career and social world of the person to whom it was applied. The tante community of Paris was a particularly urban phenomenon that required a large population in order to guarantee them customers for the sex trade. Moreover, they formed a supportive community together in order to persist in the face of widespread discrimination. However, instead of dwelling on their social marginality, Genet shows the tantes as a close-knit circle that share common values and habits, much like an affective kin group, and indeed he sometimes refers to them as sisters (Genet 24).

Thus, Genet's work upsets the progress narrative that considers queerness as a modern phenomenon by showing pockets of what Amin calls "queer sodality" that reach not only forward but backward in time. Amin's work on *Miracle of the Rose* offers examples of Genet implying homosexual activity in the orders of the monks and nuns of medieval France, and Amin also critiques narratives that celebrate modern sexual freedom by pointing out the fact that queer people continue to be

criminalized. This underscores the difficulty in the historical reading of gender and sexuality, in that no society is homogeneous nor do social changes happen everywhere simultaneously. The process by which a historian can falsely overstate social homogeneity, such as in the narrative of queer modernity, Amin calls “chrononormativity” (Amin 312).

In literature, readers must follow the writer’s timeline, but they always bring elements from their own life that inform the way they experience the narrative. Today, when we imagine a female-identified person who was identified male at birth, we have, perhaps, more examples to attach this idea to than the average reader of Genet’s time. We might imagine Divine looking like one of many well known transgender celebrities such as Laura Jane Grace of Against Me! (see fig 1), or we might instead imagine someone we know personally.



Figure 1

This aspect of our reading is hard to avoid, and can obscure the shock Genet's text clearly caused in French society at the time. However, it can be argued that does not make this reading invalid. Genet claims in the novel to have met Divine in person, putting him in a position more like ours than like that of readers of his own time period. If he says she was beautiful, the people of his time might have smirked and considered him sick or delusional. Today, more readers might understand and accept his glowing descriptions of her early attractiveness.

She is described in androgynous clothing. A silk blouse, sailor pants, and



Figure 2

sandals in the 1940s may not have been enough to get her arrested for indecency, but it would certainly indicate femininity to those who saw it. Women had been wearing trousers since World War I and sailor outfits were a common

fashion statement (see Fig 2). Her long hair and gaudy ring would push the outfit over the threshold of androgyny, though, into outright femininity, and her feminine mannerisms compounded such indications. For the bourgeois, this placed her into an uncomfortably alien category. Within Genet's more queer realm of criminals and pimps, however, these were recognizable indicators of not only her sexual preferences, but also of how she was to be treated socially.

Emma Heaney, in her article, “The New Woman: Sexology, Literary Modernism, and the Trans Feminine Remainder,” discusses how Genet’s description of Divine echoes the first person narrative descriptions of trans feminine experience as recorded in Krafft-Ebing’s 1886 opus, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Heaney 29). Unlike sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter who focused on the “deviant” aspects of trans feminine experience, Genet portrays Divine as having strong sympathetic relationships with other feminine people.

Heaney differentiates between a pathologized view of effeminacy still present in today’s gender dysphoria diagnosis in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, and one grounded in positive bodily sensations (Heaney 28-29). For example, she notes that the diagnosis is distinguished by “clinically significant ‘distress and impairment’” (Heaney 1). She then goes on to trace the history of diagnoses of both homosexuality and gender dysphoria to their common root in the early sexological category of the invert. Despite Krafft-Ebing’s theories of inversion, Heaney finds that in turning to the case studies of two of his female-identified subjects, there was a positive social component to their narratives that included strong friendships and feelings of kinship with other feminine people (Heaney 13-14). She also discovered that there were accounts, not of disassociation with the body, but instead a kind of mental transposition in which the body is subjectively experienced as a different gender (Heaney 16). Genet’s representation of Divine, Heaney notes, is much closer to these accounts than are other literary depictions of gender deviance of his time (Heaney 28-29).

Chapter 2

Cherry Blossoms

In his novel, Genet uses the character of Divine as a means to express his own phenomenological experiences, with the goal of identifying to what extent change is possible. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* can therefore be a productive lens through which to understand the novel's particularly subjective point of view, and suggests that the transformation of Culafroy into Divine was facilitated by a move from the village to the city. Moreover, the intervening period of homelessness forcibly unsettled old habits and routines, allowing profound changes in self-expression to emerge.

Disavowing its apparently autobiographical elements, Genet insists, "this book aims to be only a small fragment of my inner life" (Genet 4). However, while distancing himself from the novel, he also admits that it may contain a fragment of his experiences, which he then calls "an anguished memory that had been haunting me since the beginning of the world" (Genet 4). His hope that the writing process will allow him access to such a buried fragment of memory accords with the passage wherein he describes a process of forgetting that forms his self conception as a unified whole (Genet 109). Divine is also haunted by past trauma, as indicated in the lines, "At her heels, the wings of terror bear her along. She is quick, for in order to elude the ghosts, to throw them off her track, she must speed ahead faster than her thought thinks" (Genet 11). Thus Divine is constantly in motion in order to avoid being caught up in her own thoughts, the ghosts of her past. These two

passages show common ground here between Divine and her creator. Both of them are troubled by something buried in their pasts and thus Genet suggests the possibility that Divine's "ghosts" may represent his lost fragment or repressed memory. Perhaps this is what he means when he says, "it is my own destiny, whether true or false, that I am laying (at times a rag, at times a court robe) on Divine's shoulders" (Genet 24). This line could indicate the aspects of the story that are actually autobiographical, including the descriptions of homelessness and of the court trial, both of which Genet himself also experienced.

Genet writes from a liminal point of view straddling a border between the subjective and objective. His commonalities with Divine offer the reader access to her interiority, and allow the writer to convey some of the more subtle phenomena of human consciousness. Sara Ahmed imagines a "queer phenomenology," as "one that faces the back, which looks "behind" phenomenology" (Ahmed 29). One way she gets behind it is to consider the way an object is shaped by its history. To illustrate this point, she quotes an example given by Marx and Engels, in which they consider that Feuerbach's immediate perception of a cherry tree was only possible due to the transplantation of cherries to his region for commercial purposes (Ahmed 41). They meant to illustrate the role history plays in the formation of the phenomenal world, but Ahmed goes further, to suggest that objects and people are also shaped by repeated action, or habit. Actions can be as simple as the positioning or orientation of the subject towards an object, while habit encompasses such things as sharing space. Thus Ahmed is interested not only in how we perceive but how we are shaped by our perception of the world around us.

Ahmed does not, however, leave the subject at the mercy of the history and habits already inscribed into a body. She instead argues that one's background can act as both a stabilizing influence and a point of departure (Ahmed 62-63). It is this aspect of her thought that speaks to Genet's story, since he is deeply interested in the human potential for change. Where Ahmed describes subtle changes over time, however, like the tendency of a tree to grow toward the sun, Genet is interested in abrupt changes. It is no wonder, then, that when he describes how he understands himself, he speaks in terms of "grafting." For Genet, the subject can, under certain conditions, free itself enough from its history to become something radically different, and that capacity for change is the primary reason he chose to center his narrative around Divine, whose gender transformation is so profound.

Yet at the same time, her story is illustrative of a more general process by which the self recognizes itself in the other, and then must adapt to a new and complicated self-image. Genet calls these self-images "dramas," perhaps gesturing to their performative or fictional aspects, but it is important to realize that he does not contrast them with some imagined truth of selfhood that can ever be achieved. The act of self-reflection is an act of forgetting in which the subject creates a self through discarding the other. The recognition of the self in the other is certainly a truth, but never a complete one.

In considering the concept of orientation, Ahmed reinterprets Freud's analysis of a case of lesbianism from the perspective of group psychology in which the family unit seeks to reproduce itself. In her reading, homosexuality "challenges the 'ego ideal' of the family," and is therefore seen as threatening the death of the

family line through lack of offspring (Ahmed 73-77). Ahmed's reading of the family drama as an instance of group psychology may offer insight into Genet's protagonist since while Divine refuses a traditional family structure, she apparently still carries an attachment to the bourgeois values instilled in her during childhood. This is illustrated when her lover, Darling, brings her home a branch of cherry blossoms, Divine is unable to appreciate their beauty because she sees in them only a lost potential for the production of fruit. Her focus on the reproductive potential of the fruit tree was instilled in her as a child due to being raised in an agriculturally based community.

Divine's continued belief in the value of reproduction also explains another strange action on her part, having to do with her gender expression and that of her social circle. One evening, when dressing for a drag party, she playfully puts a dress on her younger lover, Our Lady. She is not attracted to trans feminine people like herself, and therefore seems to have nothing to gain by initiating him into the practice of cross-dressing. In fact, it turns out to change the sexual dynamic of her household because Our Lady starts a sexual relationship with Divine's other lover, Gorgui, that evening, and she begins to feel neglected as a result. However, her action makes sense from the perspective of the reproduction of the family line, making her interest in him somewhat parental. In addition to her attempt to interest him in cross-dressing, she later said of Our Lady, "he could be my son," (Genet 105). Inasmuch as the tantes of Paris represent a kind of chosen family to her, Divine reproduces that queer family line through bringing Our Lady into their circle.

In retaining values such as home, family and reproduction that she acquired as a child, she shows that her transformation is not a break from the past, but rather an addition onto it, and that she remains connected to her history as Culafroy even while “grafting on” the second drama of *Divine*. The privileging of the home might condition the subject to seek an often elusive sense of belonging. There are limits to such conditioning, however, as Genet shows. *Divine* does eventually make a comfortable home for herself, and a social group within which she feels a sense of normality. However, in moving to Paris and seeking the company of the tantes, she creates a community on different terms than those available in the conservative village of her birth. The ongoing social existence of the Parisian tantes would rely on the adoption of new members into itself over time, so *Divine*’s queer form of reproduction can be seen as an adaptive response to the group need for the social benefits that French society of that time considered the domain of the family. Such benefits would include functions like funeral arrangements, as seen in the opening of the novel when the tantes gather at the garret to accompany *Divine*’s casket to the cemetery.

If, as Ahmed suggests, the environment shapes those who dwell within it, then it makes sense that change would often require physical relocation, as Culafroy undertakes in travelling to Paris. The narrative of the gay or trans pilgrimage to the city is a well-worn, even tired trope (Annes 57), but it remains true for many people that urban life allows one to find community and resources unavailable in rural areas. Ahmed’s phenomenology suggests an additional reason, though, in that the very act of radical self-reimagining might be facilitated by physical removal from the

surroundings and relationships that had kept one locked into the well-worn rut of old habits.

If being at home allows the creation of the self-image through habit, then it follows that being homeless in an unfamiliar place would be deeply unsettling. After leaving the slate house where Culafroy lived with his mother, and before reaching Paris where Divine makes her home in the garret, there is just such a period of instability. Not only are old habits lost in “the anguish of shelterless days,” but new habits are acquired in that Culafroy first cross-dresses during this period by stealing a nun’s habit from a correctional home for boys. He also begins to survive through performing sex work, by means of which Divine will support herself for the remainder of her life.

Another way of looking at this transitional period is as a kind of border crossing, and scholars have noted that the boundaries of national borders and genders are both heavily policed in an attempt to preserve a “sphere of normality” (Bhanji 517). Therefore, it is not a particular surprise that it is during this trying period of homelessness that Culafroy has the first of many interactions with law enforcement.

Writing from his cell in Fresnes Prison, Genet often reflects on his imposed inaction, describing it as “petty, vegetative misery,” and saying, “I accept living there as I would accept, were I dead, living in a cemetery” (Genet 62). While these lines highlight the unyielding stasis enforced by the institution, Genet at times also praises his cell, and even speaks to it as if it were a lover (Genet 38). If physical immobility can constrain one’s capacity for change, as Ahmed’s work suggests, then

his seeming ambivalence about incarceration may in fact be ambivalence about self-transformation. This becomes clear near the end of the novel, when he begins to imagine he might be freed following his upcoming hearing, saying, "I already feel that I no longer belong to the prison. Broken is the exhausting fraternity that bound me to the men of the tomb. Perhaps I shall live..." (Genet 116). Genet's rebirth from the "tomb" of the prison is just the sort of radical change he has been contemplating throughout the writing of his novel.

By implicating habit in the formation of subjectivity, Ahmed makes the subject an active participant in their own conditioning and shaping. By showing the role of the environment and the people and things within it, Ahmed leaves open the possibility of change via relocation. Genet's narrative in *Our Lady of the Flowers* seems to underscore Ahmed's sentiment that, "the "new" is what is possible when what is behind us, our background, does not simply ground us or keep us in place, but allows us to move" (Ahmed 62-63).

Chapter 3

Too White a Child

In looking closely at Divine's background, it is easy to overlook the fact of her whiteness, a characteristic Genet rarely mentions because it is the norm in his country. It is, however, just such an overlooked but embodied history or lineage that Ahmed wants to draw attention to in her phenomenological work. One day, Culafroy found his mother's maiden name in an old book of aristocratic heraldry. He confronted her about it, at which point she opened up to him her knowledge of the

family history. Genet explains that, “in trying to make herself illustrious through an ancient lineage, she was succumbing to the call of darkness, of the earth, of the flesh. She was seeking roots” (Genet 68). Through his mother, then, Culafroy is tied to a heritage and a history. If leaving home was in part an attempt to renounce such privilege, these roots have been shown to have remained within Divine despite her transformation.

Alexander Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus* works from the standpoint of Black studies, a lens that is often not applied to works such as *Our Lady of the Flowers* that were written by and about white people. He makes the argument, however, that Black studies offers a critical lens through which to interrogate the hierarchization of power, and the mechanisms by which people are assigned human status or divorced from it (Weheliye 16-18). While both Genet and Weheliye explore the physicality of their subjects as a means of finding the possibilities for human freedom, they approach the question of otherness with different tools and perspectives, and thus their works complement each other. As in Weheliye’s examples of oppression, Culafroy/Divine experiences periods of extreme deprivation and state violence. It is important, however, to see how Divine’s whiteness plays a changing role in how she navigates her relationships throughout her life.

Weheliye draws on Hortense Spillers’s definition of “the flesh” as the physical ground on which legal personhood (the “body” or *corpus* of habeas corpus) is established (Weheliye 2). Unlike the body, the flesh cannot be contained entirely within the strictures of legality which themselves are based on a universalized

concept of “Man.” Weheliye’s project seeks alternative expressions of humanity by looking at the lives and strategies of those whose humanity in the legal sense has been denied or revoked, under the strictures of slavery or internment in concentration camps, for example. Following Walter Benjamin, he remarks that, “the radical shift in the political horizon is premised on the existing situation of the tradition of the oppressed and on the desire to create alternatives” (Weheliye 84). Weheliye envisions kinds of liberation that do not necessarily rely on the humanist ideals of resistance and agency. Instead, he sees the mere fleshly act of survival in such extreme circumstances to offer new theories of what it means to be human. In these new models of humanity, Weheliye seeks new ways to escape the false universality of the concept of “Man” which has been used so often to exclude and dehumanize.

Using Weheliye’s definition of whiteness “as a series of hierarchical power structures that apportion and delimit which members of the Homo sapiens species can lay claim to full human status,” (Weheliye 19) one can see, for example, how structures such as the State, the scientific community, or organized religion, serve to dehumanize certain groups while privileging others. Through the course of the novel, Culafroy begins as a child of relatively uncontroversial whiteness, but his humanity becomes increasingly called into question over time. As a young trans feminine prostitute, although Divine is still targeted by the police, her attractiveness still gives her an edge over many of those in her social realm. When a younger sex worker mocks her on the street, for example, a pimp corrects them quickly with the words, “Her, she’s Divine. You, you’re a slob” (Genet 63). As she ages, however,

balding and beginning to wrinkle, she loses even that small edge. By the time she meets Gorgui, another sex worker, she has to pay him for sex instead of the reverse, thus showing the relative value of each to the other. Even so, her interactions with Gorgui are described in orientalizing terms that consistently center and highlight their racial difference. Thus Divine's whiteness cannot be effaced even when she is in her most precarious social position.

Weheliye describes what he terms "racializing assemblages" as "a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not quite humans, and nonhumans" (Weheliye 8). With that definition in mind, and despite the fact that Divine maintains a base level of whiteness, it is still productive to examine the social and institutional processes by which her humanity is compromised during the course of her life.

At one point, she is taken into the station by the police, and returns with a black eye (Genet 25). This kind of brutality at the hands of law enforcement is a quotidian reality in the lives of sex workers, violently differentiating them from those who perceive the police as maintaining the peace. The juridical laws protecting citizens from abuse seem designed to fail certain groups (women, racial minorities, gender nonconforming, poor, homeless, and mentally ill) who continually fall outside their purview. Even today, this second-class status prevents sex workers from going to the police when they are in danger, prevents police from investigating attacks against them, and leads to their being killed with impunity. Thus Weheliye argues forcefully against Agamben's formulation of the state of exception in which normal civil laws are suspended, noting that for certain groups

the exception has always already been the rule (Weheliye 86). Weheliye offers Ruth Wilson Gilmore's description of racism as "the state-sanctioned and/ or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death," (Weheliye 55). When Genet refers to Divine's early death as tantamount to a murder, one straightforward way to understand his claim would be to look at the social mechanisms that made consumption overwhelmingly a disease of the urban poor. Weheliye would suggest that in conditions of such overwhelming structural violence, survival, even in the absence of active resistance, might be seen as a radical act.

In contrast to the currently pathologized descriptions of trans experience, Genet's privileging of the tantes' intergroup bonds, such as the complex friendship between Divine and Mimosa II, has been shown to accord closely with early trans feminine narratives (Heaney 24-32). Divine's experience of her body as the site of positive sexuality similarly echoes these accounts, as in the lines, "Divine is she-who-is-soft. That is, whose character is soft, whose cheeks are soft, whose tongue is soft, whose tool is supple. With Gorgui, all is hard" (Genet 60). Here, Divine differentiates between herself and her lover in terms of the embodied feelings of their relative malleability rather than focusing on genital configuration. Another axis of difference is explored in language, since Genet explains that, street slang is a masculine "secondary sex attribute" avoided by women and tantes (Genet 20). This offers them yet another way to decouple genders from genitals, clearing a space for the tantes to be able identify themselves.

Genet's foregrounding of Divine's romantic life rather than her suffering might be interpreted as a simple refusal to translate her pain into sexual excitement. The fact that the novel is presented as a masturbation fantasy could too easily lead to something similar to what Weheliye calls pornotroping, or "the enactment of black suffering for a shocked and titillated audience" (Weheliye 90). Genet avoids this trap by carefully redirecting the reader's gaze back to her many loves and her happiness.

Frieda Ekotto suggests that the experience of confinement forced Genet to overcome his shame and transform it into a powerful creative force that she calls "strong shamelessness" (Ekotto 86). Trapped within a system that was designed to instill self-hatred in him, he responded with defiance and turned his abjection into what she calls, following Foucault, a technology of the self that he could use to channel his creative energies. His darkest fantasies became both an escape and food for his confessional novels. This creative response to physical confinement may also be an example of Weheliye's concept of *habeas viscus*: a new way of relating to the world as a response to deprivation.

Genet's relationship to race is considerably more complex than Divine's. For example, he was quoted in the 1970's as saying, "I am a black whose skin happens to be white," (Sandarg 270) a statement which today would be seen as deeply problematic if not downright meaningless. At the same time, however, he also acknowledged the real privileges that came with his white skin. Recalling the riotous 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, he perceptively observed, "I was sure that I risked absolutely nothing because I have white skin.... But if I had been

black I am sure that the police would have shot at me" (Sandarg 272). Drawing on the work of bell hooks, Sara Ahmed discusses how whiteness can reinforce itself through proximity to the Black body. The attempt to gain proximate Blackness through this kind of appropriation is what hooks calls "eating the other" (Ahmed 128). Genet is also preoccupied with metaphorical cannibalism, although in his more Catholic imagination it takes the form of the sacrament. One example occurs after describing Culafroy's ingestion of aconite, when Genet imagines that, "the Renaissance would take possession of the child through the mouth, just as the Man-God does of the little girl who, sticking out her tongue, though piously, swallows the host" (Genet 41). Another instance of this metaphor occurs when Divine's best friend Mimosa II swallows a small photograph of Our Lady, "the way one swallows the Eucharist," (Genet 48) thereby giving Divine reason to think she was attracted to the young man. It is apparent that Divine's life becomes more marginalized over time, and thus it is possible that Genet is trying to make her, and perhaps himself, less white through proximity to, or consumption of, Blackness.

Ahmed suggests that, "To become black through proximity to others is not to be black; it is to be "not black" by the very extension of the body toward blackness" (Ahmed 128). Weheliye similarly suggests that the white desire for Blackness, "expropriates the putative surplus carnality and sexuality of Black flesh ungendered in order to fuel its workings" (Weheliye 107). Both theorists warn that white appropriation of Blackness is a form of violent erasure, however Genet's own use of the term "race" is generally de-linked from concepts of skin color or ethnic background. For example, he refers to a "the race of harried children," speaking of

Culafroy, and to “a race of fascinating demons,” in describing the other boys of his village (Genet 41-43).

Relatedly, Genet states that if he were free, the first place he would go would be “to prison to acknowledge my own, those of my race” (Genet 38). In describing the denizens of the prisons as his “race,” he constructs a racial category out of what is essentially a socio-economic category. The men incarcerated in Fresnes Prison were of various racial and ethnic backgrounds as is demonstrated by the fact that he shared a cell with the Black Clement Village. However, the prisoners do share a certain precarious social status that arises from the simple fact of their incarceration. As he puts it, they are “men on the margin of the living” (Genet 64). He is perhaps naïvely optimistic to try to revalue a concept as loaded with meaning as is the term “race.” Perhaps the most generous reading of his use of the word is as an attempt to broaden the definition of the term to encompass all possible classificatory systems, thereby rendering it toothless as a meaningful method of social hierarchization.

Chapter 4

Reanimation

Genet is a master of using language to overturn social hierarchies, especially with regard to Divine. Drawing on the ideas of Mel Chen’s book, *Animacies*, it is possible to see how the linguistic concept of animacy functions far beneath conscious thought to invest certain bodies with life while withholding it from others. Genet’s fascinating description of the cultural transmission of queer gender

presentation as an act of theft is a refutation of the common homophobic rhetoric of queerness as contagion. For example, Divine “steals” certain of her stereotypically feminine verbal quirks and hand gestures from an older tante called Mimosa I, while Darling, despite his long exposure to the society of the tantes, does not absorb their habits.

The circulation of particular flamboyant gestures among the tantes served to reinforce their feeling of community through a set of shared habits. Genet’s positioning of this queer mode of cultural reproduction as a theft indicates the feeling of desire that motivates it, and may also give insight into how to better understand the writer’s own identification as a thief.

Undoubtedly he did commit material theft from time to time, but more interestingly, his artistic thefts could be seen as an attempt to create a sense of community or solidarity among the underclass whose lives he represented within his work. The novel form reflected the lives of the working class back to themselves and helped them achieve some level of class-consciousness at the beginning of the 20th Century, and Genet’s own narratives might have been designed with a similar goal in mind. Considering his mid-career switch to theater, perhaps he saw the novel form itself as unequal to the task at hand.

Angela Davis, quoting the work of John Bender, discusses the possibility that the novel itself is implicated in the rise of the penitentiary as the default form of punishment of our age. Bender argues that books such as *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe* convinced a wide audience of the beneficial effects of long periods of solitude. Bender cites the many similarities between the two, including a

preoccupation with discipline and order as well as a narrative of personal improvement. While admittedly an interesting theory, it seems likely that most cultural productions that come into being in the same era would share such widely held social values in common. Davis also discusses prison literature, of which *Our Lady of the Flowers* is arguably an example. While she does not mention any works of fiction in her book, it is interesting to note that Genet's work straddles a line between prison literature and urban fiction while predating the golden era of either genre.

Mel Chen describes the linguistic concept of animacy as, "the grammatical effects of the sentience or liveness of nouns," (Chen 2) and argues that this is actually a deeply political question underlying many attempts to expand or constrain the amount of agency attributed to a given subject. An animacy hierarchy "conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority" (Chen 13). Chen demonstrates that such linguistic hierarchies are present in all languages to some degree, and more troublingly, they often function without the conscious knowledge of the language user. These hierarchies generally reinforce existing social power structures; however, creative language users such as Genet can find ways to disrupt such systems.

As Weheliye explains, racializing assemblages work alongside gendering assemblages in the work of creating and maintaining hierarchies of power in a society. Both work on the level of the flesh, constructing and attaching meanings to bodies to which they then adhere. In his investigation of the mechanisms of

racialization, Weheliye notes that gender is a complicating factor because of the fact that racialized bodies are often simultaneously sexualized or hyper- or de-gendered.

This area of complication might be brought into focus by incorporating Chen's idea of animacy, and the historical idea of role-based sexuality. This conception of sexuality is common in many non-western societies and prisons, and consists in the idea that a penetrative sexual partner is more masculine, active and positive while a receptive partner is more feminine, passive and negative (Ross 173). As the terms "active" and "passive" suggest, in terms of animacy, taking a passive sexual role would then lower one's position in the social hierarchy just as do non-white races or feminine gender. This similarity in the social effect of de-animation across various axes of difference may explain why they are often conflated.

Genet is sharply aware of how language is used to dehumanize gender nonconforming people and describes Divine's experiences of such othering. One instance of this occurs in a cafe where she is "metamorphosized" into a monster because another customer murmurs "a magic word as he thought of her: 'Homoseckshual'" (Genet 12). This is a translation, however, of Genet's somewhat more emotionally loaded term, "*Pédérasque*," which is a portmanteau of the French words *pédéraste* and *masque* (Bullock 53). This "magic word" blends the ideas of child abuse and deceit in a way that expresses the speaker's subconscious association of those ideas with homosexuality and gender nonconformity respectively.

Among other definitions, the etymology of the word “queer,” includes to “spoil or ruin” or to “put someone in a hopeless or disadvantageous position” (Chen 60). This definition suggests an assumption that something or someone can be irreversibly queered, resulting in a lowering of their original value or position. Such assumptions are likely behind much homophobic rhetoric, with the result that queering seems to take on the terrifying communicability of a virus, contaminating through intimate contact. Genet indirectly responds to this kind of rhetoric through his positive descriptions of the introduction, first of Culafroy and then later of Our Lady, to homosexual contact. Far from being ruined by this contact, both of them are depicted as eagerly seeking out and enjoying their experiences. In this way, Genet shows queerness, like theft, to be a function of desire.

Unlike Sartre, John Plotz understands Genet’s intent to challenge hierarchical power structures. He, however, is not convinced that Genet succeeds in his attempt. According to Plotz, Genet’s glorification of masculinity and physical power, in the forms of Divine’s lovers for example, actually bolsters the right-wing fascist elements he professed to abhor. To support this claim, Plotz argues that Genet fails to represent weak or “womanly” figures in his writing, a claim that puzzlingly ignores the author’s first novel. In fact, Genet spends a great deal of time in *Our Lady of the Flowers* describing people who fall quite far from traditional portrayals of masculine power.

Even Darling, Divine’s longest-term lover, has more than a few moments when his masculinity begins to fail. Genet explains, “if he says, “I’m dropping a pearl,” or “a pearl slipped,” he means that he has farted in a certain way, very softly,

so that the fart has flowed out very quietly” (Genet 15). When, at trial, the judge asks his occupation, Darling almost responds with the words, “bar maid” (Genet 90). Similarly, Genet describes his cellmate, Clement as crying at one point. “His long arms would rise and drop heavily on his knees (women carry on like that). He was weeping (Genet 60). Contrary to Plotz’s claim, then, Genet is singularly interested in the lives of those who live on the margins of society, those who have no access to power except in the poetry of their own thoughts.

Genet, though, is not content to simply point to the violence language can do, but takes it upon himself to destabilize and overturn such implicit power structures. Within the story, Divine is by far the most active character and is often described in counterpoint to other characters who in contrast remain slow or completely stationary. One example of this is in the line “Divine leaps to the assault, clings to her man, licks him and envelops him; he stands there solid and motionless as if he were Andromeda's monster changed to a rock in the sea” (Genet 18). This line, in addition to depicting Divine’s vigorous movements, de-animates her masculine lover twice over - first by referring to him as a “monster,” and secondly as a “rock.” Linguistically speaking, the masculine is normally higher on the animacy hierarchy

than the feminine (see fig 3),

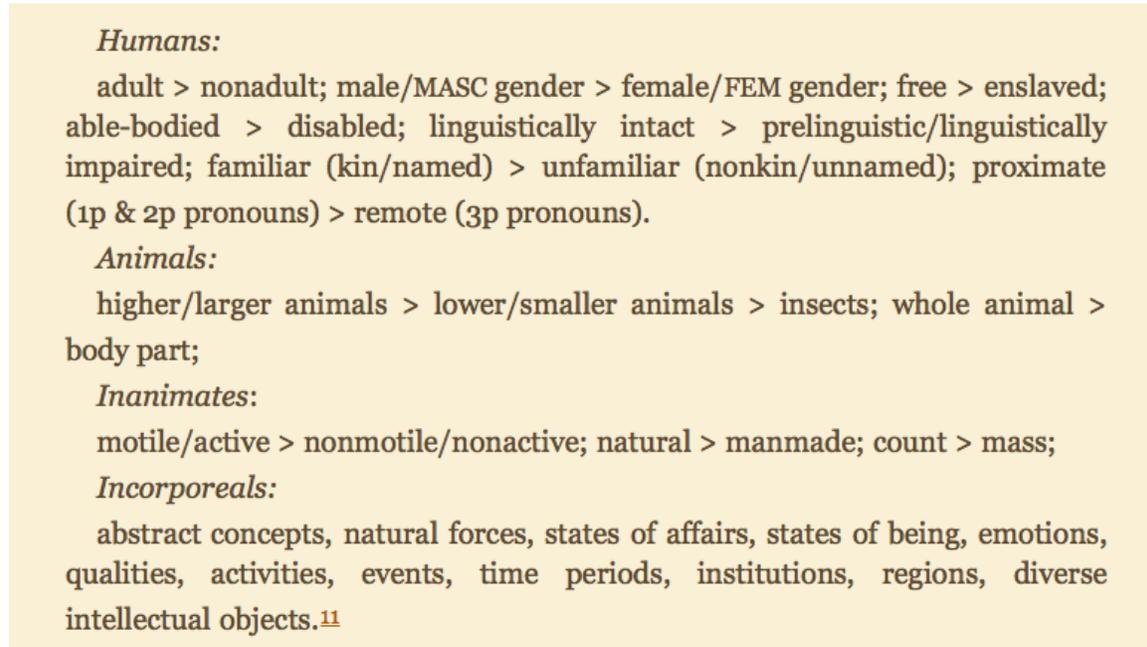


Figure 3

so that in switching these values, Genet is performing a move that humanizes Divine and increases the reader's empathy toward her. This animated femininity also extends to the tantes as a whole through their vibrant and witty use of language, which stands in contrast to the reticence of their masculine lovers (Bullock 55).

In overturning such linguistic hierarchies, Genet should not be thought to be performing a purely symbolic act. Chen argues that language should not be thought of as separate from physicality, but as "a corporeal, sensual, embodied act" (Chen 53). This is evident in the way language is formed through the actions of the throat and mouth, or by the gesture in the case of sign language. Divine's own gestures play a significant role in Genet's depiction of her character, and sometimes they even seem to take on a life of their own. While Frechtman's translation says that she

“appropriated” certain of her gestures from Mimosa I, Genet’s actual words are “*avait dérobés*” meaning explicitly that she had stolen them (Genet 30). Where appropriation leaves open the possibility that the taker has the authority to take something, stealing is more uncompromisingly taboo. Appropriation has also commonly come to mean the use of culturally specific artifacts or ideas by someone outside of the culture in question, a practice that is generally perceived as disrespectful when performed by a member of a dominant culture with regard to an oppressed minority culture.

Genet’s specific language is important because Divine, in obtaining Mimosa I’s gestural habits, is very much not appropriating in this sense, since this is certainly an intra group transfer. Genet’s use of the term “stealing” in this case refers to a kind of mimicry that strengthens commonalities within the tantes’ community, and enriches their shared vocabulary. Unlike borrowing, to steal requires making something one’s own. It requires personalization, and thus avoids the misappropriation that comes from simply borrowing to avoid the effort of creating something new.

Linguistic animacy, as described by Chen, may not create the social orders that we use to categorize people, but it is bound to these orders on a level that remains largely unconscious, causing Genet’s imaginative interventions to be both surprising and challenging. His poetic use of the concept of theft is similarly destabilizing to the humanist idea of possessive individualism. His depiction of Divine’s gestures as the product of theft revalues theft as a positive social activity, and suggests that his own work is another such product. Theft becomes, for Genet, a

kind of queer reproduction that allows cultural forms to live, evolve, and survive beyond the death of their originator. Divine's theft of Mimosa I's gestures represents only a part of a series of her thefts of feminine performance that, as they evolve over time, become unique to her. Her performance of gender nonconformity, then, is just such a queer cultural form, showing how, subject formation is also a product of social interaction. Far from being an agent of contamination, queerness moves through the operation of desire. Thus, in *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Genet demonstrates the power of language to destabilize hierarchies of power even as he uses his novel as a means to enact social change.

Conclusion

Genet's meditation on the life of Divine is marked by a variety of experiences, environments, and habits that shape her as a person. In describing the changes she undergoes in age, emotion, class, and gender, Genet is able to instill a certain imaginative flexibility in his readers. He is brought into a sudden awareness of some of his suppressed memories when a child laughs, and shatters his overly tragic self-image. Near the end of the book, Genet too laughs (Genet 109), and perhaps he means, through his work, to shatter the value judgments by which we try to separate ourselves from whatever we consider bad, wrong, dirty, or somehow unacceptable.

Individuals and societies form their identities through a process of forgetting that leaves them traumatized and broken. The instability posed by the abjected or

excluded remainder is due to its status as an alienated aspect of the self. Thus the abject functions as a reminder of the otherwise unconscious processes by which the self was formed, denaturalizing and calling into question this very process. Genet's work suggests that the way to cope with such trauma is to draw close to those that seem immoral, antisocial, or dangerous, and finally come to recognize ourselves in them.

According to Genet's theory, the process of abjection, whereby the body solidifies its self-image by rejecting the other, parallels the workings of social bodies as well as individuals and his description of Jews as expiatory victims is especially meaningful in light of the Nazi occupation of France that was taking place as he wrote. Since he suggests that his resulting self-image was unstable and prone to being revealed as a construction, it follows that the image of the social body, whether it be a nation, race, or religion, is also dangerously unstable, thus marking his work as a politically radical response to the spread of European fascism in his time. His work, then, may also serve as a warning about the dangers inherent in creating social outcasts, due to the internal trauma such othering can cause. At the same time, Genet shows that those same outcasts, in constantly fighting for survival, are forced to imagine new ways of being that may be able to show society a way forward through difficult times.

Genet claims that poetry emerges from "dancers, negroes, boxers, prostitutes, soldiers," whose lives, he knows, "are big with terror" (Genet 57-58). For Genet, revolutionary politics and poetry are one and the same, and he considers those who struggle in the margins of society to have the greatest potential for both

(Sandarg 273). Genet's revolutionary "poets," it should be mentioned, are not quite the same as Marx's industrial working class. Instead they would be better described as the lumpenproletariat, a class with lower status than the workers, whose ranks are comprised of vagrants and criminals.

Genet identifies with this despised class, while Fanon would suggest in his 1961 work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, that this same group possesses a directionless but powerful revolutionary potential. Fanon cautions, however, that they will "always respond to the call to revolt, but if the insurrection thinks it can afford to ignore it, then this famished underclass will pitch itself into the armed struggle and take part in the conflict, this time on the side of the oppressor" (Fanon 87). Thus he is concerned that their lack of any political awareness, when coupled with their ever-present sense of hopeless desperation, could all too easily be exploited by those in power. It should be noted that although Fanon is speaking about the Algerian revolutionary war against France, many of his readers around the world have since seen in his work the echoes of their own struggles for liberation.

Genet certainly would agree with Fanon's assessment of the radical potential of the lumpenproletariat, but his idea of poetry as a revolutionary force is one that Fanon never imagined. Of poetry, Genet writes that it "is a *vision of the world* obtained by an effort, sometimes exhausting, of the taut, buttressed will" (emphasis mine, Genet 80). In this statement, Genet suggests that the revolutionary potential that interests him is the poet's ability to imagine the world differently than it is. Unlike the cynical Fanon, however, who believed that the lumpenproletariat has to

be guided and instructed like children, Genet is much more interested in the revolutionary potential of their ideas. Thus his class of dancers, negroes, boxers, prostitutes, and soldiers do not necessarily need to rise up and overthrow their oppressors. Instead, for Genet, it is enough that they continue to simply persist in trying to imagine a better life. He considers their struggle for survival itself an ongoing creative effort to imagine new ways of being in the world, or to use his terminology: Poetry.

In the novel, Divine is not oppressed or murdered by a specific person, regime, or class, but perhaps by a general failure of imagination on the part of society as a whole. Thus a truly revolutionary struggle would seek to imagine what it would take to ensure her survival, and that of all those like her. Genet's struggle is similar, since as he writes out his novel day by day in his prison cell, he imagines ways for Divine to live within the imaginations of his readers as a fully developed and emotionally complex person. In doing so, he creates possibilities for imagining new ways of being human - ways of adapting and evolving that Weheliye would refer to as "different modalities of existence" (Weheliye 112). Such adaptations are one reason that Genet, like the poets that he writes about, has to be thought of primarily as a revolutionary thinker. All of his work is focused unswervingly on this project of envisioning new ways of being human, for the benefit of those like himself who for any number of reasons have never yet been fully included within that category.

Genet's political message has much to offer to the present day. His unique insight into the processes by which societies scapegoat and exclude out-groups

remains as relevant today as it was in his time. The rapidly ballooning wealth gap, global political instability, and the policies of mass incarceration have swelled the violent ranks of the lumpenproletariat worldwide. Now more than ever, the world needs to find creative survival strategies to address the overwhelming structural threats to the survival of humankind.

Genet's response would be to gesture to the lives of the most marginalized people in every society who have been fighting against impossible odds from his time through today. He would also suggest we look, not at their ever-present hardships, but to the ways in which they, like Divine, manage to maintain their humanity in the face of chaos. In the poetry of their ongoing struggles, perhaps we will be able to imagine new solutions to our own. It is not a question of who we are, but who we are becoming, that is at stake.

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