



“My History, Finally Invented”: *Nightwood* and Its Publics

Laura K. Wallace

ABSTRACT:

Djuna Barnes’s 1937 novel *Nightwood* has long been a mainstay of GLBTQ, lesbian, and/or queer canons, syllabi, and reading lists. This article argues that canons, syllabi, and reading lists promise readers the experience of “feeling public.” Drawing upon magazine and newspaper reviews, scholarly journal articles, memoirs, and reviews from the literary social networking site *Goodreads*, this article constructs a reception history of *Nightwood* that demonstrates that the book has been incorporated by modernist literary publics and lesbian publics into those publics’ own histories and into their members’ everyday worldmaking practices. This article compares historical and contemporary reading practices to argue that queer texts and reading practices make GLBTQ readers feel public, even in private. Queer novels performed important worldmaking work in the early 20th century, and continue to do so. Framed by affect studies, queer studies, and reception studies, the case study of *Nightwood*’s history demonstrates that categories like “queer literature” shape affective reading practices, and vice versa.

Although Djuna Barnes is hardly a household name, she is nonetheless name-checked in Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris*. Owen Wilson plays Gil, a struggling twenty-first-century writer who idolizes the Lost Generation and travels back in time to meet his heroes. In a Paris cafe, Gil dances with a tall woman. Afterward, a friend informs him that she was Barnes. “That was Djuna Barnes?” quips Gil. “No wonder she wanted to lead.”¹ This slightly funny, slightly lesbophobic allusion epitomizes the contemporary image of Barnes: first and foremost a lesbian

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(although she scorned the label), indelibly associated with 1920s Paris and its romanticized Bohemianism, yet marginal enough not to merit a speaking role (as opposed to that other famous lesbian expatriate, Gertrude Stein, portrayed by Kathy Bates). Some viewers will recognize the name and chuckle, even as it flies over others' heads. Doubtless there are those who seek out Barnes's work after seeing *Midnight in Paris*, even as the film itself gently mocks any idolatry of the Lost Generation.

Barnes's name and the neologism "Nightwood" have become shibboleths for lesbians as well as modernist disciples. Biographers Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock describe how Susan Sontag and her lover Harriet Sohmers met:

In the spring of 1949, Harriet Sohmers, then a junior at Berkeley working in a bookstore, watched as a stunning [sixteen-year-old] Susan Sontag walked in. The male staff . . . were gay. They looked at the gorgeous Susan, then they looked at Harriet and said: "Go get her." Harriet walked over to Susan, picked up a copy of *Nightwood*, and said: "Have you read this?" It was a classic lesbian pickup line that had worked on Harriet earlier at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Of course, Susan had read it. . . .²

Nightwood haunts these two women as they fall in and out of love. Describing a night out with Sohmers and her friends, teenage Sontag writes in her journal, "At one point C began to laugh and asked us if we realized what a parody of *Nightwood* this all was. . . . It was, of course, and I had, with much amusement, thought of it many times before."³ Nine years later, she quotes the novel to describe her relationship with Sohmers as it falls apart.⁴

In *Midnight in Paris*, Barnes's name carries meaning across lines of nationality and generation when a straight white male twenty-first-century American recognizes it. His knowledge marks Gil as a member of a modernist literary public that is accessible to the general public because many of its texts circulate widely and are often taught in schools. The book's very publicness smuggles it into the hands of furtive queer readers like Sontag, who might use the title to covertly announce their lesbian tendencies; who might, reading *Nightwood*, feel themselves recognized, pulled out of the closet and into literature. Although *Nightwood* feels as if it contains arcane lesbian knowledge, it is readily available in libraries and bookstores, its queerness never really a secret. The affective experience of publicness is crucial to the development of queer counterpublics, social and print networks whose covert operation over the course of the twentieth century led to shifts in popular understanding of sexuality and gender as well as GLBTQ representation and political recognition. *Nightwood* has lived intersecting lives as a modernist novel and a lesbian novel. Appeals to the cultural capital of the underappreciated classic and the

difficult work of art, and the specificity of identity-based recognition make the book feel both canonical and radical.⁵

In this article, I construct a reception history of *Nightwood* in order to describe the interplay of the forces that keep it available to readers. I begin by analyzing the genres and categories currently attached to *Nightwood*, as demonstrated by the preface and introduction bundled in the current U.S. edition of the book, and by allusions in significant texts of queer literary studies. I then stage a series of conversations between literary scholars, reviewers in the 1930s popular press, lesbian writers of the 1970s and 1980s, queer theorists of the 1990s and 2000s, and online reviewers from the early twenty-first century. I decenter academic interpretations in order to foreground the ways that non-scholarly reading practices contribute to literary circulation and canon formation. Readers in each public make sense of *Nightwood's* difficulties through the lens of that public's expectations. In modernist publics, readers reject the book's pretention or embrace its poetic experimentation. In lesbian publics, readers reject the book as pretentiously modernist or praise it for reflecting the experience of women under patriarchy and queer people navigating heteronormativity. In queer academic publics, critics often admire *Nightwood's* undecidability. In each of these publics, the readers who most appreciate *Nightwood* incorporate it into their everyday worldmaking practices, and the book shapes these readers' understanding of their position in history.

))) Feeling Public, Making Worlds

The methodology of reception study investigates how consumers incorporate cultural productions into everyday worldmaking projects. In this particular reception history, I collect public, published responses to a widely circulated book to demonstrate that reading can feel like an intimate affective encounter and shape an individual's everyday life, even as part of its affective charge comes from knowledge that the book circulates in a mass public encompassing readers far-flung in space and time. “Feeling public” is how I describe the paradoxical sense that reading is simultaneously public and private, social and individual.

In using the phrase “feeling public,” I position my work at the junction of affect studies and queer studies, riffing on the phrase “public feelings” (associated with affect studies), on Christopher Nealon's concept of “feeling historical,” and on Heather Love's idea of “feeling backward.”⁶ Public feelings defines a diffuse cluster of affect studies projects including the Public Feelings research group organized by Ann Cvetkovich at the University of Texas at Austin and Cvetkovich's book, *Depression: A Public Feeling*. By bringing together the concepts

of “public” and “feelings,” public feelings projects challenge the public/private binary that erases emotion from the public sphere.⁷ Instead, public feelings begins from feelings, “following the surfaces and textures of everyday life rather than exposing the putative realities of underlying structures.”⁸ Rather than treating affect as a symptom of politics, public feelings sees politics as bound up with affect. As Janet Staiger puts it in the introduction to the *Political Emotions* anthology that grew out of the Public Feelings research group, “Perhaps we truly encounter the political only when we feel.”⁹

The public nature of affect also grounds Nealon’s idea of “feeling historical,” which describes a model for queer identity developed in gay and lesbian cultural productions of the early twentieth century that imagined queerness as a social identity with historical roots, rather than an individual diagnosis. The affects catalyzed by such texts offer a sense of “homosexuality as a secret relation to others, rather than a gendered inversion of the self.”¹⁰ Nealon argues that the new social model for queer sexuality grew out of “an overwhelming desire to feel historical, to convert the harrowing privacy of inversion into some more encompassing narrative of collective life.”¹¹ Some readers take feeling historical and feeling public for granted. They do not crave that feeling of publicness because they are always already included in the public of most texts. GLBTQ cultural productions and reading practices seek and build social relations precisely because GLBTQ people in heteronormative culture often feel isolated and singular. GLBTQ people often grow up thinking they are the only ones, because sexuality and gender identity, unlike race or class, are not always imagined to be clearly tied to heredity or home environment. To read published texts is to enter into a relation with others like yourself, to imagine that others are reading or have read the same text, and to imagine that another produced it.

In response to Nealon’s arguments about feeling historical, Love titles her book *Feeling Backward*, where backwardness refers to feelings that do not fit into a “linear, triumphalist view of history,” like “shame, depression, and regret.”¹² Love reminds us that reaching into the past must involve “embracing loss, risking abjection” by touching unwelcoming texts and problematic historical figures without fitting them neatly into our own definitions of sexuality or proving that they share our belief systems.¹³ The secret relation among queer people is not always a safe space, nor simply a circle of recognition and affirmation. Invoking these three disparate but related concepts in affect studies and queer studies, my idea of “feeling public” draws upon the affective grounding of public feelings, the urgent sociality of “feeling historical,” and the ambivalent historicism of “feeling backward.”

Feeling public describes the affective experiences constructed by intimate publics.¹⁴ Lauren Berlant emphasizes the everyday, affective experience of

participation in intimate publics, which may not involve direct interaction with other members of those publics or even with texts themselves, but entails desire and fantasy. Participants in intimate publics reach out to texts for what Carolyn Dinshaw calls “a touch across time” and Roland Barthes calls “someone to love.”¹⁵ Rebecca Solnit articulates the central paradox of feeling public when she states that “Books are solitudes in which we meet.”¹⁶ Even though reading is a solitary activity, most often done in silence, readers feel as if they are entering into a public.

Entrance into a public presumes the existence of others in whom the reader could recognize themselves. As Berlant puts it,

What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience. A certain circularity structures an intimate public . . . expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging. . . .¹⁷

Feeling public is both reflexive and utopian: consumers identify with the experience expressed in public texts, and find their own experiences elevated by those texts. No longer are consumers’ experiences merely personal, but “their emotional lives are already shared and have already been raised to a degree of general significance. . . .”¹⁸ The intimate public, then, “is a space of mediation,” suturing individual affective experience to the social world.¹⁹ Yet the primary site for this mediation is the individual encounter with the text, which feels, for the consumer, like it opens onto a public, an open network of consumers and producers who recognize, amplify, and make meaning of the their individual life.

Expectation of a certain affective experience defines a genre and therefore in some sense defines intimate publics, but it does not determine which texts will be included in a genre or a public.²⁰ Indeed, most genres and publics include texts that do not, on their faces, fulfill their contract with that audience; yet these texts are justified or just excused because something about the texts or their authors or their reception histories suggest that they belong. Generic categorization, which can become a kind of canonization, is a worldmaking project that frames the affective experience of reading.²¹ The inclusion of difficult texts and otherwise inappropriate objects demonstrates the worldmaking power of categories like women’s culture and GLBTQ literature, because members of those publics develop reading practices and other everyday practices that go against the grain of dominant culture.²²

There is a transformative power in feeling public, even in private. Michael Warner asserts that “[a] public is poetic world-making.”²³ Feeling public makes

labels and categories feel less like the unfortunate circumstances in which you find yourself and more like an “occasion for forming publics, elaborating common worlds, making the transposition from shame to honor, from hiddenness to the exchange of viewpoints with generalized others, in such a way that the disclosure of self partakes of freedom.”²⁴ As mass culture developed through print networks, queer counterpublics made use of these networks to connect individuals. The broad distribution of print media and widespread literacy created GLBTQ networks that laid the groundwork for gay liberation movements and Internet communities that functioned less like movements or communities than like publics, connected by texts that could be picked up or put down, pored over or flipped through. The queer world created by circulating texts is defined by serendipity, guesswork, association, gossip. It’s “a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.”²⁵ Connecting to the distant past, you might feel historical; connecting to a secret network of other readers, you might, paradoxically, feel public.

))) Appeals to Reading Publics: Genres, Categories, and Paratexts

Whether it appears in a Woody Allen film or a teenager’s diary, the allusion to *Nightwood* appeals to an association with one or both of two distinct yet related publics: modernism and lesbian literature. Such categories, which are sometimes treated as genres, tell us who the public is for the text. A genre is a way of reading or framing. Berlant describes genre as “a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances.”²⁶ Merely mentioning a title or name can activate such intensities, assurances, and expectations about authorial identity, historical period, and literary style. Publishers, editors, journalists, advertisers, scholars, teachers, and online communities can reinscribe or subtly shift a book’s classification. The process is equally explicit and osmotic. In this section, I consider *Nightwood*’s current position in popular literary and queer academic publics by analyzing the introduction and preface attached to the 2006 New Directions edition of the book and by highlighting references to the novel in contemporary queer studies.

The 2006 edition of *Nightwood* begins with a preface by Jeanette Winter-son, followed by T. S. Eliot’s original 1937 introduction. The nesting of these legitimating documents reinscribes the change in image that *Nightwood* has undergone in the past seventy years. In 1937, it was vouched for by the reigning modernist poet and critic. In the twenty-first century, it is a seminal lesbian

novel, presented by one of the most respected lesbian novelists of our time, another author associated with high art, who writes what is variously called literary fiction or postmodern fiction. Winterson’s preface works not to correct Eliot’s introduction, but to corroborate it. The two pieces overlap in their insistence on *Nightwood’s* universal applicability and their assertion that it requires a careful reading practice. One wonders if Winterson’s preface was added because her endorsement might appeal to publics over whom Eliot’s name has no sway, either because they have not heard of him or because they associate him with things they have no interest in reading. As much as Winterson might wince at the thought, her name immediately suggests that the book has some sort of queer or feminist bent. Winterson voices the conventional wisdom about *Nightwood’s* underappreciated status and advocates for its artistic merit:

more people have heard about [*Nightwood*] than have read it. Reading it is mainly the preserve of academics and students. Others have a vague sense that it is a Modernist text . . . that the work is an important milestone on any map of gay literature—even though, like all the best books, its power makes nonsense of any categorization, especially of gender or sexuality.²⁷

Winterson argues that anyone who reads the book will recognize that it works beyond the expectations of either of those genres. Eliot states that to focus on the characters’ sexuality would be to “miss the point” of *Nightwood*. He does not celebrate the novel’s queerness, but warns against “regard[ing] this group of people as a horrid sideshow of freaks.”²⁸ Both Eliot and Winterson suggest that the book works as an affective experience and does not deliver a message that can be paraphrased. Eliot states that it took him many readings to “[develop] intimacy with” *Nightwood* and “come to an appreciation of its meaning as a whole,” which for him meant seeing that all the different chapters do belong in the same book, recognizing Matthew as the linchpin.²⁹ This experience leads Eliot to contend that “only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it.”³⁰ Winterson agrees that *Nightwood* forces readers to slow down, which we’re increasingly disinclined to do in a fast-paced world focused on instant gratification. Although “there is no consolation in *Nightwood*,” it is “a book for introverts, in that we are all introverts in our after-hours secrets and deepest loves.”³¹ In a sense, Eliot and Winterson argue against genre and categorization, contending that this text is beyond genre. That is, they argue against the idea that the book does or should only circulate in certain publics. Instead, they suggest that it will appeal to singular readers across publics.

Even though critics since at least the 1930s have consistently expressed qualms about lesbian or gay literature as a category, and although queer theory is loath to recognize any canon, *Nightwood* has nevertheless become part of the central

corpus of texts in which queer scholars (I use this term advisedly, encapsulating the slippage between “GLBTQ-identified scholars” and “scholars of queer studies”) are assumed to be conversant. *Nightwood* haunts major works of twenty-first-century queer literary history, a fact that reflects its canonicity and its difficulty. Christopher Nealon, in *Foundlings*, and Heather Love, in *Feeling Backward*, mention *Nightwood* in their introductions, but do not analyze it in the chapters. Nealon distinguishes his archive (the works of Willa Cather and Hart Crane, bodybuilding magazines, lesbian pulp novels) from “the emerging canon of lesbian and gay literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which thus far has been drawn primarily from cosmopolitan literatures of England and Europe, most of them in a modernist vein,” including “Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Andre Gide, Virginia Woolf, or Djuna Barnes.”³² Nealon characterizes the protagonists of these authors’ novels as “wandering cosmopolites, expatriates who traffic . . . in the language (and the narrative arc) of degeneracy. None of these decadent texts reaches toward anything like a ‘community’ that outpaces the hostile language of inversion.”³³ In describing the concept of “backward modernism” that she analyzes, Love states that

queers have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race or as individuals in a state of arrested development. Perverse, immature, sterile, and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow still recall the past. They carry with them, as Djuna Barnes writes of her somnambulist heroine Robin Vote in *Nightwood*, “the quality of the ‘way back.’”³⁴

In Love’s argument, this novel, in depicting its backward “heroine” provides evidence of the way a queer author herself depicted backward modernism in a canonical text of backward modernism.³⁵ If nothing else, these persistent references demonstrate this book’s canonicity. Along with Winterson’s introduction, Nealon’s and Love’s allusions demonstrate that, by the early 2000s, *Nightwood* was firmly ensconced in GLBTQ and/or queer canon. Even if the text itself doesn’t “reach toward” “community,” as Nealon fears, its continued circulation suggests networks of readers who find something in the book to pass on.

))) Modernist Literary Publics and *Nightwood*

Jane Marcus implies that the number of reviews of *Nightwood* in the 1930s demonstrate the book’s perceived importance in its moment, writing that “it was given the kind of press coverage which only cookbooks get today.”³⁶ Although it would be nice to think that *Nightwood* made a huge splash, archival research suggests that any book from a major publisher in the 1930s, including many that are

now forgotten, received high-quality press on both sides of the Atlantic, and that much of this attention was the result of hustling on the part of Barnes and her friends. Most critics in 1936 and 1937 see *Nightwood* as representing the worst of high modernism, criticizing its nihilism, decadence, and pretentiousness—and many of today’s readers agree. If these critics had their say, nobody in 2016 would read this book. Indeed, many books reviewed in major publications in 1937 have been forgotten. They are out of print, out of the canon, and out of circulation, whereas *Nightwood* keeps circulating as a modernist novel, because some readers agree with Eliot about the book’s poetic power, because the book is associated with Eliot’s cultural capital and reprinted by New Directions, and because some readers want a modernist novel about lesbians. In this section, I compare representative early reviews of *Nightwood* and recent *Goodreads* reviews, tracing how the book has come to represent modernism in contemporary literary publics where modernist texts still circulate. I end the section by discussing how modernist literary publics address the book’s alleged difficulty.

Early reviewers tend to agree with Winterson that “there is no consolation in *Nightwood*.” Philip Rahv’s review in the American Marxist magazine *New Masses* demonstrates how the novel has always been problematic for readers who expect an experimental novel to be politically oppositional. Rahv writes, “That ‘to think is to be sick’ . . . is the intrinsic meaning of this novel, which reads like the transcript of a nightmare.” To Rahv, *Nightwood* depicts “the shifting sands of decadence at its most absolute.”³⁷ The novel’s negative message and its unrealistic, decadent style go hand in hand for Rahv. “Decadence” ambiguously describes both a literary style associated with writers like Wilde and the idle, privileged lifestyle of Barnes’s characters. Literary and material decadence are equally undesirable in a 1930s leftist context. Judging by *New Masses*’s content and advertisements, readers’ main concerns were expected to be the Spanish Civil War effort, the rise of fascism in Europe, and economic conditions in the United States. More recent readers repeat the criticism that such a decadent novel is out of touch with real life. Sonya Feher writes on *Goodreads* in 2010 that she tried to read the book but “It didn’t work. Too white. Too privileged.”³⁸ Others share Rahv’s concern with the novel’s negativity. Dan muses on *Goodreads* in 2012: “I’m not entirely sure why this book didn’t knock my socks off, exactly. I’d say it’s the pre-occupation with existential nothingness (decidedly NOT the way I look at the world).”³⁹

Many readers have used that old chestnut “pretentious” to describe *Nightwood*. In the *Post* of London, Osbert Burdett complains that the book is “Written in pretentious and sometimes meaningless prose.”⁴⁰ To call a book pretentious is to suggest that it is clear, often from the writing itself, that its author takes it quite seriously and imagines her work as important, but the text misses the mark, and

is overly stylized with too little attention to story and meaning. To be pretentious is to be more invested in impressing the literati than in creating real art. One of the strongest arguments about *Nightwood's* pretentiousness comes from Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Van Doren in *The Nation* in 1937. Although he praises its prose, he wonders about the novel's substance: "Miss Barnes has strained rather than enriched our sensibilities. 'Nightwood' is more fascinating than interesting. . . . 'Nightwood' is mouse meat at which we nibble page after page with a special kind of joy. But great fiction is more ordinary than this, and ultimately more nourishing. Beefsteak and apple pie."⁴¹

Like many 1930s reviewers, Van Doren assures us that he does not turn his nose up at the characters' sexual orientations. Instead, his critique hinges on the idea that reading the book requires work, but doesn't reward it. Van Doren comes to *Nightwood* with the idea that good fiction offers insight. Although he devours the novel with "a special kind of joy," it is the shallow joy of "fascination" rather than a slower, less flashy "interest." Pretentiousness may be, paradoxically, what saves *Nightwood*, because it is a defining quality of a certain version of modernism.

In the 1930s, most reviewers saw *Nightwood* as a bad example of modernism. Some readers still do. A few readers of the 1930s did praise the book: following Eliot, Dylan Thomas refers to *Nightwood* in a 1937 review as "one of the three great prose books ever written by a woman" and asserts that "It isn't a lah-de-dah prose poem, because it's about what some very real human people feel, think, and do."⁴² For many readers in the 2010s, the book represents a modernist avant-garde associated with writers like Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein. In 2012, one *Goodreads* user calls *Nightwood* "queer *Ulysses*," arguing that *Nightwood* should likewise be regarded as one of the most brilliant novels of the early twentieth century.⁴³ Most readers bring a vague sense of modernism to their reading of *Nightwood*. This expectation provides a context for the book, even if that context is just an image of American writers sitting around in Paris cafes, drinking endless bottles of wine, as in *Midnight in Paris*. To some, the modernist categorization means that the novel should be good, because certain modernist values set the standard for merit in twentieth-century literary education. Rebels though they may have been, modernists are expected to appeal to a wide audience and to represent an entire period if they are to survive in twenty-first-century canon.

Nightwood's advocates have consistently described the book as forgotten, although it has been hiding in plain sight since its initial publication. In 1957, twenty years after *Nightwood's* first printing and a decade after it was rereleased, Walter Sutton introduces the novel as a "neglected masterpiece." *Nightwood* is "difficult" and "shadowy," which this writer assumes makes it all the more

appealing as an accessory denoting high-minded taste. Douglas Messerli’s 1975 bibliography demonstrates that Barnes is, in fact, being rediscovered with some regularity. However, he describes her as “a legend who is unknown.” Messerli contrasts Barnes’s early notoriety among expatriate writers with her current reception: “Janet Flanner’s 1972 assessment of Barnes as the most important woman writer in Paris in the 1920s is strangely incongruous with the fact that, even in universities, few have ever heard of Djuna Barnes or know anything of her rich career.”⁴⁴ This may be true for academic or straight readers, but the book and Barnes’s reputation regularly circulated in queer women’s networks, as evinced by Sontag and her friends in the 1940s. *Nightwood* was reprinted by New Directions, an independent publisher unusually committed to keeping books in print in visually striking, inexpensive paperback editions. Thus the book has been accessible to teachers and students, at least in a material sense. Yet the cultural capital that such labels as “forgotten” and “underappreciated” imply remains potent. By the 1970s and 1980s, canon-expanding instructors, looking for women or queer writers, knew of *Nightwood’s* reputation, and added it to syllabi. Elaine Showalter and Ron Schreiber write about teaching the novel in their respective women’s and gay literature courses in the early 1970s. Barnes biographer Phillip Herring added Barnes to his syllabus, “when, in 1988, I was looking for more novels by women for my Modernism course.”⁴⁵ In each of these cases, the book was available, already known to the teaching public as a women’s, lesbian, or modernist novel.

Readers who seek out or stumble upon *Nightwood* today tend to be aware that they are supposed to recognize difficulty as a mark of literary merit. Many readers who fail to comprehend it locate that failure in themselves rather than in Barnes, because they know “good readers” appreciate complexity. *Goodreads* user Rob writes, “There’s a lot in this book that I just completely failed to grasp, and I think I need to return to it when I’m a better reader, but even I can appreciate the beauty here.”⁴⁶ Others blame the book itself, rejecting it in similar terms to those used by reviewers in the 1930s. Philip Lane writes in a *Goodreads* review: “Well perhaps I am just an ordinary novel-reader but I just found it too difficult to enjoy. I do feel any writer needs to take the reader into consideration and I am not quite sure what is the [justification] for making meaning so obscure that only an elite group of academics or intellectuals can access it.”⁴⁷ Glosses of individual allusions only go so far; confusion often comes simply from reading a text outside its historical or geographic context. *Nightwood* certainly requires homework. It is not enough for a reader to know about Paris and Americans in 1920s. They must also recall details of fifteenth-century Roman anti-Semitism and medieval literature, read a sentence in French and German, intuitively understand Matthew’s euphemisms, and know the geographies of Paris and

Vienna. The New Directions edition, the most widely available, contains no annotations. The first bar to access for the casual reader or struggling student is to understand the literal meaning of the words on the page.

Few twenty-first-century readers concern themselves much with Barnes's allusions. Today's readers are most likely to express frustration with *Nightwood* because it is difficult to tell what is happening. Tyler, on *Goodreads* in 2009, sighs, "Problem was: too much style, not enough substance. . . . Maybe I'm just not one for oblique turns of phrase anymore (god forbid); but personally I find it comforting to know at least something of what is going on line by line."⁴⁸ Both Matthew and the narrator of *Nightwood* often assess people using curious metrics and illustrate abstract ideas with bizarre metaphors. For example, consider that famous first description of Robin Vote as "[a]n eland in a bridal veil."⁴⁹ Even if you know that an eland is an African antelope, Barnes is asking you imagine a composite image you would probably never think of otherwise. And once you have the visual image, you must take it further: what does it mean about Robin? What does it mean to be "the infected carrier of the past," and are readers supposed to think of her this way, or to judge Felix negatively for doing so?

Sometimes, even if a reader understands enough of the words on the pages, they still experience what George Steiner calls "contingent difficulty": "We have done our homework, the sinews of the poem are manifest to us; but we do not feel 'called upon,' or 'answerable to. . . .'"⁵⁰ It is intimately personal, this way texts have of interpellating readers. There is only so much work a reader can do. Wanting to understand or like a book is not enough. Every work of literature calls upon and/or is answerable to some, not all, readers, and textual difficulty is not the only factor in this failure. Assumptions about genre, period, nationality, gender, race, and sexual orientation combine with past reading experiences and readers' assumptions about themselves, both their demographic identifications and what kind of readers they imagine themselves to be, to make certain readers more open to seduction by certain texts. The context of reading changes the valence of a text: reading a text for historical literary significance can have a vastly different effect than reading for personal significance.

))) *Nightwood* as Lesbian and/or Feminist Worldmaking

As the anecdotes about Sontag in my introduction demonstrate, *Nightwood's* title quickly became a code word within lesbian counterpublics. This section examines Barnes's reception in lesbian and/or feminist publics to demonstrate that, for lesbian and feminist readers, *Nightwood* does not merely represent high modernism—along with other lesbian books, it offers recognition and

worldmaking possibility. It makes them feel public. In a period when *Nightwood* was marginalized by mainstream modernist literary publics and their academic counterparts, *Nightwood* was a core text of a secret lesbian canon.⁵¹ Novelist Bertha Harris describes how, in 1959, she shadowed Barnes around Greenwich Village, imagining that the famously reclusive author “would stop and take my hand to thank me for all the flowers I daily stuffed in her mailbox in Patchin Place and then tell me how it was to be a dyke in Paris in the Twenties.”⁵² Reading lesbian writers was, for Harris, “read[ing] my censored history,” discovering “our family bloodline . . . these women our fathers stole from us.”⁵³ Elizabeth A. Meese registers the rush of recognition in the text, although she initially bristles at its alienating style:

How could [radical lesbian writers] admire such a throwback to masculinist, repressive, negative images of lesbians . . . ? When I first read *Nightwood*, I was a lesbian without knowing it. But I recognized a world in it—a scene over the edge, the night world of the different, my world. I wonder if a lesbian exists who didn’t, at one time or another, begin here.⁵⁴

Meese emphasizes central place in lesbian canon.

As feminist and gay liberation movements grew, women began to imagine themselves as part of a women’s and/or lesbian public with a culture distinct from heteronormative, male-dominated media and history, which had not only marginalized but erased women writers, lesbians in particular. Women hungered to feel public, instead of feeling pathological. They cobbled together secret canons through friends’ recommendations and through their own detective work. Lee Lynch remembers her adolescent practice of looking for women writers with unusual or masculine names, assuming this might indicate lesbianism—a practice that led her to Radclyffe Hall and Barnes. Meese emphasizes the constructed nature of such canons when she writes, “I need a long catalogue of women’s names. . . . My history, finally invented. A lesbian genealogy.”⁵⁵ By the early 1970s, secret canons began to be institutionalized and commercialized, as women’s studies and women’s literature courses became more common, and feminist bookstores appeared in U.S. cities. Even if it was not what they expected, classic lesbian books represented something important to young mid-twentieth-century lesbian writers like Lynch, Meese, and Harris. Lynch explains why *Nightwood* is important to her, even if it is not her story: “Although her lesbians were remote to me . . . Barnes’s writing was brilliant. If I couldn’t imagine knowing her characters, or creating a world like hers . . . I could at least dream . . . of writing as poetically.”⁵⁶ Because of their shared identity, Lynch sees herself in literary history. Harris expresses a similar sense of history. Although she acknowledges the same class issues that Lynch registers, her utopian sense of common

lesbian identity also overrides any distinction of class or nation, valuing lesbian modernists “despite all material difference between us,” recognizing lesbians as women whose “father’s nationality [is] in effect wiped out by the more profound nationality of their lesbianism.”⁵⁷ The sense of publicness that these texts offer underscores the historic erasure of women authors. Meese, Harris, and Lynch each describe an unmistakable sense of recognition found in the pages of *Nightwood*, and they unequivocally classify Barnes’s novel as lesbian literature, based on their understanding of Barnes’s identity and the novel’s depiction of lesbian desire, love, and angst.

Like Meese, Lynch, and Harris, many readers imagine *Nightwood* as a document revealing not only the world of 1920s and 1930s lesbian life in Paris, but transhistorical lesbian experience. Some contend that the novel’s lesbian content provides a key to interpreting its difficulties. Annette Kolodny argues that *Nightwood* should be considered a seminal feminist novel because its defamiliarizing prose presages similar confusion in novels by Margaret Atwood and others. Kolodny writes that, “ironically” *Nightwood* “places its readers in precisely that situation in which the main characters of more recent women’s fiction find themselves: . . . embroiled in the hopeless task of trying to decode or decipher a strange and incomprehensible reality.”⁵⁸ Some of today’s readers account for Barnes’s difficulties in a similar way: Keith Michael writes in his 2010 *Goodreads* review that

[T]he novel builds up this oppressive atmosphere where men are omnipresent . . . all of this creates a deafening noise around Nora & Robin’s relationship . . . Barnes keeps the reader off-balance throughout . . . in every positive sense, this is certainly a woman’s text; it completely lacks the linearity and rationalism and aggression of a man’s approach to writing.⁵⁹

For both these readers, the opacity and negativity of *Nightwood* make it effective feminist fiction.

Some mid-century feminist critics, however, reject *Nightwood* because of the same qualities. Although they mention the novel in their surveys of lesbian representations and women writers, respectively, Jane Rule and Ellen Moers decree the book “pretentious and embarrassing” and “no longer . . . so impressive a work.”⁶⁰ Rule registers the “decadence” issue, at once activating its class and generic connotations in order to argue that *Nightwood* is irrelevant to contemporary lesbian readers: “There is no mystery about why it should have found acceptance, for its decadent elegance removes it far from ordinary experience.”⁶¹ Rule and Moers recognize *Nightwood* as significant in its moment, but they do not see a place for it in present-day canon construction projects. For Moers and Rule, *Nightwood* is not a representative, but an outlier. Both include it because

of its entrenched place in lesbian canon, but dismiss it, suggesting that it has been superseded by more positive representations. Lillian Faderman writes in a 1981 history of lesbian literature that *Nightwood* reinscribes outdated stereotypes: “The nineteenth-century views of lesbian narcissism and frustration are delivered up whole here.”⁶² Faderman includes a long excerpt from *Nightwood* in her exhaustive 1994 anthology *Chloe Plus Olivia*. The book is divided into thematic sections organized to tell a teleological narrative about how Western society has moved from discourses of romantic friendship and inversion to the lesbian literary “Flowerings” of the present. Faderman places Barnes in the middle, in the “Carnivorous Flowers” section, which she defines as “the literature of exotic and evil lesbians,” texts in which “inevitably, the lesbian’s wicked ways destroy not only others but herself also.”⁶³ Like Moers and Rule, Faderman includes *Nightwood* in her canon as a cautionary tale, evidence of inaccurate representation that is finally being redressed. The question of accurate representation is, for many readers, the primary factor in deciding whether *Nightwood* is a bad memory to get beyond, or an important text to keep on the lesbian bookshelf.

For others, the latent political potential of the text is of paramount importance. The fact that Barnes is a woman writer leads many to fold her into feminism, to the degree that Henry Raymond can casually refer to Barnes in the *New York Times* in 1971 as “an author who was a feminist and a rebel against Puritanism before Kate Millett and Germaine Greer were born.”⁶⁴ Raymond may be referring to Barnes’s journalism more than her fiction. However, for feminist critics, it was imperative that her most famous work be read as foregrounding issues of gender and sexuality. “Lesbian” and “queer” are, for these critics, labels that describes oppositional political positions, not just the sexual and emotional happenstance of loving other women. Barnes herself might have identified with this latter category. Although she was open about her relationships with women and her place in Natalie Barney’s social circle in Paris, and her most famous works reflect this comfort, Barnes refused to label herself, famously stating, “I am not a lesbian, I just loved Thelma.”⁶⁵ This line is quoted in nearly every piece of scholarship written about Barnes since the 1990s, whether critics deploy it as an expression of Barnes’s repression and shame or of her radical queerness and refusal to accept identity categories. In her letters to Charles Henri Ford in the mid-1930s, Barnes worries that her drafts of *Nightwood* are too “invert” for a major publisher, but shows no intention of censoring the text. After the book’s publication, she writes to Lady Ottoline Morrell: “I was not offended in the least to be thought lesbian—it’s simply that I am very reticent about my personal life.”⁶⁶ *Nightwood* is not so reticent: the book explicitly details relationships between women, and “the invert” is discussed, by name, throughout. Although its author may have been private, the novel is public.

Lesbian and feminist readers continue to claim Barnes, even if Barnes might not have wanted to be claimed by them. As Love writes of Willa Cather, “she is ‘one of ours’ but she is not our own.”⁶⁷ For readers like Lynch and Harris, *Nightwood’s* existence proves that they are not crazy or sick. It makes them feel public. Validation originates in the reader’s need as much as in the text itself. Texts call out to readers, but readers also call out to texts. It is significant that Sontag, Meese, Harris, and Lynch consider *Nightwood* as part of their personal canons. Each read the novel when she was fairly young, and had read few, if any, other lesbian novels. None of these lesbian readers encountered the novel in a classroom or as part of a scholarly project, though Meese’s and Lynch’s responses are published in scholarly contexts, as is Kolodny’s feminist reading. By contrast, because of the bibliographic function of their projects, which are aimed at nonscholarly readers, Rule, Moers, and Faderman must justify why readers should spend their own time on these books, which may be difficult to do with *Nightwood*, even if one personally appreciates it.

))) *Nightwood*, Queer Theory, and Academic Publics

Erin Rand rightly observes that although scholars since the early 1990s have “participate[d] in the constitution of queer theory and lesbian and gay studies as two separate fields,” such differentiations, often phrased in chronological terms like “waves” or “phases,” “belie the fact that ‘gay studies’ was certainly not a well-developed or highly institutionalized discipline when queer theory first appeared on the scene in 1990.”⁶⁸ Thus, it is not my aim to suggest, by my section breaks and the ordering of the sections, that queer readings of *Nightwood* superseded lesbian ones. Such a distinction might entail an argument that lesbian readings focus on personal recognition, seeking a transhistorical lesbian experience, whereas queer theoretical readings focus on language and dismiss personal responses. But in practice, there is not a clear distinction between these reading practices, and they often work together. For example, Meese, whose work belongs just as much in this section as in the previous one, performs queer theoretical analyses that not only draw upon, but foreground her embodied experience as a lesbian reader. This section is framed by brief analyses of two articles by Teresa de Lauretis that both address *Nightwood*, the first in 1988 and the second in 2008. It would be easy to argue that the 1988 piece is a lesbian reading, concerned with representation of lesbians, the 2008 a queer one, concerned with difference and sexuality more abstractly. However, in the second article, de Lauretis foregrounds her reading experience—though not her lesbian identity *per se*—to address the failures of her previous readings.⁶⁹ With this move,

de Lauretis queers academic style by performing vulnerability, a move associated with more popular forms of feminist and queer writing.⁷⁰ Between my analyses of the two pieces by de Lauretis, I analyze two other influential examples of 1990s poststructuralist and psychoanalytic readings of *Nightwood* by Jane Marcus and Judith Lee. Both circulate in an academic public that includes lesbian and feminist readers like those in my previous section, but does not foreground individual recognition.

De Lauretis, Marcus, and Lee each argue that to read this novel, in particular, is to recognize how reading fiction unhinges identity. In her 1988 article, “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” de Lauretis argues that *Nightwood* stages the problem of lesbian representation. It is Barnes’s howl of “resistance to what *Nightwood* both thematizes and demonstrates, the failure of language to represent, grasp, convey her subjects.”⁷¹ According to de Lauretis, Barnes uses language to show that language is inadequate to describe the previously untold tale of lesbian desire and reveals the failures of language to represent more generally. For de Lauretis, *Nightwood*’s stylistic strangeness is a response to a repressive context, an idea that echoes Kolodny’s characterization of the novel’s disorienting style as feminist. Even if Barnes considered her work of a piece with Eliot or Joyce, her identity markers and those of her characters position them as marginal to patriarchy and heteronormativity. For readers approaching it with this frame, there is much in the text to support the reading that *Nightwood* dramatizes the failures of hegemonic discourse to account for non-normative subjects. After all, it begins with Felix, grappling with his Jewishness, and ends in Nora’s atavistic communion with her dog in the chapel. When Matthew describes lovers who, like Nora, wait for their beloved at night, he says “they begin to have an unrecorded look,” connecting “night” to non-normativity in general and queer love in particular.⁷²

Like de Lauretis, Marcus and Lee argue that Barnes foregrounds difference, although they take this premise in divergent directions, neither focused directly on queer sexuality. Instead, reflecting the concerns of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, they foreground difference more generally. These two articles represent the most in-depth analyses of *Nightwood* included in Broe’s *Silence and Power* anthology, which set the tone for the re-evaluation of Barnes in the 1990s. In “Laughing at Leviticus,” Marcus reads *Nightwood* as an antifascist text. For Marcus, *Nightwood* is not only or even primarily a lesbian text. She argues that *Nightwood* draws on the French tradition of carnivalesque literature. Marcus focuses on the image of the tattooed black circus performer Nikka as an image of Barnes’s criticism of Levitical prohibitions against writing on the body, which prohibitions she sees as a form of gender policing. In its radical hybridity exemplified by Nikka, *Nightwood* challenges Leviticus and, in doing so, challenges

the ethics of separation at the heart of Hitler's fascism. Marcus synthesizes this critique with Barnes's parody of psychoanalysis to contend that *Nightwood* levels a charge against all normalizing forces and concludes that, "*Nightwood* reminds us that the human condition is a sister- and brotherhood of difference, and that ideologies that seek to erase those differences and define only themselves as human are indescribably dangerous."⁷³

Lee likewise focuses on difference. In "The Sweetest Lie," she argues that *Nightwood* "exposes the inadequacy of our cultural myths" by troubling the (Freudian) narrative of sexual difference as the fundamental experience of difference.⁷⁴ Barnes deconstructs sexual difference, Lee contends, "because it does not define the most fundamental experience of difference: the difference between the identity one imagines (the self as Subject) and the identity one experiences in relationship with someone else (the self as Other)," which she says Barnes defines as both mother/child and the relationship between lovers.⁷⁵ Unlike both psychoanalysis and assimilationist minority literatures, *Nightwood* describes the struggle not "to overcome difference to the struggle to establish difference."⁷⁶ Although Lee sees promise in this trajectory, she is not satisfied by the novel's conclusion. It ends "with Robin's silence replacing Matthew's speech and her lack of differentiation prevailing despite his experience of separation" and so, according to Lee, *Nightwood* "remains a virtuoso performance that denies, in the end, the possibility of giving voice to (feminine) silence."⁷⁷ Lee argues that that the novel's difficulty draws attention to that performance itself, as the text refuses to provide a model for political change, utopian romance, or self-actualization.

Twenty years after "Sexual Indifference," de Lauretis returns to *Nightwood* to similarly advocate the queer reading practice it requires. In "*Nightwood* and the Terror of Uncertain Signs," she is forthcoming about her own resistance to the book:

I approached this text several times over the years, but it was not until I read Barthes that I understood why I could not go on reading *Nightwood* . . . ; the chain of signifiers would not . . . find a resting point where meaning could temporarily congeal. And it was not until I read de Man that I could let myself sustain the traumatic process of misreading—not looking for the plot . . . but going instead with the figural movement of the text and acquiescing to the otherness in it, the "inhuman" element in language.⁷⁸

De Lauretis finds language to describe *Nightwood's* images in poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, contending that both "night" and Robin represent not a specific kind of sexuality, but sexuality as a drive, a "traumatic, unmanageable excess of affect leading to abject degradation."⁷⁹ De Lauretis uses similar diction to describe her experience reading *Nightwood*. This chaotic center necessitates

the novel’s impenetrable, meandering style. It can only circle around and stab at its meaning. De Lauretis focuses on the moments where Robin interacts with animals, which are “expressive less of conscious emotions than of intensities of affect . . . entirely outside the symbolic and imaginary registers.”⁸⁰ Why does the lioness cause Robin to leave the circus with Nora? What is going on with the dog in the final scene? These are questions that cannot be answered in words. Although some would argue that the novel has its own symbolic language, for de Lauretis, it is a series of intentionally disconnected, diffuse images that do not cohere, that have no internal logic but deploy a similar charge. Reading in this way, de Lauretis mimics Nora’s “reading” of the opera in *Nightwood*: “in her eyes . . . that mirrorless look of polished metals which report *not so much the object as the movement of the object*” (emphasis added).⁸¹ De Lauretis outlines a productively idiosyncratic reading practice that accounts for the peculiar structure and difficulty of Barnes’s text, a difficulty most critics elide. In order to read the novel, de Lauretis must relinquish her expectations for lesbian texts and her image of herself as a good reader who can master any text. She must reveal to the readers of *Critical Inquiry* some anxieties that underlie her earlier published criticism on *Nightwood*. She must surrender to “traumatic misreading.”

))) Conclusion: “One of ours, but not our own”

As I construct the history of *Nightwood*’s canonical status and generic associations, I collect traces that reveal the ways this book has been used in everyday practices of worldmaking. It is part of a modernist canon that shapes how twenty-first-century writers and artists understand literary history and their position in it; part of a secret canon through which lesbian readers construct their identities and histories; a resource for academic canon expansion projects; a catalyst for a queer reading practice for scholars like de Lauretis and for non-scholarly readers. *Nightwood* has remained in circulation because it has long been recognized to appeal to the demands of modernist cultural capital and GLBTQ recognition, of canonical periodizing and canon expansion. Brought into the canon for her association with Eliot and modernist Paris, Barnes is one of the only women or GLBTQ authors included in many iterations of American modernist canon. *Nightwood* offers many of the “assurances and intensities” expected of a modernist novel (Parisian setting, stylistic strangeness, fragmentation) and a lesbian or queer novel (woman writer, romantic relationships between women, dialogue about sexuality and gender). *Nightwood* is a novel capable of jumping genres from conventional modernism to radical queer fiction.

Literary categorizations can activate or limit queer reading practices. For example, neither readers in modernist literary publics nor readers in lesbian publics understand or enjoy *Nightwood* if their expectations are too rigid. For those who love the book, it exceeds categorical expectations, plugging the reader in to the expansive possibilities of that particular public and history, rather than just reflecting back the modernism or lesbianism they expect to find. *Nightwood's* excessive speech ends in an untranslatable moment of nonverbal communication, illustrating the limits of language even as it relies on language as a medium. It demands a subjective, experiential reading practice. People who love *Nightwood* love this about it. See these *Goodreads* users: "It's modernist, it's insane, it's poetic . . . it's elusive. This book, a cult classic of modernist and lesbian literature, defies categorization. The characters seem to be nothing more than hallucinations, and yet they are somehow very real, very believable. It's mysterious. You should read it"; "I'd say don't force it if you don't like it; when NIGHTWOOD is ready to be of use to you in your own life's narrative, it will make itself very clear. And if not, that's obviously OK, too."⁸² These readers, along with professional writers like Harris and scholars like de Lauretis, demonstrate that, to many (perhaps most) readers, a book's greatness inheres in its applicability to their own lives, in the aesthetic and affective pleasures and intensities it provides, which have everything to do with identity politics and historical context. Even when readers admit to not understanding, sometimes they still feel attached. These readers experience the pull and the promise of feeling public.

NOTES

1. Woody Allen (dir.), *Midnight in Paris* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2011).
2. Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock, *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon* (New York: Norton, 2000), 27.
3. Susan Sontag, *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks 1947–1963*, ed. David Rieff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 32.
4. *Ibid.*, 189, 191–92.
5. My use of the word "recognition" is heavily influenced by Rita Felski's discussion of the concept in *The Uses of Literature* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2008), 23–50.
6. Other texts that have shaped my thinking on this topic include works from affect studies, queer studies, and reception studies, notably Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); Roland Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*. Trans. Richard Miller (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*:

- Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” *College English* 34, no. 1 (1972): 18–30; Barbara Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” *Conditions* 1, no. 2 (1977): 25–44; and Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
7. The investments and theories behind the Public Feelings projects are explained in detail in Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 1–10; and in Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds, ed., *Political Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1–17.
 8. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 5.
 9. Staiger et al., *Political Emotion*, 4.
 10. Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 177.
 11. *Ibid.*, 8.
 12. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3, 8.
 13. *Ibid.*, 30.
 14. Berlant develops the concept of intimate publics to differentiate these publics from counterpublics, which are “saturated by the taxonomies of the political.” Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 8.
 15. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 21; Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, 9.
 16. Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 2013), 54.
 17. Berlant, *Female Complaint*, viii.
 18. *Ibid.*, ix.
 19. *Ibid.*, viii.
 20. In a recent article on Berlant, Virginia Jackson defines the contemporary understanding of genres as “modes of recognition—complex forms instantiated in popular discourse, relying on what we could or would recognize *collectively, in common*—and so subject to historical change and cultural negotiation.” Virginia Jackson, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 12, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/function-criticism-present-time/>.

21. Kristen Hogan describes how building a “feminist bookshelf” has functioned as a utopian project. Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
22. My thinking here draws from Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, and Radway, *Reading the Romance*.
23. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 114.
24. *Ibid.*, 61.
25. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” in *Publics and Counterpublics* ed. Michael Warner (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 187–208. First published in *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 198.
26. Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 4.
27. Jeanette Winterson, preface to *Nightwood*, by Djuna Barnes (New York: New Directions, 2006), ix.
28. T. S. Eliot, introduction to *Nightwood*, by Djuna Barnes (New York: New Directions, 2006), xxii.
29. *Ibid.*, xvii.
30. *Ibid.*, xvii–xviii.
31. Winterson, preface, xvi, xv.
32. Nealon, *Foundlings*, 9.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Love, *Feeling Backward*, 6.
35. Nealon and Love disagree in passing about who the “heroine” of *Nightwood* is: Love, as I quote here, says it is Robin, Nealon says it is Nora.
36. Jane Marcus, “Mousemeat: Contemporary Reviews of *Nightwood*,” in *Silence and Power: A Reevaluation of Djuna Barnes*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 195.
37. Philip Rahv, “The Taste of Nothing,” review of *Nightwood*, *New Masses* 23, no. 7 (4 May 1937): 32.
38. Sonya Feher, review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, January 13, 2010, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/84922816>.
39. Dan, review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, February 1, 2012, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/268345748>.
40. Osbert Burdett, review of *Nightwood*, *The Post* (London), November 3, 1936, quoted in Marcus, “Mousemeat,” 196.
41. Mark Van Doren, review of *Nightwood*, *The Nation*, April 3, 1937, quoted in Marcus, “Mousemeat,” 199.
42. Dylan Thomas, review of *Nightwood*, *Light and Dark*, March 1937, quoted in Marcus, “Mousemeat,” 199–200.
43. Richard Reviles Censorship Always in All Ways, review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, February 19, 2012, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/280568845>.
44. Douglas Messerli, *Djuna Barnes: A Bibliography* (New York: David Lewis Inc., 1975), xiv.

45. Phillip Herring, *Djuna: The Life and Work of Djuna Barnes* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1995), xv.
46. Rob, review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, May 3, 2011, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/165043067>.
47. Philip Lane, review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, January 11, 2012, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/257747883>.
48. Tyler, review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, March 20, 2009, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/49894195>.
49. Barnes, *Nightwood*, 41.
50. George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 29.
51. The idea of secret canon comes from conversations in Dayna Tortorici, ed., *No Regrets: Three Discussions* (n + 1, 2013). In that book, Carla Blumenkranz says, “Whenever you’re put in a university or even just in a group of people, there’s always a secret canon that everyone’s referring to. . . . It’s just a reference point. There’s a collection of books that will tell you so much about the microculture you’re in, and that’s the secret canon.”
52. Bertha Harris, “The More Profound Nationality of Their Lesbianism: Lesbian Society in Paris in the 1920’s” in *Amazon Expedition: A Lesbian Feminist Anthology*, ed. Phyllis Birkby et al. (Washington, NJ: Times Change Press, 1973), 77.
53. *Ibid.*, 78–79.
54. Elizabeth A. Meese, *(Sem)erotics: Theorizing Lesbian: Writing* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 46.
55. *Ibid.*, 46.
56. Lee Lynch, “Cruising the Libraries,” in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 45.
57. Harris, “More Profound Nationality,” 78–79.
58. Annette Kolodny, “Some Notes on Defining a ‘Feminist Literary Criticism,’” *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1975), 82.
59. Keith Michael, review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, August 30, 2010, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/109026816>.
60. Jane Rule, *Lesbian Images* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 192; Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (1963; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 108.
61. Rule, *Lesbian Images*, 191.
62. Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 364, quoted in Meese, *(Sem)erotics*, 44.
63. Lillian Faderman, introduction to *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, ed. Lillian Faderman (New York: Viking, 1994), xiii, 297.
64. Henry Raymond, “From the Avant-Garde of the Thirties, Djuna Barnes,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1971, 24.

65. Djuna Barnes, quoted in Susana S. Martins, "Gender Trouble and Lesbian Desire in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 20, no. 3 (1999): 108.
66. Djuna Barnes, letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, November 12, 1936, box 2, folder 1, Ottoline Morrell Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.
67. Love, *Feeling Backward*, 25.
68. Erin Rand, *Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance* (University of Alabama Press, 2014), 41.
69. De Lauretis will revise her reading of *Nightwood* yet again in 2011, when she acknowledges that "My own psychoanalytic-literary reading of the novel did not specifically address its place in a possible archive of queer literary writing" and argues that *Nightwood* is a queer text that "carries the inscription of sexuality as something more than sex." Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future," *GLQ* 17, nos. 2–3 (2011): 243–63.
70. De Lauretis emphasizes the centrality of feminism to queer theory in a 1991 essay that is widely regarded to contain the first published use of the term "queer theory." Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory, Lesbian and Gay Studies: An Introduction," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* vol. 3, no. 2 (1991): iii–xviii.
71. Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 2 (May 1988): 160.
72. Barnes, *Nightwood*, 101.
73. Jane Marcus, "Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman's Circus Epic," in Broe, *Silence and Power*, 250.
74. Judith Lee, "*Nightwood*: The Sweetest Lie," in Broe, *Silence and Power*, 208.
75. *Ibid.*
76. *Ibid.*, 212.
77. *Ibid.*, 218.
78. Teresa de Lauretis, "*Nightwood* and the 'Terror of Uncertain Signs,'" *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008): 118.
79. de Lauretis, "*Nightwood* and the Terror," 120.
80. *Ibid.*, 126.
81. Barnes, *Nightwood*, 57.
82. Abby, review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, September 21, 2014, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/207154188>; Elizabeth Watson, review of *Nightwood*, *Goodreads*, January 19, 2012, <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/264388386>.

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Laura K. Wallace, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research and teaching interests include twentieth-century U.S. fiction and film, queer studies, and reception studies.