“You Can’t Be An Idealist”
Prefigurative Institutions in Gay and Lesbian Politics Around 1980

There isn’t really a choice at all. The issue has been raised, as they say, by events themselves; the question is not if, but how to question power. And it’s such a large problem! – because it involves so many aspects of everyday life that we have scarcely begun to think about in this way… Yet if a person were to ask me, I would always claim there are reasons enough to hope, if we only see what is actually happening around us. Why not look at the kinds of language that articulate goals of community? — examples of imagination that narrate us toward the new.

– Bruce Boone, *Century of Clouds* (14–15)

While Bruce Boone’s name may be unfamiliar to most political theorists today, his work – and the larger New Narrative movement of which he was a founding member – have been subjects of new academic interest in recent years.¹ This interest has focused on the years from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, during which Boone was quite productive: he translated Lyotard and Bataille; he produced a number of contributions to overlapping debates in literary, Marxist, political, and aesthetic theory; he issued programatic political statements; he organized important conferences that brought together diverse communities. His overlapping concerns are best exemplified in *Century of Clouds*, a stylized (mostly) non-fiction narrative centered around events at “the first Summer Institute of the Marxist Literary Group of the MLA, during the summer of 1977.”² The MLG Summer Institute is, in many ways, like many other summer academic retreats, conferences, and workshops. About 40 people spend three weeks together, present papers, discuss, dine, stroll, dine, watch movies, discuss, and so on. *Century*’s narrator is not above indulging the book’s readers in funny anecdotes, campy asides, or even gossipy details about Fredric Jameson and other Institute attendees; but these more strictly entertaining elements of Boone’s style are combined with frequent digressions into metacommentary that situate the story – and Boone’s way of telling it – historically and theoretically.³ The book turns, to a significant degree, on the story Boone tells of two interventions he makes to name and interrupt the everyday structural forms of sexism and homophobia he encountered – to his shock! – at this “conference of committed socialists” (CC 77). Boone’s interventions at the Summer Institute are a central example of one of his story’s recurring topics: “the many difficulties of building counter-hegemonic institutions” (CC 5).

¹ See especially From *Our Hearts to Yours: On New Narrative as Contemporary Practice*.

² “GLPP,” 59. In terms of contemporary work, I would say Century’s form is closest to the neighborhood of something like Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*. In terms of more historically proximate work that might be better known today, Boone’s style could also be compared to the writing of Chris Kraus and Kathy Acker.

³ Boone’s theoretical and critical work can be read as further theorizing and historicizing the linkages between him and these aesthetic decisions.
In this paper, I use Boone’s work to begin to show the way radical lesbian and gay movements in the late 1970s pushed and expanded leftist assumptions about just what a “counter-hegemonic” institution might look like or how it might function. I organize these contributions through the concept of “preffigurative institutions.” Boone highlights how existing institutions serve as sites of organizing communities that, through their very shortcomings, provide a foretaste – a prefiguration – of more radical possibilities.

As his interest in “counter-hegemonic institutions” might already signal, Boone is unambiguous about his socialist commitments, and he’s interested in the Communist Party as classically conceived, and in a broader tradition of left political organization reaching back to at least the Paris Commune. Near the very beginning of the book, Boone introduces “the problem of counter-hegemonic institutions” by relating a conversation he has with his friend David. The discussion is informed by David’s first hand experience with “the practice of the Italian and French parties“ (Boone, Century 5). In this conversation, thinking about “the many difficulties of building counter-hegemonic institutions” thus centrally includes thinking about the problem of building something like what Boone calls “the culture of a party.”

Given Boone’s interest in the Communist Party, I use Jodi Dean’s recent Crowd and Party as my leading point of comparison to help me introduce and draw out the significance of Boone’s approach. While Dean is clear that the party “is not, cannot be, and should not be believed to be infallible” (250), Boone gives greater emphasis to the insufficiency of the Party – indeed, of all existing institutional forms. For Boone, this insufficiency is not the result of some generic dissatisfaction with authority, it does it suggest rejecting institutionalization, nor even does it reflect a belief that the Party is particularly outmoded, passé, or irrelevant. It’s about the state of the world. Rather than signaling a kind of defeatism, Boone’s focus on the radical potential of the insufficient. The problem isn’t that Dean talks about the Party, but in focusing so exclusively on the party, Dean risks overlooking the many other institutions which can inform – and ultimately reshape – its approach to organizing and concentrating political force. I use the concept of “preffiguration” to understand this surprising relationship between institutions.

The paper’s first section is clarifies the period and subjects my paper is concerned with. The next two sections elaborate the paper’s central concept – “preffigurative

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4 While Boone notes the “obvious distortions” of this name for the problem, his reservations likely have more to do with the concept of "culture" than with any simple squeamishness about communism and/or parties. Another CP affiliated figure Boone writes favorably of is Jessica Mitford, member of CPUSA, who wrote “an account of her life in the Party in the ’50s and early 60s” recommended by his friend David.
institutions” – through a reading of Boone’s work. The paper’s fourth section cautions against reading too strong a conception of unity into the forms of institutional practice I identify. In my brief conclusion, I make an initial attempt to further develop the concept of “prefigurative institutions” by connecting it to Susan Leigh Star’s concept of lesbian feminism around 1980 as a “method of multiplicity.”

“Gay and Lesbian... Around 1980”

In addition to drawing on Dean’s work, I will here make some initial attempts to situate Boone’s argument in the broader context from which it emerged, as suggested by my subtitle: “Prefigurative Institutions in Gay and Lesbian Politics Around 1980.” This essay aims to contribute to more precise genealogies of the concrete forms of political work done around and through gender and sexual politics in this period, in order to draw out their more general relevance. My effort builds on reassessments of late 20th century feminist and gay politics published over the last several years. In particular, I draw inspiration from Emily Hobson’s remarkable Lavender and Red (2016). Following Hobson, I’m here tracing “the day-to-day, month-to-month, and year-to-year work of movement building” performed by the gay and lesbian left in these understudied years.

Before proceeding, though, I should make two things about my subtitle clear.

The first concerns periodization. As I use it here, “around 1980” does not primarily mean “in the 1980s.” The story of 1980s gay and lesbian activism has been amply and ably told. Many scholars, even those working outside queer politics, have ready to hand a collection of anecdotes about the AIDS organizing that came to dominate the decade. Instead of indicating a focus on the 1980s as a whole, though, I mean “around 1980” as a quick shorthand way to refer to a slightly different period. 1980 itself – the year Boone’s Century of Clouds came out, the year the UK gay socialist journal Gay Left closed down – is fulcrum and focus of this paper; the years of Harriet Desmoines and Catherine Nicholson’s founding editorship of the lesbian feminist journal Sinister Wisdom – 1976 to 1981 – provides bookends between which I organize the larger argument of which this paper is a part.

In terms of broader historical trends, one way to describe this period is as a ringing of

5 In particular, see two important works focused “around 1970”: Victoria Hessford’s Feeling Women’s Liberation and Sharon Hayes’s experimental documentary Gay Power. More broadly, I take inspiration from a number of other scholars who have been working to put 20th Century social movements in the context of wide ranging transformations in organization of life and in relation to cultural life, of which a list, however idiosyncratic, might be: Wynter, Sedgwick, R. Ferguson, Kelley, Hanchard, Zerilli, Beltrán, Weeks, Sparks.
bells, announcing an overlapping series of fundamental transformations to the form and organization of capitalism – globalization, postfordism, neoliberalism – in the process of making their first wide release debut. However, these transformations themselves cannot be neatly separated from the organization of sex, sexuality, and gender, nor can those categories be understood apart from other ways of stratifying human difference, especially race and class; put differently, one cannot tell the story of neoliberalism without telling the stories of its sexual politics, and sexual politics itself must be understood in terms of a complex site of diverse intersections. The periodization of capitalism thus takes shape in relation to the periodization of sexual politics, and the periodization of sexual politics is part of my motive for focusing on the years “around 1980.”

The period 1976 to 1981 occurs in the heart of what Marc Stein, in *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (2012), identifies as “The Era of Conservative Backlash.” The unique character of the period, and my reason for choosing the years 1976 and 1981 as bookends, might also be captured by putting it in constellation with news stories from either side of it.

In December 1976, Metro-Dade County Commissioner Ruth Shack introduced an ordinance barring discrimination based on “affectional or sexual preferences” in housing, employment, and public accommodations. “Metro to Examine Gay Bias Law,” reads the December 7th 1976 headline in *The Miami Herald*. The title of the news story is unassuming, but the backlash spawned by the ordinance, crystalized in Anita Bryant’s *Save our Children* campaign, would be a constant point of reference for activists in the years ahead. That is, Bryant’s campaign was almost immediately held up as a symbol of what Stein retrospectively summarizes as the tenor of the time: “the rise of the New Right and Christian Right, their acquisition of significant government power, and the rightward shift in national politics.” Shack’s ordinance, and the “Dade County Coalition for the Humanistic Rights of Gays” that supported it, might themselves be thought to represent what Stein describes as “the movement’s dominant tendencies in this era” – those tendencies were “liberal and reformist, as they had been before the heyday of gay liberation and radical lesbian feminism” (115).

Five years after Shack introduced her anti-discrimination ordinance, another small story appeared in the nation’s newspapers: “Rare Cancer seen in 41 Homosexuals,” read the unassuming July 3rd, 1981 headline in the *New York Times*. Within a few short years, AIDS would help reconfigure the priorities of gay and lesbian communities, kill many of their luminaries, and forge new coalitions.

Of course, my drawing of this constellation is retrospective and partial, and shouldn’t

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6 See, for example, Crenshaw; Sedgwick; R. Ferguson; A. Rich; Ngai.
be taken as a map of causality: Desmoines and Nicholson didn’t start _Sinister Wisdom_ because of events in Florida, and didn’t hand off the editorial reigns because of the looming AIDS crisis. But these bookends help define a period, in Stein’s words, of “formidable new obstacles.” In his 1979 essay “Gay Language as Political Praxis,” published in the first issue of _Social Text_, Boone himself placed the antigay ordinance passed in Florida as a result of Bryant’s campaign alongside a similar law in Oregon, together with “attacks on ERA and the women’s movement in general,” in a chain of events that “have gathered momentum and reached a focal point in what might be called the rise of a new fascism” (59).

In taking a closer look at this period – after the initial bursts of gay liberation at the end of the 1960s, but before the fully developed AIDS crisis of the later 1980s; during the rise of the New Right but few hints of the depth of the coming catastrophes – I aim to complicate existing histories of it, especially as they circulate in political science and political theory.


I intend my inclusion of “Gay and Lesbian” as specific, differentiated communities to stand as a reminder of both connections and differences. Boone’s _Century_ and Desmoines and Nicholson’s _Sinister Wisdom_ share no umbrella homosexual agenda, nor even a shared theorization of non-normative genders and sexualities. Indeed, in describing the most important lessons they’d learned over these years, _Gay Left_ cited “the divisions between lesbians and gay men and the dissonance of those interests.”7 What they do share, however, is that their uses of “gay” and “lesbian” were considerably queer by contemporary definitions. They did not signal a narrow interest group politics.

In _Sinister Wisdom_’s early issues, the lesbian is above all defined as a boundary-dweller (“Notes for a Magazine I”). Indeed, the lesbian represents “a leap beyond humanism” – a “new species is already emerging on the boundaries of patriarchally defined reality,” the species of those “who embrace and redefine their ascribed boundary/criminal status” (“Go Tell Aunt Rody”). For his part, Boone is sometimes playful about the shifting capacity of “gay”: he associates gay men with “a tolerance for ambiguity” – including an appreciation of the ways “straight men can surprisingly often have strengths found in gay men” – “that’s often sadly lacking in many straight men” (Boone, Century 19). Other times, as in his polemic “Toward a Gay Theory of the 80s,” he is serious about the term’s broad meaning: “it is not in our own interest… to indulge in the wish-fulfillment that legal and moral ‘tolerance’ is any adequate goal of

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7 See Sedgwick, Axiom 4.
our movement. We should realize that this is the time when we must press forward to make social demands that are radical enough to help bring about the basic restructuring of society as a whole” (2). Here, as elsewhere, he is interested in “the transformatory potential of a gay collectivity to influence the development of future socializations and societies” more broadly (2).

Stein writes that during the late 1970s, “though there were many exceptions, movement activists increasingly presented themselves as minority rights advocates who practiced interest group politics rather than participants in a sexual liberation movement that wanted to change society as a whole” (115). Here, I focus on a couple of what Stein terms the “many exceptions” to the pragmatic turn toward electoral politics that constituted the “dominant tendency” of the time.

Put differently, this is just a reminder: I want to flag up front that “gay” and “lesbian” around 1980 did not reference exactly the same set of subjects as they do in 2018. In the spirit of Michel Foucault’s 1981 call “to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are” (“Friendship as a way of Life,” 136), Gay Left, Century of Clouds, and Sinister Wisdom were efforts to build – not assume – what it meant to be gay and lesbian, and what it would mean in the future. This complexity has long been ignored in queer theory’s quick dismissals of identity claims. Like her, I highlight the way these movements “see identity not as a rigid container of political claims but as a flexible medium with which to reimagine political possibility” (6). My efforts to think otherwise might be summarized in a motto from Boone: “Declining to instrumentalize those gone before us, can we hope that those still to come will go further – and raise us up alive?”

**Prefigurative Institutions**

In what sense are Boone’s “prefigurative institutions” prefigurative? Boone develops what I’ll call a non-ideal account of prefiguration.

While Boone uses the word “pre-figurative” only occasionally in Century (60, 69), this problematic – coming to recognize a goal through the shape of the everyday – saturates his analysis. He writes of valuing existing “shapes of collectivity” as “alienated but actual ideals” or as “a promise of things to come” (40). His perspective holds that “political communities in my present” may “stand for” “a community of the

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8 The problems with this gesture were pointed out early on by Cathy Cohen, José Muñoz, and others.
future that exists only in dreams” (31). Particular forms of “collectivity” are “important for me as a figure, as metaphor” (46).

Boone’s usage of “prefigurative” broadly accords with the definition Carl Boggs gave prefigurative politics in coining the phrase: “the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.” But Boone’s account of prefiguration is “non-ideal” first in the sense that he reverses the direction Boggs’s definition is usually thought to imply: for Boone, prefiguration is not a matter of working backward from a goal to shape the everyday, but of coming to recognize a goal through the shape of the everyday.

Boone’s prefigurative puts extra emphasis on the pre: prefigurative institutions are the best we can do for the time being, as through them we learn how to make better things possible later. The fact that the figures offered by prefigurative institutions are “alienated” (40) or “distorted” (19) is why I call Boone’s account non-ideal. In Boone’s hands, to call an existing political form prefigurative is not to view it as an actual or potential island of purity, a shelter from the storm of the dominant order. On the contrary, prefiguration is his rubric for understanding how to construct a future when no such space of purity exists. But Boone’s “prefiguration” is also non-ideal in a second sense: namely, it’s materialist. In this section, I illustrate both of these kinds of “non-ideality” through an initial survey of two institutions Boone mines for prefigurative potential in his work: the aforementioned Summer Institute, and the gay bar (together with the broader “gay ghetto” within which it is embedded).

Of course, academics are fond of viewing their work as political action, even when the case for doing so is rather tenuous, and so it would be fair to regard the prefigurative significance Boone assigns to the Summer Institute with some skepticism. Here, however, the case for the political significance of academic work is a bit more direct.


10 Similarly, in considering Vivian Gornick’s descriptions of the Communist Party in the US, Dean rejects Gornick’s view of “the dream of revolution as external to this activity” (228). Dean reverses the usual way of looking at things: it’s not that a utopian goal motivates collective action, but rather collective action that makes a utopian goal feel within reach. The activity was the practical optimism that sustained the vision” (228).

11 Thus, Boone’s sense of “prefigurative” is quite different from that assumed by Dean and Marco Deseriis in their “A Movement without Demands,” http://www.possible-futures.org/2012/01/03/a-movement-without-demands/, insofar as Boone’s prefiguration is not based on an assumption that it is possible to avoid “interaction with dominant arrangement.” See also Engler and Engler, “Should We Fight the System or Be the Change?,” https://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2014/06/04/fight-system-or-be-the-change/, where “prefigurative” is the name for a politics that tilts toward “a very limiting type of self-isolation.”
than usual, because the MLG’s first Summer Institute is a bit more political than most academic summer retreats. One of the Institute’s more distinctive features is “a form on the question of membership.” At the Institute that summer were representatives of “6 or 7” “sectarian parties,” and at the political forum “each organization had about 15 minutes to present its line. When all the parties had spoken, you would know which one to join. That was the idea anyway” (Boone, Century 17). It’s through his friend David’s skeptical eyes that Boone introduces this “Party Night,” or what David more cheekily calls “What’s-My-Line Night.” David’s name for the evening expresses an orthodox Marxian critique, albeit through his characteristic camp sensibility: the political forum exhibits a kind of commodity logic, a fantasy of “world upon world of disputatious complexity” offered up as endlessly consumable (Boone, Century 17).

Boone admits that, for his part, he initially loved the idea of the political forum for its apparent militancy, even as he later came to see it as David does. But for Boone, this is not a reason to reject the political pretensions of the Institute out of hand, only a reminder of their necessarily prefigurative character: “until things get ‘cancelled and raised’ into socialism, we can only manage to understand the good things to come in some distorted fashion, as a dream” (Boone, Century 19).

As I’ve said, though, a strength of Boone’s analysis of prefigurative institutions is the broad range of institutions it can include. Thus, for as much as Boone is interested in the potential lessons his friend David can offer about the history of the Italian Communist Party, gay bars are another sort of institution he’s interested in: “we should see institutions like the bars as critical locations for the development of a new politics” (4). More generally, he argues that “the ghetto” – or, in more contemporary

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12 Another way Boone describes what I’m calling the non-ideal is by invoking a distinctive usage of the concepts of “ideology” and “utopia.” For example, in “Gay Theory,” he writes that the “positive, utopian aspects of ghetto life” turn out to be “in actuality inseparable from deformations of community life.” The “ghetto” is characterized by “distortions of our social and sexual needs” – yet “the distortions that are most characteristic in our community also hold, from another point of view, the deepest promise for new, utopian social forms.” In Century, his most immediate point of reference on this point – once named, usually not – is Jameson’s work on the concepts of ideology and utopia. Boone’s discussion seems especially resonate with Jameson’s “Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology,” Political Unconscious, 271–290, although this version of Jameson’s argument was not published until 1981, a year after Boone’s book; through Jameson, see also Karl Mannheim’s Ideology and Utopia. Boone’s use of the concepts ideology and utopia, and his way of using them, could also be read in relation to a rich line of engagement with Ernst Bloch’s notion of the concrete utopia developing within contemporary political theory. See, for example, José Muñoz, Cruising Utopia; Kathi Weeks, Problem with Work; Jishnu Guha-Majumdar, “Dilemmas of Hope and History”). Boone also cites Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the jumping off point of Jameson’s analysis and a frequent point of reference in the literature on “concrete utopias,” and thus another potentially productive quilting point to be developed in relation to these themes.

13 My two initial examples of prefiguration are related: in a “Postscript” to “Gay Theory,” Boone acknowledges the way his thinking has been reshaped by conversations at the second institute with two friends who are characters in Century’s stories about the first.
parlance, a gayborhood— is the “structure in and through which demands can be made and a consciousness developed which begins to transcend spontaneity” (1). In identifying this political role for the “gay ghetto,” Boone does not mean to idealize it. On the contrary, he sees it as a site of “specifically gay” forms of “sexism and sexual harrassment,” “racism and agism.” He argues that the vision of gay existence crystalized in “ghetto life” is “often repetitive and unsatisfying, and take[s] place in an exploitative commodity environment” (2). Nevertheless, Boone affirms that, “strange as it may sound, what we need… is an ability to think about certain developed aspects of commodity life in a positive way, as making demands on capitalism for the reorganization of society according to human needs” (2).

The commodity is hardly the only object Boone sees as laden with prefigurative potential, and his analysis of capitalism is hardly exhausted by a critique of commodification; nevertheless, it is noteworthy that he draws attention to the commodified nature of both the “Party Night” of the Institute and the stereotyped version of gay life developing within “the ghetto.” In suggesting that these commodified experiences prefigure an anticapitalist politics, Boone is not making a case for ethical conception. Boone’s argument is more formalist; but in a unique way. To help explain Boone’s engagement with the commodity form, I’ll here situate Boone’s argument within the broader milieu of left gay male criticism from which it emerged; this, in turn, will help me draw out the fundamentally anti-capitalist and fundamentally materialist aspects of the prefigurative politics developed in Gay Left, and carried on by Boone.

In broad terms, Boone’s arguments for finding prefigurative value of gay bars and the institute resonates with what Gay Left says in the collective statement that led their final issue, summarizing what they had learned, over the ten years since the magazine

14 Here, I want to draw attention to the function Boone assigns the gay ghetto—a structure for transcending spontaneity—rather than the specifics of his analysis of it. That said, the case Boone makes for this particular structure for the development is itself interesting; “Toward a Gay Theory for the 80s” might be read as a late example of a history of “the shifting meanings of the ‘gay ghetto’” which Hobson treats as an index for tracking the political development of a style of gay men’s activism that was “align[ed]… with a more multiracial and socialist agenda” (Lavender and Red, 18).

15 For another demonstration of Boone’s method of finding utopian potential in the degraded objects of mass culture, see his review of Saturday Night Fever in “Monsters,” My Walk with Bob. For best results, contemporary readers should experiment with reading this as a review of Spring Breakers.

16 It would be interesting to compare Boone’s analysis of the critical potential of certain commodified experiences to more recent theorizations of the commodity form as a flashpoint in debates between so-called “new” and “old” materialisms. See, for example, Jane Bennett, “Commodity Fetishism and Commodity Enchantment,” Enchantment of Modern Life, 111–130; Christina Lupton, “What It-Narratives Know About Their Authors,” Knowing Books, 47–69)
debuted in 1975, about the relationship between the two words of their title. Just what did sexual politics have to do with socialist politics? Positioning their magazine as part of both gay movements and of a broader set of struggles around “sexual politics,” they argued that:

Perhaps, our signal contribution to the redefinition of socialism is the insight that the transformation of our most intimate desires, and of the conditions of their satisfaction, has to be part and parcel of the new society for which we are working. Those intimate needs, wishes, fantasies are the substance of struggle — why we fight in the first place. Gay politics speaks with a sensitivity to our felt needs and the felt restriction of those needs. It is with a similar sensitivity that we conceive of a socialist politics gaining mass legitimacy. That legitimacy will be built through time and within capitalism.

More specifically, it’s easy to see points of resonance between Boone’s arguments and, for example, Richard Dyer’s essay “In Defense of Disco,” published in Gay Left 8 (1979).

Dyer’s “defense” is not an unqualified celebration of disco as “some great subversive art form” (21). He grants as obvious that “disco is produced by capitalist industry, and since capitalism is an irrational and inhuman mode of production, the disco industry is as bad as all the rest” (20). But he rejects the false assumptions that allows this Marxist truism to slide into blithe leftist dismissals of any and all commercial art. One such assumption is the belief “that capitalism as a mode of production necessarily and simply produces ‘capitalist’ ideology.” For him, this view is out of touch with the fundamentals of a critical understanding of capitalism: “capitalism is about profit,” and it “can just as well make a profit from something that is ideologically opposed to bourgeois society as something that supports it.” Following the analysis above, “the fact that disco is produced by capitalism does not mean that it is automatically, necessarily, simply supportive of capitalism. Capitalism constructs the disco experience, but it does not necessarily know what it is doing, apart from making money.” Accordingly, he draws attention to the necessarily “ambivalently, ambiguously, contradictorily positive qualities of disco” (20).

More fundamentally, Dyer’s defense of disco is a qualified defense, not because disco is second best to some truly revolutionary art form, but because, for him, no such form does or could exist within capitalism. Viewing capitalism as a totality, he rejects “the belief that it is possible in a capitalist society to produce things (e.g. music, e.g. rock and folk) that are outside of the capitalist mode of production.” Dyer argues that his imagined interlocutor – a critical critic who prefers putatively authentic forms of folk music to, say, Gloria Gaynor – actually flees from politics in the name of hard-nosed analysis, insofar as they “elevate activity outside of existing structures rather than
struggles against them.” Dyer rejects this prioritization of ideal forms over real material.

Rather than follow the folk fan in hoping to find revolutionary potential in some “‘emanation’ outside of history and of human production,” Dyer advances his defense of disco as an expression of materialism, in the sense that “socialism and feminism are both forms of materialism.” The overlapping sources of his materialism – socialist/feminist – may be why today his definition can seem to unite so-called “old” and “new” materialisms (understood, however problematically, as a shorthand for referring to, on the one hand, an attention to the way reality is shaped through conflictual history and, on the other hand, a focus on non-human “stuff”). On the one hand, Dyer is quite orthodox in emphasizing that “materialism seeks to understand how things are in terms of how they have been produced and constructed in history, and how they can be better produced and constructed.” Understood in this sense, materialism “certainly does not mean immersing oneself in the material world — indeed, it includes deliberately stepping back from the material world to see what makes it the way it is and how to change it.” However, Dyer sounds a slightly less familiar note within Marxist analysis when he adds a reminder that “materialism is also based on the profound conviction that politics is about the material world, and indeed that... the material world is all there is.” These two definitions are somewhat in tension with one another. As an attention to large-scale historical forces, “materialist politics... is in constant danger of spiritualising itself”: “materialists have to work so hard not to take matter at face value that they often end up not treating it as matter at all.” What Dyer values in disco is that it unites both senses of materialism: through its emphasis on “passion and intensity,” disco “effectively tells us — let’s us experience — that we live in a world of materiality, that we can enjoy materiality but that the experience of materiality is not necessarily what the everyday world assures us it is. Its eroticism allows us to rediscover our bodies as part of this experience of materiality and the possibility of change.” In short, while Dyer is emphatic that “disco can’t change the world, make the revolution,” he nevertheless values disco for its prefigurative capacity: “partly by opening up experience, partly by changing definitions... disco, can be used.”

Like Boone’s way of valuing the MLG’s Summer Institute and the “gay ghetto,” Dyer’s approach to disco is prefigurative in that it involves coming to feel, understand, and develop what could be through what is. Like Dyer’s defense of disco, Boone’s analysis of prefigurative institutions is materialist in that it is resolutely committed to what is (and thus refuses to take what is as all there can be). For Boone, the process by which things are “cancelled and raised” through socialism does not come from outside of history, and in comparing existing institutions to “a dream,” he does not mean to

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17 Compare Hobson, who notes the same period as one in which gay men on the left engaged with lesbian feminist theory in increasingly rich ways.
idealize them. What Boone says of his specific analysis of “contradictions in ghetto life” thus holds for his broader approach to prefigurative institutions: it is a way of “take[ing] seriously… Marx’s dictum about new forms of social organization first being prepared and coming to have a certain existence ‘within the womb of the old’” (2).

Storytelling and Its Institutions

In what sense are prefigurative institutions institutions? At least, in what sense are they political institutions?

Boone is interested in institutions in the broad sense defined by Dean: institutions “organize and concentrate social space.” They effect a “putting in relation [of] the emergent effects of sociality.” For Dean, the purpose of this definition is to situate her own narrower focus on a particular kind of institution: political parties (“an organization and concentration of sociality in behalf of a certain politics”), especially communist parties (organizing and concentrating a politics for “the rest of us”). Could Boone’s institutions serve anything like this function?

At first, the idea of seeing gay bars as institutions supporting political development may seem strange, but Boone notes “the function of the Black Cat bar in the 50s historically, of the Stonewall in connection with the birth of the gay liberation movement of the 60s, and of the Castro Street bars in the May ’79 [“White Night”] riots” following the acquittal of Dan White for the murder of Harvey Milk and George Moscone (4). Boone’s point is precisely not to celebrate the Stonewall and White Night riots as irruptive moments of revolt. Indeed, Boone is critical of the way the gay movement “continues to be shaped by single-issue causes and still has little long-term sense of direction” (1). Rather, he draws attention to the institutional framework from which those revolts developed, in order to understand how that politics might develop into a more sustained, less episodic form. He’s not just interested in how a community can

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18 Literal and metaphorical dreams play important roles throughout Century, but in each case, “dream” is presented not as an escape from reality but as part of reality: a dream is “just another way of explaining things” (23).

19 Cf. Dean’s gloss on The German Ideology’s description of communism as “the real movement which abolishes the present state of affairs,” Crowds and Party, 253–254

20 In a quote he attributes to Rudolf Bahro, Boone writes of the party: “on the site of their differences, it clamps together the competing interests of various groups and levels and makes them mesh toward a higher synthesis” (69).
emerge, he’s interested in how it can develop over time.21

We can begin to deepen this concept of “prefigurative institutions” by turning toward a third example of an institution Boone assigns prefigurative significance: the Lasallian novitiate he attended years before the MLG.

Consider, for example, this scene:

At our robing ceremony we were filled with exhilaration. The collectivity was already beginning. As the novices filed out to make their vows... each of the older brothers would up one by one to... kiss each one of the younger ones, till everyone was embraced by everyone – visibly signifying the festival of unity and love (Boone, Century 40–41).

For Boone, the novitiate shows a collectivity and its affects formed through common practice. There was a great deal Boone was critical of while he was there, and a great deal more he’s critical of in retrospect. But Boone writes that, as a novitiate, “I knew what I liked and loved against my better principles, and I understood what I loved through the emotions.” His “affective life taught [him] to value” the “alienated but actual” “shapes of collectivity” he saw there (Boone, Century 40). These affects are, in his analysis, not separate from the shapes of collectivity but generated through them.

For Boone, storytelling is a key example of a collective practice by which a group comes to see itself as a group.22 In the Novitiate, for example: Bruce and his friend Sean’s sense of dissatisfaction with a compulsory form of private confession crystalized out of gossip and joking. Gossip and joking are what allowed them to identify the problem (Boone, Century 70) – namely, that everyone got the same advice every time. The story’s telling and being told “constituted its hearers as a collectivity of the cheated – at a minimum” – and gave them a knowledge of their numbers and a sense of solidarity (Boone, Century 72). People together, through their work and play, come to tell themselves stories about themselves.

The way they share jokes at the Institute provides a similar example of a community

21 This move aligns Boone with Hobson, insofar as Lavender and Red aim to counter what she terms “Stonewall exceptionalism, or the false narrative that gay and lesbian radicalism flared up spontaneously in 1969 but quickly disappeared.” The broader problem with Stonewall exceptionalism is that, by erasing the context that preceded and unfolded from the uprising, “implies that those who seek radical change must simply lie in wait for opportunity and that radical transformations will always, inevitably, be short-lived.”

22 This emphasis on storytelling took shape in relationship to the high formalism of the historical avant garde, especially as represented in Language poetry, who were "dead set against a narrative basis for innovative writing.” See Kaplan Page Harris, “New Narrative and the Making of Language Poetry,” American Literature 81.4 (2009), 808.
“language practice.” In both religious and political institutions, “flexible networks of codes develop to start solving people’s problems in terms of everyday need or common sense. So there begin to be communities, little by little built out of details, small, trifling matters. Is it surprising that jokes and anecdotes will have surprising roles to play here? — and that they may take on pre-figurative meaning for the future of such communities” (Boone, *Century* 69). At the Institute, the jokes they tell each other become woven into their dreams. They shape their ways of planning for a future (Boone, *Century* 10).

*Gay Left* claimed the elaboration of the perspective that enables this analysis as one of the signature contributions of sexual politics to socialist politics. Sexual politics have: opened up new areas of struggle, conceptualised anew the forces acting on members of society, especially in the rubric ‘the personal is political’. What we mean by this, is not that every action we perform is political, but rather that our ‘private' lives, our selves and our desires, are targets for intervention by social forces — definitions, models, rules, woven in ideology and lived by us.” A central goal of gay politics, they argue, is “opening up that area as one of struggle.”

Such struggle is necessary because at least as often as the emergent language of a community serves to “narrate us toward the new,” it seems to often contain “muttered apologies” to existing social relations (Boone, *Century* 15). Forms of “collectivity and common praxis“ can also be reconciliations to the way things are. In fact, perhaps that’s what they usually are (Boone, *Century* 72).

An example of this struggle is the story of how Boone finally commits to an intervention into the conference’s patriarchal dynamics. It happens as a result of a comic incident while he’s sitting next to his friend Christine at a difficult lecture by Jameson (Boone, *Century* 63). Having trouble keeping up, Boone notices she seems distracted too. They pass a few notes back and forth before the conversation lulls and they start to space out again, “to slip away into separate worlds of reverie” (Boone, *Century* 64). – Bruce is roused when he sees Christine pushing him another note, making a goofy face this time. When he reads the note, he understands the face: “The note reads, ‘How would ....

23 The theme takes on additional meaning in the context of his literary critical and political theoretical essays completed around the same time. In “Toward a Gay Theory for the 80s,” Boone argues that “we should know how to value the superstructural and cultural apparatuses of our community. We should see the positive role that language has taken in forming the community.” In “Gay Language as Political Praxis,” Boone clarifies that “positive role,” drawing theoretical resources from Voloshinov and Fanon to trace the complex relations between the poetry of Frank O’Hara and the historical conjuncture within which it emerged.

24 Note the way this definition of “the personal is political” deliberately inverts the individualized reading the phrase is often given. It should also be noted, though, that this “inversion” is much closer to the phrase’s original meaning as it circulated within second wave feminism, as a proverb for summarizing the functional insight generated through consciousness raising.
you like to marry Fred? (signed) Christine.” The deliberately middle school-y nature of the activity and the question make them realize they have “regressed into a childlike world of no responsibility” (Boone, Century 65). They laugh, and as they do, Bruce decides to intervene (Boone, Century 66).

For a political theorist (at least one like me), it might be tempting to hastily map this scene onto Hannah Arendt’s account of the relationship between thinking and judging. For Arendt, thinking involves removing oneself from the common world, but in so doing, it often has a “liberating effect” on judgement, “the ability to tell right from wrong” which forms “the most political of man’s mental abilities” (“Thinking and Moral Consideration,” 446). Here, Boone zones out, then resolves to intervene. The impression of a relationship between Boone’s account and Arendt’s is strengthened by comparing this scene to Boone’s second intervention into the sexist dynamics of the conference. The beginning of the story of Boone’s second intervention comes unannounced at the start of the book. During his walk with David discussing counter-hegemonic institutions, the conversation lulls as each of the participants becomes “lost… in our respective mediations” (Boone, Century 7–8). Although the resolution of this scene isn’t revealed until the end of the book, seventy pages later, it turns out that it is exactly the moment that this reverie breaks – “so uncivilly ending our tranquil walk” – that Boone resolves upon "a firm purpose to act that very day," to intervene a second time (77).

But before we join Boone in exclaiming “Oh beautiful life of the mind!” (Boone, Century 9), we also need to note a significant potential divergence here: in each case, what triggers Boone’s insight, and thus his judgment and action, is that he isn’t as alone as he thinks he is, not even in (seemingly) private reflection. What’s so funny, and so troubling, to Boone about the interaction he has with Christine is the very “programmed” or “prearranged” nature of their reactions: just while Boone is daydreaming about his relationship to Jameson, Christine emerges from her own reflections to make a joke about the very same thing. The coincidence suggests to Boone that even their solitary reveries are structured by their collective life – namely, by a system of male power. It’s the content of this revelation that troubles Boone, not the illusory structure of individuality he sees in it. For a more positively valued example of the same thing, consider again the robing ceremony described above. Boone writes that this “was a community structured like a narration, and its meaning was an exchange of certain signs – a patterned exchange, rather than an anarchic one. Love, I found out, was not the same thing as spontaneity” (41). If we read either this scene of community or the later scene of dissent simply as what Dean calls “a beautiful

25 There’s a third example of this productively illusory solitude in (what I think of as) the story’s coda, which I discuss below: “if I hadn’t thought I was alone in the apartment... Well, there’s the key as far as I’m concerned” (79, my emphasis).
moment,” we miss Boone’s point: what looks and feels spontaneous is often highly patterned. This patterning is both what Boone praises about institutions and what he often finds himself resisting within them.

Indeed, perhaps surprisingly, Dean expresses a similar set of insights in describing what she calls “the affective register of organization.” After noting that one of her sources, Raphael Samuels, describes “the lost world of British communism” as both “a secular religion” and as “familial and pedagogic” – even a “surrogate for university” (223). Dean argues that, “underpinning these institutional analogies of church, family, and university were the practices through which the Party organized its members.” (224) Within the Communist Party of Great Britain, as among members of a religious order or an academic department, activity “enveloped members deeply and daily,” broken down into “specialized roles,” and supported by various procedures for “following up and self-assessment” (224). For Dean, this “series of disciplines of the faithful” acts as “a generator of enthusiasm, an apparatus of intensification”: “organization produced a shared sense of strength, of a collective with the capacity to carry out its will” (225).

But Dean’s “institutional analogies” seem to work more like equivalences. More attuned to the complex work figuration performs, Boone more insistently notes the differences between different modes of community practice. In fact, Boone arranges these different institutions in a chain, which provides a kind of thumbnail sketch for the book: “The religious communities of my past, I think, stand for political communities in my present, and these in turn for a community of the future that exists only in my dreams” (Boone, Century 31). Crucially, here and elsewhere, taking one institution as a “figure” for another is not to simply equate them. Rather, Boone aims to show parallels and (– what’s “finally… more important” –) differences between the tensions he experienced within religious community and tensions driving the political choices of Bruce’s later life: “religious collectivity” is an “expression, not realization of human need” (Boone, Century 46).

**Linking Experiences, or the Battle over Meaning**

Even as he notes (what might crudely be called) the dark side of the processes of collective patterning he traces in the life of institutions, he argues that there’s hope they will come to work differently, to become not just “a verbal solution” but “a mustering of forces,” “a precondition… a prehistory” (Boone, Century 72). *Century of Clouds* is an attempt to narrate, to theorize, and to (in some capacity) be a political push in that direction. I say the book (in some way) is a political push because Boone repeatedly emphasizes that a theme of his story is that “telling stories has an effect on the world” (47). If a story is going to have an effect on the world, he argues, “the story is
going to be impure; just like real, actual life is” – the very things you want to encourage “exist and are found mixed in the social class and historical period of the audience you are addressing” (Boone, Century 47). For Boone, storytelling is non-sovereign: “The meaning of the story is always getting away from you, becoming what you didn’t intend” (Boone, Century 80). What’s more, you’re always finding yourself tangled up in so many other peoples stories, and their stories in yours. His point is simple: If you want to move a crowd, “you can’t be an idealist. You must learn to follow certain rhythms – both of yourself and of those with whom you want to speak, and upon whose social and historical trajectories you want to have an effect” (Boone, Century 47). This is another sense in which Boone’s account of prefiguration is “non-ideal,” and suggests another meaning of prefiguration we can disentangle from his. For Dean, “the crowd... prefigures in a completely literal way: ‘prior to figuration.’” The crowd is “unnamed”; “it cuts out an opening by breaking through the limits bounding permitted experience” (Crowds and Party, 66). In formulations like these, Dean risks giving the impression that we could, in some simple sense, “start from zero.”26 By contrast, Boone’s prefiguration is a figure that comes before, not something “prior to figuration.”27

As these references to impurity and non-sovereignty suggest, Boone’s references to community and collectivity should not be read as endorsements of uniformity, a suppression of difference, or an aversion to divisiveness. This might be a final way Boone’s politics resonates with Gay Left’s 1980 articulation of the contribution of gay politics to left politics: gay left politics, they argued, has proven particularly adept at revealing “the necessary antagonisms that operate within apparently homogeneous

26 Zerilli, Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom. Obviously, Zerilli’s “from zero” is not simple, and this hasty footnote stands as a temporary placeholder until I can offer a more sustained engagement with her important work on imagination. By way of this concept, I note here that there is a whole literature on radical imagination I could engage here: one important place to start might be Robin Kelley’s Freedom Dreams.

27 Except in this sense: in Boone, when a figure comes before something else, the something else is often (always?) itself a figure: Boone’s religious past figures his political present, itself a figure for his socialist future. This way of describing the structure of Boone’s thought echoes his description of the structure of Jameson’s thought (64). Perhaps surprisingly, then, Boone and Dean turn out to disagree more on crowds than on party. For Boone, we might say, every crowd is always multiply structured, never a simple gap. Consider Dean’s example of the crowd as gap: “There is no politics until a meaning is announced and the struggle over this meaning begins. Most of us have experiences in everyday life that confirm this point: we come across a bunch of people in an unexpected place and want to know what’s going on. What are they doing, what is everybody looking at, why are police there? Have we come across a protest, a crime, an accident, a film set?” (Crowd and Party, 124–125). But I can’t think of too many experiences of such totally blank wondering in my everyday life: for instance, if I don’t see filming equipment, I’m unlikely to assume I’m looking at a film set. Although some of the social and historical trajectories shaping a crowd’s emergence might align with identity categories, identities do not neatly cohere at the individual level; instead, “identity” is a way of describing the ways a crowd might be multiply coded and overcoded above and below.
categories.” I’ve already begun to notes some of the ways the stories of Boone’s time at the Institute and within the Novitiate are stories of conflict. Elsewhere, he notes that at the Institute he found “a great deal to draw from, though, indeed, much to struggle with too” (“Gay Language,” 59n1). Indeed, at the very end of Century’s story about those struggles, Boone identifies “the basic question” as nothing less than this: “Who is the enemy and who isn’t?”

For example, consider Boone’s understated way of characterizing the power and the problems he sees in telling stories: “narrated disappointments become bearable,” leaving “only the tractable problems of unity” (Boone, Century 70). Who accepts this story? Are we all on the same page here? If these problems are tractable, they are nevertheless complex, and deeply political. In the Novitiate, for example: who accepts the story the priest tells at the funeral of their young friend, that his soul is now in heaven? With what effects? The process of grappling with questions like these, always laden with power relations, can also be a way of coming to reshape power relations.

Boone gives an example at a much broader scale by describing a talk he hears at the Institute on the development of words like Carib, cannibal, Caliban, and Caribbean (Boone, Century 22). To him, the talk indicates the inseparability of rhetoric and history: the example shows history/rhetoric as a process in which “one way of describing can be seen to triumph over another. And it’s not at all a question of keeping your hands clean – for anyone. Least of all for the historiographers, for the storytellers… Each new description of things becomes a challenge to all the old ones, actively seeking to displace them, becoming new ways of seeing things… New writings particularly are placed in opposition to old writings, and writings of groups newly coming to power contest vigorously the writings of the groups already in social dominance” (Boone, Century 24–25). However, “as a writing comes to be established, it… sees itself as less contestatory than it actually is: it disavows its polemic origins” (Boone, Century 24). Boone chooses a side: Accepting these “radical-negative implications” of “holding the narrative office” (Boone, Century 24), Boone thus insists that the purpose of writing history, or any story, is – contra Herodotus – in part in order to “abolish the works of humankind” (Boone, Century 25).

In this section, I’ll walk through three scenes of conflict: one from Boone’s Novitiate

28 “Who is the enemy and who isn’t?”: Century ends with Boone realizing, in a new way, “that there couldn’t ever be a personal answer to this question – but only a collective one” (Century, 79). Yet at the same time, the same experience recalls Boone’s sense of collectivity to “the limitations of real bodies, real people.” (Century, 79).

29 Cf. Arendt’s epigraphs to the “Action” chapter of The Human Condition.

30 Dean: ”Explanations of what is happening may diverge. Their divergence, the conflict between accounts, marks the political division” (Crowd and Party, 124–125).
years, two from the Institute. Across the three examples of intervention, we see Boone working out just what might be involved in an “actual practice” uniting conflict and collectivity within one institution, rather than seeing them as only opposed.

Intervention Zero: Conflict at the Novitiate

The conflict Boone describes at the novitiate emerges through a struggle over what he calls the “business end” of its “community ordering process,” a ritual of public confession called “the chapter of faults” (Boone, Century 41). Boone relates how and why he and his friend Sean opposed the practice: while they have no qualms about confession in principle, they worry that moving the site where confession is address from abstract God to present people meant “submission in a real, actual sense.” Particularly troubling to them is the norm by which everybody accuses everybody else – to “jog your memory.” As protest against the whole practice, Bruce and Sean decide “we wouldn’t accuse anybody of anything” (Boone, Century 44). When eventually this is noticed, they’re brought in for discipline, but continue to resist.

The result of the intervention at the Novitiate, in Boone’s later evaluation, is a win for “the principle that the rules ought to be reasonable,” but a loss for “community values.” For Boone, the question raised by thinking about the tension between his current appreciation for the functions of the “chapter of faults” and his critical attitude toward it during his novitiate years is: how to be neither “divisive of community life” nor “manipulative and authoritarian” (Boone, Century 42). At a slightly different level, the question is: how to keep traditions from becoming “only gestures – the artifacts of museums”? (Boone, Century 42) Unresolved is what now seems to him to be a far more pressing question: how to go “beyond these antagonisms to an actual practice” (Boone, Century 45). The story of Boone’s interventions into the sexism and homophobia he sees at the MLG’s Summer Institute – and the form of Century as a whole – are, I think, attempts to describe and perform such an “actual practice.”

First Intervention: Boone’s Talk

The ground for Boone’s first intervention at the institute is prepared before he arrives. As a result of a complicated set of overlapping events in the weeks leading up to the Institute – ranging from a chance encounter with a friend from his Novitiate years to the murder of Robert Hillsborough in a gay bashing in San Francisco – Boone arrives with a heightened awareness of (in my terms) patriarchy and heteronormativity as interlocking systems, crystalized in his resolutely unqualified assertion that “men have real problems, all of us.” (61). Once there, he comes to gain deeper understanding of the vexed relationship of these problems to socialism. One man, for example, says gay
rights struggles were "just disruptive. He explained that there have to be priorities, and that the gay movement just drains away energies better spent elsewhere" (Boone, *Century* 62). Increasingly, Boone links these aspects of his "situation" to a tension he sees between the theme of the conference that summer ("politics and everyday life"), the composition of the institute ("at least half [of the 40 participants] were women"), and its structure and organization ("male-organized and male-dominated," with women frequently ignored or interrupted during discussion). In noticing things like this, he "thought more and more of an intervention," a way of bringing these tensions to the surface in order to change them (Boone, *Century* 63). After realizing how deep these patriarchal patterns of power relations ran (through the way he found himself reacting against them when joking around with his friend Christine during Jameson’s lecture), Boone realize his unique opportunity to intervene, given his (apparently) unique place in those power relations as a gay man (Boone, *Century* 66). Thus he resolves to so intervene, using his presentation of his paper on Jack Spicer as an occasion. He cuts his prepared remarks short, and kicks off discussion by mentioning the awkwardness of his presence at the conference, given the persecution of gays in socialist countries and the general indifference of socialists to gay liberation (Boone, *Century* 67–68).

Reactions to this first intervention are mixed. But the effects, while limited, were real: "I had learned a bit about practical action – how to get something done politically – and the others had learned a bit about gay oppression." What’s important here is the example Boone takes this to be of two groups “learning to speak each other’s languages, in the most literal, ordinary of senses” – a process that, Boone emphasizes, takes time and daily effort (Boone, *Century* 68–69). It’s in a realization of just how much time, and just what kind of effort, that leads Boone to adopt a critical attitude toward his first intervention. Although already this first intervention has “begun to consort with all the trivial, the historical, the ritualistic of the group, even its gossip” (Boone, *Century* 73), he suggests his plan – his plan, executed by him, standing alone before an audience – remained too detached from the bodily life of the group. Details like these can “make or unmake a commitment.” His first intervention might have come to nothing at all if not for concrete details, and thus especially bodies, joined “in love and in friendship, or in struggle” (Boone, *Century* 74). This insight, in turn, prompts his second intervention (Boone, *Century* 74).

Second Intervention: The Volleyball Game

The beginning of the story of Boone’s second intervention comes unannounced at the
beginning of the book, in the first scene he presents from the Institute. His walk with David discussing counter-hegemonic institutions comes to an abrupt end when, just as they are approaching home, “a volleyball flew by our noses” (Boone, Century 7–8). It’s not until the end of the book that we learn the reason why this particular volleyball is so annoying – indeed why, after it crossed their path, “the afternoon’s mood was shattered” (8). Boone tells us that volleyball was the go-to, essentially compulsory recreational activity at the Institute – “because it’s part of a socialist tradition” (74); given the boorish behavior of several men in the game, it “turned out to extend certain power realities based on sex” (74–75). For example, one man repeatedly sent hard serves to the same player, insisting it was just “a little teasing” (76). He’s apologetic when called out… but then goes right back to it – “at a conference of committed socialists,” no less (77)! Things came to a head when David and Boone were returning from their walk – the ball sailing in front of them seems like a symbol of the problems manifesting in the game and within the Institute as a whole, so he puts into motion a “contingency plan” he’s developed with others (77). Boone’s part in this loosely planned intervention is to take and hold the ball. This serves as an effective intervention because (as planned) his friend Sonia backs him, “proposing a group discussion of the dispute” (78).

Boone does not directly report on whether the discussion he and Sonia called for in the second intervention happened, or how it went if it did; but when Sonia and Boone are debriefing later, she tells him that the main offender has apologized to her. Perhaps suspecting that this apology might not be sincere (given the many that have preceded it), Boone asks her: “if you were a socialist, wasn’t the point to make people and things change?” It’s through reflecting on her reply — “She said it was. Only he wasn’t the enemy, was he?” – that Boone gets to what he calls “the basic question”: “Who is the enemy and who isn’t?”

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In an essay from the 1990s looking back on the development of lesbian feminist theory and practice during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Susan Leigh Star – feminist theorist of organizations and first poetry editor (for Issues 6 through 16) of Sinister Wisdom – identifies lesbian feminism, and feminism more broadly, as a “method of multiplicity” (151). For Star, the latter-day value of this method lies not in a celebration of disorganized multiplicities, but in the process it outlines of developing tools for linking multiplicities: “linking experience gained in one time and place with that gained in another” – the insight it provides into how to “build a shared context in which to make
sense of... information.”33

“Method of multiplicity,” in this sense, might be a good name for the “actual practice” that emerges across the three scenes of intervention (the refusal to participate in the “chapter of faults,” the talk as a call out, and the interruption of the volleyball game) I’ve laid out above: a difficult and often divisive practice of “learning to speak each other’s languages” through simple forms of shared activity within existing institutions. I see something like this “method of multiplicity” as, indeed, the broader aspiration of Boone’s work in the same period identified by Star: Boone’s goal is to bring larger and larger forms of collectivity more and more into everyday experience in order to ensure collective survival, itself conceived in larger and larger terms: from the individual to the species, from the planetary to the galactic, from bare life to more life.34

Boone uses a technical term for this broad, broadening commitment driving his work: “largeness.”

Largeness is the word Boone uses to describe the politics of the era: “a time of Marxism, feminism, gay rights, black struggles, [and] the beginnings of an environmental awareness” (Boone, “Afterword,” 92). This political largeness – an international, multi-issue, coalitional politics – is stamped on Century’s setting, themes and form. Looking back in his 2009 “Afterword” to Century, Boone writes: “I wanted to write large. Who didn’t? And it was largeness, specifically, that I was conscious of when writing Century... I felt I saw myself among spiral galaxies. I recognized my humanity in the largeness of phenomena” (Boone, “Afterword,” 92).35 In his

33 Compare the centrality of “the ability to exchange experiences” to Benjamin’s account of storytelling. In terms of contemporary political theory, Star’s program could also be considered in relation to Davide Panagia effort “to show how organization may occur without a pre-articulated common measure” (“A Theory of Aspects,” 544), or to Dean’s argument that “the force of a brand like Coke persists in... its capacity to retain its symbolic efficiency across multiple registers... the force of an idea appears in the struggle over it, in its capacity to serve as a site worth Contesting.”

34 This comes out even clearer in Boone’s slightly later essay, “Writing and an Anti-Nuclear Politics”: “What death is for me personally, the possibility of species extinction may be for group life, or with more generosity and a solidarity that’s comprehensive, what ecological problems might look like for planetary existence... There’s a bigness here that’s just too staggering, makes itself less available imaginatively. In this quandary humor often arises. If it didn’t, our survival outlook would probably be less good.”

35 Internationalism is not an explicit focus of Century. I associate the theme with the movements named by Boone under influence of Munoz, Ferguson, Hobson. But this milieu is not a foreign importation into Boone’s considerations; rather, it is suggested by Boone’s reliance on Fanon in “Gay Language,” or the important role of Ileana’s talk on the Caribbean. He makes some efforts, through citation, to situate his claims in relation to anticolonial politics and the black radical tradition). These references are at times clumsy, but nevertheless sustained, serious, and helpful.
“Afterword,” Boone argues that the problematic of “globality” that emerged from the sensibility and practice of these movements is “worth looking at” these many years later (Boone, “Afterword,” 92). These movements “looked at things from the standpoint of a whole world, a whole humanity” (Boone, “Afterword,” 92). For Boone, the development of this standpoint is the critical intervention of the New Left movements within which he understands his work.

Century itself starts with admitting a bias toward “largeness,” in six short paragraphs I think of as the story’s prologue. One example of liking largeness is finding pleasure in the idea of “wave upon wave of collective life displaying ever new patterns.” These patterns of collective life include – are at times made up of – nonhuman animal and vegetable life: “the stripes of sea bass… the desert cactus in bloom after years of waiting” (3). But for Boone, liking largeness is also caught up with seeing oneself and one’s own closest relationships from an enlarged perspective, in sets of “mosaic-like patterns.”

Another example of liking largeness is being able to laugh at the joke/anecdote Boone reports having heard:

At the institute last summer, I dream for several nights about Fred’s [– that’s Frederic Jameson’s –] repeated anecdote. By sheer coincidence, he says, when [the] three had come together, Sartre is the first to speak. ‘Three little men!’ – and a smile to Picasso and Charlie Chaplin. I dream they’re in a circle looking down, peering into and beyond something. But it’s there at their feet. I wake up and laugh.”

Part of the joke is that, from an enlarged perspective, from the perspective of history, Sartre, Picasso, and Chaplin really are but “three little men.” Liking largeness means dreaming bigger, going further than even the largest individual human life could go. Liking largeness means looking up.

But “beneath these clouds, … [is] a tiny, fragile human body.”36 The form in which Boone relates his dream is itself a comment on the theme of the place of a human life – or indeed with human life in the aggregate – within “largeness.” Just when Boone has stretched his account of his love of “patterns, designs, excesses” to the “ribbon of distant faces turned outward” of the Milky Way,” we shift from galactic scale expanses of space and time to “the institute last summer.” The shift in scale is made visceral by the even more abrupt shift of the next paragraph: while Boone dreams of Sartre, Picasso, and Chaplin’s place in the grand arc of history, “there’s an explosion… Letelier

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36 Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” I
is being blown up in his car by the agents of Chilean reaction” (4). This spectacular, explosive violence is then brought further down to earth as Boone recalls more local, less punctual, sometimes even “nearly silent” forms of violence: the violence of the police visited upon Oakland’s black residents, the daily violence that characterizes “lives of women and gays oppressed in patriarchy,” the “daily violence done to workers” (4).

That, then, is the problematic that launches and defines Century of Clouds: “These thoughts large and public, how to relate them to my life? … Perhaps beginning to tell you stories” – namely stories of “friendships, in between spaces as my life moves outward.” Largeness is ultimately not a fixed concept but the set of “Problems. Questions.” driving the story. The story itself is a reflection of institutions and aims – prefiguratively – to shape institutions.

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37 This happens in Washington D.C. in 1976, the summer Boone is at the institute.