

## WHAT HAPPENS TO COUNTLESS GESCHWITZ? REVISITING HOMOSEXUALITY IN HORKHEIMER AND ADORNO

Kevin S. Amidon  
*Iowa State University*\*

In the philosophical and culture-critical works of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the concept of homosexuality exists almost always in close textual relation to fascist domination. This is because they cannot see homosexual persons as existing outside the dominating discourses of the nineteenth-century bourgeois legal and psychiatric explication of homosexuality. This issue throws the stakes of ethical reflection in Critical Theory into high relief, especially since feminist thinkers including Judith Butler have recently provided a highly positive rereading of Adorno's ethics. A close reading of Adorno's exploration of Alban Berg's opera *Lulu* further demonstrates the labile ethical and philosophical status of homosexuality in Critical Theory.

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\* Kevin S. Amidon (ksamidon@iastate.edu) teaches German Studies in the Iowa State University Department of World Languages and Cultures, 3102 Pearson Hall, Ames, IA, 50011, USA. © 2008 Kevin S. Amidon.

*If we are to act ethically...we must avow error as constitutive of who we are.*

Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*

The work of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory – and particularly the individual and collaborative efforts of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who formed its center over more than three decades – shows such diversity of method and focus that many of its most significant scholars and critics apply to it the term “interdisciplinary” with substantial justification and without irony (Benhabib, Bonss, and McCole 1993). Horkheimer and Adorno would doubtless have been gratified at this stream of reception of their work, for they indeed sought and developed an embedded critique of the inherent problems of the control and instrumentalization of knowledge through academic and scientific discipline from the inception of the concept of Critical Theory itself in the mid-1930s. Nonetheless this interdisciplinarity sometimes took such heterodox form that readers and scholars cannot help but come to contradictory conclusions about the theories and arguments propagated by the many members of the school. These frictions in the school’s reception are further exacerbated by the ongoing – and sometimes increasing – disciplinary divisions that separate the fields with the greatest interest in the Frankfurt School’s work: sociology, philosophy, cultural and literary studies, and musicology. Furthermore, the established historical and critical narratives of the school’s development, written by scholars including Martin Jay, Susan Buck-Morss, and Rolf Wiggershaus, have provided generations of scholars with such a thorough introduction to the school’s work that they have reached the level of orthodoxy. Thus as rich as the Frankfurt School’s legacy remains for scholars and critics in numerous fields, new work on it must navigate carefully around these many disciplinary investments, established orthodoxies, and standing controversies.

A growing stream of recent work in sociology and cultural studies has attempted to make sense of a particularly troublesome sphere of

the Frankfurt School's interest: its approach to the multifarious social and psychological aspects of sexuality. Sexuality complicates the historical and intellectual legacy of the school for many reasons. Some of the work of several early and important members certainly takes sexuality as its main critical focus. These members, however, were not the inner circle (Horkheimer and Adorno), but rather (in the 1930s and 1940s) Erich Fromm and (in the 1940s and later) Herbert Marcuse, both of whom came into conflict with Horkheimer and Adorno for the potentially redemptive aspects of their analyses of the erotics of culture and society (Halle 1995; Dannecker 1997; Wheatland 2004; Worrell 2006). These conflicts sometimes leave readers with a sense that Horkheimer and Adorno could be curiously prudish, despite the fact that one need not do more than scratch the surface of their work to discover extensive reflection on sex and sexuality. Some of their own close colleagues feared even that they might be seen as libertines: Leo Lowenthal's first reaction to the manuscript of *Dialectic of Enlightenment (DoE)* in 1944 was that it "may create the impression that the program of free love is proclaimed" (Quoted in Schmidt 2007: 58). The second excursus in *DoE*, which analyzes the writings of the Marquis de Sade, is of course only the most proximate cause of such concerns (an issue trenchantly explored in Comay 2006). Nonetheless recent scholarship that reevaluates the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis on Horkheimer and Adorno reinforces the sense that their philosophically generated abstraction of libidinal and erotic drives casts attention away from the diverse lives of individuals in the service of theoretical totalization (Halle 1995). Their choice to maintain a high-bourgeois style of dress and domestic life and thereby to reject proletarian or radical trappings, heightened the sense of some critics (especially in the later 1960s) that too much deployment of authority lay behind their critique of the authoritarian. The infamous "bared-breasts incident" in Adorno's lecture hall in Frankfurt in 1968 (recently reread brilliantly in Lee 2006) has long been the central symbolic moment of this tension.

It is in the inner circle's interpretation and representation of homosexuality that their residual prudishness seems most dramatically displayed. The few places in their work where they directly address the

concept "homosexuality" indeed do read almost hair-raisingly, which has occasioned reasoned critique in recent scholarship (Halle 1995; Rycenga 2002). *DoE* contains the concept four times (though Halle and Rycenga miss the later two). The first two sit in close proximity in the sixth section of the "Elements of Antisemitism," where a circuitous argument links "homosexual aggression" to antisemitic violence. The first statement is surprisingly direct, and found in a sentence that must rank among the very shortest in *DoE*: "The forbidden thing transmuted into aggression is mostly of homosexual character" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1988: 201).<sup>1</sup> This argument is glossed further with specific – and typically biologically-inflected – reference to Freud's theorization of projection as the correlative of the weakness of defense mechanisms oriented toward repressed elements of the ego: "under the pressure of dammed-up homosexual aggression the psyche's mechanism forgets its most recent phylogenetic achievement, self-awareness, and experiences that aggression as the enemy in the world, the better to be able to confront it" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1988: 202). A first reading of this passage indeed raises the concern, as Halle and Rycenga emphasize, that Horkheimer and Adorno interpret homosexuality entirely through Freudian categories. And one need not dig deep in the extensive documents of the inner circle's activity in the 1940s to find evidence that Horkheimer, at least, chose to stick to Freudian orthodoxy rather than accept Fromm's views (Jay 1996; Dannecker 1997). This problem in fact seems redoubled in the second passage, for there seems to be no homosexuality without repressed Oedipal aggression.

The remaining two references to homosexuality in *DoE* are found in the final passage of the work, the extended and heterodox series of fragmentary "Notes and Sketches" that represent the authors' attempt to begin to construct an "anthropology" – that typically German variety of philosophical reflection on the characteristics and typology of the human that has little to do with the Anglo-American academic disci-

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated in the references, all translations are by the author.

pline that appropriated the moniker (Schmidt 1998). Remarkably, the two longest of these fragments contain reflections on homosexuality, and both make even more overt the links that Horkheimer and Adorno posit between repressed homosexuality and fascism. The title of the first and longest, "Human and Animal," points directly at its German anthropological spirit. The other is a remarkable text called "Interest in the Body." Both have drawn notice in the growing literature on sex, sexuality, and gender in the Frankfurt School, but not for the deployment of the concept of homosexuality in them (Franks 2006: 205; Lee 2006: 116). Perhaps the most eye-popping statement about homosexuality in all of Critical Theory is the one in "Human and Animal," which is suffused with gendered and politically charged language difficult to render in English: "He [*Mann*] becomes woman [*Weib*], who looks upon domination [*Herrschaft*]. Everyone in the fascist collective, with its teams and work camps, is from tender youth on a prisoner in solitary confinement; it breeds homosexuality" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1988: 269). The passage on homosexuality in "Interest in the Body" reverses the focus, concentrating not on the power of fascism but on the ways it embraces and transfigures the repressions and resentments of its own victims. In the bleak intellectual ocean of *DoE*, with its breaking waves that seem to scour the veneer of liberation from all human motivation to reveal a violent and dominating core, this passage towers high. In it, the powerless, resentful, and manipulated lower members of a dominating society – victims or collaborators as they may be – are necessarily homosexual and paranoid: "Such enmity of the lowest for their own withered life, to which these homosexual and paranoid people themselves relate through murderous assault – this enmity, so carefully raised and nourished by the temporal and spiritual higher-ups, was always an indispensable instrument of the art of government" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1988: 249).

Halle, Dannecker, and Rycenga have analyzed the few other passages of similar import in Adorno's work in the decades after the publication of *DoE*. The most interesting of them, "Sexual Taboos and the Law Today," was written for a collection of essays on sexuality and crime published in 1963. After a lengthy exploration of the Freudian theory of genital sexuality as an integrated stage of development sub-

sequent to earlier, partial stages, Adorno argues that sexual taboos in late capitalist society take the form of prejudices that exclude anything but the genital from the sphere of the sexual (Adorno 1977: 537-540). He subjects several legally proscribed but discursively common spheres of sexual practice to his Freudian-dialectical mode of analysis. These include prostitution, sexual issues surrounding minors, and homosexuality. He concludes with a set of nine suggestions for empirical social research on the justification and consequences of the legal proscription of sexual behaviors, and proposes that the "F-Scale" developed in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) to quantify fascist tendencies could provide a model for an ordering of sexually 'criminal' personality types (Adorno 1977: 551).

The analysis of homosexuality in "Sexual Taboos and the Law Today" is the shortest of the three analyses of particular forms of proscribed sexual behavior, filling only one page-long paragraph. It is also remarkably undialectical in character (though plenty of readers might welcome more such respite from apparently gratuitous complexity in Adorno's work). There is plenty of Adorno's trademark irony, of course, but his condemnation of the retention of the notorious paragraph 175 of the German penal code in postwar West German law is straightforward. He begins: "The abhorrent paragraph about homosexuals has been rescued for liberated Germany." The rest of the passage, as Halle and Rycenga note, is remarkably retrograde, and almost a museum of nineteenth-century arguments about the etiology and cultural position of homosexuality. It discusses blackmail, the Freudian theory of unresolved Oedipal conflict in homosexuality, and even the "intellectual talents" of homosexuals, which he sees as potentially damaged and lost to society because homosexuals must live in fear of prosecution (Adorno 1977: 543-544). Nonetheless this set of antique arguments has a dialectical introduction, a single sentence that completes the paragraph prior to it. And this sentence, while leaving fascism unmentioned, again links homosexuality and dominating intent in ways familiar from *DoE*. It concludes Adorno's argument that in bourgeois society, taboos often have the function of causing those people most disadvantaged by them to internalize and recapitulate repression by redirecting it outward toward others – the Freudian mechanism of

projection. Adorno's crowning example: "homosexuals among whom the enthusiasm for virility couples with that for well-bred order [*Zucht und Ordnung*], and together with the ideology of the noble body stands ready for the persecution of other minorities like intellectuals" (Adorno 1977: 543). Adorno's dialectical silence about Nazism runs the danger of deafening the reader in this sentence, and gives everything in the following discussion of homosexuality a throwaway character. If anything, the atypical undialectical flatness of that subsequent discussion represents Adorno's mode of talking down to an audience whose level of philosophical sophistication could not be assured.

What then, if anything beyond a cautionary tale of scholarly meta-prejudice (an argument pursued in Schlipphacke 2001), can be retrieved from Horkheimer and Adorno's approach to homosexuality, given that it recurrently and repetitively discusses homosexuality primarily if not only in the context of arguments about domination and fascism? Many equivocal rationalizations are possible. First, especially in *DoE*, the negativity of the presentation of all of the social phenomena of bourgeois society under late capitalism is absolute. Everything is dissected in search of its residues of domination. Second, it is often in the behavior of self-appointed 'progressives' or 'liberators' that Horkheimer and Adorno detect particularly noxious – if unconscious – residues of domination. Such skepticism bears more specific fruit in works like Horkheimer's essay on "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937) and his book *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), as well as Adorno's essays like "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America" (1968/1969), which contain substantially more direct reflection on social and scholarly practice than does the rigorously theoretical and philosophical *DoE*. Third, Horkheimer and Adorno owe more to biological and medical discourses of pathology and deviance than the traditional historical and critical narratives of the development of their work have allowed (Amidon 2008). Homosexuality was broadly if not universally recognized as pathological in the early twentieth century. Even some of the great crusaders for homosexual rights like Magnus Hirschfeld argued that homosexuality was exclusively a biological and medical concern, rather than a legal one, and if homosexual inclinations were not inherently pathological, some manifestations of them were (Bul-

lough 1994: 61-75; Amidon 2008a). Horkheimer and Adorno, despite their nuanced and lively critique of scientific and medical disciplinarity, did not give up scholarly knowledge production as a goal (if not the goal) of their practice, and they accepted remarkably uncritically the evaluation of homosexuality as pathological.

None of these rationalizations is remotely satisfactory, however. Halle and Rycenga have shown how other scholars with methods and goals congruent with Horkheimer's and Adorno's – meaning containing embedded dialectical critique – have pointed the way out of what appears to be the trap of their approach to homosexuality. Halle finds a historically embedded potential in Herbert Marcuse's essay "On Hedonism," published in Horkheimer's *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1936. Rycenga finds it in Raya Dunayevskaya's arguments about revolution. Neither, however, seeks in the structures and trajectories of Horkheimer's and Adorno's methods – and in the other branches of their work that address culture and the arts – a fuller explanation of what appears to be a moment of critical failure in their arguments about homosexuality.

Recent feminist scholarship, which has provided numerous avenues for reviving the vigor of Critical Theory and its legacy, has pointed to the potential development of a reading of Horkheimer and Adorno that contributes both to a revival of Critical Theory's contribution to scholarship and ethics under (post-) modern conditions and to an adequate reading of the blind spots and inadequacies in the work of Critical Theory's founders. Only work that does both can in fact earn the name 'critical' for itself, and this new feminist scholarship, found in two superb recent essay collections, both published in 2006, does so. The first is a special issue of the journal *differences*; the second is a volume in the vigorous Penn State University Press book series on "Re-Reading the Canon" (Brown 2006; Heberle 2006). Despite ongoing interest, feminism has in fact had trouble approaching Critical Theory, often precisely because its forbidding negativity seems unremediable for interventions in social praxis (Schlippacke 2001; Rycenga 2002; Hewitt 2006; Lee 2006). But when feminism embeds its own critique of such intervention, it embeds Critical Theory. Heberle explains: "Adorno's work may have unintended (by him) consequences for femi-



nism that can only be discerned through open-ended and experimental approaches to his work, which is open and experimental in its own right" (Heberle 2006a: 3). Brown makes a similar and even stronger argument: "Critical Theory is thus a model both for the complexity and self-reflexivity feminist theory requires and also offers elegant insights for contemporary work" (Brown 2006a: 5). Their arguments indeed point the way toward an adequate contextualization of the problems in Horkheimer and Adorno's approach to homosexuality.

In 2002, the University of Frankfurt invited Judith Butler to give the inaugural set of an ongoing series of lectures by major thinkers named in honor of Theodor Adorno. In 2005 these lectures appeared in English under the title *Giving an Account of Oneself*, and have contributed new energy both to Adorno scholarship in general and particularly to work that focuses on Adorno's ethics (Butler 2005). Several of the contributors to the Heberle and Brown essay collections see Butler's arguments as providing a new basis for reengaging feminism with Critical Theory. Her ideas can further provide the grounding for a clear understanding of Horkheimer and Adorno's claims about homosexuality. The key moment comes through careful attention to the rigorously recursive relationship of the individual and the social in their work. In their negatively valenced Critical Theory, any hypostasized claim about either society or the individual is immediately suspect. All psychology is sociology and vice versa. All philosophy is social science and vice versa. Butler configures her own language in this spirit. The three chapter headings of *Giving an Account of Oneself* represent this moment of the derivation of social content from ethical reflection: from the individual ("An Account of Oneself"), to the power relations of the socially active individual ("Against Ethical Violence"), to a concept that inheres recursively ethical intersubjectivity in a social world ("Responsibility"). The center of the chapter on "Responsibility" contains Butler's reading of Adorno's ethics, derived primarily from lectures he gave in 1963 and published under the title *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. Immediately she focuses on recursion, pushing the individual in the direction of the social, placing herself and her reader within an implied sphere of ethical social practice through the use of the plural first-person pronoun: "If the human is anything, it seems to be a dou-

ble movement, one in which we assert moral norms at the same time as we question the authority by which we make that assertion" (Butler 2005: 103). She resolves her argument into a highly positive reading of Adorno's ethical thought: "it is a model of ethical capaciousness, which understands the pull of the claim and resists that pull at the same time, providing a certain ambivalent gesture as the action of ethics itself" (Butler 2005: 103). Finally, she concludes that the idea of the autonomous ethical subject, despite its troubled history, cannot and must not be allowed to wither completely:

This is not the death of the subject...but an inquiry into the modes by which the subject is instituted and maintained, how it institutes and maintains itself, and how the norms that govern ethical principles must be understood not only to guide conduct but to decide the question of who and what will be a human subject (Butler 2005: 110).

Thus Butler returns to the crucial moment in Horkheimer and Adorno's thought which itself generates their troubled reading of homosexuality: all ethics that take individuals seriously contain exclusionary potential. Butler's argument brings Adorno's thought closely into contact with that of Michel Foucault, who also pursues the potentially exclusionary power discourses of enlightened knowledge production, and therefore also requires attention to the historicity of ethical processes. And it is through the historical trajectory of the concept of homosexuality that Horkheimer's and Adorno's blind spots can be brought into focus and resolved into critical insight.

Same-sex-oriented sexual behavior is, of course, observable in human history from the inception of the documentary tradition, and inferable in prehistory through other anthropological and archaeological methods. The scholarly literature that explores the complexities of the documentary tradition and how to read and analyze it to reveal the often-proscribed forms of same-sex-oriented sexual behavior has grown extensive and fascinating recently (Foucault [1978] 1990; Boswell 1980; Woods 1998; Fone 2000; Halperin 2002; Crompton 2003). A key portion of this literature, however, insists appropriately that de-

spite the increasingly well-documented historical and cultural ubiquity of same-sex sexual behavior, the concept 'homosexuality' is an invention of the nineteenth century, derived largely from legal, medical, biological, and psychiatric interest (Greenberg 1988; Bland and Doan 1990; Halperin 1990; Oosterhuis 2000). 'Homosexuality' as a concept – and therefore in many ways as a subject or identity position taken by individuals to represent themselves – therefore contains the new and often repressive moments of the legal, medical, and psychiatric definition (and sometimes condemnation) of deviance, but at the same time a new kind of definition of the self based on sexuality that seems to promise liberation from repressive social and cultural norms. Foucault famously called this compelling but often counterintuitive modern process of the co-determination of repression and liberation through conceptualization the “putting into discourse of sex” (Foucault 1990: 12).

Horkheimer's and Adorno's negativity toward the concept of homosexuality derives from this historical process of the discursive code-determination of repression and liberation by a scholarly concept. Critical Theory as idea and ideal, defined originally by Horkheimer in his “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937), seeks as the fundamental moment of its method a critique of the social function of the scholarly-philosophical concept (Horkheimer 1970a: 39-46). In order to formulate his statement of the content of Critical Theory, however, Horkheimer drew on his own work from the year before about the status and freedom of the bourgeois individual in society. This essay, entitled “Egoism and the Freedom Movement: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era” (1936) argues that the bourgeois concept of self-fulfillment through the exercise of personal freedom (i.e. egoism) is the dialectical twin of the concept of unfettered and destructive capitalist competition of all bourgeois individuals with all others – and that moral thought in both its Kantian and utilitarian forms collaborates in this making-equivalent of personal freedom and competitive exploitation. The issue of sexuality enters in Horkheimer's reading of repressive proto-bourgeois moralists like Savonarola, Luther, Calvin, and Robespierre, as well as in Horkheimer's deployment of Freud's read-

ings of the friction between culture and ego-driven competitiveness (Horkheimer 1970b: 120-132, 155-156).

The fuller form of the exploration of the moment of sexuality in Critical Theory arrives in *DoE*, particularly in the two "excurses" that in fact form the core of the work's analysis of cultural objects as the grounds of philosophical understanding. The first of these excurses explores Homer's *Odyssey*, a work that culminates in Odysseus's reestablishment of the sexual order of the society of Ithaka through his and his son Telemachos's slaughter of the many dozens of freeloading suitors of his wife Penelope. The second excursus analyzes the works of the Marquis de Sade, and concludes, deploying Kant's classical definition of the enlightened subject, that "the work of the Marquis de Sade shows 'understanding without control by another,' that is the bourgeois subject freed from guardianship" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1988: 93). For the Horkheimer and Adorno of *DoE*, "free" sexuality cannot be anything of the sort, because it is only conceivable as taking place between participants in the bourgeois moral-economic system of the inexorable exploitation of all people by all people all of the time. For them, then, the concept homosexuality – historically invented both to defend and to condemn same-sex sexual behavior – cannot be anything but a constitutive part of this system of the recursive generation of domination.

Adorno and Horkheimer therefore only use the term homosexuality to refer to a kind of social pathology, because their critique of bourgeois society reveals – almost *avant la lettre* - that the term is derived from a nineteenth-century construction based on arguments about pathology and deviance. In their understanding homosexuality reveals a great deal about the repressive and dominating deployment of Enlightenment science and medicine, but almost nothing about its liberating spheres of rights, subjectivities, and expressions. Therefore the case-study scholarship and highly personal advocacy of many of the early German researchers and commentators on homosexuality, from Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Károly Kertbeny to Johann Ludwig Casper, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Magnus Hirschfeld, does not reach the level of generality about the human, the social, and the conceptual that Horkheimer and Adorno's theoretical investments seem to de-

mand, and are never mentioned in their work. It is not the diverse sexual behavior of individuals that makes them squirm (and Horkheimer and Adorno would doubtless have loathed the concept of “sexual expression” for its unexamined conflation of behavioral and aesthetic categories). It is rather the ways in which the social and symbolic function and interpretation of that behavior often reveals potential or real violence, domination, and exploitation. They are also – sometimes to a fault – never afraid to seek the dominating elements in the motivations of those who would declare their own behavior enlightened, liberated, or radical. Critics like Axel Honneth (himself a successor to Horkheimer and Adorno in Frankfurt) have seen this as evidence of a “sociological deficit,” but it might better be described as an almost-too-radical dialectical critique – and thereby retention through refiguration – of conceptual totalization that takes ironical and dialectical revenge on its own advocates (Honneth 1991: 17; Jay 1984).

The most troubling aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno’s negatively dialectical deployment of the concept of homosexuality is that it makes no attempt to account for the diversity of individual human beings and their practices. Butler explores how and where, in his ethically-oriented work, Adorno in fact developed a vigorous critique of false universality as “violence” perpetrated on the individual (Butler 2005: 4-7). Nonetheless this spirit seems entirely absent in his and Horkheimer’s approach to homosexuality, and it thus appears here that their attempt to develop a philosophically grounded theory of society that links the anthropological (in the German sense of the conceptual analysis of the human) with the cultural (in the German sense of the products of human effort in both the artistic and the economic spheres) homogenizes the individual. Thus they slide easily into the appearance of ignoring – or even backhandedly denigrating – the concerns of homosexual persons subject to the legal and psychiatric disciplinary regimes of their day. This blind spot represents a moment where their dialectical method abruptly stands still – a potential which became central to the inquiry and method of their colleague Walter Benjamin, whose own later work seeks the discrete almost radically. Adorno had vigorous debates with Benjamin about this issue in the

1930s (Wiggershaus 1994: 210-218; Presner 2007: 16-19). The reality of social domination and conflict has vanished entirely into an endless sequence of dialectical recursions. That Adorno was aware of the possibility of this failure, and therefore of the absurdity of the idea that he might need to be absolved of it – a point Butler emphasizes – nonetheless does not cause it to disappear.

There is, however, a moment where Adorno's astringent theoretical rigor does develop an almost disorientingly positive interpretation of the work of a particular artist – and particularly of one of his works in which the representation of a homosexual person resolves into the possibility of humanity at the level of discrete relationships. That artist is Alban Berg, Adorno's teacher of musical composition. The work is Berg's final, unfinished opera, *Lulu*. Adorno wrote extensively about both, and explored with subtlety and care the many issues of sexuality surrounding both Berg as a person and his opera. Nonetheless these readings again show Adorno's fluctuating reticence to approach matters which take him from the level of the conceptual to that of individual human beings, and therefore might raise the specter of the deviant. In the midst of his most subtle and sympathetic forms of critical argument, his blind spot remains.

Berg based his *Lulu* on a pair of plays by the German playwright Frank Wedekind, *Earth Spirit* (*Der Erdgeist*, 1895) and *Pandora's Box* (*Die Büchse der Pandora*, 1902). Highly controversial in the first decades of the twentieth century, the plays narrate a series of the consummated and unconsummated sexual liaisons of Lulu. The final of these is an unconsummated lesbian affair with Countess Geschwitz. All lead to murder or suicide. Lulu herself – in the company of Geschwitz – falls victim to Jack the Ripper at the end of the plays and the opera. Berg had known Wedekind's plays as early as 1904, and remained fascinated with them for his entire life. He began adapting them for the text of his opera in 1928, and by the time of his death in 1935 had completed two of the opera's three acts, a five-part suite of orchestral excerpts from the opera, and the text, musical sketch, fragments of the orchestration, and suggestions for the complete instrumentation of the third act. From these notes, the Viennese musicologist Friedrich Cerha produced a full version of the orchestration of the third act that

was published after the death of Berg's wife Helene in 1976. This 'completed' version is now used regularly in performances of the work (Perle 1985: 33-41, 275-277). The incredible and fascinating complexity of the opera makes it impossible to discuss in any detail here. The work has drawn the admiration not only of philosophers and musicologists, but also of opera-going audiences. Rare among modern operas – and almost unique among works composed with the rigorous twelve-tone method of Berg's teacher Arnold Schoenberg – the work achieves regular performances in opera houses around the world. George Perle, the most dedicated scholar of Berg's music, goes so far as to call the completed three-act *Lulu* "among the uniquely significant, uniquely original, and supremely important musical creations of our century" (Perle 1985: 280).

Adorno spent 1925 and 1926 studying with Berg in Vienna, and developed a lifelong fondness for his teacher. He wrote a number of extensive biographical essays about Berg, and also analyzed Berg's entire small but intense musical output. Much of this work was collected and reworked into a major monograph published in 1968 (Adorno 1971). It contains a remarkable dialectical formulation that reveals Adorno's conviction that true humanity might indeed keep one at a distance from individual human beings. He in fact attributes this character to Berg's music: "No music of our time has been as humane as his; that pushes it far away from human beings" (Adorno 1971: 330; compare Adorno 1991: 5). He then reformulates and expands this same argument in praise of *Lulu*: "Berg's music hits the pressure point at which organized humanity cannot understand a joke, and just this point becomes for him a refuge of the humane" (Adorno 1971: 333; Adorno 1991: 7). The monograph also demonstrates dramatically how Adorno's sensibilities could lead him to limit his own discussion of matters of sexuality. The book's second chapter is a thirty-three page biographical "Erinnerung" (reminiscence). It contains much reflection on Berg's personal life and marriage, phrased with some delicacy and distance: "The habitual underestimation of the sensual by the German spirit was completely alien to Berg.... He handled his own person carefully and indifferently at once, like the musical instrument that he was to himself" (Adorno 1971: 344; Adorno 1991: 16).

These hyper-poetic phrasings have a rather saltier counterpart, however. In 1955 Adorno wrote – and did not publish – an essay entitled “To the Memory of Alban Berg” that contained a much more frank estimation of Berg’s sexuality and approach to it – including homosexuality. The editor of Adorno’s complete works indicates that Adorno stipulated that the reflections not be published in his lifetime or that of those mentioned immediately in it. Nonetheless Adorno suggested that “after that I would like them to be printed, because I believe that I have grasped something about Berg that would otherwise be lost” (Tiedemann 1984: 645). Much reworked material from this essay found its way into the 1968 Berg monograph, but not the most direct material about sex and sexuality. The editors and translators of the Berg monograph note this, but do not analyze it (Adorno 1991: 141). In his unpublished reflections, Adorno describes Berg’s personal approach to sex and sexuality with something that approaches wistfulness – though Freudian language is, as always, not far away: “Berg’s relationship to sexuality: he had a friendly attitude toward everything sexual, like one sometimes finds among aristocrats – namely with a kind of pride in others and in himself about every successful sexual union, as if its affinity for death had been triumphantly put down” (Adorno 1984: 490). Clearly, Adorno saw Berg’s sexuality as polymorphous, though in this page-long discussion homosexuality does not appear.

In the final passages of the essay, however, homosexuality erupts, and again in a curious, unstable, and dialectically overloaded way. Adorno’s narrative first co-opts Berg into a sarcastic moment edging on homophobia, and then – twenty-two pages after he discussed Berg’s attitudes toward sex in some detail – raises the possibility of Berg’s own homosexuality. The first moment comes at the only point in Adorno’s writings on Berg where he mentions that Berg’s sister Smaragda lived openly as a lesbian. He does so snidely, in a passage that also seems to denigrate Berg’s wife, Helene:

I would also like to take note of Helene’s brother, Mr. Nahowsky, who was homosexual and openly [sic] schizophrenic, but also of unforgettable beauty. Smaragda, Berg’s sister, was for her part lesbian, and among her girlfriends there was a most unsympa-



thetic woman named Keller.... Berg and I enjoyed imagining for ourselves a marriage between Nahowsky and Smaragda (Adorno 1984: 507).

This passage may be the exception that proves the rule posited by Rycenga: that Adorno “seems (blissfully?) unaware of lesbian possibilities” (Rycenga 2002: 375). It also does a factual and biographical injustice to Berg’s relationship to his sister, whom the composer defended in public and in writing. Recent commentators including Perle and Mitchell Morris have explored the relationship between Alban and Smaragda Berg (Perle 1985: 39-40; Morris 1995: 361-363).

Unsurprisingly, Adorno cannot conclude his essay without a direct denial that Berg himself was homosexual despite his interest in issues of sexual and gender ambiguity. Again in an eye-popping meta-dialectical manner, Adorno does so in a passage that emphasizes, in stark contrast to other points he makes, Berg’s “inhumanity”:

I possessed, in a certain measure, an organ for that part of him that bordered on the inhumane, and which was perhaps related to his charm, his female element. He was, moreover, not homosexual, but he passionately believed in Weininger and said once that every decent human being most certainly has a female component. This moment of inhumanity is to be understood in a most emphatic sense, and is certainly not to be separated from his relationship to death... (Adorno 1984: 511).

Once again, Adorno’s thought makes homosexuality inseparable from death and the inhuman. In this essay he treats the individual sardonically, as the living site of critique, and does so to cast light upon the greater dialectical importance of the conceptual. Berg himself even becomes a metaphor for this sublation of the individual into the realm of principle:

In the ten years that I knew him, I always more or less clearly had the feeling that as an empirical human being he was not entirely there, did not really play along; he was the opposite of an existential, self-identified human being.... Berg's entire empirical existence stood below the primacy of the work; he fashioned himself into an instrument for it... (Adorno 1984: 511).

In the 1968 Berg monograph, this interpretation is phrased strikingly: "Psychology transcends itself in Berg's music" (Adorno 1971: 351). If, for Adorno, anything can escape the Enlightenment-domination trap, and even perhaps help individuals themselves to do so, it is Berg's music. Unfortunately, his moment of blindness about homosexuality remains. Universally in Adorno's thought, homosexuality as a concept excludes the possibility of transcendent and self-transcendent aesthetic work from the position of homosexual self-identification.

Adorno's interpretation of the relationship between Lulu and Geschwitz in Berg's opera bears the marks of this complex, meta-dialectical relationship to his teacher's person, work, and memory. In all of Adorno's extensive writings on Berg, the lesbian relationship between Lulu and Geschwitz – unconsummated as it may be – is mentioned directly only once, in a lecture that Berg delivered to the audience before the premiere of *Lulu* in Frankfurt in 1960.<sup>2</sup> And once again, in almost radical and radically poetic dialectical language, it demonstrates the abjection of the individual human characters in the opera in the service of the realm of ideas:

At the same time that points to the idea. In the same way that the characters in the drama throw themselves away among the hopeless and the lost – the compulsive Lulu, Geschwitz in sexual thrall to her, Doctor Schön, and Alwa – so too does the opera....

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<sup>2</sup> The index to the English translation of the 1968 Berg monograph contains a list of references to the characters in *Lulu*. Geschwitz does not appear (Adorno 1991: 149).

It [the work] turns to rescue that which must carry the load of universal scorn. That is the origin of its violence-free violence. No other music of our time is so humane as that of Berg, and people thus recoil from it. The phantasmagoria of grand opera as which *Lulu* will represent itself to you is at the same time the model of an artwork of real humanity (Adorno 1984a: 648-649).

Homosexual individuals certainly qualify in Adorno's thought for conceptual inclusion in the sphere of those subject to universal scorn. But he cannot bring himself to grant them, as individuals, any moment of humanity. So his dialectics carry on inexorably, both aware and unaware at once of the blind spots within.

The incommensurabilities of the representation of homosexuality in Horkheimer and Adorno thus display the dissonance between ethical action (derived from and centered on the critical and self-critical subject, and therefore 'capacious' in Butler's sense, meaning generating and requiring intersubjective responsibility and respect) and ethical systems (which as a historical and collective phenomenon under modern conditions embed enough of the repressive content of bourgeois enlightenment to be always suspect). Because, for Horkheimer and Adorno, homosexuality carries enough historically derived residues of pathology that its foundation as a subject position is shaky, and also because it has always been a key locus of the generation of bourgeois discourses of ethical system-building, homosexual persons fall into a gap in Critical Theory – just as they do in Kant's ethics where they are at their most abstract, in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (Comay 2006: 8). For Adorno and Horkheimer, then, homosexuality as a concept is both so historically and philosophically labile that it appears untenable as grounding for the psychologically integrated critical subjectivity necessary to all ethics. Adorno approaches awareness of this in "Sexual Taboos and the Law Today": "The question of the freedom of the will is probably not at all to be solved abstractly, namely through ideal constructions of the individual and his character that exists purely for itself, but rather only in consciousness of the dialectics of individual and society" (Adorno 1977: 548). Unfortunately, homosexuals as persons

fall into the gap between individual and society because, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, the concept that governs the possibility of their self-identification belongs to neither, but only to the dialectical detritus of enlightened domination. Their blind spots, however, can help to illuminate the possibility of – and the importance of their contribution to – the ongoing process of the critical reconstruction of society.

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