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Ann Matsuuchi

“Happily Ever After”: The Tragic Queer and Delany’s Comic Book Fairy Tale

People can tolerate two homosexuals they see leaving together, but if the next day they’re smiling, holding hands and tenderly embracing one another, then they can’t be forgiven. It is not the departure for pleasure that is intolerable, it is waking up happy. —Michel Foucault, qtd. in Leo Bersani, *Homos* (1995)

In a 2014 panel discussion with Samuel R. Delany, bell hooks praised his autobiographical graphic novel *Bread & Wine: An Erotic Tale of New York* as being a work that exemplifies a subversive refashioning of sexual imagery:

The amazing thing about *Bread & Wine* is that it is so tender. And I think that we are still trying to figure out how can we create sexual images, images of the penis, that are loving and tender and not about domination. . . . We praise him because of the visions that he has created in his work. (bell hooks in “Open Dialogue”)

Together with artist Mia Wolff, and with an authorial contribution from his partner Dennis, Delany depicts a queer love story that resists clichéd homonormative recasting of existing familial templates but one that calls into question how expectations of queer happiness are formulated, given that they are bounded by a persistent set of social norms (race, class, education, and income) and their intersections. Drawing the penis in a way that conveys love rather than violence is no easy task, and as Wolff has pointed out, creating images that convey happiness and light can be much more challenging than darkness and abjection.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed presents an important phenomenological and feminist critique of the discourse surrounding the notion of happiness itself—as a state that is necessarily supported by satisfaction with the status quo and resistance to social change. Ahmed contends that queer exclusion from a normalized state of happiness (an “alien planet”) is systematically part of the structure that defines it (49), employing science fictional terms to describe the deviations of “affect aliens” who do not follow conventional, strictly determinative “happiness scripts” (centered on a futurity guaranteed by the production of children) (59). While Ahmed suggests a resistance to this conception of happiness, advocating for a more utopian and politically generative mode of being, Delany’s stories take on the challenge by moving beyond a rejection of existing scripts, instantiating the possibility of happiness in the here and now. In the following essay, I attempt to detail how Delany’s happy ending in *Bread & Wine* can be read as a kind of social critique, reworking viewers’ responses to what is “shocking” in what is seen and not seen, in how bodies and dirt need not be predictable signs of abjection.

The validity of everyday moments, depicting realities (or possible realities) not reliant on existing scripts, are recurring features of Delany’s fictional and nonfictional narratives. In the following essay, I locate *Bread & Wine* in a body of work that continually calls attention to systematically unacknowledged moments of everyday life, highlighting the potentialities of spaces created by the movement of bodies and social forces. Delany’s happy ending in *Bread & Wine* can function as a kind of social critique, complicating and transforming an instance of abject urban poverty into a visually fantastical but authentic assertion of the possibility of happiness.

While a critical questioning of the end goal of happiness and its costs is necessary, it remains problematic how narrative templates with happy endings in queer representations are still limited. In *Bread & Wine*, Delany grounds the account of the start of his relationship with life partner Dennis in the details of lived experience, depicting queer futurity by pairing the narrative with lines from the Friedrich Hölderlin poem that shares the same title with the work. I also briefly discuss the Japanese *manga Future Lovers* (originally titled “memory of the future”), a fictional account of the initiation of a gay romance, and its presentation of how the protagonist reconsiders the inevitability of an imagined future. Following José Esteban Muñoz’s hermeneutic construction of queer futurity, I consider Delany’s illustration of how happy endings can function as a renegotiation of the utopian impulse into something more complex and realistic.

In an interview with Kenneth James that followed a reading from *Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders* in June 2012, Delany shared one of the reasons he insisted on a happy ending for the lifelong love story between characters Eric Jeffers and Morgan “Shit” Haskell. Delany referred to an essay following the controversial publication of *Lolita*, where Nabokov bemoaned publisher excuses for rejecting his novel:

Their refusal to buy the book was not based on my treatment of the theme but on the theme itself, for there are at least three themes which are utterly taboo as far as most American publishers are concerned. The two others are: a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren; and the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106. (Nabokov 74-75)

Defying the rules that govern narrative templates can cause deep discomfort, with few permitted exceptions. Nabokov later reported that one publisher would have been more accepting if he had changed *Lolita* the nymphet into a twelve-year-old boy (75). In another challenge to conventional expectations, the impact of the 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* was due in part to its ending, where the African American protagonist does not get torn apart by police dogs and successfully escapes. Audiences were reportedly shocked (although some were inspired) by the violation of an accepted formula, one which resulted from sociopolitical forces that intentionally sought to perpetuate a submissive mindset (*How to Eat Your Watermelon*). What was unbelievable was not so much the protagonist’s survival, but the heroic depiction of his flight.

Reviewers of both *The Mad Man* and *Spiders* have sometimes reported reactions of discomfort or shock when reading unflinching portrayals of sexual practices that lie outside of conventional expectations (Walton n. pag.; Lind 64). I think that the intent here is not to shock, but to encourage readers either to recognize the familiar or to acknowledge what is not registered in the normalizing gaze. In *The Mad Man*, protagonist John Marr is told of how sexual activity can go unnoticed by those not inclined to see it by an old man named “Pops,” who describes an encounter with a “chink kid” twenty or thirty years earlier:

[T]his kid come up to me—little chink kid, thirteen, fourteen: slanty-eyed bastard, Chinese, I guess. Or Japanese, maybe. He come right up to me an’ he say, “Lemme suck yo’ dick.” Just about like you done, this afternoon—’cept he weren’t a nigger, he was a chink. So I say, “Okay, but where you gonna do it? I mean them guys is playin’ baseball, right back there.” An’ you know what he tells me? He tells me: “That’s all right—it don’t make no difference. They come here and play every week. They won’t see nothin’”—they right there playin’ baseball! (*Mad Man* 51)

For a moment, Marr considers the resemblance between this youngster and the Asian American philosopher Timothy Hasler whose life he has been tracking. Pops’s account suggests that these actors and encounters were not at all unique, that they (and Marr) are part of the multigenerational resurfacing of kinds of human relations. This is visualized by an entangled ballplayer/cocksucker binary:

And this chink kid tells me: "Look. There're two kinds of people in the world. There's baseball players. And there's cocksuckers. An' most of the time the baseball players don't even see the cocksuckers." Then he tells me, besides, he done already sucked off four of the guys on the baseball team right where I'm sittin'! (*Mad Man* 51)

This observation does not mean to imply the existence of an objective, authorial lens that guarantees a known reality, but serves as a reminder of epistemological limitations shaped by the contradictions between expectation, experience, and acknowledgment.

In line with Nabokov's comment about how happy endings can be exclusionary, Reed Woodhouse points out that some readers were less surprised by *The Mad Man's* sexual frankness than by the ending, in which Marr and Leaky, a professor and a homeless man like Delany and Dennis, end up quite happy: "The final sentences, the 'happily ever after' of this 'pornotopic fairy story,' have an almost Fitzgeraldian sound to them, and thus serve to remind us that *The Mad Man* has been a New York, as well as an AIDS, or love, story" (215). He goes on to playfully ask why we should want to read such a "disgusting" book (Woodhouse 216). If there is any discomfort prompted in the reader, this serves a purpose: "knowing his story *will* shock, he writes in the plain belief that it ought not to. . . . The most shocking thing about this book is not its presentation of extreme sexual acts, however, but its assumption that they can be occasions of friendship or love" (Woodhouse 215). The characters in *The Mad Man* choose to overlook conventional commandments involving sexuality and class-based limitations on interactions. Marr's investigation into the philosopher Hasler's death reveals a transgression against the rules surrounding sexual commerce—his happiness was borne out of disregard for a social template that he threatened.

The blindness of the "baseball player" can be consequential. During a Q&A that followed a book discussion with Delany and *Bread & Wine* artist Mia Wolff, an attendee asked Delany if there were any sexual aspects of the story that were too intimate to depict. Delany responded that a writer has a responsibility not to obfuscate difficult matters:

I'm a gay man who came through the AIDS epidemic. The notion that being genteel about intimacy and there are certain things we don't show, that KILLS people. . . . And I just didn't want to be complicit in murder, because I think that's what it does. . . . [A denial of human sexuality and varieties of it is . . .] very, very wrong . . . the ignorance that it fosters, the lies that it fosters . . . is a very bad and evil thing. I am violently opposed to it, and this is why I write the books I do. ("Delany & Wolff Discuss")

To go along with the conventional messages about what is "appropriate" to see or to say out loud results in the prescribed ignorance that distorts an accurate depiction of reality and our ideas about it.

From a writer's perspective, Delany has commented upon the role of language in manipulating the experience of the reader. What is said and not said matters. In "About 5,750 Words," he describes how frequently overlooked specifics (*e.g.*, a narrator saying that she laid a generic book on a table versus saying they set down a specific book and its significance): "Five tones of voice are generated by the varying specificity. . . . the different tones give different information about the personality of the speaker as well as the speaker's state of mind" (3). However shocked the reader may be when asked to look again at what's going on in the bushes, details serve a purpose: "Both the fictive subject and the equally complex (and equally important for science fiction) fictive object are rendered differently by these supposedly minimally different details" (3). Rather than glossing over events with excuses of appropriateness, these details call attention to what goes unnoticed about our experiences in the world.

Carl Freedman, in his review of *Bread & Wine*, appreciates how Delany shuns the novice writer's tendency to overdramatize: "Though as sexually frank as can be,

it contains little of the impulse to shock, or even to problematize normative heterosexuality, that characterizes much current gay writing” (357). *Bread & Wine* is not a “pornotopic fantasy” but a memoir with realized moments of joy and wonder, feelings conveyed in the drawings by magical, fairy-tale decoration. The poem from Hölderlin that provides the title and whose text serves as a kind of foreign backdrop to a familiar New York City landscape, simultaneously functions as a means of exalting a love story filled with quotidian detail. Mia Wolff expertly captures both moments of hesitation and triumph, similarly employing universalizing metaphor, not from classical texts but modern surroundings. The closing images of *Bread & Wine* reveal hands tightly clasped, and a scene that playfully combines elements from the shared domestic pleasure of watching a PBS nature documentary with Chip and Dennis standing amid jubilant penguins in the snow, bare and proud in their survival (43).

For Delany, a writer must bring clarity to our picture of human life by providing as much detail as possible. Given the chance to look through the eyes of a “cock-sucker” through orgiastic minutes so textually illustrated that time seems expanded: a fifteen- to twenty-minute encounter in a truck-stop men’s room is covered in over twenty pages, with the protagonist Eric making contact with a number of significant characters, including future partner Shit (*Spiders* 45). The experiences in the men’s room and the porn theater do not seem quite as dismal or shame-ridden as they are customarily depicted as being. At the same time, Delany partly resists this interpretation of his textual practices, calling on readers to more humbly acknowledge that they may not be seeing what is hidden in plain sight:

I resist, as they say, the notion of “demystification” because it suggests something apocalyptic, in the sense of pulling away the *kalyptra*, the veil, of revealing the truth—that is to say, it suggests someone “who knows.” And I don’t know or claim to know. What I tend to find myself doing more and more is insisting on what we *don’t* know—and that we would do ourselves a favor by ceasing to carry on as if we did. . . . Any demystification that, from time to time, readers can find—and that’s entirely dependent on the readers’ position within the greater discourse—is a happy accident. (qtd. in Lukin 184-85; original emphasis)

It is the responsibility of the writer and artist to dislodge the hubris that results from a refusal to acknowledge all aspects of human experience. In the Afterword to the 1999 edition of *Bread & Wine*, Wolff describes Delany’s approach as a writer to him neatly: “What you’re good at is vacuuming up the world and making it into sentences and stories” (*Bread & Wine* 46). This is a fitting analogy, since it reminds us of all the dirt and unseen particles—what gets vacuumed up is not filtered subjectively. Customarily omitted commonplace details such as the brand of coffee used on an unremarkable morning are included: how it is stored, how it is prepared, by what means it is scooped out of the jar (Delany, “View”). By drawing our attention to the details of everyday life, Delany restores the oppositional and hierarchal understanding of mythos (the unreal, fantastical, and prelogical) and logos (the real, scientific, and reasoned) to their classical, complementary relationship.

Henri Lefebvre warned of the dangers of capitalist institutional forces and the resultant homogenizing effects of culture that limit our imaginative memories of a historical past, one which was likely more inclusive of a greater diversity of modes of life: “We perceive everyday life only in its familiar, trivial, inauthentic guises. How can we avoid the temptation to turn our backs on it?” (133). While this reading may lean toward romanticizing a precommercialized past, Lefebvre makes an important connection between mythologized images of the everyday and the sociopolitical contexts that define it. Delany’s insistence on clearly delineating the economic burdens of characters in his later fiction (“how they put bread on the table”) serves as a literary example of what Lefebvre advocates, a resistance to the mythologized image of the individual as consumer-hero, unsullied by the dull repetition of work.

Ideas of everyday life are commodified and homogenized in ways that limit how we conceive life to be possible: how poverty is defined, how standards of living vary.

Sex and domesticity are two of the most important, yet often distorted, locations of everyday life. Happy endings, connoting both physical pleasures in sexual transactions as well as fairy-tale conclusions to stories, inform the linear teleological narratives of possibility that some individuals devise for themselves. In the back-cover blurb for the 1999 edition, Edmund White commends the “fairy-tale atmosphere” created by the illustrations in *Bread & Wine*. Looking at this love story as a fairy tale allows us to identify a number of elements familiar to the genre: beggars and princes, transformation, discoveries, and a happy ending uncomplicated by shame and punishment. Wolff fills her drawings of the urban Central Park background with an evocative mix of naturalistic and fantastical elements (*Bread & Wine* 5). In many social contexts, the possibility of the success of a relationship between cross-class lovers is looked at with suspicion. Here, Dennis is not turned magically into a prince but is revealed to be simply a man who underneath the grime of the streets deserves love as much as anyone.

In his fictional and autobiographical work, Delany has resisted casting his characters as pathetic victims, never gesturing toward the narrative cliché of the tragic queer (“bury your gays”) where suffering and death are inevitable conclusions. Recalling Nabokov’s complaint about how happiness is taboo for nonnormative protagonists, Delany insists upon a countermeasure to the tragic queer in allowing for an equal chance at happy endings for everyone present. In *Spiders*, Eric and Shit demonstrate what is often cast as impossible in the conventional fictional templates, that two men from different races and classes could live out their lives together quite happily, their fates not predetermined by inevitable societal punishment. The tropes of genre here permit a narrative flexibility to fully realize these often muzzled possibilities. Eric and Shit become old men in a future America filled with technological wonders, new social conventions, and new sets of prejudices.

The format of the American comic book implies a representation of impossible fantasies borne out of unrealized desires. To Lefebvre, elevating the “marvellous” over the mundane distracts readers from the alienation of everyday life. Via critical knowledge and action, everyday life can be effectively interrogated: “only the philosopher, and the sociologist informed by the dialectic, and maybe the novelist, manage to join together the lived and the real, formal structure and content” (Lefebvre qtd. in Elden 113). Comic books and science fiction, granted an automatic exemption from the demands of realism, can be effective platforms not merely for fantasy, but also for actualizing the ways we might construct possible futures and more clearly understand how our present worlds inform these futurities.

Here I suggest that Delany’s approach offers not escapism, but rather what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls a “reparative” mode of reading (116). Delany’s fiction suggests the potentiality of psychic recovery rather than dwelling on the inscription of trauma. Can queer happy endings be rewritten and redrawn with newly reparative vocabularies and imageries? Through her drawings, Wolff communicates important nonverbal aspects of the story. In particular, Delany points out how Dennis’s emotional state is aptly conveyed by a page break (Fig. 1); the words describing emotional reactions on both their parts remain somewhat restrained throughout the text (Cusack 164). Dennis is credited for a being a co-creator of the text, providing the artist with geographical details and memories that flesh out the work (Enright 139). Wolff fills in any emotion she detects from the couple in her drawings: Dennis’s joy in the freedoms of a new life; trucks suddenly swerving around corners, striking Dennis’s father, and later Delany, in hit-and-run accidents; domestic comfort with a new family sitting before a TV set. This is a comic book account of the start of a relationship and we see it unfolding through images, rather than just via dialogue and anecdotes from the memoirist’s perspective. Infusing the story with an otherworldly



Fig. 1: Dennis in flight and freedom (*Bread & Wine* 38).

motif, Wolff renders the experience of this comic book akin to reading an illustrated fairy tale with similar pedagogical designs.

Parents of queer children are said to worry about whether their children can be truly happy when faced with presumed challenges such as persecution and loneliness. Does this expectation result from an absence of images of any deviations from what Lefebvre called capitalist fictions? As Ahmed puts it, in “Happiness and Queer Politics”: “Such identification through grief about what the child will lose, reminds us that the queer life is already constructed as an unhappy life, as a life without the ‘things’ that make you happy: a husband and children. The desire for the child’s happiness is far from indifferent. The speech act ‘I just want you to be happy’ can be directive at the very point of its imagined indifference” (8). The parent might intend to communicate unconditional love, but the “just” suggests apology and justification: “It is always paradoxical to say something does not matter: when you have to say something does not matter it usually implies that it does” (9). Straight parents may never have been exposed to any alternative castings of successful human life outside of fictions informed by tradition, old or newer (*e.g.*, from fantasies created by 1950s’ television sitcoms). The state of happiness itself can be cast as being inherently “normative and regulated,” requiring a kind of sterile conformity to the status quo (Jones 3). This critique, however, supports the premise that happiness and queerness are oppositional states.

Increased visibility of homonormative domesticity seems to ease some of these parental anxieties. If one’s child fits into newly cast modes of acceptable homosexuality, that child is permitted the possibility of happiness achieved via comprehensible channels. To Ahmed, this reclamation of happiness is little more than an empty imitation of the hetero-trappings associated with the state of being happy, and she raises a fair criticism of how happiness dulls a necessary anger with the status quo: “We must stay unhappy with this world” (“Happiness” 9). Ahmed argues that “[r]ather than reading unhappy endings as a sign of the withholding of a moral

approval for queer lives, we would consider how unhappiness circulates within and around this archive, and *what it allows us to do*" (1). To be sure, this kind of punk-rock sensibility does motivate social change and challenges a continually pervasive indifference and passivity.

In a similar move, Judith Halberstam quotes Jamaica Kincaid when arguing for negative endings as a requirement of political responsibility: "I think in many ways the problem that my writing would have with an American reviewer is that Americans find difficulty very hard to take. They are inevitably looking for a happy ending. . . . I am not at all—absolutely not at all—interested in the pursuit of happiness. . . . I am interested in pursuing a truth, and the truth often seems to be not happiness but its opposite. . . . I feel it's my business to make everyone a little less happy" (149). This position seems well supported in the face of Hollywood-movie mediocrity, suggesting that there is something fundamentally unreal about happy endings, particularly for certain types of characters. Dulled by the fantasy that all is as it should be, audiences can easily leave the forces that govern their lives and their understanding of history unquestioned. Fairy tales gloss over the details of how their characters fall in love, and in *Bread & Wine*, due to format limitations and a narrative approach that favors factual observation over impressions and speculation, questions about the relationship are left unanswered. The narrative of this romance, while brazenly depicted, does not touch upon any future developmental negotiations or relational conflicts. This allows for an overly simplistic reading of the cheery domestic resolution as being a tidy closure of monogamous assimilationist marital bliss. This misinterpretation is corrected when read in light of Delany's other fictional and autobiographical writing.

Could it be that this negative pose follows what Sedgwick warns about the critical prevalence of the suspicious lens? As she writes,

[F]or someone to have an unmystified view of systemic oppressions does not *intrinsically* or *necessarily* enjoy that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences. To be other than paranoid . . . to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does *not*, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression. (127-28; original emphasis)

This mode of knowing offers an understandable appeal, but "it is not only important but *possible* to find ways of attending to such reparative motives and positionalities" (Sedgwick 150; original emphasis). Narrative practices do not have to be limited in such a way in order to fulfill necessary political obligations. Kincaid and Halberstam make important points about how happy endings can concretize unacceptable norms, but to exclude them involves its own risks and can result in an oversimplified and overly nihilistic picture of the world. Is it not possible that reclaimed narrative forms with happy endings might succeed in interrupting and disrupting problematic modes of thought?

In *Spiders*, Eric's personal history incorporates a philosophical dimension. An older gay neighbor, Bill Bottom, serves as a mentor, and initiates a lifelong interest in Spinoza while also offering advice about the pursuit of happiness. Bottom's story of missed opportunity recalls one lost by Arnold Hawley in Delany's 2007 novel *Dark Reflections*, in which a quick decision made out of fear and hesitation leads to a lifetime of regret. Bottom advises Eric to disregard the stories and thought processes that might limit the as-yet-unwritten possibilities that he will encounter:

Eric, sometime in your life—it may be in twenty minutes, or two months, or six years, or twenty-five years—you are going to find yourself in a situation that, simply because of all the things you have done, you will realize holds the possibility of . . . happiness. Now it won't be like mine. But it will be something lots fewer people could understand than could have understood . . . well, what I just told you about. But when it happens, don't be like me, Eric. You say, "Yes." (*Spiders* 62-63)

Eric, unlike Arnold Hawley, goes on to accept some unusual characters and situations, finding love mixed in with the garbage that with which he and his partner work. With this direction and a lifelong re-reading of Spinoza's *Ethica*, Eric becomes satisfied in his lifelong project of living peacefully and beneficially among others in the world.

One memorable image appears not in the illustrated body of the text but in the Afterword. Here Delany relates an incident in which he had passed by a still-homeless Dennis on the sidewalk when going to have sushi with his daughter. Delany deeply regrets the choice of *not* violating customary social rules here, while for Dennis this experience was so commonplace that he cannot recall it at all (Afterword n. pag.). When faced with choices like the one Bill Bottom describes, it is difficult to resist automatically following what we believe is the correct and appropriate decision.

The "Beggar"

In the archetypal fairy-tale scenario, the princess (or some other royal character) disguises herself as a beggar to test the worth of her would-be suitor. Dennis does not position himself as a helpless victim. Despite the presumptions that many New Yorkers might have about homeless people, Dennis is looking neither to be saved nor to con a credulous Samaritan: in a passing remark carefully noted by Delany he says, "I got it good out here. All I really need is a lover." Neither of them starts out in a state of despair, although Dennis's lifestyle is far from comfortable.

Dennis describes the key elements of his daily routine to Delany: where he sleeps at night and the walk back and forth across Manhattan's Central Park. At the same time, insights that are likely unfamiliar are shared, such as how not sleeping and working in the same neighborhood night after night helps a street person avoid police harassment. New Yorkers rarely pause to think about the immediate challenges faced by characters passed by on daily commutes: "He told me how, on these daily trips from the Eastside to the West, he would stop off mornings in the park's public restroom—when it was open—for minimal washing, to masturbate, and to take a dump" (*Bread & Wine* 6). Aside from selling books on the sidewalk, Dennis earns a little bit of money sweeping up for local store owners, and assisting with an absurd game New York drivers engage in—avoiding tickets due to alternate-side-of-the-street parking regulations. Thinking about the streets of the Upper West Side years later, I wonder how many of these small shop owners remain in the midst of Broadway's chain stores.

From the outset, this love story seems as unbelievable to some viewers as that of a fairy-tale romance. In an interview, Delany mentions how a reviewer of *Bread & Wine* described it as being "really creepy." The reviewer seemed to find the story not just unbelievable, but appalling:

His basic two worries were (one) how can two people who are so different in their experiences and educations even like each other, much less have anything to talk about, and (two) because Dennis had been homeless for six years and living on the street, he assumed Dennis must be crazy and psychotic and "wouldn't be surprised to learn that he had murdered Delany in his bed some day!" (qtd. in Enright 139)

This presumption is almost comical given that this was precisely Dennis's worry about Delany (Fig. 2). This reviewer rejects any relations that do not jibe with his homonormative preconceptions as inauthentic. Differing socioeconomic classes, racial and cultural backgrounds, or age gaps automatically imply disharmony and problems both internal and external to the relationship. Commercials for heterosexual online dating websites rarely feature couples that do not resemble siblings, visually



Fig. 2: Dennis asks a cop friend for advice about trusting Delany (*Bread & Wine* 30).

manufacturing the concept of ideal matches. At the same time, it goes unacknowledged that hetero-relationships are permeated with difference. Even within similar socioeconomic spheres, the experiences of men and women can vary so widely that any sense of “coming from the same place” seems fictionalized. How could a man and a woman possibly have anything in common to talk about when their roles and interests are rigidly defined (“sports” or “shopping”)? Interestingly, Dennis even seems to construct their potential relationship as being not dissimilar to some traditional hetero ones: “You hear women talking about guys who want to keep them just for their bodies, and they don’t like it. . . . Well, I wouldn’t mind if some guy wanted to keep me just for *my* body. Me, I think it’d be pretty cool” (*Bread & Wine* 7).

Delany goes on to point out that the reviewer’s insistence on a commonly held belief accepted as factual truth—that homeless people are crazy and violent—fails to account for what actually happens in this story. Dennis is actually more hesitant to trust Delany than vice versa. He conducts an informal background check, asking friends on the street, including a cop, if they think going behind closed doors with a science-fiction writer is a safe move (Fig. 2). Life on the street requires a level of caution to which those better-situated are unaccustomed. In the Introduction, Alan Moore describes this as a moment of “understated comedy”:

The humor comes in our reaction, in the fact that we find it funny that a bum might harbor the fears towards a comfortably situated member of society as that society is prone to harbor towards bums. Check out the literature, lift up the lids upon the Dahmers and the Nilsons, all the guys who never lived out of a supermarket trolley ever, then decide whose phobias are more laughable. (n. pag.)

In fact, this love story involves a denial of the expected sites of conflict borne out of the differences that exist between these partners. This absence of anxieties revolving around interracial sex, homosexuality, or even the sensory overload of filth and stench that Wolff captures so dramatically, may help to explain why some

reviewers find the story to be so implausible. Race and class come up only incidentally, with Dennis describing his parents as working-class Irish-German alcoholics. When describing his interracial marriage to Marilyn Hacker decades earlier, Delany has commented on how the biggest problem they experienced was being warned by so many people about the many problems that they would face:

[A]ll the problems we had as an interracial couple were people telling us all the problems we'd have as an interracial couple. We just didn't have any. That became kind of, I guess, the template for the way a lot of that was going. (qtd. in Robinson)

While Delany is careful to introduce a formerly homeless domestic partner into a home that includes teenage daughter Iva, he similarly finds that problems are not at all inevitable. It takes only a few panels for viewers to see Iva very comfortably sitting next to Dennis on the family sofa in front of the TV. In a book discussion that accompanied the 2013 republication of *Bread & Wine*, Delany tells of a similar account reported by Iva. He asked her if she had experienced any particular problems or if there was anything particularly different about being raised by gay parents (Delany and Marilyn Hacker), and she said: "The most characteristic experience of being the child of gay parents is that practically every three months since I've been ten years old, I had to sit on a panel of children of gay parents and talk about it to some public group" ("Delany & Wolff Discuss").

Other scenes that convey serious emotional gravity center on mortality, much like those detailed in *Spiders*. During the weekend spent in a hotel at the start of their relationship, Dennis tells Delany about his life prior to homelessness, and the self-neglect that stemmed from guilt over his father's death. The conclusion is also marked by another hit-and-run, sadly a frequent occurrence on New York streets, where Delany is hit by a truck making a turn when standing on a street corner. Lying prone on the street like an image from an Edward Gorey etching, the prospect of happiness is temporarily paused. Shortly, a crowd of passersby helps Delany get back up on his feet. City dwellers are often villainized for callous indifference, but with the sheer number of people available on a busy street, genuine concern emerges from the crowd.

Hands

Wolff employs a range of techniques to guide the viewer and to communicate emotions. Our perspective shifts with the narration, rendered primarily in Delany's voice. The level of detail varies, offering scribbled abstractions juxtaposed with realistic depiction (Fig. 3). While at some moments physical characteristics are visually idealized—*e.g.*, in the Afterword, Dennis humorously remarks that the blow-job on page twenty couldn't have possibly been so wasteful and sloppy (n. pag.)—Wolff chooses mostly to unsentimentally include every fold, wrinkle, and half-missing fingernail. She draws our attention to hands as the most noticeable parts of the bodies—a predilection Delany mentions on page eight, and one that is evidenced throughout his work. Images of hands herald important communicative exchanges, signifying a relationship sealed both in the final frame and on the cover of the 1999 edition (Fig. 4).

Hands are also the primary signifier of affect. In these images, our eyes are constantly drawn to Dennis's hands and their location. Wolff shifts the perspective of the viewer and we are introduced to Dennis from Chip's point of view, facing him at his sidewalk book sale: one hand is protectively jammed into a pocket, the other visible and friendly. In the first exchange between them, Delany's open hand anticipates

Both comments stayed with me because I didn't respond to either one— But a day later, I went down...

... and asked Dennis if he was serious about what he'd said yesterday.

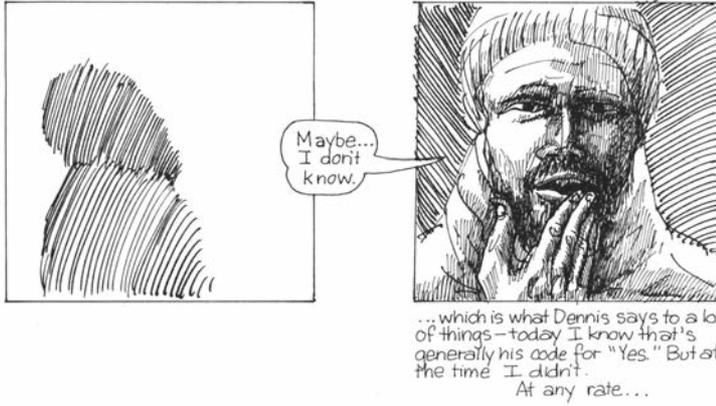


Fig. 3: Scribbled shadows and detailed faces (*Bread & Wine* 7).



Fig. 4: Hands among the stars in space (*Bread & Wine* 44).

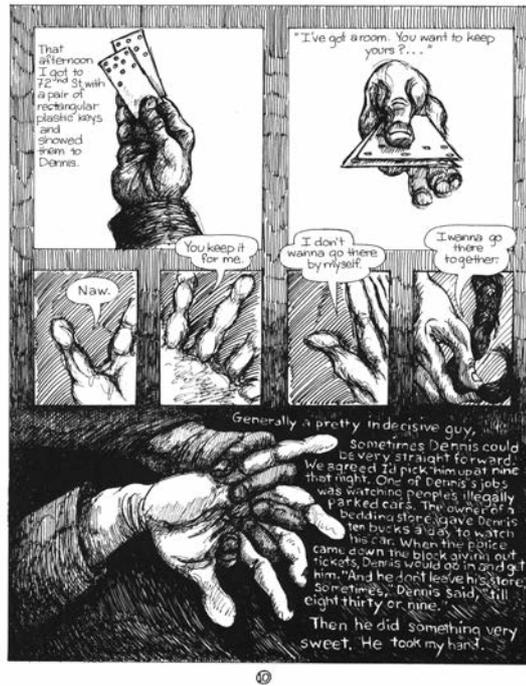


Fig. 5: Wolff tries to guide our attention to the hands at play (*Bread & Wine* 10).

receiving a book being given to him by Dennis, as if awaiting an unexpected gift. Later, in the panels showing the negotiation of their first liaison, this perspective-shifting proceeds from panel to panel, culminating in a first grasping of hands (Fig. 5). Despite the hesitancy and shyness communicated by Dennis's nervous gestures, fingering his ponytail, he grabs hold of Delany's hand very firmly. This is not a coquettish first hand holding, but a decisive grab—he will not let go.

Hands also communicate moments of discovery and joy. In a moment Dennis describes, in his characteristically uncensored voice, he flies jubilantly above an Amherst school building like a griffin, his outstretched fingers mirroring the feathers that have sprouted from his new bicycle (Fig. 1). Later, Dennis is asked how he feels about his new life and he responds with a series of new foods he has discovered for the first time. His hands hold them in utensils as if they were exotic treasures: "I never ate no strawberries" and "I didn't even know what blueberry pancakes were" [*Bread & Wine* 37 (Fig. 6)]. Even though he grew up in nearby Brooklyn, ordinary customs and items from middle-class domesticity are as unfamiliar to him as if they came from an alien world. Dennis is wide open to new experiences, seemingly lacking the prejudices—also originating from middle-class domesticity—that readily dissuade others.

At the same time, Dennis remains somewhat mysterious to the viewer. This is likely an intentional move, since Delany resists adding any speculations to what he sees, hears, or is told. As part of the specific demands of the medium, Delany has also suggested that characterization in comic books should rest primarily in illustration rather than in textual description or dialogue (*Silent Interviews* 95). Textual space is also limited by the inclusion of passages from Hölderlin's Dionysian elegy after which the work is named. The connections between the texts are temporal—Delany was contemplating this poem in his notes around the same time this relationship was initiated—but in a way the passages simultaneously evoke utopic desires for future possibilities.



Fig. 6: Dennis describes his new life (*Bread & Wine* 37).

Futurities

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz constructs what he calls queer futurity out of a redefined notion of utopia as a hermeneutic tool for being and doing. For Muñoz, queerness itself “is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1). Cultural locations both high and low, such as genre literature and avant-garde performance, are presented as means of recolonizing futurity. For Muñoz, queer futurity

is not an end but an opening or horizon. Queer utopia is a modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality. The queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support. . . . It is a being in, toward, and for futurity. (91)

In a move similar to Ahmed’s critique of the tragic queer’s exclusion from happiness, Muñoz finds the “anti-relational turn” in queer studies, stemming from Leo Bersani’s *Homos* and Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, to be flawed with nihilistic tendencies, problematically abstracted from political reality:

Yet I nonetheless contend that most of the work with which I disagree under the provisional title of “antirelational thesis” moves to imagine an escape or denouncement of relationality as first and foremost a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference. In other words, antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference. (Muñoz 11)

Muñoz acknowledges the significance and validity of many of the charges made in antirelational arguments, particularly Edelman’s rejection of a childcentric

reproductive futurism. However, what he suggests would require that the very idea of futurity be decontaminated from reproductive obsessions and historical linearity (Muñoz 94). In such a project, cultural arenas like science fiction might function as a valve for imaginative liberation, challenging conventional notions of reproduction, sexuality, humanity and time itself.

In emphasizing the utopian, Muñoz problematizes a hetero- and homonormative present, an approach plagued by an “aping of traditional straight relationality” (21). Delany’s fairy-tale love story complicates this framework, situating his reality not as a future potentiality, nor as a presentist assimilationist stance. This relationship simultaneously exists outside of normative space and rejects its very exclusion. Even though Dennis and Delany do not follow the rules of conventional married homo-domesticity, they refuse false choices in order to claim a happiness that is not deferred for any external legitimation. Following Delany’s commentary on heterotopias, many spaces exist in the here-and-now that seem impossible to those who don’t inhabit them.

Edelman’s warning about the current hegemony of childcentric futurity should be kept in mind. Contesting this cultural obsession finds validation in much more than the annoyance of a gay man kvetching about strollers crowding the Chelsea sidewalk (Muñoz 94). In a Brudner-Prize lecture delivered at Yale University, Delany mentions how this construction of futurity poses a very real material demand on the bodies of women, particularly less affluent ones. He talks about how his daughter Iva, now an emergency-room doctor, has been forbidden to provide contraceptive advice. Corporations, the state, and the church all promote a “conjoined Salvationist rhetoric that supports the idea of ‘Go forth and multiply’ and ‘life begins with conception’—which is absurd; life doesn’t begin; it only continues on” (Delany, “View”).

The happy ending to which we are treated in *Bread & Wine* would be less surprising if the work belonged to the Japanese *yaoi*, or “boy’s love,” *manga* (comic book) genre. This mainstream and commercially lucrative genre of *manga*, both in Japan and in translation in the U.S., is dedicated to presenting gay male love stories that are designed for an audience composed primarily of young Japanese women (Brienza 302). In an analysis of a recent series entitled *Future Lovers* written and drawn by Saika Kunieda, Casey Brienza praises it as an example of a *yaoi manga* that more ambitiously includes political aspects of gay life (302). Typically, *yaoi manga* often resemble romance novels or pornography populated by the kinds of feminized beautiful men and boys that have populated female-penned stories as far back as the *Tale of Genji*.

The title of *Future Lovers* conveys the idea of queer futurity, and Brienza points out that its original untranslated title, *Mirai no Kioku*, an impossible-sounding “memories of the future,” does this even more so (302). The story’s narrative is told mainly through the perspective of a conservative, butch, young male schoolteacher named Kento who starts out identifying as straight. After a drunken hookup with an apparently out, fellow male teacher named Akira, he falls in love and struggles with a challenge to his identity as a traditional man whose future would be expected to include a wife and children. The story is not entirely linear, with “memories of the future” introducing possible outcomes of their relationship. Brienza reads this approach as allowing viewers a means of imagining “alternative possibilities, possibilities which are suggested to them by the stories of others. These possibilities are then subsequently apprehended as memories which then guide their actions in the present as they move through time toward the future” (312-13).

Delany and Dennis never once declare their undying love for each other—their is a story about two people who do not find it necessary to lie to themselves or each other. *Future Lovers* predictably presents a love story as melodramatic soap opera, with the relationship drama, jealousies, lies and abusiveness that inform the genre template. The character development, however, does attempt to illustrate how

young people become prone to fantasy images of their future lives, and how inadequate strict boundaries around notions of family ultimately are. Kento learns to relinquish the picture of himself in some idealized future as the father in a family with a wife and two children. Even though his grandparents demand filial piety and a grandchild from him, he learns through a conversation with his grandmother that true love is more important than tradition or social expectations. His future dream-family picture changes to that of one mirroring his grandparents, who in old age can say to each other, “My life was happy because I met you” (Brienza 303).

At the same time, Akira learns to relinquish his own picture of an inevitable future, one limited to casual sex. Despite the story’s location in a politically conservative setting, a Japanese high school, both men are unwilling to accept a relationship disguised by a façade of public heteronormativity. Kunieda cautiously suggests political and social change in the context of the singularly important relationship on which her *manga* is focused. The story ends happily after Kento comes out to his grandparents. Kunieda also effectively utilizes images of clasped hands to represent a long-term bond between lovers. *Future Lovers* is but one example of queer relationships presented in non-American pop-culture contexts that are in need of further scholarly attention. Gengoroh Tagame, a writer specializing in a *manga* genre called “ero SM” that targets mainly gay men, has started a new series entitled *Otouto no Otto* [*My Brother’s Husband*] for a mainstream audience that centers on the inclusion of an interracial gay couple into a traditional, suburban family setting (Armour, *passim*).

While *Future Lovers* engages with the idea of how our fictions interfere with our pursuit of happiness, it remains a comic book fantasy rather than a straightforward memoir about love and life. In a reading/interview given at the Pratt Institute, Delany told a story about how creative writing is an attempt at “negotiating the relationship between writing and life.” A writing student had presented him with a short story about a conflict-filled encounter he had with his girlfriend and some other young men at the beach. The story was at once “extremely talented and deeply flawed” (qtd. in Livingston). In it, the student sees his girlfriend flirting with a gang of bikers. He calls out to her, but she rejects him. The bikers beat him up and leave him bloodied and defeated, lying in the sand.

Something about the story did not ring true to Delany. While the student at first insisted on the veracity of the story, it became clear upon further questioning that he had largely fictionalized this biographical account. The student described events in ways that embellished the interactions and material details in significant ways by exaggerating the number of rival males present, describing motorcycles rather than bicycles, and most important, describing a young woman who was an acquaintance rather than an actual girlfriend. In the story this student concocted writing served as a means of filling in his anxieties, aspirations, imagined attitudes and reactions. What really happened seemed too dull, too unsatisfying. The problem was that the character in the story was not the student at all. What he had written was told with the aim of describing not what actually happened but what he thought was preferable, what he imagined should or could have happened. The story about the student writers illustrates our inclination to narrativize our daily lives and interactions in similarly flawed ways: what we think is being said or implied versus what is actually occurring. In order to supplement a reality deemed inadequate, we construct impossibilities and barriers that might not actually be there. The story that this student told could just as easily have happened entirely differently, ending neither in misery nor in silence, but perhaps even happily (Livingston).

Over twenty years have passed since the start of their love story, and Delany and Dennis are living out a happy ending on a path that seems to follow that of Eric and Shit in *Spiders*. In the Introduction to a collection of essays compiled by Robert Reid-Pharr commemorating Delany’s fifty years of writing and seventieth birthday, Reid-Pharr beautifully describes Delany’s intellectual project as it has been reflected through time and genres:

Thus our encounters with Delany's oeuvre are at once infinitely pleasurable explorations of the ways in which language allows access to ideas, images, and forms of consciousness that break with both social and syntactical norms, while also being exhaustive—and exhausting—examinations of the many strategies we utilize to seal ourselves off from awareness of the full complexity of what it means to be humans inhabiting this planet, reproducing these societies, and speaking these tongues. (Reid-Pharr 680)

Even though he describes himself first and foremost as a writer, Delany has used his writing to teach his readers to look at themselves and their own futures in ways unbounded by clichéd scripts of the real. In *Bread & Wine* we are given a story about real-life transformations, embodied by nice people just trying to be good to one another. Delany's graphic novel is but one of many examples from an oeuvre that supplements and provokes future discussion of the intersections between queer theory and cultural studies. Stories of everyday gay life need not center on shame and abjection.

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