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“PERFECT INTERINDEPENDENCY”: REPRESENTING CRIP FUTURITY IN
BECKETT’S *MERCIER AND CAMIER*

A culture of being with the other is still to be worked out. This is a task for our time, not only an intellectual luxury or an apolitical stake, nor even a moral or religious duty. To learn how to be with the other is a new stage, and perhaps the most important step, toward our becoming humans.

Luce Irigaray

When analyzing representations of disability, one of the most common critical moves has been to evaluate the presentation of characters with identifiable disabilities in relation to contemporary disability politics and to judge whether or not, based on that standard, the representations are in any way pernicious. Are disabled characters being used, for example, as symbols (of abjection, moral failings, vulnerability) rather than being treated as fully rounded characters? Does the text reinforce stereotypes of disability as a tragedy in need of amelioration? Recognizing the pervasiveness of these tropes and problematizing the ableist logic in which they are grounded has been critical to developing a broader awareness of the meanings of disability and the role they play in our cultural imaginary. It is these kinds of projects that most people have in mind when they think of literary disability studies.

The very success of the methodology, however, has produced a downside. Despite theoretical work demonstrating the widespread applicability of disability studies concepts to all texts (and bodies), the emphasis on cataloguing works with more explicit connections functions to reinforce the mistaken belief that conversations about disability are relevant only when there is a recognizably disabled person (or character) present. Evaluating representations through comparison to understandings of disability that emerge from disability activism, which emphasize the idea of disability as an identity in the service of concrete political gains, also serves to keep the focus on the present in ways that risk overshadowing potential alternative functions of representation, in particular what Ernest Bloch refers to as “anticipatory illumination,” paraphrased by José Esteban Muñoz as “the process of identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practices helping us to see the not-yet-conscious.”¹

¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York UP, 2009), 3. As Georgina Kleege and others have pointed out, the use of vocabulary associated with vision (‘to see,’ ‘to glimpse,’ ‘to illuminate,’ etc.) to signify a sense of understanding problematically associates visual impairment with a lack of

Such an approach to aesthetics emphasizes art's ability to call into being new realities not yet imagined by first making them thinkable.

In the case of disability in particular, this expansion might include broadening the discourse to demonstrate how the description of all bodies, as well as the interactions between subjects and between subjects and their surrounding environments, can be more fully understood when disability theory is brought into the conversation. From this more expanded collection of representations, representations that need not necessarily fit within the confines of the disabled subject position as it is strategically constructed within contemporary disability political movements, we may be able to identify alternative ways of being and interacting that, while not readily legible within today's frameworks of disability and identity, productively gesture toward a crip politics of the future.

Thinking toward crip futurities is important because for many, disability and futurity are still perceived to make for uncomfortable bedfellows. As Alison Kafer points out in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, there is an almost total lack of space within the frame of contemporary politics for a future of disability to register as anything but dystopian, a fact attested to by the ongoing discourse surrounding the selective abortion of disabled fetuses and the rhetoric of "cure" that still pervades discussions of most disabilities. Developing a sense of a desirable crip futurity therefore requires a shift in the ways we think about both disability and politics, bringing the vital components of standpoint epistemology and activism into conversation with a wider ranging understanding of the political as, in Kafer's words, a "framework for thinking about how to get 'elsewhere,' to other ways of being that might be more just and sustainable...and, perhaps, an 'elsewhen'...in which disability is understood otherwise; as political, as valuable, as integral."² Critically analyzing representation is one way of moving us toward this 'elsewhere,' because representation provides a space to think beyond attitudes to disability grounded in our own political moment, in which pragmatic emphasis on achieving equal access to civil society often threatens to overshadow the ways that non-normative bodies, relations and desires can function to ground a radically different, "more just and sustainable" society of the future.³

Articulations of similar futures within queer studies have emphasized the importance of moving away from models of identity that currently dominate

comprehension. I try throughout this essay to avoid these uses, but given their prevalence within English there are times either, as here, when they appear in passages I am directly quoting or when I could not find a suitable synonym.

² Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2013), 3.

³ Within queer studies, much of the push back against pragmatism has centered on critiques of the extent to which the issue of marriage equality has dominated discussions of LGBTQ rights. Disability activism does not have such a singular focus, and many of the issues activists do address are matters of life and death (affordable assistive technology, accessible to medical care, the right to live independently). These are significant distinctions to bear in mind, especially given that the tendency to conflate difference in an attempt to form political alliances is one of the issues critics of such pragmatism raise. Nevertheless, I would argue that pragmatism functions in both contexts to keep the focus on the present in ways we might wish to challenge.

both disability and queer theory and activism. In place of the version of identity politics that marshals subjects together with claims of similarity, Muñoz postulates a “belonging in difference” that is “not an identitarian formulation but, instead, the invocation of a future collectivity, a queerness that registers as the illumination of a horizon of existence.”⁴ Similar to Kafer’s theorization of an alternative political, Muñoz positions non-normative embodiment and desire as a jumping off point for future ways of being. “Belonging in difference” therefore offers one way of mediating the longstanding tension within both queer and disability studies between the standpoint epistemologies of activist praxis (which again make strategic use of the idea of identity as being linked to a discrete and more or less fixed version of the self) and the anti-identificatory impulses inherent in many queer and crip ways of being, impulses that led Lennard Davis to describe disability as “dismodern,” as an unstable identity that “spells the end of many identity groups” by highlighting the ways in which bodies (and therefore identities) change.⁵ Both queer and crip futurity invites us to embrace and move into this instability in ways that we have not yet worked out how to enact politically.

Among the many things that crip ways of being or epistemologies might contribute to this more just future is an intimate knowledge of modes of relationality that do not have a place within democratic societies structured around the idea of the discrete autonomous individual. There is, as Irigaray suggests in the essay from which I have taken my epigram, an ethical imperative in our historical moment to develop new “culture[s] of being with the other” so that we might become more fully human.⁶ The interactions developed around non-normative embodiments (a term I intend to include psychological, intellectual and sensory, as well as physical ways of being in the world) provide a rich tapestry of alternatives to the model of self and other that undergirds civic life today. By offering concrete examples of relationships that involve a move outward towards networks and interactions that exceed the individual corpus but that nevertheless remain responsible to the material and experiential realities of embodied difference, crip ways of being challenge the configuration of all points within a conventional relationship: self, other, and the spaces around and between. The “new relational possibilities,” to borrow Foucault’s phrase, engaged in and suggested by disabled people is a key component of any conception of crip futurity.⁷

My project in this essay will be to explore representations of such alternative relationalities. I will be focusing in particular on Samuel Beckett’s *Mercier and Camier* because, like much of Beckett’s work, the novel includes numerous examples of interactions between non-normatively embodied characters. *Mercier*

⁴ Muñoz 20, 25.

⁵ Lennard Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York UP, 2002), 26.

⁶ Luce Irigaray, “The Path Toward the Other,” *Beckett After Beckett* Ed. S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (Gainesville: The UP of Florida, 2006): 50.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will,” *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* Ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994): 160.

and *Camier*, written in French in 1946, though not published until 1970 and not translated into English until 1974, follows its titular characters as they repeatedly, though half-heartedly, attempt to leave a city, detailing the ways in which routines—the finding and losing of objects, repetitive interactions with others, the use of schedules or lists—shape their actions. As the novel demonstrates, central to Beckett's experiments with novelistic form was a consideration of alternative relationality. Just as the pair is ambivalent about their journey, so too are they ambivalent toward one another. At times desperate to remain together, they rejoice when they find themselves “unstuck at last!” only to reunite before parting again at the end of the book.⁸ Because of the text's disinterest in both identity and the politics surrounding it, the presentation of these interactions offer a taste of ways of “being with the other” that move away from the rhetoric of disability identity and politics as we currently understand them. These ideas emerge most prominently in relation to what Beckett refers to in his later novel *The Unnameable* as “pseudocouple[s],” queer platonic pairs that provide a range of examples of Muñoz's notion of “belonging in difference,” collectivity that challenges our understanding of identity and the construction of the self.⁹

Most of the critical work on these couples has identified their interactions as exemplary of a twentieth-century dissolution of relationality, the fundamental gap that supposedly divides all subjects. C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski, for example, suggest that “One might read SB's pairs as pseudocouples...as human beings, isolated and unable to overcome the distance that separates them.”¹⁰ Mary F. Cantanzaro similarly claims that Mercier and Camier in particular “dissolve the myth of togetherness. In the physical impediments and ruptures of the pseudocouple there is a virtual metaphysics of discord.”¹¹ There is indeed a great deal of discord in the relationship of Mercier and Camier, but there are many other aspects of their relationship that these accounts do not capture. As I will demonstrate, the two men cycle through relational modes ranging from complete separation to radical physical and psychological overlap. Approaching their relationship with the tools crip theory provides for engaging non-normatively embodied subjects enables us to identify in these interactions insights into numerous possibilities for how we might inhabit space with others and, through this, conceive of a non-identitarian disability politics of the future that remains responsible to specific embodied difference.

⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 107.

⁹ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable, Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 291. While it was published earlier, *The Unnamable* was composed after *Mercier and Camier* as part of Beckett's “trilogy” of novels that also includes *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*.

¹⁰ Chris Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 465.

¹¹ Mary F. Cantanzaro, “The Unmediated Voice in Beckett's Couples,” *Critique* 31 (1990): 3. Cantanzaro does describe other modes of interactions between Beckett's characters, including what she intriguingly refers to as a kind of “merging of figures,” but her ultimate emphasis remains on isolation, on the unknowability of the other and what she elsewhere calls the “seeming impossibility” of “coupling and partnership.” Cantanzaro, 5. Mary F. Cantanzaro, *Voicings of Desire: Beckett's Pseudocouples*, Diss. (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986), 3.

I am not the first to identify Beckett's pseudocouples as a rich site for disability inquiry. Michael Davidson has compellingly argued that these figures "offer[] a parable about the limits of agency and community in a post-ableist era" by depicting what he describes as "abject dependence," a state in which "individuals cannot realize themselves as independent agents without first recognizing their dependent and contingent relations with others and with their own animal bodies."¹² While I would put pressure on the use of the idea of limits to describe the alternative interactions explored in Beckett's work, Davidson's account very helpfully directs our attention to the ways such interactions challenge our assumptions about independence.

As Davidson and ethics of care theorists including Eva Kittay have argued, post-Enlightenment societies are based on a fiction of discrete agency that mischaracterizes the interactions between all subjects and is particularly damaging to those who are the most visibly dependent. As Kittay explains in *Love's Labor*, "By excluding...dependency from social and political concerns, we have been able to fashion the pretense that we are *independent*—that the cooperation between persons that some insist is *interdependence* is simply the mutual (often voluntary) cooperation between essentially independent persons."¹³ In his survey of dependence in Beckett's couples, Davidson argues that the "co-dependence" they enact functions to deconstruct this myth of autonomy by operating "as a means of survival, the social contract reduced to its most naked form."¹⁴ It reminds us of the extent to which we are dependent beings. Focusing on this "mutual obligation" also foregrounds "the labor such alliances entail," a labor of care-taking most commonly undertaken by women of color and which both Davidson and Kittay argue is too often rendered invisible.¹⁵

Dependency in these terms is indeed one of the components of the interactions between Mercier and Camier, who spend much of the novel engaged in recognizable acts of care-taking. Camier, for example, monitors Mercier's needs ("Do you feel strong enough to move?"), and retrieves food for him—"Camier go get you food"—slipping as he does so into a kind of baby-talk that suggest the infantilization which can accompany care-taking activities.¹⁶ Earlier, Camier also attempts to arrange lodgings when Mercier is "dropping with fatigue."¹⁷ These actions occur so often that they draw derisive comment from Mr. Connaire, from whom Camier buys sandwiches: "You'll spoil him...yesterday cakes, today sandwiches, tomorrow crusts..."¹⁸ This relationship, however, is not one-sided. In addition to taking care of Mercier, Camier also finds himself the recipient of care, as when Mercier warns, "Don't overdo it, Camier, a nice bloody fool I'd look if you caught pneumonia" or, later, when Mercier comments to his

¹² Michael Davidson, "Every man his specialty': Beckett, Disability, and Dependence," *Journal of Literary Disability* 1.2 (2007): 57, 56, 58.

¹³ Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependence* (New York: Routledge, 1998), xii.

¹⁴ Davidson, 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

companion, "Your hand is clammy and you cough, perhaps you have senile tuberculosis."¹⁹ Both characters are presented as physically weak because of age and illness, and the question of "which would drop first" is raised throughout the text.²⁰

Unlike in traditional understandings of care-taking relationships, that is, Mercier and Camier alternative between receiving and providing assistance. It is not just that the presence of visible dependence on the part of one character hints in a general way at the implication of all bodies within networks of care, but that both actively enact this dependence. This dynamic is perhaps most succinctly illustrated in a scene in a pub in which the two attempt to drink. As is the tendency throughout the novel, their physical movements as they do so are described in some detail: "There were moments, minutes on end, when Camier lacked the strength to raise his glass to his mouth. Mercier was subject to the same failing. Then the less weak of the two gave the weaker to drink, inserting between his lips the rim of his glass."²¹ In this interaction, we can observe a doubling of the role of care-giver as each character inhabits the position in turn.

In addition to being part of the book's narrative, these kinds of reversals also appear in the parodic summaries included in the novel to undermine conventional methods of capturing a text's meaning, suggesting the narrator's (and possibly the characters') recognition of their interdependence.²² After a typical conversation between Mercier and Camier, the narrator informs us that "two points seemed...established," the second of which was the following:

It so chanced that Mercier, up to now, had shown himself the live wire, Camier the dead weight. The reverse was to be expected at any moment. On the less weak let the weaker always lean, for the course to follow. They might conceivably be valiant together. That would be the day. Or the great weakness might overtake them simultaneously.²³

While both characters are described as weak, unable to proceed independently, which evokes toward the kind of relationship of mutual dependence outlined by Davidson, the constant shifting of their position within the relationship and the sarcasm used to describe the interaction ("They might conceivably be valiant together. That would be the day.") suggests a performative dynamic that exceeds the bounds of caretaking as Davidson articulates it. Outside the frame of the story, this excess is reinforced by the number of times the text indicates that it is unclear who is dominant in a given moment; they proceed "not knowing who is leading, who following whom," a position of authority swapped so many times that even the narrator can't keep track of who is in control ("...at the suggestion

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57, 201.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² In addition to the summaries, the remnants of other forms and techniques associated with producing significance are strewn throughout the text including the narrative voice that provides no organizing consciousness and lists and charts that impede rather than aid the action of the characters.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18, 19.

of Mercier, whose turn it must have been to lead, they went to Helen's") or even who is being described ("Mercier, Camier, no matter, Camier").²⁴

The text, in other words, goes out of its way to call our attention to the fluidity with which Mercier and Camier exchange roles and the extent to which control over their decisions or movements is not a goal. In addition to the necessity of meeting one another's needs in order to proceed, the characters also evince what we might describe as *crip desire* (or desire for cripness); a yearning to be dependent or to be perceived as such. The alternating weakness that prevents first one, then the other, character from retrieving his own straw in particular functions to parody more than enact a relationship of dependence. Neither character had previously demonstrated an inability to move his arms, and the effort required to insert a straw into one's mouth is not, for characters without neurological or upper body mobility impairments, particularly strenuous. These reversals therefore suggest that Mercier and Camier are engaging in elective dependence, masquerading in one of Tobin Siebers' senses of the term, "display[ing] their disability by exaggerating it."²⁵ While Mercier and Camier's behavior is significantly different from the majority of Siebers' examples of disability masquerade in that they are utterly unconcerned with identity, all of these performances create a space in which it becomes possible to desire cripness and the visibility that often accompanies it.

In analyzing Mercier and Camier, then, I want to expand on Davidson's reading in several key ways. Rather than "abject dependency" replacing independence as a model for understanding relationality, I argue that Mercier and Camier oscillate between independence, mutual dependence, and what I will refer to as *interpenetration*, the physical and psychological overlap of two or more subject positions. What is most significant in these interactions is not the substitution of one form of relationality for another (mutual dependence or even interpenetration for independence), but rather the slippage between them. The desire the text associates with such indeterminate positionality, I suggest, offers a glimpse at ways of being "otherwise" that are both non-identitarian and flamboyantly non-pragmatic.

Part of the flamboyance of the presentational style of these interactions is tied to the rapidity with which the characters move through not only relative positions of control within the relationship (as suggested above) but different forms of relation (dependence, independence, and overlap) altogether. The following paragraph, which again provides a detailed description of the pair's movement, demonstrates these shifts:

Their progress was now no better than a totter. They overflowed on the bog, with risk of fatal consequences to them, but nothing doing. Soon falls began to enter into play, now Camier accompanying Mercier (in his fall), now the reverse, and now the two collapsing simultaneously, as one man, without preconcertation and in perfect interdependency.²⁶

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 86, 70, 103.

²⁵ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 2008), 100.

²⁶ Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, 102.

At one moment the characters are completely separate and recognizable as such ('their' signifying their existence as multiple discrete entities), while in others they are interdependent (leaning on one another). The intersection between these modes is captured by Beckett's neologism "interindependency," an independence that cannot be separated from interdependency, that is literally surrounded by it on the page. Present too, however, is a component that goes beyond mutual dependence, an overlap or "overflow[]" in which the two characters slip into one another, becoming "as one man," unified to such a degree that each is able to anticipate the other's thoughts and actions. But this overlap does not mark a comfortable endpoint of the relationships fluidity. The idea of 'concertation,' a cooperation or unity among opposing factions, preserves the sense that the other relational modes (and the different versions of subjectivity they involve) persist, grating against one another.

The instability introduced in passages like this through the quick cycling of different forms of interaction again demonstrate that the dependent elements of the relationship between Mercier and Camier is based on a mixture of need, habit and desire for dependency, rather than on strict necessity. We witness a similar desire when Mercier asks Camier to relay visual information despite the fact that he is physically able to see for himself: "What is the weather doing, said Mercier, now you mention it. Look and see, said Camier. I'd rather you told me, said Mercier."²⁷ Here, the characters demonstrate an urge to enhance rather than minimize need. Intriguingly, this elective dependence begins to problematize the boundaries of the subject by moving sensory input outward from the individual corpus and into a network of bodies that the brain can draw on for information.

Mutual dependence in both Beckett's and Davidson's accounts, maintains the possibility for the existence of an independent subject. "Perfect interindependency" keeps 'independence' intact within it, and Davidson's assertion that "the basic formula for Beckett's treatment of abject dependence can be stated thus: individuals cannot recognize themselves as independent agents without first recognizing their dependent and contingent relations others..." similarly retains independent agency as a possibility (indeed, as a probable outcome of the process of recognizing dependence).²⁸ But this sort of network, like the confusion over which character is being described and their overlap when walking, points toward a more extreme form of intersection that demands a more fluid conception of the body.

Like dependence, interpenetration is concretely modeled in crip ways of being. The lived experience of many disabled people involves literally merging with objects and other subjects through complex series of relationships with assistive aids including prostheses, implants and catheters, the environment (as, for example, for people with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity), and care-taking relationships. In situations in which a caretaker assists with functions like seeing, moving, using the bathroom and having sex that are commonly thought of as actions performed only by the self, the relationship between giver and receiver of

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 102. Davidson, 58.

care can at times move beyond profound interdependence and become reminders of the ways that the boundaries between self and other are both conceptually and literally porous.

The idea of penetration is haunted by specters of violence against the self, posited within the framework of identity politics as the primary site of agency. But as Ellen Samuels reminds us, our current working understanding of individual identity derives from “fantasies of identification” developed in the twentieth century in response to a “modern crisis of identification” that “seek[s] to definitively identify bodies, to place them in categories delineated by race, gender, or ability status, and then to validate that placement through a verifiable, biological mark of identity.”²⁹ Having been invented for specific political purposes, these ideas about identity were (and continue to be) imposed in restrictive ways, particularly on those occupying minority subject positions. Part of imagining a dis-identificatory politics necessitates a willingness to problematize this idea of the individual body as a discrete entity identified through its belonging to a fixed set of categories.

Rejecting this sense of identity has been an important component of queer theory since the 1980s. In his groundbreaking essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” written in the context of the AIDS crisis, for example, Leo Bersani argues that “the self is a practical convenience; promoted to the status of an ethical ideal, it is a sanction for violence.”³⁰ For Bersani, the “self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance*” of sex, therefore functions as “our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence;” this dissolution of the notion of the self as discrete functions in his account as a site of joy and pleasure rather than being representative of a loss of agency.³¹ Bersani’s and Samuels’ critiques of identity both create a space for articulations of agency that are not perceived to be in conflict with the interpenetration of subjects, technologies and environments.

As I have suggested, *Mercier and Camier* provides numerous examples of what it might look like to take seriously the idea that physical and psychological discreteness are not always necessary or desirable. In addition to registering this overlap by having the narrator lose track of which character is which, and the characters themselves forgetting who made a particular decision, this is also signaled grammatically through non-normative pronoun usage. Mercier, for example, exclaims “Woe is us,” and Camier entreats Mercier “let us sit us down” and “let us think twice before we hold our tongue,” as though the friends shared a single set of legs and mouth.³² A similar tactic is employed to signal a more significant psychic intertwining in the following passage in which Mercier and Camier gaze out at a canal:

Where do our feet think they’re taking us? Said Camier. They would seem to be heading for the canal, said Mercier. Already? Said Camier.

²⁹ Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: New York UP, 2014), 2.

³⁰ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43 (1987): 222.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

³² Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, 39, 12, 90.

Perhaps we shall be tempted, said Mercier, to strike out along the towpath and follow it til boredom doth ensue...The very water...will linger livid, which is not to be despised either. And then the whim, who knows, may take us to throw ourselves in.³³

In this passage, Beckett presents both a physical and a mental overlap. "Our feet" become singular, and the thought of suicide is described as "the whim," as if both men were animated by a single consciousness or "activated by a single wire," as they are later described.³⁴

Similar to Mercier's use of Camier to form a network of visual information that exceeds his physical body, the characters also expand their subjectivities outward by employing one another as mental prostheses. "Even if we had the umbrella, said Camier, we could not use it, for it is broken. What fresh extravagance is this? Said Mercier. We broke it yesterday, said Camier. Your idea, Mercier took his head between his hands. Little by little the scene came back to him."³⁵ Here Mercier uses the mind of Camier as an extension of his own, reconstructing his past actions through the memory of his companion. While this idea of memory exceeding the individual is not new to Beckett, the interactions of Mercier and Camier serve as reminders of the everyday ways in which we are already engaged in these alternative forms of relation, though we rarely think of them in terms of self-shattering.

There are brief moments in the text when this overlap is linked with behavior we might describe as ethical. Blurring the boundary between self and other produces a situation in which self-interest no longer benefits just the individual. "You hinder me more than you help me, said Mercier" as the two make their way through the streets with a bicycle. "I'm not trying to help you, said Camier. I'm trying to help myself. Then all is well, said Mercier."³⁶ Even though neither character is actually helping the other here, the scene suggests ways in which the interpenetration they demonstrate might enable subjects to help others without necessitating altruistic behavior.

To be clear, Mercier and Camier's relationship is not an idealized one that functions as a straightforward model of how we should behave. The characters are frequently cruel to one another and, rather than resulting in epiphany, their intertwined interactions often end up thwarting them and leaving them fatigued. Walking through the street with "linked arms," for example, "Mercier drew Camier's attention to the fact that they were not in step. You have your gate, said Camier, I have mine. I'm not accusing anyone, said Mercier, but it's wearying. We advance in jerks."³⁷ Despite repeatedly expressing desire for this kind of queer movement, the desire is not consistent and the movement does not represent an efficient mode of locomotion.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

Moreover, Mercier and Camier engage in decidedly unethical behavior. When targeted by a constable who views their non-normative bodies and unauthorized sexual desires (they ask him for direction to a brothel) as threatening and attempts to use violence to remove them from public space (“It was not every night a diversion of this quality broke the monotony of his beat...He unsheathed his truncheon,” the two react in kind.³⁸ The suggestion that moving beyond a fixation with individual identity may enable one to behave in a more ethical manner towards the other does not, in this instance, bear itself out. I quote the description of their response to the constable at length to capture the gratuitousness of the violence:

Camier, beside himself with indignation, caught up the truncheon, sent the helmet flying with his boot and clubbed the defenseless skull with all his might, again and again, holding the truncheon with both hands. The howls ceased...Cover his gob, said Camier. They freed the cape and lowered it over the face. Then Camier resumed his blows. Enough, said Mercier, give me that blunt instrument. Camier dropped the truncheon and took to his heels. Wait, said Mercier. Camier halted. Mercier picked up the truncheon and dealt the muffled skull one moderate and attentive blow, just one. Like partly shelled hard-boiled egg, was his impression.³⁹

The image of the skull shattering, the glee the two experience as they continue to inflict damage on the body after the constable’s probable death, broadcasts in an excessive manner similar to the descriptions of Mercier and Camier’s movement the im-(or a-)morality of the couple. If there are ethical lessons to be learned from their interactions, they have not been absorbed by Mercier and Camier themselves.

If not practical as a model of behavior, however – indeed, precisely *because* it is impractical – Mercier and Camier’s relationship nevertheless consists of elements that, in different contexts, may well function to bring about the more ethical futures imagined by Muñoz, Kafer and Irigaray. It is only by conceptualizing and representing the relationships between non-normatively embodied subjects in terms other than those available within a framework of a pragmatic politics of identity that we can begin to imagine what alternative futurities might entail. Mercier and Camier flaunt their difference, occasionally to other characters but most significantly to us as readers. They perform a queer crip relationality for our benefit, reminding us of the ways in which our own everyday interactions exceed the version of individual identity most commonly accepted today. Despite the discomfort involved, Mercier and Camier elect, for the vast majority of the text, to maintain their relationship, to “advance in jerks” with one another, simultaneously inhabiting and performing their alterity. It is only by thinking outside the box of the politically correct and pragmatic that we can arrive at a future dramatically different from our present. Representations of unauthorized, slippery, complicated and problematic relationships like that of Mercier and Camier help us move closer to that goal.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 92-3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

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