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Epilogue: Sadomasochism in the Library

Franz Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" elaborates the rise and fall of an apparatus—a horrifying device that, over the course of six hours, inscribes a condemned man's body with a sentence, deepening the inscription in the body until death. The officer who carries out the sentencing spends most of the story explaining and demonstrating the apparatus to an explorer who has been invited by the Commandant of the penal colony to review and advise on the efficacy of the machine.

"I'm chattering, and his apparatus stands here in front of us. As you see, it consists of three parts. With the passage of time certain popular names have been developed for each of these parts. The one underneath is called the Bed, the upper one is called the Inscriber, and here in the middle, this moving part is called the Harrow."

The Traveler wanted to raise various questions, but after looking at the Condemned Man he merely asked, "Does he know his sentence?" "No," said the Officer. He wished to get on with his explanation right away, but the Traveler interrupted him: "He doesn't know his own sentence?" "No," said the Officer once more. He then paused for a moment, as if he were requesting from the Traveler a more detailed

reason for his question, and said, “It would be useless to give him that information. He experiences it on his own body.”¹

The prisoner does not speak the officer’s language and cannot comprehend the sentence until the sixth hour, at which point enlightenment is his: “Nothing else happens. The man simply begins to decipher the inscription. He purses his lips, as if he is listening. You’ve seen that it is not easy to figure out the inscription with your eyes, but our man deciphers it with his wounds.” Upon reaching enlightenment, the condemned man is pierced all the way through and is delivered to a pit.

The notion that a body is inscribed and reinscribed with a sentence declaring a person’s crime, in a language foreign to the condemned and that is rendered intelligible only by way of the wounds the body bears, provides a powerful (albeit damning) metaphor for the acts of classifying, naming, and labeling bodies of literature that carry subjects or methods that deviate from accepted norms. By way of the disciplinary apparatuses of subject headings, classifications, and restrictive labeling policies, the Library of Congress has effectively condemned certain bodies of literature and, in some cases, sentenced them to certain death. The irony is that, like the penal colony, the library inscribes these classificatory marks in the name of enlightenment—to provide access to knowledge. Some of these classificatory acts are to be considered what Sanford Berman calls “bibliocide,” where inadequate, incorrect, and biased cataloging practices render a range of effects: Entire classes of literature may be ghettoized, with the clear indication that the contents within include deviant topics; they may be made invisible and inaccessible, hidden by a lack of meaningful description and subject headings; and by way of labels, entire collections may be designated as restricted, closed off from the public. In the most extreme cases, the sentence is the flames of an incinerator. I invoke Kafka here because, as Jane Bennett writes, he “gives shape to a political stance that is skeptical of established ideals, capable of self-satirical laughter, and available for the ‘spiritualization’ of public life.”² In those instances where the absurdity of the systems inspires laughter, the classifications break down. Indeed, the library is Kafkaesque.

Toward the end of the story, the explorer informs the officer that he cannot abide by his request to proclaim the brilliance of the machine publicly. “No,” he says, “I am opposed to this procedure.” Upon hearing this news, the officer first remains silent, then releases the condemned man from the apparatus and enters into it himself. The apparatus goes haywire, cruelly devouring the officer, jabbing at his flesh rather than inscribing any

kind of sentence. No enlightenment would come to the officer. But for readers and the explorer the officer's death is anything but a meaningless sacrifice. It demonstrates the absurdity and perversity of the apparatus and the law as well as their failure to bring into being what they command.

Kafka wrote his story in 1914, within a decade of the publication of the list of LC headings and parts of the Classification. Rather than refiguring his characters as particular officers and commanders and subjects of the library, I take his actors to be models—of the state, its apparatuses, and its subjects. Hannah Arendt writes of Kafka's characters: "Given that these protagonists created by Kafka are not real persons, that it would amount to hubris to identify with them, and that they are only models left in anonymity even where their names are mentioned, it seems to us as though every one of us were being addressed and called."³ The fact that any particular person might occupy a variety of roles in the story of the penal colony renders the rewriting of the story by refiguring the characters even more difficult. For instance, although my own role might at first most closely resemble that of the explorer, I am not at all external to the machine. I am not a foreigner in a strange land. I am, in a real sense, a cog, having been trained and employed to deploy the apparatuses. I currently teach practicing and aspiring librarians to use the myriad tools, skills, and principles underlying the classifications and their operations. And, while imploring students to think critically about its limitations and problems, I nevertheless find myself proclaiming something like, "It's a remarkable apparatus!" I encourage reluctant students to find comfort in the fact that learning cataloging is like learning a foreign language. The practices of encoding, classifying, and describing all adhere to separate codes and schemas. I have classed works, added subject headings (even when they fail to capture), and I have placed valuable books in a locked case. It would be dishonest to claim that all of these acts didn't bring a degree of satisfaction, a sense that I am protecting, conveying books to their readers, and bringing them to life through control. I have even maintained authority headings in a library's database (all the while taking notes on the more infuriating ones). At the same time, I have experienced the disorientation caused when trying to find books in the catalog and on the shelves. Perhaps it is the masochist in me that finds no place on earth to be as quite as thrilling as the Library of Congress. But it was precisely the training and on-the-job experience, colliding with these subject positions, that delivered me to my research.

Arendt seems to be taking a stance similar to Foucault's ethics of the care of the self—that we are all in the machine, but freedom is possible if each of us answers Kafka's call to break the system down in order to

imagine and enact a better life. She writes: “In order, at least in theory, to become a fellow citizen of such a world freed from all bloody apparitions and murderous magic . . . [Kafka] necessarily had to anticipate the destruction of the present world.”⁴ Freedom in the penal colony only becomes imaginable with the destruction of the apparatus, which not only reverses relations of power but devours itself. It is at the moment that the command “BE JUST” is ordered that things fall apart. It would seem that the illegibility and impossibility of this particular command is what leads to the machine’s breakdown.

The library classifications, along with library personnel and all of the technologies and policies, comprise a certain kind of perverse machine—an assemblage that disciplines and sometimes condemns its subjects. We can compare the Library of Congress’s classifications with the diagrams designed by the deceased Commandant and carried by the officer as instructions about the apparatus. They map and instruct librarians in how to apply and inscribe terms and classes on the bodies in the library. The explorer, foreign to the country in which the penal colony resided, could not make any sense of the diagrams, frustrating the officer, who had been hoping to impart the beauty of their logics and design. In part the problem was that the set of instructions was a palimpsest, like the LC Classifications, written over by many people over time. The archaic formulation retains its control over those who are operating it even during a time in which it has become illegible. According to Butler, this is Kafka trying to “grapple with experience of time and space that is no longer organized legibly by progress or redemption.”⁵ In the same vein, patrons visiting the library may be at pains to decipher the intricacies of the rules that guide subject heading and classification creation and applications—a task made more confusing given that it was produced with Progressive Era notions of universality and the state.

One of the joys of reading Kafka springs from his endless trajectories. Deleuze takes Kafka to be an exemplar of nomadic writing, and Kristeva counts Kafka among the great modernists who collapse the Other.⁶ In his foreword to Deleuze and Guattari’s book on Kafka, Réda Bensmaïa notes that the book brings to light the fact that the compulsion to categorize Kafka’s body of work can lead only to failure—“an always excessive reduction of his work.”⁷ And for Bennett, Kafka evokes a sense of “uncanniness: the Officer’s penal system, which aims at closure, impartiality, moral transformation, and responsibility, is disquietingly familiar. Kafka doesn’t so much describe a Justice gone horribly wrong as exaggerate the moral ambiguities inherent in an ideal that is always made up of more elements than

any one invocation or execution can express.”⁸ Indeed, it is precisely this problem of trying to unify and capture bodies of literature with a single class or name that effaces multiple meanings and ambiguities.

On the library shelves we find that nearly all of Kafka’s work and critiques are brought together in PT2621.A26—the section designated for Kafka within German literature—blatantly territorializing and disciplining a body of literature that extends far beyond any nation or language or author’s name.⁹ Kafka’s struggles with his own sense of place and time as a German-speaking Jew in Prague are well documented in his own diaries and in scholarly analyses. According to Deleuze and Guattari, one of the ways we might define Kafka’s body of work derives from his identifications and disidentifications with the German language, and they describe Prague German as a “deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses.”¹⁰ Thus, it is with Kafka’s body of work that we witness a further perverse effect of the system—an erasure of these nomadic, strange, polymorphous aspects of his literature.

I read “In the Penal Colony” as a parable that speaks to my study of the Library of Congress as a state bureaucracy and its apparatuses and that helps undo, so as to remake, a vision of a utopian library. The condemned man, when released, is free but not free. The explorer flees the penal colony, leaving the condemned men to life in the colony. That the former Commandant and his disciple (the officer) are no longer in control might offer reason for hope. There is a new Commandant who has doubted the efficacy of the apparatus all along. But before the explorer leaves (cutting his visit short), he views the dead Commandant’s grave, upon which is inscribed: “Here rests the Old Commandant. His followers, who are now not permitted to have a name, buried him in this grave and erected this stone. There exists a prophecy that the Commandant will rise again after a certain number of years and from this house will lead his followers to reconquer the colony. Have faith and wait!” Here is the suggestion that, although the Commandant and his old methods of torture may themselves have been condemned and laid to waste, one might hold out hope in the belief that these techniques will be reborn. It may be the case that the human tendency for violence and control is so great that, although this particular apparatus is no longer functional, another equally menacing disciplinary mechanism will take its place. And as long as relations of power are present such as they are in the penal colony, apparatuses will be necessary to enact and inscribe the rules of the law.

It is for this reason that I am not so quick to find a solution by creating another system. I am skeptical of claims that the digital realm enables

the lines of flight. Indeed, the Internet has become another battleground for claims to territory and authority. Far from the democratic space that we might imagine it to be, it has become a scene of surveillance and the advancement of capitalism. And battles over who speaks for whom and for what purposes access is granted and denied will only continue to unfold. I am not willing to relocate the library to the digital universe, nor am I quite able to endorse technologies like tagging and the semantic web. Whereas some scholars view such advances as holding great promise for access to information, I accept them with great reserve and cannot help viewing such technologies as another arrival of the devices of control and discipline.

Kafka's story is not only a great allegory for the library; it is an expression of polymorphous perversity on a particularly artful scale. Plenty of scholars have examined the sexual perversions in Kafka's oeuvre, but Anna Katharina Schaffner argues that part of Kafka's greatness has to do with the way it resists classifications and delineations and the ways in which it exposes the perversity of all desire. For her, Kafka's polyvalence destabilizes anything we think we know about the perversions. She points to his personal study of psychoanalysis—with Wilhelm Stekel's work being among those with which he was most familiar. Kafka also read Sacher-Masoch, Sade, and Freud, and he had a personal collection of pornography. Schaffner describes "In the Penal Colony" as a "homo-erotic torture-redemption fantasy" and marvels in its reversal of social and sexual hierarchies.¹¹ And Clayton Koelb points out that the apparatus in the penal colony is an explication of a machine that enacts disciplinary power through a sexualized ritual:

The condemned prisoner is laid out, naked, on a platform covered with a layer of cotton and named "the Bed," while the Harrow, a mechanism shaped exactly like a human body, is placed in contact with him. In this copulation of man and machine, however, the male sexual role is reserved entirely to the machine. Not only is it covered with hundreds of penetrating and spraying organs, but it also performs a grotesque parody of sexual excitement . . . rigid discipline, is thus both sexual and authoritarian.¹²

The apparatus is perverse, as is, I would suggest, the desire to control the entire bibliographic universe through the practice of inscribing names and classes. But it is the kind of perversion that does harm and stands in opposition to the kind of perversion I seek to embrace.

Similarly, drawing upon Deleuze, Margot Norris reads "In the Penal Colony" as an intensive study of sadism—one that reveals the perversity

and absurdity of the law. She suggests that there may be no better source for a textual analysis of sadism than Kafka. “In the Penal Colony” so beautifully illustrates law with no content—one that is upheld by an apparatus that is meant to inscribe and demonstrate the rule but that is so easily blown up in the face of the explorer’s gaze and critique. Norris argues that the diagrams and machinery combine to render the torture and execution impersonal, reducing them to pure reason, and, citing Deleuze and Barthes, she writes: “The subordination of personal lusts and passions to a sham rational system, the phenomenon of ‘reasoned crime’ is the violence behind the violence in sadism.”¹³ The officer’s failure to convince the explorer of the efficacy of the rational system results in a reversal of the processes by which we come to view pain as acceptable. Following this line of argument, I suggest we consider the classificatory apparatuses of the library similarly, as order and reason necessarily rationalize suffering. To organize by class and name is to exclude and silence certain bodies. It is the justification of violence by necessity of the law that I wish to undermine. It is through perverse subjects that we can pierce through such rationalizing explanations of the inadequacies inherent in our present bibliographic control systems. And it is by way of this particular group of subjects that we see how flimsy the machine is, even with its multiple efforts to ensure disciplinary effects.

Let us not forget that the condemned man’s crime was that he did not honor authority and that what is in question in this project are the rules of authorized subjects, names, and classes. It was precisely this body that refused the law that turned the machine on itself. Indeed, the body that challenged the law exposed that law’s injustices. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that language is made to be obeyed; “order-words” give orders and order/organize the universe: “Language is not life; it gives life orders. . . . Every order-word, even a father’s to his son, carries a little death sentence—a Judgment, as Kafka put it.”¹⁴ Perverse bodies and readings subvert the law, subjecting it to its own violence. To be sure, the reasoning behind such adherence to standards is an argument founded on the ideal of access: If all libraries use the same terms, the databases will communicate with one another, shared catalogs are possible, efficiency abounds and duplication of effort is eliminated, and the uniformity ensures searchability across systems. Among the libraries there is a shared language, but that may or may not be legible to the members of the public who visit them. There is a great sense of the necessity of the apparatuses and the standards, which, in turn, justifies their violence and sustains the belief in the efficacy of the systems.

We do not know the crimes committed by the members of the penal colony. The only evidence we have is the sentence imposed on the condemned and the word of the report about the prisoner who failed in the completely ridiculous task to which he was set, resulting in the inscription “HONOR YOUR SUPERIORS.” The crime that resulted in a death sentence was that he did not submit to authority. But we don’t know why he was in the penal colony in the first place. Let us assume that the residents are perverse in some way; they have perverted, rejected, or attempted to subvert a law, and they are being punished for it. Likewise, we have no evidence that the machine ever really brought enlightenment. We have to take the officer’s word for what was read on the faces of the condemned. In truth, for all we know, the enlightenment viewed on the faces of the dying may have been the recognition of the injustice of the entire apparatus and the system.

So again, we can return to the question of legibility and recognition. For Andreas Gailus, Kafka’s apparatus strips the body of life through the act of inscription:

It stages a scene of ideological recognition: the moment of transfiguration is the one when the prisoner deciphers, and recognizes himself in, the Law that is being inscribed onto his body. . . . The Law is inscribed through a process of repetitive writing that hollows out the body and evacuates its corporeality. The writing of the Law is therefore not, as the officer believes—and wants others to believe—a miraculous fusion of body and meaning. Rather, it is a mechanical operation for extracting the body’s vital energies. Thus the radiating image of comprehension on the prisoner’s face is the product of a terrifying exchange; it is the chiasmic transfer of a meaning whose vitality is brought about through the extraction of life from the body.¹⁵

We might ask when and where recognition happens. There seems never to be any recognition of the subjects in this story. Rather, it is by way of the inscription that the body’s life is expelled. And it is only through that inscribing/condemning/killing that the subject recognizes its position in relation to power. Ultimately, it is this incapacity to recognize or signify that makes the system break down, and without the support of the apparatus, we might assume the colony will crumble along with it.

Jane Bennett writes: “The term ‘Kafkaesque’ is conventionally applied to situations involving an organization that is in principle highly complex and relentlessly efficient—but in fact so obese that it is anarchic, so thorough in aspiration that it is inefficient, so comprehensive in aim that it is incomprehensible, so rational in design that it is idiotic.”¹⁶ If we relocate

this plot to the Library of Congress, an arm of the state, with its current organization having been designed at a time when bureaucratic expansion and technological efficiencies reigned, we immediately recognize the possibilities for freedom that come with the undoing of the apparatus that inscribes the bodies that escape recognition.

The Masochistic User

Early on I said that any reference to a library “user” would be deferred to the end of the book. Ron Day has suggested very convincingly that the construction of the user in library and information science has failed to point to the processes by which users and user needs are produced by the systems they use. Day calls for moving beyond the “user” as generally conceived by information science toward a conceptualization that views subjects and objects as co-constitutive and co-emergent within “in-common zones for affects between bodies.”¹⁷ More precisely, for the purposes of this particular analysis, subjects and objects can and do use one another. Having analyzed the power structures in the library and how those structures produce subjects, we can see not only where the system breaks down and opportunities for creating new paths for knowledge discovery, but with this critical work we can assume a position of power within the existing mix. In such a scene, the life of a user in the erotics of the library takes on entirely new depths. By removing violence from the contexts in which it is used to encode unjust laws and uphold relations of power, and then appropriating it for bodily pleasure, sadomasochism dissolves the foundations upon which those laws are built.

In contrast to the interpretations of sadism in the penal colony, I would like to end with the suggestion that it is in viewing the user as a masochist that we find freedom in the library. Masochism remains a great mystery, with wildly diverging theories and interpretations that entertain and frustrate the mind. I am being deliberately selective in my positioning the user as a masochist, and, no doubt, there will readers who will disagree with my decision to conclude on this perverse note. This is intended to be playful and not at all a final interpretation. It is my own attempt at a perverse reading. I speculate that the masochistic user is, in fact, the necessary agent for gaining freedom in knowledge/power/pleasure relations because, as Noyes puts it, “the struggles we have come to associate with masochism are struggles for a technology of control.”¹⁸

I dare to side with the Marquis de Sade—or at least particular readings of his work and life. Jean Paulhan, writing in 1946, actually viewed Sade to

be a masochist, and in spite of the fact that he found the masochistic position of deriving pleasure from pain completely incomprehensible, Paulhan determined that Sade, with his repeated imprisonments that so neatly paralleled the virtuous Justine's subjection to brutality and abuse, must be read as a masochist.¹⁹ What Sade did, in Élisabeth Roudinesco's and Paulhan's views, was to expose the fact that people derive pleasure from destroying and brutalizing others—even those we love. His writings are a refusal of lies and cover-ups, a refusal of the law, and an exposure of the evil that underlies nature and humanity. Roudinesco says that Sade “distorted the Enlightenment Project to such a degree that he turned it into its antithesis.”²⁰ Indeed, he created a universal system based on the logic of pleasure, and his writings promoted a pleasure economy that exchanged in power and destruction and cruelty. I would argue that the brilliance of Sade is the way in which his system revealed the absurdity of universalisms. His “catalogue of sexual perversions”—*120 Days of Sodom*—might best be read as system akin to Borges's Chinese classification, as it reveals the extent to which a “rational” system is, in fact, politically and socially situated and motivated, serving those for whom it is designed.²¹ A man who belonged to the age of encyclopedists, he was a steadfast collector and cataloger (and even applied for a position as head librarian at one point). Sade parodied the sciences, abolished the Law of God, and turned *jouissance* into a discipline. In Roudinesco's interpretation, Sade's writings realized a utopia where the Law was inverted. And it is with Sade that perversion made a mockery of the “natural order” and laws of procreation. Ironically, while the censors locked his books away, Krafft-Ebing consecrated Sade's categories in his sexological taxonomy. This is why it is important to view Sade's work for its power to draw attention to the ways in which a universal system, based on Enlightenment ideals, can easily be used as justification for violence and subjection. Sade revealed the perversity of positivist ethics that sought to control the human passions.

For that (and other reasons, to be sure) the Marquis de Sade was imprisoned for much of his adult life. Nevertheless, Paulhan viewed Sade to be the freest spirit, even while his body suffered confinement. Relatedly, Slavoj Žižek argues that a masochistic staging is the first act of liberation: In order to be freed of our subjection, we must invest the body in a redemptive violence.²² According to both Žižek and Michael Uebel, masochistic violence is rooted in a desire for interbeing. For Uebel, the violent act denies the unbearable necessity of interdependence and contravenes shame and the fear of alienation.²³ For Žižek it brings a certain connection between the masochist and the dominant.

According to Deleuze, we must rethink the notion that the sadist is complementary to the masochist. Instead, he construes the masochist in relation to a dominant—one who is not a sadist but who derives pleasure from supporting the masochist's desires in power play. As Amber Musser explains, "Deleuze's masochist cannot be thought as a singular entity—s/he requires a symbolic dominator to be complicit in the illusion of powerlessness."²⁴ I part ways from Deleuze where he says that an encounter between the sadist and masochist is impossible because they are organized around entirely different orientations. But I would agree that masochism is a cultural practice—one of the imagination and aesthetics—whereas the sadist is a systematizer. And I would suggest that Sade illustrates a profoundly sadomasochist being—one who drew up a great system based on a logic of perversion, but one who must first be read as a creator of fictions and a cultural figure—a masochist who upset social norms through writing "the most indefinable body of work in the entire history of literature."²⁵ There certainly is a masochistic side to Sade—one that aligns quite nicely with the masochistic library user. Sade's work has a life that far exceeds him, and we as readers encounter a truth of ourselves and our world in Sade. Nature and man and laws are cruel. We face the deeply unsettling experience of simultaneous arousal and disgust, precipitated by what Sade understood to be a universal condition of humankind. While our first response may be to write his work off as the product of a madman, we eventually come to the realization that the world is mad and perverse and that we are, too.

The necessary interrelation between the masochist and the dominant becomes clear in the library. As Day suggests, systems and their users must be understood as interdependent and coemergent. For Deleuze, masochism has several formal characteristics. For one, the fantasy is of "primordial importance" for the masochistic scene to commence. It is always a contractual relation, but the masochist pushes the contract to its extremes by dismantling its machinery and exposing it to mockery. The masochist is not weak, nor does s/he aim toward self-annihilation, but rather, citing Theodor Reik, Deleuze finds the masochistic traits to be "defiance, vengeance, sarcasm, sabotage, and derision."²⁶ The mockery of the Law of the Father is manifested in a submission to that law in order to obtain a forbidden pleasure. Deleuze suggests that by "scrupulously submitting" to the law that seeks to separate us from pleasure, we are subverting it. There is a "masochistic form of humour" that demonstrates the absurdity of the law. The masochistic contract always positions punishment as primary—not that the masochist necessarily enjoys being punished (s/he may or may

not) but that it is required as a sort of rite of passage in order to obtain pleasure.

Masochism illustrates the possibility for agency in acts of subordination, in a desire to submit. It is not that the masochist loves submission for its own sake, however. John Noyes explains this so well:

Within this network of bodily spaces and mediating machines, masochism is not the love of submissiveness. It is not the purity of unpleasure or humiliation. It is a complex set of strategies for transforming submissiveness, pain, and unpleasure into sexual pleasure. But over and above this, it is the appropriation of the technologies that our culture uses in order to perpetuate submissiveness, an appropriation that plays a subtle game with the machinery of domination. As such, masochism is the eroticism of the machine, or . . . “An erotics of discipline.”

Noyes also reveals that masochism as we know it is a nineteenth-century invention. Or rather, the pathologization of the erotic acts made famous by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s fiction, the person for whom Krafft-Ebing named the condition, is a specific (and, arguably, perverse) form of disciplining. In reducing a suite of expressions to a category within his taxonomy of perversions, Krafft-Ebing erased the historical and cultural contexts in which masochism is required and thrives. Indeed, Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* and other stories each displaced the scenes of subjection, humiliation, and violence of social and political conflict in mid-nineteenth-century Eastern Europe into the sexual realm. Writing about sexual power was effectively a dramatization of political power. Like the Marquis de Sade, Sacher-Masoch depicts a struggle between reason and nature in the bedroom, to formalize wider political and social conflicts. Foucault’s description brings this together neatly: Sadomasochism, according to him, is “the eroticization of power, the eroticization of strategic relations. . . . It is an acting-out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure.”²⁷ It also appears to Foucault that sadomasochism is the “real creation of new possibilities of pleasure.” Given that he viewed the invention of new possibilities to be the highest form of resistance within relations of power, the masochist in the library might actually have the greatest capacity to create new possibilities for knowledge and self-discovery.

It is hardly surprising that Sedgwick mentions her own encounters with the library catalog in her essay about beating fantasies. Recall her words from “A Poem Is Being Written”: “The wooden subject, author, and title

catalogues frustrate and educate the young idea.”²⁸ We enter into a library, seeking pleasure in books, and submitting to the laws as written in the classification and in the terms of use. For many of us, the entire of suite of encounters—entering the building, searching the catalog, inquiring with the reference librarian, checking out books—is simultaneously thrilling, intimidating, and fearsome. The first step toward obtaining pleasure in perverse readings is to submit oneself to the library’s disciplinary techniques. The threats of punishment and shame are real. And the shelves, with their separation of subjects from one another and the placement of sexualized and racialized subjects in the margins, reflect one’s alienation. Take, for instance, Lillian Faderman’s account of first discovering a book about lesbians in the library:

So I’m in the stacks of the English Reading Room about to be seduced. I’m looking for a novel by E. M. Forster, and it’s not there. . . . But in the spot where the book is supposed to be sitting is another book, not by Forster, but by Foster. Jeannette Foster. With the title *Sex Variant Women in Literature*. . . . Is “Sex Variant Women” really a euphemism for what I think it is? It is! And that spectacular revelation knocks the breath out of me. . . . Standing there in the stacks, I devour the opening section, even forgetting to look over my shoulder to see if I’m being observed. I read for twenty minutes or half an hour, and no one comes by to frighten me away. But I mustn’t press my luck. I place the book back in its slot, vowing to visit again as soon as I can, praying I’ll have no rival for my devoted attention to it.²⁹

This tale is charged with a magnificent erotic tension deriving from the pleasure obtained after submitting, and the threat of being caught, with the continued worry of a rival. She will return to this spot repeatedly, subjecting herself again to gain forbidden, secret pleasures.

The dominant library and its systems must be viewed in relation to the user, as it is by submitting to the law that users find their books and their pleasures, in spite of the disciplinary lines. In order to use the library, users must subject themselves to these dividing practices and participate in the denial of intertextuality and intersubjectivity by seeking texts in various spaces, as determined and disciplined by the rules. But we must also consider how the user is used by the library and how the constitution of subjects is integral to these relations between the library and its users. One might argue that the enmeshment of human subjectivity in technologies of control begins with categories. Of course, the trick, as Žižek points out, is in knowing how to draw the line between redemptive violence and the

kind that “confirms one’s entrapment.”³⁰ This, in my view, is the purpose of critique, and I would argue that it is by first submitting to the rules and cruising the lines of shelves, and then through defiance, curiosity, perseverance, and mockery of the laws of classification, that perverse readings and pleasures become possible.

Perverse subjects expose the library classifications to their own weaknesses, or to the extent to which the condition of the apparatus is one of “being in force without significance.”³¹ The inability of the system to signify or enforce a law via the inscription of categories means that the rationally ordered hierarchies quite easily collapse under their own weight. The authority with which they are created and enforced is then called into question, and we have to ask whether and how we can consent to the terms by which we engage in the relations of power when we enter a library, peruse its catalog, and browse the shelves. I would suggest that, as long as we do the kind of work that examines how the machine functions, take it apart, and interrogate the mechanisms by which knowledge is produced and circulated, we are able to move toward a more just way of producing knowledge. Relations of power are always present, but we are, in fact, free in the library if we understand what is going on. We can consent to playing the power games. Through the act of dismantling the system, even if only in theory, we can open the library up to other possibilities, particularly in the ways that we figure and refigure the self in relation to the system and its subjects.