

# Dennis cooper's the sluts

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Despite the obvious thematic prominence of homosexuality—and homosexual men in particular—in Cooper's works, his relationship with homosexuality and gay studies is not as straightforward and easy to define as might be expected. Taking the measure of Cooper's presence in the field of the discourse on homosexuality is more complicated than one might think. The prevalent discursive trends in gay studies are colored with a tendency to elevate the social standing of homosexuals and dignify the practice of homosexuality and the lifestyles that come with it. While some authors, either consciously or unconsciously, might in their depiction of the homosexual characters in their works bring them closer to so-called 'normal', i. e. procreating heterosexuals, people with the aim of making it easier for society at large to recognize the equally humane being of such individuals and come to accept them as they would one of their own, Cooper's homosexual protagonists are presented as extremely perverted, far from a "normal" and easily relatable individual. Cooper doesn't want to conform homosexuality to the well-established conceptions of 'good' and 'acceptable' of society so that it will be allowed to meekly and indistinguishably coexist with the heterosexual mentality that has taken upon itself to make decisions for everyone. Cooper does not task himself with popularizing homosexuality and making it palatable for the public.

The ethical and ideological principles guiding Cooper's pen are of a different sort altogether. Cooper doesn't rely on a politicized community as a guarantee for the protection of sexual freedom. He believes that "you need freedom from the political community to protect your individual and ever-coveted perversions of mind and body" (Nicolini 1993). We can see a clear

reflection of the beliefs informing this last statement in Cooper's George Miles Cycle which is made up of his first five novels— Closer (1989), Frisk (1991), Try (1994), Guide (1997), and Period (2000).

The theme of transgression is magnified in these novels, we can hardly identify any aim or purpose that would act as a guiding principle behind the acts of the characters, and the flat quality of the writing speaks of its distance from external concerns. There is a certain detachment from the everyday in Cooper's cycle of novels. He creates a hallucinatory world inhabited by emaciated, drug using teenagers that are manipulated by psychopaths, a group of individuals that act as if they are endowed with a kind of special knowledge enjoyed exclusively by their private circle. This esoteric knowledge to which they aspire is gained at the limits of experience and they see the body as a privileged site for experimentation and the actualization of their will to knowledge.

As mentioned, Cooper doesn't show much sympathy for the mainstream homosexual cause. What's more, Cooper shows no interest in politics. He belongs to the Blank Generation. In the George Miles Cycle there is basically a whole lot of nothingness and a discomfoting level of superficiality. As a result, the relevance of a homosexually-oriented reading of Cooper's work has stayed hidden from the attention of his critics and commentators. His works have been criticized from a variety of perspectives, including avant-garde and overly philosophical outlooks, but not so often from a point of view that gives privilege to homosexuality itself or to queer studies.

However, this self-willed alienation from gay and queer theory ended when Cooper's *The Sluts* came out in 2005. Some of the most important and definitive fundamentals of queer studies have found their way into Cooper's writing in this novel. We can say that Cooper finally goes queer with this novel.

*The Sluts* is focused on carnality. The novel is a gallery of the flesh in all its forms, at turns caressed and mutilated, attractive and repulsive, living and even dead. The novel is obsessed with the male body. At every turn of the page it is waiting for the slightest glance to come out at the reader with an almost hostile immediacy and urgency:

He has the hottest, sweetest little ass, especially if you like them a little used like I do. I must have eaten out his hole for an hour. I got four fingers inside him. I couldn't fuck him hard and deep enough. I spanked him, and not softly either. I pinched and twisted the hell out of his nipples. Nothing fazed him. All the time his cute boy face looked at me with his mouth wide open and made these sounds like he was scared to death and turned on at the same time. I came twice, first in his mouth and then up his ass. (2005: 3)

But sometimes looks can be deceiving. At the heart of this extravagant display of carnality, this cornucopia of the flesh, we can see a seemingly contrarious theme being played out, the theme of prosthetization.

Ultimately, a virtual prosthesis takes the place of the organic body part. *The Sluts* is the account of Brad's trade.

He is a gay hustler whose experiences are narrated by his clients in electronic reviews and board posts on an escort agency website, and through voicemail messages on a chat-line for “rentboys”. The novel is narrated from multiple perspectives. These accounts are interspersed with interludes by the webmaster and the hustler himself, which adds to the complexity of the narrative structure of the novel. The accounts are made up of harsh and extreme contents. Brad’s body may be abused, raped, or even murdered.

At the end of the novel the reader finds out that this display of carnality and all this talk of transgressive sexual experimentation is all made up. They are just words on the screen before their eyes. We are facing an unreliable narrator here. All the cruel, hair-raising descriptions on the website, the whole array of sadistic reviews, are products of the perverted fantasies of a client who is infatuated with Brad.

Dear Webmaster,

I need to clear my conscience. I’ve been lying to you and to everyone who reads this website. I maintained the lie for as long as I could but I don’t have it in me to keep going. I don’t have the imagination to pull this off. I realized that today and made a decision to come clean to you because either way I lose.

The truth is that I started this in good faith. I went to great effort to get Brad for you and finish this thing off right. He wasn’t Brad. He sure fooled me for a while, but I know how easy it is to bullshit someone when you know what he

wants to hear. The first six reviews were real. After that, the Brad imposter fucked me over and left. I wrote the rest of the reviews except for the review of 'Thad' from the guy in Portland. (2005: 260)

The computer screen, with its display of eroticism, becomes for the clients (and readers) the only source for the extraction of sexual desire and the sole locus of reference for reassuring themselves that it still exists and has ever existed throughout the novel. After reading this confessional passage all the carnal passions aroused by those fantastical reviews lose their intensity and immediacy, as if fading away behind the pixels of the screen—or the printed words in the case of Cooper's readers.

Here arises a question regarding what Cooper's purpose could be in implementing this disillusioning turn in the plot. Or maybe it would be better (not to get tangled up in an inconclusive pursuit of the author's intention) to ask what it is that the novel does, what function it fulfils, by way of this substitution of the image of a concrete body of desire with the airy outlines of a mere phantasm, a product of pure imagination, or we could say a prosthesis. Could it be simply to prevent readers from fully identifying with the murderous ideas presented in the exotic reviews? Or is it an expression of a nihilistic outlook on the human condition, brought out thanks to the growing influence of virtuality in our lives? A nihilistic outlook in which humans, to use Baudrillard's words with a little modification, are seen to be "trapped between their fossils and their clones"?

In *The Sluts* the situation is not quite as depressing and gloomy as conveyed by the nihilistic view I speculatively put forward in the above paragraph. In

the deception exposed at the end of the novel we can actually find an opening into bliss. Also, the way Cooper writes about cybersexuality, the way the discourse on sex and sexuality in relation to cybernetics plays out in his novel leads the way to an enriched and promising outlook on both themes.

Situating the plot in a virtual framework makes it possible for Cooper to easily and proficiently play with reality and the expectations of his readers. The novel reflects on how sexuality works, how it takes shape and comes to be the way it is. In this way, Cooper's work enters the discussion on sexual identities and sexuation which is also one of the most important subjects in queer studies. Cooper's treatment of sexuality and desire in *The Sluts* sets the ground for a broader understanding of sex than allowed by dualistic views that oscillate between essentialist and constructivist conceptions of it. And this is why reading and examining the novel in the vein of these two latter trends fail in coming up with satisfactory results.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the advent of gender studies. The intellectual developments that followed led to serious disturbances in the male- and heterosexual-centered inclinations that dominated society. Intellectuals started questioning the mechanisms behind the formation of sexual identities. The privileged status accorded to heterosexuality, having been based on clearly problematic and indefensible notions, could not hold against the challenge. Examinations of the subject of sexuality mainly fell into two categories in terms of their guiding principles: essentialist and constructivist. Essentialists insisted on fixed notions of 'man' and 'woman' corresponding to concrete 'natural' differences between

the two sexes that in their view preceded all cultural foundations.

Constructivists, on the contrary, believed the two categories to be products of historical and cultural configurations, and thus subject to change.

However, both outlooks were riddled with problems. From the late twentieth century it became clear through the brilliant works of thinkers such as Foucault, Butler and Sedgwick (among many others) that sexuality is much too complicated to fit in such a narrow dyadic perspective.

Both the essentialist and constructivist outlooks suffer from a poor understanding of the role of technology. The truth is that with the developments in recent history the line between artifice and nature has become increasingly thinner. Sometimes the two are almost indistinguishable. Technology has become a form of nature itself. Our sexualities are made up of fiction and living social reality in equal parts. Nature and technology mix and mingle, especially in our conception of sex and gender. The binary opposition between nature and artifice in relation to sexual pleasure and desire falls apart in the encounter with prostheses, such as transsexual bodies, sex toys, drugs and hormones, that have transformative power over sexual desire and pleasure. These prostheses can redefine nature and give birth to new realities. Cooper employs prostheses in *The Sluts*. With the introduction of these prosthetic means sexuality assumes a creative quality in the novel. The computer screen itself appears in the capacity of a prosthesis in the novel. Words become the carriers of the substance of sexuality, sexuality is manifested in a text on the screen. Towards the end of the novel, when we read the confession quoted earlier, sexuality is clearly shown to be a creation. The narrator adds: “ I am a great



liar, so I started writing fake reviews. I thought I could make up a better ending than whatever would have happened anyway” (2005: 261). Sexuality for Cooper is the joint product of fiction/fantasy, nature and technology. With the computer, the machine, he gives the narrator the means to introduce the element of fiction to the conception of sexuality.