Natalie Ruby

Statement of Purpose

U.C. Berkeley Ph.D. in English

*Clarissa: Or the History of a Young Lady* gripped me from the first excerpts I read in an undergraduate course on the history of the novel. Despite historical differences, Clarissa’s struggle against rape resonated with my own experience of sexual assault. I identified with her repeated attempts to articulate complex, contradictory desires within the strict constraints of the eighteenth-century consent binary of seduction or rape. Like Clarissa’s, my experience fits uneasily in contemporary consent discourses. The importance of unveiling rape in the #MeToo era has unintentionally obscured encounters that lack the clarity of “yes” or “no.” However, desire can be ambiguous even in unambiguous cases of assault. My research as a master’s student at the CUNY Graduate Center explores how desire, in a broad archive of transatlantic seduction literature, refuses the bourgeois ideals that undergird consent discourse. **I am interested in alternative modes of knowing and being that emerge from the “grey,” or what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the “murky” terrain of the social.**

In his book *Screw Consent*, Joseph Fischel examines grey areas by looking at how age, power gaps, human-animal relations, and BDSM communities make a mess of consent. Following Fischel, I interrogate the “grey” embedded in ordinary sexual encounters. Ambivalence, incoherence, and indifference are examples of everyday “untidy desires” that are evident across the seduction plot and the novel tradition. To have ambivalent desire is to be overwhelmed by a dialectic of contradictory emotions, perpetually suspended in what Toni Bowers calls the “shadowy realm of ‘or’” in the consent binary. **At U.C. Berkeley’s doctoral program in English, I intend to explore how a critique of consent that incorporates “untidy desires” can generate methodological innovations for reading scenes of sexual violation. I am also interested in how ambivalent desire subverts gender norms, encouraging gender variance within and outside the text.**

Seduction is a generative space for thinking through discourses of consent, the construction of feminine subjectivity and sexuality, and the problematics of reading the novel. Historicists tend to read the seduction plot as a political allegory that dramatizes liberal consent discourses; feminist theory often reads it within psychological realist traditions as summoning feminine interiority. The success and failure of both these readings hinge on the excesses and instability of feminine virtue. **But feminine virtue also acts as an unstable signifier for feminine subjectivity and sexuality, simultaneously supporting and undermining allegorical and psychological realist interpretations of seduction. *Clarissa* and the seduction plot suggest feminine virtue cannot be a stable pillar of bourgeois femininity.** Rather, like Freud’s *Dora,* seduction narratives point to the impossible and fragmentary nature of the feminine. What forms of interiority the seduction plot does illuminate come at the cost of rape.

In working with ambivalence and incoherence, the methodology I construct illuminates the continued presence of desire and pleasure in catastrophe without overwriting gaps in memory, silences, and affective testimony. My master’s thesis, underway with Dr. Carrie Hintz, uses this method to examine *Clarissa* alongside Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*. While Clarissa’s ambivalence is a radical repudiation of the consent binary, Jacobs’s “constricted choice” in a lover demonstrates that there are strict racial and class boundaries that determine who can comfortably maintain ambiguity in sexual encounters. I am therefore not only interested in how and to whom the false binary of seduction or rape is applied, but in how the alternatives it evokes are unequally distributed based on material structures of identity. In contrast to Clarissa’s lack of action, Maggie Verver transforms her ambivalent feelings about her husband’s affair into an ambivalent mode of action in which she learns to decisively act without ever acknowledging the imperatives to act. As a form of relationality and as a method of acting, then, ambivalence operates distinctly in each of these narratives, with distinct political and ethical aims.

My interest in ambivalence and desire has prompted me to take courses on modernism and to assist with Dr. Richard A. Kaye’s research on D. H. Lawrence as an assistant editor of the *D. H. Lawrence Review*. I am interested in applying interdisciplinary techniques for reading ambivalent desire, and for this purpose I have learned to use archival practice and feminist and queer theory to inform my literary analyses. This interdisciplinarity builds off my time as an undergraduate *Corporeal Techniques and Technologies* fellow at the Wesleyan Center for the Humanities, where I participated in a weekly lecture and seminar series with faculty and visiting scholars. Since graduating, I have continued to develop both techniques, notably as an archivist at the Frick Collection and as an interdisciplinary master’s student concentrating in Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. My commitment to feminist and queer studies is reflected in my current work as the assistant for the Women and Gender Studies department at the Graduate Center, where I advise students and coordinate public and intradepartmental events.

I believe that the English faculty’s focus on Novel Theory and Gender and Sexuality studies, paired with the Center for the Study of Sexual Culture, makes U.C. Berkeley the ideal climate to deepen my knowledge of literary analysis and grow as a researcher. A major draw for me is the work of Dr. Elisa Tamarkin. Dr. Tamarkin’s approach to relevance in her recent book, *Apropos of Something*, demonstrates how previously unremarkable events take on importance through interpretation within and outside the text, mirroring the kinds of analyses I hope to develop and apply to remarkably unremarkable desires. A case in point is how she traces the golden bowl’s transformation from irrelevant object to erotic signifier for Maggie Verver. The bowl itself plays an ambivalent role in the text; it signifies the catastrophe of adultery while simultaneously providing Maggie with an opportunity to avert it. I also see myself working with Dr. Dorothy J. Hale. Dr. Hale’s analysis of the importance of novelistic space for negotiating relational differences in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of reparative reading relates to my interest in ambivalence as a middle space of “both/and” that potentially generates an ethical critical encounter with narratives of sexual violation. In addition, I hope to learn from Dr. Sara Guyer, whose recent analysis of critical anthropomorphism as a relational mode and a method of reading asymmetrical relations has implications for reading ambivalent desire and “grey rape.”