Queerer Than Thou:
Being and Deb Margolin

Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan

Deb Margolin shows up for my Wednesday night graduate seminar half an hour late. She comes tearing into the room in full character, panting about the perils of Amtrak. She is wearing hot-pink tights, a short, tight, blue-jean dress with puffy girly sleeves, and brown leather ankle boots with toes as pointy as those on the shoes of the Wicked Witch of the West. Her shock of straight black hair is tied back tight in a high pony-tail that accentuates her mad Bette Davis eyes. Her bright pink lipstick matches her tights. Around her enviably taut belly is a fanny pack from the Body Shop—one of the green and purple ones decorated with a bright yellow rhinoceros, its horn pointed toward a giant orange butterfly. The pack bounces on her belly whenever she moves. It says “animals in danger,” and it’s about to bust the zipper. So, for that matter, are Deb’s breasts bursting at the blue-jeaned buttons of her dress. I know they are swollen with milk for Molly.

I make an effort to censor these thoughts. One of my feminist selves is shouting “don’t objectify her! don’t report such intimate details! don’t dwell on a woman’s physical characteristics!” But my lesbian selves (and certainly more than one of them are operating in this scene) are saying: “There’s just something about Deb Margolin that makes me forget the rules and violate the boundaries.” I think about Deb’s jazz-musician self who is fired because she couldn’t keep a beat, whose rhythm is marked by an absence of judgment, who thinks of jazz as a form of civil disobedience, and I worry with her that I might “start to time things between the beats instead of right on the mark.”

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1 Deb Margolin, “Jazz Musician,” in Of All The Nerve, unpub. performance script, n. pag. Regrettably, most of Margolin’s work remains unpublished; here is a partial chronology of her writing and performance: Split Britches, 1981 (Split Britches); Beauty and The Beast, 1982 (Split Britches); Upwardly Mobile Home, 1984 (Split Britches); Coupla Weirdos, 1985 (with Reno); Little Women: The Tragedy, 1987 (Split Britches); Honey, I’m Home: The Alcestis Story, 1989 (with Split Britches at Hampshire College); Of
I sit next to her, watching her catch her breath and gather her focus by prattling obsessively the way that only Margolin, the manic philosopher, can. I watch as she yanks and tugs at her clothing to arrange it comfortably on her body. My students are rapt by the reality of her. She seems to have leaped right off the video monitor where we were just minutes before watching her solo performances Of All the Nerve. I am suddenly acutely and painfully aware of myself—that kind of self-consciousness that is always about consciousness and envy and identification of/with an(other). And what I see is how drab, rigid, confining, and sometimes utterly oppressive it is “to be” what “I am,” in that moment—too many moments in my time—an academic.

And so as I sit down to write yet one more article for an academic journal, all I can think of at first are some old lines of poetry that are bumping around in my overly crowded head: “Life friends, is boring. We must not say so.” I ask my girlfriend—who gives up poetry, her first love, for too many pretenders—“who wrote those lines? Do you know?” She thinks and then exclaims, “John Berryman,” deducing it as if she were taking her qualifying exams. I e-mail my poet colleague, who, magically, I think, e-mails back: “They’re from a John Berryman Dream Song. . . . It’s the fourteenth song.” And he completes the citation:

we our selves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) “Ever to confess you’re bored
means you have no
Inner Resources.”

Jubilant that she has gotten the quotation correct, my girlfriend tells me Berryman committed suicide shortly after this poem was written. I am not surprised. Ever the academic, my mind is now heavy with the worry that I will quote too many of Berryman’s lines for “fair use,” and will have to pay for them.

The next day I’m reading the New York Times Book Review, scanning it for the “good parts,” the same way I read porn, and I find Adam Phillips’s review—aptly entitled “The Joy of Boredom”—of Patricia Meyer Spacks’s Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind. Just when I think I cannot possibly perform another academic act, the President of the Modern Language Association publishes a book arguing, according to Phillips, that boredom “was, as it were, a woman’s activity.” And if Spacks’s first sentence, “writing resists boredom, constituting itself by that resistance” (13), is credible, then it sounds like one has to write to avoid both boredom and “womanhood.” Spacks echoes Berryman when she repeats the aphorism that “many people say their mothers said that if you’re bored, you’re boring; you have no inner

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All the Nerve, 1989 (solo); There’s A Place For Us, 1989–90 (with Dale Goodson and Kevin Seal); 970-DEBB, 1990 (solo); Gestation, 1991 (solo); Lesbians Who Kill, 1992 (written for Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver); The Breaks, 1992 (with Rae C. Wright); Valley of the Dolls House, 1993 (with Split Britches at University of Hawaii); Of Mice, Bugs and Women, 1994 (solo); and Carthievers! Joyrides!, 1995 (solo).

1John Berryman, 77 Dream Songs (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1964), 16. I thank my colleague, Bob Perelman, for the citation. And for sending me this bit of clarity and interest in the darkness of the internet one quiet night.

resources” (13). I wonder why it is always mothers who are responsible for this evidently pervasive bit of wisdom (my mother told me that too, didn’t yours?). Is being bored a luxury that few women are allowed to indulge? A defense against the terror of femininity? An escape from academia? Whatever it is, it certainly makes me wander. So back to the subject at hand.

Deb Margolin has inner resources. She is never tedious, but she makes wonderful art from the most quotidian of experiences. She tells of pushing her one-year-old son in his stroller around the grounds of the condo complex in Secaucus, New Jersey, where her neighbors, who spend most days lying by the pool in bathing suits with gold chains sewn onto them, scarcely acknowledge the existence of this bedraggled mother whose kid only knows two letters and sings them out in his burgeoning baritone voice—B O B O BO—as they make their daily rounds. She tells of the Chelsea Coffee Shop waitress who refuses to service any of the customers who call in for take-outs: one because it’s disgusting to eat a tuna sandwich without tomato or lettuce; another because he ordered the same thing the day before; yet another because he can’t understand the difference between synecdoche and metonymy. In between calls, she tells us her fantasy of being taken to the theatre to see a Beckett play (the “one where nothing happened”) by a man who looked at her with eyes that he thought might be crossing but that she believed were just “waiting for the light.”

I can easily get lost for hours letting Deb speak for herself. But now there is something else academic nagging at me. This is an issue on queer performances. Am I in this issue because I write queerly about performance, or because I write about queer performances, or because I am queer? If the latter is the case, then I am on fairly stable ground. But either of the first two requires a great deal of explanation. Is Margolin the “proper object” of this inquiry? That damned I AM is everywhere, even, perhaps especially, in queer performance. I am bored with BEING, if not with being who I am. But Sue-Ellen Case has told us that “queer theory... works not at the site of gender, but at the site of ontology, to shift the ground of being itself, thus challenging the Platonic parameters of Being—the borders of life and death.”

Screwing my courage to this stick(y) place, I turn to the inevitable question. Yes, Deb Margolin is a brilliant performer, and a feminist writer for the theatre who is, in my opinion, unsurpassed in her philosophical ruminations—but is she queer? Honestly, I just don’t know. I know that she is one of the sexiest women I’ve ever known, and without a doubt the funniest. Deb makes me laugh until I think that I will fall over dead. Could that challenge the Platonic parameter of death? I wouldn’t mind if I died laughing in the middle of a Margolin performance. Is this a death wish that could be read as a displacement of my desire?

If identity is a matter of self-enunciation, then Deb Margolin is a 1995 Buick Riviera. Or so she says in her latest performance, “Car Thieves! Joy Rides!”:

Men say cars are like women, and they’re right. Just like women. Me? I’m like the 1995 Riviera. In almost every way. I’m Jewish, and the Riviera is Buick. [She shows us a picture

4 Deb Margolin, Secaucus, unpub. performance script, n. pag.
5 Deb Margolin, “Chelsea Coffee,” in Of All the Nerve.
Deb Margolin. Photo: Dona Ann McAdams.
and indeed they do look alike] Look at this silent steel arc. That’s my line too. My first line of defense. Green, curved, lit. That’s how I am at parties. See what it says here: Sleek, comfortable, powerful, quiet, agile, beautiful. And fun. Riviera.7

Is she having us on? I’ve never known Deb to be quiet.

In one of my favorite Margolin monologues, Deb analyzes a message that was mistakenly left on her answering machine. No matter how many times she repeats the message (and she plays it back for us numerous times, even seducing the audience to repeat it along with her as she reads off of giant cue cards that she holds up) it makes no sense. One simply cannot figure out the cast of characters within the message, or follow the message’s import, despite its urgency to communicate. But Deb is obsessed with the way in which this message, spoken in perfectly plain English, cannot be deciphered unless one is a member of the “ingroup” to which the message is addressed. Deb refuses to allow this exclusion to chasten her.

Finding it reminiscent of “all the paradox and tragedy of the universe” in its utter banality, she fights the message, she tackles it, wrenching it from context to context, pulverizing it like a piece of soft fruit, forcing its juices to spurt out all over us and insisting that we lick its stickiness off our faces and spit it back out at her. She will not let us go; she cannot rest until the words submit to her desperate desires. She dances to the rhythm of the voice on the machine’s beat. She dances like the evil queen in her red hot iron slippers. She pulls her dress to and fro and waves it up and down like a small girl who cannot resist flaunting her underpants. One either recognizes the hilarity in this, which can only come through identification, or one leaves. At one point, the voice on the machine insists: “But that cannot be.” Deb hits the stop button violently and confronts us all: “Alright, now if there’s one thing you know when you get to be my age, it’s that anything can be.”8

There it is again, that beingness. And Deb, the feminist philosopher cum performance artist, is right again. Anything can be. But anything that can be also, necessarily, must be able to not be, or not have been, or will not be. Those of us who carried Sartre around like a bible in college (am I the only one?) know these problems of being and nothingness ad nauseam. They go hand in hand; they’re a couple: In you I am. Could we say that the opposite of being is not nothingness, but Deb Margolin?

She has written some of the most enduring, passionate, complicated lesbian language of our time. This behind-the-scenes member of Split Britches, the one who has, as they say, given lesbians so much voice, wrote this sequence, which I love:

We picked wild raspberries together by the railroad tracks, in the dark. Ridiculous.
She said she knew where they grew and I loved to make preserves. She said we couldn’t go in the daytime. It was forbidden. Against the law. Of course we went at night. Raspberries. Those little clusters of edible garnets.
The darker the sweeter. And when they’re at

8 Deb Margolin, “Bonnie Josephs,” in Of All the Nerve.
their prettiest they are too young to eat.
And the raspberry bramble is so protective of
her bower . . . thorns. We brought metal pots.
It was dark and there was that odd hot wind and
we crouched down where the trains passed.
We were eye level with the train wheels.
It was like being in the mouth of an animal.
She forbade me to cry out when the thorns burnt my skin.
And in the dark I crushed more berries than I picked.
It was torture not to be able to cry out and
not knowing when the pain would come. And the
trains kept coming. In the morning my hands were
blue with berries, and blue with blood, and my
lips were blue with cold. And the horizon was purple,
as if we had crushed all those raspberries against
the night sky. All those raspberries hidden
somewhere in the sunrise. She washed my hands for me and
sucked the bruises. Even that reads like a dream to me.
But she says she never dreams, and I believe her.9

As written, it would be hard to argue that there is anything particularly lesbian about
this passage. In performance, with Peggy Shaw, as June, telling this story to us as she
slowly undresses May (Lois Weaver), it is one of the most erotic scenes between
women that I have ever witnessed. But, you will say, what makes it lesbian is the
performance by Shaw and Weaver. And I think you will be quite right. Suppose that
Shaw read this as a monologue without the presence of Weaver? Or suppose Deb
performed this monologue herself? Would it still be lesbian?

Such “identity” questions continue to exert very real pressure on lesbian and gay
intellectual inquiry. Their very articulation indicates that many of us retain a belief in
the object of desire and/or the (object)ive “self” prior to the performance. I have
written about this exhaustively (for me that is) elsewhere; so why bring it up again?
What is the pressure that is exerted on me, that I have indeed quite thoroughly
internalized; for no one has said to me that Margolin is not a proper object for a queer
performance issue. Why, then, do I and so many others succumb to this kind of
interrogation, often self-imposed?

Teresa de Lauretis’s contention, that it “takes two women to make a lesbian,”10
strikes me forcibly now as “right” in ways that I had not before comprehended. For
though I am somewhat reluctant to admit it, I don’t think I would read the scene above
as lesbian unless it were performed by two women. You see, before I understood de
Lauretis’s argument with the emphasis on two—like “two for tea, and tea for two, a
boy for me, a girl for you.” But now I see that the emphasis, for me anyway, is on
women. For surely if that scene were performed by Lois and Deb, or Peggy and Deb, or
let’s say, just for fun, me and Deb, I would still read it as lesbian. And I would probably
do so if any one of the women above or a host of others read it alone, because of course
the missing woman in the couple would be filled in by myself. So there we have it; it

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9 Deb Margolin, Lesbians Who Kill, unpub. performance script, n. pag.
10 Teresa de Lauretis, “Recasting the Primal Scene: Film and Lesbian Representation,” in The Practice
takes women, plural, to make lesbians. But maybe it takes three people to perform a queer act? Like the trio who make Split Britches?

So what about Deb’s own fantasy scenes? One of the more provocative moments for this line of inquiry emerged in a few quick lines during a monologue on loneliness. Not using the phrase, “inner resources,” but most assuredly conjuring them, she said that she was not a lonely adult because as a child of six or seven she had a fantasy about keeping Kitty Carlisle hanging upside down by her high heels from a coat hanger in her closet. Kitty Carlisle has my last name now, but I have no interest in hanging upside down in Deb’s closet. I have closets of my own to hang myself in. I do like to wear high heels, though. And sometimes I like girls who wear them; not usually at the same time that I am wearing them, though. And they have to have their own. Mind you, I don’t mean to imply that I have any theoretical objections whatsoever to girls swinging from their heels with the blood rushing to their heads in each others’ closets. Also, it’s not at all clear, nor do I think it can ever be determined, that she meant this in any way to represent an erotic scene. Maybe I’m just perverting it.

With all this tentativeness, I’m beginning to identify with Deb’s character who berates her author for cutting her out of the novel and leaving her suspended in time:

See it’s women! The problem is Women! Having a story, it’s too scary for them, it’s too scary, it’s like throwing a spear at the heart of an animal and having it hit, it’s violent in some way, it’s terminal, it ends. Stories end. So instead they throw the spear, and then, afraid it’s gonna hit the good heart they aimed it at, they run after it, catch it; the animal shrugs its shoulders and walks away, and then what? Where do you go from there? To Peru! Or get a drug problem. Or talk about your mother.11

Maybe one of the reasons I’m having such a hard time writing this is because I’m trying to do it all by myself. I seem to have gotten all tangled up in this theory and I’m not even sure what kind of act I’m performing here. At the very least I want it to be a lesbian act. And if the theory holds, I can’t do that alone. So I guess I better get some help. Could you come give me a hand with this please?

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I know you are bored. You tell me so a thousand times a day. Now you are publishing it. Not exactly a good advertisement for life with me, is it? But this isn’t really about me, not even about us. It’s about Being and Deb Margolin. It’s about being queer and being a spectator-fan of Deb Margolin. The former claim is not about us; the latter is. Let me rehearse my options: If I point out that we actually have a good thing going, that we are among the lucky ones with tenure, interesting students, good cities, and fabulous work to “teach,” you will look at me as if I am completely insane. If I agree with you and dis the profession, I’ll hate my life. That’s the problem with lesbians: no proper distance. Always getting entangled in each other’s dramas, in each other’s other girlfriends.

11 Deb Margolin, “Loneliness,” in Of All the Nerve.
12 Deb Margolin, Of Mice, Bugs and Women, unpub. performance script, n. pag.
You know all there is to know about my jealousy. So what am I doing in this piece? Providing you with the base of the triangle to work out your desire? H.D. mocked her lover for saying, "I love you but I desire l'autre." In French or English it still bugs me. Bugs me more to see Margolin's exterminator on the stage haunting me again: "See I know a lady got porcupines! Porcupines, they eat houses. Lady's got a problem with porcupines lunching on her house, you see! She buys a gun, right? She puts on a hat, lies down on the ground, near the floorboards, starts shooting! But she shot a mouse!" 

My therapist tells me, in effect, that I mistake a mouse for a porcupine. She says that my worry (the clinical, dangerous term is paranoia) about the solidarity of my home demands that I create porcupines to give my worry something to munch on. She says I am forever turning mice into elephants large enough to shoot. George Orwell put the drama in colonial India; I stage it here and there.

I match your boredom with paranoia. Does that make a pair? Go fish. Yes, Margolin's phone message performance is a hilarious attempt to decipher the message's meanings, but what gives the piece its energy is Margolin's increasing paranoia about being unable to decipher it. If "queer" is the audible message on mainstream culture's answering machine, the fact that we believe we can now leave that message, signify it, rehearse it, iterate it, does not mean that it's getting through. That's part of the tragic-comedy that Margolin's work continually evokes.

Toward the end of his analysis of one of psychoanalysis' most famous homosexual-manques, Freud discusses Schreber's paranoia. Summarizing his enquiry into paranoid disorders (research undertaken collaboratively with Jung and Ferenczi, with whom Freud had what might be described as homosexually inflected intellectual relations) Freud remarks: "The patients whose histories provided the material for this enquiry included both men and women, and varied in race, occupation and social standing." Dropping the contemporary sounding rhetoric of the social sciences, Freud continues, "we were astonished to find that in all of these cases a defence against a homosexual wish was clearly recognizable at the very centre of the conflict which underlay the disease [paranoia], and that it was in an attempt to master an unconsciously reinforced current of homosexuality that they all came to grief." In other words, wishing fervently not to recognize their homosexual desires, Freud's patients developed paranoia as a kind of compensation. ("I didn't go for the girl behind door number one, I took paranoia instead.") Throughout his analysis of Schreber, Freud traces the collusion between paranoia and male homosexuality; but, as so often with Freud, the "riddle" of lesbianism is left out of consideration. Freud's study suggests that if paranoia is the result of a repressed homosexual desire, then a conscious, actualized, and non-repressed homosexual desire would allow the subject to escape paranoia. And yet homosexual-manques hardly have the corner on paranoia. Might it be that paranoia in lesbians has something to do with a defense against a heterosexual

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13 Margolin, Of Mice, Bugs and Women.

wish? (We were astonished to find that in cases of lesbians a defense against a heterosexual wish was clearly responsible for their raging paranoia . . .)

To put it more pointedly, might it be that such a defense informs the often paranoid work of the queer border-keepers, those who demand identity papers before nominations are conferred? ("Well, is she or isn't she?") If there is a defense against a heterosexual wish among some paranoid lesbians, in which direction does the wish point? If it takes two to make a lesbian, maybe we tend to defend against our partner's unacknowledged wish rather than our own. If so, the energy of our paranoia is fueled by that defense.

In projects of this kind it is tempting to try to mark the "source" of queerness. (Does it come from the script? the viewer? the writer? the performer?) Indulging this temptation yields no satisfaction, however. If the ontology of the object of desire is immaterial, the only desire that matters is the one which knows he or she has it. It is quite possible to queer a straight object and to straighten a queer one. This is one of the reasons why the queer border patrol is superfluous as a tracking apparatus; as a political apparatus it, like the closet but swinging in the other direction, is inherently homophobic.

I do not know who or what Margolin is in her "being." Judith Butler has helped us substitute philosophy's search for the truth-effects produced by ontologies with a search for the truth-effects produced by performances and acts. Margolin's most radical act is her writing. If Butler is right, then a philosopher might settle for the statement, "she is a writer." But I do not know what that actually means; it's a statement as treacherously vague to me as "she is a lesbian."

The opposition that most intrigues my students these days is between "queer acts" and "normative performatives." Writing is a manifestation of style; queers, I have been told, have intimate relations with style, as well as with each other. Style is an embellishment on the norm; it's opera instead of a telegram. In Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" there is no promise of style. Style is what makes living different from surviving. Style is living differently than Newt would like.

Writing with style is a queer act as against a normative performative. It takes place somewhere between the social and the asocial; somewhere between silence and amplification; somewhere between the tenses time says we can have. When it really works, this writing occurs somewhere between living (in time) and dying (out of time). Writing enacts the death of the "I" we think we are before we begin the inquiry into subjectivity that writing, in this sense, demands. Newt and friends would like to assign us each an "I," if only so they can keep us counted. Queer writing, as an allegiance to the radicality of unknowing who we are becoming, betrays that system of accounting.


See both of Judith Butler's books: Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identities (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex' (New York: Routledge, 1993).
Writing in this sense, like sex in another sense, is a beautiful and elegant form of transforming the surface of the visible; some might call both sex and writing sublime forms of lying. Both writing and sex make movements that are impossible to predict in advance; writing makes the movement in words, sex in flesh. The raspberry monologue in Margolin’s *Lesbians Who Kill* is a dream in a play that explicitly states it wants to take place “in your dreams.” May and June argue over whether or not May dreams, but Margolin’s writing is an unabashed, carnal journey into its own dream. Margolin is not so interested in May or June as “characters.” She is interested in how May and June can reveal her writing’s dreaming. Her writing’s deepest dream is that it might find the words to match the stain of a woman’s skin soaking through another woman’s open lips; that it might make skin pucker and ooze when the vowel inside the perfect word nestles in the pink lozenge in the center of her mouth. (“And the horizon was purple, as if we had crushed all those raspberries against the night sky. All those raspberries hidden somewhere in the sunrise. She washed my hands for me and sucked my bruises.”)

I have had this dream myself. (Alas I always wake before I find the word that I need to slide back into my dream.) Dreams are stylish versions of our deepest desires. So when you write that you desire Margolin, a woman who writes the lines for the two hottest lesbians in the world of performance, should I believe there are porcupines eating our house?

Porcupines—almost an anagram for cupids—all those quills and arrows spilling between them. Arrows or quills. Pens or penises. It all comes down to the body. Faced with coming down to the body, like most non-smoking academics, I saturate the air above me with theory.

Lacan thought that sexual difference could be explained in terms of the difference between the dream of having and the dream of being the phallus. Condensing a million complications, and several diagrams: he dreams she is it, according to Lacan. It’s a little silly as a way of understanding history and sexual relations but it has the advantage of simplicity. It also helps bring this conversation back to the question of Being. Being and Time. Being and Deb Margolin. Being and the phallus. Being and Nothingness.

To mention Lacan is to bring in the agency of the letter, for the unconscious is structured like a language. But aren’t queer acts somehow outside the Law of the Letter, to say nothing of the letter of the law?

Margolin is almost fetishistic in her passion for words; for the twists and turns of the letter as it slides across the dream of coherence and the allure of incoherence, that precarious ledge upon which we spend so much time worrying: “People just litter the streets with words. Like sides. When you’re supposed to audition, and they give you the lines in advance, those are called sides. But to me sides is what you take in an argument.”

Is this an argument? Whose side are you taking? What is happening to our bodies, to “the queer body” I hear so much about? “This is my body, take and eat.” Was that an argument?

17 Margolin, *Of Mice, Bugs and Women.*
Well, it was for me, though I don’t have so many problems with it now. After I was confirmed I had a huge argument with the pastor about transubstantiation. He said the body and blood of Christ were real; I said there was no way because we would have run out by now. He called my mother and recommended that I get counseling. My mother decided I was right, and we weren’t going back to church. It’s about Being and Faith. My friends often tell me that I am the funniest person they know. It’s a terrible responsibility—to entertain others, to keep them from being bored. You get heavy on it, like mothers who eat all the food their babies spit back at them. So Deb gives me great hope because when she’s around, no one thinks I’m funny at all. I can just sit there and not do anything; I can disappear if I want to and just . . .

I guess there’s no getting around it. I’m just going to have to talk about this being thing. If desire has no object save for its own reproduction; if the so-called object of desire is just a phantasmatic construct, a bit of nothingness around which desire wraps itself to hide the hole that constitutes its center and its aim; then isn’t the object of any queer’s desire queer(ed) by definition? The sexologists tried very hard to avoid such a disruptive idea by retaining some faith in the purity of the object. Remember Ellis’s “true invert” as opposed to the one who was just the “unlucky” object, or passive recipient, of the real queer’s desire? The distinction didn’t hold very well. All those categories started slip sliding away and before they knew it, all the women were queer except for the white, middle-class, devoted wife and mother, who didn’t seem to exist. Maybe it’s not such a good idea to make the claim that one is queered by virtue of becoming the “object” for/of a queer “subject.” It could play right into “homosexual panic” fantasies. But I don’t see what the alternative would be, for the strategies in effect now certainly are not serving to contain homophobia.

You have this thing about “betweenness,” and you had it long before it became a fashionable academic trope. You say that writing is a queer act because it’s between this and between that. This betweenness, of course, has its special terrors and pleasures in the realm of sexualities. When I was a kid in Sunday school my sister and I were obsessed with betweenness. We used to sit in the back row and flip through the hymnal whispering “between the sheets” after each title: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”; “Joy to the World the Lord Has Come”; “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Your desire for betweenness may be about writing, or it may be about sex and religion, but I wonder if it’s because you always have to have someone between us, fearing that you’re losing that proper distance and thus becoming a too-too proper lesbian. So right now we’ve got Deb here between us. God, I’m in heaven, between the most serious and the funniest girl in the world. And all on one blank screen. Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me, Let Me Hide Myself in Thee.

Now wait a minute: you brought Margolin in. This was, like everything else, all your idea. I thought I was and wanted to be your object of desire. But now I read that the object of your desire is “a bit of nothingness.” (I know I said earlier that the ontology of the object of desire is immaterial, but what is disappearing there is ontology, not the object qua object.) I can live with the idea that I am a convenient prop for the circulation of your desire, that I am “a bit of nothingness” that keeps you desiring. But I can live with it because I can see that I am that FOR you, but not for
myself. Hence our need for the agency of the third. Margolin, here anyway, is someone about whom we can share some of the same thoughts, beliefs, feelings—since we know we cannot feel the same about each other. I am willing to admit the agency of a third helps me see things between us, but I am uneasy about using the work of Margolin to work out our stuff. Although to be honest, I’m not sure how to avoid it. Maybe that’s all reading really is: using the intimate scripts of others to rehearse the personal dramas of our own tragic-comedies.

Margolin’s writing matters for those interested in queer acts, in queer performance and queer theatre, because it calibrates the “betweenness” that every queer person must negotiate, living and dying as we do between two deaths. Queers are queer because they have survived their own deaths: the death in the world of the Social that demands heterosexuality and kills off, spits out, gets rid of all those who cannot conform to that Law. Lesbians and gay men who survive that death and create another life get to dream continually of another social space, one they help bring into being, by reciting their dreams out loud. Writing, in the sense in which I am defining it here, also allows us to survive our deaths; as I said earlier, writing enacts the death of the I we think we are before we begin to write. Probably all great writing does something like this; I am calling it a “queer act” because it is set against the normative ideology that insists we die once in an expository, teleologically driven future.

Margolin’s texts give language to the dreams of those still conversing after they have survived the deadly consequences of mainstream U.S. culture’s treacherous faith in single selves who possess a singular sex, single selves who will die a singular death in a singular moment in the future—in a time that has not yet come into being. Queers know that that time has come and gone and we are still here.

In a letter to Helene Deutsch, Freud once wrote, “I invented psychoanalysis because it had no literature.” We are inventing “queer theory” because we want something less knowing than the truth offered to us by the literature and philosophy of our time. We do not want a “Contract with America,” for we have lost faith in contracts. “What does ‘woman’ want?” I want something less permanent than the literature of contracts, something less knowing than the Science of Psychoanalysis, something less scripted than the faith of the male apostles. I want something as flimsy and precarious as performance. Because, despite all the yeling about mimesis and realism and the tyranny of the couple, I want something to match the tentativeness of the lives and loves I, and I hope we, make on the other side of the death drive.

Margolin is crucial to this invention because the Being of her writing comes into being as it, dolphin-like, chases waves of excited skin touching long longed-for words, and sprays back the salt with which words preserve the body’s oldest dreams. If Being is finally the match of spirit and thing, of body and word, Margolin is reinventing the bodies and words that make up those beings.

We speak of the transubstantiation, of surviving death, of shooting elephants. Maybe we feel compelled to make grand claims because we think if we don’t our words will be blown away, like Dorothy’s house. Margolin’s writing blows me away—

I say that identities are pathetic when they are so uncomfortable with their own
we think of queer identities as eidetic images, not ontological truth claims that must be
Themselves. Like an eidetic image, could queerness be
Deb says that you can tell by its hum when the bee has given up hope and resigned
perfection, at the height of my power as a physical and sexual being. But there’s a bee,
clouds chum... like muscles in use! But it doesn’t rain, and I finish, and I get out, dripping
it passes us by. If not, don’t talk or write anything too long for a few years. It might
our worried paranoid way, are waiting to get us. Queer theory has not yet been stung
Bees, porcupines, mice, elephants. We share the world with others who we believe, in
 mem that it passes us by. If not, don’t talk or write anything too long for a few years. It might
say that identities are pathetic when they are so uncomfortable with their own
necessary instabilities that they resort to calling out other queers to account for
Is it a hurricane? a gun? No, it is a specific form of il/logic. It’s the il/logic of sexual
difference itself: based on a crudely visual literalism and a paranoid mind set,
Margolin’s il/logic avoids the deadly asperities usually produced by this economy
and makes something hilarious, stylishly ridiculous, from it. In the absurdity of
Margolin’s il/logical literalism, we see things we would be otherwise blind to:

I’m 20. I’ve just been swimming like a hundred laps in a nearby pool, tight at first, then
loosening like a dress has been unzipped, and I’m in motion, all breath, and above me
clouds churn... like muscles in use! But it doesn’t rain, and I finish, and I get out, dripping
water like power, I dress quickly, go home, sit at the table by the tree. Coffee, I have hot
black coffee, and in my body pure white joy. I’ve got a beautiful body by this time, it’s
perfect, and of course I’m about to light a cigarette. And inside me is health, silence. So
here’s the image: at the table, perfect, in fact, somehow, at the very needle’s edge of my
perfection, at the height of my power as a physical and sexual being. But there’s a bee,
buzzing behind the blind, caught between the screen and the blind and I’m afraid of bees.
... I’m afraid because I’ve never been stung, and I’m waiting to be stung...

Bees, porcupines, mice, elephants. We share the world with others who we believe, in
our worried paranoid way, are waiting to get us. Queer theory has not yet been stung
by Be-ing, philosophy’s deadly game of containment. If you are given to prayers, pray
that it passes us by. If not, don’t talk or write anything too long for a few years. It might
save us all from boredom, from bee stings, from the quills and arrows of outrageous
misfortunes.

* * *

You are always so optimistic in your worried, sad, serious way. My cynicism gets
lost in your hope, one of my favorite places to disappear. But I’m afraid that Queer
Theory has indeed been stung by the Being bee. But remember that Bee in Deb’s “Of
Mice, Bugs, and Women,” the one that lies dying trapped behind the windowscreen?
Beh says that you can tell by its hum when the bee has given up hope and resigned
itself to dying: “when the buzz is low, it’s weak and angry! That’s a bad combination,
weak and angry. Can’t conserve! It’s death in a matter of minutes, see!” My hope is
that the Being in Queer Theory is the dying bee and not one of the beings it stung. Can
we think of queer identities as eidetic images, not ontological truth claims that must be
constantly shored up by confessions and declarations that implicitly cry “queerer than
thou?” Deb says that the word “eidetic” is halfway between “identity” and “pathetic.”
I say that identities are pathetic when they are so uncomfortable with their own
necessary instabilities that they resort to calling out other queers to account for
themselves. Like an eidetic image, could queerness be

a dreamlike mental image that appears to the dreamer on the deepest, most magical, most
repeatable level; an image as inevitable as breath or rain; an image that seems painted on
velvet, so full of feeling and texture it is. And it’s an image with great symbolic importance
to the imaginer, to the visualizer, and that person can call the image up at will. Whenever
they need it. Poof!

19 Margolin, Of Mice, Bugs and Women.
20 Margolin, Of Mice, Bugs and Women.
21 Margolin, Car Thieves!
We are living in an atmosphere that is much like the one created by Deb's exterminator, who is obsessed with drawing distinctions between mice, bugs, and women. He offers himself to us as a kind of lay philosopher, psychologist, priest. He asks us to give him our confessions, tell him our problems, surrender to him our secrets and our desires. He tries to seduce us with his populist charm and promises us his good will. But he gives himself away: "See, I'm not allowed to kill anything myself, see! With my own hands, see! It's against company policy, see! I just create an atmosphere, see where they can drop dead! Or an environment, if you like, see. An environment where they drop dead! But I don't do it myself. I'm an operative!" But at the end of that scene, the last thing we see just before the lights go out is the exterminator killing that bug with his flyswatter, technically, I guess, not with "his own hands."

* * *

Margolin's exterminator and her twenty-year-old swimmer remind us we might only have a minute or two to wait before what we are terrified of is inside our skin, stinging. Death is assured. Performance is a place of play between two deaths: the one we have survived and the one we think is still ahead of us.23

22 Margolin, Of Mice, Bugs and Women.