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Subjects Who Cannot Be Consolated: The Discarded Opening of *Albert Angelo* and the Queer Afterlife of “BS” Johnson in *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* by Isabel Waidner

Chris Clarke

“Another Ballsup”

- 1 Jonathan Coe presents the “Coda” of his biography, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson*, as “merely ‘a story about B. S. Johnson’” (2004: 421, Coe’s emphasis). This story, Coe implies, is to be treated differently from “*The Story*” announced in the text’s subtitle, which reconstructs “A Life” for its “one-man literary avant-garde of the 1960s” in various ways (3). Coe’s biography honours Johnson’s view that “Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily” (1973: 14) by adopting a fragmentary form that divides the text into three parts: “A LIFE IN SEVEN NOVELS” (2004: 11), “A LIFE IN 160 FRAGMENTS” (33), and “A LIFE IN 44 VOICES” (387).¹ Separated from these different constructions of “A LIFE”, the “Coda: Fragment 46, or Why Did B. S. Johnson Cut Holes in the Pages of *Albert Angelo*?” concerns a discarded opening section to Johnson’s 1964 novel. This fragment presents “an electric unspeakable, inexplicable knowing” (436) between the characters Samuel (Albert in the final novel) and Graham, and the apparent “ballsup” (441) that God has made Samuel’s other half “almost a man instead of wholly a woman” (441).² For Coe, this deleted section of the novel provides a way to tie up the “loose ends” (422) in the “picture [of Johnson he] was trying to reconstruct” (422). The text, Coe suggests, reflects how, in the 1950s, Johnson had failed to “act upon” “powerful (and disturbing) homoerotic feelings” (447), “betray[ing] [his friend Michael Bannard] by taking the ‘normal way’” (447): “heterosexuality” (70). But no sooner does Coe emphasize the “homoerotic

undertones of this deleted section" (445), than he dispels the significance of his biographical reading because "we can never know something like that" (447): "Not for certain. It's a good story, that's all" (447). Coe closes his biography on this note of uncertainty, and consequently one could argue that his text reproduces the "self-doubt and vulnerability" (452) that he suggests characterise Johnson's novels: "they quiver with nervous energy even now" (452). However, critical responses to the biography suggest that the "Coda" has the opposite effect. Jennifer Hodgson, for example, contends that Coe's attempt to "explain the 'something inexplicable' about Johnson's suicide" "undercut[s]" the "biography's own literary experimentation" (2013: 30).³

- 2 The uncertain status of Johnson's discarded representation of same-sex desire — it is a part of, and yet apart from, "*The Story of B. S. Johnson*" — highlights the danger that the reclamation of the work of postwar experimental novelists could obstruct an engagement with the more difficult affects their texts dwell upon. This essay suggests that Coe's equivocal retrieval and (re)displacement of the abandoned opening of *Albert Angelo* provides an opportunity to critically reflect on what we risk missing in appearing to recover the experimental novels of the postwar period. Where Johnson had once been "in danger of being forgotten as a postmodernist who wasn't postmodern, and a realist who had rejected (conventional) realism" (Tew & White 2007: 6), Coe's biography has sparked a reappraisal of his work and other forms of postwar narrative experimentation, with essay collections such as *British Avant-Garde Fiction of the 1960s* (Mitchell & Williams 2019) stimulating discussions on the literary innovators fleetingly alluded to in Coe's biography: "(Alan Burns, Eva Figes, Ann Quin, Christine Brooke-Rose spring immediately to mind)" (Coe 2004: 3). While this broadening of the scholarly conversation on postwar experimental novels challenges the view that "Johnson was the dominant voice and leader" (Tew 2012: 59), reassessments of these experimentalists' writings have tended, as Julia Jordan observes, to offer "recuperative gestures" (Jordan 2020: 4). Paradoxically, scholars' attempts to reinstate these experimental writers in histories of the postwar British novel might make it harder to acknowledge those aspects of their texts that resist the work of recovery, such as the "ballsup" (Coe 2004: 441) hovering on the edge of the image of Johnson produced by Coe.
- 3 In her revisionary analysis of these literary innovators, *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel: Oblique Strategies* (2020), Jordan argues that we can view these experimental novels as part of a "strain of oblique late modernism" (2020: 8), constituted by a "thematic and philosophical concern with, and compositional and formal use of, accident, error, and indeterminacy" (2). Jordan's argument — that "a form of being best articulated by the accidental is constitutive of [this writing's] distinctively 'late' status" — provides one way to appreciate the postwar experimental novel's "affective distinctiveness" (6). However, I want to suggest that we could equally understand the temporal splitting and historical ambivalence characterizing this work (and responses to it) as a repercussion of the way in which these experimental novels turn away from contemporary readers and linger on negative affects and irreparable losses. In particular, I argue that we can reconsider the anxieties surrounding the recovery of Johnson's abandoned fragment — a "ballsup" (Coe 2004: 441) deleted from the published text of *Albert Angelo* — by exploring how this text evokes what Heather Love describes as the "backward feelings — shame, depression, and regret" (2007: 8) — "tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical 'impossibility' of same-

sex desire" (4). In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Love traces "a tradition of queer backwardness" (8) in texts by writers including Walter Pater and Sylvia Townsend Warner, in order to attend to the way in which a "history of marginalization and abjection" (29) continues to "structure queer experience in the present" (29). Love's study is motivated by her concern that the political strategy of turning shame into pride and visibility "has meant that the painful and traumatic dimensions" (3) of texts marked by the losses of queer history "have been minimized or disavowed" (4).

- 4 Love's reassessment of this "affirmative turn" (4) in gay, lesbian, and queer criticism suggests one way to engage with the problem that Coe's recovery of the deleted section of *Albert Angelo* presents: namely, that "the critical compulsion to fix — at least imaginatively — the problems of queer life has made it difficult to fully engage with such difficulties" (3). While attending to the specific socio-historical context of Johnson's work, I read his abandoned representation of same-sex desire through Love's analysis of how late 19th- and early 20th-century authors cultivated a kind of "backward modernism" (7) in response to their "painful negotiation of the coming of modern homosexuality" (4). In doing so, I suggest that the value of our return to Johnson's work lies in how its figures of backwardness — its "explorations of haunting and memory" (Love 2007: 7) and its articulation of feelings such as "regret", "ressentiment", and "despair" (4) — asks of readers to "refuse to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead" (30).
- 5 My reading of this strain of queer backwardness in Johnson's work impresses, in Love's words, how his texts "do not welcome contemporary critics — instead they turn away from us" (8). Consequently, it proposes a way to understand why the discarded opening of *Albert Angelo* has been omitted from discussions of his writing and to appreciate Johnson's subsequent exploration of the problems with what he calls "tak[ing] the normal way" (Coe 2004: 70) in *House Mother Normal* (1971). Johnson's destabilizations of notions of the (ab)normal accentuate experiences of loss, abjection, and marginalization, and they thereby point to his work's resonance with recent literary contestations of damaging social norms. *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* (2019) by Isabel Waidner, for example, reanimates Johnson's character "House Mother Normal" as part of their text's intervention against both "the appropriation of queer cultures by the straight mainstream" and "the normativity and elitism of much English-language and European avant-garde literature" (2019b). "House Mother Normal", Waidner writes, "might be one of the villains in *Diamond Stuff* — but another villain might be B. S. Johnson himself" (2019b). Since *Diamond Stuff* resists being "read as an extension of a genealogy of experimental literature" (Waidner 2019b) represented by Johnson, it highlights the need to critically reassess the affirmative history and identity that have accompanied Johnson's reappearance.

"A Nothing Teacher"

- 6 It may seem strange to examine backwardness in the work of Johnson, a writer intensely committed to "the evolution of the form in which he is working" (Johnson 1973: 16). "The novelist cannot", Johnson proposes, "legitimately or successfully embody present-day reality in exhausted forms" (16), and "[n]o sooner is a style or technique established than the reasons for its adoption have vanished or become

irrelevant” (17). However, as Love argues, “[e]ven when modernist authors are making it new, they are inevitably grappling with the old: backwardness is a feature of even the most forward-looking modernist literature” (6). Indeed, Johnson’s aesthetic innovations respond to what he calls “exhausted” (1973: 13) and “clapped out” (13) literary forms, “failed” (19) and “inadequate” (19) writing conventions, as well as his sense that he “has something to say which [he] fail[s] to say satisfactorily in conversation, in person” (18). Johnson sets up his commitment to “writ[ing] truth in the form of a novel” (14) as a way to fix these literary and personal faults — he writes “to retaliate on those who have hurt [him]” and to “repay those people who have helped [him]” (18). However, the more his texts insist on presenting his authentic self, the more they call attention to the subject’s always partial and uncertain articulation in language as the parentheses of the lines below insinuate:

The following tries to grope towards it, in another way:

I have a (vision) of something that (happened) to me
 something which (affected) me
 something which meant (something) to me (Johnson 1973: 19)

- 7 Yet, despite critics’ frequent refutations of Johnson’s claim to present his truth, readings of the limitations of his truth-telling tend paradoxically to privilege his authorial agency by implying that Johnson alone lies behind his writing’s apparent failure. Patricia Waugh, for instance, suggests that Johnson’s misplaced focus on telling the truth shows how he “failed, tragically and inevitably, to get out from under a ‘net’ which increasingly closed in on him until his suicide” (1984: 98). Jordan suggests that this tendency to conflate the “literary-theoretical and biographical in the face of [Johnson’s] 1973 suicide” partly emanates from the way in which readers “take [Johnson] too much at his word” (2020: 132). “[W]hat makes “the experience of reading [Johnson] an oddly intimate one”, Jordan observes, is his work’s “tone, in [Sianne] Ngai’s sense” of ““a cultural object’s affective bearing”” (119). For Jordan, “[e]xcessiveness in all senses” — “overstatement, fatness, disproportion; the inelegance of feeling oneself to be overwhelming” — characterizes the tone of Johnson’s work and it creates “an excess of intimacy between author and reader” (119).
- 8 I want to suggest that figures of backwardness in Johnson’s writing offer a way to attend to the socio-historical privations that underpin his work’s need to produce a “peculiar excess of identification” (122) — what Jordan discerns as its “affective potency” (117). In contrast to the apparent authority and autonomy of the “I” staged in his literary polemics and parts of his fiction, Johnson’s experimental novels dwell on failed forms of sociality and the backward feelings they evoke. While, for example, *Albert Angelo* presents its eponymous protagonist — an “architect *manqué*” (Johnson 1964: 29) having to “earn [his] living by [substitute] teaching” (12) — as an “allornotthing” (105), the novel emphasizes that “it is usually nothing” (105), and we hear him think, during a difficult lesson, “*Nothing. This class is a nothing / And I’m a nothing teacher*” (72). My reading of backwardness in Johnson’s texts follows Carol Watts’ suggestion that the “lineaments [of his work] are to be read less in [its] authorial pronouncements, and more in the formal experiments of his writing” (2007: 87). For Watts, “the seeming egotism of that Johnsonian voice” (91), permeated with “its angers and points of impasse” (91), betrays an “encounter” with “non-identity” (82). Moreover, Watts helpfully suggests that “[t]he formal engagement with non-identity in Johnson’s work becomes a means of forcing an encounter with those excluded from the

conservative certainties of bourgeois life, even as they are made the object of those certainties" (88). The "nonidentity" Johnson's writing asserts "with his reader" (Watts 2007: 82) — its backwardness — is crucial, I argue, because it orientates readers to the states of injury, or what Love calls "the wounds, the switchbacks, and the false starts", that spur his text's expressions of other more affirmative feelings and give them their appeal and "binding power" (32).

- 9 The discarded opening of *Albert Angelo* and other texts by Johnson articulate the difficulties of bearing marginalized desires and subject positions in postwar Britain. We can attend to the lasting imprint of these backward feelings by returning to Coe's biography and reconsidering key fragments for thinking about the missing section of *Albert Angelo*. The "Coda" re-examines what the biography labels as fragment 1, an extract from Johnson's diary from 1961, which — for Coe — made his subject "flicker to life for the first time" (2004: 37):

M wanted to go too deep and I was too scared to follow him; (Aug 55) break which freed me, broke him; real conflict; Bach [...]

Homosexuality would be such an affront to the Goddess that I am tempted, merely to see if she would destroy me. [...]

Bach link with Michael: the constant, ever-fixed mark, the centre around which it is possible to build an intellectual life. (Qtd. in Coe 2004: 37-8)

- 10 The diary's "Bach link" reappears, in a different form, in the abandoned section of *Albert Angelo* through the representation of the first time Samuel and Graham touch: "when they sat back to back on a hot summer evening in the arena at a prom, and the points of contact seemed to burn together so that they thought they might never come apart" (Coe 2004: 441). In another echo of the diary extract, the narrator of the discarded section at once builds and breaks up this intimate attachment, referring to the relationship as another "ballsup" on God's part and insisting that Graham was "not homosexual, just neuter" (441). In both texts, the stuttering articulation of same-sex desire is offset by uneven gendered identities, which simultaneously idealize and denigrate femininity. Graham, for example, is "almost a man instead of wholly a woman" and "hates" (441) women, while the extract from the diary plays with the idea of upsetting "the Goddess" (38). The diary's allusion to "the Goddess", as Coe clarifies, refers to *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves, which, as Johnson would put it in a review of the text, argues that "[t]he function of poetry [...] is ritual invocation of the Muse Goddess; true poetry is concerned with the relationship between men and women" (Coe 2004: 113).

- 11 Where the misfiring of Johnson's truth-telling presents the possibility of destabilizing these limited gender roles and relations, Coe's return to the diary entry at the close of his biography offers to reverse the future into which he has been projected and complicate the image of Johnson he has constructed. At one point, Coe reflects on the apparent inevitability of writing Johnson's biography:

Johnson always had his eye on posterity, and I reckon he was certain that someone like me would come along and write this book one day. I have the resigned sense of having been chosen to fulfil a confident prophecy. (Coe 2004: 84)

- 12 Yet, in the Coda's restaging of the moment in which Coe felt his preconception of Johnson — "[a] man utterly sure of himself" (2004: 36) — come undone, we can see how the biography, rather than simply bringing Johnson back to life, instead offers, in Love's words, a way to imagine the past as something "dissonant, beyond our control and capable of touching us in the present" (2007: 9-10). This disruption of Coe's

received image of Johnson accentuates how the biography registers other kinds of historical discord. Where Coe had imagined that the story of B. S. Johnson would “fit a predetermined mould” — “embattled working-class modernist, with fiery temper and tunnel vision, pits himself against a complacent and reactionary literary establishment” (2004: 41) — fragment 56, “extracts from *Albert Angelo*”, reveals how the biography’s title is a correction of a spelling mistake made in one of the school children’s essays collected in the novel: “He is a bit of a film Star he acted the part of Garula. / He walks like a firy elephant” (Coe 2004: 143). The image of Johnson as “fiery” seems limiting, then, precisely insofar as it implicitly reaffirms Coe’s emphasis on a male subject’s volatile agency, and thereby eclipses the semantic indeterminacy of the child’s use of “firy” and its links to the educational failings explored in the novel: what the text refers to as its “social comment on teaching” (Johnson 1964: 176). In reading Johnson and the subjects of his novels as “fiery”, we risk failing to attend, as Watts highlights, to how, “in the voices of the children of *Albert Angelo*”, there is “an acute sense of human cost”: “the potential and actual waste of lives and stories, caught within, and asserted against the grain of, the bland generalizations of a society that are violent in their effects” (Watts 2007: 87). Reading for backwardness in Johnson’s work thus offers a way to offset the argument that the “modernist subjectivism” of his novels helps to “abstract the subject from the social determinants of [their] resentment” (Bond 2005).

“A Mortal Wound Above His Right Eye”

13 The disavowal of same-sex desire in the discarded section of *Albert Angelo* is doubled by its literal absence from the novel’s final form. However, these kinds of negative representation do have, as Love suggests, “a lot to tell us [...]”: they describe what it is like to bear a ‘disqualified’ identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury — not fixing it” (Love 2007: 4). Though the “social negativity” that we find in this ghost section of *Albert Angelo* might, as Love warns, be “branded as internally homophobic, [...] or too depressing to be of use” (4), such a reading risks missing how the novel turns backward and impresses our ties with the “abject multitude against whose experience we define our own liberation” (10). The following reading of *Albert Angelo* and its abandoned section traces how these texts’ figures of backwardness expose the limitations of the gender relations instituted by the postwar education system, before considering how the imprint of this lost attachment accentuates the novel’s appeal to attend to other experiences of social exclusion.

14 The discarded section sets up the fragile “mystical oneness, connection” (Coe 2004: 442) between Samuel and Graham by presenting the moment in which “their eyes met and a strange thing happened. It was as if they had exchanged minds for a second, synchronously” (437). The scene evokes Johnson’s poem, “An Eye for Situation”, written six years before the publication of *Albert Angelo*, whose dedication reads, in a significant reversal, “for Bryan, from Michael”:

Recalling your intense obliqueness,
the unsaid things we knew together,
you would disapprove; whether
you are right I cannot say,
but you would call it treacherous weakness
that I thus take the normal way. (Qtd. in Coe 2004: 70)

- 15 The poem's difficult recollection of rejecting a deep and elusive connection parallels the breakdown of Samuel and Graham's relationship in the discarded fragment.⁴ When Samuel "plunge[s]" into an "incongruous affair" (442) with a woman, Graham condemns Samuel to death at 29, a fate *Albert Angelo* alludes to through its famous future-seeing holes, which reveal an account of Christopher Marlowe's death at the same age. The deleted section dwells on this breakup, describing Graham shouting about how "Samuel would never be an architect", "he had treacherously betrayed all that was good in him and in the world, [...] his small spark of spirit would prick and burn him still. And he would die at 29" (443).
- 16 This "betrayal" appears indirectly, if at all, in the final text of *Albert Angelo*. Albert occupies the flat Graham has vacated, and Albert's relation to an absent other extends to his occupation as a substitute teacher: "always in supply there is this mysterious figure whom you are replacing. You try to build up your own conception of him from what the others let fall in conversation" (Johnson 1964: 38). This architectural language – the idea of "build[ing] up" people from others' words – echoes Samuel's desire to "communicate [to Graham] his enthusiasm about architecture" (Coe 2004: 439). At the same time, the narrator's detailed descriptions of the schools in which he works calls attention to the institutions shaping the gender roles and relations that are possible and permissible in postwar Britain. "[T]all factory buildings, with heavy wire shields over their windows", border the playground of a school, one of its walls "broken in its length only by a door, later than the rest of the building [...], dividing the sexes" (Johnson 1964: 29). The novel intimates that the formation of distinct gendered subjects is implemented at the level of education, and it reflects on the limits and damaging consequences of this:
- They sit, large and awkward at the aluminium-framed tables and chairs, men and women, physically, whom you are today trying to help to teach to take their places in a society you do not believe in, in which their values already prevail rather than yours. Most will be wives and husbands, some will be whores and ponces: it's all the same; any who think will be unhappy, all who don't think will die. (Johnson 1964: 47)
- 17 The novel emphasizes the losses of this apparently rigid gender framework in its depiction of Albert calling the school register. Where at first students "chorus, 'He's not here'" when "Jackie Weir['s]" (128) name is called, later repetitions of their refrain take on a disquieting and ambiguous echo: "after a couple of days, it was 'Jackie Weir—He's a queer', mingled with 'He's not here'" (128).
- 18 In *Albert Angelo*, the shadow of Samuel's "betrayal" of Graham also offers a critical perspective on the text's misogyny, what is repeatedly referred to as Albert's "betrayal" (124) by Jenny. The poems included and excluded from the novel highlight the divergence between these relationships. While Johnson's poem "An Eye for Situation" is absent, another with a similar title, "An Eye for Place", does appear, and it presents how I "anti-romantically" (Johnson 1964: 140) kissed you, in "Hungerford lane" (139) in order, as an earlier part of the novel reflects, "to prove it, the romance, the love" (49) – the speaker stopping "in the middle of a sentence" (49) and turning Jenny towards him. This interruption and turning mid-sentence is reenacted by the novel's carefully orchestrated aposiopesis – "OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING! [...]" –fuck all this lying" (163-7) – and the unravelling of Albert's character implicitly realizes Graham's prophecy that he would never become an architect. In the "Disintegration" (167) that follows, the narrator claims that "the end of this book" has

had a “definite effect of release” from “the influence of [the] memory of [Jenny], suffering the pain of her betrayal” (171). The novel even reveals the real name of the so-called “betrayal”.

- 19 However, the text’s punishing misogyny appears as another shaky facade when we consider how the actual holes in the novel unsettle Albert’s accusation that women “only want bits of [him]” rather than the “enormous totality” (105) (or whole) of himself. The holes in the novel’s pages look forward to someone inflicting “on him a mortal wound above his right eye [...] from which he died instantly” (149-153). The effacement of the “right” (or so-called “normal”) eye takes on a deep symbolism when one considers how the poem, “An Eye for Place”, seems to have displaced “An Eye for Situation” in the novel. Furthermore, the “anti-romantic” (Johnson 1964: 140) kiss in Hungerford Lane presented in Albert’s poem for Jenny seems all too appropriate reading it alongside the moment in the abandoned section when Samuel and Graham walk up “Hungerford Lane together, under the arches’ groins” (Coe 2004: 444), and Samuel confesses “that he had brought the girl he loved here once” — “had shown her what Graham had shown him, and was guilty about it” (444). One is left with the sense that the “eye for place” (139) referred to in *Albert Angelo* always already involved another person, and that the “situation” the wounded “I” of this text confronts, but cannot fix, is that their love for another cannot find a place in this time because their relationship lies outside postwar social conventions.
- 20 The backward feelings that emanate from the missing relationship at the centre of *Albert Angelo* also accentuate how the literal holes in this text evoke other forms of social exclusion. The novel depicts how Albert and his fellow teacher and friend, Terry, frustrated with how the postwar education system is “desperately old-fashioned” and “waste[ful]”, “revolt, in desperation [...] becom[ing] like delinquent teachers” (52). The pair wander through the city at night “to remind [themselves] that other people are suffering”, finding “a place for outcasts, misfits, where [they] feel something in common, however else we differ” (52). Throwing an empty milk bottle “overarm, as if it were a grenade, towards the playground” (126), Albert’s frustration mirrors that which he fears is being produced by the faltering education system. “[T]he violence will out” if “we go on half-educating these kids” (133), Albert warns, before acknowledging how “the kids take breaking up [for the school holidays] rather literally” (147): “Last term windows were broken and a couple of doors kicked in” (147). The novel’s future-seeing holes appear directly beneath the lines on the page relating how “windows were broken” (147); these rectangles of empty space in the novel correspond to the position of the words “were broken” (147) resting on top of them. Turning over the page, the text appears to have been subject to the student’s violence; its “window” of representation has been fissured, and the novel warns that there may be more to come as the holes in the pages look ahead to someone who “died instantly” (149-153) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Hole in the page in B.S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo*, 149

Source: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/405464772671726512/>

- 21 While the holes in the pages amplify feelings of anger and resentment towards the failings of the postwar education system, they equally overlap with anxieties concerning others on the margins of society. Philip Tew notes how "in [Albert and Terry's] nocturnal meandering they face the diasporic realities of another form of alterity, the nocturnal colonial presence in the underprivileged quarters of London, Cypriots, West Indians and Africans in particular" (2007: 205). The novel depicts Albert "try[ing] to give as many [...] lessons as possible that do not involve reading and writing" (33) so as not to exclude the children who cannot speak English. Similarly, the pages directly preceding the violent murder revealed by the future-seeing holes present a fight between Albert and a "Giant negro" (151): "He was [coming], screaming something I don't remember. I screamed something back that included fuck and indicated he wouldn't be able to do it [kill him]" (151). The holes in the pages of *Albert Angelo* thereby impress the negative affects attached to different experiences of marginalization, while the absence they circle insinuates the ghost of those figures that, as Love notes, have been discarded by modernity: "the nonwhite and nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others" (10).
- 22 Bringing *Albert Angelo* into a dialogue with its discarded section, we can recognise the painful substitutions and irreparable losses underpinning its conspicuous representation of an insecure virility and the politics of *ressentiment* it risks producing – an eye for an eye could describe the novel's punishing approach to failed relationships and appears to underpin its misogyny. But the unspoken eye-to-eye relation that the novel refuses to bring to light gives a new significance to other Johnson texts, which also try to foreground an authoritative, masculine subject. The

notion that one starts from “I”, “always with I” (Johnson 1966: 7), as Johnson’s next novel *Trawl* (1966) insists, takes on a critical ambiguity if we hear in the “I”s that echo in this opening line a nod backwards to an “electric unspeakable” (Coe 2004: 437) eye-to-eye meeting.

“(Some BS there, B. S.?)”

- 23 The shadowy figurations of an unrealized intimate connection and forms of social exclusion in *Albert Angelo* and its discarded section cast new light on Johnson’s subsequent critique of enforcing “the normal way” in his novel, *House Mother Normal*. Where, in the poem, “An Eye For Situation”, “the normal way” implies, as Coe suggests, “heterosexuality” (2004: 70), *House Mother Normal* attempts, as Johnson put it, to “say something about the things we call ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’” (1973: 26), specifically in relation to the provision of elderly care in postwar Britain. The novel extends his work’s examination of notions of the (ab)normal by staging varying (de)compositions of characters’ bodies and memories, which register and expose violent impositions of so-called normality. The subversions of normality presented in *House Mother Normal* reappear in Isabel Waidner’s recent innovative novel, *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*, in order to impress, as Waidner puts it, “that queer politics [...] must be transformative of society at large” (2019b). Following the “eco-feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne”, Waidner contends “that ‘it’s not a question of integrating homosexuals into society, but of disintegrating society through homosexuality’” (2019b). Aligning the subversions of normality presented in *House Mother Normal* with the social disintegrations staged by *Diamond Stuff*, we can chart how figures of backwardness are a key aspect of the lasting connection between postwar narrative experimentation and contemporary innovative fiction.
- 24 Set inside “an old people’s home” (Coe 2004: 24), *House Mother Normal* presents, as Coe elucidates, “one single event” — a social evening hosted by the House Mother for the elderly residents — “from ten different points of view” (23). In the novel, the first-person interior monologues of the nine residents appear consecutively and are evenly weighted so that, “in every section, the same event (and the characters’ differing responses to it) occurs not just on the same page but at precisely the same point on that page” (Coe 2004: 24). Consequently, “the whole book becomes”, in Coe’s words, “polyphonic, fugal, a novel that can be read ‘vertically’ as well as ‘horizontally’” (24-25). Johnson heightens this twisting of readerly conventions through *House Mother Normal*’s concluding monologue, which reveals her exploitation and sexual abuse of those in her care. In this section, *House Mother Normal* offers a false justification for her actions by claiming that, “There are worse conditions and worse places, friend” (Johnson 1971: 197): “geriatric wards” (197) where people “are forgotten and wholly in the power of nurses who have been known to make them alter their wills” (198). But the novel’s final page subsequently upends even *House Mother Normal*’s disclosure of her abusive “normal” — her “I” is revealed to “be the puppet or concoction of a writer [...], a writer who has me at present standing in post-orgasmic nude” (204) after a scene of bestiality. In light of the reading of backwardness in *Albert Angelo* and its discarded fragment, *House Mother Normal*’s grim order, “prepare, accept, worse times are a-coming, nothing is more sure” (204), appears to emanate as much from the *ressentiment* of the anonymous “I” that speaks on this final page as from the novel’s attentiveness to

lost and fragile relationships. The novel represents, for instance, “Gloria Ridge” repeatedly recalling an image of her “one true love” (103), but (poignantly) the colour of their lover’s hair changes with each new recollection, emphasizing the vulnerability and loss underpinning the memorization of human connections.

- 25 The lost relationships indirectly staged by texts such as *Albert Angelo*, its discarded fragment, and *House Mother Normal* evoke Love’s point that some aspects of “history only live on in the present through [...] wounded attachments” (2007: 42). In order to avoid “severing” our ties to “traumatic — albeit important — parts of the past” (Love 2007: 42), we need to consider the aesthetic and affective discontinuities (as much as the continuities) between the work of Johnson and current manifestations of narrative experimentation. Waidner’s work is particularly helpful for exploring such literary-historical disjunctions. In a mock-academic essay that “peer-reviews” (Waidner 2019b) *Diamond Stuff* and Caspar Heinemann’s poetry collection *Novelty Theory* (2019), Waidner describes the relationship between their “own writing practice” and the “historical avant-garde” as “disidentificatory” (2019b). Drawn from José Esteban Muñoz’s analysis of the queer past, “disidentification”, Waidner elucidates, is “a practice enacted by a minority subject (me)”, who “must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that the dominant culture (in this case, the avant-garde canon) generates” (2019b). Far from offering a straightforward continuation of an “avant-garde canon”, Waidner’s adoption of a literary strategy of “disidentification” — the paradoxical way they “[a]llign [...] [themselves] neither with, nor fully against” (2019b) Johnson’s work — reinforces the need to attend to the more backward aspects of Johnson’s experimental texts.
- 26 *Diamond Stuff* propels its critique of the inequities entwined with class, queerness, and citizenship in contemporary Britain by weaving a surreal and capricious narrative around an assemblage of texts, ranging from the sociology of Paul Willis and the queer theory of Jasbir Puar, to the science fiction of Samuel Delany and the poetry of Nisha Ramayya. Among the dialogues it opens with other texts, *Diamond Stuff* reimagines Johnson’s character “House Mother Normal” as a manager not of “a nursing home in ’70s London” (Waidner 2019a: 17) but of “a no-star hotel — the ‘New House of Normal’ — in present-day Ryde” (17) on the Isle of Wight. *Diamond Stuff* recalls how House Mother Normal “exploits and abuses those in her care” (17) — “the Pass the Parcel game” in which there is “no chocolate inside the parcel, only dog shit” (17) — before noting that “B. S. Johnson violates House Mother Normal in turn, putting her through a public masturbation I mean bestiality scene — with dog, Ralphie — not once, not twice but nine times over the course of the novel” (17). The repetition of this violation is, the narrator observes, “Ghastly, really, but funny. Funny’s important. It was a different time —. (Some BS there, B. S.?)” (17). While the text points to the temptation to conflate Johnson’s violations with those of his character — “Violent character is B. S. Johnson’s House Mother Normal” (17) — the narrator complicates their critique of Johnson’s work by acknowledging the troubling feelings it evokes (“ghastly”/“funny” (17)) and the temporal break between their times (signalled by the em dash). The novel thereby challenges the depiction of Johnson as a figure of “British avant-garde literature” (15) by insinuating that this recuperated image of the author may make it harder to appreciate the implications of the “BS” (17) of his work.
- 27 In *Diamond Stuff*, House Mother Normal employs the unnamed narrator, who resembles the character “Eleven” (3) from the science fiction television series “*Stranger*

Things” (3), and Shae, for whom the stereotype of the “Reebok Working Class” (28) “fits but also doesn’t” (29) because Shae is “working-class and also queer (there’s no hiding it)” (29). In addition, Shae’s clothes become characters — “The polar bears [on his “army green t-shirt”] are novelists (infantry soldiers), the reeboks are poets (intelligence operatives)” (15) — whose anarchic agency symbolize an alternative to the forms of resistance charted by Willis in *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (1977). In a moment that evokes Albert Angelo’s concern with the damaging consequences of “half-educating these kids” (Johnson 1964: 147), *Diamond Stuff* reflects on what Willis analysed as the pyrrhic victory of the “working class counter-school culture” (Willis 1977: 2). In “successfully resisting the norms of capitalism transmitted in school” (Waidner 2019a: 28), participants in this counter-school culture end up “having to take on lowly paid working-class jobs as adults” (28). The novel parodies how the characters consequently redouble their attempts to “escape their [supposed] working-class destin[ies]” by “putting their difference to work —.” (29): “Do you know why they’re grafting like this. (Queer. Queerdo.)” (29). In the kitchen of House Mother Normal’s hotel, for instance, the characters work gutting “raw” and “inky” squid, “purg[ing] entire beaches and tiny digestive tracts from maritime bodies” (9). Ironically, their work produces “Sandy refuse” and “raining black squid ink”, which threatens the existence of the narrator’s “permanent residence card” (40): “Squid ink gets on it, thing is disintegrating—.” (40). The abject and damaging detritus produced by the characters’ work exposes the incongruities and hypocrisies of the “Life in the UK test” (51), which is presented as a matter of acquiring “a particular form of educational capital, namely the ability to memorise information — kings, queens, invasions, a sanctioned version of British history and culture” (52).

- 28 *Diamond Stuff* uses parataxis, textual collage, and critically satirical parentheses and em dashes, amongst other rhetorical devices, to emphasize how the unpredictable performances of its characters constantly subvert the norms of capitalism, education, and Britishness, which its House Mother Normal symbolizes. If the novel invites us to see Shae and the narrator, the Reeboks and the polar bears, as backward children on this ““derelict”” (103) island, House Mother Normal embodies a financial class “preoccupied with optional wage cuts, pulling tricks, cutting corners, profiteering” (59). With hotel “guests ‘disappear[ing]’ without paying” (59) — more people check in to the hotel than check out — House Mother Normal also appears to have “gone” (59): “Indisposed, Shae says (Disappeared.)” (63). The unreliable presence of Johnson’s character in *Diamond Stuff* allows the text to pose the question, “Where is Normal?” (25), and this challenge to the construction of normality intersects with the novel’s challenge to promoting forms of social and political visibility.
- 29 In a parallel to the literary form of *House Mother Normal*, and its play on the discrepancies between different characters’ perceptions of events, *Diamond Stuff* skips between universes in order to imagine an alternative reality, in which all inequities have disappeared. In this “upside down world” (90), House Mother Normal (re)appears in “full drag” (91) and hosts the narrator’s “citizenship ceremony” (91): “I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to her Majesty Queen Mother Normal the First” (92). The novel’s satirical reversal of the deprivations that have given rise to a resurgent nationalism intensifies as the narrator remarks, “This is the part where working-class people including working-class migrants live in quality social housing in Central London” (92). The parentheses that follow impress how the representation of this ideal alternative universe serves to underline the novel’s critique of the punitive forms of

social normalization prevailing in “Tory Britain”: “(Stop it.) (Is this dimension selling me BS, I increasingly think so. Social housing in London? Micky Mouse citizenships, Queen Mother Normal the First? WORKING-CLASS GRADUATES)” (92-3).

- 30 This reference to “selling me BS” (93) implicitly iterates how *Diamond Stuff* challenges the temptation to align it with Johnson and the reappropriation of a postwar avant-garde, and instead insists that we engage with the experiences of abjection to which it points. Indeed, the novel collapses the sense of exhilaration that attends its ideal, mirror image of the world and emphasizes the seeming impossibility of its actualization when, in a parallel to its earlier enquiry regarding the location of “normal”, it turns backward, asking “(Where’s reality, I want to change it.)” (93). In its final pages, *Diamond Stuff* responds to this appeal to transform reality by presenting quotations from reviews of the Isle of Wight Zoo. The fragments of text evoke the architectural ruins of *Albert Angelo* — “I thought it was derelict. It looked like it probably closed 30 years ago. It stands next to a crumbling hotel or casino” (103) — and echo the juxtapositions of children’s voices we hear in the essays written by Albert’s students:

“Half an hour of my life I can’t get back.”

“This is a con.”

“Symptomatic.”

“The staff really do try.”

“Desolate.”

“Heartbreaking.” (Waidner 2019a: 105)

- 31 The novel closes with the acknowledgement of a time that an anonymous reviewer cannot “get back” and feelings of “heartbreak” and “desolation” (105). In doing so, it entwines its anarchic juxtapositions and self-satire with the backward feelings that come from writing within the constraints of the dominant culture’s “conditions of (im)possibility” (Waidner 2019b). In this respect, *Diamond Stuff* recalls how Johnson’s experimental texts similarly resist and contest forms of social normalization by turning backward toward the past and demanding that readers find a way to recognize its difficulties.

“We Do Not Form a School”

- 32 This essay’s reading of the backwardness permeating *Albert Angelo* and its deleted fragment and *Diamond Stuff*’s disidentificatory writing practice suggests one way to understand why, as Jordan observes, Waidner’s “invocations of B. S. Johnson’s writing” are “magpieish” (2020: 31). While scholars’ “recent recastings of modernism” might, as Hodgson argues, go some way to establishing the sense of ‘historical continuity’ so dearly lacking in existing accounts of the British novel” (Hodgson 2013: 20), this emphasis on their work’s apparent connection to the present risks, as I have argued, attenuating our ability to engage with the ways in which Johnson’s writing turns away from us. If allusions to Johnson and his contemporaries’ experimental novels in recent innovative fiction seem fragmentary, then these disjointed literary responses to their work may offer a valuable counterpoint to the way in which dominant modes of writing literary history struggle, as Coe’s biography demonstrates, to respond to the damage articulated by this writing. Another unfinished text by Johnson, an essay entitled “Experimental British Fiction”, reiterates the problem of engaging with the damage and dissident desires presented by these writers’ texts. In this essay, Jordan notes,

Johnson “writes of a ‘we’” — the literary group to which he temporarily belonged — “and yet explicitly refuses the collectivization this might entail: ‘we do not form a school’” (Jordan 2015: 145). In light of the critique of the different kind of school we find in *Albert Angelo*, this simultaneous invocation and disavowal of a collective perhaps asks us to acknowledge how the literary experiments of writers such as Johnson, Figs and Burns respond in different ways to subjects who cannot be consoled.

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NOTES

1. Instead of telling stories, Johnson claimed to write "truth in the form of a novel" (1973: 14). Confronted with Johnson's "untenable" "theories" (2004: 452), Coe turns to the "other extreme" (35), proposing a notion of the "biography as creative enterprise" (35), an "artwork" (35) that moulds "the chaos of reality" (35) into "appealing narrative shapes" (35).
2. All quotations from the abandoned opening section of *Albert Angelo* are made from the version of this text published by Coe in *Fierce Elephant* under the title, "46: Deleted Episode from *Albert Angelo*" (437-445). When I quote from other archival fragments collected by Coe, the page numbers refer to the location of that text in Coe's biography.
3. Similarly, Vanessa Guignery suggests that the footnote in which Coe acknowledges the displacement of fragment 46 to the Coda has the effect of "arous[ing] the reader's curiosity and introduc[ing] suspense" (135), and emphasizes how "a form of linearity persists in his biography, as opposed to Johnson's more discontinuous novels" (135).
4. Jordan also remarks on how this poem figures "homosexual desire" as an "intense obliqueness, / the unsaid things we knew together" (2020: 115) in the introduction to her analysis of the excessive tone of Johnson's texts. Interestingly, Jordan attaches this "obliquity" to "someone" other than Johnson — "this is likely a reference to a homosexual advance from Johnson's friend Michael Bannard" (115) — despite the poem's admission that the feelings here, although unrealized, are shared — "the unsaid things we knew together". Jordan's subsequent claim that the "skew-whiff, the perverted, and the eccentric all hold some terror for Johnson, whose work is riddled with attempts to get on the perceptual and philosophical — as well as, perhaps, the sexual — straight and narrow" (115-6), only holds, I would suggest, if we implicitly privilege the excess of identification that Johnson's writing is said to produce.

ABSTRACTS

In the discarded opening section of *Albert Angelo* (1964), recovered by Jonathan Coe in his biography of B. S. Johnson, the narrator laments how "God had made another ballsup": the protagonist's "other half" is "almost a man instead of wholly a woman". This essay reads Johnson's abandoned representation of same-sex desire through the "tradition of queer

backwardness” traced by Heather Love in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007). I argue that the abandoned fragment’s representation of “an unspeakable, inexplicable knowing” between two characters evokes the “backward feelings” which Love proposes are tied to “the historical ‘impossibility’ of same-sex desire” (Love 2007). In doing so, I show how Johnson’s literary afterlife lies in orientating readers to modernity’s denigrated “others”, such as sexual deviants marginalized for refusing to take what Johnson calls the “normal way”. Where the backward feelings in Johnson’s experimental novel illuminate his work’s resistance to various conditions of modern subjecthood, they can equally help us understand the resonance between his work and recent innovative fiction, which also contests punitive forms of social normalization. Isabel Waidner’s “critically British novel”, *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* (2019), for example, reanimates Johnson’s perverse character “House Mother Normal” to propel its critique of the inequities of class, queerness, and national identity. We can appreciate what remains most subversive about Johnson’s experimental novels by charting how their backwardness reverberates with the concerns of queer experimental literature in the present.

Dans la première section rejetée d'*Albert Angelo* (1964), retrouvée par Jonathan Coe dans sa biographie de B. S. Johnson, le narrateur se lamente sur le fait que « Dieu a fait une autre connerie » : l'autre moitié du protagoniste est « presque un homme au lieu d'être entièrement une femme ». Cet article étudie la représentation abandonnée par Johnson du désir homosexuel à travers la « tradition du sous-développement ou retard [backwardness] queer » décrite par Heather Love dans *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007). Je démontre que la représentation dans le fragment abandonné d'un « savoir indicible et inexplicable » entre deux personnages évoque les « sentiments sous-développés » qui, selon Love, sont liés à « la prétendue 'impossibilité' historique du désir homosexuel » (Love 2007). Ce faisant, je montre comment l'après-vie littéraire de Johnson consiste à orienter les lecteurs vers les « autres » déconsidéré.e.s du monde moderne, comme les déviants sexuels marginalisés pour avoir refusé de suivre ce que Johnson appelle la « voie normale ». Si les sentiments d'arriération ou de sous-développement dans le roman expérimental de Johnson mettent en lumière la résistance de son œuvre à diverses conditions de la subjectivité moderne, ils peuvent également nous aider à comprendre les échos entre son œuvre et la fiction innovante la plus récente qui conteste également les formes punitives de normalisation sociale. Le « roman critique britannique » d'Isabel Waidner, *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff* (2019), par exemple, fait revivre le personnage pervers de Johnson, « House Mother Normal », pour alimenter sa critique des inégalités de classe, de l'homosexualité et de l'identité nationale. Pour appréhender ce qui reste le plus subversif dans les romans expérimentaux de Johnson, on peut tracer la manière dont leur sous-développement est en résonance avec les préoccupations de la littérature expérimentale queer d'aujourd'hui.

INDEX

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