Book Proposal materials by Ellen Berry

Field of Study: English literature and criticism, American cultural studies, Women’s Studies

Table of Contents

- Proposal Guidelines from two University Presses
- Publishers Guidelines for Reviewers
- Book Proposal
- Reader’s Report
Proposal Guidelines

Routledge publishes innovative works by international scholars and professionals in the fields of humanities, behavioral sciences, and social sciences and distributes its books worldwide.

Book proposals are always welcome! Ideal proposals offer specific details and address the following areas. Please include a table of contents, one to two sample chapters and background information about your experience in the subject area, including a curriculum vita if relevant.

1. The Concept

   In one sentence, describe your concept for the book.
   In one to two paragraphs, why are you writing this book?

2. The Market

   Who is the intended reader for this book?

   On the bookstore shelf, where are readers likely to find your book? (Please specify one section only.)

   In addition to the bookstore, where else would readers look for your book? (Please specify catalogs, trade shows and conferences.)

   List two or three competitors for your book. How is your book different from the competition?

3. The Book

   What are three unique features about your book?
   What are your sources and how do you intend to research the book?

   Describe the ideal trim size and length of the book. What does it look like to you? (Please specify the number of pages, trim size and illustrations)

4. The Timetable

   What is your schedule for completing the book?

   Are there times of the year when this book can be promoted in a special way?
information for prospective authors

Do you have an idea for a book?
Are you currently writing?
Are you looking for a publisher?

If so, as one of the world's leading social sciences and humanities publishers, we would like to hear from you. If you would like to submit an outline or proposal, please contact the appropriate commissioning editor or contact name at the Polity Editorial Office in Cambridge. You may find the following guidelines for the preparation of proposals useful.

guidelines for proposal preparation

Proposals should give a brief synopsis of the central arguments and themes of the book. It is very helpful to include the following information:

* The proposed working title (the title should give a clear indication of the content of the book);
* A chapter-by-chapter outline;
* the estimated length (in thousands of words, including bibliography);
* a realistic delivery date;
* an outline for the proposed market, including which subject group(s) the book is aimed at; the names of particular courses on which the book might be used; the level at which the book is aimed. Think in international terms (e.g. whether your book would be appropriate for European as well as North American markets);
* information on whether your book is designed to be a research monograph, supplementary reading, a core textbook, or a book for general readers;
* information on the main competing titles and how your proposed book is different.

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GUIDELINES FOR REVIEWERS

Peer review is a vital part of the evaluation process, and the key to controlling the quality of published books in the field. Your comments are taken in confidence, and your identity will not be revealed to the author without your consent. As a result, we encourage you to be frank in your judgements (backed up with examples from the proposal or manuscript), though where appropriate, it is helpful to have suggestions for revisions and improvement framed in a constructive way. The first role of your comments will be for the publisher's benefit, but keep in mind that part or all of the report may be passed on to the author to help guide revisions. If you intend for any of your report to be withheld from the author, it is best to indicate this in your cover letter. Also, if there are aspects of the project that fall outside of your area of expertise (e.g., in the case of interdisciplinary projects), please let us know.

The following points are intended to help guide your comments for this review, but they are not meant to be restrictive. Please feel free to structure your comments differently if it helps to clarify the specific features of this project. However, comments are most helpful when they cover:

- A broad outline of the project
- Critical analysis of its strengths and weaknesses
- A recommendation on whether it deserves to be: 1) published as it stands or with minor revisions; 2) resubmitted after reworking; or 3) rejected.

Other important points to address are:

- The quality and significance of the project
- Its originality and relation to existing works in the field
- Structure, organization, and presentation of the material
- Recommendations for revision (please indicate whether these are fundamental to the project's success or discretionary issues that should not affect a publication decision. Please specifically mention if any sections should be cut or expanded)
- Any problems regarding citations, terminology, accuracy, etc.
- Timeliness and likely shelf-life of the research
- Likely competition or comparable books
- Likely readership (what fields will it appeal to? what level is it written to?)
- Potential use in courses (At what level? As primary or secondary reading?)
Book Proposal:
_Fetishism and Its Discontents:_
_Theory to Fiction, Disavowal to the Death Drive_

**Project Overview**

My proposed book manuscript is entitled _Fetishism and Its Discontents: Theory to Fiction, Disavowal to the Death Drive_, and it is the first detailed study of fetishism in post-1960 American fiction. The thesis of the book is that novels and short stories by Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Ishmael Reed, Tim O’Brien, Gloria Naylor, John Hawkes, and Robert Coover, among others, advance a post-Enlightenment understanding of fetishism as a strategy for expressing social and political discontent, and for negotiating traumatic experiences particular to the second half of the twentieth century. Freud’s well-known 1927 essay, “Fetishism,” defines the sexual fetish as an object through which the male is able to disavow the traumatic truth that his mother is castrated: as a substitute for his mother’s missing penis, the fetish sustains the fetishist’s contentment with the female body as an object of desire, “saving” him from a homosexual destiny. Freud’s definition shapes the common understanding of fetishism as essentially misogynistic and conservative—an understanding that continues to inform much contemporary work in the fields of feminist and queer theory. My argument, by contrast, is that post-1960 American fiction challenges the idea that fetishism is dedicated to maintaining the social status quo, redefining the fetish as an object that testifies to threatening differences in racial, gender-, and class-based perspectives.

_Fetishism and Its Discontents_ takes its title from a critically unexamined moment in Freud’s _Civilization and Its Discontents_, in which Freud uses the image of a “primitive” fetishist beating his fetish as an illustration of hostility toward society. As I
argue in the Introduction to my book, this apparently incidental passage in Freud’s text runs counter to his earlier definition of fetishism a successful coping strategy for men; it also raises a number of questions about the broader history of theorizing about fetishism as a form of superstitious or perverse belief. Several contemporary theorists, including Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and anthropologist William Pietz have argued that the history of Western thinking about fetishism is defined by the effort to portray fetishistic belief as the opposite or dialectical counterpart of rational, enlightened thought. Despite approaching fetishism in different theoretical contexts, Hegel’s description of “superstitious” African religion, Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism, and Freud’s discussion of sexual perversity all share a common emphasis on fetishism as simple, childlike strategy that blinds one to historical and social change. I argue, however, that Freud’s description of the hostile fetishist in Civilization and Its Discontents challenges us to rethink this reading of the history of fetish theory. By portraying fetishism as a figure for the antisocial threat of the death drive, Freud begs the questions: Why have Enlightenment philosophers and thinkers insisted on neutralizing the subversive potential of fetishistic belief? What might fetishism offer as a strategy for representing, rather than disavowing, sexual, racial, and ideological difference?

My book takes up these questions by rereading the history of fetish theory as the perpetuation of a particular narrative form—a “first encounter” narrative that recurs in Hegel, Marx, and Freud but which is revised and, in some cases, deliberately parodied in post-1960 American fiction. I argue that novels by Pynchon, Hawkes, Acker, and DeLillo are not merely object texts for existing theories of fetishism; rather, they constitute an intervention in the history of Western thinking about the fetish by redefining
fetishism as a figure for social and political discontent. In some cases, as in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) or Kathy Acker’s *My Mother: Demonology* (1993), redefining fetishism depends on explicitly revising the form and content of Freud’s 1927 theory, queering the essential relationship Freud establishes between fetishism, sexual difference, and trauma. In other texts, such as Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* (1963) or Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990), seemingly straightforward depictions of male sexual fetishism evolve into broad critiques of contemporary ideological fantasy, blurring conventional distinctions between sexual and anthropological fetishism. In *The Parallax View* (2006), Slavoj Žižek argues that late twentieth- and early twenty-first century knowledge and politics are defined by *parallax*—the problem whereby an object becomes the locus of two or more antagonistic perspectives. Building on Žižek’s observation, a central thesis of my book is that, in post-1960 American fiction, the logic of fetishism shifts from Freudian disavowal to parallax, such that the truth of the fetish becomes its ability to represent radically opposed and incommensurable viewpoints.

Analyzing the portrayal of fetishism in my selected texts, I hope to enrich not only critical understanding of these texts and their place in literary history, but also to reveal the complex ways in which post-1960 American fiction reflects and contributes to knowledge in the areas of feminist, queer, and critical race theory.

My proposed book intervenes in two principle areas of scholarship: general studies of contemporary and postmodern American fiction and contemporary cultural and literary theories of fetishism (particularly through the lens of feminist, queer, and critical race theory). In recent years Amy Hungerford’s *The Holocaust of Texts* (2003) and Jeremy Green’s *Late Postmodernism* (2005) have suggested that a certain degree of
fetishism characterizes contemporary American literary history; but these studies reduce
fetishism to personification or a perceived authorial fixation on features of high
modernism. Meanwhile, over the past ten years much attention has been devoted to
revising Freud’s theory of fetishism in texts like E. L. McCallum’s *How to Do Things
with Fetishism* (1999), Henry Krips’s *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (2000), Clare
Taylor’s *Women, Writing, and Fetishism 1890-1950* (2003), and Louis Kaplan’s *Cultures
of Fetishism* (2006); yet contemporary American fiction has played little, if any, role in
these accounts. My book fills important gaps in, and creates bridges between, these areas
of study while foregrounding a new historical reading of the development of fetishism as
an Enlightenment (and post-Enlightenment) concept.

**Detailed Synopsis** (please also see the enclosed Table of Contents)

As mentioned above, my Introduction, “Fetishism and Its Discontents,” begins by
calling attention to, and posing a series of questions about, Freud’s apparently incidental
mention of “primitive” fetishism in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Although this
passage has been ignored in discussions of Freud’s religious thought and his theory of the
perversions, I draw attention to the crucial difference between this passage and Freud’s
other writings on fetishism. I then go on to suggest that Freud’s equation of fetishism
with social discontent and the death drive anticipates a pervasive strain in contemporary
American fiction in which distinctions between sexual and anthropological fetishism are
broken down. In O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, for example, a short story entitled
“Stockings” describes the transformation of one soldier’s sexual fetishism into a strategy
through which an entire platoon comes to negotiate the experiences of Vietnam. What
begins, in this story, as an opposition between a man’s “childish” fixation and the mocking attitude of his platoon-mates becomes the basis for a community held together, but also threatened, by a fusion of superstition and cynicism. Although most of the men in the platoon do not share their fellow soldier’s fetish, they come to recognize, through repeated trauma, that fetishistic belief is the only kind strong enough to survive in their world. O’Brien’s short story is one of several which I present (alongside Gloria Naylor’s “Kiswana Browne” and Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Sexy”) in order to situate my study as a contribution to general studies of contemporary American fiction, contemporary cultural and literary theories of fetishism, and literary studies of trauma.

Following the Introduction, Fetishism and Its Discontents is divided into three parts, each consisting of two chapters. Part One, “Fetishism from Theory to Fiction” explains why the concept of fetishism that emerges in post-1960 American fiction is “post-Enlightenment” rather than simply “post-Freudian.” In chapter 1, “A Parallax History of Fetish Theory,” I argue that Freud’s theory of fetishism is the culmination of a long Enlightenment history in which theorizing about the fetish is inseparable from a particular narrative form. That form, identified by anthropologist William Pietz as the “first encounter theory,” emerges alongside the earliest concept of fetishism in discourses describing trade between European merchants and African peoples in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. My thesis is that the first encounter theory, particularly as reiterated by Hegel and Freud, serves the function of what Slavoj Žižek calls an ideological fantasy scene. By telling a story about how the fetishist came to endow a contingent mundane thing (a rock, a shoe, a piece of underclothing) with magical power, Hegel and Freud attempt to overcome the gap between two fundamentally incompatible perspectives on
the fetish object—those of the “enlightened” theorist and the primitive, perverse, or “unenlightened” fetishist. In these accounts, the need to privilege the theorist’s perspective over that of the fetishist stems from the fact that the latter is characterized as superstitious and lacking in historical consciousness, thereby incompatible with the universalizing claims of Enlightenment thought. The first encounter theory of fetishism thus serves a socially preservative function as that which neutralizes the ahistorical, threateningly queer perspective of the fetishist. Post-1960 American fiction, I argue, thwarts this socially preservative function of fetish theory by articulating new narrative strategies for describing the relationship between fetishism and ideological fantasy.

In chapter 2, “No Ideas but in Fetishes: Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo,” I argue that Reed constructs a post-Enlightenment concept of fetishism by liberating and validating the subversive historical perspective of the fetishist demonized by Western critical theory. As outlined in several of his critical essays, Reed’s “neo-Hoodoo aesthetic” is an attempt to challenge Western notions of history and subjectivity; to that end, rather than create conventional literary characters, Reed populates his novels with what he calls “fetishes” inspired by African-American Hoodoo and conjure practices. I argue that Mumbo Jumbo (1972) is the ultimate expression of Reed’s neo-Hoodoo aesthetic because in it, he re-imagines crucial moments in the history of Western thinking about fetishism, including the first contact between Portuguese and African traders on the Gold Coast of Africa. By explicitly portraying psychoanalysis (Freud is a peripheral character in the novel) as an effort to appropriate and cover up the power of African-American Hoodoo practices, Reed’s novel provides a template for understanding the parallax logic of fetishism that develops through post-1960 American fiction. In Mumbo Jumbo, fetishism is not
explained away as mere superstition or perversion; instead, in the Jazz Age America of Reed’s novel, fetishism defines the gap that separates European- and African-American perspectives on history and social progress.

Part Two, "Fictions of the Female Fetish," examines the ways in which novels by Thomas Pynchon and Kathy Acker contribute to debates about fetishism in contemporary feminist and queer theory. In chapter 3, "Queering Lesbian Fetishism in Pynchon’s V.,” I begin by offering a summary of the history of theorizing about female fetishism from the foundational work of Sarah Kofman and Naomi Schor in the early 1980s, to theories of lesbian fetishism by Elizabeth Grosz and Teresa de Lauretis in the 1990s, to the more recent work of E. L. McCallum, Clare Taylor, and Louise Kaplan. While acknowledging crucial differences regarding the political and critical potential of fetishism in these theorists and critics, I argue that a feature common to all of them is their insistence on fetishism as an epistemological strategy for identity construction. Pynchon’s V. (1963), I argue, anticipates these debates through its depiction of lesbian fetishism and its deliberate parody of Freud; but it challenges us to rethink the relationship between fetishism and identity by associating lesbianism with the corruption of children. V. has been sharply criticized in the past for what some regard as Pynchon’s misogynistic, pseudo-Freudian treatment of the relationship between female sexuality, fetishism, and the death drive; but I argue that the enduring interest of Pynchon’s novel is its portrayal of lesbian identity as a series of traumatized historical fantasies created by male narrators committed to protecting heteronormative values. In V., the opposition between queer identity and the image of the fetishized, innocent child is implicated in numerous strains of twentieth century history, from the decadence of pre-World War I
French theatre to the aftermath of German attacks on Malta in World War II. Exploring this pervasive theme of Pynchon’s novel, I build upon the work of critics and theorists like Adrian Schober, James R. Kincaid, and Lee Edelman, who argue that the cultural regulation of identity—particularly queer identity—is managed through narratives of threatened and saved children.

In chapter 4, “Resighting Gender Theory: Butler’s Lesbian Phallus in Acker’s Pussy,” I argue that Kathy Acker’s attempt to create, in her late novels, what she calls a “myth beyond the phallus” emerges through a complex citational engagement with psychoanalytic and queer theory. Acker’s work is often described as a form of literary piracy in which plagiarism serves as the ironic signature of her fictional style; but particularly in her last two novels, My Mother: Demonology (1993), and Pussy, King of the Pirates (1996), Acker’s plagiarism achieves a new level of complexity and sophistication as a result of her discovery of the work of Judith Butler. In these novels Acker develops a new citational practice derived from the critical strategy which Butler, in Bodies that Matter, a calls a “reverse mime.” I say derived from because Acker’s citational practice is no straightforward employment of Butler’s theories; rather, Acker’s desire to use fiction as a corrective supplement to theory becomes evident early in My Mother: Demonology, when characters “cite” a Freudian theory of female fetishism that never existed, rallying to this theory as a source of political inspiration. Through a detailed reading of Pussy, King of the Pirates and one of Acker’s last critical essays, “Seeing Gender” (1996), I argue that depictions of female fetishism, masturbation, and penetrative sex between women mark the points at which Acker’s fiction consummates and violates various terms of Butler’s theorizing. By registering both her aesthetic
interest in, and partial discontentment with, Butler’s work, Acker aims to free her own writing and that of feminist and gender critics from over-reliance on an established canon of fictional and theoretical texts.

In Part Three, “Pomo-Pornologies,” I examine novels that refashion Gilles Deleuze’s definition of “pornology” as a literary genre devoted to shaping theoretical definitions of perversion. In *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze defines the fiction of Sade and Masoch as pornology because, unlike pornography, it does not employ erotic language merely to describe and titillate; rather, novels like Sade’s *Justine* and Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* are theoretical interventions in their own right, defining the symptoms of perversion in a way that counters Freud’s later efforts to read sadism and masochism as expressions of a common “sado-masochistic” syndrome. In chapter 5, “Domesticating Fantasy: S/M Fetishism and Coover’s *Spanking the Maid*” I argue that Coover’s novel merits the definition of “pomo-pornology,” in part, by virtue of its deliberate combination and parody of the literary symptoms of sadism and masochism. Employing both masochistic suspense and sadistic repetition, and alternating between the perspectives of master and maid, *Spanking the Maid* offers a parallax view of its central spanking ritual and attendant fetishes; but Coover’s aim is more than literary parody. I read Coover’s novel as a development of his earlier, “cubistic” domestic fiction, “The Babysitter” (1969), and as a postmodern rewriting of the relationship between two of the most famous Victorian practitioners of domestic S/M, Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick—figures who feature prominently in histories of S/M practice and studies of gender and class in Victorian culture. By retelling the Munby/Cullwick story in a way that deliberately blurs historical context, Coover invites us to consider how perverse
fantasy underlies suburbanization and the inculcation of class values in post-1960 American culture. In this regard *Spanking the Maid* enriches and complicates recent discussions of class in post-1945 American fiction by Andrew Hoberek, Robert Beuka, and Heather Hicks.

In chapter 6, "Narrating the Death Drive: Automotive SynthomoSexuality and John Hawkes's *Travesty,*" I argue that Hawkes’s critically neglected novel about a man who plans a triple murder/suicide by car crash is an important contribution to a tradition of texts exploring sociological connections between sadism and automobility—a tradition that extends from J. G. Ballard’s *Crash* (1973) through Quentin Tarantino’s *Death Proof* (2007). Written while he toured southern France in the early 1970s, *Travesty* was described by Hawkes as an explicitly “Sadean” attempt to make sense of Western culture’s morbid fascination with the automobile accident. As such, *Travesty* shares the concerns of prominent French theorists of the time, most notably Jean Baudrillard, whose *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (also published in 1976) portrays the car crash as symptomatic of the “death drive” associated with the Americanization of French and global culture. But *Travesty*, like Coover’s *Spanking the Maid*, is vague with regard to historical and geographic specifics; instead, its depiction of the late twentieth century’s cultural and technological death drive is organized, as in Pynchon’s *V.*, around the ideologically-laden image of the child. Papa, the driver of the car, defines the “formative event” in his life as one in which he attempted to run down a little girl at the side of the road. As a result, I suggest that he is a powerful incarnation of a character type which Lee Edelman describes as a “synthomoSexual”—a scapegoat charged with figuring the general perversity or death drive of the social order. Adding a capitalized “S” and “M” to
Edelman's neologism, I suggest that *Travesty* rewrites conventional symptoms of sadistic and masochistic subjectivity so as to describe a specifically postmodern form of "*Sintho*Mosexuality" allied to the perverse spectacle of the automobile accident.

My book concludes with a comparison of two "encyclopedic" accounts of twentieth century history: Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1998) and William T. Vollmann’s *Europe Central* (2005). Both of these novels crystallize the parallax logic of fetishism expressed in the earlier texts under study, focusing their portrayal of major historical events through fetishized objects (the Bobby Thomson homerun baseball in DeLillo, a Geco 7.65 mm shell casing in Vollmann). In both of these novels, I argue, fetishism provides an organizing principle for representing mid to late twentieth-century history, dramatizing on a grand scale the post-Enlightenment concept of fetishism which I have traced throughout my study.

To date, the manuscript is complete with the exception of chapter 2 and portions of the Introduction and Conclusion; I anticipate that the book as a whole will be completed by December 2009. Based on the work finished so far, I estimate a finished length of approximately 80,000 words. I do not envision the need for pictures, tables, or non-text material.

Earlier versions of chapters 3 and 4 have already appeared in print. Chapter 3, devoted to Pynchon, was published, with significant differences, in *Pynchon Notes*; while portions of chapter 4, devoted to Acker, have appeared in *Genders* and *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*. All previously published material has been significantly revised and reworked for the book manuscript.
Target Market and Competition

I envision that the primary market for my proposed book will be academic libraries as well as specialists, researchers, and teachers working in the areas of twentieth century American literature and gender theory. My book would fit well into graduate and upper-division courses in post-1945 American fiction alongside texts like Jeremy Green’s *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millenium* (Palgrave, 2005), Jeffrey Ebbesen’s *Postmodernism and Its Others* (Routledge, 2006), Andrew Hoberek’s *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton UP, 2005), and Heather J. Hicks’s *The Culture of Soft Work: Labor, Gender, and Race in Postmodern American Narrative* (Palgrave, 2009). Like these texts, my proposed book reads contemporary American literary history through a particular thematic strain explored by placing individual novels and stories in dialogue with contemporary theory. Where my book differs from these others is, first, in its focus on gender, race, and class through the lens of fetishism, and second, through its identification of post-1960 American fiction as a distinct narrative contribution to philosophical trends that extend to the origins of Western Enlightenment thought. As a result of this broad theoretical and historical focus, I can also envision my book being adopted for advanced level courses in contemporary queer theory and psychoanalytic theory alongside texts such as Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke UP, 2004) and Adrian Johnston’s *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Northwestern UP, 2005)—texts with which my book engages directly. Finally, because fetishism is a multidisciplinary and provocative topic of inquiry, I also envision the possibility of a wider, non-academic audience for my book.
As mentioned earlier, there currently exists no study of fetishism in contemporary American fiction. Earlier literary studies of fetishism include: Emily Apter’s *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Cornell UP, 1991), Marcia Ian’s *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and the Fetish* (Cornell UP, 1993), and Clare Taylor’s *Women, Writing, and Fetishism 1890-1950: Female Cross-Gendering* (Clarendon P, 2003). Apart from offering a focus on contemporary literature, my study differs from these in that it does not remain confined solely to a psychoanalytic framework but engages, in addition, with the long pre-Freudian history of thinking about fetishism.
Reader's Report: Fetishism and Its Discontents

The first detailed study of fetishism in post-1960 American fiction, Fetishism and Its Discontents analyzes the ways in which some major contemporary authors employ, deconstruct, and revise prior understandings of fetishism as a means of negotiating and critiquing salient features of contemporary American culture. In this respect, the book aims not to "apply" fetish theory as an interpretive lens to illuminate literary texts; instead it explores diverse ways in which contemporary works of fiction themselves may be considered as critical interventions in or "corrective supplements" to this body of theory. In contrast to conventional understandings of fetishism as synonymous with a primitive irrationality outside of history, sexual perversity, or false consciousness, the author argues that, in the works of these writers, fetishism becomes redefined as a critical resource for representing the encounter between radically opposed viewpoints or ideologies (using Zizek's concept of parallax); for foregrounding—rather than disavowing—sexual, racial, gender, and other differences; and for reworking the narrative form of the "first encounter" that undergirds the history of fetish theory (and the Enlightenment values of which it is a part) itself. The study is divided into three broad sections: "Fetishism from Theory to Fiction," "Fictions of the Female Fetish," and "Po-Mo Pornologies;" it discusses fiction by Ishmael Reed, Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, John Hawkes, among others; and it is in dialogue with a broad range of theorists from Hegel, Marx, and Freud to Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, Zizek, and Butler.

Strengths of the Manuscript

Among the manuscript's strengths are its ambitious scope—it spans from pre- to post-Enlightenment cultures—its cultural timeliness (within and without the academy), its insights into the cultural role played by literary texts in a contemporary moment, and the originality of its overall argument. The author is an inventive and sensitive reader of texts, both fictional and theoretical, a clear and cogent writer, and a careful, thorough researcher. I learned a great deal from reading the manuscript and I believe that it will appeal to a broad range of readers.

Weaknesses of the Manuscript

With the exception of Chapter I, each of the book's chapters seems relatively self-contained—not in itself a problem. It becomes one when it prevents the author from making productive connections between and among chapters so that the book's central claims develop and are demonstrated throughout the study. Sometimes this is simply a missed opportunity to forecast the argument made in subsequent chapters, such as on p. 48 where the author comments that the
fetishist's point of view is missing from fetish theory. This would be a place to mention the return-with-a-vengeance of the fetishist's point of view in a novel such as Travesties. Such forecasting and retrospection help to stitch a manuscript together so that it coheres as a whole. At other times, seeking to make connections might enrich the author's analysis of central themes appearing in the novels he/she reads. For example, the author discusses the psychosexual and socio-cultural functions of childhood and the child/adult relation in the Pynchon chapter, the Hawkes chapter, and the Acker chapter. How do these depictions differ and what do these differences tell us about—at the very least—gendered relations of power and privilege in contemporary culture? To what degree is Papa's incestuous desire for children and his compulsion to embrace the death drive a product of his position as privileged inheritor of the Western cultural tradition? And in this respect, does Papa's fetishism serve as a "strategy for negotiating the many losses of meaning in which postmodernism trades" (54)? Does this mark a return to the violence at the foundation of Western culture's social contract? Such a characterization simply does not apply to Acker's work in that father/daughter incest and sexualized violence against women appear to signify the state of male/female relations under patriarchy more generally, a state from which all of Acker's characters struggle to escape, as the author notes. Thinking through and making explicit the many intertextual resonances among the novels discussed might yield some important insights, and, at the very least, would help to lend a sense of continuity to the manuscript as a whole. The accumulation of these sorts of missed connections lends the manuscript a diffuseness, a sense that the book doesn't quite add up as a whole, which may be a result of the fact that it is not yet completed. Nevertheless, I'd encourage the author to scrutinize the manuscript carefully to ensure that connections among the many texts are explored and all the threads raised in the book are concluded fully. This weakness tends to play itself out in the conclusions of individual chapters—with the exception of the Acker chapter in which the "stakes" or implications of the argument are addressed fully.

I'd also like the author to situate more clearly the discussion of fetish theory not only in relation to its own history, its own rise and eclipse, but in relation to a broader 20th-21st C critique of Enlightenment values and narratives (including the first encounter narrative) occasioned by the traumas of 20th C history; the extensive and persuasive philosophical critiques of Western metaphysics by Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard and many other poststructuralists; the rise of a variety of new social movements and cultural expressions in the U.S. and elsewhere (e.g. feminism, ethnic identity politics, GLBT and queer politics, postcolonial critiques, etc) that continue to pose the problem of radical difference and so act to destabilize many of the presuppositions at the foundation of Western culture. At points in the manuscript, the author seems to give priority to fetishism/fetish oaths as the foundational act of disavowal at the heart of the Western social contract and the (so-called) rule of law. At other times contemporary revisions of fetish theory seem to be simply an instance of a larger
post-Enlightenment critique. Pages 5-6 in the manuscript is one place where the author discusses these relations, but I’d like to see him/her situate contemporary revisions to the fetish narrative more deliberately in the context of a larger postmodern (or post-Enlightenment) global condition. Filling in this context will help to broaden the appeal of the book, I think.

As part of this broader contextualizing or situating of the topic, the author might develop more fully and draw some conclusions about relations between fiction and theory as discourses in a contemporary moment. All of the novelists discussed in the book engage concepts from fetish theory (broadly defined), but they also are themselves forms of theoretical intervention into this body of work. This confrontation is staged in especially dramatic and direct ways in the Acker chapter in which Butler’s theory is brought to a kind of conceptual impasse by Acker’s insistence on art as survival (vs. theoretical consistency or logical rigor). Here, Butler is the upright inheritor of the Enlightenment and Acker’s gone native (again). (As an aside, the pirate penis could signal transgendered bodies that disrupt the hetero-homo, male-female binary, as Butler herself discusses in Undoing Gender). If contemporary fiction functions as a corrective supplement to fetish theory, what does this series of supplements add up to? Taken as a whole, what does this body of fiction illuminate about “the aporias and fixations of Western thought more generally”? After the “direct intervention in the history of Western theories about fetishism” made by this fiction, what’s left of fetish theory?

Nuts, Bolts, and Loose Ends.

I’d like the author to elaborate terms and concepts fully the first time they’re employed in the argument rather than using them as if they are self-evident. Some examples would include: Enlightenment values (especially those reflected in first encounter narratives); post-Enlightenment, fatal theory or fatal aspects of the novels’ interventions (as in Baudrillard’s Fatal Strategies?), car crash culture studies, etc.

Chapter I reads as a cross between an introduction to the book as a whole (as in the truncated chapter outline at the end of the chapter) and an introduction to the history of fetish theory. It might make sense to separate the introduction to the book from this first chapter—the book proposal goes in this direction. Beyond this, I find the organization of the chapter to be itself confusing. Perhaps the author could first discuss the history of fetish theory from pre-Enlightenment narratives (via Pietz’s work) through to Hegel, Marx, Freud, Lacan. This discussion could be followed by the second-generation or post-Enlightenment fetish theorists—Butler, Derrida, Zizek, Baudrillard, feminist and queer theorists,
along with the author's intervention into fetish theory via his/her reconsideration of Freud's neglected fetish narrative in Civilization and Its Discontents, as well as the interventions made by the novelists he/she considers. Some of the contemporary fetish theory referenced in the chapter might also be moved to relevant chapters later in the manuscript rather than being elaborated here. For example, McClintock's observations might work well in the Ishmael Reed chapter. The rather lengthy discussion of Derrida in this first chapter might be saved for Chapter 3, where it is also raised. Such a rethought organizational strategy (or some other one) might also help the author to avoid unnecessary repetitions (as on pp. 14 ff and 33 ff), lead to a more focused argument overall, and allow him/her to better integrate the contemporary critiques of fetish theory with the novelists' interventions.

Finally, the author might want to take a look at Catherine Belsey's recent book Culture and the Real, which also treats relations between cultural texts (art, film, literature) and expressions of the death drive (via discussions of Freud, Lacan, Zizek, Butler, and others). The last chapter in particular—which treats postmodern art and architecture—would be especially relevant to the author's discussion of contemporary fiction.

Final Evaluation: Accept contingent on the author responding to the suggestions for revision detailed above.