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To cite this article: Manuel Hueso-Vasallo (29 Dec 2024): Queer Literary Assemblages: Justin Torres's *Blackouts* (2023), Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2024.2439325

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2024.2439325>



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Published online: 29 Dec 2024.



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Queer Literary Assemblages: Justin Torres's *Blackouts* (2023)

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to explore the connection between assemblage theory and queer studies, arguing that this connection could be extremely productive as a critical tool through which to explore literary texts dealing with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minorities (hi) stories. Although assemblage theory was originally articulated by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Milles Plateaux*, there has recently been, as the research project into which this essay is integrated demonstrates, a noticeable spike of interest regarding assembled thinking. This interest, however, seems to have overlooked the critical potential that combining assemblage theory and queer studies could offer. In this sense, this essay details the affinities shared between both fields of critical enquiry and, through the lenses of Bill Brown's "Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)," analyses Justin Torres's novel *Blackouts*, in order to provide a working example of how the combination of these affinities could lead to new understandings of queer literary modes. I shall argue that Torres's novel is an important text from which to rethink the ways in which we analyze queer literature precisely due to its inclusion of assembled materials within its pages.

Introduction

Since the advent in 1980 of assemblage theory, there has been (and, especially, recently) a myriad of publications in which assembled thinking has been applied to diverse aspects of human gender and sexuality (Lahti; Bazzul and Santavicca; Camiré; Nash and Gorman-Murray; Puar), mostly from sociological perspectives. Despite this, there seems to exist a certain critical constraint when addressing the representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQ+) (hi)stories in a literary context through assembled thinking. This is doubly incongruent when we consider that the novels of North American queer author William S. Burroughs were certainly influential in Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's original articulation of assemblage theory. In fact, in the preface to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari exemplify their idea of assemblage by referring to Burroughs "cut-up method" of narrative expression in his novel *Naked Lunch*, published in 1959 (6). Despite this apparent critical reticence to associate assemblage theory and the exploration of LGBTQ+ narratives, I argue that both assemblage theory and queer studies share profound affinities, or points of contact, that, when brought together from a critical standpoint, have the potential to offer readers and scholars new ways to understand the representation of dissident sexualities in literature. Furthermore, certain extant scholarly work, such as Bill Brown's "Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)", already provide us with a methodological framework through which to bring together these two areas of critical enquiry. Indeed, Justin Torres's recent novel, *Blackouts*, when regarded as an assembled, queer text, can clearly depict the many ways in which a combination of assemblage theory and queer studies can be extraordinarily productive for the study of fictions that represent nonconventional sexualities.

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In order to demonstrate this potential productivity, however, it is necessary first to inspect at close range the aforementioned affinities between both assemblage theory and queer studies. To do this successfully, it is convenient to divide these affinities into those that are more “superficial,” or casual, and in those that are more “profound,” or related to these areas’ agendas. It is also important to consider the works or ideas of scholars that have worked with assemblage theory recently so that we can understand how these affinities can be efficiently translated into actual literary analysis. After explaining these connections, Torres’s *Blackouts* will provide, as stated before, an ideal textual backdrop through which to contrast what this new approach can offer. *Blackouts* constitutes a perfect text in which to test this approach because the novel is, *per se*, an assemblage: a conglomerate of deeply connected elements carefully laid out, whose relationship tells a story about the nonlinear temporality of queer history. The novel’s composition, made up of a mixture of text, fragments from “scientific” volumes that are heavily redacted by the author, photographs, and other visual resources, plus its nonlinear recounting of events, confirm the “assemblage mode of existence” (Brown 271) of this particular work, as its structure and content clearly evoke Deleuze and Parnet’s definition of assemblage as “a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them . . . [it is] a co-functioning” (69). Considering the text’s own evident affinity with assemblage thinking, the interconnectivity of assemblage theory and queer studies will, then, be inspected by paying special attention to two elements within the novel that directly deal with queer desire: its redacted “scientific” texts and its historical photographs.

Affinities Between Assemblage Theory and Queer Studies

As stated above, the points of contact between assemblage theory and queer studies can be divided into two different categories: those that are more superficial and those that, on the other hand, constitute important similarities between both fields’ agendas and critical interests.

General Affinities

The more visible point of contact between assemblage theory and queer studies is related to their similar genealogical problems. Their development, scope, definition, and aims have often been criticized as inconsistent or as too broad. For instance, queer studies has often been seen as too “all over the place,” its main adversaries gathered under the premise that “queer theorists are a diverse lot exhibiting important disagreements and divergencies” (Seidman 125). However, what many people have seen as one of the field’s most evident shortcomings is, in truth, one of its main assets according to its defenders. As Chris Berry and Annamarie Jagose state, “[Q]ueer is an ongoing and necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation” (11), or as David Halperin more consistently clarifies, “[Q]ueer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. . . . [I]t is an identity without an essence” (62). In other words, where some see a lack of cohesiveness and a failure to agree on a common course of social and cultural criticism is, conversely, an intrinsic strength of the field for others. Indeed, as queer studies gains momentum each passing decade, it seems that its wide scope of interest has led to a surprising wealth of academic insights that have the potential to offer a better understanding of the sociocultural phenomena that govern our conception of human sexuality and gender relations.

From Sara Ahmed’s essays on queer phenomenology or queer use, to Dustin Friedman’s exploration of estheticism as proto-queer theory, or Elizabeth Freeman’s detailed understanding of queer temporality, what at first sight seemed to be an incongruent and nonmethodical approach to sexuality has proven to be a fertile ground for scholars interested in many areas of research, providing a common link between many cultural products concerned with expressing and explaining same-sex desire or gender identities. In this sense, the “disagreements” and “divergencies” expressed by some queer scholars have led to an increasing interest in the field, as these same conflicts enable both academic debate and the possibility to conflate sexuality with many other contemporary concerns.

After all, both Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—in early attempts to explain the protean character of queerness—already mentioned how “queer” must always be in opposition to any monolithic understanding of itself and how it entails a constant process of self-reflection on the queer subject, an embracing of its ever-changing relation to social norms (Butler 19; Sedgwick 6–7).

Interestingly, a similar conflict can be observed when it comes to the genealogy of assemblage theory. Relevant voices in the field, such as Manuel DeLanda’s, point out that Deleuze and Guattari’s original articulation of assembled thinking “hardly amounts to a fully-fledged theory” (3). And, while it is certainly true that Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of assemblage as a “fragmentary whole” (*What Is Philosophy* 16) that brings together “singularities” (Deleuze 63)—that is, individual entities with a life of their own—and pays attention to the “in-between” relations that unite and change these entities (Deleuze & Parnet viii) may seem broad and unspecific, other scholars tend to see the matter from a rather different perspective. For example, Thomas Nail draws from several works by Deleuze and Guattari, and by Deleuze and Parnet, to argue that they did, in fact, create a “basic theoretical apparatus” (37) through which to understand the concept of “assemblage.” Furthermore, Nail appreciates how their theory, despite encompassing a great range of cultural and social manifestations, can be of great value in its philosophical quest to reject unity and embrace multiplicity:

[a]ssemblages are [...] like machines, defined solely by their external relations of composition, mixture, and aggregation. In other words, an assemblage is a multiplicity, neither a part nor a whole. If the elements of an assemblage are defined only by their external relations, then it is possible that they can be added, subtracted, and recombined with one another ad infinitum without ever creating or destroying an organic unity. (23)

Despite this seemingly “mechanical” summary of what an assemblage is, Nail goes on to list how Deleuze, Guattari, and Parnet understood the uses of assemblage to be quite wide, transcending mechanical relations and addressing many aspects of social and cultural relations in which each entity adds its own values and characteristics to the others’, creating a resulting whole that could not function without the in-betweenness generated by the combination of these characteristics. This has been translated into practice by scholars who have founded their research, precisely, on the wideness and openness that this theory foment. As such, Jon Anderson, for instance, used Deleuze and Guattari’s theories to create an “assemblage approach to literary geography” (120), remarking on the potentiality of regarding “place” in literature as a “geographical assemblage” in which different sides of the readers’ own experiences and the text’s indications collide to create a spatial locus dependent on the interconnectedness of these sides (121–23). Yannis Hamilakis and Andrew Meirion Jones, Jamie Collier, and Katarzyna Niziolek, among many others, have, in turn, developed and explored assemblage theory in order to provide a better understanding of such different topics as cybersecurity, collective memory, or archeology. Even more relevant to the purposes of this essay, however, is Brown’s idea that the novel itself possesses “an assemblage mode of existence” (271), being as it is composed—both in a literal and in a figurative sense—by a plethora of different materials, documents, experiences, and readers whose textual existence is closely bound by the liminal space in which they conflate, influence, and work together.

Thus, it is possible to claim that both queer studies and assemblage theory, despite their perceived overreach, find some of their relevance in their wide scope and in the ample possibilities for interpretation that their founders crafted into their original stances during these fields’ infancies.¹ Claire Colebrook aptly points out the many ways in which queer theory can be interpreted, and how it can come to bear witness to a great quantity of human endeavors (11). Were it not, in fact, for its foundational ambiguity, we might not have had its main tenets applied to such differing fields as phenomenology, Victorian studies, contemporary literature, and many others. After all, and as Sedgwick claims, queer studies are “a continuing moment, movement, motive, recurrent, eddying, troublant” (viii). And, of course, the same seems to be true for assemblage theory. A theory crafted in the 1970s is, indeed, still relevant for such diverse areas as cybersecurity, archeology, and literature. In this way, we can claim that both theoretical endeavors share a specific affinity to be adapted to a wide number of cultural and social interests, a protean character that can be shaped to address almost any

aspect of human—or natural— activity. In a world that, as Butler herself claims in *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, is being overpopulated with disinformation regarding sexual and gender identities (36), the combination of these two theories may prove specially fruitful, not only because of their wide potential for human analysis, but also because of the deeper, more meaningful characteristics that they share.

Specific Affinities

Beyond their widespread reach, queer studies and assemblage theory have at least two other common characteristics. These two characteristics—their opposition to essentialism and their rejection of binaries—constitute a deeper affinity between them, proving the many ways in which they can be made to interact in fruitful and promising ways. These ways, however, have remained, to the best of my knowledge, unexplored until now. In *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, a nuanced collection of essays edited by Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr that positions Deleuze's work alongside the main tenets of queer theory, assemblages do appear as connected to certain queer concerns. As such, the essays comment on the assembled origin of queer politics and sexuality (Conley, 27–28; MacCormack 136), on gender and identity as related to assemblages (Hickey-Moody and Rasmussen 40–46), on queer affect and desire as assembled (Olkowski 57–62), and on the relevance of assemblages in the “production” of new ways of experimenting with sexuality (Parisi 75–84). However, I would like to contribute to these important and pioneering insights by proposing that these two concepts are so productively aligned, partly because of their shared concern, ever since their coinage, with the two cultural aspects previously mentioned: essentialism and binaries.

The idea of “essences,” of “a person's gestures, tastes, desires, and ways of being-in-the world, as the expression of an innate, autonomous, and unique core, an ‘I’” (Sullivan 81), has always been antithetical to the main tenets of queer studies. In contrast, queer scholars argue that the individual and, more specifically, their relation to sexuality and gender, is “culturally and historically specific rather than being something that exists in an essential sense” (Sullivan 81). In other words, queer scholars, developing theories mainly articulated by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, tend to agree that humans are not “born” in a specific manner that conditions the rest of their lives, but rather strive to demonstrate that our ways of acting, thinking, desiring, and being in the world are deeply conditioned by the performance of certain culturally established and hegemonic models of living (Butler). An example of this can be found in how contemporary queer scholars engaged in the analysis of literary texts have, for instance, reconfigured Oscar Wilde from being “the tragic victim of Victorian sexual repression and an early martyr for gay rights” to a queer man whose specific context makes it impossible for us to regard him as “gay,” but rather as an individual influenced by a kind of social performativity that conditioned his life in a way that has little to do with contemporary categories of identity (Friedman 91–92).

Complementarily, assemblage theory also rejects the idea of essences. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze clearly shows his mistrust toward the logic of essentialism: “If one insists, the word ‘essence’ might be preserved, but only on condition of saying that the essence is precisely accident, the event” (191). As Nail argues, the main issue in which essentialism and assemblage theory collide is that the first perspective assumes that “the thing” is a “complete product, we simply identify the enduring features of its history and retroactively posit them as those unchanging and eternal features that by necessity must have pre-existed the thing” (24). On the other hand, an assemblage does not have an essence because it has no eternally necessary defining features, only contingent and singular features. In other words, if we want to know what something is, we cannot presume that what we see is the final product nor that this product is somehow independent of the network of social and historical processes to which it is connected. [...] [W]e cannot extract the being of a book from the vast historical conditions of the invention of an alphabetic language, distribution of paper, the printing press, literacy, and all the social contingencies that made possible the specific book of our inquiry, with all of its singular features (color, lighting, time of day, and so on) and all the conditions under which

someone is inquiring into the book. A vast network of processes continues to shape the book and thus there is no final product. (N24)

Thus, assemblage theory does not consider essences a perdurable or intrinsic quality of reality, but rather as an “accident,” a word that we may decide to use to refer to something in a specific moment in time, but that does not capture the myriad complexities that constitute the precise object of our analysis, contemplation, or inquiry. The example selected by Nail, the book—which will prove quite relevant further on—clearly illustrates the logical system proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. According to them, a reality, such as a book, is not just a shared referent with some common characteristics that we attribute to this word, but rather a set of “multiplicities or complexes of relations and corresponding singularities” (Deleuze 203) that are substantiated in the particular circumstances in which a book (1) is written, (2) is produced, (3) is acquired, (4) is read, and (5) is analyzed by a specific person.

In summary, both queer studies and assemblage theory seek to transcend the idea of essences and embrace more complex models of understanding sexuality and reality as—precisely—an assembled group of singularities that modify both themselves and each other when they get in contact. For queer scholars, gender and sexuality are not predetermined or an essential part of any given individual within a specific social group, but rather a highly contextualized trait that is influenced by the “in-betweenness” generated by cultural, moral, medical, historical, and even artistic mores at any specific time. Similarly, assemblage thinking regards any given reality as the result of a very similar process, so much that Nail’s claim that assemblages do not possess “eternally necessary defining features, only contingent and singular features” (24) could easily be applied to queer objects of inquiry with equal effect. As stated above, the next section of this essay will provide a specific example on the ways in which literary analysis can benefit from bringing these two profound affinities together and from studying queer texts from a perspective that combines both queer scholarship and assemblage theory.

The second affinity shared by both fields is, on the other hand, their consequent rejection of binaries as a way to perceive reality. It is perhaps unsurprising that two areas of study that reject or question the validity of essentialism should also be skeptical regarding binary divisions of the world. After all, to deny an essence is to see the world beyond the pale of black-and-white and enter into a zone profusely inhabited by grays, which, of course, complicates the existence of pure opposites such as “good” or “bad” or, in this particular case, “homosexual” and “heterosexual.” In this sense, the challenging of Cartesian dualism has been an important part of queer theorists since the advent of the field. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick already sought to move beyond the male/female, nature/nurture, straight/homosexual binaries in order to transcend the importance of “the gender of the object choice” (8) and take a more open view of human sexuality and gender expression. Based on Derridian ideas of “deconstruction” and their attempt to “undermin[e] the notion of polarised essences” (Sullivan 50), later queer scholars replicated Sedgwick’s attempts by drawing attention to both the instability and potential irrelevance of dualism. In literature, for instance, this has been done by questioning the importance of assigning contemporary labels such as “homosexual,” “gay,” or “heterosexual” to specific authors.

A good example of this can be seen in some approaches to Henry James’s life and works. Authors such as a Hugh Stevens and Eric Haralson argue that James’s sexuality—the object of much scholarly debate—is, ultimately, irrelevant. For them, what matters is that James, by virtue of his personal ambiguity, his complex prose, and the themes he treats in some of his texts, can be regarded as a queer author, in the sense that he has inspired later queer theorists and writers in a way that defies any easy dual categorization (Haralson 1–26; Stevens 1–19). And, in a broader sense, other queer theorists have challenged binaries by promoting intersectionality within queer studies. Sara Ahmed, Gloria Anzaldúa, J. Halberstam, and Robert McRuer are just some of the most well-known queer scholars who have sought to defy dualism by proposing a queer approach to family affect, race, trans experiences, and disability, respectively.

This rejection of dualism is, once again, mirrored in assemblage theory. Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical view of the world aims for a more protean understanding of the realities that surround

us, one that rejects Cartesian dualism in favor of a “flow[ing]” “current”: “[d]esire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow” (Deleuze and Guattari 5). In other words, Deleuze and Guattari’s claim suggests that (1) binaries have no place in a world formed by “fragmentary and fragmented” entities, one cannot simply identify with one side of a binary because no such thing as a completed or unmovable category exists, and (2) that “desire” is an important part of the way in which realities coalesce together, thus already pointing the way to a queer understanding of assembled thinking. In time, this claim has come to be regarded as one of the main tenets of assemblage theory for, as Sari Pietikäinen claims, “assemblage [...] bypasses old binaries [...] by shifting the focus to relationships and interactions between elements” seeking to represent “complex historical, political and economic processes” in all of their dimensions and fragmentary qualities (236). If we think about how assemblage theory focuses on the “in-betweenness” of the relations it studies, on its insistence of regarding the world through its “external relations of composition, mixture and aggregation” and define the result of these relations as “a multiplicity, neither a part nor a whole” (Nail 23), it follows that dualism has no place within its scope. Indeed, if everything is a mixture of different realities and circumstances, if a product (be it material, cultural, social, political, etc.) is a multiplicity, it follows that a theory that arranges the world in opposing categories is insufficient for the purposes of what assembled thinking tries to accomplish. DeLanda explains this rejection of binaries by contrasting the solid quality of “exclusive binary categories” with the fluidity of assemblages, which he compares with the “solid and fluid phases of matter”: “phases can be transformed into one another, and even coexist as mixtures, like a gel that is a mixture of the solid and liquid phases of different materials” (19).

In summary, it seems clear that both queer studies and assemblage theory are oriented toward an understanding of reality that does not accept the relevance of complete opposites. In this sense, the critical tools developed by theorists devoted to the study of assemblages can perfectly complement the myriad ways in which queer scholars try to demonstrate how human sexuality and gender identity should not be understood in terms of polar opposites. Other scholars have, indeed, successfully argued how the sociological analysis of gender can acquire a greater level of nuance through assembled thinking:

Gender is seen as a process of becoming across social, material, discursive, human and more-than-human worlds: it entangles different elements and relationships from partners and relationship dynamics to other involved people (friends, children, relatives etc.), from societal power relations and ideals (gendered conventions, relationship norms, heteronormativity, homo- and transphobia etc.) to non-human elements (gendered spaces, events, living/housing arrangements etc.). However, it is not only the elements that make up the multiplicity, but rather the relations between elements, which are essential for analyzing assemblages. (Lahti 177–78)

Here, Lahti uses notions of assembled thinking to highlight the importance of the relationship between seemingly different fields when describing the process through which gender norms are created. In this way, an assembled understanding of queerness would pay attention not only to the term’s historicity and genealogy, its perceived “umbrella-term” status, its intersectionality, or its understanding of sexuality as fluid and protean, but also to how all these aspects are related and influenced each other in each particular instance of queer exploration.

In fact, the vested interests of both assemblage theory and queer studies in anti-essentialist and nondualist approaches to culture have already been used as a conjoined methodological tool, even when these affinities have remained explicitly underexplored until now. Jasbir K. Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, for instance, brings together both theoretical frameworks to scrutinize the complex relationships established between two elements that are an important part of the assembled multiplicity of terrorism: race and sexuality. Despite this, and as stated during the introduction, there is still little critical apparatus that applies both fields of study to the analysis of literature. Taking this into consideration, the following section establishes the many productive ways in which contemporary queer narratives can be assessed through a combination of assemblage theory and queer studies, considering the affinities articulated through this section.

Assembling Queerness in Justin Torres's *Blackouts* (2023)

Brown's "Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode)" remains one of the most relevant pieces of scholarly research for those interested to apply assembled thinking to the study of literary works. In his article, Brown defends the idea that novels have "an assemblage mode of existence" (271). He supports this claim through two different arguments. The first one, based on Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on the diverse voices that compose a text ("*Dialogic Imagination*"; "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics"), consists of the fact that novels are, indeed, a "polyphonic (heteroglossic) assemblage of voices and [...] genres" (271). In other words, Brown acknowledges that a novel is composed of an assemblage of ideas, philosophies, and genre features that collide together and that create a multiplicity through the relationships established in the in-betweenness of this collision. For instance, a novel may represent a well-known historical or archetypal character, a specific but common setting, and embody the ideas of a specific genre such as Realism or Modernism, but the uniqueness of the novel will reside within how this multiplicity of elements influences and conditions one another to give rise to an unprecedented text. The second, more innovative argument through which Brown defends the assembled "mode of existence" of novels is the fact that texts are also "an assemblage of materials" (271). These materials—paper, ink, binding, book, volumes, pictures, et cetera—are the "material manifestation" of the novel and are, for Brown, as important and as evidential of the assembled quality of novels as the assemblage of voices that conforms the "immaterial substratum" of the text *per se* (271).

Appropriately, Brown goes on to establish how the novel as a narrative form can create new and innovative ways of thinking about assemblages in a broader sense:

[T]he ways in which distinct materials can denote or imply distinct sociolects and idiolects [...]; the ways in which the significance of specific materials depend on their role within a narrative [...]; the ways in which an assemblage juxtaposes different autobiographical plots and subplots [...]; the ways in which printed matter (such as newsprint) interpolates a reading subject; and the ways in which the discoloration of such matter suffuses the object with time. (274)

Thus, it is clear how novels may be regarded as assemblages in many different ways. There are specific cases, however, in which a text may present all of the characteristics of an assemblage in order to tell a queer story and, in such a case, it is interesting to see how the cultural agenda of queer studies and the assembled "mode of existence" of the novel come together to produce a text in which the previously explained affinities between assemblage theory and queer studies are evidenced.

Such seems to be the case of a certain number of queer contemporary novels. For instance, Jordy Rosenberg's *Confessions of the Fox* professes to be an account of the life of the well-known eighteenth-century London thief Jack Sheppard. However, in Rosenberg's version Jack is, in contemporary terms, a trans man. To articulate and explore the implications of his gender identity, the author uses a series of footnotes, alleging that the novel is, in fact, a manuscript discovered by a scholar whose own story is told to the reader in different sections of the text. In this way, the novel can be seen as an assemblage of both voices and materials, all assuming the credibility of academic scholarship and that allows, thus, for a representation of queerness that is understandable to twenty-first-century audiences. Other novels that follow this trend are, for instance, Catherine Lacey's *Biography of X* and Anthony Oliveira's *Dayspring*. Both books tell explicit queer stories by using different kinds of assembling techniques. In *Biography of X*, the narrator is writing a biography of her late wife and, as a consequence, the narrative is filled with photographs, excerpts from letters, and other kinds of documents that expose, through their "in-betweenness," through the clash that the reader experiences between the differing accounts of a life proffered by these documents, a kind of sapphic queerness that is both unconventional and cruel, and that can only be wholly understood by the contrast provided by all the fiction sources the author conjures. And, even more shockingly, *Dayspring* assembles different Biblical stories in order to queer the life and actions of John the Evangelist and Christ. In this novel, Oliveira uses different fonts for different

characters, tells stories from the ancient past through contemporary elements (such as television football matches, or the consumption of canned beers), and uses the material dimension of the book to confer it with a sense of antiquity and solemnity (the pages of the 2024 Strange Light edition are cut in such a way that lends the book the appearance of an old manuscript).

In other words, these recent novels can be considered good examples of the first affinity shared by queer studies and assemblage theory: their great scope of interest and the fluidity of the topics with which they deal. *Confessions of the Fox*, *Biography of X*, and *Dayspring* deploy the characteristic interest in human sexuality and gender of queer literature while, at the same time, using assembled material and voices to articulate their stories and their explorations of queerness more accurately. As Nigianni and Storr point out, when addressing queerness one faces “not one, single, coherent theory on sexuality and difference, but an assemblage of texts, of multiple voices, of writings-in-variation” (8), and these novels have the merit of perfectly exemplifying this by actually presenting queerness through assembled mediums. Indeed, Brown argues that assemblages can be understood as “three dimensional work composed in part or whole of already existing objects” (269), and the incorporation of academic language and footnotes, photographs, and forged indicators of authenticity does lend a three-dimensional quality to these novels that voice what has often been undocumented. However, Justin Torres’s *Blackouts* goes one step further from the previous novels in both its ambitious use of assembled materials and in its exemplification of the advantages of thinking of queer studies and assemblage theory as closely related and attuned frameworks. In fact, it is possible to argue that the novel covers all three affinities between these two fields—wide aims, rejection of essentialism, and disruption of binaries—while at the same time emphasizing the multiplicity of voices and materials required to articulate contemporary queerness. Consequently, the following paragraphs offer a brief analysis of the novel to demonstrate its potential significance for a better understanding of the beneficial possibilities of thinking about queerness and assemblages as closely related concepts.

Torres’s novel is the story of the relationship between a younger, unnamed narrator and an older man named Juan Gay who resides in a seemingly out-of-time retirement house known as “The Palace.” Their friendship is based, partly, on Juan’s attempts to guide the narrator toward a different conception of sexuality, one that transcends identitarian labels and embraces all forms of subversion: “I saw only that Juan transcended what I thought I knew about sissies. When he spoke, he spoke in allusion, literarily. [. . .] I don’t think he expected me to understand directly, but rather wanted me to understand how little I knew about myself, that I was missing out on something grand: a subversive, variant culture; an inheritance” (41). In order to comprehend his queer inheritance, the narrator sets out to complete a project begun by a younger Juan:

The grand project, which I was to complete after Juan’s death, involved a file folder stuffed with scraps of paper, newspaper clippings, photographs, and scribbled notes, along with two massive books whose pages had been mostly blacked out. The books comprised a research study [. . .] titled *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns*. [. . .] He’d found the books that way, erased into little poems and observations. (14)

The contents of this file folder give to the novel its assembled character, as many of them are included within its pages, interlaced with its prose in order to illustrate what is being told. Each of the photographs, notes, newspaper clippings, and excerpts from *Sex Variants* serves to connect the narrator with some aspect of the “subversive, variant culture” of queerness in a way that outlines the multiplicity of voices required in order to describe such an approach to human sexuality. In this way, we can state that the novel evidences the first affinity between assemblage theory and queer studies, as its multiplicity of both voices and materials serve to investigate, articulate, and, more importantly, stress the importance of different elements in constituting a narrative whole that relies on the relationships between these elements to convey many of the ample interests of queer theorists. Indeed, through these elements the novel tackles issues of race, class, and gender from a queer perspective in an effective way, thanks to the assembled nature of the text(s).

Among the many documents that compose the novel, perhaps the ones that best illustrate the productive connection between assemblages and queerness are the blackout excerpts from *Sex*

Variants. Far from being a fictional tool, *Sex Variants: A Study of Homosexual Patterns* is an actual scholarly volume published and edited by Dr. George W. Henry in 1941 with the purpose of providing somewhat “scientific” illustrations of both male and female homosexuality through an inspection of an important number of “case studies” comprising the sexual experiences of queer men and women from the period. The novel focuses on the real-life person who actually conducted most of the interviews, Jan Gay, a queer anthropologist whose dedication to portray homosexual lives in a nonpathological way was finally erased from the manuscript as Dr. Henry took control over it in order to present the information from a more conventional and morally condemning perspective (Torres 85–89). However, in assembling some excerpts from this volume into the novel and blacking out some of its contents, Torres presents them not as a historical record of how homosexuality was regarded in the mid-twentieth century, but rather as another instance of Burrough’s “cut-out method” that inspired Deleuze and Guattari when formulating the importance of assemblages in understanding objects as multiplicities (*Thousand Plateaus* 6).

The clever, absurd, and frank ways the variants’ stories had been erased, and what remained of their suffering, and hope, and sexual desires; the vernacular and the idioms they used; the vocabulary of the underground 1930s [. . .] the particularities of their sorrow, their persecution; and to see, too, the ways in which they’d been freer and more fluid when it came to sex acts, roles, identities; to be reminded of a time when much had yet to be defined (Torres 99).

Thus, the excerpts from *Sex Variants* are a clear example of the “assemblage mode of existence” novels (Brown 271) because they constitute a multiplicity in as much as they depict a “more fluid” conception of sexuality by defacing the pages of a book designed to classify and typologize it.

Furthermore, and as the previous quote from the novel states, the censored passages from *Sex Variants* within the novel promote a “freer and more fluid” description of same-sex desire that is aligned with the anti-essentialist and anti-binary agendas of both assemblage theory and queer studies. That a queer novel that has been written using assembling techniques should reflect, at the same time, some of the main aims of these two fields, could be considered an important step forward to establish the many ways in which these theories can illuminate each other. Take, for instance, the following fragments from *Sex Variants* after having been modified by Torres in *Blackouts* (slashes, “/,” indicate parts of the original text that have been blacked-out by Torres):

Rose S. General impression: Any description of Rose would be/a/Rose/prolong/her vowels/hesitate/describe/a statue/white, translucent skin/make her/a/Rubens/paint/her dreamy blue eyes/shrewd and penetrating and/low/Rose/is still/a/Rose/a/tangible return. (61)

Dennis C. General impression: On a hot afternoon/Dennis comes/neatly/with prominent/trousers, apparently unaware of the/mincing/rotatory swaying of his hips/coy/and unclear/why he has always been called/Nevertheless/he is delicate and chivalrous/he permits/freer play/the gayest of the “queens.” Dennis has a gracile body/his embarrassment/His capacity for grace/the small, but firm/pink cheeks/long lashes/health/in his face, a little more than might be expected/It is probable also that/an old lover/of his youthful zest/Protest. (182)

In contrast with the original descriptions in Henry’s *Sex Variants* (919, 303), the *Blackouts* extracts omit all references to common essentialist beliefs from the period, such as the perceived masculinity of Rose and the perceived femininity of Dennis. By assembling the text in this way, Torres manages to draw the reader’s attention toward positive characteristics of these two real-life, queer human beings, instead of reproducing the list of dualist assessments that appear in Henry’s original volume in an attempt to classify “inadequate” types of sexuality according to standard notions of gender roles (Henry v). There is little to be found of the original focus on “pathology, mixing the newish Freudian psychosexual theories with physiological explanations for deviance. Eugenics” (Torres 86) of *Sex Variants* in the assembled copies of its pages that appear through the novel.

Instead, *Blackouts* presents the subjects of the study as “little poems and observations” (14), as representatives of a “subversive, variant culture” (41) of queer individuals that do not engage or are not accurately represented through the pathologizing and dualist discourse employed by Henry. For

instance, in his original description of Rose S., Henry describes her as “masculine, aggressive,” “embittered” (919), and coming from a family filled with “psychopathy” and “gross deviations,” yet he is hopeful that she can be “adjust[ed]” to “an adult heterosexual relationship” (934–35). Of course, there is no trace of any of these essentialist and reductive views in the assemblage provided by Torres, which instead seems to remind the reader of the poetic efforts of Gertrude Stein and focuses on Rose’s most positive physical traits in an attempt to draw attention to the complex multiplicity that a human being truly is. In the case of Dennis C., Henry quickly relates his “effeminacy” with him being called a “sissy,” and adds that “Dennis had the misfortune of being an answer to his mother’s prayers for a daughter. [...] He was thus thwarted in giving expression to his masculine tendencies and encouraged in effeminate development” (303–12). There is little sympathy to be found for Dennis—who is ultimately described as “a potential menace to adolescent boys” (313) or, in fact, for any other of the subjects in *Sex Variants*. Henry emphasizes, over and over again, the way in which these individuals fail to fit into the “proper” side of the male/female binary, and on how their “maladjustments” derive from this failure to embody the essentialist notions of what being a man or a woman entails (vii–xix). As with Rose, however, Torres assembles Dennis’s story in such a way that evidences what Sedgwick sees as the core of queerness itself, an invitation to interpret and think beyond any monolithically established category: “‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 7). In other words, the queerness of Torres’s assembled fragments resides precisely in the fact that it draws attention to gaps, lapses, and ambiguous meaning that allow the reader to perceive these two individuals as a multiplicity of traits that do not necessarily classify them in an essentialist or dualist way into a pathologizing and monolithic scheme of human sexuality.

Furthermore, in achieving this, Torres is also making use of some of the main ideas within assemblage theory. More specifically, he presents Rose and Dennis as individuals composed of “contingent and singular features,” instead of as defined by “eternally necessary defining features” (Nail 24), thus applying the logic of assemblages to human sexuality in a way that resonates with the cultural agenda of queer studies. In summary, both the material alterations done to *Sex Variants* in *Blackouts* and the consequent offset of different perspectives on sexuality that emerge from these alterations produce a clear sense of the harmonious way in which queer studies and assemblage theory can influence each other to produce an understanding of sexuality as an assemblage that is, actually, “a multiplicity, neither a part nor a whole” (Nail 23), a stance that permits readers and scholars to produce a more nuanced analysis of all things queer that definitely transcends hegemonical medical, legal, and moral discourses.

Conclusion

Through this essay I have attempted to outline the academic potential of regarding queer studies and assemblage theory as complementary tools of analysis. Even if these two fields have already been addressed together, I believe that their joined application in literary scholarship and, more specifically, in the analysis of queer texts, remains underexplored at present. In order to clarify the benefits of using the main tenets of both theories in a combined fashion when exploring queer literature, I have followed these steps: (1) I have traced the general and specific affinities shared between queer studies and assemblage theory, and (2) I have approached Justin Torres’s *Blackouts* from a theoretical perspective that outlines how the logic of assemblages and queerness support each other’s aim when creating literary representations of nonnormative sexual experiences.

Among the affinities between both theoretical frameworks, I have been able to identify three. The first one is quite general and is related to the wide range of topics, realities, and cultural products to which both can—and have been—applied. Both areas share a propensity to expand their interests and to explore many different aspects of human and material experience. However, in a more specific manner, queer studies and assemblage theory also partake of a similar concern with rejecting essentialism and dualism. These two specific affinities stress the close compatibility

of both theories, while at the same time lending to their combination a myriad of interesting uses in the study of literary texts. A theory of literary queer assemblages would understand the formation of human sexuality, as well as its surrounding discourses and cultures, as a multiplicity of individual elements whose relationships between each other produce entities that are far from being easily classified in binaries or reduced to essences.

On the other hand, Torres's *Blackouts* provides the perfect ground on which to test the potential of this combination and the benefits that could be derived from paying closer attention to the affinities between assemblages and queerness. Torres's novel employs a large number of material complements to the narrative in order to illustrate the complex ways in which sexuality is articulated. The novel includes extracts from movie scripts, sexually ambiguous photographs, illustrations, photograms, footnotes, and a whole subtextual apparatus that grounds and conducts the rhythm of the plot. However, the most interesting of these fragments are a collection of pages from Henry's *Sex Variants*—a sociological manual aimed at classifying queer people into well-marked, dualist, and essentialist medical discourses—that have been censored by Torres himself. The aim of these “blackouts” is to transform the reductive comments of Henry into lyrical accounts of queer individuals that stress the many different elements whose relationship conform their multiplicity, without engaging with any of the most common (mis) conceptions related to nonnormative sexuality and gender expression.

In summary, a combination of the theoretical frameworks provided by both queer studies and assemblage studies has, if properly addressed, a large potential to provide literary scholars with new tools through which to better understand the assembled character of contemporary queer fiction. In a moment in time in which sexual and gender expression is as wide as it is now, a methodology that embraces multiplicity is more necessary than ever in order to understand the ways in which this expression is being fictionalized.

Note

1. Interestingly, even these theories' nomenclature seems to be a part of a similar critical phenomenon that bounds them even closer. The term “queer” has had, at best, a complicated history full of both detractors and defenders. In its early years—and even now—some scholars question the ethical implications of a term possessed of such a loaded genealogy (Fone xxx). Similarly, and as Nail points out, the implicit differentiation between the word “assemblage” and its French original “agencement” has also led to “confus[ion]” and debate regarding the theory's true scope (22).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research conducive to the production of this essay has been supported by the Research Project “Reorienting Assemblage Theory in Anglophone Literature and Culture” [PID2022-137881NB-I00], funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

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