

On Not Having Sex: Sumner Locke Elliott and Queer History

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SINCE the publication of *Fairyland* (1990) at the end of Sumner Locke Elliott's life, there have been several calls from critics for work that would consider the queer aspects of his oeuvre (Altman; Bell). *Fairyland* is an autobiographical novel about Elliott's youth in Sydney and move to the United States and it was framed by his publisher as well as by Elliott himself as a 'coming out' novel. While Elliott's prolific fictional oeuvre always drew on aspects of his life, it steered clear of gay characters or storylines. *Fairyland* is satisfying to read because it places a queer lens over Elliott's body of work, bringing into focus the autobiographical basis of many of the key scenes in his writings and bringing their homoerotic energies to the surface. As Sean Bell has illustrated, Elliott's work, with its repeated autobiographical scenes, responds well to a cross-historical reading practice where Elliott's last novel, *Fairyland*, is allowed to work upon, queer, reframe and re-signify the tropes and preoccupations of the oeuvre overall.¹

This essay attempts a similar task by pairing *Fairyland* with Elliott's 1940s play about an ordinance depot in the Northern Territory during the Second World War, *Rusty Bugles* (1948). In its own time, Elliott's play was both popular and notorious. It was banned for blasphemy and then re-released in censored form. And it was one of the best-known and most successful plays of its day – touring extensively to all the major Australian cities and then to New Zealand from 1948 to 1952.

¹A similar move is made by Elizabeth McMahon in 'The Lateness and Queerness of *The Twyborn Affair*: White's Farewell to the Novel'.

As Anne Pender has argued, there has been less work done on Sumner Locke Elliott's theatrical writing than his prolific output warrants. While Elliott is usually remembered for his novels, he also wrote a number of highly successful plays as well as writing for radio and, significantly, for television when he lived in New York. Sharon Clarke's biography meticulously details this history. *Rusty Bugles* has received more criticism than any of Elliott's other plays and is generally given a place in Australian theatre history (see Pender; Hanger; Rees; Carroll). Pender, for instance, compares it to Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* as a watershed play in Australian theatre history (70): like Lawler's *Doll*, *Rusty Bugles* was wildly successful, at least for a time, and it imbued a series of well-worn tropes about Australian masculinity with an existential weight and rigor as yet unseen in Australian theatre. And several critics have claimed that this Australian play, in which nothing really happens apart from boredom and endless waiting for the 'leave' that never comes, anticipates Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Pender 70; Fotheringham 154; Fitzpatrick 440).

There has, however, been no extended reading of the queerness of *Rusty Bugles*. Such a reading is invited firstly by what we know of Elliott's life and the way it might have informed his writing: Elliott himself asserted that the play was 'documentary', based very literally on his own time at an ordinance depot (which is also dramatised in *Fairyland*) and so we might be tempted to trace the outline of the writer's own sexual attachments and desires in the play (*Rusty Bugles* vii). Secondly, the play is about men together and thousands of miles away from women and their heterosexual domestic ties. If the play is not explicitly about homosexual desire, it is nonetheless about a world that is formed outside of the conventions, practices and attachments of heterosexual Australian society: away from wartime conflict but equally removed from the bonds and binds of mainstream Australia. And so the men at the ordinance depot engage in the tedium of domestic life together and here a series of bonds form which queer the homosocial space – both through the delighted pleasure the play seems to take in the male body and through the way the space is imbued with the flavour of the domestic home. Drawing our attention to this aspect of the play is one intention of this essay.

I want, however, to do something more than simply read the currents of latent or repressed homosexual desire in this now forgotten play. Rather, I am interested in the representation of *not having sex* in both these texts and what might be queer about this theme. In order to read the non-sexual queer relationships in Elliott's work we need to think beyond the tropes of the closet and coming out of the closet as models for interpretive practice, as well as the image of an authentic queer subject gasping and grasping for expression but restricted by the representational codes of the culture.

In making this argument I do not mean to suggest that Elliott's life and work was not significantly marked by sexual secrecy and restriction, both real and imagined: *Fairyland* perhaps more than any other Australian novel gives an account of the texture of closeted life in Sydney in the 1930s and 40s. However, the trope of the closet has also shaped the interpretive habits of queer theory in ways that make it hard to read the expressive and subversive potential of relationships, scenarios and identities that are not oriented towards what Benjamin Kahan calls 'normative sexual acts' (21). This challenge is well summarised by Kahan in his work on celibacy when he states that 'queer readings tend to interpret "absence" (preterition, silence, the closet, the love that dare not speak its name, the "impossibility" of lesbian sex) as evidence of same sex eroticism, covering over our ability to read actual absences of sex' (19). Kahan here refers to the important tradition of queer interpretation that is about reading the unspoken, the coded or the disarticulated. This tradition is a necessary answer to a history that has forced silence and abstention upon same sex desire and activity. Yet, as his argument makes clear when we look mostly for evidence of queer desire, or 'read through censorship to recover sexual expression' (21), we are unable to read forms of expression, identity and experience that may not be oriented towards sex and 'normative sexual acts' (21). As Kahan's study shows, sex is typically associated with expression and celibacy (or an absence of sex) with censorship and repression. This habit of interpretation misses what might be produced and expressed (erotically, politically, socially) by practices and structures that either refuse or sit to the side of sexual activity and identity.

Like Kahan, I am interested in what is made possible by spaces and relationships where sex is structurally absent. However, while Kahan is interested in the pleasure and subversive potential of a celibate identity (an identity which he argues needs to be read in its own right and not as a repressed, coded or failed homosexual identity), here I am interested in the way that spaces without sex in Elliott's writing offer an escape from the necessity of identity altogether and particularly from the burden of homosexual identity in the historical moment before gay liberation. I will argue that in *Fairyland* sex is rarely stifled but it fails repeatedly to live up to its promise. By contrast, a series of close homosocial bonds, including a series of bonds formed in the army which are not explicitly sexual, offer the most satisfying mode of relation for Elliott's protagonist. These relationships are not always without sexual desire but in bypassing sex itself they are presented as slipping the question of homosexual identity, which for Elliott, who lived as a homosexual man in Sydney in the 1930s and 40s, was a source of marginalisation much more than it was a basis for expression and community. I will suggest that paradoxically, in Elliott's oeuvre it is the spaces without sex, either structurally or situationally, that

seem to present his protagonists with the most satisfying queer exchanges.

An attention to the erotic and intimate potential of spaces and relationships without sex also provides a way to understand what has been read as Elliott's political anachronism or untimeliness, for example, Dennis Altman's claim in his preface to the recent reissuing of the novel by Text that *Fairyland* was 'already out of date when it was published' (xii). Elliott's late writings, although they come after the moment of gay liberation, seem still to be attached to the homosexual experience of the earlier twentieth century in ways that are difficult to square with the political optimism of a future oriented criticism. Like the sad, recalcitrant and damaged queers that people Heather Love's *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Elliott and his work raises the question of what we do with those queer experiences, texts and lives which seem to have no political or affective use for the present, that seem, to quote Love, to 'resist our advances' as we, as queer readers, 'reach . . . back towards queer figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them' (8).

As Dennis Altman suggests, and I will elaborate, Elliott's late work refuses to embrace the politicised gay identity of the post-Stonewall moment and it remains attached to the idea that homosexual relationships are impossible. However, I will argue that when we read *Fairyland* and *Rusty Bugles* together we can also trace the attempt to imagine a world in which sex (what kind of sex and with whom) would not confine one to a sexual identity. It is perhaps too much to claim that Elliott's work imagines what José Muñoz would describe as a 'queer utopia' (91, 177). Nonetheless, nestled in alongside its reluctance to claim a politicised homosexual identity there is, in Elliott's work, an attempt to imagine modes of desire and subjectivity beyond the possibilities of the present, that eschew the question of sexual identity and that gesture towards a 'then and there', to quote Muñoz's title, beyond the possibilities of his time.

In this sense, Elliott's work feels both forward and backwards. And it can tell us something about the experience of surviving the homophobic twentieth century. The survival that his work and life evidences is not just an index of the damage of homophobia, nor is it a politically triumphant escape from exclusion and abjection: Elliott is not one of Kahan's radical celibates. But it does tell us something of the creative and compromised strategies through which marginalised desires might find some expression.

I want to start by proposing that *Rusty Bugles* is a play all about not having sex and then move to thinking about what might potentially be queer about this theme. We can begin of course with the title, *Rusty Bugles*. The title is most explicitly about the fact that the men at the ordinance depot see themselves as kept away from the 'real' war. Vic, for example, will comment, resentfully: 'Fat

lot of heroism there is about sitting here with a sandy rifle and twenty rounds guarding a shed full of soyer stoves' (49). But it also references the men's sexual exile from their wives and girlfriends. Sex, the sex they are not having, is both the implicit and explicit preoccupation of the men in the play. They talk constantly about the women who are not there, about Rita Hayworth: 'Strike me . . . a man could do her over' (28) and 'the bumps on her' (68). They also talk about past girlfriends and encounters: 'I remember one night a few years back meeting a redhead skirt in a hamburger's . . . We-e-ell! Was it *on!*' (51). Interspersed with these sexual fantasies and recollections is a brooding anxiety about what this exile in the tropics might do to the men's masculinity and sexual potency: 'Christ what good will a man be when he gets out of this rathouse?' one of the men says (39). Another comments: 'a bloke wouldn't know what to do after all this time' (16).

Perhaps most explicitly and tragically the anxiety over wasted manhood plays out through the story of Mac and his dermatitis. Mac refuses to wash and rubs himself obsessively with a towel in an effort to get extreme dermatitis and be sent away on medical leave. The result is a body both ridiculous and abject with its own decay: covered in mercurochrome, bleeding and stinking. So it is no surprise when we find out that Mac's wife has become pregnant to the local butcher. As one of the men says: 'Christ, if I were married to Mac I'd have frigg'd off long ago. Jeez, imagine having that in bed with you' (37). Mac embodies the general fear that the men have been left to 'rot' in the ordinance depot. In the absence of skin contact he enters a state of aggrieved and masochistic auto-eroticism, aggravating his own skin until his body is unfit for any kind of sexual congress at all.

There was a general uncertainty about the place of sex in this play in the controversy that surrounded its release. The play was banned because of its use of blasphemous language, a decision that led to a slew of media hysteria about censorship and whether or not the play was indeed obscene. The ban only lasted seven days, after which the play was reopened with an altered script that left out what were taken to be the most objectionable terms. As Sharon Clarke shows in her biography, Elliott himself believed that this whirlwind of controversy over the play was what made its remarkable success (149–50). It certainly it generated a lot of media coverage which has been well documented by Leslie Rees.

At the centre of this controversy was the question of how to interpret the liberal profanity in the play and whether this language was 'perverse' or 'innocent'. For the most part the defence of the play was that although it was full of 'rough' language, this language was not sexually suggestive. Thus, one

commentator stated: ‘*Rusty Bugles* is an outspoken play, which makes use of a good deal of coarse language; but it IS not a suggestive play. Its object is not the furtive stimulation of sexual excitement, but the presentation of an accurate report on one side of army life. Its object is naturalism’ (‘What Is Offensive’ 13).

Elliott himself would make a similar defense some years later in an interview with Hazel de Berg, saying that *Rusty Bugles* was more a documentary than a play and that the language was not ‘pornographic’ but rather ‘blasphemous’. The underlying defence of the play was that there was no sexual content in this dialogue, which was rather an accurate reflection of the way soldiers talk. As Elliott would say in a statement written for the program: ‘I ask forgiveness and tolerance because I too was shocked until the constant repetition drove all obscenity from the words and rendered them eventually as harmless as bread and butter’ (*Rusty Bugles* viii).

These defences of the play and its swearing, which said that it was documentary without carrying any sexual overtones, assumed illogically that there could be no sexual content in the way that soldiers talk. What it missed here was not just that that the swearing might indeed reference sexual activity (heterosexual or homosexual, present, past or imagined) but rather that it was part and parcel of the play’s preoccupation with enforced sexual abstinence. To put it another way: swearing in *Rusty Bugles* does not just reference sex, rather it *is* the sex in a context where sex itself (whatever that is) is absent.

In *Fairyland*, written and published long after this debate was over, Elliott returned to the scene of the ordinance depot and his descriptions of this world in the novel make precisely this point: ‘the more they were sexually restrained by some nitrate, the more they exercised their right to copulate by obscenity: fuck him, you, it, they said. Get it up the flaming cook they said, reviling the food . . . Up they said. Always up’ (175). Here swearing is a direct result of the men’s enforced sexual restraint and also takes the place of sex. The narrator observes that linguistic obscenity is how the men maintain their own virility and lay claim to female bodies in their absence, ‘claiming their long distance rights’ as he puts it (175). But it is also how they lay violent and aggressive claims on each other. In *Rusty Bugles* the men say ‘up yours’ and ‘get ripped’. They call each other ‘sawn off runt’, ‘sawn off pimp’ and ‘perv’ obsessively and repeatedly (and we can add that runt was a substitute for cunt in the censoring of the play).

If one of the resonances of the blasphemous language in both *Rusty Bugles* and *Fairyland* is the aggression and aggrieved nature of heterosexual men denied a sexual context, the play and the later novel also suggests other, queerer

resonances and possibilities that might emerge from this scene of enforced sexual restraint. In an interview with Hazel de Berg, Elliott recalled his time at the ordinance depot, and commented at several points on the absence of women and also on what he would describe as a culture of sexual hiatus. ‘We never saw a woman. I know they gave us saltpetre’, he states. Here Elliott imagines a world where not only do the men live in exile from their heterosexual ties and society but also where sexual desire itself has been quietened almost to non-existence. Something similar is imagined in *Fairyland*. The narrator describes ‘the dozens upon dozens of deactivated organs going flip-flop, flip-flop to the showers. No one looked, no one cared. After a period of such mutual abstention it became a virtue, like an oath of chastity’ (175). Of course, to call this an absence of sex is a bit too literal. It is not quite true when the narrator says that ‘no one looked’ because the narrator, it seems, looks quite closely and as a result we do too, following the men to and from the showers via the ‘dozens upon dozens of deactivated organs’.

A similar kind of pleasure in the de-sexed male body can be found in *Rusty Bugles* in the depiction of both the tedium and the shenanigans of life in the barracks. Dressing and undressing in *Rusty Bugles* is one of the play’s main punctuations, as are trips to the showers and washing and drying clothes and underwear. These actions are part of the play’s depiction of the close quarters of life in the barracks and the absence of privacy. But *Rusty Bugles* also revels in its playful displays of the male body both to the other servicemen and to the audience: the stage directions are very clear about how often the men should be mostly unclothed. Here for instance we see OT undressed and at his exercises: ‘He finishes undressing and with one bound is in bed. The next he is standing on his head on the stretcher . . . OT returns to normal side up. He starts his arms-out exercises squatting on bed’ (15). The image of OT doing gymnastics in his underwear is in stark contrast to Mac’s dilapidated body covered in mercurochrome. Not having sex, it seems, can take the male body in different directions.

In *Fairyland*, this space of sexual quietude also does something interesting and important to Seaton’s relationships with the other men. ‘Seven hundred miles north of Alice Springs, two hundred miles south of Darwin, and exactly in the centre of nowhere’ (169) Seaton experiences a new kind of acceptance that he never knew as a homosexual man in Sydney:

Seaton was unable to remember exactly when it was that the old feeling of exclusion vanished. He had become one of the mob, browned and red dusted, thin with the daily portions of dry mutton and boiled potato (cold at lunch, hot at supper), gritty with the constant blow-

ing sand, loquacious on beer nights (Thursday and Saturday when they were doled two bottles of warm larger), satisfied. Here, in this scorched earth exile, amidst five-foot-high anthills like ancient Inca cities against the sunset, here where only once a week a train whistle was to be heard in the night, reminding them of the outside world, here was peace. No one knew. No one cared. (175)

Seaton associates the new feeling of belonging he experiences, the feeling of becoming ‘one of the mob’, with the removal of the question of sexual identity. It is not just that his sexuality remains unspoken (‘no one knew’) but also that it is not in this context a question that is asked (‘no one cared’).

In this world, Seaton (and perhaps Elliott himself) is protected from exposure. More importantly, he also gains access to an unselfconscious physical intimacy with men. As he puts it, he is ‘devoid of the precaution constantly forced on him by his sexuality or peculiarity, whichever it was’. And, ‘so it was, going to mess, say, that one automatically put an arm around a cobbler and he around you; they needed to and that was all there was to it’ (176). We can note here as well that it is not just the gay man who is free to express his affection but also his presumably heterosexual mates.

There is something surprising and counter-intuitive about this account of the gay experience of army life that decouples queer expression from sex. It is quite different, for instance, from the story told by Yorick Smaal in his historical study of queer identities and homosexual activity amongst soldiers in the Second World War, *Sex, Soldiers and the South Pacific*. The focus of Smaal’s study is much more keenly on occurrences of what he calls ‘homosex’, that is explicit homosexual activity between men. Smaal suggests that the war facilitated new kinds of sex between men, both gay and straight. The war disrupted the usual patterns of heterosexual intimacy and also threw men into lives together where ‘continually living, training and fighting together nourished emotional intimacy’ (72). Against this backdrop, ‘many young recruits stole furtive moments with their queer and square comrades when opportunities arose’ (70) and ‘soldiers who were *girls* as the terminology went, could, if lucky enough to tap into certain subcultures, find an abundance of interest from “masculine servicemen” or “normal men”’ (70).

Smaal tells a story, then, where army life liberates same sex desire and allows for the emergence of new sexual identities and relationships between men. Elliott, by contrast, tells a story about the liberation from sexual desire itself, or perhaps more precisely from sexual identity and the new intimacies that this allows him to access. The surprising thing about Elliott’s story, particularly when read against the more familiar and celebratory account of gay sexual

expression by Smaal, is that for Elliott it is not that the sexual undertones of life in the army lead to free (or freer) sexual expression. Rather, the sexual undertones of this homo-social space (which we see in *Fairyland* and *Rusty Bugles*, in the narrators' voracious descriptions of the male body as well as in the descriptions of touch between the men) are sustained and sustaining precisely because they are not acted upon.

What is the nature of these intimacies? In *Rusty Bugles* the homo-social space of the army allows Elliott to imagine a domestic life with men. The play is full of the details of daily domesticity in the army: washing and darning and borrowing soap off a mate. Perhaps most significantly, running through this play is a narrative about the growing friendship between Rod, the character who is most clearly based upon Elliott himself, and Vic, a working-class recruit. Although often touted as a play where nothing happens, these two characters' journey – from open hostility (at the beginning of the play Vic breaks Rod's coffee mug) to a tentative and then close friendship and finally to the approval of Vic's leave and his departure from the camp – is the main narrative arc of the play.

The significance granted to this relationship and the investment that the play makes in the homo-social domestic space is voiced by Rod at the end of the play before Vic leaves. As he darns his socks, Rod accidentally refers to the ordinance depot as home:

I'm going to be sick of the rain by the time Vic and Keghead get home—

[*He stops and laughs*]

I mean get back . . .

Home, eh? I'm beginning to look on this bloody place as home. [*Biting off the thread.*] I'm going troppo. (88)

This slip voices Rod's comfort in this space and his domestic relationship with Vic. Read against Seaton's descriptions of life in the army in *Fairyland* we can argue that it presents the ordinance depot as a place to belong. Paradoxically, it is in this space of exile from civilian society that Seaton (and we might speculate, Rod) experiences some relief from the exile from companionship that is his lot as a homosexual man.

The comfort and belonging offered by the celibate space of the army in *Rusty Bugles* can be contrasted with the alienation that surrounds almost all the sex in *Fairyland*. If *Rusty Bugles* is all about not having sex, *Fairyland*, which was written and published some forty years later, is all about sex – implicitly and

explicitly. And the sex is not good. Rather, the novel gives us a catalogue of damaging and disappointing sexual experiences. For starters, sex with men in the novel is dangerous. We see this most extremely in a scene where Seaton picks up a man at a gay beat and is beaten up and left for dead, ‘booted and booted in the face’ (156). And the novel finishes when Seaton is shot by the mother of one of his lovers. Even when sex is not followed by violent assault it is generally joyless. For example, Buck seduces Seaton, has sex with him and then moves on, leaving our protagonist heartbroken. In the heady days after the war, Seaton falls in love with Lloyd, an American serviceman, but when the two reunite in New York Seaton is rebuffed with disgust: ‘What do you think you’re *doing*? . . . That was the war, feller. All kinds of guys did all kinds of things because we didn’t know what day would be our last’ (210). In New York there is Skinner, a lawyer who uses Seaton to get away from an unwanted fiancé by orchestrating that she walk in on the two men in bed together. Most importantly, there is a joyless affair in the army with Captain Smollett. Referred to by the other recruits as ‘Vince the Vile’ (175), Smollett is barely an object of desire for Seaton but instead a man who has been rendered cruel and ugly by his own homophobic self-loathing and repression: ‘I’m so fucking lonely. Not only here, everywhere. Back in Melbourne. Everywhere . . . I’ve never told anyone about myself. You’re one of the four people on earth who knows’ (182).

In interviews Elliott was adamant that Captain Smollett was entirely fictional – and that there were no sexual affairs in the army (Clarke 106). In the novel, however, Smollett and this affair tragically interrupt the easy and open comradeship between Seaton and the men described earlier in this essay. Their sexual encounters are hidden and painful and so stage something of the exclusion of homosexuality from homo-social society and the cost of that exclusion for gay men. In both *Rusty Bugles* and *Fairyland*, it is only in spaces and moments without sex, that have been carved out and protected from the possibility of any kind of sexual congress (either heterosexual or homosexual), that meaningful queer expression is possible. In comparison to the easy and open intimacy between the men, the arms around shoulders, the affair between Smollett and Seaton has to be carefully guarded in ways that can only destroy any trust between them. As Smollett will say: ‘I don’t think I have to tell you that if ever a word of this is squeaked out the results of it would be very serious for you. I don’t have to remind you that the word of an officer against a soldier is generally taken without question’ (179).

Seaton’s experience with Smollett is a familiar account of the pain and distortions of the closet. And yet the interesting thing about both *Fairyland* and *Rusty Bugles* is that if queer expression is allowed in these texts (and I am

suggesting it is) it is not through ‘coming out’ but rather through structures of relationship that bypass the question of sexual identity altogether. Coming out, as many critics have pointed out, has never been unproblematic for queer subjects. For instance, in an essay about the paradoxes and impasses of ‘coming out’, Diana Fuss makes the brilliantly counter-intuitive point that the birth of the homosexual at the turn of the century, was simultaneously its ‘ghosting’. The historical ‘coming out’ of the homosexual, she argues, cannot be dissociated from a simultaneous repression and forced disappearance into the closet. To come out is to seek entry into the public domain, into ‘speech and visibility’ but is also to be relegated to an ‘outside’: ‘the devalued or outlawed term of the homo/ hetero binary’ (4).

In *Fairyland*, the distorting violence of the closet cannot be disentangled from the ambivalences and dangers of coming out. In the example below, Seaton’s friend Rat, an older gay man and mentor, lays out the double bind of being a gay man in love with your best friend. The scene embodies the tragic human experience of the theoretical impasse that Fuss describes:

if you are sure he is straight then you have only two choices. You risk everything and tell him and possibly have your face smashed in . . . Or at the very least he’ll get that deeply embarrassed look as if you had told him you have syphilis and you’ll get the cold marble hand good-bye, or else you don’t ever tell him and you continue to live indefinitely in a kind of unrealistic twilight where nothing ever happens and you are forced to watch him go waltzing with girls while you must sit and wait and wait for a crumb of love to come your way, which it never will. (119)

Here to ‘come out’, to express his desire means to be subject to the regulation, exclusions and likely the violences of homophobic society, to be relegated to ‘the devalued or outlawed term of the homo/ hetero binary’ to quote Fuss again (5). To not come out is to experience the no less damaging fate of a life without recognition and intimacy.

It is probably this bleak vision of the impossibility of homosexual expression that has made Elliott difficult to reclaim by contemporary queer critics with the exception of Shaun Bell. Dennis Altman, for example, has commented that:

Fairyland was perhaps already out of date when it was published. It belongs on the shelf next to E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*, which was written in 1913–14 but only published after Forster’s death in 1971, rather than with Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man*, published in

1964 which is far more open about homosexuality and far less willing to accept social condemnation. (xii)

If, in the context of Elliott's life, *Fairyland* is the gay novel that helps him out of the closet and queers his writing life and, in this sense, offers a satisfying story that fits with the history of gay liberation, the novel itself seems to remain committed to a more troubling engagement with gay identity and desire. The ending of the novel in particular is hard to square with modern gay politics. Although much of Seaton's narrative is based on Elliott's own life, Elliott finishes the novel by having him murdered shortly after the war in a scene that feels like an out of date rehearsal of the well-worn trope of killing off gay characters. As Heather Love puts it, 'the history of Western Representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants. Those who are directly identified with same-sex desire most often end up dead; if they manage to survive it is on such compromised terms that it makes death seem attractive' (1).

Many moments in *Fairyland*, and this ending in particular, remain wedded to this bleak vision of the impossibility of queer life. There is a contradiction at the heart of Elliott's final novel: *Fairyland* is a coming out novel and in this sense it is part and parcel of the post-gay liberation moment but it also remains committed to the narrative tropes and imaginative limitations that had to be transcended in order for it to be written at all.

However, as I have argued here, if read carefully, Elliott's work also imagines spaces and forms of relation which do not conform to the punishing logic of the closet, Rat's bleak vision for homosexual lives or the narrative tropes that Love describes above. The world of *Rusty Bugles* and the world that is invoked at specific moments in *Fairyland* escape the violent regulation and punishment of homosexual identity. And they do not confine the homosexual to a life devoid of intimacy. Elliott's work is able to slip the logic of the closet and some of the more punishing ideas surrounding homosexual identity because of the way that the ordinance depot allowed Elliott to imagine a space that was carved away from sexual identity and exchange both for the heterosexual and the homosexual man.

The beautifully generous move of Elliott's work is to imagine that this space without sex may not be devoid of erotics or intimacy. We see this in the joy and tenderness of the depiction of the men and their relationships in *Rusty Bugles*. But the erotic potential of the non-sexual relationship is perhaps articulated most clearly outside the army in Elliott's descriptions of Seaton's conversations with his straight best friend, Anthol, in *Fairyland*. This relationship is most often read as an example of gay unrequited love. But I would suggest that there is too much joy and understanding in this relationship for us to read it only in

terms of what it lacks. Here Elliott describes the two men, lying on their backs, under a Moreton Bay fig and just talking:

talk had erupted from them as if they had been released from a mandated silence and now it had left them as much spent as though they had ravished each other sexually. The talk was in fact, a substitution for sex. They had, in effect, carnal knowledge now of each other in a more personal sense than of mere flesh because bold admissions had been proffered, lubricated by the warmth that had become significant between them. (123)

Elliott describes the talk as a ‘substitute for sex’ but in his language Elliott also suggests that it is not so much that the talking happens because sex can not but rather that the talking is the sex. Elliott here imagines a mode of relationship that blurs the distinction between chaste friendship and unrestrained sexual copulation. This vision disrupts the logic of Rat’s pessimistic account of the options for gay desire where it can only be either hidden or punished. The homoerotic intimacy at work here is constrained, but without the indefinite and torturous frustration that Rat predicts for men like himself and Seaton. Rather, Seaton experiences it as an erotic union that is more satisfying and intimate than that of ‘mere flesh’.

Elliott’s life and his work evidences the violence and damage done to homosexual men across the twentieth century. Yet the argument I have made here is for a reparative reading of his work, in Eve Sedgwick’s sense of the term. One of the lessons of Sedgwick’s beautiful essay on reparative reading is that queer lives and expressions also find pleasure and sustenance in a world that is set up against them. Reparative reading teaches us ‘the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them’ (150–51).

I have wanted to include in this essay something of the stubborn, melancholic and masochistic in Elliott’s work and particularly in his final novel. But I want to finish by also suggesting that Elliott’s attachment to the pre-Stonewall era, his refusal to embrace modern gay identity in his last novel, might also be a way of insisting upon the pleasure and sustenance of other forms of queer relating that were enabled precisely by the way they refused the terms of gay identity. Here I have argued that these relationships are made possible by spaces without sex. Returning to Fuss’s reading of the paradox that surrounds coming out, we can make the obvious Foucaudian point that political identities regulate as much as they liberate. If there is something hopeful and even utopic in Elliott’s

work it is to imagine a world where erotics, desire and sex are not limited by politics and identity.

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