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Introduction: Performing Sin—Perversion, Insufficiency, and Excess

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"Every sin is the result of a collaboration," claimed Seneca, observing that sin is both a cultural and an intersubjective process. Seneca's pointed formula implies both cultural performances that maintain normative order and a collusive, furtive will to resist that order. Sin is, to be sure, a rhetorical construct—but it is also a resource. It is simultaneously social and surreptitious. Above all others, the seven deadly sins have become emblematic for understanding many of the practices of everyday life (sometimes vaunted, sometimes reviled). Some have gone so far as to claim that the seven deadly sins illustrate the excesses and abuses of Western society as a whole (Lyman). With this in mind, we take as a starting point in this special issue that sin has long held a firm grasp on our cultural imagination. Internal battles between good and evil are at the very heart of most of our storytelling; external battles between good and evil comprise the bulk of our tales of history. The discourse and imagination surrounding the seven deadly sins is particularly dramatic because the stakes are drawn so high. As a product of Christian guides to proper living, the seven deadly sins are constructed as offenses against God's will that lead to certain damnation and the death of the soul. They are literally deadly. These are the sins of anger, envy, gluttony, greed, lust, pride, and sloth.[1]

The seven deadly sins are tied to personal behavior and decorum, articulating prohibitions concerning human desire. In his *Inferno*, Dante explains that the seven deadly sins are all failed relationships to love, articulated within the three relational categories of perversion, insufficiency, or excess. Whether understood as emotions or actions, as directed at self or other, or as spiritual or social matters, the seven deadly sins routinely enact relationships that cut to the heart of the onto-epistemic labors of performance. The contributors to this issue all engage Dante's typology in one way or another to perform sin through perversion, insufficiency, and/or excess (of style, of topic, of method).

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Curiously, in our contemporary context most of the deadly sins have been re-articulated as guiding principles for the respectable performance of American values. The seven deadly sins *order desire* in a way best described as a union of economics, justice, and morality. But the prohibitive face of the sin-system can mask its prescriptive implications. Whether proscribed or prescribed, the sins require self-mastery and self-control, a policing of the self. The self is policed over and against desire (which is collective, collaborative, and indeed social most of the time). We find this policing (and arresting) of desire troublesome and tiresome. Such a practice helps mask the construction and deployment of normativity's sly embrace.

Any aggregate of rules meant to order behavior and contain desires is bound to meet resistance. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so does culture abhor stasis. There are always ways out of a boundary system; containment is never total. Like a drunken uncle in a family obsessed with appearances, social resistance always seems to show up at the most embarrassing moment to peel back the façade of propriety. Practices of sin can reveal the constitutive machinery of social decorum. We feel that by bringing a performative lens to sin, normative (ideological) tools can be recast to help us understand cultural practices and processes of change.

All told, we think there is something redemptive in the seven deadly sins. We think that the sins can be revisited and re-imagined by placing them in new contexts and exploring them as positive and/or productive cultural processes. We see sin as a kind of practical methodology that can open up a critical space for creative resistance to the sedimentation of values in a moral sphere on the one hand, and in an epistemic sphere on the other. This is not to be misunderstood as a methodology of evil or wickedness, but as an experimental and critical practice for redemptive or saving grace. Sometimes this is a grace of concepts; at other times it is a grace of insight.

Tensions between being open to new and thrilling experiences and remaining critical in one's approach to those experiences play out in various contributions to this special issue. Many of the essays negotiate and explore the boundaries of the shameful and depraved in epistemic and political senses. The writers inhabit their writing like it is a den of iniquity, not a temple of ideological purity. They approach their subjects with care, but they also take chances, understanding, as Henri Lefebvre noted, that academics "could be thirsty, that they could be hungry, that they could feel desire" (104). They push the boundaries and concepts of sin for the sake of piety. Indeed, they revel in the seven deadly sins because the sins open a window onto the world and its myriad cultural practices.

The seven deadly sins are a set of practices circumscribed by normative ideologies. Performing a deadly sin, then, is a mode of engagement with the world that is both institutionally dangerous and fueled by an aesthetic of risk and transgression. In some ways, sin is a rite of passage for scholars and performers who feel an ethico-aesthetic summons to push the boundaries of decorum established in inherited discourses and norms of scholarly comportment. There is always a strangeness in beauty—just as there is in the grotesque. The rupture of expectations is what draws our attention to

these two faces of otherness. This is perhaps the original sin of aesthetic taste: the call of the strange that is always already attached to a moral judgment.

Sin, therefore, articulates boundaries so they can be crossed. Many of us need the journey to sinfulness to allow for the redemption that makes the mundane aspects (and morality) of our lives tolerable. The routines of our daily lives, like the social pressures and commitments that demand moral conformity, also provide the safety nets that ensure we don't go too far. The boundaries between sin and redemption are often stamped with a kind of 1950s blandness. It's the slow dance with sin that simultaneously frees us from those routines while spitting in the faces of Ward and June Cleaver. We find ourselves embracing an idealized construct of rebellion, as if we could become Harvey Keitel's Bad Lieutenant on some highway to hell. We're just taking a walk on the wild side, even if the wild side is packaged for us like a ride at Universal Studios. It's important to note that these sinful acts are more than some glorified version of slumming (although they certainly could be); rather, taken together the acts themselves and the encounters with sin in this special issue help create a portrait of a system of social mores that presents a face of stolidity and tradition while betraying its tenuous nature. The borders of sin and purity are always porous and shifting. The concepts of sin and purity require miscegenation for their very constitutive enactments. And when we move back out of those liminal spaces of sin we can feel good that we pushed ourselves and hopefully altered how we will exist in the world when returning to our daily lives.

This issue opens with Marcyrose Chvasta's reassessment of the performance of anger in street protests in light of the waning efficacy of carnivalesque strategies. Jennifer L. Tuder then considers the role of envy in performance as a foundational epistemic moment of becoming-other. Jon Leon Torn then examines and performs gluttony as a topic, a method, and a critique of interpretation, irony, economic rationality, utopian thought, and the mundane practices of scholarship. The fourth article comes from Elizabeth Whitney, who examines queer identity and some implications of the cooptation of camp performance strategies by marketers. Ronald J. Pelias takes us on a personal history of Bourbon Street, ruminating on the role of lust in his life there as a child, a young man, and a parent. Next, in Ramsey Eric Ramsey's epistle on pride, an eccentric fictional scholar who has gone missing argues for an increased pridefulness of collectivity to counter the destructive pride that is the cornerstone of contemporary unreflective nationalism. Rob Drew turns his sights on the merits of slothfulness in academic writing and research, proposing a dialectical other to the academic rate-buster. Joshua Gunn then experiments with performing-sinful-scholarship (in the modes of both gluttony and pride) by exploring performative, rhetorical, and philosophical vagaries of waste and excess (i.e., "gluttony in reverse") in a tone that is at once irreverent and critical. Finally, the Performance in Review section is consistent with the theme of this special issue as it focuses on performance and anger. Ragan Fox provides a narrative account of his one-person performance about anger, abuse, and sexuality, weaving selections of his script with analysis. This essay is followed by a conversation on the uses of anger in performance by Thomas K. Nakayama and Frederick C. Corey.

Note

[1] We provide the current list of deadly sins because they are the ones most well known in popular culture. Showing up in some versions of the current list are also avarice and covetousness (both substitutes for greed), vanity (pride), and wrath (anger). Throughout Christian theological history, however, there have been several incarnations of the list of deadly sins. Sometimes the list includes eight sins; sometimes it includes only six. The sins making the list have gone through some changes as well. Sins such as acedia ("spiritual apathy") and sadness were combined and renamed sloth, for example, while the stand-alone vainglory was folded into pride. Interestingly, envy was a latecomer to the list. In early versions of the typology, a hierarchy of increasing seriousness was included. The hierarchy generally went from the less offensive "bodily" sins (lust, gluttony, and greed) to the "social" sins (sloth and anger) to the "spiritual" sins (envy and pride), with pride considered the awful root of all of the others (which is quite a contrast to contemporary ideologies of nationalism). In contemporary times, the church has adopted more of an "equal opportunity" view on the nature of sinning by eliminating hierarchies of wickedness.

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