When Eileen Joy (gadfly extraordinaire) invited me to join this volume, she encouraged me to get over my fear of style, first contracted during my anxious pubescent scrutiny of those thumbnail photographs of fashion “don’ts” featured in teen magazines of the early 1960s. My heart would sink when I discovered that some accessory of mine, beloved to me for its vibrant charm, was, in fact, deemed by the style editors to be the latest sign of abjection. But, voila, after all these years, here I am today discussing “style” and still working through those fears.

What strikes me now as I look back on those
early magazine days (as clichéd as they were) is the intimate vulnerability of style. I am wondering if my enduring sense of such vulnerability might have something to do with Michael Snediker’s optimistic investigation of the smile in his gorgeous reading of lyric poetry—style as smile: a “mysterious, collective force as a serial trope”? More about this to follow.

What I would like to stake out roughly for our roundtable are some issues haunting the current debate in Queer Theory over the death drive and futurity. I want to ask what the so-called “master signifier” has to do with this debate. Can we imagine a beside and beyond itself of the master signifier? What would that mean and what might it have to do with style? By the master signifier, most Lacanians imagine an ontological concept that is supposed to decide meaning through foreclosure of the primary impressions of intrauterine experience, a matrix shared by all mammals. The master signifier can figure thinking (and as medievalists, it is important to recall the lively medieval tradition that imagined figuration as a superseding theological temporality: Jews [as they were then] figured Christians [as they are now]). Or, the master signifier decides linguistically—“a refers to b.” Neither figural thinking

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nor linguistic theory is able to imagine a *beside and beyond itself* of the master signifier, a *beside and beyond itself* of the Phallus, since such a borderspace would disturb the incarnations of figurality or break the chain of signification, the result of which would be psychosis (as Lacan obsessively warned). Are these then the only options of the master signifier: incarnation or psychosis?

In his undeniably brilliant and deeply controversial study *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman takes up the question of the master signifier and the death drive. Rather than deconstruct the incarnational impulse of figural thinking, Edelman defends against it in an act of hypostasis (to borrow a term from Michael Snediker). Like a medieval thinker, Edelman produces a superseding figural typology of sexuality: queer subjectivity incarnates a “this is now” that supersedes heteronormativity as a “that was then,” and, in so doing, he ends up smuggling in, I think, a version of the very messianic temporality which he set out to critique.

In his thoughtful response to Edelman, Michael Snediker swerves away from a Lacanian politics of the signifier. He draws upon the work of the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott in order to argue for the importance of the afterlife of the object—its survival of destruction by the

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4 Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, 23.
subject:⁵ “The destructiveness that an object can withstand, for Winnicott, demonstrates not just the object’s own integrity (an integrity from which the subject might subsequently learn), but its own capacity for loving in spite of feeling damaged, or even repelled, by the subject.”⁶ Snediker’s swerve toward Winnicott enables us to think productively of queer optimism along non-futural lines. As he engages in this thought experiment, Snediker excavates what he calls “an aesthetic person.”⁷ An aesthetic person, he clarifies, is not a psychoanalytical, deconstructive, or queer theoretical entity. It is not a subject, subjectivity, nor ontology. I love this concept of the aesthetic person. Snediker, I think, is inviting us to broaden the concept of the Symbolic beyond the chain of discursive signification, beyond the master signifier.

I understand Snediker’s aesthetic person as a threshold vibrating with the matrixial border-spaces explored by the Lacanian psychoanalyst and painter Bracha L. Ettinger. In her study *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Ettinger has risked both the incarnational impulse of figural thinking (which always produces the phallus) and the threat of psychosis (the imagined punishment for breaking the taboo of phallic foreclosure), and she has lived to tell the tale as an aesthetic person

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⁷ Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, 127.
(a kind of Eurydice who repeatedly appears and fades). Ettinger understands that one cannot really know what survival means and yet she lives on in “crazy hope.”

Reading Ettinger is like diving into a coral reef and carefully observing the myriad creatures whose filtering of sustenance secretes the reef. Her text blossoms with what she calls “eroticized aerials,” receiving and transmitting the incipiences of a co-poesis. Habits of explication falter at such incipiences; thus, in a few sentences I will try to gesture toward her project and then share with you a transjective encounter of mine when I read Ettinger with Snediker. Ettinger imagines a psychoanalytical borderspace, a matrix, in which partial objects and partial subjects do not “come about as a result of separation from organs such as the mouth or anus (understood as regulated parts).” Prior to such cuts (the cut of the drive), she argues for dynamic partial linkages. Thresholds emerge and fade across vibrating, emergent fields. Transmissibility (relating without relations) is rhythmic (acoustic, tactile). Ettinger cautions that the matrix is not the opposite of the Phallus—it does not destroy nor replace the master signifier. Her project is to “retune” the Symbolic to deform its edges through a “supplementary co-shaping-not-quite-

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The transsubjectivity Ettinger proposes works like a tuning fork that vibrates with ravishment. For Ettinger, ravishment is a spreading of the effect across the entire severality, rather than an act performed by a subject on an object or its effect.

Ettinger thus swerves from Winnicott’s theory of the survival of the object after aggression. Her sense of timing is different, is trans-serial, emerging and fading partial effects. Subjectivity is never whole but distributed as transsubjective affects. Ettinger’s serial paintings of Euridyce explore such trans-seriality, especially in terms of what she calls the trans-traumatic. In her words: “The matrixial borderlinks allow the articulation of a meaningful space between living and non-living, which has nothing to do with the notion of the abject and with the binary opposition between life and death.”

Ettinger’s writing works like a tympanum stretched across matrixial border spaces and thus defies easy explication; by way of conclusion, I would like to engage in a transsubjective thought experiment. I am sending a smile from a trans-medieval borderspace to Michael Snediker as an act of queer love for his wonderful book. Recall Snediker’s reflection on the smile of Hart Crane as a “mysterious, collective force as a serial trope.” The smile may be found on the beautiful face of the Old Testament prophet Daniel [Fig. 1]

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13 Snediker, *Queer Optimism*, 36.
carved in the Portico de Gloria of the Cathedral of St. James at Compostela. The Master Mateo sculpted this portico sometime between 1173-1188 C.E. Paul Binksi, a medieval art historian, counts this smile as the earliest in what would become a poetics of the Gothic smile.14 Within a century, Northern European cathedrals would be filled with choirs of smiling angel-musicians.

Figure 1. The smile of Daniel, Portico de Gloria, St. James Compostella (last quarter of the 12th century).

Daniel, as you see, is young and beardless. He bears his scroll of prophecy inscribed with the

words (*Ecce Enim Deus Quem Colimus*) spoken by his optimistic friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, on their way to death in the fiery furnace. They tell King Nebuchadnezzar: “If it be so, *our God whom we serve* is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace and he will deliver us out of thine hand” (Daniel 4:17). We know from the Book of Daniel that the prophet was a smiler. Words for the smile (usually constructed as “let your face shine on the other”) are rare in the Hebrew Bible. According to the Book of Daniel, the prophet smiled twice at King Cyrus (Daniel 14:6, 14:18) as he advised him about the bottom line of his idol, Bal. Jewish exegesis assumed that Daniel and his three friends were castrated when the chief eunuch of Nebuchadnezzar selected them to be taken captive back to Babylon after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. When Jerome (d. 420) wrote his influential Christian Commentary on Daniel he knew these Jewish debates and cited the arguments for Daniel being a eunuch (thus accounting for a wide dissemination of this argument in medieval Christian exegesis). The Book of Daniel has its own story to tell about Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar’s chief eunuch: “God had brought Daniel into the favor and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs” (Daniel 1:9). By the tenth century, Byzantine theologians used the shining example of Daniel and his friends to argue in favor of eunuchs as members of the upper clergy and court.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Kathryn. M. Ringrose, “Reconfiguring the Prophet
Daniel’s smile opens us up to an investigation of pain with what Snediker calls a “solicitous openness to scrutiny.” Jewish and early Christian exegetes had wondered how Daniel had gotten separated from his friends on the way to the fiery furnace (they reunited after the young men miraculously survived their ordeal with the aid of an angel). Some thought it was because he was a eunuch, but other exegetes argued that the three boys were eunuchs, too. By the time the medieval sculptor carved his face, Daniel had become more radically cut from his Hebrew friends. He had been claimed by medieval Christians as a major prophet of Christ’s coming. Contemporary Christian liturgical drama (contemporaneous with the Compostela portico) had put in his mouth the words of juridical condemnation of Jews. Take for example, his recitation in the mid-twelfth century Play of Adam. He opens with a proof text taken from the pseudo-Augustine polemic Sermo contra Judaeos, Paganos et Arianos and proceeds to renounce Jews as felons: “I shall tell you what I think, O Jews, you who are guilty of such a grave crime (felon) against God. The manuscript “play book” for the Play of Adam breaks off abruptly as Nebuchadnezzar condemns the young men (now subsumed as Christians by their Christian audience) to the fiery furnace, a


16 Snediker, Queer Optimism, 89.
stage prop located in the nave of the church, or perhaps on the church portico (all the better for the stone Daniel at Compostela to have to watch again).

But the transtraumatic links of Daniel’s smile transmit even more widely in another contemporaneous encounter. In 1171, when the Count of Blois condemned 32 members of the Jewish community to burn for an alleged ritual murder accusation, those condemned Jews (male and female) imagined themselves in the fiery furnace and sang in the fire (just as the three boys had done in the fiery furnace in the story of Daniel). The rabbis who, in liturgical hymns, lamented the deaths of their neighbors, declared their deaths to be miraculous. Their bodies did not burn even though their life force had been incinerated (a “divine electrocution,” as Susan Einbinder has called it). 17

Thus the links between, exegesis, sculpture, performance, juridical execution, and liturgical lamentation distribute themselves along the matrixial space of Daniel’s smile. I like to think that it is something about the “tender love” of Daniel’s young days in the palace of the chief eunuch that somehow persisted as a trans-traumatic encounter in the stony remainder of the Portico de Gloria at Compostello.