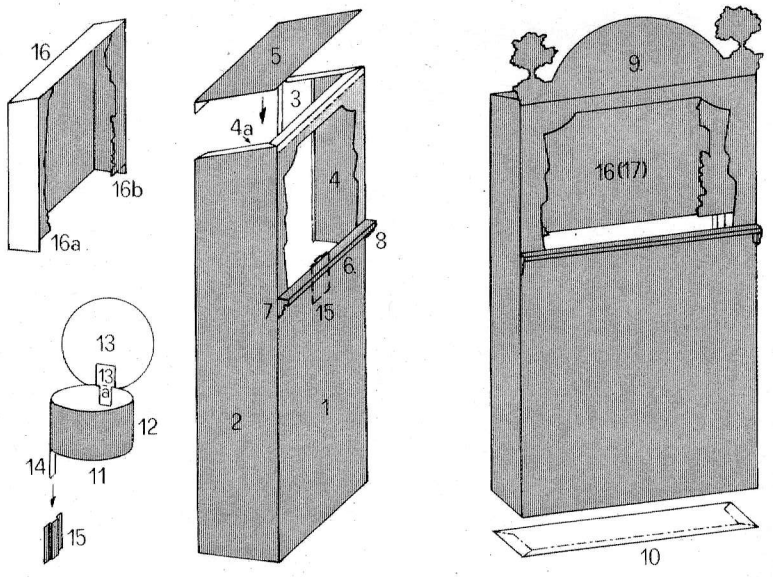

SAMUEL R. DELANY
TIMES SQUARE RED, TIMES SQUARE BLUE

1999

As long as there is something like experience, it is not entirely mine.
—AVITAL RONELL, Finitude's Score

§1.1. We are all aware that landlords and tenants exist in a fundamentally antagonistic relationship. Generally speaking, throughout most of what we might call the middle classes of our society, landlords tend to be somewhat better off financially than their tenants. Certainly the class war is as strong there as between any groups save, perhaps, workers and employers.

With that in mind, here is a tale:
A black woman born in Nottaway, Virginia, my maternal grandmother came from Petersburg to New York City at age eighteen in 1898 and moved to Harlem in 1902, when it was still a German neighborhood. With my grandfather, an elevator operator in a downtown office building and later a Grand Central Terminal redcap, she took rooms in the first house in Harlem opened to blacks, on 132nd Street between Seventh and Lenox. Owned by a black man married to a white woman, the house rented to men and women working as servants in the neighborhood. My grandmother told of returning to her rooms after work, while the Germans sitting in front of their houses along Seventh Avenue played zithers through the evening.

A number of times in the sixties and seventies, Grandma spoke of the social practice in the twenties, thirties, and, in a few places, into the forties, of the landlord's annual or sometimes semiannual visit to her apartment. My sense

is that these visits were notably different from the monthly visits to the landlord to pay the rent—in the days before universal banking.

Expected by both tenants and landlords, the visits allowed tenants to point out directly to the building's owner any breakages or repairs that were needed. The owner got a chance to see how the tenant was treating his or her property. By opening the door for less formal ones, these scheduled visits established an arena for social interchange. From them, landlords gained a sense of the tenants as individuals and tenants took a sense of the landlord as a person.

In no way did the social practice obviate the socioeconomic antagonism between the classes. But it tended to stabilize relationships at the personal level and restrict conflict to the economic level itself—keeping it from spilling over into other, personal situations. What eroded this practice of landlord visits was, first, the economic forces of the Depression. Pressures on tenants (from the exhaustion of having two or three jobs to the anomie of having no job at all) became such that tenants began housing extra materials or extra people in their apartment to the point that a good day's cleaning could not cover over the evidence. Models for bourgeois living standards became less available, as did the time and the energy to implement them. Landlords found themselves unable to afford keeping the facilities in the first-class condition tenants expected.

Tenants began to see the visits as prying. Landlords began to see the visits as a formal responsibility empty of content and—finally—an unnecessary nuisance, in which they had to listen to demands they could not afford to meet. Repair work was now delegated to a superintendent whose job was to carry out those repairs as inexpensively as possible. While more stringent rules were instituted to restrict property-damaging wear and tear, in practice tenants were now allowed greater leeway in what they might do to the house. Older tenants saw the failure of the landlord to visit as a dereliction of responsibility. But younger tenants cited the "privilege" of better-off tenants in more lavish properties, often paying far higher rents, to forgo such visits. Why shouldn't the privilege of the better-off be a right—the right of privacy—for all?

[...]

§1.3. At the rhetorical level, the trace of the social practice my decade-and-a-half dead grandmother spoke about still lingers in the language, as tenants on the Upper West Side speak about our landlords' "seeing to" certain repairs, even though the landlord will not and does not intend to set eyes on anything within the front door of the building—just as the term "landlord" is itself a rhetorical holdover from a time and set of social practices when the important things the owner was "lord" over were, indeed, "land" and the "tenants to the land," rather than the buildings erected upon it.

§1.4. The betraying signs that one discourse has displaced or transformed into another are often the smallest rhetorical shifts. The shift from landlord visits to superintendents in charge of repairs is signaled by the rhetorical shift between "the landlord saw to the repairs" as a literal statement and "the landlord saw to the repairs" as a metaphor. I say "shifts," but these rhetorical pairings are much better looked at, on the level of discourse, as rhetorical collisions. The sign that a discursive collision has occurred is that the former meaning has been forgotten and the careless reader, not alert to the details of the changed social context, reads the older rhetorical figure as if it were the newer.

As are the space of the unconscious and the space of discourse, the space where the class war occurs as such is, in its pure form, imaginary—imaginary not in the Lacanian sense but rather in the mathematical sense. Imaginary numbers—those involved with i, the square root of minus-one—do not exist. But they have measurable and demonstrable effects on the real (i.e., political) materiality of science and technology. Similarly, the structures, conflicts, and displacements that occur in the unconscious, the class war, and the space of discourse are simply too useful to ignore in explaining what goes on in the world we live in, unto two men yelling in the hall, one a landlord and one a tenant, if not mayhem out on the streets themselves, or the visible changes in a neighborhood, like Times Square or, indeed, the Upper West Side, over a decade or so, and the specificities of rhetorical shift.

[...]

§4.2. Two orders of social force are always at work. One set is centripetal and works to hold a given class stable. Another set is centrifugal and works to break a given class apart.

The first set runs from identity, through familiarity, to lethargy, to fear of difference—all of which work to hold a class together. These are the forces that the networking situation must appeal to, requisition, and exploit.

The second set has to do, however, with the needs and desires that define the class in the first place: hunger, sex, ambition in any one of a dozen directions—spatial to economic to aesthetic to intellectual. These forces militate for breaking up a class, driving it apart, and sending individuals off into other class arenas. This is the level where, in a democracy, contact functions as an anti-entropic method for changing various individuals' material class groundings. The reason these forces work the way they do is simply that when such desires and needs concentrate at too great a density in too small a social space over too long a time, they become that much harder to fulfill—even when you pay generous honoraria to people who might help fill them, to move briefly into that crowded social space and dispense data about the process, without dispensing the actual rewards and benefits that those involved in the process seek. Love/desire/awe/fear/ discomfort/terror/ abjection (horror) is the human response range to greater or lesser power differentials.

The centripetal forces work to tame the components of that response. Those components underlie and are the centrifugal forces.

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT
LESSONS

1795

The first book of a series which I intended to have written for my unfortunate girl.

LESSON I

CAT. Dog. Cow. Horse. Sheep. Pig. Bird. Fly.
Man. Boy. Girl. Child.
Head. Hair. Face. Nose. Mouth. Chin. Neck. Arms. Hand. Leg. Foot. Back. Breast.
House. Wall. Field. Street. Stone. Grass.
Bed. Chair. Door. Pot. Spoon. Knife. Fork. Plate. Cup. Box. Boy. Bell.
Tree. Leaf. Stick. Whip. Cart. Coach.
Frock. Hat. Coat. Shoes. Shift. Cap.
Bread. Milk. Tea. Meat. Drink. Cake.

LESSON II

Come. Walk. Run. Go. Jump. Dance. Ride. Sit. Stand. Play. Hold. Shake.
Speak. Sing. Cry. Laugh. Call. Fall.
Day. Night. Sun. Moon. Light. Dark. Sleep. Wake.
Wash. Dress. Kiss. Comb.
Fire. Hot. Burn. Wind. Rain. Cold.
Hurt. Tear. Break. Spill.
Book. See. Look.