

## ‡ THE END OF SAN FRANCISCO

By Mattilda Bernstein. *San Francisco: City Lights*, 2013, pp. 186.

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Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's *The End of San Francisco* emerges at a crucial and fertile time in queer thought: thirty-something years into an epidemic, wherein AIDS has developed a history upon which scores of recent memoirs and political accounts have attempted to lay claim, Sycamore's work contextualizes the epidemic in hindsight in concomitance with the mainstreaming of gay politics. But far from a memoir in the conventional sense, Sycamore's challenging, non-linear portrayal of activism, queer theory, gender, abuse, and quotidian life in San Francisco's Mission neighborhood seemingly defies the impulse to frame the evolution of queer life through any one particular valence. Rather, by exposing the history of queer being (and being queer) to endless difference through self-reflexivity—that is, a continuous questioning of what *is* and what *has been*—Sycamore tears at the contours of such historical and political work, troubling the very possibility of providing the definitive accounts which seem so strenuously sought in recent queer writing.

Condensing the (immense) value of *the End of San Francisco* to queer thought becomes relatively impossible—although the following attempts such parsing—for Sycamore's work is in equal measure personal memoir, manifesto, gossip column, theoretical intervention, *belles lettres*, prose poem, call to action, and letter to a younger generation of emergent queers who, like the young Sycamore, dream of escaping suburban America for the seductive tumult of the gay mecca. Sycamore writes: "I'm trying to get to the place where my sexuality doesn't feel so separate from the visions that inspire me, where it's not just moments so charged like a sudden burst of everything I need. Like

I'm filled with possibility it's me I'm everywhere at once" (42). Sexuality may be the lens through which Sycamore's actions are best understood, but sexual possibility—which I take to imply the continuous rethinking of sexuality—is her real concern. *The End of San Francisco* is about manifesting that possibility despite a regulated, policed world, where it is always already lost, where to be 'political' is to mimic certain beliefs. Sycamore's text is about enacting such possibility as a method for thinking beyond the now: what queer might yet become, rather than what it *is*.

Sycamore herself is somewhat of an enigmatic figure in the history of activism. Known for her work in ACT UP, Fed Up Queers, the inaugural Gay Shame event, and her growing collection of writings—including the collection of essays *Why are Faggots so Afraid of Faggots* and novel *So Many Ways to Sleep Badly*—Sycamore bridges theory and practice, studious understanding of socioeconomic issues with political action and demonstration. Her fluctuating relationship with gender—Sycamore is genderqueer and uses female pronouns—becomes intertwined with her own histories of childhood sexual abuse, drug dependencies, and (both failed and flourishing) activist initiatives, producing an intentionally non-linear mode of writing that is both intensely self-conscious (how does Sycamore's abuse at the hands of her father affect her AIDS activism?) and macroscopically global (how does Sycamore's strained relationship to San Francisco Pride, say, speak to larger issues of queer assimilation?).

One might take, as a speciously banal example of her admixture of specific examples implying more generalized advice for queer living, Sycamore's learning to walk in Boston during one of her many escapes from San Francisco:

So let me tell you about runway. The point is that you walk like you're going to die right now you walk like you're never going to die you're never going to die as long as you keep walking and you walk like you're going to kill, kill with this walk and you walk like no one can touch you. And the truth is that no one can touch you, as long as you're walking" (112).

(Her sentences are always this delicious: think William Burroughs meets Dorothy Alison.) Walking, as a metonymic extension of her maturing away from San Francisco, and as an act of self-sustaining expression, is rendered both

deeply personal and educational: it is survival advice far exceeding a sanitized 'its gets better,' a form of cultural aggression, a mode of self-proclamation. *The End of San Francisco* is rife with these subtle moments of advice for the careful reader: advice given only through the back door.

San Francisco, as literal city and metaphoric space, doesn't quite end so much as it is always in the process of ending. For Sycamore, the city is a place of growth where she develops self-expression beyond social expectations, for example, or learns to cope with the pain of sexual abuse inflicted by her father. San Francisco's social flux—from the changing scenes of punk to new wave to urban hipster, or through processes of gentrification indelibly erasing the unassimilated mode of queerness Sycamore champions—renders the city a place of learning, but from which one must ultimately graduate. For San Francisco to be San Francisco, it must end. One must move on.

The temporal warp and woof Sycamore adopts, where scenes from her childhood, to her later confrontations with her dying father, to her time at Brown University filtered through later experiences at a drug filled party in the mission, re-enacts this continuous process of escape. Such 'escape' simultaneously provides the opportunity for self-reflexivity and thus re-entry, if only at the level of thought. So too, San Francisco's capacity as incubator for queer being and becoming is on the wane: as radicality gives way to corporate culture, as skyrocketing rents force expressions of anarchy or anti-assimilationist activism elsewhere, the queer possibility so treasured by Sycamore becomes increasingly difficult to access. San Francisco's end equally demarcates a changing conception of queer acceptability, a process with which Sycamore is clearly at odds. San Francisco's end—contrary, one is led to suppose, to the intentional act of ending San Francisco—is mourned as a loss.

Sycamore's hopes for the inherent potentiality of contemporary queer thought cannot (and does not) assume polemical form, for any rigidity would directly undermine her version of queerness itself. Rigidity precludes the process of self-realization and perpetual difference Sycamore demands. Consider Sycamore's portrayal of her generation:

We were the first generation of queers to grow up knowing that desire meant AIDS meant death, and so it made sense that when we got away from the other death, the one that meant marriage and a house in the suburbs, a lifetime of brutality both interior and exterior and call this success or keep

trying, keep trying for more brutality, but when we got away it made sense that everywhere people were dying of AIDS and drug addiction and suicide because we had always imagined death. Some of the dead were among us, just like us, just trying to survive. Others were more in the distance, the elders we barely got to know except as we lost them. We went crazy and cried a lot, or went crazy and stopped crying, or just went crazy. (82-83)

To go crazy is not to succumb to death in any of its forms. Rather, for Sycamore, to go crazy is to surmount death, to move beyond the enclosure and “brutality” of life lived within the bounds of acceptability. To go crazy is an act of refusal, a call for an ending. This, in a nutshell, is Sycamore’s call to arms, directed at an emergent generation: the political lies in the process of ending, for to end or to refuse or to go crazy is to be able to go back again, to refashion the parameters of the literal into the potential of the possible. This, for Sycamore, is the only mode of survival else queer thought foreclose its very queerness. In a world where AIDS, abuse, experimentation, gender expression, activism and public expression of queer sexuality continue to mean death—socially, politically, and otherwise—Sycamore’s advice must be heard at all costs.